

Byron and the Politics of Readership

Marcin Leszczyński

Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland

Lord Byron's attitude towards his readers was complex and changeable, influenced by many factors dependent on their reactions or literary modes employed by the poet. Very early he became aware of his readers' power and autonomy in relation to literary works. The author of *Don Juan* was conscious of the fact that it is the audience that creates the meaning of his poetry in the process of reception. In his *Oriental Tales* Byron invited them to be creative, to exercise their imagination in active reading, filling in the gaps left intentionally, notably in the fragmentary structure of *The Giaour*. Such a creativity, which might be well elucidated by Roman Ingarden's theory concerning the cognition of the literary work of art, rendered the readers co-authors, to a large extent independent of the writer's intentions.

The readers were not passive consumers despite the growing influence of commercial society and commodification of both writers and their books. On the contrary, together with more power and independence of readers came their increasing ability to construct their images of poets and create meaning of the works of art. An unexpected and unpleasant response on the part of readers, especially reviewers, came as a blow to Byron with the publication of *Hours of Idleness*. It prompted him to write a satire *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* to attack his opponents. In *Don Juan*, as we will see, Byron will partially replace such a satirical and polemical mode of responding to unwanted judgements and readings with an ironic mode.

The fact that Byron was aware of unpredictable ways in which the readers exercise their power to interpret might be exemplified by the entry in his Ravenna diary on January 4, 1821, where he describes surprising vicissitudes of Richardson's *Pamela*, the volume of which was found to be used as wrapping paper for the gypsy-murderess's bacon:

I was out of spirits—read the papers—thought what *fame* was, on reading, in a case of murder, that "Mr. Wych, grocer, at Tunbridge, sold some bacon, flour, cheese, and, it is believed, some plums, to some gypsy woman accused. He had on his counter (I quote faithfully) a *book*, the Life of *Pamela*, which he was *tearing* for *waste* paper, &c. &c. In the cheese was found, &c., and a *leaf* of *Pamela* *wrapt round the bacon*." What would Richardson, the vainest and luckiest of *living* authors (i.e. while alive)—he who, with Aaron Hill, used to prophesy and chuckle over the presumed fall of Fielding (the *prose* Homer of human nature) and of Pope (the most beautiful of poets)—what would he have said, could he have traced his pages from their place on the French prince's toilets (see Boswell's Johnson) to the grocer's counter and the gipsy-murderess's bacon!!!

What would he have said? what can anybody say, save what Solomon said long before us? After all, it is but passing from one counter to another, from the bookseller's to the other tradesman's—grocer or pastry-cook. For my part, I have met with most poetry upon trunks; so that I am apt to consider the trunk-maker as the sexton of authorship. (BLJ VIII, 11-12).

This literary-criminal event might serve, metaphorically, as an indication of Byron's awareness of the active role of readers who take control over the literary texts. A poet might only delineate certain paths, but cannot be sure whether they will be followed by others or even noticed. In the end he might be unable to recognize his own work as viewed and manipulated by others. In the given example different modes of reception fluctuate between the French prince's toilets, the grocer's counter and the gipsy-murderess's bacon. A sentimental novel *Pamela* might be involved in a detective and criminal occurrence due to its unexpected and even perverse use on the part of readers.

Byron seemed to be obsessed with such a harsh evaluation of poetry through equating it with paper, which indicates that in commercial society everything might be treated as commodity. In *The Blues: A Literary Eclogue* one of the characters notices that new books which are unavailable in a publisher's shop might be found in a next-door pastry-cook's. When Byron addresses bluestockings in the fourth Canto of *Don Juan*, he is dreading jokingly that their harsh judgement might force him to go "to the oblivious cooks" – "those Cornish plunderers of Parnassian wrecks" (IV, 108). These cooks may use his poetry as wrapping paper for their dishes and pastry. Cornwall was infamous as a dangerous place for ships, therefore "Parnassian wrecks" stand for failed poems. In the manuscript Byron suggests that the author of *Tintern Abbey* is already a victim of cooks: "What! must I go with Wordy to the cooks?" Wordsworth became the butt of similar satirical criticism in *The Blues*: "I shall think of him oft when I buy a new hat: There his works will appear" (II, 61-62). When Lady Bluemount protested, pointing out that his works reach to the Ganges, Inkel replies that he shan't go so far, because he can have them at Grange's who was, as Byron explains, a famous pastry cook and fruiterer in Piccadilly, and not a book-seller. The Blues, as we learn from the eleventh Canto of *Don Juan*, "sigh o'er sonnets, / And with the pages of the last Review/ Line the interior of their heads or bonnets" (XI, 50). Here the poet metonymically equates a headdress with a head itself and transfers the activity of lining the hats with literature to "lining" the heads with its worthless contents, good only for waste paper. Sometimes, however, the fate of poetry is even harsher, that of toilet paper, as when Byron calls Wordsworth Turdsworth. Thereby his opponent's philosophical and speculative poetry is tantamount to the materiality of paper it was written on and might be used by readers in numerous ways.

During the greatest commercial success Byronism operates almost without waste or remainder. However, the threat was real, especially when Byron departed from his previous

mode of writing which was so popular. The example of Richardson and his *Pamela* suggests that a writer's hubris might suffer a serious blow in such cases. Byron's defensive strategy, especially in *Don Juan*, became assumed humility and self-degrading as a poet in order to forestall criticism. In contrast, earlier in his literary career he tried to defend his stance and defend his authority over the ways his poetry should be read and interpreted, voicing his opinions in prefaces or directly in his verse.

Byron started pursuing the strategy of irony to diminish his vulnerability as a published author who is no longer in control of his poems and their meanings. Anticipating such unfavourable "reception", he deliberately denigrated his own poetry, for example treating *Don Juan's* Cantos ironically as material to line portmanteaus:

Young men should travel, if but to amuse
Themselves; and the next time their servants tie on
Behind their carriages their new portmanteau,
Perhaps it may be lined with this my canto. (II, 16)

Such a strategy led to the poet's disassociation from his work (previously, Lord Byron, alias Byron, was strongly identified with his poetry). Irony might be therefore regarded as a strategy of defence against the readers' freedom to appropriate a literary work according to their whim.

In his poetry, Byron as a reader, as we have seen, compared poetry of his opponents to waste paper quite often, but also he became a critical reader, though ironically, of his own poetry. Whereas in his previous works he invited a comparison between himself and Byronic heroes, in *Don Juan* he exhibited detachment from his main character and the poem itself.

Consequently, the poet regains control over his poetry, creating it and instantly de-creating. The theory of romantic irony might be in some aspects useful, indicating the poet's

detachment from commitment to his own creations. Ironic self-parodying and self-criticism enables him to transcend his own poetry in a playful way, anticipating reader's reactions and taking the wind out of their sails. In such a way Byron achieves artistic freedom in a commercial society, becoming independent of unpredictable readings, interpretations and criticism. Having lost the ownership of his own image and creations, the poet destroys them himself when he is not able to determine their meaning.

Byron's politics of readership revolves around a defensive strategy of irony whose aim is a protection against the increasing autonomy of readers and their control over his product. Byron employs such a strategy in order to limit this power and regain control together with artistic independence.