PAPER PELLETS: BRITISH LITERARY CULTURE AFTER WATERLOO

By Richard Cronin
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Reviewed by Anthony Harrison on 2011-07-03.

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One can say of Richard Cronin's new book what can be said of few scholarly books these days: for the most part, it is a good read. It begins with detailed accounts of two duels, both of them fatal, fought by literary men in 1821, and it concludes with a brief account of a duel fought fifteen years before. It is from this earlier engagement, also resulting from a literary quarrel, that the book takes its intriguing title. In the July, 1806 issue of the *Edinburgh Review*, Francis Jeffrey had attacked Thomas Moore's *Epistles*, *Odes*, *and Other Poems* "using language that seem[ed] grossly personal and insulting" (229). Moore gave Jeffrey the lie, and, after some missteps, a duel ensued:

> Moore and Jeffrey were [in the event] spared injury, but they did not escape ridicule. *The Times* reported as fact a rumour that Jeffrey's pistol "was not loaded with a ball," and that Moore's "had nothing more than a pellet of paper," so that if the police had not appeared "this alarming duel would have turned out to be a game at pop-guns." The *Morning Post* versified the same allegation in a piece entitled "The Paper Pellet Duel: or, Papyro-Pelleto-Machia, An Heroic Ballad" (8).

Adopting its title from the *Post*, Cronin's book takes its place in a critical discussion of popular nineteenth-century literary culture, especially periodicals, that originated (as Cronin notes) with Jon Klancher's *The Making of English Reading Audiences*, *1790-1832* (1987) and includes not only Mark Parker's and David Higgins' recent books on literary magazines but also David Parker's forthcoming book, *The Age of the Magazine*: *Literary Consumption and Metropolitan Culture*, which began as a University of Glasgow PhD dissertation (directed, one suspects, by Cronin himself).

As his subtitle indicates, Cronin's chief contribution to this ongoing inquiry is his focus on magazine articles "that best exemplify the 'current press' in the decade after Waterloo." Also original is his incisive analysis of three literary "phenomena":

> First...the development of a new and distinctively modern variety of literary magazine, the best examples of which are *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Baldwin's *London Magazine*, and Colburn's *New Monthly*, a phenomenon that has prompted Mark Parker to claim that the magazine was "the preeminent literary form of the 1820s and 1830s in Britain.... " The second was the extraordinary celebrity of Lord Byron.... Third, there were the "Scotch novels," the series of novels by "the author of Waverley," that, according to William St Clair's extraordinary calculation, outsold the work of all other novelists put together. (11)

Cronin's chapters pivot on the egregious quarrels that either directly or indirectly involved Byron and Scott and that agitated both editors of and contributors to these magazines (and that resulted in the dueling deaths in 1821 of John Scott, editor of the *London Magazine*, and Sir Alexander Boswell, who contributed to *The Beacon*). According to Cronin, the period was characterized "not, as has sometimes been suggested, by the doctrine of sympathy that its leading writers held in common but by the antagonisms that divided them. It is a decade remarkable for the number and intensity of its literary feuds, a decade appropriately introduced by Isaac D'Israeli's publication in 1814 of his *Quarrels of Authors*" (13). Their quarrels went well beyond politics. Though Chapter 2 shows at some length that political affiliation could prompt literary disputes, Cronin chiefly aims to show how they sprang from the emerging literary and social culture of the period. In the years after Waterloo, the construction of male subjectivity was an especially vexed and fragile process, male writers were threatened by the dominance of women in the literary marketplace, and definitions of social class were increasingly fluid and increasingly determined by factors other than birth.

Chapters 2 through 9 sequentially discuss "the volatile relationship...between literature and politics"; "personality," a key term that "named at once the practice of making public attacks on private character, and the power to persuade readers that they were granted access to the writer's private self"; the development a distinctive magazine rhetoric, a style that suggested "intimate address" to a "mass audience" for whom "literature was decisively identified with printed language, not with language spoken or inscribed with a pen"; and the emergence of new varieties of "class insecurities" as "literature finally established itself as a professional occupation rather than a gentlemanly vocation" (15-16).

