Don Juan belongs with vital vibrations to its age - a remarkable age, too, in human history — and it dramatizes that age with such lively intensity, with such a sweep of imaginative power, that no generation to come will ever be able to dispute the image of the age that emerges from the poem. Sir Herbert Grierson described it as primarily a satire on the royal and aristocratic politicians who governed Europe. It was an exposure of the whole system of comfortable hypocrisies on which their lives were based.  

Don Juan is a sort of picaresque novel in verse. It is in Don Juan that Byron attains to the full disclosure of his personality and the final expression of his genius. Don Juan is cast in the form of objective narrative dealing with the theme of duplicity and self-deception. About the nature of his poem we have information from Byron's several letters to his companions like Captain Medwin, John Murray. Byron writing to them describes his poem as an epic — 'an epic as much in the spirit of our day as the Iliad was in that of Homer.' With the Ottava
rime — an eight line stanza much favoured by Italian poets — Byron found a verse medium capable of expressing the brilliance, satirical wit and gaiety which characterized his letters to friends. In the opinion of most modern readers Don Juan is the most characteristic and enjoyable of Byron's works. Helen Gardner says of the poem as the most amusing poem ever written.²

In Ottava rima, the rhyme scheme is uncomplicated - a b a b a b c c — unlike the more complex intertwining of the Spenserian there is no Alexandrine to slow the pace and no anticipation of the rhyme of the final couplet. This couplet can either provide a triumphantly decisive summing up of what has gone before or give a totally unexpected twist. This opens up tremendous possibilities both for wit and satire, which delights in the unexpected and ridiculous.

Don Juan grew from a scandalous story that Byron had heard in Venice. He assured Hobhouse that Juan's adventure with Donna Julia, the subject of Canto I, did not reflect an adventure of his own, 'but one of an acquaintance of mine (Parolini by name), which happened some years ago at Bassano, with the
Prefect's wife when he was a boy; and was the subject of a long case, ending in a divorce or separation of the parties during the Italian Viceroyalty' (Correspondence, 25 January, 1819). Byron began Don Juan on 3 July 1818.

The troubled fortunes of Don Juan during the years of its composition elicited a number of defences from Byron. These varied with the nature of the attack and the stage he had reached in the poem. On 12 August 1819, he defended it to Murray as a playful improvisation;

You ask me for the plan of Donny Johny: I have no plan - I had no plan; but I had or have materials; though if, like Tony Lumpkin, I am 'to be snubbed so when I am in spirits,' the poem will be naught, and the poet turn serious again. If it don't take, I will leave it off where it is, with all due respect to the public; but if continued, it must be in my own way. You might as well make Hamlet (or Diggory) 'act mad' in a strait Waistcoat as trammed my buffoonery, if I am to be a buffon; their gestures and my thoughts would only be pitiably absurd and ludicrously constrained. Why, Man, the Soul of such writing is its licence ...

... 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; and so to the indecency, do, pray, read in Boswell what Johnson, the sullen moralist, says of Prior and Paulo Purgante.
On 16 February 1821, shortly before laying the work aside for a year, he assured Murray that he seriously intended a vast comic epic:

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. To how many cantos this may extend, I know not, nor whether (even if I live) I shall complete it; but this was my notion: I meant to have made him a Cavalier Servente in Italy, and a cause for a divorce in England, and a Sentimental 'Werther-faced man' in Germany, so as to show the different ridicules of the society in each of those countries, and to have displayed him gradually gate and blase as he grew older, as is natural. But I had not quite fixed whether to make him end in Hell, or in an unhappy marriage, not knowing which would be the severest. The Spanish tradition says Hell: but it is probably only an Allegory of the other state. You are now in possession of my notions on the subject.

On 25 December 1822, having finished twelve cantos, he gave Murray a sober and cogent statement of his purpose and again resisted the charge of indecency:

Don Juan will be known bye and bye, for what it is intended, a Satire on abuses of the present states of Society, and not an eulogy of vice; it may be now and then voluptuous; I can't help that. Ariosto is worse; Smollett (See Lord Strutwell in Vol.2d. of R(oderick)R(andom) ten times worse; and fielding no better. No Girl will ever be
seduced by reading D.J: no, no; she will go to Little's poems and Rousseau's romans for that, or even to the immaculate De Stael: they will encourage her, and not the Don, who laughs as that, and - and - most other things. But never mind - Caira!

Don Juan is a vast monologue, in the course of which a story gets told. From the first line of Canto I, the monologist claims to be speaking extempore. 'I want a hero', he starts as if his hero were still unknown to him.

So far does he seem to be from having rehearsed or even planned his narrative that before long he has to recall himself from a wrong track: 'Jose, who begot our hero, who/Begot - but that's to come - Well, to renew:' (I.ix). Nor is this the only occasion on which he decides at the last moment to withhold information that is on the tip of his tongue. Four times in a single stanza, he stops himself from stating exactly what it was that Juan might have learned at a public school but did not learn from his private tutors (I.liii). Embarrassment silences him when Julia and Juan are about to consummate their love (I.cxv) when the searches in Julia's room find something other than what they sought under her bed (I.cxliv), and when the pregnancy
of a country girl reminds him of a particular event in his own early life (XVI. lxI). Another painful personal recollection cut short his account of Haidee's reaction to her father's return (IV. xxxvi), while his interest in the turncoat poet on Lambro's island causes him to forget where he is in his story, so that he has deliberately to remind himself of his place (III.lxxxI).

On two other occasions, he offers no excuse for forgetting what he meant to say (IX.xxxvi, XV.i).

His manner of expression appears to be equally unpremeditated. He admits his uncertainty about spelling (VIII.lxxiv) and grammar (VII.xlii) and several times confesses that the words he uses are dictated by the exigencies of rhyming and versifying (I.lxxxiv, I.clxxviii, V.lxxvii, VI.xvii-xviii, XIII, lxxxiii). His suspicion of fine writing causes him to pretest,

I won't describe; description is my forte,
But every fool describes in these bright days, (V.lii)

and even to deride his own similes (I.lv, VI. lxviii, XIII. xxxvi). He emends one simile before he has finished the stanza that introduces it (VI.xxxiii). We are clearly meant to believe him when he says,
I ne'er decide what I shall say, and this I call
Much too poetical. Men should know why
They write, and for what end; but, note or text,
I never know the word which will come next,

(IX. xli)

and when he issues his personal manifesto:

Speculating as I cast mine eye
On what may suit or may not suit my story,
And never straining hard to versify,
I rattle on exactly as I'd talk
With any body in a ride or walk.

I don't know that there may be much ability
Shown in this sort of desultory rhyme;
But there's a conversational facility,
Which may round off an hour upon a time,
Of this I'm sure at least, there's no servility
In mine irregularity of chime,
Which rings what's uppermost of new or hoary,
Just as I feel the 'Improvvisatore.'

(XV.xix-xx)

G.M. Ridenour sees the poem as coherent and unified. He discusses three structural principles in it. The first of these is the classical rhetorical theory of the styles. Byron couches his satire in the pedestrian, or low style; but such is his dedication to truth that he periodically soars to the heroic level, and by so doing justifies his claim to be writing an 'Epic Satire.' Flight is a manifestation of pride, however, and can lead to a fall. In consonance with this, Ridenour names the Christian myth of the Fall
as the second structural principle. Recurrent allusions to it, he argues, help Byron to organize in his poem the conflicting elements which compose the world as he knows it. The third structural principle is the character of the poet himself as this is presented in the poem he is writing.

The poem is a wholesale and ruthless revelation of the selfishness, greed and folly of the governing classes of Byron's day. But its scope is wider than that of political and social satire. In this poem all Byron's conceptions of liberty, personal, moral, political and intellectual - meet in a grand symphony. This liberty is not the mere desire of a young aristocrat to shake off restraint; it is liberty of the mind, a release of creative energy, freedom from the slavery of the stock response and the conventional attitude. The most concentrated expression of the spirit of the poem is, perhaps, to be found in the following stanzas from the 9th Canto (XXIV and XXV)

And I will war, at least in words (and - should My chance so happen - deeds) with all who war With Thought; - and of thoughts foes by far most rude, Tyrants and sycophants have been and are.
I know not who may conquer; if I could
Have such a prescience, it should be no bar
To this my plain, sworn, downright detestation
of every despotism in every nation.

It is not that I adulate the people:
without me, there are demagogues enough,
And infidels, to pull down every steeple
And set up in their stead some proper stuff.
Whether they may sow scepticism to reap hell,
As is the Christian dogma rather rough,
I do not know; - I wish men to be free
As much from mobs as kings - from you as me.

To read Don Juan is to share in Byron's own
great act of self-emancipation and to hear the voice
of a completely free spirit, rejoicing in the richness
and variety of life and thoroughly conscious of its
absurdities, its baseness, its beauty, its glory and
its misery.

Sir Herbert Read's judgement of this poem is
memorable. It is almost too good to be true - true
in the sense of being authentic, true in the sense of
being sincere. But it is both.

Don Juan is cast in the form of objective
narrative and deals with incidents which have their
roots in the gossip of the time. What holds it
together and provides its amazing vitality is Byron's
personality. His purpose was to expose the hypocrisy
and the corruption of the high society which he knew so well and in his hero to depict

'a vicious and unprincipled character and lead him through those ranks of society, whose high external accomplishments cover and cloak internal and secret vices.'

He wished to expose a disgraceful sham by telling the truth about it. He wished to tell the truth as he saw it with all the paradoxes and contradictions of his nature. The result is an extremely personal document in which the whole of Byron is contained. The exaggerations and the fantasy of the story only to serve to bring into prominence and set in a clear perspective his individual views of existence and his conflicting feelings about it.

The fullness of his experience of life, his range and ease of reference, his curiosity about all things human, the candour and courage with which he exposes himself as well as his world, his intellectual toughness and temperamental resilience created the manner of Don Juan as their appropriate vehicle.

As boy, I thought myself a clever fellow
And wish'd that others held the same opinion;
They took it up when my days grew more mellow,
And other minds acknowledged my dominion;
Now my sere fancy falls into the yellow
Leaf and imagination droops her pinion,
And the sad truth which hovers o'er my desk
Turns what was once romantic to burlesque.

Thus wrote Byron in Don Juan which exhibits
the best qualities of the poet - "his magnificent,
ironic detachment, his humour, his iconoclasm, his
vitality and his zest for life." In fact, he was
primarily a satirist. In satire, his genius flowered.
Pope Gifford and Swift influenced his satirical works.

Satire is a major element in Don Juan; but
so is romance. Neither is pure, and both are contained
within a comic vision of man. Don Juan is criticism
of the Romantic outlook because it says that human
beings may have beautiful dream but fail to live up to
them. In embarking on this realistic and satirical
task, Byron was careful not to exaggerate on certain
matters which concerned him. He saw that though he
had largely outloved his wilder notions or seen their
limitations in actual life, they still counted for
something and could not altogether be rejected. His
aim was to put them in a true setting, to show both
that strength and weaknesses, to assess them at their right worth. So his poem moves, as it were, on two lines.

Byron's dual approach to his subject is reflected in a mannerism which is extremely common to Don Juan. He will begin to discourse seriously of a subject and speak nobly and finely about it, only to end with some calculated anti-climax, which makes us think that after all he does not care very much about what he has said. We almost feel that he has tricked us by making us respond to a serious topic, only to say that there is nothing in it. But this is only an inadequate analysis of what Byron does.

He gives in Don Juan a panorama of contemporary life which is much richer than anything as background we get from Romantic literature. Those who saw in Don Juan the epic of the age were not entirely wrong. It touches many facts of actual life and gives an appropriate poetry to each. Byron had omnivorous taste for experience and tried most things that came his way. The result is that his masterly poem provides a vivid and searching commentary on the contemporary scene.
About the narrative and action of *Don Juan*, it is not necessary to go into detail; their attractions are obvious; and the most original feature of Byron's enterprise is well suggested in this quotation from Halevy's Preface to his *History of the English People* in 1815.

To an Englishman, English society is the whole of society, the ideal society. Buckle, in a work celebrated half a century ago, avowedly treated all forms of human civilization as to many deviations from the true norm of civilisation, the civilisation of Great Britain. Very different is the attitude of the observer from abroad. A great number of characteristics which, being familiar to the natives from birth, have come to form part of their intellectual and moral nature, are for him matter of astonishment—whether of admiration or disapproval is indifferent—and demand from him an explanation. Indeed, of all the nations in Europe, it is perhaps the English whose institutions must, in many respects, be regarded as being, beyond the institutions of other people, paradoxical, 'unique'.

The later cantos of *Don Juan*, and especially the description of the house-party, owe their excellence to Byron's ability to be both inside and outside the people, the institutions, and the social falsities and absurdities which supply his material. At home in no civilisation himself, he responds the more keenly to
the comic aspect of people who are at home in theirs. In serious moods, he reveals himself as a deracine who cannot forget 'Society' and his triumphs and disasters in it, but who dreams of another kind of society in which the standards of success or failure are different. That there is an element of daydream in his fondness for the viewpoint of a Tartar chieftain, or a levelling radical, does not mean that he cannot thereby project a lively criticism of the unrealities, fallacies, and inhumanities of the established fact: his knowledge of life and the world projects him from many illusions; and his indulgences in misanthropy do not preclude a real and generous humanity. The anger and horror of the war sections of Don Juan owe the power of their expression to their being the correlates of positive feelings; just as the force of the irony, in the frivolous parts of the poem, derives from Byron's unfailing capacity to discriminate between the 'human' values and the 'social ones'. And thus it is that Don Juan, which is in one aspect licentious, cynical, antinomian, in another aspect is a most edifying and improving work.
As to the nominal hero of the poem, objections have been made to his general colourlessness, passivity, and silence; but he plays the part that is allotted to him. He seems in his love-affairs to represent that willingness of Byron to be used by women, which is so curious a quality of Byron's own vie amoureuse; but he never evinces the reaction against that role, and against the Regency gentleman-amorist in general, which is equally characteristic and significant. So, his performance, as a dramatization of Byron's own relations with women, is always simplified and partial. Thus, if we judge that his relationship to Catherine II reflects - as it probably does - Byron's affair with Lady Oxford, we must add at once that the fiction leaves out something essential to the understanding of the life-situation: Byron's need for, or intermittent conviction of his need for, a woman who would be motherly without moralizing. There are two reasons, one technical, and one biographical, for this two-dimensional character of the hero. Byron the narrator has taken over his functions; and in so far as he stands for the young Byron, the older man is too remote from him (except in the early cantos) to be willing, or perhaps able,
to recapture either his foolishness or his charm. The Byron of *Don Juan* does not give us, as does Stendhal, that recreation of the follies of youth which is done from within, but which we none the less feel to be always under the eyes of maturity. For Byron, the contemplation of the past is too painful; he has too much a sense of loss, and a tragic waste, to accept it as a condition of the present. *Don Juan* is the work of a mature mind, but not one with an integral vision.

Farce and satire, adventure and romance, characterize the earlier cantos; ludicrous, horrifying, and tender scenes develop in a wide variety of exotic settings. On the whole, the action moves fairly briskly. After the attempted highway robbery at the beginning of Canto XI, however, it slows down until it almost comes to a halt in Canto XII, the most digressive in the entire poem. It seems then to make a fresh start with its scenes of aristocratic British life before a background that its author knew intimately. Digressions became fewer. Even so, the narrative does not recover its original pace. Nor apparently does the narrator wish it to do so. Greater rapidity would be incompatible with his relaxed,
quizzical, ironical contemplation of the familiar social comedy. If the first ten cantos of Don Juan show us an innocent and mainly passive hero getting into a series of scrapes rather in the manner of Voltaire's Candide, the last six seem to anticipate much that is typical of the novels of Thackeray.

To say this is not to take literally the mocking declaration that the first dozen cantos are merely the 'introduction' to 'the body of the book'. But, if it is unwise to read Byron too soberly, it is also unwise to neglect the element of truth, as he saw it, in even his most high-spirited and outrageous statements. His dismissal of his first dozen cantos as a mere 'introduction' evidently expresses his own sense of the fresh start which we have discerned in Canto XIII. His cheerful readiness to make such a fresh start so late in the poem exemplifies once more his casual and improvisational manner.

To refer at last not to 'the monologist' or 'the narrator' but to Byron himself brings a considerable feeling of relief. Critical theorists rightly discourage us from simply assuming the identity of poet with imagined narrator, but in this particular
instance the scrupulous dissociation of the two cause great inconveniences and no advantages. As a matter of biographical fact, Byron evidently thought of himself as speaking with his own voice in *Don Juan*. His account of the assassination of the military commandant in Ravenna (V.xxxiii-xxxiv) corresponds so closely with the accounts in his letters dated 9 December, 1820 that it is impossible to suppose otherwise; and this is only one instance out of many. As a matter of literary fact, nothing in *Don Juan* encourages us to discern an authorial point of view differing from that of the narrator, or digresser. Perhaps we are getting somewhere near doing so when the story-teller professes to have been a friend of Juan's parents (I.xxiii-xxiv). But very little more is made of this claim than of his claims, implied in passing by his use of the first person, to have been present on the Trinidad (II.xlii, Xcv) and at the siege of Ismail (VIII.xlvii). It will be all the more an exercise in futility if we try to do so because it is the voice in which the narrator and digresser speaks from beginning to end. This is a voice that defines him sharply and leaves him in sole command of the poem; and it is surely the voice of
Byron himself as we know it in his letters and journals and in the copious records of his conversation. It is the voice of a spirited and versatile talker; its tone is normally gay and sociable, but it can easily compass gravity and pathos.

The significant 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." The root of Byron's attack on the heartless frivolity and cynicism of the ruling classes and on the idol Legitimacy which they made the shield for their self-interest, is his scepticism. Like the child in the story of the Emperor's new clothes he continues to reiterate that the Emperor is naked. His defence of Don Juan as a moral poem was grounded on the salutariness of being undeceived. There are a few critics who declare that Don Juan is neither moral nor immoral, that it is written to amuse, to shock, to horrify and startle, to make the serious absurd, and to play tricks with our feelings. But it is preposterous
to call *Don Juan* an amoral work. Apart from the obvious moral passion in many passages, we are in no doubt as we read that Byron admires courage, generosity, compassion and honesty, and that he dislikes brutality, meanness, and above all self-importance, hypocrisy and priggery. If he does not denounce, he displays with great force the satiety which dogs, as its appropriate nemesis, the life of sensation. He offers no panaceas and does not pretend that men can be saved from themselves by love, sensual or Platonic, by politics, or by patriotism. His resolute refusal to be taken in by cant of all kinds is so far-reaching as to deserve to be called a positive devotion to truth, and *Don Juan* is the most moral of poems, in this, at least, that it does not flatter what Swift, along with higher authorities, thought was man's worst vice, his pride and vanity.

But, unlike many who hold a low view of human nature, Byron is not driven by it into political reaction. If men are not capable of ruling themselves, they are certainly not to be trusted to rule others. Tyrants themselves are only men, and man's weakness and folly are no arguments for depriving him of his freedom.

Byron was a good hater and he hated many hateful things.
Although he had no very clear notions of what he was fighting for, he was quite clear as to what he was fighting against. We get no reasoned doctrine of liberty from Byron, as we do from Milton; we get a very good idea of tyranny and its compassion, sycophancy:

But still there is unto a patriot nation
which loves so well its country and its king.
A subject of sublimest exultation -
Bear it, ye Muses, on your brightest wing!
However the mighty locust, Desolation,
Strip your green fields, and to your harvests cling,
Gaunt Famine never shall approach the throne -
Though Ireland starve, great George weighs twenty stone.

(Byron first wrote 'forty-stone'; but hyperbole had to yield to his passion for exactness. The joke is improved by his moderation).

Although Byron's vision of man and the world is not very flattering to our self-esteem, or very comforting to our hopes, it is not discouraging. Man may not be a very noble animal, but he has his moments of glory, and life provides pleasures and satisfactions of many kinds. Although most men are fools, by no means all are knaves. The human race has even produced a few heroes, and common men are capable of loyalty and kindness. 'Chequered as is seen our human lot,' it is
still better to be alive than dead, better to be young than old, better to be generous than cautious, and better to be compassionate than censorious. For all its bursts of cynicism, savagery and melancholy, there is a fundamental good humour in Don Juan which becomes the dominant tone when Byron finally gets his hero to England. Even today Byron is a congenial reading. There are many and obvious affinities between his age and ours, both exhausted by a great revolution and its aftermath of war; and no writer has been more heartily and consistently 'against the Establishment.' But although Byron can be bitter and astringent he is not sour. His scepticism and irreverence are echoed today; but not his high spirits, and his zest for life. It is rather doubtful if we rise from reading Don Juan as wiser men. Wisdom of the highest kind Byron did not attain to, and this prevents him from ranking with the greatest poets. But if we are not wiser we are certainly not sadder from reading Don Juan, and there is something for us to learn from the courage and buoyancy with which Byron came to terms with a world as shabby and confused as ours.
SUMMING UP:

As a character Don Juan is not very impressive - not a round character in the Forsterian sense. But as I mentioned in the Introduction he is a typical Byronic hero. Although he learns a piece of wisdom from each of the women he comes across, we cannot call the poem education of Don Juan. A view of society with all its moral foundations is not the theme of Byron's poetry. The theme of his poetry is a view of the world in which all the moral foundations collapse. Custom and convention which are supposed to give a sense of unity and tangibility to the social order do not find any significant place in the world in which the Byronic hero tries to find his own identity. When Byron wrote his poems the ideas of Rousseau were a part of the revolutionary climate. Rousseau did not advocate any kind of non-ethical living. He thought that man's instinctive source of evil and his awareness of the good for the self are restricted and curbed by a society which custom and convention have petrified. In Child Harold's Pilgrimage and in Don Juan Byron tried to achieve a view of life and the world in which man's liberty is
the cause of innumerable problems, especially the problem of quest and identity. In this sort of quest the Byronic hero and through his eyes the reader see reality, not in terms of an ideal, but in terms of existence. In the next chapter **Digressions** I have tried to clarify the significance of these digressions in terms of the world which Byron saw and analyzed.
REFERENCES:


3. A Prussian baron who became a supporter of the French Revolution. Suspected by Robespierre, he was condemned on a false charge and guillotined in 1794.

4. Sanctioned lover of a married woman.

5. Quoted from Thomas Moore. Werther is the hero of a romance by Goethe.

