The Narrator of Don Juan

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AS a poet and as a man, Byron was a poseur, everyone agrees, but some of Byron's posturing is more interesting than most poets' sincerity, and by no means everyone disapproves of it. Nevertheless, for those like myself who feel that what there is of value in Byron is not to be dissociated from this posturing, there is a problem; not one that immediately affects our enjoyment of the poetry, but one that can ultimately do so, once we start puzzling about meaning: it is often difficult to know who is saying what is said, how seriously, and with what shade of irony, if any. The problem has been complicated by current intellectual fashions. Problems of identity are all the go, and it is tempting to see Byron as a Regency Borges with a passion for masks, as a precursor of existentialism, or as a devotee of the absurd. I think he probably does have some importance in the history of these phenomena, but simply to say that Byron was doing what lots of writers today are trying to do seems to me neither accurate, nor a good way of seeing where he stands in literary history, nor indeed a reason why we should admire what he wrote.

One critic who has managed to state the problem, without falling into the pedantry encouraged by intellectual fashion, is John Wain.[1] Byron's failure to establish his own true identity, he argues, prevented him from having "a fully successful relationship with his poetic imagination." Byron's method, he suggests, was to project an image of himself, "and then let the image do the writing." Because he lacked the confidence to look deeply into his own mind, he fell into the trap of projecting oversimplified images, who wrote oversimplified poetry for him.

I agree that Byron failed to establish his own true identity, that his life and his poetry may be seen as a series of experimental postures, and, like John Wain, I cannot see how he would have developed had he lived, but it seems to me that in one poem at least this failure was no handicap. In *Don Juan,* I believe, Byron exploited his lack of firm identity, his posturing habit, to create a work of enduring value, in which the oversimplification is transmuted into something richer and more satisfying.

The oversimplification is found in each of the multiple narrative voices that all wakeful readers of *Don Juan* notice. Some critics have been offended by these multiple voices, but most readers enjoy them, and it seems to me that the critic should be wary of finding blemishes where the common reader finds only things to enjoy. I am thinking of the narrator's trick of appearing in alternative and contradictory guises. At one point he tells us he is past his "days of love"; at another, that he is "fond of a little love," fond of the "old pleasures," "so they but hold." Almost as soon as the prevailing worldly and tolerant attitude towards sexual irregularity has been established, we come across stanzas such as the following, expressing a prudish distaste for amatory verse:

> Ovid's a rake, as half his verses show him,
> Anacreon's morals are a still worse sample,
> Catullus scarcely has a decent poem,
> I don't think Sappho's Ode a good example,
> Although Longinus tells us there is no hymn
> Where the sublime soars forth on wings more ample;
> But Virgil's songs are pure, except that horrid one
> Beginning with 'Formosum Pastor Corydon.'
>
> (1.42)

One could go on listing examples for a long time.

Objections of the sort John Wain makes are set aside by critics who favour the interpretations endorsed by intellectual fashion. They explain the multiple voices of *Don Juan* by making Byron out to be a modern, with a taste for the absurd, in the modern sense. The meaning of the poem, they suggest, is to be found in the ironic

dissonance of the many voices. "Its irony," says William H. Marshall, "is terminal rather than instrumental."[2] This is not an explanation likely to satisfy an enquiring mind; its anti-historical tendency has obvious disadvantages. Indeed, it has been opposed,[3] and fairly successfully I feel, but it seems to me that the way the different narrative voices are united has yet to be fully explained.

The notion that the irony is "terminal" is no longer tenable, once we recognize the pervasive mocking tone, which suggests a judging mind, the narrator's or Byron's, assessing each of the multiple voices. It is only at one level, a fairly low and immediate one, that we find ourselves thinking of, and responding to, the sort of mind that prefers "decent" to "chaste," that speaks with relief of Virgil's "pure" songs, and that dare not refer to the second eclogue, except as "that horrid one / Beginning with 'Formosum Pastor Corydon.' " Most of today's readers, I suppose, see that there is a joke in such passages, first of all because they know Byron. A reader new to Byron might recognize the mockery in this passage, because it is out of tune with what's gone before. But you don't need to know Byron, or to have read any but this single stanza, in order to see that there is a joke. By itself, the stanza makes us aware of the judging mocking mind, a mind that delights in human absurdity (I'm not now using the word as a modernist slogan), but delights also in rising above it, in fixing or placing it, by giving it a crazy elegance of a sort the mind mocked could never devise and would never approve. In this stanza, the rhymes alone make us aware of the judging mind. And whenever the dissonant narrative voices chime in, the comic rhymes, the seemingly casual versification (in truth cunning) — all the things that give the unmistakable air of pretence — clearly indicate that there is something behind the diversity, that the irony is not terminal. The oversimplified images suggest a hidden complexity.

By itself, of course, a tone is not enough to provide a poem with unity. We don't recognize a tone as such, unless it suggests something deeper. My contention is that the multiple voices are united in our recognition, partly induced by the tone, that the narrator is a version of the rogue, who traditionally discovers identity in diversity. Byron's admiration for eighteenth-century literature is well-known, and some critics have demonstrated, specifically, his debt to picaresque fiction.[4] I should say, however, that I feel the narrator's roguishness is not to be explained simply by the identification of a specific "influence." He has qualities fundamental to rogues found throughout the long tradition of rogue literature.

Juan himself is a version of the rogue, but the narrator, in his mode of thought rather than in his actions, is the one who evokes more often the sentiments that belong to rogue literature. It is his commentary that gives the work its distinctive flavour. It is he who focuses the hatred of cant and hypocrisy, such as we find in *The Alchemist;* he who glorifies faith in impulse and truth to nature, such as we find in *Tom Jones.* And it is he who, through being protean, attains to a higher, freer identity. From Mak the sheep-stealer in the Towneley Mysteries, to Felix Krull, rogues have always been lovers of disguise, mimicry and imposture. The narrator of *Don Juan* takes his place in this tradition. Like the character in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Wilde is surely one of Byron's literary progeny), he discovers that one is more alive, more alert to the possibilities of life, the more one stretches oneself to embrace alternatives and contradictions. He discovers that, when it is difficult to approach truth at all, it is better to approach it obliquely, from many points, than to pretend it is easy from one.

Recognizing that the narrator is a version of the rogue helps solve not merely the puzzle of the multiple narrative voices; it helps solve the puzzle of how far we should allow ourselves to hear Byron's own voice in the poem. It

doesn't matter whether we tell ourselves we are listening to Byron, or to an image projected by Byron, or to a dramatically conceived narrator. The important thing is, we are listening to someone discovering identity through diversity, someone getting at the truth with the help of a variety of alternative disguises. This someone stands behind, concealed, knowable only through deduction and intuition. Perhaps the most sensible thing to say would be that Byron himself is the figure we ultimately sense or detect, and that the narrator is a projected image, the last layer of disguise. That, however, is by no means the only profitable way of imagining the latent structure of the poem. The point is, there is something complex behind the surface simplicities, but it is definable only in terms of those simplicities.

It might be objected that considering *Don Juan* as a piece of rogue literature is no more helpful than considering it as a piece of absurd literature. Both traditions suggest that there is something wrong with conventional attitudes towards truth and identity, and that imposture is a significant activity. Yet there are differences, and *Don Juan,* I feel, has some of the qualities that distinguish rogue literature from absurd literature. The latter usually suggests that there are no certainties: that what we think of as truth is convenient fiction, what we think of as personal identity is role-playing. Sometimes this postulate produces a grim or freakish comedy, but almost always, in the background, there is despair, or at best glum stoicism. Rogue literature, too, questions what is normally accepted as truth, and casts doubt on the fixity of human identity, but it usually does this on the understanding that it is primarily the certainties endorsed by society it is criticizing; rarely does it strive towards the metaphysical nihilism of absurd literature. If it is in any way nihilistic, it is not so glumly; rather, in the dissolution of certainties it finds freedom and scope for the imagination; not a pretext for *angst.* Even while we criticize them

morally, we admire the imagination and appetite for life of Lazarillo de Tormes, of Falstaff, of Roderick Random. We find their scepticism about rules and theories exhilarating, not dismaying. *Don Juan* provokes the same exhilaration. In it, the feeling of moral liberation and the gusto, that belong to rogue literature, blend imperceptibly with the love of freedom and of truth to nature, characteristic of romantic literature. The narrator of *Don Juan* is the rogue as romantic sensibility.

