Don Juan – Method and Morality

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Inconsistencies abound in all aspects of **Don Juan** - except in its style. To extend Byron's own metaphor, the style of the poem is its northern star, its main fixed point in the sparkling Aurora Borealis of the whole poem. The poem, which ranges in so many different ways over such a range of subject matter, is given its coherence by the style.

The dominant effect of the style, I would argue, is to deny all pretension. This characteristic is supported by the stanza form, the Ottava Rima which requires a rhyming couplet that can be used either to sustain or else to undercut the substance of the preceding sestet. Such a stanza is particularly apposite for Byron's desire to furnish a personal epigrammatic comment on his subject matter.

It has been argued, by Paul Trueblood, that that stanza at last allowed Byron to express in his poetry the view of life that had characterized his letters, even as far back as 1810. This is simplistic. Amusement may be juxtaposed with seriousness in the letters, but not necessarily as governing that seriousness. Far from the stanza form reflecting a consistent point of view, it was used in effect to impose one, through facilitating authorial comment on the narration. As a result, though Byron's art manifested itself in many ways during the long drawn out composition of **Don Juan**, the poem as a whole presents a very consistent attitude to life.

The most notable gap in the composition of **Don Juan** was after the completion of Canto 5 at the end of 1820. He resumed after over two years, having written most of his plays in the meantime. The reason he gave for the pause was Teresa Guiccoli's request, on the grounds that the poem was immoral. This seems the more plausible, inasmuch as he was certainly not short of material for continuation. He had written, early in 1821 to Murray *'The 5th is so far from being the last of D.J., that it is hardly the beginning. I meant to take him the tour of Europe, with a proper mixture of siege, battle, and adventure, and to make him finish as Anacharsis Cloots in the French revolution'.* (Interestingly, and not totally irrelevantly, perhaps, given Byron's concern in his plays with the loss of Paradise, Cloots was later to be described by Carlyle as 'hot metal; full of scoriae which should and could have been smelted out, but which will not. He has wandered over this terraqueous planet; seeking, one may say, the Paradise we lost long ago.')

From the withdrawal of Teresa's ban in 1822, it has been argued by Guy Steffan that the character of **Don Juan** was changed; that the cantos composed after that show a 'Shift to social satire and revolutionary indoctrination'. This view denies the unity of style in the poem, as characterized above, and takes advantage of inconsistencies that may be shown to be unconnected with the gap in composition. This is most obvious with regard to the structure of the poem. At first sight, the later cantos seem diffuse in comparison with the steady movement of the earlier ones, the explanation being that Byron was more interested in

commentary than narrative. Yet it is not between cantos 5 and 6 that alteration in structure takes place. Only with canto 11 does editorial material begin to play an obtrusive, though not inordinately larger, part; and the halving of cantos in length, after the second, has already had an important effect.

My view is that the division of the third canto had a drastic effect on the structure of the poem. The first two had been built around two incidents each, of contrasting tenor (the development of love and the Alfonso farce, the shipwreck and the Haidee idyll); originally, the third canto would have moved from Lambro's revenge to the operatic slave market. Possibly because his fascination with the idyll led to imbalance (if that was not unavoidable, given Byron's romantic affinity to the depiction of Paradise, and hence a cause in itself) Byron abandoned the relatively self-contained unit. Henceforth, he could write a canto without a climax in view. Thus there is a relative lack of narrative thrust in Juan's story in cantos three and seven, and it seems to simply meander along in cantos nine and ten. However it was only when Juan had arrived in England that Byron took advantage of the form to write cantos with hardly any progress in the story itself.

Yet this, in itself, does not indicate a new concept of his art. His editorial material is concerned more with the truth to life of his subject matter than a moral purpose. This may seem an unnecessary distinction; any exposure of inadequacies could be said to demand improvement. The demand, though, can be made to sound more or less sincere. The deliberate detachment Byron cultivates (unlike Juvenal, for instance) makes him sound less so. The style was of use for this, as is exemplified in what Trueblood describes as 'one of the last, clearest, and most explicit of Byron's avowals of his serious moral purpose and satiric intent', the 103rd stanza of the 15th canto:

> But politics, and policy, and piety,
> Are topics which I sometimes introduce,
> Not only for the sake of their variety,
> But as subservient to a moral use;
> Because my business is to dress society,
> And stuff with sage that very verdant goose.
> **And now, that we may furnish with some matter all**
> **Tastes, we are going to try the supernatural.**

The couplet, which I have highlighted, and which Trueblood does not quote, makes clear what the third line and the absurd metaphor have already indicated: Byron's denial of all pretension. The couplet of the previous stanza:

> It makes my blood boil like the springs of Hecla,
> To see men let these scoundrel sovereigns break law

sincere, doubtless, as far as it goes, had to be qualified even further – and that in addition to the explicit avowal of self-contradiction at the beginning of this digression:

> But if a writer should be quite consistent,
> How could he possibly show things existent?
>
> If people contradict themselves, can I
> Help contradicting them, and everybody,
> Even my veracious self? – But that's a lie:

I never did so, never will – how should I?
He who doubts all things nothing can deny:

The style remains the same in nearly all the stanzas that are quoted as evidence of serious moral purpose. Nevertheless, it is true that there are more of these than before, which requires an explanation. This may be found in what might be termed the negative aspect of so much of the editorial material, namely the concern to deny the charges of immorality made by his critics. He had dealt with this problem even in the earlier part of the poem, though only to a limited extent, given perhaps that the charges of immorality had not had time to gather:

Some have accused me of a strange design
Against the creed and morals of the land

This occurs at the beginning of canto four, and was followed at the beginning of canto five by

I therefore do denounce all amorous writing,
Except in such a way as not to attract;

But the scenes in England required this sort of treatment much more, simply because the suggestion that they set a bad example was much more realistic. The later cantos without the digressions could very easily have read something like Choderlos de Laclos's 'Les Liaisons Dangereuses,' where titillation triumphs over satire. The frequent assertions of realism were doubtless essential, though occasionally tedious now, for the cantos to get a balanced reading from their subjects of reference. In no way do they contradict an earlier statement of purpose in a letter to Murray.

'You are too earnest and eager about a work never intended to be serious. Do you suppose that I could have any intention but to giggle and make giggle? - a playful satire, with as little poetry as could be helped, was what I meant:'

This is not to deny that the playful satire could at times be very sharp. But it is sharp throughout the poem, indeed, so much so in the earlier 'predominantly jocular and gaily ironic cantos', as Trueblood calls them, that the later ones could equally plausibly be described by Steffan as exhibiting 'a gradual mellowing, a decrease in acrimony and violence'. Both these views make no allowance for the difference in subject matter. The subjects satirised in the earlier cantos were less immediate, and hence more suitable for obvious exaggeration (though it still seems odd to describe the shipwreck as predominantly jocular and gaily ironic – or even the characterization of Inez, as opposed say to Lady Adeline). At the same time, until the English cantos, Byron was dealing more with elemental passions than social situations, which naturally led to greater acrimony and violence – though not when it was inapposite, as with Julia or Dudu. Right through, though, in dealing with themes within his poem, sympathy accompanies an amusement that is detached rather than bitter.

It is quite otherwise with the real characters whom he mentions, such as Southey, Castlereagh and Wellington. Most of the attacks on these occur early on, even the notable stanzas on Wellington in canto nine having been written originally for canto three. This imbalance may be due to a desire for contemporary reference in the early cantos, fulfilled by the subject matter itself later on; though, in view of the relatively fewer attacks in the middle cantos, a

more likely explanation might be that Byron realized attacks on the same people would grow tedious. Besides, the mention of Wellington in canto eight indicates that Byron worried at a subject once he had mentioned it. It was not that he was indignant early on and then mellowed, but that, possibly because of the dedication, certain ideas held his attention, once attracted, for an indefinite period.