The final three chapters explore the radical novelty and volatility of magazines like *Blackwood's* and *London*, in which "facts and fictions," "solemnities" and "absurdities, were not decorously separated but allowed to jostle against one another with excitingly unpredictable consequences" (including fatal duels). This volatile stew emerged from what Cronin sees as a dominant culture of heartless callousness bred (perhaps) by profound insecurities among men of the middle and upper classes about their own masculinity, insecurities at once betrayed and compensated for by a widespread cultural (and

literary) fascination with boxing (as in Hazlitt's essay "The Fight"). Throughout these chapters, Cronin repeatedly asserts or implies that "magazines are the most sensitive cultural barometers of the period" (227).

Cronin's detailed historical analyses are impressive and, for the most part, compelling. Recurring frequently (almost too frequently) for transitional purposes throughout the book, the two duels of the introduction grow into increasingly expansive metaphors for the complex of cultural developments under discussion here and for the constellation of anxieties, hostilities, and unintended consequences that emerged from those developments. The Conclusion, for instance, makes a surprising point about the contemporary reputations of major Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Keats, whose works were published in small runs and few editions. Their reputations, Cronin argues, were "more indebted ...to their detractors than their admirers." When Francis Jeffrey wrote of *The Excursion*, "This will never do!," says Cronin, "he was addressing fifty times as many readers as bought the poem." Likewise, Cronin contends, "it seems that Coleridge's contemporary reputation was sustained by his quarrel with the periodical press" (234), and "Lockhart and Croker in their attacks on Leigh Hunt and Keats seem all to have been engaged in a spectacularly misconceived enterprise through which they contrived to call attention to the very writers that they were recommending to oblivion" (235). Examples such as these prompt a paradoxical inference: "in periodical writing insult was always and transparently a back-handed compliment" (232).

But not actually always so "transparent," as chapters 2-4 demonstrate in discussing the vitriolic politics of literary attacks and attempts at character assassination in magazine columns focused largely on Byron, Scott, Hazlitt, Kean and their loves. Though filled with helpful anecdotes and analysis, these three chapters seldom surprise in the ways that later chapters do. But later arguments are sometimes foreshadowed by observations such as "Print...is an uncanny medium: it severs the connection between a writer and his writing, so that the writing becomes less an expression of the self than a weird doppelganger" (56).

Chapter 5 fruitfully examines the illusory rhetoric of "intimacy" developed by magazine writers during the decade after Waterloo and the novel effects of such rhetoric in the first era of real mass circulation periodicals. Since one strategy of such rhetoric was to displace "the metropolitan by the provincial" and reposition it at "the centre of national life" (83), magazines led many of their readers to feel themselves intimately connected with great personalities of the day (some of them invented). Such readers, Cronin suggests, were primed by Scott's novels, which "brought into existence a new kind of...mass readership" that "no doubt relished...the feeling that their enjoyment was shared by so many" and yet was simultaneously persuaded "that they are enlisted in a...local community made up of those who can share [often obscure] references" (85). Even as periodicals in general exemplified the age of mechanical reproduction, the new magazines strove to sound as unmechanical as possible. With the introduction of Koening's steam press, which could copy at the amazing rate of "25000 impressions an hour,"

> Writing for periodicals was in danger of becoming as mechanized and impersonal a business as printing them. It was in reaction against the conditions that made possible their production that the new magazines encouraged a prose that fostered an illusion of personal, intimate address. Essays in the new style, of which Lamb, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Leigh Hunt, and Cobbett were the masters, worked busily to realize the presence of the essayist, so that the consumption of a mass-produced pamphlet might seem to the reader an experience as being engaged in conversation by an unusually clever and entertaining friend. (86)

