

‘Byron’s manipulation of authors and addressees in his comical political poems’

Don Juan, *Beppo* and *The Vision of Judgement* offer a similar type of literary discourse in which the politics of the author towards his addressees is pervaded with pseudo-educational persuasion aimed at an explication of concepts in a humorous and ironical way. ‘My politics as yet are all to educate’ the author says in the final stanza of his Dedication preceding *Don Juan*. *Beppo: a Story* starts with an instructive statement: ‘’Tis known, at least it should be, that throughout/ All countries of the Catholic persuasion [...]’. *The Vision of Judgement* starts with a lengthy Preface explaining the political and literary stance of the author, who, however, hides behind a pseudonym Quevedo Redivivus which obviously refers to the political writer of the Spanish Baroque known as a Conservative and pro-Catholic writer (Clamurro 1-20).

Despite the authorial declaration of instructiveness as the main purpose of his writing, clarity or homogeneity of thought is hardly his aim. Byron’s discursive method aims at destruction, reshaping and re-construction of motifs and ideas known to the reader. *Don Juan* re-shapes the well-known plot of the valiant seducer, *Beppo* dismantles the cultural stereotype of the Catholic South and Protestant North and the heroic myth of the merchant Robinson Crusoe, whereas *The Vision of Judgement* shatters the theatrical sanctity of a royal funeral as an important event of British cultural policy, which codifies public behaviour and understanding of values (Łotman 127).

It is not accidental that all the three texts are deeply embedded in theatre. *Don Juan* bears in it the memory of Tirso de Molina’s first dramatic version of the story by that Jesuit monk with a clear purpose of moral edification and the subsequent dramatic versions of it by Mozart and Moliere. *Beppo*, with the theatrical and operatic vision of Venice, the ‘bubbling cauldron’ (stanza 3) is deeply rooted in Shakespeare’s plays, and *Macbeth* (Act IV) in

particular. *The Vision of Judgement* in a comical way re-enacts the *psychomachian* tradition of European morality and mystery play.

The importance of theatrical motifs in Byron's political writings may well be explained by the relationship between early nineteenth century understanding of history, of which Byron as an author is an important part, and the historical necessity embedded in the cultural behaviour of the time. Theatrical scenes in the epoch of pre-Romanticism and Romanticism had the function of a 'coding mechanism', or of a device projecting human behaviour not only during the performance (Łotman 94). Theatrical forms, such as army parades in front of monarchs, pervaded life and became theatrical means of re-enacting the order of the society, with the military drill and automatic execution of a previously designed scenario being the expression of blind loyalty and adherence to absolute political power.

In such a political and cultural context, public assassinations or public suicides were perceived as heroic deeds against the tyrant, a programmed act of political protest (Janion 142-146). Jurij Lotman in his studies of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century speaks about the category of 'heroic suicide' and explains that 'readiness to die elevates the hero above the tyrant and transfers the human being from ordinary life to the world of historic acts'. A heroic suicide may have been an example of behaviour modelled on literary examples of rebellious protagonists, such as, for example, Schiller's *Don Carlos*, or heroic protagonists of ancient Rome. The literary character of political protest was also visible in the loquacity, the love of rhetoric and propagandist verbosity of conspirators, for whom sociable spree and cheerful carousal was an expression of anti-regime protest and a synonym of freedom (Żyłko 2011: 94-95).

In the cultural context of the time, Byron's *Don Juan*, *Beppo*, and *The Vision of Judgement* are an expression of the libertine political attitude of the author who poses as a 'Romanized'

or Latinized hero. His literary behaviour is aimed at re-naming and re-signifying cultural attitudes and codes of behaviour. The theatricality of his writings is an intended reference to the ritualistic political culture of the day, which is often the subject of Byron's poetry. As, for example, in *D.J. Canto VII, stanza 84*:

Medals, Ranks, Ribbons, Lace, Embroidery, Scarlet,
Are things immortal to immortal Man,
As Purple to the Babylonian harlot;
An uniform to boys is like a fan
To women; there is scarce a crimson varlet
But deems himself the first in Glory's Van;
But Glory's Glory; and if you would find
What that is – ask the Pig who sees the Wind!

