

Lord Byron's Poetic Technique : A Study

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Abstract. Byron is a great satirist. The Augustan age is essentially an age of satire and Byron, too, has his fascination for satires. In his poetry Byron has satirised love, war, women, politicians, English society and even his own contemporaries. While satirising them, he has used different techniques. To understand Byron's poetic technique it is essential that we should compare it with that of Dryden and Pope. Like all other satirists, Byron, too uses certain devices to achieve his characteristic effect. The satires of Dryden and Pope have monolithic structure – monolithic in the sense that they never digress. But Byron is always digressive. There is too much of digression in his satires. But Byron's satires are certainly not dull, and it is because of his digressions. It is the satiric spirit only that links him with the Augustan tradition. The models of Dryden and Pope are the Latin satirists – Horace and Juvenal, but the models of Byron are the Romantic Italian satirists Pulci and Casti. The present paper is an attempt at exploring Byron's technique in his poetry.

Keywords : Burlesque; mockery; irony; digressions; duality of tone.

Besides being a romantic, Byron is a great satirist, and therefore, he is called a romantic paradox. The Augustan age is essentially an age of satire, and Byron too, has his fascination for satires. Thus we can say that consciously he belongs to the tradition of Pope and unconsciously he reflects a few romantic characteristics. In short, he is an Augustan born late. In his poetry Byron has satirised love, war, women, politicians, English society and even his own contemporaries. While satirising them he has used different techniques. The present paper is an attempt at exploring Byron's technique in his poetry.

To understand Byron's poetic technique it is essential that we should compare it with that of Dryden and Pope. T.S. Eliot in his essay on John Dryden points out that the characteristic method of Dryden is that he magnifies his victims while Pope minimises them. His most important satires, "The Dunciad" and "The Rape of the Lock", follow the method of Dryden, and this is called the mock epic method. Therefore the characteristic method of Augustan satire is mock-epic or mock-heroic. So far as Byron is concerned, he does not follow this method. His technique is burlesque. In the mock-epic the theme is trivial, but the treatment is exalted. For instance, in Dryden's "Mac Flecknoe" the theme is the succession of Shadwell to the throne the kingdom of dullness. Flecknoe chooses Shadwell because he looks like his father most in respect of dullness and it is Shadwell who alone can maintain the integrity of that vast empire. Shadwell succeeds to the throne and all royal ceremonies are performed.

Here was seen how the subject is insignificant, but it is treated in an epic manner. The process is of magnifying a certain trivial thing to a fantastic heights so that it begins to look ridiculous. In his *Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* Dryden points out :

How easy it is to call rogue and villain and that wittily!
 But how hard to make a man appear a fool, a
 blockhead, or a knave, without using any of those
 opprobrious terms! To spare the grossness of names,
 and to do the thing yet more severely, is to draw a
 full face, and to make the nose and the cheeks stand
 out, and yet not to employ any depth of shadowing.
 This is the mystery of that noble trade, which yet no
 master can teach to his apprentice... There is a
 vast difference betwix the slovenly butchering of a
 man, and the fineness of a stroke that separates the
 head from the body and leaves it standing in its place.
 (Dryden, *A Discourse* 136)

But to make the victim ridiculous, the satirist has to dress him up in the suit of armour, i.e., he has to treat him in a lofty style. Let us illustrate it through concrete examples :

Shadwell alone my perfect image bears,
 Mature in dullness from his tender years;
 Shadwell alone of all my sons is he
 Who stands confirmed in his full stupidity. (15-18)

Here the words like 'perfect', 'mature', 'confirmed', we readily associate with positive virtue , and which therefore, predispose our minds to admiration, or at least approval. But the perfect image turns out to be an image of the wretched Flecknoe, and Shadwell's maturity is the maturity of dullness, and what he is confirmed in is his stupidity. All these words make the style elevated and Shadwell's dullness and stupidity are well magnified. Let us take another example from Pope :