It is not just that looking at *Don Juan* as rogue literature makes us see it better than looking at it as absurd literature. It seems to me that this way we are more likely to do justice to the intelligence and sanity of the poem. Rogue sentiment and the romantic love of freedom both easily turn into superficial gesturing, but not so easily as the existentialist *angst* that seems to be at the heart of absurd literature. The trouble with this *angst* is that it is well-founded only if you believe the universe has let you down, if you feel it has neglected its clearly defined duty to provide you with certainties. Absurd literature is the literature of an age of transition; its value lies more in the way it records characteristic experiences of the age, than in its insight into enduring truths. Too often, it amounts to little more than the formalized self-pity of the generation. *Don Juan* is altogether more robust than most absurd literature. There is a continuous energy behind it that stops it from ever degenerating into superficial gesturing (however much it makes superficial gesturing its subject matter). Its clarity of vision demands that the poem be put in a different category from absurd literature.

Some readers might resist thinking of the narrator of *Don Juan* as a rogue, because he is aristocratic in temperament and style. He is familiar with members of the Spanish gentry, and he writes in a lordly fashion, with the manner of a man who finds it easy to laugh at modish ideas, persons and institutions, because his breeding sets him

above them. It would be wrong to see this as something disqualifying him from being a rogue. Rogues are drawn to gentlemanly and aristocratic styles, and there seems to be an obscure link between rogues on the one hand, gentlemen and aristocrats on the other. Some rogues, like Mak the sheep-stealer and the hero of Quevedo's *La Vida del Buscón,* are enthusiastic mimics of upper-class styles. Some, it is suggested (ironically or otherwise), are good at upper-class styles because of a natural affinity with gentlemen and aristocrats: Robin Hood in the ballads, for example, Macheath, and Fielding's Jonathan Wild. And some rogues have an easy command of upper-class styles because, like the heroes of Restoration comedy and Roderick Random, they really are gentlemen or aristocrats.

During the Restoration era, in fact, it became fashionable to assume that all true gentlemen had something in common with rogues (it helped distinguish them from the hypocritical bourgeoisie). The old equation, "rogues are like gentlemen," was reversed. But the way had been well-prepared by the rogue tradition in literature. In the ballads, Robin Hood is a yeoman with a courtly style. At the end of the sixteenth century, Anthony Munday made him a real aristocrat, the wronged Earl of Huntingdon.[5] Within a few years, it became natural to think of rogues as possessing a certain elegance. In *Volpone,* Mosca speaks admiringly of

> . . . your fine, elegant rascall, that can rise,
> And stoope (almost together) like an arrowe;
> Shoot through the aire, as nimbly as a starre;
> Turne short, as doth a swallow; and be here,
> And there, and here, and yonder, all at once;
> Present to any humour, all occasion;
> And change a visor, swifter, than a thought:[6]

The rogue's very protean nature is thought of as elegant. By the time of *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (1625), we find an old-fashioned low-class rogue, Sir Giles Overreach, being defeated by one of the new upper-class gentleman-rogues, Welborne, whom Massinger evidently thought

naturally superior in wit and resourcefulness. In the Restoration era, as I say, both in comedy and, it seems, in life, gentlemen and aristocrats thought of themselves as rogues. The tradition was carried forward by *The Beggar's Opera* and by eighteenth-century fiction. During the Regency period, the Restoration feeling about rogues and gentlemen was evidently revived in social life and, by Byron among others, in literature.

The style, or rather styles, of *Don Juan* is one of the things that points to a link with the rogue tradition. "Carelessly I sing," the narrator tells us, "But Phoebus lends me now and then a string" (VIII.138). This is a fair description — of the effect at any rate. We admire the ramshackle gracefulness of the verse, and the way it moves imperturbably from one contradictory note to another. Rogues are always masters of style, and of quick changes between styles. It is part of their delight in disguise, mimicry and imposture. This is another area, too, in which the rogue and the gentleman meet. We can think of the narrator of *Don Juan* as one of the mob of gentlemen who write with ease, or we can think of him as a rogue with a love of brilliant surface. For a complete response, we have to think of him as both.