But if we were to look for his political programme or a set of recognizable ideas in connection with the author, we might be at a loss. His authorship, just like his reading public, is split (agonistic), and his identity, whether social, national, or cultural, is reflected in a reading list which is a broad and ecumenical miscellany. The multifariousness of his references creates a poetic style which aims at ambiguity of poetic stance and provokes interpretation that favours the multiple, and the stylistically varied. Byron as a political author does not represent a clear set of ideas, and clarity of discourse is not his aim. Also his 'ego' as a writer, although emerging from English language and culture, is often hidden behind other cultures and literatures. It is a style and method aimed at presenting a political and cultural attitude of the author as a liberator from formulas and paradigms. It seems that for Byron *literary* conventions metonymically represent political and cultural conventions and his literary dramatizations of dialogues are meant, at a higher level of his texts, as the author's dialogue with political regimes.

His personal aim is to ‘destroy’ the ‘Cold-blooded, smooth-faced, placid Miscreant’ Robert Southey, but Bob Southey as a character internalized in his texts, is a form of synecdoche. He stands for the group of people that signify a taxonomy of values despised by the author. Byron’s destruction of Southey, ‘the vulgarest tool that Tyranny could want’ (D.J. Dedication, stanza 12), therefore usually means a sort of dramatized destruction of the establishment and the author is very clear about it in his Dedication to *Don Juan* and the Preface to *The Vision of Judgement*.

1.

Bob Southey! You're a poet, poet laureate,
And representative of all the race.
Although 'tis true that you turned out a Tory at
Last, yours has lately been a common case.
And now my epic renegade, what are ye at
With all the lakers, in and out of place?
A nest of tuneful persons, to my eye
Like four and twenty blackbirds in a pye,

2.

Which pye being opened they began to sing'
(This old song and new simile holds good),
'A dainty dish to set before the King'
Or Regent, who admires such kind of food.

Byron, posing as a Miltonic ‘Avenger’ and the ‘Tyrant-hater’ equals the poet laureate activities with ‘adoring the Sultan’ and characteristically adopts a despondent ‘Roman’ attitude” which immediately evokes the Senecan theatre of auto-destruction:

16.

Where shall I turn me not to view its bonds?
For I will never feel them – Italy!
Thy late reviving Roman Soul desponds

Beneath the lie this State—thing breathed o’er thee;
Thy clanking Chain, and Erin’s yet green Wounds,
Have voices – tongues to cry aloud for me;
Europe has slaves, allies, kings, armies still,
And Southey lives to sing them very ill. –
17.

Meantime, Sir Laureat, I proceed to dedicate
In honest, simple verse, this song to you;
And if in flattering strains I do not predicate,
'Tis that I still retain my “Buff and blue”;⁴⁴
My Politics, as yet, are all to educate; [...]
(from *Dedication to Don Juan*)

In terms of style and composition, Byron’s attitude as an author is that of an Improviser, as he declares somewhere else in *Don Juan* (Canto XV, 20). This allows him the freedom of ‘irregularity’ of his ‘desultory rhyme’ and the ‘conversational facility’ which makes it possible to manipulate his addressee into the realms of associations which stimulate and at the same time destroy the reader’s sense of recognition, as Byron the author may just as well be sentimentally Fieldingian to his ‘Kind Reader’ (e.g. Canto IX, 23), or rather offensively Rabelaisian in the way he treats his audience in Canto VII, stanza 7:

7.
Dogs! or Men! (for I flatter you in saying
That ye are dogs – your betters far
Ye may
Read, or read not, what I am now essaying
To show ye what ye are in every way;
As little as the Moon stops for the baying
Of Wolves, will the bright Muse withdraw one ray
From out her Skies; then howl your idle wrath!
While She still silvers o’er your gloomy path. –

By way of comparison, in the authorial Introduction to *Gargantua and Pantagruel* we find the following comment on the process of reading:

What are the hopes of his labour? What doth he expect to reap thereby? Nothing but a little marrow. True it is, that this little is more savoury and delicious than the great quantities of other sorts of meat, because the marrow [...] is a nourishment most perfectly elaborated by nature. In imitation of this dog, it becomes you to be wise, to smell, feel and have in estimation these fair goodly books, stuffed with high conceptions, which, though seemingly easy in the pursuit, are in the cope and encounter somewhat difficult. And then, like him, you must, by a sedulous lecture, and frequent meditation, break the bone, and suck out the marrow,--that is, my allegorical sense, or the things I to myself propose to be signified by these Pythagorical symbols, with assured hope, that in so doing you will at last attain to be both well-advised and valiant by the reading of them: for in the perusal of this treatise you shall find another kind of taste, and a doctrine of a more profound and abstruse consideration, which will disclose unto you the most glorious sacraments and dreadful mysteries, as well in what concerneth your religion, as matters of the public state, and life economical. [...]' (From *The Author's Prologue to the First Book*. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1200/1200-h/1200-h.htm#link2H_INTR)

