

# LITERATURE

## LORD BYRON AS A PROSE HUMORIST

MARIUS BYRON RAIZIS

*University of Athens*

Mentioning the word *humour* in relation to Lord Byron sounds much like "bringing coal to Newcastle". Not only Byron scholars, but even "innocent" undergraduates and casual readers of his poems notice, early enough, that humor is one of his most salient characteristics as a poet. Since Byron wrote neither fiction nor tales in prose, my brief survey will be based on observations and comments on humorous instances found in his numerous letters and notes — the rich and inexhaustible treasure trove made available to the public by Leslie Marchand, the teacher, guide and inspirer of many a contemporary Byronist all over the world.

One of the numerous definitions of humour is offered by an American stylistics specialist: "A comic quality causing amusement. Humour is also applied to the faculties of seeing, understanding, or expressing what is amusing and laughter-producing, and to a mood or frame of mind. Humour consists primarily of the recognition and expression of peculiarities, oddities and absurdities in a situation or action."<sup>1</sup>

The first difficulty I encountered during my perusal of the twelve volumes of Professor Marchand's monumental edition of Byron's epistles and diaries was that of selection. There is humour in Byron's letters to relatives (i.e., his mother), to dear persons (Augusta Leigh), to close friends (Hobhouse), business associates (Hanson, Murray), to former classmates, and so on. A *second* problem was that of literary, or rather, philological classification. Since irony is indispensable in the expression of humour, should one narrow his examination to Byron's uses of stylistic devices such as understatement, overstatement, bathos, and other figures of speech and manners of expression in his humorous passages? A *third* consideration was that of selecting the categories of prose passages exhibiting instances of humour. There is humour in descriptive, in argumentative, and even in lyrical passages expressing tenderness and affection. *Last, but not least*, was the problem of grouping together excerpts with humour

<sup>1</sup> Harry Shaw (1976:136).

on the basis of subject-matter or theme. For instance, humour in the description of, or comments on, various persons — including himself.

After my examination of most relevant texts, I reached *two* conclusions which I feel I must state here, rather than at the end of my paper. My reason for doing so is simple: these conclusions helped me to adopt a workable approach, and to narrow down my rather broad and all-encompassing topic. My general conclusions are the following:

*First*, Byron's qualities as a prose humorist initially followed a definite chronological development, parallelling, somehow, that of his growth as a poet, up to a point in time, though. That is, there is much humour of fairly good quality in his early years as a pupil at Harrow and student at Cambridge. The volume increases and the quality of his humor improves as Byron finds himself in Europe during his first Continental experience, 1809—11, and a variety of local stimuli sharpen his wit and enlarge his scope. This level of quantity and quality is maintained for several years as he returns to England and becomes involved with English people and a different set of situations. After this plateau — if one may term it so — Byron's humorous tendencies begin to slowly decline in numbers, though never in quality. There is no doubt that the lapse of time, the death of his mother and some other dear persons, the failure of his marriage, the political developments, as well as financial and social cares reduced the earlier enthusiasm and sobered his mood. Finally, during the last phase of his life, 1816—24, the second set of European experiences in Switzerland, Italy and Greece, his lasting affair with Teresa Guiccioli, and the liberation movements in Italy and in Greece, made Byron become more matter-of-fact and business-like in his correspondence. Wit is often there, but this time it is no longer the literary show or pose of an aspirant writer. It is the manner of self-expression of a mature artist who has found his *métier* as a satirist in verse, and reserves his sophisticated and developed skills for his purely literary exploits. Byron's letters from Greece, 1823—24, are rather poor in humorous instances.

*Second*, Byron felt free to use his wit in the epistolary communication with intimate friends and close relatives — primarily — as is natural. Statistically speaking, the greatest volume of humorous passages is found in his letters to his half-sister Augusta and to his faithful friend Hobhouse. Despite his love-hate relationship with his mother, his intimacy as her son allowed Byron to employ humour in many of his letters to her, to fortify their always argumentative and often apologetic contents.

