CHAPTER IV

DIGRESSIONS - THEIR RELEVANCE
Byron's plots, if they deserve that name, are extremely simple. What makes the tales interesting is first a torrential fluency of verse and a skill in varying it from time to time to avoid monotony: and second a genius for divagation. Digression, indeed, is one of the valuable arts of the story teller. The effect of Byron's digressions is to keep us interested in the story teller himself, and through this interest to create in us greater interest in the story. Like so many stories it lives as much by its digressions as by its fable. His genius for digression, for wandering away from his subject (usually to talk about himself) and suddenly returning to it, is in Don Juan, at the height of its power. The continual banter and mockery, which his stanza and his Italian model serve to keep constantly in his mind, serve as an admirable antacid to the high-falutin which in the earlier romances tends to upset the reader's stomach.¹

Strong as the satiric power in Don Juan is, and inspite of Byron's special verbal techniques in verse the underlying impulse of the poem is not satiric. It began as a farce and developed into a comedy. The
poem contains more than merely a record of Juan's adventures, Byron conceived it on the lines of the Italian medley poems; and the discursiveness of this models seems to have been his authority for an even greater discursiveness on his own part. He allows himself repeated digressions, in which he speaks in his own person and very much epistolary manner.

I rattle on exactly as I'd talk with any body in a ride or walk. (XV-19)

He speaks of love, of fame, of politics, of poetry; and in doing so he voices explicitly that sardonic but finally compassionate sense of the human comedy which equally informs us his presentation of the incidents of his plot.

The most audacious parts of the poem are its digressions and any account of Don Juan which ignores these passages is bound to be inadequate and misleading. Byron flaunts them in the reader's face,

But to my subject ...... let me see ..................what was it?

as he observes in one point,

'Oh - The third Canto, and the pretty pair'
Byron's dual approach to his subject is reflected in a mannerism which is extremely common in *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.

It is in Byron's digressions that the reader comes nearest to him. Swift and Sterne, each in his turn, had employed the digression with telling effect in prose narrative, but Byron was the first Englishman to make a free use of it in verse. Here again, he was under the spell of the Italians, Pulci, Berni and Casti, though the wit and humour and caustic criticism of life which find a place in these digressions are all his own. In them, the dominant mood is that of mockery, Byron, indeed, would have us believe that

"if I laugh at any mortal thing,
It is that I may not weep"

but it would be idle to deny that, in these digressions, the motley of the jester, for him, was the only wear. Their very brilliance is a proof of the delight which
their author found in girding at the world and waging war upon 'cant political, cant religious, cant moral.'

Throughout *Don Juan*, Byron's personal opinions and commentaries often intrude upon the straight forward march of his narrative, rising up to overshadow, at least temporarily, the toiling image of his adventurer. One of Byron's terms for these digressions was 'ponderings', a word capacious enough to accommodate half-serious philosophizing; instances of verbal sedition against the great enemy he called. Cant; the purging away of shibboleths or factional watchwords; ad hominem attacks on pseudo villains like Southey or true villains like Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh, who cut his throat in 1822 and elicited thereby the most scatological of Byron's epitaphs; comic exegeses of current events; brilliant esthetic observations thrown out along the way with seeming carelessness and so on through a list of topics that has an end only because the poem does.4

The digressive strategy becomes especially noticeable once Byron got his hero into England during the final Cantos. Very little of any consequence happens to Juan in these sequences, and it may be that Byron's
narrative imagination had begun, in his words, to drop its opinion. It is far too late to suggest that these 'ponderings' might with profit be edited out. The poem without them would not be the poem as it is, much as Melville's MOBY DICK, minus the metaphysical musings of Ismael and Ahab, would be little more than a magnificent adventure story of the American whaling industry. Yet Don Juan does tend to unravel when Byron as Byron abandons his narrative obligations in the name of 'ponderings' and fails for long stretches to carry his readers back to the zigzag track of Juan's wanderings.

