CHAPTER III

MAJOR EPISODES IN THE POEM
To reiterate that the poem 'Don Juan' is a narrative poem and that it is a sort of picaresque novel in verse would be redundant. But mention must be made of this fact as Byron takes us across land and sea along with his hero Juan in his peregrinations. These wanderings of the hero provide Byron with varied opportunities for satirical comedy.

The poem dramatizes principally six major adventures of its hero. It opens with a description of his childhood and his early love-affair with Donna Julia, a married friend of his mother's. The discovery of this intrigue leads to his being bundled out of the country. The first half of Canto II contains an account of his shipwreck and his prolonged sufferings in an open boat. His third adventure involves Haidee, the daughter of a Greek pirate, who finds Juan unconscious on the shore of the island which is her father's home and base. She becomes his lover, but on her father's unexpected return Juan is seized and sold into slavery. In Constantinople, he resists the imperious advances of Gulbeyaz, the Sultan's favourite wife. His servitude lasts from late into the fourth to the end of the seventh
Canto, when he escapes from the Turks and enlists in the army of their enemies, the Russians. Before long his military prowess and personal charm commend him to the notorious Empress, Catherine II, whose favourite he becomes. Towards the end of Canto X, she initiates his last adventure by despatching him to England on a diplomatic mission. While mixing in English Social life, he attracts the attention of three women; Aurrora, a young heiress; Adelide, the restless wife of a haughty politician; and the lax and lavish Duchess of Fitz-Fulke.

After finishing five Cantos, Byron had told John Murray, his publisher:

The 5th is so far from being the last of Don Juan, 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 Anacharasis Cleots, 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 Servents in Italy, and a cause for a divorce in England, and a sentimental wertherfaced 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 order, 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.
After a brief exordium fixing upon Don Juan as hero and determining to abandon epic precedent by beginning at the beginning, Byron embarks upon an account of Juan's parents. Donna Inez, his mother, is a blue stocking, famed for her erudition and for her virtuous character. Her memory is phenomenal, she is acquainted with the sciences, especially mathematics and with several languages. She is a paragon, 'perfection past all parallel'. But it is obvious that the world pays her exaggerated regard.

The hypocritical respectability of Inez and Jose, her husband,

Wishing each other, not divorced, but dead.
They lived respectably as man and wife,

is broken by Inez's attempts at law to prove her husband at first mad, then bad.

Jose's death makes way for Donna Inez's highly moral system of education for her son, Juan, a system which not merely proved ineffective but, in Byron's eyes, was probably responsible for his subsequent lackadaisical morality. Juan's education gives Byron the opportunity for some delightful tongue-in-cheek stanzas on the unfitness of the Greek and Latin classics for virtuous eyes.
It is now time to introduce Juan's first and perhaps most hilarious escapade. The lady is Donna Julia, an old friend of Donna Inez and at twenty three, seven years Juan's senior. Though Byron is so convincing in his characterization of the two women and indeed in his account of Juan's tentative beginnings in love, his control does waver as he attempts to explain the prim and proper Inez's friendship with the youthful and frivolous Julia and the fact that she overlooks Julia's developing passion for Juan. He tries various not very convincing plays, such as 'that Inez had, ere Don Alfonso's marriage. 'Forgot with him very prudent carriage; and that her friendship with Julia was an attempt to keep secret this affair with Julia's husband; that she wanted to 'finish Juan's education' or to alert Don Alfonso to the failings of his wife; or that she simply failed to notice what was going on. Whatever Byron's weakness on this point his strength on characterization and motive is very evident. He subtly, and sympathetically conveys the evasions and hypocrisy which lead Julia to give way to her adulterous passion: she prays to the virgin for support and when her prayers are answered she prays no more: she first vows to slip seeing Juan and, when she
breaks her vow, deludes herself into thinking that it is her duty to face temptation and resist it. Her guilt however, is apparent in her dreams of her ageing husband's death. Even while engaged in the actual seduction of Juan she is inwardly swearing fidelity to her husband and at the very moment of consummation.

A little still she strove, and much repented, And whispering! I will never consent ... consented

Byron, however, is full of sympathy for Julia; there is no condemnation in his tone although he reveals her dishonest evasions for what they are, and though she is the seducer, in a sense he sees her as a victim just as much as Juan. At the end of the Canto the reader realizes that she never had high stakes. That she is involved in a game without a sound knowledge of the rules appears to be obvious. It is this innate innocence that makes her appear pathetic, a victim of ill-conceived loss of love and romance.