The unvarying harshness of his tone towards these real characters contrasts with the ambivalence of his attitude to his inventions. Julia, for instance, is fondly pathetic, fearfully sophisticated, and sentimentally shattered, in turn. Amusement and sympathy are not allowed to take away from each other – as is the case too with the imperious Gulbeyaz, whose feelings when her desires are thwarted are understandingly portrayed, or with the self contained Adeline with her uncertain motives. Even Suvarrow, though more critically drawn (as a real character, although in the plot), is allowed some credit, in the 48th stanza of canto seven:

> Tis thus the sprit of a single mind
> Makes that of multitudes take one direction
> As roll the waters to the breathing wind

And Catherine, though she has nearly as many lines devoted to her as to Southey, also profits from being within the plot. Though her ambitions, political or sexual, are not spared, they are included in the plot, and as such escape particular censure. Wellington, in canto nine, and England, in canto ten, receive the full vigour of assault; laughter pervades the treatment of Catherine, as in the 62nd stanza of canto nine :

> Though somewhat large, exuberant, and truculent,
> When wroth – while pleased, she was as fine a figure,
> As those who like things rosy, ripe, and succulent,
> Would wish to look on, while they are in vigour,
> She could repay each amatory look you lent
> With interest, and in turn was wont with rigour
> To exact of Cupid's bills the full amount
> At sight, nor would permit you to discount

She comes out of the poem much better than the ostensibly fictional Inez - the reason, probably, being that Inez, though not meant to be a realistic portrait of Lady Byron, was near enough to approximate her to Castlereagh or Southey rather than the other fictional characters. At the same time, there is enough humour in the plot around her to relieve the picture of unmitigated hypocrisy that otherwise emerges.

Byron's attitude towards these minor characters prevents them from being one-dimensional or tedious. With regard to Juan and Haidee (as might have happened with Aurora Raby and Leila, had he developed them into heroines) his ambivalence had a different purpose. Haidee, who creates and lies at the centre of an idyllic paradise, is introduced with fatal similes in the 117th stanza of canto two:

> Her hair, I said, was auburn; but her eyes
> Were black as death, their lashes the same hue,
> Of down cast length, in whose silk shadows lies
> Deepest attraction; for when the view

Forth from its raven fringe the full glance flies,
Ne'er which such force the swiftest arrow flew;
'Tis as the snake late coiled, who pours his length
And hurls at once his venom and his strength

She is later described, in the throes of the affair as

... too deeply blest
To feel the poison through her spirit creeping.

Yet Byron makes it clear in the next stanza that the fault is not hers.

Oh, Love, what is it in this world of ours
Which makes it fatal to be loved?

Even so, at the beginning of canto four, he seems to be welcoming the catastrophe before it comes.

A long and snake-like life of dull decay
Was not for them - they had too little clay.

Fatalism was an old Byronic concept, illustrated through many subjects. The Haidee idyll, however, represents an advance in that its protagonists do not seem to go about provoking otherwise unmotivated crisis. Byron does not suggest that Haidee displayed undue haste in taking over her father's household but, though she may have been guiltless, Lambro's rage is fairly understandable. Though Byron does still seem to suggest that anything so good could not possibly have lasted, even about that it would seem that he was moving towards the change of mind that is apparent in the 'Island'.

My argument then is that, while it was inevitable that Don Juan would move on, his departure develops naturally from the situation, the single mindedness of Haidee that provoked Lambro, and his own thoughtless acquiescence. Though 'Don Juan' is not about the ruins of paradise as obtrusively as quite a lot of the rest of his poetry, the Haidee episode has its reminiscences of the fall. But here it is noticeably a fall in which the protagonists participate, not one imposed on innocents from above.

The development in the character of Juan himself may be seen as a manifestation of decline, though again, with the seeds of decline within him already, and not externally imposed. This is apparent from a comparison of the scenes that seem to indicate a marked inconsistency in his character, that in which he turns down Gulbeyaz, and that in which he accepts Catherine. In the first, he is an unsexed victim, in the second he-

Seems Love turn'd a lieutenant of artillery.

It is absurd, as Steffan does, to suggest that the scene with Gulbeyaz provides the *'most elaborate conflict of the poem and turns upon clearly defined issues that counteract the pessimism of the preceding ninety stanzas... Byron has been preparing for this idealistic revolt, by having Juan chafe against compulsion on several occasions'.* Rather, Byron makes capital out of the mobility of human reaction. Juan declares, in the 127th stanza of canto five :

Love is for the free!
I am not dazzled by this splendid roof;
What'er thy power, and great it seems to be,
Heads bow, knees bend, eyes watch around a throne
And hands obey - our hearts are still our own.'

This is followed by a salutary reminder to those who pique themselves on their chastity – 'while some more desperate dowager has been waging Love with you'

...then suppose the face
Of a young downright beauty in this case.

Then follows Gulbeyaz's disappointment, with its fluctuations of intent at which

Juan was moved: he had made up his mind
To be impaled...
But all his great preparatives for dying
Dissolved like snow before a woman crying.

There may be laughter here at the 'despotic ego' but, far from being idealistic, the conflict dissolves in comedy. The attitude that Byron displays towards Juan's own ego has also got to be observed if we are not to be carried away by our own preconceptions. When we do not read this description of Juan's responses carefully, a change has to be postulated when he succumbs to Catherine. Steffan takes the plunge – '*For the first time, the character of Juan and the effect of environment upon him are the main subject... And thus we see what Byron had in mind. He was aiming at England all the time, and Juan had to be equipped with sufficient poise and suavity to move easily among the aristocratic decadence of London.*' A slight difficulty in this interpretation of a less sensitive Juan, Steffan brushes over by asserting *'Juan's tenderness in the little scene with Leila in the barouche is 'Byron's half-hearted attempt to retain and merge the old natural emotionalism with the new poise'* and adds '*Leila is more important than the ambiguity of Juan's heart in this scene, for she takes over Juan's function as a channel of ideas.*'

In that case, she does her job badly. A few remarks about religion are not enough. Rather, she is more successful at maintaining the continuity of Juan's identity – though he has thoroughly enjoyed the battle (The thirst/ of glory which so pierces through and through one/pervaded him) and was now, by the 21st stanza of canto ten, become ' very polished Russian' (interestingly, there is no mention of change in character, unless that counts) he remained still 'a generous creature':

There is no need to suppose that Russia changed him - he merely reacted differently to different situations. If his ego seems more prominent in the later cantos, it is simply that situations of social comedy allowed it greater play. Byron had said earlier on that he intended to display Juan gradually 'gate and blasé as he grew older' but this was because it is natural. If there is a psychological theme in **Don Juan**, it is that of the weakness of man in the range of situations he faces.

This does not mean that Byron did not have certain standards. The weaknesses were only amusing when free from hypocrisy or oppression, and for the first of these to be established, it was required that the weaknesses should be seen

clearly. But that pervading sense of fun means that there is an absence of moral conflict, degeneration or development. This is what makes Trueblood's suggestion so ridiculous, why, despite it, he has to grant that the vigorous denunciations occur on the whole before the establishment of the 'moral purpose'. From Byron's point of view, hardly anything was bad enough for institutionalized suppression and the individuals that attempted to perpetuate it; but nearly all other abuses were more absurd than culpable. Given that they sprang from man's nature, Byron did not demand reform. He did want them to be recognized, though, but not necessarily with a moral motive. Although he claimed one occasionally, he could also write

> When we know what all are, we must bewail us,
> But nevertheless I hope it is no crime
> To laugh at all things – for I wish to know
> What, after all, are all things – but a show?

That, in the end, is what **Don Juan** is – a show. It has no moral purpose. There is little plot, and though the characterization is always sharp and sure, (Raucocanti and his opera singers, for instance, Lord Henry and his guests) the absence of development marks its deficiencies in delineation of character. Yet it is a successful show, not only amusing but enthralling. Possibly this is because the style carries conviction of sincerity. The pathos, for instance of the fathers in the longboat or of Haidee's death, is acceptable because the stanza form and the swift movement seem to guarantee that it will cease when irrelevant. The general mockery of the results of introspection makes indignation genuine when it appears. As a result the writer convinces us, that on the occasions he highlights, the world beneath the laughter is worth getting upset over, there are things worth bewailing. This is what distinguishes Byron's laughter from the satire, say, of Horace with its insulated idiosyncrasy. The Byron of **Don Juan** succeeded in convincing us of the objectivity of his tone in all its diversity, by the simple expedient of exhibiting himself in the process of assessing it constantly. The technique is brilliant; the result, a show accepted at the valuation of the showman.

Works cited

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