Byron did not refrain from using his abilities as a prose writer in letters to other poets and authors (e. g., Thomas Moore), to members of the aristocracy (Lady Melbourne, Lord Holland), to bankers, publishers, lawyers (John Hanson, John Murray, Douglas Kinnaird), and to people from other walks of life. He nearly always did so as his initial acquaintance with them grew into a more

intimate, or at least friendly, relationship. He rarely used humour in addressing persons who were psychologically "distant" to him — like Annabella Milbanke, before and after their marriage. And he never employed humour in addressing personalities whose universal reputation inspired a sense of awe and demanded the use of formal politeness and social decorum, as in the case of Goethe.

After this rather lengthy introduction and its conclusions, we had better examine some characteristic cases of wit found in Byron's letters to form an idea of how cleverly and adroitly he used irony of all kinds and shapes in commenting on people, and in describing various episodes or situations. As technical and stylistic considerations are interrelated with, or inseparable from, Byron's verbal expression, the reader will have to excuse and tolerate my frequent shifting of focus from topics to mannerisms and back to contents.

Byron often created humour through the use of only one word, a telling one, to be sure. Nobody can resist smiling, when he hears Byron describing his future wife, the educated and mathematics-fan Annabella, as the "Princess of Parallelograms", in his letter to Lady Melbourne, dated 6th February, 1814<sup>2</sup>. Much earlier, on 3rd May 1810, writing to Henry Drury, Byron had sarcastically alluded to the hostile *Edinburgh Review* in his sentence: "The Mediterranean and the Atlantic roll between me and Criticism, and the thunders of the *Hyperborean Review* are deafened by the roar of the Hellespont" (I, 239). No person who knows his classics will miss the derogatory connotation of the epithet "Hyperborean" (=Northernmost) as a remote place totally lacking in civilisation and spiritual achievements. Of that same early period is his negative — actually bathetic — characterisation of Cambridge University, not as his Alma Mater, but as "...a nurse of no very promising appearance..." (I, 108) in his polite letter to the Rev. Thomas Jones (14th February 1807).

Equally felicitous is Byron's witty use of cultural allusions, literary quotations, puns, ethnic jokes and parodies, for humorous effects. Referring to his tutor's (Rev. Joseph Drury) strict instructions and admonitions in a lecture he got one morning, Byron called it "a thundering Jobation", by analogy to *oration*, and having added the awe-inspiring name of Job with its moralising connotations. He made excellent puns in characterising a "Spartan (that is, from Laconia) State paper", anything "but Laconic", that is, not short at all, in a long letter of 4th October 1810 to John Cam Hobhouse (II, 23); and in referring to matters military and warfaring when he wrote Elizabeth Bridget Pigot (30th June 1807) that "the Russians beat, a bad set, eat nothing but

<sup>2</sup> L. A. Marchand (1975), ed., "Wedlock the Devil", *Byron's letters and journals*, IV, 48. All subsequent references to Byron's letters will be to this twelve-volume set. Volume and page numbers will be given in Roman and Arabic numerals, respectively, within parentheses in my text. All twelve volumes bear individual subtitles.

oil, consequently must melt before a *hard fire*" (I, 123), using the *double entendre* of the word denoting heat as well as shooting. In the same light spirit Byron had jokingly instructed Edward Noel Long, a young officer, "When you return from the Field bring me the Scalp of Massena, or the chin of Bonaparte..." (1st May 1807; I, 118). One of his most risqué puns is found in his youthfully cynical and bragging statement that he and his male companions got gonorrhoea (i.e., the clap) from their frequent contacts with women of easy virtue: "I had a number of Greek and Turkish women, and I believe the rest of the English were equally lucky, for we were all *clapped*" — letter of 15th May 1811 to Hobhouse (II, 46).