Just then Clarissa drew with tempting grace
 A two-edged weapon from her shining case.
 So Ladies in Romance assist their Knight
 Present the spear, and arm him for the fight.
 He takes the gifts with rev'rence, and extends
 The little engine on his fingers' ends. (Pope III. 27-32)

Here the situation that the poet describes is very petty. Clarissa draws a pair of scissors from her case and presents it to the Baron to clip off Belinda's lock. But how the situation has been magnified to a fantastic height! as if clarissa were a heroine of some romance and the Baron, a knight going for a fight. The scissors is, 'a two-edged weapon', 'a little engine.' The use of such phrases and words like 'grace', 'gift', 'reverence' adds loftiness to the style. In other words, the trivial situation has been presented in heightened style.

Byron's method is completely different from this. His is burlesque. In the burlesque the satirist does not magnify the objects to exaggerated height, rather he pulls them down from their actual position. In other words, we may say that it is a leg-pulling method. Mock-epic is indirect whereas burlesque is direct. The satirist is interested in direct abuse and name-calling. The dissimilarity between the two methods can be well illustrated through the example of a bladder. The bladder is the same for both kinds of satirists. That is to say the object is the same upon which they work. But their method is different. The mock-epic satirist goes on pumping the air into the bladder till it bursts out by itself. But what does the burlesque writer do? For him the bladder is already blown. His business is just to pinch it. As soon as he pinches, the bladder bursts out. Thus they, at last, reach the same destination. To debunk the object is the common pursuit, but they arrive by different ways. Now the method of mock-epic satirist is more difficult than that of burlesque satirist. It is difficult to pump the bladder than to pinch it.

The subject of burlesque may be trivial or great, but the treatment is not elevated, nor the style lofty and grand. Let us illustrate it by a short satiric poem by Byron called 'Epilogue'.

There's something in a stupid ass,
And something in a heavy dunce,
But never since I went to school
I heard or saw so damned a fool
As William Wordsworth is for once

And now I've seen so great a fool
As William Wordsworth is for once
I really wish that Peter Bell
And he who wrote it were in hell,
For writing nonsense for the once. (Byron, *Selected Poetry* 352)

It is a heap of direct abuses bestowed upon Wordsworth. Dryden would have called it a grossness of abuse. Here the subject is certainly not trivial, but the treatment is quite trivial. There is no attempt on part of the satirist to magnify the object, rather he minimises Wordsworth to the level of a dunce, a damned fool

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deserving hell for talking nonsense. An another example from English Bards and Scotch Reviewers :

Yet none in lofty numbers can surpass
 The bard who soars to elegize on ass;
 So well the subject suits his noble mind,
 He brays, the Laureate of the long-eared kind.

(*English Bards* 261 - 264)

It is characteristically in the burlesque method. Coleridge is directly pulled from the status of a poet to that of an ass with long ears, braying. Even the heroes and military commanders are presented as if they were tiny creatures. Suwarrow, the Russian Commander-in-Chief in the Battle of Ismael, is just like an imp flitting hither and thither :

..... ; -great joy unto the camp!
 To a Russian, Tartar, English, French, Cossaque,
 O'er whom Suwarrow shone like a gas lamp,
 Presseaging a most luminous attack;
 Or like wisp along the marsh so damp,
 Which leads beholder on a boggy walk,
 He fitted to and fro a dancing light,
 Which all who saw it followed wrong or right. (*Don Juan* XLVI)

This is the typical method of Byron's satires from English Bards and Scotch Reviewers to "The Vision of Judgement" and "Don Juan". In "The Vision of Judgement" the presentation of the angels and saints (except Satan and Michael) is extremely ridiculous. Since the angels have got nothing to do, they indulge in trivial acts :

The Angels were all singing out of tune,
 And hoarse with having little else to do,
 Excepting to wind up the sun and moon,
 Or curb a runaway young star or two,
 Or wild colt of a comet, Which to soon
 Broke out of the bounds o'er the ethereal blue,
 Spitting some planets with its playful tail,
 As boats are sometimes by a wanton whale.

(*The Vision of Judgement* II)

This comic presentation of the angels and also of St. Peter pulls them down from the high spiritual status. Such serious and religious things are treated in an extremely trivial manner.

Like all other satirists, Byron, too, uses certain devices to achieve his characteristic effect. Anti-climax is one of them, and in "Don Juan" it has a great importance. It is a device of trickery. The reader feels that he has been tricked when he tumbles over the anti-climatic word or phrase. He begins as if he were going to say something good or serious about a thing or character till the bathos comes and the readers feel that they have been misled. For example,

Since then she had sparkled through three glowing winters,
 Admired, adored, but also so correct
 That she had puzzled all the acutest hinters,
 Without the apparel of being circumspect;
 They could not even glean the slightest splinter
 From off the marble, which had no defect.
 She had also snatched a moment since her marriage
 To bear a son and heir—and one miscarriage.

(Don Juan XIV. 56)

In this stanza he is speaking of Adeline. In the first seven lines he gives the impression that he is seriously talking about Adeline. It seems as if he were going to pay tribute to her. But only one word 'miscarriage' brings the whole seeming seriousness down to levity. It reverts the whole impression gathered in the above seven lines. Another instance of bathos is

He learn'd the arts of riding, fencing, gunnery
 And how scale a fortress—or a nunnery. (I. XXXVIII)

Another technique used by Byron is his mockery. The great buffoon as he was, in his satires all the time he is jesting, mocking and buffooning. His mockery is almost school-boyish. For example, he talks of Julia in the following lines :

Wedded she was some years, and to man
 Of fifty, and such husbands are in plenty;
 And yet, I think, instead of such a ONE
 'Twere better to have TWO of five-and-twenty (I. LXII)

Here Byron satirise the great disparity of age in marriage, but the tone is essentially of mockery. Take another example from 'Bepo'.

She deemed the window-frames and shutters brittle
 Against a daring housebreaker or sprite,
 And so she the thought it prudent to connect her
 With a vice-husband, chiefly to protect her. (Bepo XXIX)

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Here Byron laughs at woman's rationalising her connection with another but none than a buffoon would use word like 'Vice-husband'.

Indeed, essentially related to this mockery is Byron's humour. But in him we get two types of humour – pure and satiric. In the storm scene at sea in "Don Juan" where he describes how Juan's spaniel was butchered for food and how in the drawing of lots it fell on Juan's tutor, Pedrillo, it is a case of humour without any satiric tinge. But when he describes Wordsworth washing 'a boat' to sell the deeps of air, his humour also gathers the force of satire :

If he must fain sweep over the ethereal plain,
And Pegasus runs restive in his "Waggan",
Could he not beg the loan of Charles's Wain?
Or pay Medea for a single dragon?
Or if, too classic for his vulgur brain,
He fear'd his neck to venture such a nag on,
And he must needs mount hearer to the moon,
Could not the block head ask for a balloon ? (Don Juan III. 1c)

Irony has been one of the most effective instruments in the hands of the satirists. In Swift, it is the most powerful weapon. Irony consists in the disparity between the obvious meaning and the real intention of the writer or the speaker. But in Byron, it is not much important. It is due to the fact that the jester or buffoon is so strong in him that irony becomes almost insignificant. Still there are some cases in which he used irony most effectively. Jack Smith dies in the Battle of Ismael. Byron says :

He fell, immortal a bulletin
In the preparation for battle
Glory began to dawn with due sublimity (VII. II)

One of the most important devices through which Byron achieves remarkable satiric effect is the use of other's lines and statements and parodying them in the context of satire. In "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers" he satirises Southey :

But if, in spite all the World can say
Thou still wilt verse ward plod thy weary way.
(*English Bards* 229 - 230)

Here the second line is a parody of Gray's line from his "Elegy" – The ploughman homeward plods his weary way. Through this device, Byron has got marvellous satiric effect. It shows Southey's essential incapacity for writing poetry. It also suggests

his impudence in persisting in it.

