CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION
Byron's 'Muses' are pedestrian. Most of his contemporaries admired his unflinching devotion to the cause of human freedom at a time when despotism dominated the European continent. His pedestrian muses, very flexible as they were, were arranged and improvised to articulate certain personal feelings. Modern literature under the able guidance of symbolists like Eliot and Joyce banished personality from poetry. But ironically enough most romantic poets were not anti-personal. Creative imagination unobtrusively brought forth what we contemptuously dismiss as richness of personality. A good awareness of the personality of the poet, when we read Romantic poetry would be helpful in making sense of poetry itself. It is in this sense that to draw a clear map of English Romantic poetry is seldom easy critical exercise. The terrain is vast but very uneven because of a clash of personalities and views. Most Romantic poets trusted the authentic voice of imagination. But unfortunately they assimilated it in diverse ways.

As Northrop Frye says, "it is hardly possible to discuss Byron's poetry without telling the story of
his life in some detail .... the main appeal of Byron's poetry is in the fact that it is Byron's. To read Byron's poetry is to hear all about Byron's marital difficulties, flirtations, love for Augusta, friendships, travels and political and social views. As Byron is consistently interesting person to hear about, this being why Byron, even at his worst of self-pity and egotism and Blither and Doggerel, is still so incredibly readable.¹

Byron's sexual conquests and unconventional ways of living attracted a lot of public attentions in his own time. Although he is personally involved in most of the startling events of his time, he seems to have developed an impersonal view of public relations, political creed and sexual life. The point is reinforced when we read A.D. Hope's poem "The Damnation of Byron."

The speaker of the poem says,

The female body's impersonal charm, the curves of a young head poised on its gracious talk.
The idiom of her gesture he observes.
That tender dislocation of her walk.²

As a 20th Century poet who is also interested in the extremes of existence and crisis situations, Hope thinks that as a professional lover, Byron lost touch
with what is human and thereby suffered eternal loneliness. In a penetrating diagnostic language Hope clinches the issue in the following lines:

He longs for the companionship of men,
Their sexless friendliness. He cannot live
'Like the gods in Lucretius once again'
Nor ever in woman's wit and charm forgive.
The taint of the pervading feminine
yet always to this nausea he returns
From his own mind—the emptiness within
of the professional lover.

The tone of Hope's poem seems to suggest that it is from his personal experience that Byron forged the intellectual paradoxes that his stories convey. Given a Christian framework, these paradoxes symbolise a damned soul, but in the modern context of Faustian Revival Byron seems to open those avenues of the soul which are the themes of most modern literature.

Historically speaking the 20th century is an age of short poem. The Romantic and the Victorian periods are known for their long poems and sprawling novels. This difference is not just a matter of taste, but change in creative and critical attitude. In the following paragraphs I have tried to analyse the creative and critical attitude of Byron's time so as
to felicitate a close study of Byron's well-known long poem *Don Juan*.

Most long poems from Blake's *Heaven and Hell* to Browning's *Ring and the Book* are heavily loaded with biographical content. This should not make us conclude that the poems lack objectivity. Although themes are important, the structures are more significant. The *Prelude, Endymion, Alaster* have the structure of a mental journey. In these poems structure is not as taut and controlled as it is in Sonnets and odes. Nonetheless it controls the direction and amplification of the poem. The amplification necessitates a few digressions. In a poem like *Ring and the Book* the structure is well controlled to highlight the character and motive of the individual speakers. In Byron's poem the structure is a device to accommodate facts and fiction so as to make the poem breathe something extra, may be, vigour, vividness and variation of tone.

The great theme of *Don Juan* is the power of illusion. Byron said that the reason his mistress Teresa disapproved of it was because it was the wish of all women "to exalt the sentiment of the passions and to keep up the illusion which is their Empire. "Now *Don Juan* strips off this illusion and laughs at that and most other things."3
As I have explained in appropriate places, some of the events in the poem have their roots in the life of Byron. But as a Romantic poet Byron could not attack and smash the illusion itself for the very simple reason that illusion also is the product of creative imagination. The process of disillusion should never come as a miracle. The change from illusion to disillusion is a juxtaposition of exaggeration and simplification. This is what Keats supposed to have realised towards the end of Nightingale. The speaker of the poem seems to observe that the poetic truth and truth of the world are not different realms of experience, but different levels of experience. If we analyse Don Juan from this point of view, we notice that the poetic truth which may be called structure and truth of the world which we call satire synchronize in the poem without absorbing each other. Hence the improvised digressions that make the poem more interesting. They bristle with infectious vitality.
The most significant point a book like *Tom Jones* makes is that words like truth, honesty, integrity, love, friendship, freedom and welfare have lost their meaning and are just colourless words, innocuous in their use and insignificant in their sense. This may suggest the level of civility man was capable of at that time. The narrative in its ongoing movement tries to restore their pristine value to the words. It is in this sense that the language of *Tom Jones* is ironic. When Byron wrote *Don Juan*, the vocabulary of romance was indiscriminately applied to the political strategies of European despots. As Byron himself points out, the theme of love of the European literature became an adolescent and juvenile affair. The benevolent despotism of the wedding ring seems to justify the despotism of the royal family. In order to expose the romance language of politics Byron depended on satire, truth of experience emerging from a keen observation of the ways of the world. The linguistic sliding that makes it possible is demonstrated in the following stanza.
Thou mak'st the chaste connubial state precarious,
And jestest with the brows of mightiest men:
Caesar and Pompey, Mahomet, Bilisarius,
Have much employ'd the muse of history's pen;
Their lives and fortunes were extremely various,
Such worthies Time will never see again;
Yet to these four in three things the same luck holds.
They all were heroes, conquerors, and cuckolds.

The heroes mentioned in the citation are great conquerors, giants on the page of History. This is juxtaposed with what they are in life which the greater part of humanity may not know. But the power mongers like Caesar, Pompey and Mahomet tried to supplement their lack of success in one field by exploiting a different field of life. Passion for power, and will to exploit others seem to emerge from a skeleton in the cupboard of the hero which later day biographers may read. In most romantic adventures love turns into lust and lust de glamourises beauty. Analogically speaking, concern for the welfare of the people leads to despotism and despotism de glamourises authority.

But the Byronic hero is slightly different. Byron wrote his plays and tales, *Cain*, *Heaven* and *Earth Child Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Don Juan*, *The Vision of Judgement* when the Gothic Novel was very popular in
England in the first half of the 19th century. In the 'thrillers' of this period the atmosphere and the locale are largely determined by the particular crisis the character seems to face. It is not a sort of framework in which Dante, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton found their essential subject matter and inherent values. In Byron's tales the hero if we may use such a word, is largely a drifter. He is not worried about the lost paradise. Nor is he interested in regaining it. His main problem appears to be one of plunging into light to reach darkness. This may sound paradoxical. But behind the light, one notices areas of darkness which are worse than Hell. In trying to participate in the activities of this sort of Hell that Byron's Hero acquires an existential stature. As we proceed in analysing a poem like Don Juan we notice, that the hero of Don Juan is not a substantial character. He does not act with any kind of conviction, except his own frank and free disposition and he goes forth into the world with an openness of heart. In examining various digressions in the poem I tried to show the significance of the digressions in terms of the critical principles explained in the preceding lines.
John Spoil's argues that in the narrative poetics of the late 18th and the 19th centuries, the distinction between prose and poetry seems to collapse. Most essays of Lamb and Hazlitt for example are based on a kind of poetic organisation which felicitated the communication of the vision. This trend is maintained in Ruskin, Carlyle, and Pater. The distinction Arnold draws between prose and poetry in his "Study of Poetry" was later rejected by Eliot so that any critical evaluation that we make about a long poem suggests the collapse of genres. For example, the 12th canto of Don Juan is a farcial exposure of 'London Life.' As Spoil's argues, 'Byron here anticipates Dickens' "grimmer exhibition of the money power in his contemporary England, its deadly blight on individual human lives. Byron can still afford, however, to treat the subject with a lighter irony, though with clear unenchanted knowledge ........."^4 The subject matter of the Canto is the great world of aristocratic society as Byron had known it. Its worldiness, hardness,
heartlessness and Cynicism are dramatised in terms of a high spirited comedy and makes us think of James' *The Awkward Age* which was critical of the contemporary English life. Notwithstanding the use of novelistic devices and dramatisation of the whole world according to the canons of realism, Byron often begins and ends each Canto on a familiar note. As I have earlier suggested inspite of the objectivity and the distance the author maintains, a few biographical items intrude into the narrative, may be, unconsciously. This is true of Dickens. This is true of Byron also. In structuring their experiences the narrative artists most often are compelled to keep the structure loose so that improvisations which strengthen the narrative as a whole could be accommodated. But a problem arises when the narrative is also a satire, in the sense of the exposure of the blighted items in society. Any satire to be effective and successful should have an ideational scaffolding. In order to supply this component which we may call the semantic component, deviations are necessary to the extent that they do not crack the structure. In the following pages I have tried to analyse Byron's long poem *Don Juan* on the basis
of the foregoing critical observations. In order to create suitable critical climate and to place the poem in its context, I discussed the origin of the poem, its development and theme, keeping in mind that Don Juan is a 'novel in verse.'

Too much emphasis on the structurality of a poem may obscure the human aspect and its relevance to the world for which it was written. I tried to read the major episodes in the poem and their contribution to the total impact the poem makes on the reader.
REFERENCES:


