

## **Miroslava Horová, History and Play in Byron's Dramas, Ph.D. dissertation**

The great contribution of this dissertation is a consistent employment of advanced anthropological methodologies, Roger Caillois's typology of play and Wolfgang Iser's theory of the "fictive". Especially the analysis of *Cain* can be mentioned not only as an exemplary use of these advanced methodologies but as a real breakthrough in the interpretation of this work, where the individual play types create a multi-layered fiction of cosmic and human history. This also more than justifies the treatment of Byron's "mysteries" together with his historical dramas and demonstrates the depth and proleptic power of Byron's dramatic representations of history. The same can be said about *Werner*, which reveals the crucial nature of this unjustly neglected play for the understanding of Byron's late representations of history in *Don Juan* and especially in *The Deformed Transformed*. Moreover, the interpretation of *Werner* notably exceeds the existing approaches to all Byron's dramas, since it brings strong and persuasive arguments for understanding the play as an attempt to "transcend, from within, as it were, the tragic genre that has been a cornerstone of Western culture". The chapter efficiently – and almost surprisingly – integrates different thematic lines of the dissertation and the discussion of the tragic form. Similar to the *Cain* and *Werner* chapters, the last one on *The Deformed Transformed* also marks the breakthrough in Byron criticism, which has been mostly either slighting this play or vainly trying to understand it by drawing forced parallels with works of other historical periods (Renaissance, Baroque). The dissertation displays its critical acumen and brilliance of close reading in demonstrating the importance of the fragmented play as a summary statement on the relationship of fiction and history in Byron's work. In this way, the dissertation persuasively establishes the importance of the neglected dramatic creation for the understanding of Byron's oeuvre.

The following part of this report contains critical comments on the individual parts of the dissertation and some of its general problems.

The Introduction opens with perhaps a too detailed discussion of recent interpretations of Byron's understanding of history and Byron's dramas, while the main thesis, which should distinguish the candidate's approach from others, namely that Byron "plays with history in order to get as close as possible to the truth of history" (p. 10), lacks theoretical discussion and support. The discussion should concentrate on different meanings of "play" (in a dramatic/theatrical sense, "ludic" sense, and, most generally, as a functioning of a dynamic, open structure - Derrida). Similarly the problem of the relationship between fact and fiction would require more theoretical attention, based especially on Iser's anthropological understanding of fiction and also on Romantic debates about the nature of "dramatic illusion" (in Coleridge's Shakespearean lectures, and *Biographia Literaria*, whose penultimate chapter about "Jacobinical drama" provoked Byron's angry response). Moreover, a discussion of the relationship between Byron's approach to history and sacred history (and especially its ending, the Apocalypse), evident from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Don Juan* and especially from *The Vision of Judgement*, should be developed both in the introduction and in individual chapters. The same can be said about the carnivalesque, which also includes a remarkable relationship to drama discussed by scholars in early modern theatre (Bristol, Weimann). Discussing some of these aspects separately from the main topic of the thesis under the heading "A Note on Methodology" can hardly contribute to the persuasiveness of the introduction. Reliable knowledge of recent theories of play demonstrated in the footnotes (p. 18) and the main text (p. 17) should be related to two basic topics of the dissertation: Byron's concepts of "regular drama" and "mental theatre" and the understanding of history as a "play", that is, an open, dynamic structure. Although these themes may seem rather remote from the theories of play discussed in the introduction, they could be subsumed under a common heading of "constitutive" and "regulative" functioning of play. This would bring the

whole argument closer to theories of fiction drawing from Kantian stimuli (Hans Vaihinger, Wolfgang Iser) and their relatedness to Byron's attempts to approach "the truth of history" in the fictional and dramatic way.

The individual chapters are more successful in demonstrating the power of principal methodology and its importance for the interpretation of Byron's dramas. Nonetheless, some important questions remain unanswered:

1. What is the relationship of the different types of play defined by Caillois and Iser to the carnivalesque defined by Bakhtin? This question concerns mainly *Marino Faliero*, but also other plays, such as *The Deformed Transformed* and *Sardanapalus*.
2. What is the relationship of Caillois'/Iser's types to the dramatic structure of Byron's historical plays, and especially to Byron's efforts to achieve "regularity" of dramatic form? This question is especially relevant in the case of *Marino Faliero*, *Sardanapalus* and *Werner*.

Similar to the Introduction, the structure of individual chapters needs more attention which should consist in the identification of secondary themes and their relationships and in the division into sub-chapters. The exception are the last – and best – chapter on *Werner* and *The Deformed Transformed*.

My further remarks concern individual chapters.

In the discussion of *Marino Faliero* the interpretation of the prepared uprising as *revolution* is not given an attention it should deserve. This especially relates to the character of Bertuccio, who is not given sufficient attention. The thematic focus on the carnivalesque somehow averts attention from the issue of revolution, which was prominent in Byron's major works, such as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III and IV and *Don Juan*.

In the case of *The Two Foscari* the emphasis on the grotesque does not allow to appreciate the importance of a more relevant theme, Venice as a Foucauldian "carceral state" where the ruling oligarchy is bound by criminal complicity and the power is exercised chiefly by surveillance and "segmentation" of society. The grotesque in the play is rather unrelated to the carnival and owes its power both to the "disciplinary" character of the regime and to its form of financial oligarchy. This theme seems very topical especially in the present situation of the post-communist countries.

In the analysis of *Sardanapalus* attention should be paid to the different *fictions* of history, which seem to be organized by the powers of the grotesque and carnivalesque. The unrealizable attempt of the hero to shake off the *responsibility* for history can be seen as the problem of the "gift of death" discussed in Derrida's eponymous book. The *avant la lettre* Nietzschean interpretation of history could thus be efficiently confronted with the questions of fiction (which played an important role in Nietzsche's philosophy) and Derridean emphasis on the otherness of death as the predicament and limit of responsibility. As for "cairós" or rather *kairos*, Foucault's *History of Sexuality* II, would probably be a better source than Agamben, especially because of its direct relatedness to the protagonist and his hedonism.

The detailed and penetrating analysis of Clausewitz's treatise *On War* in *Werner* might still benefit from reflecting on the links between the modern warfare and the state management of bio-power, pointed out in Foucault's *History of Sexuality* I. *Werner* can be read as a tragedy of the collapse of the principle of "alliance" in social politics. The destructive and at the same time playful war may represent the extreme of "political technology of individuals" based on the "deployment of sexuality" and leading to large-scale genocides in the course of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The brilliant discussion of *The Deformed Transformed* would benefit from the comparison of Arnold's Faustian pact with the plot of *Manfred* where the emphasis is on the refusal of the hero to conclude a pact either with the forces of nature or those of the evil. On the whole, it appears that the last play of Byron elaborates the structures and thematic features

of the first one, especially in terms of the relationship to the two key themes of the dissertation: fiction and history. For this reason, I do not think the exclusion of *Manfred* fully justified. On the contrary, I think that the correlation of *Manfred* with *The Deformed Transformed* would contribute to the structural unity of the thesis. Finally, in the conclusion of the chapter, one may lack the references to Deleuze's notion of history as a comic play of fictions in his "Theatrum Philosophicum", which is also a text linking two postmodern visions of history (Deleuze's and Foucault's), both of which stem from Nietzsche and, can be used (apart from anthropological approaches of Caillois and Iser) to map Byron's visions and fictions of history.

Finally, I do not think that a conclusion to such a penetrating interpretation of Byron's drama should stress "the deliberate *amorality* of his [Byron's] moral". First because the plays seem to transcend the sphere of individual morality (let alone the morality of Byron as a historical figure) and secondly because they demonstrate the deficiencies of existing forms of ethics across centuries and millennia, thus challenging our concepts of the ethical and even the anthropocentric notions of the universe.

In spite of these critical comments, the dissertation can be said to overwhelm, surprise and, chiefly, stimulate not only Byron scholars but all who ask Iser's question: "How to do theory?" It is not an overstatement to call it a breakthrough in Byron studies. So far my memory can reach, it is one of the most revelatory and accomplished dissertations submitted in our Ph.D. programme.

S velkou radostí doporučuji k obhajobě.

V Praze, 28. března 2014

prof. PhDr. Martin Procházka, CSc.  
školitel