The question asked by Rabelais in his introduction: 'What are the hopes of this labour?' and the answer 'nothing but a little marrow' (which, however, may lead the reader to the depth of knowledge not available without the necessary humiliation and the bravery of breaking the bones with one's own teeth) is a question about the communicative situation between the writer and his addressee. And it is the depth of understanding by the reader that is at stake in Byron's poetry. This is also the reason for Byron's masquerading as an author, which is not only meant to be artfully seductive, but also very demanding of the addressee. Masks and roles taken on by the writer function like characters in a theatre which exhibit concepts and modes of thinking with which Byron manipulates the reader's understanding of the presented reality.

A good example of this is Byron's use of authorship, as a sort of implied variety of persons, which introduce various concepts of writing and various concepts of literary politics, as in his use of pseudonyms in *The Vision of Judgement*. He signs the text as 'Quevedo Redivivus', while in the Preface he refers to another author whom he calls 'Savagius' (he Latinizes the telling name of Savage Landor, the 'learned' author of 'crypto-pornography' and a friend of Southey). Yet again, in the text proper Byron calls up the character of Junius as a witness in the psychomachian debate. (Modrzewska 2013: 85-106) The 'phantasmagoria' of Junius, an authentic, famous author of political letters who criticized King George's policies in the years 1769-72), is needed as an antithesis to the renegado Antijacobin, the 'Bard' recognizable as Robert Southey by all the features introduced by Byron in the *Preface*. Junius is a literary pseudonym, just like 'Redivivus' and it has been noticed that in the text of Byron's *The Vision of Judgment* he becomes a *porte parole* of the author himself (Cochran, 41-43). Byron plays with the mysterious name and uses the periphrastic 'Nominis Umbra' in stanza 84 ('Shadow of a Name'). The 'Shadow', apart from signifying a 'ghost', a glorified 'phantasmagoria' in the world of spirits created by Byron, acquires the meaning of a 'name' as an 'eponym', a name after a famous writer (stanza 74). As Byron puts it in stanzas 77-78: 'a duke – or knight – An orator – a lawyer – or a priest – A Nabob – a Man Midwife', 'epistolary "Iron Mask"'. The character is capable of God-like power ('For sometimes he like Cerberus would seem/ "Three gentlemen at once") and simultaneously he is 'really truly – Nobody at all' (79-80). A sort of amorphous man and 'Author' of an ungraspable 'body':

80.

I've an hypothesis – 'tis quite my own –

I never let it out till now, for fear

Of doing people harm about the throne – 635

And injuring some minister or peer,

On whom the stigma might perhaps be blown;

It is – My gentle Public, Lend thine ear!
'Tis that what Junius we are wont to call
Was – really, truly – Nobody at all. 640
81.

I don't see wherefore letters should not be
Written without hands, since we daily view
Them written without heads, and books, we see,
Are filled as well without the latter too –
And really till we fix on Somebody
For certain sure to claim them as his due,
Their Author, like the Niger's Mouth, will bother
The World to see if there be Mouth or Author.

82.
"And who and what art thou?" the Archangel said.
"For that you may consult my title-page," 650
Replied this mighty Shadow of a Shade.
"If I have kept my secret half an age
"I scarce shall tell it now." "Can'st thou upbraid,"
Continued Michael, "George Rex – or allege
"Aught further?" Junius answered, "You had better 655
"First ask him for his answer to my letter;

83.
"My charges upon record will outlast
"The Brass of both his epitaph and tomb."
"Repent'st thou not," said Michael, "of some past
"Exaggeration? Something which may doom 660
"Thyself if false, as him if true? Thou wast
"Too bitter – is it not so? – in thy gloom
"Of Passion?" "Passion!" cried the Phantom dim;
"I loved my country, and I hated him.

84.
"What I have written I have written – Let 665
"The rest be on his head or mine!" So spoke

Old "Nominis Umbra", and while speaking yet
Away he melted in celestial smoke.
Then Sathan said to Michael, "Don't forget
"To call George Washington – & John Horne Tooke – 670
"And Franklin;" but at this time there was heard
A cry for room, though not a phantom stirred.

