

Miroslava Horová, **History and Play in Lord Byron's Dramas**
Review of a PhD Thesis (oponentský posudek disertační práce)

In her PhD dissertation Mgr Horová examines the last seven dramas by G. G. Byron, i.e. the entire dramatic work of the English poet, with the exception of his perhaps most famous play *Manfred* (1817). The exclusion of the aforesaid “dramatic poem” is well explained in the introduction and its absence in no way diminishes the value of the thesis. On the contrary, the dramatic texts beginning with *Marino Faliero* and ending with the unfinished *The Deformed Transformed* convincingly delineate the arena of Byron's attempt to dramatize history, both actual (based on historical record) and mythological (based on biblical accounts) and thus to present what M. Horova calls “a sustained dramatic project”, marking the final phase of the poet's career (1820-1822). As Byron critics prevailingly tend to neglect or undervalue this part of the Byron legacy, the thesis puts it as its foremost goal to reassess and redefine the position of this “project” in the context of English early nineteenth-century writings, by demonstrating “the extent to which ... the seven dramas ... represent a fascinating ... universe of thematic and conceptual cross-pollination and progressive experimental development.”

To achieve this ambitious goal Horová finds a unifying principle of the dramas in Byron's conception of history as “play”, as an occasion to transform “historical truth” to a dynamic interplay of fact and fiction revealing theatrical and literary truth of historical (or “historical”) moments. Methodologically, she makes use of W. Iser's application of Roger Caillois's anthropological conception of play, with its four defining strategies – *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx* – to demonstrate that this is exactly the principle which can be applied to investigate how history is treated in Byron's plays.

The entire body of the thesis is then divided into five chapters, each of which is devoted to a neat and detailed analysis of one or two plays. The first chapter discusses two Venetian tragedies, *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari*, focusing on how the play strategies invest these texts with the sense of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, respectively. Horová's interpretation of the use of “graffiti” and “veiled portrait” motifs in the first play can stand for the characteristic strong points of the thesis. Similarly, the second chapter deals with the question of heroism and the agonistic strategies of the eponymous hero of *Sardanapalus* in his attempt to oppose the Nietzschean mechanisms of power. The third chapter explains, how the play strategies apply to the author's treatment of biblical topics, analysing Lucifer's *ilinx* and *agon* to tempt Cain and discussing divine *ilinx* as presented in the Deluge theme of *Heaven and Earth*. Chapter 4, dealing with Byron's German drama *Werner*, clearly manifests that Horová's application of Iser's taxonomy is by no means mechanical. Realizing that this play moves away from the previous concept which still observed the demands of the tragic form, she includes a new term, the Heraclitan *polemos*, to explain the intra-textual transformation, “bursting ... the confines of [a] dramatic genre.” This suggests that Byron grew more and more radical in developing his dramatic project. The final chapter seems to support this tendency, discussing the unfinished last play as experimental drama in which free play is unleashed unprecedentedly, thus allowing the play strategies to be deployed in full.

There are many points for which M. Horova's thesis should be recommended as a work of unique critical value. First of all she was able to find an effectual interpretive clue to the texts which still maintain a rather precarious position in the history of English literature, mostly due to the unease the Byron critics show about this part of the poet's output. In her analyses she has proved that her idea was right; the seven plays viewed through the prism of play strategies

make a considerable contribution of their author to the role of history in literature. Horová's approach is exceptionally attentive to all possible aspects of Byron's texts, avoiding mechanical applications and managing to see the specific character of each play. Due to this she is also able to modify her presentation, to adapt it to the demands of the critical discourse, accentuating what she finds absolutely central about a play's meaning (the passage on names in Werner can well exemplify this). All in all, we can say that her thesis is a fundamental contribution to Byron scholarship and that it should be published without delay.

There is only one minor point I would like to ask about. As M. Horová knows, Caillois's conception of the play is not the only one that appeared during the 20th century. Almost contemporaneous is the phenomenological game theory of Eugen Fink, the fact never mentioned in the thesis. Would M. Horová see it viable to think about including this angle to reading Byron's dramas? Does her understanding of play include the illusionary, "unreal", symbolizing character of the phenomenological Spiel? Is it worthy of noting in the Introduction at least?

Conclusion:

I am happy to conclude that the submitted PhD thesis more than meets the requirements for such a kind of academic writing and that I can recommend it for defence unreservedly.

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