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Autor: Esterhammer, Angela
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Performing Identities in Byron and Bourdieu

Angela Esterhammer

In order to explore the distinctively modern performances of identity found in the later poetry of Byron, this paper focuses on *Beppo*, the hundred-stanza poem that Byron wrote in Venice in October 1817. *Beppo* is well known as Byron's first use of the serio-comic, conversational narrative voice that came to characterize his later poetry; but the "plot" of this poem, an anecdote related by an expatriate English narrator about the habits of Venetian society, has received relatively little attention. By exposing interpersonal relationships and the construction of identities as performative and improvisatory processes, this anecdote intriguingly anticipates the perspective of postmodern sociology. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* as the disposition inculcated in individuals by their socio-economic environment is a particularly relevant model for reading the behaviour of Byron's Venetian characters and their interactions within a Carnavalesque setting. *Beppo* throws open questions about individual and national identities: how fixed or durable they are, whether they are conceptual or embodied, how they are negotiated in interpersonal situations. Adopting an ironically sociological perspective, Byron depicts social role-playing as a conjunction of environmental determinism with individual improvisation.

Separately and – especially – together, Lord Byron's life and his poetry manifest processes of identity-construction on multiple intersecting levels. The performance of identity is arguably the main structuring principle of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-1818), in which the wandering Byron/Harold assembles a self by accumulating performative responses to European historical landscapes. In a different way, the performance of identity underlies Byron's mock-epic masterpiece *Don Juan* (1819-1824), whose rambling cantos are tenuously held together by the protag-

onist Juan's adaptive performances of national, local, (cross-)gendered, professional, social, and relational identities as history and fortune drive him around Europe. *Don Juan* thereby represents a more sociological perspective on identity-construction than the egocentric self-performance of the brooding, conflicted, remorseful, yet great-souled Byronic hero that goes on in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The more social and cosmopolitan performative identities of Byron's later poetry are the focus of this essay, which takes as its main point of reference *Beppo: A Venetian Story*, the hundred-stanza poem that he wrote in Venice in October 1817. *Beppo* is significant for Byronists and Romanticists because it marks Byron's first use of the serio-comic, conversational narrative voice that came to characterize his later poetry. Yet the "Venetian story" promised in Byron's sub-title – an anecdote told by a dandyish, expatriate English narrator about the habits of Venetian society – has received relatively little interpretation.¹ I will propose that, by exposing interpersonal relationships and the construction of identities as performative and improvisatory processes, this anecdote intriguingly anticipates the perspective of postmodern sociology.

A similar "improvisational turn" can be identified in late-twentieth-century sociological theory and in late-Romantic literature.² In Byron's *Beppo*, the notion of improvisation is explicitly evoked through the setting of the story in the midst of the Venetian Carnival, and on the narrative level by the haphazard style of the storyteller. More generally, Byron, along with many of his early-nineteenth-century contemporaries, manifests an understanding of the relation among individual agency, social practice, temporality, and identity that finds distinct resonances in the work of twentieth-century social theorists who recognize improvisation sometimes as an analogy for, and sometimes as an actual component of, social practice. Claude Lévi-Strauss' notion of *bricolage*, Erving Goffman's analysis of interpersonal "interaction rituals," Victor Turner's anthropological study of rituals developed by cultures to deal with crisis situations, and Harold Garfinkel's "ethnomethodological" study of the way ad-hoc decisions get codified into official procedures are examples of a wide-ranging shift of attention from *structure* to *process* in the modern social sciences (see Lévi-Strauss; Goffman; Turner; Garfinkel). While these approaches already incorporate various forms of "ad hocism" (to use the architectural term coined by Charles Jencks), postmodern theorists like Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau go a

¹ A notable exception is Paul Elledge's "Divorce Italian Style," which makes substantial use of the story of Beppo in exploring Byron's poetics of discontinuity.