When asked by the Archangel about his actual identity, the 'Shadow of a Shade' replies: 'For that you may consult my title-page'(82). The character of Junius is then 'decomposed' by the author into parts of flesh: 'Hands', heads', 'mouth'(81). The concept of the author Junius is reduced to a linguistic sign on the title page, made 'unreal' and then again transformed into a pseudo-Biblical voice: 'What I have written I have written'. The way Junius disappears makes his character ambiguous and oxymoronic: 'Away he melted in celestial smoke' (84).

All the different authors and their names in *The Vision of Judgement* : Southey, Savagius, Quevedo Redivivus and Junius are subjects of conceptual treatment and Byron's optics of humorous literary 'delusion'. It is part of the author's mannerist presentation of reality and a type of irony inherently linked with the grotesque transformations of characters and their actions, but also with the grotesque transformations of language. Words and their meanings in Byron's text are metamorphosed and dissociated from their previous connotations like the bodies and persons of the characters; and the 'shadow of a name' is the key metaphor which signifies Byron's 'destructive' creationism. The motif of the 'shadow of a name' (Stat Nominis Umbra) is symbolic and refers not only to Byron's treatment of language, words and their meanings, but it also refers to the author's treatment of the process of communication between the reader and himself.

The addressee of this text has to deal with an author who, although he writes in English and for an English speaking reader, is elusive and hidden behind a Latinized pseudonym of

Quevedo Redivivus, which refers to the representative of Spanish Baroque. This Latinized image is further made also equivalent with an image of Junius (a character semantically parallel to the author as an enemy of the tyrannical establishment), known to the contemporary British readership as an anonymous political writer and the author of letters in the *Public Advertiser* from 1768-1772 (Ousby 501)¹. Both pseudonyms, Junius and Redivivus, not only serve Byron as a protection against censorship and the tradition of dissident thought, but also take part in Byron's poetic and intellectual strategy of conceptual dissociation. Byron dissociates his authorship into a number of persons and a multiplicity of meanings which correspond and echo one another. The author of *The Vision of Judgement* is a multiform being living in various cultures and assuming a devilishly grotesque and deformed body. It is 'The Lame Devil', who himself turns out to be the illusive 'shadow of a name', a 'Shoal of Fish', or the 'airy nothing'; a multiplicity of signs and a 'tumult' of shades, which represents the spiritual reality of Sheol and creates a labyrinth of meaning for the implied reader, who has to find a way between fiction and political rhetoric. Byron's literary aim is not purely intellectual. Unlike Junius, the author of letters who presents himself as a representative of the English nation writing for the public benefit², Byron's practical aim is to

¹ The pen name, Junius however, also refers the reader to Marcus Junius Brutus, also a conspirator against the ruler, first century B.C.

² Compare the way in which Junius establishes an open agreement with his readers in the 'Dedication To The English Nation' preceding his collection of letters: DEDICATE to you a Collection of Letters, written by one of yourselves, for the common benefit of us all. They would never have grown to this size without your continued encouragement and applause. To me they originally owe nothing but a healthy sanguine constitution. Under your care they have thriven. To you they are indebted for whatever strength or beauty they possess. When kings and ministers are forgotten, when the force and direction of personal satire is no longer understood, and when measures are only felt in their remotest consequences, this book will, I believe, be found to contain principles worthy to be transmitted to posterity. When you leave the unimpaired hereditary freehold to your children, you do but half your duty. Both liberty and property are precarious, unless the possessors have sense and spirit enough to defend them. This is not the language of vanity. If I am a vain man, my gratification lies within a narrow circle. I am the sole depository of my own secret, and it shall perish with me.

If an honest, and, I may truly affirm, a laborious zeal for the public service, has given me any weight in your esteem, let me exhort and conjure you, never to suffer an invasion of your political constitution, however minute the instance may appear, to pass by, without a determined, persevering resistance. One precedent creates another. They soon accumulate, and constitute law. What yesterday was fact, to-day is doctrine. Examples are supposed to justify the most dangerous measures; and, where they do not suit exactly, the defect is supplied by analogy. Be assured, that the laws which protect us in our civil rights, grow out of the constitution, and they must fall or flourish with it. This is not the cause of faction, or of party, or of any individual, but the common interest of every man in Britain. Although the King should continue to support his present system of government, the period

cause hatred, as he is himself a personal ‘hater’ and a carnivalesque ‘monster’ as a writer. The motifs of carnival and the carnivalesque are equally important in the creation of the implied author in *Beppo*, which exhibits a similar paradoxical duality of meaning of most of the characters and motifs. *Beppo: a Story* is set in an operatic Venice during the time of Carnival; but due to Shakespearean allusions to *Othello*, *As You Like It* and *Macbeth* and the theatrical shaping of space it becomes a symbol of London, and then (stanza 59) as an essence of ‘vulgarity’ and ‘baseness’, a ‘Cauldron’s bubble’ and the opening of Hell. Although in the first stanza the author presents himself as a Traveller and poses as a guide in a Catholic country, through the networks of Shakespearean allusions to *Macbeth* and *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Modrzewska 2013: 116-125), he reminds the reader of the great theme of human Fall, rebellion and death, the theme also present in Voltaire’s *Candide* (ch. 6), where the Venetian Carnival is a place of exile as a result of revolution and loss of political power. Venice, as a place of festival is also the place of exile for ‘Freethinkers’ (*Beppo*, stanza 3) and becomes an allegorical ‘cave’ – an infernal pit in which the author posing as a ‘Traveller’ like his characters gains all kinds of artistic, religious, cultural, political and sexual experience. He puts on a mask of a Romantic Traveller like a Child Harold, but in the end of the poem reveals his identity as a Devilish Seducer (Modrzewska 2013: 120). This may be observed well in stanzas 19 and 20 of *Beppo*. Stanza 19 starts with a friendly initiation of dialogue with the reader as a potential tourist:

19.

Didst ever see a Gondola? For fear

You should not, I’ll describe it you exactly;

is not very distant, at which you will have the means of redress in your own power. It may be nearer, perhaps, than any of us expect; and I would warn you to be prepared for it. The King may possibly be advised to dissolve the present parliament a year or two before it expires of course, and precipitate a new election, in hopes of taking the nation by surprise. If such a measure be in agitation, this very caution may defeat or prevent it.

I cannot doubt that you will unanimously assert the freedom of election, and vindicate your exclusive right to choose your representatives. But other questions have been started, on which your determination should be equally clear and unanimous.’ (<http://www.historyhome.co.uk/c-eight/junius/dedicat.htm>)

'Tis a long covered boat that's common here,
Carved at the prow, built lightly but compactly –
Rowed by two rowers, each called "Gondolier" –
It glides along the water looking blackly,
Just like a Coffin clapt in a Canoe,
Where none can make out what you say or do.

But then the dramatization of the gondola-coffin-coach motifs into the image of rowing manipulates the reader into an erotic visualisation of two gondoliers. Byron uses sexuality as a method of political persuasion based on seduction: the reader as a potential traveller is manipulated through ambiguities, seduced by ekphrastic images of beautiful bodies, the Greek-like 'pretty faces' of Venetians, 'Italian Beauty!' into the destruction of meanings and the destruction of clear cut divisions of cultural, geographical and mental borders.

Byron's texts, although they refer to known plots and dramatic conventions used by authors of various epochs, in the way they create the bond with the addressee are particularly close to Spanish seventeenth century literature, Shakespeare's plays, or Jacobean Comedy. Especially if one thinks about the 'She-Tragedy' in *Beppo* with Laura as a protagonist, or the role of the author as a Jacobean Trickster, el Burlador ('Devilish Deceiver'). This is so, because the key issue of Byron's dialogue with the reader is a crisis of representation; the problems of authenticity and illusion, vulgarity and culture, or ambiguous sexuality (Dynes 365-384).

Since, as all know, without the Sex, our Sonnets
Would seem unfinished, like their untrimmed bonnets.)
(signed) Printer's Devil. –
(end of stanza 46)

Beppo, like Byron's other burlesque writings, such as *The Devil's Drive*, *Don Juan*, *The Vision of Judgement*, is designed to be both a comical narrative poem and a tool of liberating language as a way to intellectual and political libertinism. The role of an author as a new

masked ego of the Trickster presupposes a new reading style and a new role for literature, as a seductive political game with the reader (Burzyńska 251-268). It reminds of the old Cervantesque ideas of art and life, but Byron's new Romantic version of literary knighthood and missionary errantry is his linguistic manipulation as a 'performative field of pleasure' (Felman 19) which is based on the rhetoric of eroticism and dramatic auto-creation. For the reader this means a ludic, carnivalesque and theatrical enjoyment of ambiguity stimulating bouleversement and intellectual anarchy as an effect of literary political discourse.

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