In Juan's case Byron sets about deflating the typically sentimental treatment of dawning love (or
rather lust). His main thesis is really that it is climate and physiology, rather than sublime emotion, which is responsible for Juan's feelings. Again the final couplet of the ottava rima comes into its own blow to deflate what has gone before and to give us a pithy, memorable epigram:

What men call gallantry, and gods aultery,
Is much more common where the climate is sultry.

After this very careful account of the development of love between Juan and Julia we find ourselves suddenly in the realm of pure farce. Julia, in bed with Juan, is awakened by her maid, Antonia (a down-to-earth, practical, no-nonsense character) announcing the return of her husband Alfonso. A hilarious search reveals nothing but it is accompanied by a splendid tirade of 13 stanzas in which Julia protests her innocence and berates her husband for his suspicions. It is no wonder that poor Alfonso feels decidedly non-plussed. Byron's strategy is one of mock horror (but tinged, one suspects, with admiration) at the bare faced hypocrisy of the lady.

No sooner was it bolted, than - Oh, shame!
Oh sin! Oh, sorrow! and Oh womankind!
How can you do such things and keep your fame, unless this world and the other too, be blind?

With much heartfelt reluctance be it said, young Juan slipp'd, half-smothered, from the bed.

But disaster follows. Before Juan can leave Alfonso returns, only to discover a pair of man's shoes under the bed. Juan succeeds in making good his escape (with the loss only of his clothes) and to avoid scandal is sent abroad by his mother. Julia is less fortunate; she is forced to retire to a nunnery from which she writes to Juan her final pathetic letter:

They tell me it is decided, you depart:
It is wise. It is well, but not the less a pain.
I have no further claim on your young heart,
Mine is the victim, and would be again;
To love too much has been the only art
I used: I write in haste, and if a stain,
Be on the sheet, it is not what appears,
My eyeballs burn and throb, but have no tears.

Canto two is perhaps the most striking of all the Cantos for its disturbing contrasts, its deflation of sentimentality, its blending of the savage and the ridiculous, its excitement and its evocation of idyllic love. As Juan, on boardship watches Spain recede into the distance, he swears eternal fidelity to Julia and rereads her letter. Unfortunately this romantic prose
is considerably marred by sea sickness. This is just one of many examples of Byron's sense of the incongruity between man's physical needs and his mental and emotional capacities. The storm which follows is closely based on an actual account which Byron had read. It is objectively factual and detailed, even to naming the maker of the pumps. The observation of human behaviour in this situation has a note of hilarity; of the crew and passengers.

Some plundered, some drank spirits, some sung psalms, The high wind made the treble, and as bass The hoarse harsh waves kept time;

but Juan reveals both practical sense and courage in fending off all comers from the casks of rum "let us die like men, not sink below/like brutes" he says. Much of the canto is devoted to bringing out this very brutishness in mankind. As the effects of the storm grow more severe, Byron's tone is one greater seriousness and emotional involvement; there is a sense of tension and anxiety in the very impersonality of the reference to those on board:

the distress was also great with which they had to cope for want of water and their solid mess was scant enough; in vain the telescope was used.....
The practical efforts of crew and passengers to prepare for abandoning the ship contrast strongly with the wild and ineffectual response to the onset of the storm. After this build-up of detached description, farce, mounting anxiety and practical action Byron pulls out all the stops revealing the full horror of the situation with, for once, not a hint of humour or irony. The very rarity of such completely serious stanzas makes them the more effective. Once the survivors (including Juan, his spaniel and his tutor Pedrillo) are in the long boat, humour returns, though it is of an increasingly macabre kind.

It is highly significant, for instance, and uncomfortably near the truth that,

They grieved for those who perished with the cutter
And also for the biscuit-cakes and butter.

The increasingly importunate demands of stomach make Juan's spaniel an inevitable victim and though Juan refuses to partake at first, his hunger drives him to share one of its paws with Pedrillo. This leads into the horrific section in which the sailors gradually conceive the idea of cannibalism. Again it is a deadly serious stanza which brings this out:
At length on whispered his companion, who whispered another, and thus it went round, And then into a hoarser murmur grew, An ominous, and wild and desperate sound, And when his comrade's thought each sufferer knew, It was but his own suppressed till now, he found: And out they spoke of lots for flesh and blood, And who should die to be his fellow's food.

And again there is a rapid retreat into humour, which is both shocking and at the sametime a relief. Poor Julia's letter is seized for the drawing of lots and with all the inevitability of rhyme the word 'neuter' in stanza 75 brings the lot into Julia's tutor. Horror and humour continue to alternate through stanzas 76 to 83. The outrageous stanza 81 is almost in the realm of high comedy as the ships mate escapes being eaten because of veneral disease:

And next they thought upon the masters mate, As fattest; but he saved himself, because, Besides being much averse from such a fate There were some other reasons; the first was, He had been rather indisposed of late; And that which chiefly proved his saving clause, was a small present made to him at Cadiz, By general subscription of the ladies.

Some moments of beauty relieve the horror in stanzas 91 to 94, though Byron is quick to remark what a good thing it was for the 'white bird' that it did not perch upon the ship. Thus through another ten
brilliantly sustained stanzas the boat continues to drift. Though land is sighted the sailors overset the boat and only Juan is able to swim for shore and reach the entrance to a cave.

The rest of the Canto is an evocation of young love between Juan and a pirate's daughter, Haidee, the only one of Juan's affairs which is not held up to ridicule or satire. This episode is the longest and most carefully elaborate of all the amorous passages, and it deserves pretty high marks. It is an idyllic love set on a remote island, hardly belonging to the real world and it may therefore seem odd to find it in a poem which Byron intended to be realistic. It is not, however, a sentimental episode and its outcome is a tragic one. Byron believed in such a perfect love as a human ideal, something which represented the perfection of what human love could be, something which might even be realized but which was deemed to be short-lived and was likely to have only tragic consequences. The setting for the idyll is the wild coastline of a Greek island; it is a natural setting, untouched by civilization, just as Haidee's and Juan's love is a natural one. Some moments of detachment and
humour can easily be discovered in this episode. When Juan is first discovered, hunger predominates over love; the practical maid Zoe is a foil to the passionate Haidee and Byron does not neglect to send up the conventional romantic style by a deliberate descent into bathos.

And she bent over him, and he lay beneath Hushed as the babe upon its mother's breast. Dropped as the willow when no wind can breathe, Lulled like the depth of ocean when at rest, Fair as the crowning rose of the whole wreath soft as the callow cygnet in its nest; In short, he was a very pretty fellow, Although his woes had turned him rather yellow.

As Canto three opens we are distanced from Juan's and Haidee's idyll: love is presented as a tragic force -

Ah why with cypress branches hast thou wretched thy bowers, And made thy best interpreter a sigh? The cypress is of course symbolic of death.

True love, says Byron, only comes once, if at all; in most instances, of course, it does not lead to death but into a humdrum marriage or a succession of loveless affairs:

Marriage from love, like vinegar from wine- A sad, sour, sober beverage - by time
Is sharpened from its high celestial flavour,
Down to a very homely household savour.

Thus we know that one way or the other Haidee
and Juan are doomed, idyllic love has no lasting place
in this second-rate human existence.

While Juan and Haidee enjoy their short-lived passion our attention is focussed on Haidee's
father La»»bro, a pirate who only now returns from his
latest voyage. He is a ruthless and efficient pirate,
and a man of simple tastes. In his way he is a devoted
father and a lover of his country. He combines ruthless
cruelty without extreme courtesy of manner.

He was the mildest mannered man
That ever scuttled ship or cut a throat,
Pity he loved adventures life's variety,
He was so great a loss to good society.

Yet he is a meancholy, not a ridiculous or simply
villainous figure. His natural anxieties on returning
home after a long absence are much increased by the
signs of feasting and extravagant entertainment which
he sees all over the land. He learns that news of
his death had plunged his daughter into a brief period
of mourning from which she has now emerged to celebrate
publicly her liasion with an unknown young man. This
might indeed render anyone melancholy but Lambro's melancholy goes deeper than this; it stems in fact from the enslavement of his country and his inability to serve her. His way of life has hardened his character and he stands almost as a symbol of the lost heroism and present degradation of Greece itself.