² For a much more extensive development of this hypothesis, see Esterhammer, *Romanticism and Improvisation*.

step further. They explicitly identify improvisation as an element that complicates theories based on notions of ritual, script, or game (such as those mentioned above). Thus, Certeau demonstrates in *The Practice of Everyday Life* that subjects use improvisational “tactics” to assemble a social identity in defiance of the “strategies” pursued by institutions. Interpersonal relations, according to this improvisation-based anthropology, depend on separate moments of contingent behaviour and a web of connections among these moments that is tenuously woven by human subjects or derived from social processes. This interpretive web conceals the discontinuities between contingent moments and provides a fragile basis for the fiction of a continuous, underlying “essential self.”

For a reading of social behaviour in Byron’s *Beppo*, the work of Pierre Bourdieu provides especially apt terms of reference. Bourdieu negotiates between the two poles of environmental determinism and individual improvisation, or social conditioning and individual creativity, primarily through his reorientation of the term *habitus*. Inheriting different inflections of this originally Aristotelian term from medieval scholasticism (which translated Aristotle’s *hexis* into *habitus*) and later from twentieth-century sociologists like Marcel Mauss and Norbert Elias, Bourdieu redefines it as a concept that mediates between objective structures and subjective behaviour, as well as between ideology and the materiality of the body. As a set of dispositions acquired from social institutions such as family, school, and religion that become physically inculcated in a subject’s body, *habitus* does not determine or programme behaviour, but rather inclines the subject to act and react in systematic ways, although the details of each reaction are as unpredictable as the contingent circumstances that call it forth. “The *habitus*,” Bourdieu writes,

a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history. . . . Because the *habitus* is an infinite capacity for generating products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions – whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it provides is as remote from creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the original conditioning. (54-5)

To cite examples equally relevant to Bourdieu and Byron, *habitus* may encompass ways of speaking, dressing, or eating, semi-ritualized social behaviour such as gift-giving, and the manner in which one has learned to make (or avoid) eye contact. In Bourdieu’s theoretical formulation as in Byron’s narrative depiction, *habitus* is “embodied history” (56), the product of “economic and social processes” (50) beyond the individual’s

control, yet it manifests itself in unpredictable behaviour called forth by the unforeseeable contingencies of everyday life. In this sense, as Bourdieu explicitly suggests, everyday behaviour is comparable to the “regulated improvisations” (57) of music or poetry that are played out in time and generate variations on a theme.

Bourdieu insists that understanding social practice demands more than the static structures identified by traditional sociology; it demands a *narrative* description that takes full account of temporality. Such a description reveals that social practice is discontinuous: rather than following mechanical sequences or rigid rituals, it is full of temporal gaps that admit apparent spontaneity and uncertainty into the structures of everyday life. “The most ordinary and even the seemingly most routine exchanges of ordinary life,” Bourdieu writes, “presuppose an improvisation, and therefore a constant uncertainty, which, as we say, make all their *charm*, and hence all their social efficacy” (99). An example of a “routine exchange of ordinary life” that will be germane to *Beppo* is the promise and its more ritualized form, the marriage vow. The temporal gap between utterance and fulfillment in the marriage vow, as in any promise, opens up a space for improvisation, admitting the possibility of unforeseen behaviour that may or may not respect the expectations aroused by the promise. Improvisation, therefore, is not merely a useful analogy for the ongoing interaction of a person’s *habitus* with new situations; rather, improvisation actually and constantly occurs in social practice. In Bourdieu’s postmodern sociology, the view of society as a set of rigid structures and durable relations gives way to a practice-oriented description of social relations as time-bound behaviour interrupted by gaps of indeterminacy that call forth improvised responses. Identities and relationships are therefore circumscribed by what Bourdieu calls “sincere fiction[s]” (112): on the one hand, ordinary individuals uphold a fiction that their actions are free and unconstrained, while, on the other hand, social scientists who study them maintain an equally fictitious belief that rituals and relationships are durable, stable, and inevitable.

The best description of social practice, according to Bourdieu, negotiates between the sincere fictions of subjectivity and objectivity – and I would like to suggest that the nameless English narrator in Byron’s *Beppo* anticipates this Bourdieusian perspective. Both an expatriate observer and a participant in the social practices of Venice, the narrator represents himself as a pseudo-scientific analyst, yet presents his observations in a storytelling mode. The “Venetian story” he relates is circumscribed by the structuring rituals of Venetian society, from Christian marriage to the masquerades of the Carnival season, but its action hinges on interruptions and moments of uncertainty, including a long, unexplained absence on the part of one marriage partner and an uncon-

ventional encounter at a masked ball. In other words, this story of a love triangle among three characters called “Beppo,” “Laura,” and “the Count” (Laura’s lover) centres on a discontinuity in social relations, a disruption to which all three characters react spontaneously yet in a way that manifests the *habitus* inculcated in them by their Venetian environment. Reading this anecdote with Bourdieu’s terminology in mind highlights a new sociological-anthropological orientation that enters Byron’s poetry at this juncture, along with the insights it generates into the performative nature of individual and collective identity-construction.

From the beginning, an epistemological undercurrent runs through this lighthearted poem. Thematically and rhetorically, *Beppo* highlights the theme of knowing and not knowing, whereby not-knowing takes a variety of forms that include misunderstanding, misrecognition, superficial observation and jumping to conclusions. These terms prove equally relevant to the characters’ relations with one another, and the narrator’s relation to his subject matter. With his jaunty opening words – “’Tis known, at least it should be, that throughout / All countries of the Catholic persuasion . . .” (stanza 1) – the narrator embarks on an underlying parody of the enormously popular nineteenth-century genre of travel literature that purports to convey knowledge of foreign customs. But the passive formulation “’Tis known” evokes the same ironic response as another famous opening sentence about universal knowledge penned by Byron’s contemporary Jane Austen: “It is a truth universally acknowledged . . .” (Austen 1). Both these claims immediately trigger questions about the reliability of universally acknowledged cultural information: known by whom? On what authority? How objectively? *Who knows?*

Beppo’s assertion of knowledge is countered by the literal and epistemological obscurity that pervades the poem’s setting in the midst of the Venetian Carnival, the season of masks and disguise. Much in this world is literally dark and unreadable: black eyes, black hair, black clothing. The “dusky mantle” of night (stanza 2) offers concealment, as does the gondola, a “coffin clapt in a canoe, / Where none can make out what you say or do” (stanza 19). Names themselves serve to conceal, rather than to reveal identity. The trio of main characters is made up of a protagonist known only by his nickname “Beppo,” the Italian equivalent of “Joe”; an unnamed Count, whose dandyish description identifies him with the stereotypical Italian social role of *cavaliere servente* or acknowledged lover of a married woman; and “Joe”’s estranged wife, of whose name the narrator is entirely ignorant. Calling her “Laura” only “because it slips into my verse with ease” (stanza 21), the narrator conceals her behind a pleasant-sounding pseudonym just as she conceals herself behind costume and make-up when attending the Carnival festivities.

Rather than one of the traditional disguises of Carnival-goers, however, the “Laura mask” recalls Petrarch’s Laura, the ideal, chaste love-object, an association that becomes more and more obviously misleading as this lady’s physicality and her cavalier approach to marriage become more apparent.

Laura, the Count, and Beppo are sketched as blatant products of the social and economic processes of Venetian society (to echo Bourdieu’s formulation); they wear their *habitus* as if it were a Carnival mask. The plot, such as it is, turns on the meeting of the three characters at the Ridotto masked ball, an unexpected encounter that demands a spontaneous reaction within the constraints of each character’s ingrained disposition. It is an encounter triggered by the unconventional behaviour of one of the characters in the midst of an otherwise conventional Venetian setting. Instead of meeting and greeting other masked revellers, “one person” draws Laura’s attention by staring at her in a manner deemed “rather rare” by those who frequent the Ridotto:

While Laura thus was seen and seeing, smiling,
Talking, she knew not why and cared not what,
So that her female friends, with envy broiling,
Beheld her airs and triumph, and all that;
And well dress’d males still kept before her filing,
And passing bow’d and mingled with her chat;
More than the rest one person seem’d to stare
With pertinacity that’s rather rare.

He was a Turk, the colour of mahogany;
And Laura saw him, and at first was glad,
Because the Turks so much admire philogyny,
Although their usage of their wives is sad . . . (stanzas 69-70)

That is to say, a moment of unconventional behaviour renders conventional Venetian social practice discontinuous and thus gets the action underway on the level of the characters as well as on the level of narrative. The narrator promptly turns *his* attention to this staring stranger with the identifying affirmation “He was a Turk.” What can “He was a Turk” possibly mean, however – given a setting where everyone is in disguise – except “He *was not* a Turk”? ’Tis known only that the stranger is dressed to look like a Turk, which is as much as to say that he must “really” be something or someone else. Yet the appearance of Turkishness leads Laura into a significantly mistaken assumption, and the narrator into a significantly lengthy digression, about the disposition associated with “being a Turk.”

The crucial ambiguity here is between interpreting the stranger's Turkish appearance as his *habitus* – that is, as an ingrained disposition rightly or wrongly understood to be produced by Turkish social and religious institutions – and interpreting it merely as a Carnival mask. The poem has already provided a coy hint that Turkishness should be seen as a removable mask: at the outset, when describing the Venetian Carnival for English readers, the narrator actually names “Turks” first among the masks to be found there, even before the traditional *commedia dell'arte*-inspired costumes of “harlequins and clowns”:

And there are dresses splendid, but fantastical,
Masks of all times and nations, Turks and Jews,
And harlequins and clowns, with feats gymnastical,
Greeks, Romans, Yankee-doodles, and Hindoos . . . (stanza 3)

So, in all likelihood, the “Turk” who stares so egregiously at Laura is *not* a Turk – but, in a further twist, it turns out he is not a stranger dressed up as a Turk to celebrate Carnival, either. Rather, he is the concealed title character Beppo, returning after years of absence from his native Venice, wearing and performing one of many identities he has improvised over the years in order to survive captivity in Turkey and piracy at sea. As the narrator eventually explains,

he got off by this evading,
Or else the people would perhaps have shot him;
And thus at Venice landed to reclaim
His wife, religion, house, and Christian name. (stanza 97)

Thus the Turk is unmasked as a Venetian pretending to be a Turkish merchant in order to safeguard his life and property, whom his wife Laura and the reader mistake, first for a real Turk, then for a Venetian stranger dressed up as a Turk while revelling in the Carnival. The process of peeling back these layers, however, generates lingering uncertainty about what it means to be or not to be a Turk, a Venetian, or, by extension, an English expatriate in Venice.

The recognition scene between Beppo and his wife is a *tour de force* that perpetuates the confusion between assumed masks and embodied cultural identity. Beppo's disguise is thoroughgoing enough that Laura, even after recognizing him, does not know whether to treat him as her returning husband or as a visiting stranger. Once she has got over her initial shock enough to recover her voice, she mixes both forms of address indiscriminately:

And are you *really, truly*, now a Turk?
 With any other women did you wive?
 Is't true they use their fingers for a fork?
 Well, that's the prettiest shawl – as I'm alive!
 You'll give it me? They say you eat no pork.
 And how so many years did you contrive
 To – Bless me! did I ever? No, I never
 Saw a man grown so yellow! How's your liver?

Beppo! that beard of yours becomes you not;
 It shall be shaved before you're a day older:
 Why do you wear it? Oh! I had forgot –
 Pray don't you think the weather here is colder?
 How do I look? You shan't stir from this spot
 In that queer dress, for fear that some beholder
 Should find you out, and make the story known.
 How short your hair is! Lord! how grey it's grown! (stanzas 92-93)

In the course of this tirade, Beppo is addressed as a returning traveller who can report on the foreign customs of the Muslims (“Is't true *they* use their fingers for a fork?”), but also as a Muslim himself (“They say *you* eat no pork”). Besides shifting pronouns, Laura jumps erratically between domestic concern about her husband's health and appearance, and the nervously polite small talk she would exchange with a foreign visitor (“Pray don't you think the weather here is colder?”). She alternately registers Beppo's Turkishness as external and as internal. It is in some respects an embodied state, signalled by his yellow skin, his diet, and the condition of his internal organs, but at the same time it is a “queer dress” that he can throw off along with shaving his beard. Hare-brained as it is, Laura's diatribe worries the question of whether Beppo's Turkish disguise – or, for that matter, her own painted Venetian one – is a consciously removable covering like a Carnival mask, or an embodied identity akin to Bourdieusian *habitus*. Even the narrator cannot, or will not, resolve this ambiguity. He affirms that Beppo “threw off the garments which disguised him,” but, in the same breath, that Beppo was re-baptized on his return to Venetian society (stanza 98), suggesting that his assumed Muslim identity is thoroughgoing enough to require a ritual re-naming and re-admission to European Christendom.

Nevertheless, the other speech-act ritual (besides Christian baptism) that structures the three characters' social identities – that is, the classic performative of the marriage ceremony – remains ironically intact when Beppo returns after years of absence to reclaim his wife. After their encounter, he, Laura, and the Count fall into an improvised lifestyle, apparently a happy enough *ménage à trois* in which Beppo and Laura resume

their married state without disruption to the Count's place in the household. Indeed, Beppo and the Count, who borrow each others' clothes and are "always friends" (stanza 99), seem to get along better than Beppo and his wife. The moment of recognition and choice on which Byron centres his anecdote of Venetian mores opens up the performative ritual of marriage to the possibility of improvisation. His "Venetian story" thereby becomes a sociological observation, cast in a narrative mode, about the collective improvisation on monogamy that Venetian society is already practising, with its general tolerance of a *cavaliere servente* as part of the marital household. Despite a gap of many years that admits absence, infidelity, and Beppo's radically altered bodily appearance as well as his dubious ethnic-religious identity, the marriage vow that underlies Beppo's and Laura's social identities as husband and wife miraculously survives. Its openness to improvisatory variation forestalls the complete breakdown of social relationships and prevents this charming mini-drama of *anagnorisis* or discovery from being followed by a tragic *peripeteia* or reversal.

On several levels, then, Byron's parodic Venetian story throws open questions about individual and collective identities: how fixed or durable they are, how far they penetrate the body, how they are acknowledged or negotiated anew in interpersonal situations. Through characters who are part Carnival masks, part manifestations of Venetian *habitus*, and part unpredictable improvisers, Byron's poem explores the extent to which identity is performative, and questions whether Turkish, Venetian, and English identities are equally so. On the narrative level, the narrator's long-term absence from his native England gives rise to improvisatory accommodations that parallel those of Beppo and the Venetians in the inset story. The expatriate condition creates a similar discontinuity and necessitates a similar re-negotiation of relationships that manifests itself in the narrator's rhetoric, particularly his forms of address and his allusions to his native culture. Externally, he dons Italian costume and adopts an Italian verse-form – yet he reinforces his underlying affiliation with an English readership by consistently using the pronouns "we" and "our." He adapts to Venetian custom by eating fish during Lent, yet makes it palatable by importing his fish-sauce from England (stanza 8). This and other evocative details show the narrator and the characters responding to dislocations and discontinuities while reaffirming the *habitus* inculcated in them by nationality and history. As a literary text, finally, *Beppo* constitutes an especially good example of Bourdieu's claim that written texts should not be regarded as static objects, but instead – by bearing in mind the temporality of writing – as "irreversible oriented sequences of relatively unpredictable acts" (98). In other words, improvisation inheres in written texts, since they are the result of a series

of choices made in response to a series of contingencies. Stylistically speaking, *Beppo* wears its construction out of choices and contingencies on its sleeve; the narrator's haphazard logic and rhetoric give the impression that the choices are still being made and the contingencies are still intruding even as the pen touches the paper. Byron's *Beppo* thus portrays both poetic and social practice as "sincere fictions" – as sequences of partially determined, partially improvisatory moments that make up relationships and identities.

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