More innocent and quite clever is the pun included in the sentence, "I shall fold up this rag of paper, which I send tomorrow by *snail* to Patras," where the substitution of *snail* for *mail* implies the recipient's — Hobhouse — penalty for neglecting his correspondence — letter of 18th March 1811 (II, 44). In a later epistle to the same friend Byron writes, "I am accompanied by two Greek servants both middle aged men, and one is Demetrius your old misinterpreter" — alluding to the Greek's lack of fluency in the lingua franca they used (II, 48). John Hobhouse, in several later letters Byron addresses as "Yani" using the demotic Greek for Johnny (II, 30 and elsewhere).

An example of witty use of quotation is his comment about the contents of Benjamin Drury's letter to him: "... the contents are so singular that I can scarce believe my optics, 'Which are made the fools of the other senses, or else worth all the rest'," he writes to Francis Hodgson on 17th December 1808, aptly echoing the floating dagger description by Macbeth in Shakespeare's eponymous tragedy (II, i, 45) — (I, 182). Alluding to Adam and Eve, in a letter of 15th January 1814 to Lady Melbourne to comment on Lady Caroline Lamb's views *vis-à-vis* their tumultuous relationship, Byron writes: "How does Caroline go on? I do think between her *theory* and system of Ethics you will begin to think that our first parents had better have paused before they plucked the tree of knowledge" (IV, 32). In a letter to F. Hodgson (3rd January 1813) he makes a classical allusion, "I am still in *palatia Circes*, and, being no Ulysses, cannot tell into what animal I may be converted" (III, 8), implying his involvement in sensual pleasures like those that had turned Odysseus' companions into swine. In the same letter he refers to notorious Lady Caroline Lamb by the name of the most famous *hetaira* of antiquity, Phryne, one of her imaginative signatures, showing this way that he knew a good deal about legendary ladies of great sex appeal.

Mrs. Catherine Gordon Byron, his own mother, received many a one-word comic appellation. Her quick and explosive temper was immortalised in the parodying allusion to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, used in his letter of 9th August 1806 to John M.B. Pigot, wherein the young man humorously expresses his thanks for the Pigots' assistance to him: "... your Mother has laid me under

great obligations, and you with the rest of the family, merit my warmest thanks, for your kind Connivance at my Escape from 'Mrs. Byron Furiosa' — Oh! for the pen of Ariosto to rehearse in *Epic*, the *scolding* of that *momentous Eve*, or rather let me invoke the shade of Dante to inspire me, for none but the author of the *Inferno* could properly preside over such an Attempt" (I, 94). The numerous literary and cultural echoes in the above passage are characteristic of young Byron's desire to impress with his erudition and wit, at a time when his proper career as a poet was in its inception.

In an earlier letter on the same subject, the torment of living with his mother, addressed to Augusta (10th August 1805), the seventeen-year old Byron had called Mrs. Byron by the name of one of the furies in Greek mythology. "This I owe to myself, and to my own comfort, as well as Justice to the memory of my nearest relations, who have been most shamefully libelled by this female Tisiphone, a name which your Ladyship will recollect to have belonged to one of the Furies" (I, 74). In his very next letter to Augusta, Byron calls his mother "my tormentor whose *diabolical* disposition... seems to increase with age" (I, 75). In other communications he refers to her as „the dowager". In all fairness to his filial feelings, we must mention that after Mrs. Byron's death her son referred to her with all due respect to one's mother, regardless of how strained their relationship had been in the past. But by then, he no longer was a boy of seventeen.

Byron's knowledge of literary matters is exhibited in a number of witty uses of names, expressions and terms. For example, addressing Hobhouse on 13th October 1811, in Ireland at that time, he writes: "You are exiled to Ireland, quite a military Swift! — we may now Swiftify and Popify as if we were wits of the last Century" (II, 114). Women writers, his detested Bluestockings, are ridiculed in a letter to Hobhouse, dated 17th November 1811. Byron writes: "I have heard nothing of Miss Milbanke's posthumous buffoneries, but here is Miss Seward with 6 tomes of the most disgusting trash, sailing over Styx with a Foolscap over her periwig as complacent as can be — Of all Bitches dead or alive a scribbling woman is the most canine. — Scott is her Editor, I suppose because she lards him in every page" (II, 132). That letter is signed in Greek, Μπατῶν, with the stress mark ostensibly placed on the last syllable — in the Scottish manner — as are some others of the same period.

Humour is also the tone setter in a number of other, much more innocuous comments. Addressing John Hanson, on 1st December 1804, the then sixteen-year old Byron had written: "I am Glad you approve of my Gun, feeling myself happy, that it has been tried by so *Distinguished a Sportsman*. I hope your campaigns against the feathered tribe, have been attended with no serious consequences; *trifling accidents* such as the loss of a few fingers and a thumb, you *Gentlemen of the city* being used to, of course, occasion no interruption to your field Sports" (I, 60). This passage shows a commendable use of periphrasis.

ses and witty understatements which attest to Byron's salutary exercise at Harrow School.

A few months later, the ironic Byron expresses to Augusta his views on age and the proper age for one to marry, "... Young Ladies ought not to throw themselves into the fidgets about a trifling delay of 9 or 10 years; age brings experience and when you in the flower of youth, between 40 and 50, shall then marry, you will no doubt say that I am a *wise man*, and that the later one makes one's self miserable with the matrimonial clog, the better" (I, 69). No woman will be displeased hearing Byron aver that one's "flower of youth" is between 40 and 50, but then he was always a master of hyperbole and overstatement.

His rather cynical remarks on marriage (VIII, 51), which he repeatedly presents as a necessary evil helping a man secure a good living through his wife's dowry, seem to be in part an honest belief and in part the attitude of a superior male of the species who will condescend to getting "clogged" — as he was later on himself — only for the sake of material advantage. In several of his letters during all three phases of his career Byron did not change his view on marriage (I, 222), and always capitalised, as a poet and as a prose writer, on the infidelity of wives — especially those of Italy (I, 220) — on hell raised by small brats, like Leigh Hunt's pack of noisy children, and on all manner of limitations and restrictions imposed upon the freedom of married men. The view-point of wives and the domestic difficulties of young mothers do not seem to have occupied him seriously, save in the case of his beloved Augusta Leigh and her own unhappy marriage. Byron's derogatory remarks on matrimony may be cited as examples of Black Humour, or of what he called "Pantaloon Humour", after the Italian fashion; or even as witty and a bit cynical comments by a young man with a fierce sense of personal independence.

Among other things, Byron made fun of various occupations. Complaining about Augusta's handwriting he jokingly compares it to his attorney's (26–27 June 1817): "P. S. Your handwriting is grown like my Attorney's — and you gave me a qualm — till I found the remedy in your signature" (III, 68), a simile indicating his dislike of Hanson's writing. The hardness of bread issued to the soldiers of the Revolutionary Government in Greece, made Byron mention in a letter from Missolonghi to Douglas Kinnaird (30th March 1824) — less than a month before his death: "But we have gotten a new Commissary, and a Baker, instead of the Bricklayer who furnished the former loaves, apparently — and with not very good bricks neither" (XI, 145). The use of the double negative is, obviously, his way of putting emphasis on his funny metaphor.

Complaining about printers' mistakes — an almost constant plague — in a very brief note to John Murray (16th January 1814) the irate Byron writes: "Dear Sir — I do believe that the Devil never created or perverted such a fiend as the fool of a printer. I am obliged to inclose you *luckily* for me this *second* proof — *corrected* — because there is an ingenuity in his blunders peculiar to

himself. Let the press be guided by the present sheet. (IV, 33). The choice of vocabulary here renders the passage sarcastic, but to an uninvolved reader this postscript sounds quite funny.

During his first voyage to Greece, Byron wrote Francis Hodgson the often-quoted letter of 3rd October 1810 in which he mentioned: "I have really no friends in the world, though all my old school companions are gone forth into the world, and walk about in monstrous disguises, in the garb of Guardsmen, lawyers, parsons, fine gentlemen, and such other masquerade dresses" (II, 19). Again, the use of emotion-charged diction is indicative of Byron's state of mind at the time. To us, however, his cynicism — pose or sincere belief no matter — attests to his powers as a comedian bent on the ridicule of society and its sacrosanct institutions.

Quite witty and purely comic is also his allusion to the amorous activities of young Bowman — his Newstead tenant. Addressing his mother on 25th June 1811, Byron wrote: "Besides, it is necessary to sober young Mr. Bowman, or he will people the parish with bastards" (II, 52). Byron's ability to pick a telling word is also manifested in a letter to Hodgson (3rd October 1810), where, mindful of the great fire risks that theatres of the time faced, he calls Tom Sheridan, the brother of Richard, "the manager of this combustible concern" (II, 20).

Byron also poked fun at the literary exploits of various persons. His own friend's book was not spared either. "When Hobhouse published his volume of poems, the *Miscellany* (which Matthews would call the 'Miss-sell-any')", he writes Murray, in this case borrowing another man's wit, and acknowledging it to state the fact that the book had sold very poorly, without having to use his own words and thus offend the good Hobhouse — letter of 19th November 1820 (VII, 232). Three years earlier he had composed some doggerel lines with his comments on some contemporary texts. Since this rhyming commentary is quite funny and inserted in a letter to Hobhouse (31st March 1817) we may mention it here along with his humorous prose:

- I read the "Christabel".  
Very well.  
I read the "Missionary".  
Somewhat visionary.  
I tried at "Iderin."  
Ahem!  
I read a sheet of "Margaret of Anjou."  
Can you?  
I skimmed a page of Webster's Waterloo.  
Pooh! — Pooh! —  
I looked at Wordsworth's milkwhite  
"Rylstone Doe".  
Hillo!  
I read "Glernavon" too, by Caro Lamb,  
God Dama (V, 199).

No sample of Byron's skills as a prose humorist would be valid without the mention of some of his numerous comments on himself. In a letter of 25th June 1809 to Hanson, asking him to look after his finances, Byron made an ethnic joke as he concluded his instructions with the statement: "You see I must turn Jew myself at last" (I, 207). His various ailments are cleverly described in a letter to Henry Drury (7th July 1811), referring to Surgeon Tucker

whom I met with in Greece and so on to Malta, where he administered to me for three complaints *viz.* a *Gonorrhoea* a *Tertian fever* and the *Hemorrhoides*, all of which I literally had at once, though he assured me the *morbid* action of only one of these distempers could act at a time, which was a great comfort, though they relieved one another as regularly as Sentinels, and very nearly sent me back to Acheron, my old acquaintance which I left fine and flowing in Albania (II, 58).

Byron's humour in this instance, no doubt, expresses his relief at his recovery.

In a letter to Leigh Hunt (9th February 1814), Byron made a *jeux d'esprit* from the French phrase "canard boiteux" by alluding to somebody who had called him a Devil, and commenting: "Devil (*boiteux* they might have added...)" (IV, 50), thus poking some international fun at his own lameness. A little later (19th February 1814), in a good letter to Annabella Milbanke, he ended humorously by mentioning his age: "— a few weeks ago I became six and twenty in summers — six hundred in heart — and in head and pursuits about six" (IV, 67), belittling with pretended frankness, his creative efforts, and emphasising his heaviness of heart in cleverly exaggerated hyperboles which others might have abused as common clichés.<sup>3</sup>

Referring to his abilities as a linguist, in a letter to Hodgson of 20th January 1811, Byron jokingly mentioned his newly-acquired and practical skill in swearing in Turkish: "I am left to my resources which consist of tolerably fluent *Lingua Franca* middling *Romaic* (modern Greek) and some variety of Ottoman oaths of great service with a stumbling horse, or a stupid servant" (II, 37).

Late in his life, in a letter from Cephalonia to Augusta Leigh (12th October 1823), referring to his own poetic *métier* with rather assumed cynicism, Byron expressed the hope that his own daughter Ada would not follow in his footsteps: "I hope that the Gods have made her any thing save poetical — it is enough to have one such fool in a family" (XI, 47). Though by then Byron was weary and inactive as a poet, and quite preoccupied with the political and military problems of the Greeks, his statement to Augusta must be accepted as an expression of levity, rather than as a confession *de profundis*<sup>4</sup>.

Humour is to be found even in Byron's observations on the imperialistic

<sup>3</sup> For Byron's serious views on his growing older see Higashinaka (1979: 59–60) and Schroeder (1983:18–19).

<sup>4</sup> For additional comments on himself see Istvan Palffy (1976:72).

designs and appetites of the Europeans after the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence on 25th March 1821. In a letter to Hobhouse (20th May 1821), Byron created an excellent pun by mingling culinary and political imageries involving the word turkey, the fowl, and Turkey, the Ottoman State. Byron's mixed metaphor is as follows: "Our Greek acquaintances are making a fight for it — which must be a dilemma for the Allies — who can neither take their part (as liberals) nor help longing for a leg or wing and bit of the heart — of Turkey" (VIII, 122). Talking of food, we should not forget his one-word characterisation of himself as a vegetarian, by means of the telling compound "leguminous-eating Ascetic" — letter of 8th December 1811 to F. Hodgson (II, 141).

After these rather short and "economic" samples of Byron's gifts as a humorist, we must discuss a few longer, descriptive passages of his prose wherein this "Monarch of Wit" — if I may borrow here Thomas Carew's appellation of John Donne — recreates comic scenes, episodes, and *tableaux* he had witnessed, in sustained narrative parts of his epistles<sup>5</sup>.

Beginning chronologically we should perhaps mention Byron's reference to a funny situation involving his half-sister, which he could have only imagined since he was not present when it occurred. His words (30th January 1805) to Augusta are: "Amongst other circumstances I heard of your *boldness* as a Rider, especially one anecdote about your horse carrying you into the stable *perforce*" (I, 61). The teenaged Byron could not help laughing at the embarrassment of his equestrian Augusta.

In a very long letter to his mother (12th November 1809) Byron took great pleasure in scaring her with his detailed description of a minor sea storm which, nonetheless, had threatened his life. His colorful servant, William Fletcher, is an indispensable comedian in that scene, as he is in several others that the poet recorded later on.

Two days ago I was nearly lost in a Turkish ship of war owing to the ignorance of the captain and crew though the storm was not violent. Fletcher yelled after his wife, the Greeks called on all the Saints, the Mussulmen on Alla, the Captain burst into tears and ran below deck telling us to call on God, the sails were split, the main-yard shivered, the wind blowing fresh, the night setting in, and all our chance was to make Corfu which is in possession of the French, or (as Fletcher *pathetically* termed it) 'a watery grave'. I did all I could to console Fletcher but finding him incorrigible, wrapped myself in my Albanian capote... (I, 229).

Fletcher — whom his master on another occasion characterised as "the learned Fletcher," ironically alluding to his assumed British superiority to local servants — in the above instance disgraced his seafaring nation, whereas the young and brave Lord Byron showed these "Orientals" the superior inner qualities and courage of a British nobleman — at least that seems to be the spirit of the real anecdote the young poet so skillfully recorded for his mother.

<sup>5</sup> For a general evaluation of Byron's prose style see John Jump (1975: 46ff).

A similarly comic scene is described in a letter of 23rd February 1823 to Augusta Leigh, from Missolonghi, in which Byron laughs at the panic caused by a rather innocuous earthquake: "But I will not plague you with politics — wars — or earthquakes — though we had another very smart one three nights ago which produced a scene ridiculous enough as no damage was done except to those who stuck fast in the scuffle to get first out of the doors or windows — amongst whom some recent importations fresh from England" (XI, 120). Were it not for the last line — the panicked Britons trying to escape just as anybody else — one could venture to find in Byron's prose vestiges or echoes of ethnic prejudice. Good for him he never tried to claim any superiority of the English over most other nations.

To go back to Fletcher and his sufferings, mention must be made of the humorous description of his reactions to the difficulties and discomforts of their trek over mountainous Greece. Byron writes his mother from Athens (20th July 1810):

Fletcher after having been toasted and roasted, and baked and grilled, and eaten by all sorts of creeping things begins to philosophise, is grown a refined as well as resigned character, and promises at his return to become an ornament to his own parish, and a very prominent person in the futuro family pedigree of the Fletchers whom I take to be Goths by their accomplishments, Greeks by their acuteness, and ancient Saxons by their appetite. He (Fletcher) begs leave to send half a dozen sighs to Sally, his spouse, ... (I, 4).

This passage, through its innocent and sympathetic humour, first appeals to the senses of the reader, as it draws the picture of an unaccustomed foreigner attacked by bloodthirsty mosquitoes, flees, lice, flies and other kinds of insects indigenous to Greece; and then it appeals to his feelings as he is helped to visualise a pathetic and uxorious domestic sighing his heart away at his absent wife — a bathetic substitution for fervent kisses.

Byron described his swimming the Hellespont, from ancient Sestos to Abydos, in several of his letters soon after the event. Humour is missing in none, as it is not missing in the equally witty lyric he composed then on that occasion. On 3rd May 1810 he wrote Henry Drury: "This morning I swam from *Sestos* to *Abydos*, the immediate distance is not above a mile but the current renders it hazardous, so much so, that I doubt whether Leander's conjugal powers must not have been exhausted in his passage to Paradise" (I, 237). Apart from his always favourite classical allusions Byron here misses no chance to humorously refer to sex — a subject of interest to him and to Drury since both were youths in their prime. In his version of the same feat, described to his mother (18th May 1810), Byron referred to the Grecian hero as "Monsieur Leander", obviously implying that he was amorously energetic as a contemporary Frenchman — another instance of ethnic stereotype humour.

A really great and hilarious passage, that reads like a page from a scandal-

ous story, is contained in Byron's letter to Augusta, written in Ravenna, on 26th July 1819, in which he describes the characteristics and antics of Teresa Guiccioli and her friend, Geltruda. The passage, rife with dramatic exchanges and details of open flirtation with both women, is too long to quote here (VI, 185–6). But a more spectacular scene was described with flair in a very long letter to John Murray (1st August 1819), in which Byron — who was in excellent spirits — jokingly apologises for his amorous activities and for the character of Don Juan that he had created for his satiric masterpiece in verse. Byron, sparing no details, quotes the hostile exchanges between his older lover, Madame Segati, and the newer one, the famous Fornarina (= Baker's wife) Margarita Cogni, and explains a good deal about the adulterous activities of married women, who easily cuckolded their husbands for money, presents and out of whim, or even *amore*. The letter, longer than seven printed pages, reads like a humorous short story or comedy scene. A passage reminding one of eighteenth-century novels of the bedroom-comedy type, is where Byron mentions a fight between the furiously jealous Fornarina and other Italian females who had become intimate with him:

But she had inordinate Self-love — and was not tolerant of other women — except Segati — who was as she said my regular "Amica" — so that I being at that time somewhat promiscuous — there was great confusion — and demolition of head dresses and handkerchiefs — and sometimes my servants in "redding the fray" (from Scott's *Waverley*, Chapter LIV) — between her and other feminine persons — received more knocks than acknowledgements for their peaceful endeavours (VI, 194).