In Canto four we take our last look at perfect love, a love which is man's memory of Eden. Byron makes clear the coming tragedy but suggests that his may be preferable to the alternative;

happy they!
Thrice fortunate! who of that fragile mould,
the precious porcelain of human clay.
Break with the first fall; they can never behold
the long year linked with heavy day on day
And all that must be borne, and never told.

No matter what, the idyll cannot last in human society;
They should have lived together deep in woods,
unseen as sings the nightingale.

As the two sleep, forebodings of doom come to Haidee in her dreams and the dream becomes reality as she wakes to find Lambro standing before them. The denouement is full of tragic dignity. Lambro says little. Juan is largely passive though not cowardly but Haidee reveals the true strength of her character, the indomitable spirit which she has inherited from her father.
He gazed on her, and she on him, it was stranger
how like they looked! the expression was the same
serenely savage, with a little change
In the large dark eyes mutual-darted flame;

but Lambro's superior strength defeats her and Juan is
captured and thrown aboard the slaveship. The tragedy
is over for Juan. Not so for Haidee; her death from a
cerebral haemorrhage is deeply tragic and with her, it
seems goes the very spirit of life itself in the loss
of her unborn child. In Canto 3, 73, Haidee was
described as a life giving force; it is appropriate
there, that her death brings desolation to her land
and on a note of melancholy beauty we take our leave of
her.

That isle is now all desolate and bare
Its dwellings down, its tenants passed away;
None but her own and father's grave is there
And nothing outward tells of human clay.

In the slave market Juan meets another of Byron's
memorably drawn characters. Johnson is an English
gentleman with a proper contempt for foreigners, a
soldier of fortune and man of the world who has lost
his youthful illusions and stoically accepts the
vicissitudes of fate. When asked what brought him
to the slave market he replies quite casually. "Oh!
nothing very rare, six tartars and a drag chain; and when Juan threatens to embark upon a pathetic account of his lost love Johnson airily intervenes with his own more worldly experiences:

Ay, quoth his friend, 'I thought it would appear that there had been a lady in the case; 'You take things coolly' remarks Juan and Johnson proceeds to describe the stripping of man's illusions which comes from experience of the world: Love's the first net which spreads its deadly mesh; Ambition, Avarice, vengeance, Glory, glue. The glittering lime twigs of our latter days, where still we flutter or for pence or praise.

The lines exemplify the negative tone and dark images that sometimes occur in Byron's poetry.

Juan and Johnson are brought by a black eunuch called Baba who takes them to the sultan's palace where each is given turkish clothes, female ones in Juan's case. There is an interesting conversational exchange between Baba and Johnson as the former advises the captives to embrace the Muslim faith and condescend to circumcision.

Juan's reaction both to this suggestion and to his female's garments has all the impetuous courage (or rashness) of one but little versed in the ways of
the world; but just as in love he never seems able to take the initiative, so his youthful heroism is thwarted by Johnson who is content to take things as they come and watch for his opportunities, but not to embark upon any foolhardy escapade. The comedy marks a sort of moral dilemma here for Juan's response is inherently more honest and commendable - Johnson's pragmatic experience is necessary for survival. Only in his rescue of Leila in Canto 8 does Juan at last take the initiative and stand by his determination.

In contrast to the natural beauty of Haidee's island is the cold and lifeless splendour of the Sultan's palace. This description is a summing up of the frustrated existence of Gulbeyaz, the Sultan's fourth and favourite wife, who is pampered and imperious but ill satisfied with her lot. Juan is her latest whim and "whatever she saw and coveted was brought, but in him she finds more than she bargained for." His wounds from the Haidee episode are still fresh and when she asks him, 'Christian, can't thou love?' he bursts into tears. Gulbeyaz is embarrassed and at a loss, and Byron shows a real sensitivity to her plight:
And she would have consoled, but knew not how:
Having no equals, nothing which had ever
Infected her with sympathy till now.

But her embarrassment turns to wrath as Juan proudly
and with some mobility rejects her overtures:

The prisoned eagle will not pair, nor
I serve a Sultana's sensual phantasy.

After reviewing all possible responses from the most
serious to the most trivial, she, too dissolves into
tears. Despite Juan's spirited refusal in loyalty
to Haidee there is some hint that fickleness is about
to take over and that he would soon yield. He is saved
from this shame by Baba's announcement of the Sultan's
arrival. After the tense emotions of Gulbeyaz and
Juan's encounter, Baba's diplomatic circumlocutions
provide us with humorous relief and at the sametime
emphasize the false and hollow splendour of Gulbeyaz's
life. Juan is of course protected from discovery by
his female garments and he is dismissed, along with
the other girls, to the seraglio, the quarters of the
concubines.

Canto six is almost pure comedy and Juan's
situation in the seraglio gives Byron plenty of scope
for innuendo. The seraglio is inevitably a hot house
of frustrated sensuality for one concubine, Dudu (with whom Juan is put to bed) there is at least a brief experience of Eden. The outcome, however, threatens to be disaster, for when Gulbeyaz learns from Baba what has been going on, her resentment gets the better of her passion and she orders the typical punishment for infidelity, drowning in a sack.

Cantos 7 and 8 immediately bring us a marked change of scene. Distancing himself from the personal problems of Gulbeyaz, Juan, etc., Byron embarks upon an account of the siege of Ismail by the Russians, an historical event which he had carefully studied so as to give a convincing description of warfare. Later he is joined at Ismail by Johnson, Juan and two women, who have, quite inexplicably, escaped from Constantinople; the two men join the fighting on the Russian side. Here, Byron gives rein to his horror of warfare. Nevertheless he uses the exploits of Juan and Johnson to show the heroism of individuals. They are among the first to enter the captured city.

Equally gruesome, but now with a grotesquely ludicrous note is the last act of a dying Moslem who
sinks his teeth into the ankle of his foe. Altruism and hatred of cruelty nevertheless find a place amid the horrow as Juan rescues a ten-year-old Turkish girl who was being tyrannized by soldiers. There is also a memorable piece of heroism in the death of the Sultan and his five sons.

Byron's hatred of war and his belief that Europe's great military leaders have let mankind down because their actions have brought destruction, not liberation, find an expression in Cantos 8 and 9.

War's a brain-spattering, wind pipe-shitting art, unless her cause by right be sanctified. If you have acted once a generous part, the world, not the world's masters, will decide, And I shall be delighted to learn who, save you and yours, have gained by Waterloo? You did great things, but not being great in mind, Have left undone the greatest — and mankind.

We see Juan at the court of Catherine the great, where he was sent with dispatches concerning the victory at Ismail. Byron gives us a brief spell of Juan as Catherine's lover. Juan is later sent on a secret diplomatic mission to England. The first incident after Juan's arrival in England is an encounter with a highway man. It is a mixture of comedy and pathos rather
in the manner of earlier Cantos but the fact that a man's death is involved gives the incident a disturbing feel. Juan is introduced to politicians, but Byron is more interested to show us the stir he made among the ladies:

Fair virgins blushed upon him, wedded dames
Bloomed also in less transitory hues;
For both commodities dwell by the Thames,
The painting and the painted
Daughters admired his dress, and pious mothers
Inquired his income, and if he had brothers.

It is obvious that he is to be caught up in the great marriage market of English society. In Canto 13, we are introduced to Lord Henry Amundeville and Lady Adeline. Lord Henry is the perfect English politician, proud, reserved, methodical, pertinacious, absolutely correct in his behaviour but dull and entirely devoid of any warmth of feeling. His wife is a jewel of society. She conceals, with in her, however, a capacity for passion and sensuality which are seeking an outlet.

Amidst all this Juan is caught up with three women. The duchess of Fitz-Fulke is a married lady of very easy virtue who with her husband enjoys.

That best of unions, past all doubt,
which never meets and therefore cannot fall out.
She quite unabashedly turns her attentions to Juan, sufficiently to frighten lady Adeline who suffers, apparently, from unrecognized jealousy.

Another lady is Aurora Raby, a young girl not prudish but of genuine moral virtue and religion. She has not the natural, unspoiled innocence of Haidee but combines integrity with a sagacity and strength of character which enable her to rise above all the petty corruption and hypocrisy of society. The story breaks off in the midst abruptly. However the remaining part of the poem conveys Byron's personal views about various things such as his dejection in life, his opinions about the corrupt English society and politics.

Byron thus displays before us a multifaceted view of life and nature with the narration of incidents involving his hero Juan. The description of the poem as a picaresque novel or a narrative poem sounds quite just after all.