As many critics have pointed out, there is an exactness of control lying behind the seeming carelessness of the verse of *Don Juan*. Byron had a good ear, and a sure taste for effect. The effect of carelessness is carefully contrived. It is largely a matter of courting poetic disaster, striking a pose, or moving from one pose to another, in such a way that the reader is convinced the precarious balance will be lost, and is disproportionately pleased when it's not. The narrator behaves, verbally, like one of those circus performers who are both clowns and acrobats. Doing a trick, he always manages to give an impression of clumsiness, of impending failure, but always at the last moment he converts clumsiness into grace, and succeeds. And like the acrobatic clown, the narrator makes those he

mockingly pretends to imitate seem silly and dull; what he does is a sort of demonstration of his contempt for such actions, such postures.

It shouldn't, then, be too difficult for us, when we are reading *Don Juan,* to identify with sufficient precision who is saying what is said. It is a rogue, a prankster, whom we perceive precisely because we are addressed by so many contradictory voices. It makes little difference whether we assume this rogue to be Byron or a dramatically conceived narrator. It is a little difficult to tell how seriously any particular utterance is made, and what shade of irony, if any, we are supposed to detect, but not much more difficult than it usually is in ironic literature, or, speaking more specifically, in rogue literature. Reading the poem, we get to know the rogue behind the various disguises; our sense of character, our natural discernment, teaches us how to assess each utterance, for its degree of seriousness and degree of irony. Most sensible critics have realized this, and I don't propose to demonstrate what they already have. The judicious reader will agree with Helen Gardner's reply to the charge that *Don Juan* is amoral (a charge implicit in the notion that it is a piece of absurd literature). "It is preposterous to call *Don Juan* an amoral work," she says. "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."[7] We are in no doubt, that is, that Byron's values, formally presented through the medium of the narrator, are ultimately the values that lie behind most rogue literature worth reading. They are the values of Ben Jonson and Henry Fielding.

Supporters of John Wain's thesis might object that the rogue tradition is not something a poet can devote his creative life to exploiting. He may try it once, or a few times even, but he has to go on. At best it offers only

a provisional adjustment to social and psychological fact. It doesn't offer a mode for discovering the deepest truths. I would agree; but I would also point out that such an objection, severely adhered to, puts out of court a great deal of literature most qualified readers admire. It implies that we should admire only the very greatest. What I am trying to suggest is this: I don't think it is true to say that Byron's failure to establish his own true identity prevented him from having "a fully successful relationship with his poetic imagination," if by that it is meant that Byron never wrote anything of significance in which this failure is not manifest, and which is not in some way spoiled by it (I think that's what John Wain does mean). *Don Juan* might not tell us whether Byron ever discovered himself, but it doesn't matter. In *Don Juan* we have a poem, unique in its way of course, but at the same time very nearly perfect of its type. And paradoxically, in the very diversity of voices heard within the poem, we perceive a man who, if he has not actually discovered himself, has got very near to it (close enough, indeed, for the purposes of the poem), through a process of exclusion: through identifying a multitude of inadequate and despicable moral postures, and thus disowning them. Negative though this process may be, it shows us a complex and volatile personality achieving at least a provisional stability, and that's no mean feat for a poem to perform.

NOTES

[1]"Byron: The Search for Identity," *Essays on Literature and Ideas* (London: Macmillan, 1963).

[2]*The Structure of Byron's Major Poems* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962), p. 177.

[3]See George M. Ridenour, "The Mode of Byron's *Don Juan*," *PMLA*, 79 (1964), 442-46.

[4]See, e.g., A. Horn, *Byron's Don Juan and the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1962).

[5]See Anthony Munday, *The Downfall of Robert Earl of Huntingdon, afterwards called Robin Hood of Merrie Sherwodde* (1598/99).

[6]III.i.23-29, *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1937), V, 1-137.

[7]"*Don Juan*," *The London Magazine*, 5 (July 1958), 64.