In "Don Juan" Byron has used this technique lavishly. Many Latin and Greek quotations are used for satirical purpose. Even the statements of others are used to achieve marvellous effect. He parodies Aristotle's unities in the following stanza with great success :

But never yet (except of course a Miss
Unwed, or mistress never to be wed
Or Wed already, who object to this)
Was there chaste dame who had not in her head
Some drama of the marriage unities
Observed as strictly both at board and bed
At those of Aristotle, though sometimes
They turn out melodrama or pantomimes (Don Juan. XV. xxxii)

Now let us consider some of the important features of Byron's satires. It cannot be denied that his satires lack the force and cogency of the satires of Dryden and Pope. This can be attributed to various reasons. Broadly speaking, it is due to three major reasons. At first their method of execution is different. Secondly, their method of characterisation is different, and thirdly, they use different poetic mediums or forms.

The satires of Dryden and Pope have monolithic structure – monolithic in the sense that they never digress. But Byron is always digressive. There is a lack of single-minded concentration upon the subject he is satirising. Dryden and Pope have always their subjects in their view. Byron has too many, or rather, too many topics, quite unconnected with his main theme, cropping up in his mind and he all the time saying something witty and interesting about them. In "Beppo", for instance, Italian climate and women remind him of England and he goes on making observation on so many English things. In "The Vision of Judgement", though it is a satire mainly on Southey, a large portion of it is devoted to the description of angels, saints, Satan and others. In "Don Juan", digression becomes one of its most important features. Owing to the excess of digressions, no monolithic satiric effect is produced.

Though this digressive habit may be counted as a defect from the point of view of pure satire, it has some other advantages for Byron. It works as a saving grace for his burlesque methods. Professor James Sutherland, while talking about the burlesque method of Samuel Butler's "Hudibras", points out the danger of monotony that it is open to. "The danger", he says, "it may be argued, is implicit in every satirical work of any considerable length; the satirist erects an elaborate pretence, and in time we have had enough, and want a change. But the writer of burlesque,

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because he keeps harping on the same extravagant note in especially open to the charge of monotony, and Butler certainly does not escape it."(Sutherland 43)

But Byron's satires are certainly not dull, and it is only because of his digressions. He does not harp on the same extravagant note and his digressions lend enhancement to his satires. T.S. Eliot in his excellent essay on Byron draws our attention to this fact. "We fail", he says "to give credit to Byron for the instinctive art by which, in poem like "Childe Harold", and still more efficiently in "Beppo" or "Don Juan", he avoids monotony by a dexterous turn from one subject to another. He has the Cardinal virtue of being never dull". (Eliot 200)

Another factor that blunts the edge of Byron's satire is his unique method of delineation of satiric characters. Dryden and Pope build up the character of their victims through successive strokes. Their victims are not allowed to have rest even for a moment. One blow falls and the other is ready. They are tossed up as if they were in a storm. For example, let us take the portrait of Achitophel :

Of these the false Achitophel was the first
 A name to all succeeding Ages curst.
 For close designs and crooked counsel fit,
 Sagacious, bold and turbulent of wit... (Dryden 150-153)

Let us take another example from Pope :

Yet let me flap this bug with gilded wings,
 This painted child of dirt, that stinks and stings
 Whose buzz the witty and the fair annoys,
 Yet wit ne'er tasetes, and beauty ne'er enjoys:
 So well-bred spanials civiliy delight
 In mumbling of the game they dare not bite.
 Etemal smiles his emptiness betray, dimpling all the way
 Whether in florid importance he speaks... (Pope 309-316)

Here Pope has built up the character of Lord Hervey under the name of Sporus. Dryden and Pope have concentrated their whole force of wit in ruthlessly hammering blow after blow on their respective victims. But such remarkable portraits are not to be found in Byron's satires. It is only Southe in "The Vision of Judgement" who can match them to some extent. Owing to his digressive habits too, he builds up his characters gradually, adding details some here and some there, some strokes here and some strokes there. This lessens the force of his satires. In "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers" where Byron tries to concentrate on his victims, even there too, he fails to rise to the height of Dryden's or Pope's skill in character painting. His

portraits of Southey, Wordsworth and Coleridge, compared with those of Dryden-
portraits of Shaftesbury, Zimri, for instance and Pope appear, rather insignificant.

Another defect of Byron's characterization, from the satiric point of view, is the dual approach to his victims. He comes to satirise his victims, but the romantic in him compels him to take the pathetic view of the situation connected with the characters. The purists of satire would object to this, because a satirist is supposed to have not sympathy for his victims. He is supposed to have as merciless a nature as possible. Swift, Dryden and Pope have this satiric virtue. But Byron does not have.

In "Don Juan" this duality of tone is revealed. Lovell has rightly observed, "It is significant that Don Juan combines and reconciles within itself the extremes of the love poem and of the satire, mingling and fusing attitudes of almost pure approval and almost complete disapproval-at once a great hymn of love and satire on woman, frequently concerned with the comedy of love. Thus the satire may merge so successfully with comedy or at other times with tragedy that it is often hardly recognisable as 'serious' satire : seldom or never is it narrowly satiric or pure." (Lovell 236) For example, the cases of Julia and Gulbeyaz, the important figures in it may be considered here. Byron attacks Julia's hypocrisy. But at the same time he pities her lot, too. She is twenty three and is married to a man of fifty. We feel that her hypocrisy springs from her unfulfilled sex desire, the fault of which is to be attributed not to her, but to her marriage. We feel had she been married to a man of her age, she would not have fallen a victim to self-deception. Had Lawrence dealt with this subject, he would have made her an extremely pathetic figure. But half-serious nature of Byron makes her half satiric and half pathetic. And, however frivolous Byron might be with her, he is certainly sympathetic with her poor lot when she is sent to convent, separated from her lover, the pangs of which surcharge her letter to him with pathos which Byron might have left. The following stanza from her letter is excessively pathetic :

Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,
'Tis woman's whole existence; man may range
The court, camp, church, the vessel and the mart;
Sword, gown, gain, glory, offer in exchange
Pride, Fame, ambition, to fill up his heart,
And few there are whom these cannot estrange;
Men have all these resources, we but one,
To love again, and be again undone. (*Don Juan* 1. CXCIV)

Similar is the case with Gulbeyaz She too, like Julia, is married to an old man. But her case is more miserable, because Sultan, her husband, has hundreds and hundreds of mistresses in his harem.

This dual approach of Byron to his characters neutralises the force of his

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satire. Whether this admixture of praise and blame, this blend of satire and pathos, should be regarded as defect or not is a debatable point. If it is a defect, it is because it neutralises the effect, but it has other advantages. In the first place, if satire is not merely the expression of personal venom, it is certainly not a defect. Secondly, it adds richness in tone to the texture of his satires.

Byron does not achieve the satiric force of Dryden and Pope because of the fact that he uses a different poetic form. It is called Ottava rima. But for the satiric purposes, heroic couplet is most suited because of its neatness and tenseness. Byron who used this form, could not succeed because his romantic temperature with its many aspects could not be tied down to the brief compass of the heroic couplet. Ottava rima, the characteristic medium of Byron, is a much looser form in comparison with the heroic couplet. Therefore, he could not achieve the neatness of Dryden or Pope in his satires.

To conclude, we may say that Byron as a satirist differs in kind from Dryden and Pope. It is only the satiric spirit that links him with the Augustan tradition. The models of Dryden and Pope are the Latin satirists, Horace and Juvenal, but the models of Byron are the Romantic Italian satirists, Pulci and Casti. The elements of mixing seriousness and levity, of praise and blame, he borrowed from them. He himself says in *Don Juan* :

To the kind reader of our sober clime
 This way of writing will appear exotic;
 Pulci was Sire of the half-serious rhyme
 Who sang when chivalry was more Quixotic. (*Ibid. IV 1-4*)

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