This sort of humorous narrative goes on for four more pages, in which all paragraphs are full of bedroom or "Pantaloons" humour. The passage, however, suffices for the reader to visualise the two ostensibly dressed Venetian ladies tearing at each other for the *amore di Lord Byron* and his embarrassed domestics bravely suffering their combined blows in their gallant efforts to disengage them.

Back to the Contessa Guiccioli, in his letter of 29th October 1818 to Richard Belgrave Hoppner, Byron created another excellent example of the figure of speech known as *bathos*, in his description of the terms of Teresa's return to her aged husband: "Count Guiccioli comes to Venice next week and I am requested to consign his wife to him, which shall be done — with all her linen" (VI, 237). The choice of mercantile diction in this instance indicates how he viewed the belated interest of the Count in his wife, personal honour and linen.

One can go on and on citing and analysing similar instances of farcical comedy found in longer or shorter passages of Byron's almost 3,000 letters.<sup>6</sup> His journals proper are more serious in tone, more concise and rather matter-of-fact. Obviously, the lack of humour in them suggests that they had been

<sup>6</sup> For Byron's overall achievement as a letter-writer cf. John Clubbe (1975: 515).

kept for his own private use as data sources of sorts. On the contrary, his humorous letters were meant to entertain their addressees as well as to amuse their witty author.

During this brief presentation I endeavored to give an idea of how successful Byron was as a prose humorist. We recognised his wit in short and in longer instances of humorous expressions, ranging from almost epigrammatic apothegms to narrative anecdotes with something like a plot. We experienced his skill at the use of metaphors, similes, puns, bathos and all kinds of verbal irony. We heard him poking fun at comic escapades, at various persons and at himself. We noticed no malice, no desire to hurt anybody and no wish to lecture the world. In many of those passages, however, we recognised details, descriptions, themes and all manner of elements that we also meet in his purely poetic works. Echoes of what we have witnessed together reverberate, more stereophonically, to be sure, in poems like "The Blues", *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, *Beppo*, *Don Juan* and other texts. In the letters, we recognised the same unmistakable genius that had composed the poems. The one set of texts illustrates and completes the other. That is why I did not call my paper "Byron as a Prose Satirist." He would not have liked that. His didactic purposes were served in his poetry; in his letters he was satisfied to offer entertainment to his friends and to himself. His letters were not meant for the public, or *pro bono publico*, as his great satires were.

No doubt, had Byron been born half a century earlier, he would have been able to emulate, or even surpass, known authors such as John Gay, Richard Sheridan, Henry Fielding and others who excelled in the writing of comic fiction and farce for the stage. But Byron was born after the Romantic Revival of poetry as the noblest literary vehicle, and the steady decline of verse and prose comedy. The examples of Wordsworth and Coleridge were fresh before his eyes; he reconciled then his own Swifitean and Popean idiosyncrasy to the composition of all manner of verse, leaving prose to less ambitious writers than "The Pilgrim of Eternity".

#### REFERENCES

- Byron, George. 1973-82. *Byron's letters and journals*. 12 vols. Leslie A. Marchand (ed). London: John Murray.
- Clubbe, John. 1975. "Byron in his letters". *South Atlantic Quarterly* 74. 507-15.
- Higashinaka, Itsuyo. 1979. "Byron's sense of ageing". *The Byron journal* 7. 48-60.
- Jump, John. 1975. "Reflections on Byron's prose". *The Byron journal* 3. 46-56.
- Palfy, Istvan. 1976. "Byron and his romantic self-portraits". *Hungarian studies in English* 11. 65-72.
- Schroeder, Ronald A. 1983. "Byron's sense of time and age before 1810". *The Byron journal* 11. 4-20.
- Shaw, Harry. 1976. *Concise dictionary of literary terms*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co.