Even typography could help to generate a rhetoric of intimacy, as we learn from Chapter 6. This fascinating chapter, which closely examines the styles of *Don Juan* as well as of the novels of Scott and Hogg, intriguingly concludes that these styles addressed reading habits developed by periodical audiences. Novelists, writes Cronin, began to create tableau-like, almost stand-alone chapters and scenes that did not require close continuity with the broad narrative, and poets "began to invite their readers to scan poems much in the same way that they would scan a magazine" (121). Byron's epic is the foremost specimen under scrutiny: "*Don Juan* may be the first major English poem designed from the first to be read silently, to be encountered not through the voice, but on the page, as type" and therefore "best characterizes the cultural moment that I have been describing: it is the primary epic of the age of print" (122).

Of the two main topics of Chapter 7, one is aptly described in the title of a subsection: "The Semiotics of Class"; the other, closely related to the first, is the social and historical status of magazine writing and writers. In the decade after Waterloo, when the social status of writers was more vexed and fluid than ever before, dueling was a way of stepping socially up: when workaday writers resorted to dueling to defend their honor and reputation, they were imitating the behavior of their precursors, literary men most often perceived as gentlemen of leisure rather than as pens for hire. "Print," writes Cronin,

> had once been the preserve of gentlemen, a medium produced and consumed primarily by a group who shared a gender, an education, and a certain social standing. When two members of such a group fell out they might have recourse to pistols. If the offence was given by someone whose entitlement to gentlemanly status was refused then the proper recourse was to the horsewhip rather than the pistol. The distinction between the two weapons was a primitive attempt to organize those who worked within the new and rapidly expanding print industry into two categories. But by the early decades of the nineteenth century the literary world had become too large and various to be divided so simply, and the social uncertainties that resulted, as John Scott found, could be fatal. (153)

But social insecurities such as those displayed by literary men who were not gentlemen by birth could also be observed in authors who actually were--or at least believed they were--gentleman, as is demonstrated by the anxieties over pay-for-work (not to mention a frequent disingenuousness about the subject) of authors like Byron and Sir Walter Scott. The two dealt rather differently with the question of pay for their professional writing. Byron, though always broke, pretended not to care whether or not he was paid; Scott, who "sometimes seemed ...impelled to invent the historical novel out of nostalgia for a time when the barriers separating different orders of men were more carefully maintained," published his novels anonymously so as, presumably, not to sully his name by being seen to make money from his works (145). Along with social anxieties such as these, Cronin sets the "semi-permanent" status of magazine writing against the traditionally assumed permanence of high literature. Different writers, Cronin observes, grappled with this problem in different ways. While Thomas Love Peacock turned "to Greek literature so enthusiastically that Thomas Taylor knew him as 'Greeky Peaky,' Charles Lamb clung "tenaciously to a sense of his own inbetweenness" (140).

Since Chapters 8 and 9 revert to the concerns of 5 and 6, the organizing principle at work in this second half of Cronin's book seems somewhat baffling (at least the positioning of Chapter 7 does). Having already analyzed the social effects of post-Waterloo print culture and the era's magazine as a new kind of miscellany, Cronin now examines the fiction of the period. "By 1813," he writes, "Jane Austen was already conscious that the novel, always the loosest of literary forms,

was becoming markedly more miscellaneous" (155). Cronin finds this quality in novels by Susan Ferrier as well as by Scott, Hogg, and Peacock (once more), and for Cronin the word "miscellaneous" also describes *Don Juan*. With its multiple topoi, digressions, and irregular organization, Byron's poem reflected the content and format of magazines, which themselves took to parodying it with some frequency.

The following chapter also ends with a focus on *Don Juan*. Like magazine pieces by Lamb and many others, Cronin insists, this poem encouraged a "new way of reading" that involved "skimming, dipping, skipping through the pages." But such reading habits also "obstructed deep responses, as did their miscellaneous character" (194). According to Cronin, a striking level of "heartlessness" gripped the culture of the period; callousness and insensitivity manifested themselves "in the production of writing that was apt to forge a bond with its readership by advertising its insensitivity" (189). Cronin sees this phenomenon in Jane Austen, who wrote to her sister Cassandra: "Mrs Hall of Sherbourn was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, oweing to a fright.--I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband" (188). In Scott's works also, Cronin notes, and in the highly successful novels of Pierce Egan, such as *Life in London*, "even scenes that seem to demand an ethical response contrive somehow to refuse it" (190). Similarly, "the refusal of sentiment, the spectacularisation of all experience, even murder, that DeQuincey at once satirizes and exploits, was a feature of the magazines of the period, and also of the newspapers" (196-97) as well as *Don Juan*. With persuasive nuance Cronin concludes that the

> writing I am describing...is hurried into casual cruelties out of a fear of being dull. But to say just this would be unfair. At its best, it is writing that recognizes that 'our human lot' demands the exercise of sympathetic feeling, and yet demands just as urgently a willingness when occasion requires to curtail that exercise, even to practise in its stead a strategic callousness(202).

The book's final chapter is itself a kind of coherent miscellany. Beginning once again with a focus on dueling ("as an assertion of manhood"), it proceeds to show how "the odd propensity of men of letters in the years immediately after the war to engage in duels may usefully be understood as one aspect of a concerted attempt to re-masculinize the literary world," which had become increasingly colonized by women writers up to the appearance of Scott's novels and Byron's poetry. But the gender issues involved in Cronin's discussion here are both complex and self-reflexive. In analyzing attempts to recover fiction as a genre available to male writers, for instance, he observes that "the novel can be masculinized only if it is admitted to be feminine, and the femininity of the novel in the early nineteenth century was all but guaranteed by a readership that included in its numbers so many women" (207). As a result, a variety of cross-dressing characterizes many novels by men of the period including Scott, whose "feminized heroes are sometimes brought into confrontation with unusually masculine heroines" (209) and in whose Highland speech forms, "it seems, genders are [often] indeterminate." Although Scott "set out confidently to masculinize the novel...his novels seem haunted by a suspicion that the masculine novel may simply be the novel in drag" (210-11). Again, Cronin invokes an effective rather than strained comparison to dueling: "The more strenuously the novels of the period insist on their masculinity the more likely they are to compromise it. In this the novel rather resembled the duel. Men fought duels as an assertion of their masculinity, but, in the unfortunate event that they killed their opponent, they were required to complement their display of manly courage with an equally flamboyant demonstration of their capacity for feminine sensibility" in showing extreme sympathy to their victim (212).

Nevertheless, just as Scott tried to re-masculinize fiction, Byron sought to make poetry male again. "Byron," writes Cronin, "turned violently against a school of women poets that he had himself done much to inspire" and in the end asserted that he wished to write only for men (215). Similarly, among periodicals, *Blackwood's* "most vigorously asserted its role as a champion of the new masculinity" in proclaiming an "evangelical mission against 'blue-stockingism' " (217), and others followed suit, including even the *New Monthly*. In its February, 1822 issue it published "the greatest of all pugilistic articles, Hazlitt's 'The Fight' " (223). Glossing this article at the end of the chapter, Cronin very helpfully weaves together a number of threads that run through his book as a whole:

> It seems that Hazlitt is exhibiting with unusual intensity a set of cultural rather than psychological symptoms. Male writers in the late teens and early twenties of the nineteenth century register anxieties that have to do with a nervous sense of their emergent professional status. The production of literature was no longer securely a gentlemanly vocation: it had become an employment for which a writer expected and required payment. The increasing importance of women writers, first as novelists, but more recently as poets too, threatened this new status by suggesting that literary earnings might properly be thought of as amounting to no more than "Pin Money".... [and] left male writers anxious to assert their own masculinity. (227)

This book comes, as Cronin acknowleges, near the end of his distinguished career, and if it proves to be his last, it constitutes a strong finish. The volume makes any number of useful and often surprising connections between cultural and literary developments in the decade after Waterloo, and it does so with intellectual creativity, analytical nuance, and stylistic panache.

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