His most explicit statements of the theme occur in certain of his digressions: at the beginning of Canto VII, for example, and at the close of Canto XI. One of the stanzas devoted to it early in the poem illustrates the characteristic manner of delivery:

What are the hopes of man? Old Egypt's King Cheops erected the first pyramid
And largest, thinking it was just the thing
To keep his memory whole, and mummy hid;
But somebody or other rummaging,
Burglariously broke his coffin's lid;
Let not a monument give you or me hopes
since not a pinch of dust remains of Cheops.
(I. 219)
Vernon, the butcher Cumberland, Wolfe, Hawke
Prince Ferdinand, Garnby, Burgoyne, Keppel, Howe
Evil and good have had their tithe of talk,
And fill'd their sign-posts then, like Wellesley
now;
Each in their turn like Banquo's monarchs stalk
Followers of fame, 'mine farrow' of that sow:
France, too, had Bonaparte and D'Estaing,
Recorded in the Moniteur and Courier.
(Canto 1-2)

Thomas Moore's notes on these military and
naval heroes of the eighteenth century in his edition
of Byron indicate the high esteem in which they were
still held. Byron cites them in order to introduce
one of the recurrent themes of Don Juan: the imperma-
nence of such fame, and the fickleness of the age.

Cf - Canto I 218-20

What is the end of fame? It is but to fill
A certain portion of uncertain paper:
Some liken it climbing up a hill,
Whose summit, like all hills, is lost in vapour;
For this men write, speak, preach and heroes kill,
And bards burn what they call their 'midnight taper'
To have, when the original is dust
A name, a wretched picture, and worse bust. (218)

What are the hopes of man? Old Egypt's King
Cheops erected the first pyramid
Since not a pinch of dust remains of Cheops.

(219)
But I, being fond of true philosophy,
Say very often to myself, 'Alas'
All things that have been born were born to die.
And flesh (which Death mows down to lay) is grass;
You've pass'd your youth not so unpleasantly,
And if you had it o'er again - 't would pass -
So thank your stars that matters are no worse,
And read your Bible, Sir, and mind your purse;

There is some evidence, in the early parts of
Don Juan, that Byron intended to create a narrator with
a distinctive character, but the consistency of tone and
point of view implied by such a narrative method would
not have allowed him to indulge so easily in self-
conscious intrusions and ironic digressions on literary,
social, moral and personal matters, and the role of
narrator is taken over by the author as impresario:

And so interfered, and with the best
Intentions, but their treatment was not kind:

The description of Juan's education is an
obvious satire on current educational practice; it is
also directly relevant to the poem's central subject:
goes so far as to claim that the entire poem may be read
as a richly humorous investigation of the results
stemming from a canting, maternal education which
attempted to deny the very physical foundations of life.

But that which Donna Inez most desired
And saw into herself each day before all
The learned tutors whom for him she hired,
Was, that his breeding should be strictly moral;

The languages, especially the dead
The Sciences, and most of all the abstruse,
The arts, at least all such could be said
To be the most remote from common use
In all these he was much and deeply read

Byron's vagueness and inconsistency in the characterization of Julia have sometimes been disapproved by critics who give primary importance to the narrative parts of the poem, but Byron seems more concerned to use her as vehicle for his contrasting satires on platonic love, feminine hypocrisy, shrewishness and duplicity.

I can't tell whether Julia saw the affair
With other people's eyes, or if her own
Discoveries made, but none could be aware of this, at least no symptom e'er was shown;
perhaps she did not know or did not care,
Indifferent from the first, or callous grown.
I am really puzzled what to think or say
She kept her counsel in so close a way.

The stanzas from 122 to 133 constitute a good example of Byron's technique of digression and accretion.
The lyric in praise of first love is relevant to the subject of his narrative and serves to bridge the time gap in his story. Having paused, Byron decided to add a further six stanzas to his manuscript, and inserted his most brilliant yet serious satire of the Canto on the paradoxes of scientific progress and moral confusion.

We'll talk of that anon. It is sweet to hear At midnight on the blue and moonlit deep The song and oar of Adria's gondolier By distance mellow'd, over the waters sweep:

(122)

Sweet is the vintage, when the showering grapes In Bacchanal profusion reel to earth Purple and gushing: Sweet are our escapes From civic revelry to rural mirth.

(124)

But sweeter still than this, than these, than all Is first and passionate love - it stands alone, Like Adam's recollection of his fall; The tree of knowledge has been pluck'd - all is known And life yields nothing further to recall Worthy of this ambrosial sin so shown, No doubt in fable, as the unforgiven Fire which Prometheus filch'd for us from heaven. (127)

Man's strange animal, and makes strange use of his own nature, and the various arts, And likes particularly to produce Some new experiment to show his parts;

(128)
Bread has been made (indifferent) from potatoes;  
And galvanism has set some corpses grinning, 
But has not answered like the apparatus 
of the Humane Society's beginning, 
By which men are suffocated gratis;  
What wondrous new machines have late been spinning! 
I said the small-pox has gone out late 
perhaps it may be followed by the great.  

(130)

This is the patent age of new inventions  
For killing bodies, and for saving souls, 
All propagated with the best intentions: 
Sir Humphrey Davy's lantern.  

(132)

Man's a phenomenon, one knows not what, 
And wonderful beyond all wondrous measure;  
'tis pity though, in this sublime world, that 
pleasure's is a sin, and sometimes sin's a pleasure 
few morals know what end they would be at,  
But whether glory, power, or love, or treasure, 
The path is through perplexing ways, and when 
The goal is gained, we die, you know - and then -  

(133)

What then? - I do not know, no more do you -  
And so good night - Return we to our story;  

(134)

Returning to the poem, the initial intention 
then is a poem of light, social satiric kind, but there 
is the possibility of its developing in other directions. 
As a result the poem, in the end, turns to be most 
remarkable for its extent and its variety. By abandoning 
the satiric, Promethean pose of the early poems, Byron
has given himself the advantages of wit, humour and ease and worldly wisdom; and from this relatively firm standpoint he can survey with safety other aspects of experience, which hitherto he has never been secure enough to deal with adequately.

Although the digressions sometime swamp the main narrative as in Canto III, they are so essential to Byron's creative concerns that we seldom resent them. The introductory passages at the beginning of the Cantos are bound to remind us of Fielding who was clearly in Byron's mind as he wrote his 'Comic epic poem in verse' but at times we are reminded even more unmistakably of Sterne, when Byron draws attention to a daring transition with the words

... how odd are the connections of human thoughts which jostle in their flight,

it might be the author of Tristam Shandy who is speaking. Byron reminds us of Sterne in his alternations between gaiety and gravity, in the confidential tone in which he discusses his book with the reader, debating points of literacy, criticism and morality, in the apparent shapelessness of his plot, and in the
mischievous way in which he stands things on their heads and is determined to cheat the reader of the "stock-response". Like Sterne, Byron presents himself as a broadminded philosopher who has seen farther than the common run of mankind. Juanism has something in common with Shandyism and in many ways Don Juan, a poem unfinished and unfinishable, stands to the tradition of English poetry as Tristam Shandy to that of the English novel. As Frye says, "Armed with this new technique, Byron was ready to tackle a narrative satire, and in narrative satire he found not only a means of exploiting all his best qualities, but of turning his very faults as a poet into virtues. He could digress to his heart's content, for digression is part of the fun in satire - one thinks of Tristam Shandy and the "Digression in praise of Digressions" in A Tale of a Tub. He could write doggerel, but doggerel in satire is a sign of wit rather than incompetence. He could be serious if he liked, for sudden changes of mood belong to the form and he could swing back to burlesque again as soon as he was bored with seriousness, or thought the reader might be".⁵
REFERENCES:


