

Byron's Use of Literary Names in Canto I of *Don Juan*

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When one starts to read the first canto of *Don Juan*, he or she is immediately met by a long list of military heroes as the narrator tries to find a suitable hero for his own poem. This is the first few lines of stanza 2: "Vernon, the butcher Cumberland, Wolfe, Hawke, / Prince Ferdinand, Granby, Burgoyne, Keppel, Howe, / Evil and good, have had their tithe of talk"⁽¹⁾. This kind of piling up, or cataloguing of proper names, continues until stanza 5 where the narrator finally makes up his mind and says: "I'll take my friend *Don Juan*", as the hero of this poem. Apart from this cataloging of military names, this canto is sprinkled with literary names throughout. Before I proceed, I would like to have a quick look at the *Dedication* of the poem. In addition to the name of Robert Southey, we encounter many literary names such as Horace, Milton, Gibbon, Henry James Pye, Pope, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Rogers, Campbell, Moore, Crabbe and so forth. This choice of the literary names prescribes, along with politicians' names, not only the nature of the *Dedication*, but also that of the tenor of *Don Juan*, which Byron meant to present as a whole. Those literary names are there in the *Dedication* for him to satirize the poetry and politics of his contemporary world.

Don Juan is not the only poem of Byron's in which literary names appear abundantly. Another notable example is Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which is also sprinkled with literary names. It abounds with literary places as well. Byron writes in a letter to Thomas Moore in 1816: "[Venice] is a poetical place; and classical, to us, from

Shakespeare and Otway”⁽²⁾. In fact, he tells Moore facetiously that he has fallen in love with the wife of “‘a Merchant of Venice’, who is a good deal occupied with business”⁽³⁾. Byron says in *Childe Harold* that Venice will not disappear because “Shylock and the Moor, / And Pierre, cannot be swept or worn away” (IV, 4). The narrator makes a point of visiting places of literest haunted by literary ghosts. His journey includes such poetical and classical places as Arqua, Ferrara, Florence, River Clitumnus, the Fall of Terni, Mount Soracte and so forth, in addition to Venice and Rome. These places are closely related to big literary names such as Petrarch, Tasso, Dante, Ariosto, Boccaccio, Cicero, Horace and others. The Fall of Terni, for instance, is a classical place of interest *per se* celebrated by poets from Virgil downward⁽⁴⁾. I believe much can be said about literary names plus literay places in connection with the narrator in *Childe Harold IV*. On this occasion, however, I shall limit my discussion to *Don Juan*.

I like to mention one other thing. When it comes to intertextuality, Byron rarely falls behind other poets. The narrator of *Don Juan* not only mentions literary names very often, but also is very conscious of his predecessors and makes free use of their literature. A glance at the notes supplied by Jerome McGann in his Oxford edition of *Don Juan* tells us that Byron owed a great deal to his predecessors for creating his own poetry. Again this paper does not look at echoes of, and allusions to, other writers, even though Byron is a poet of allusion as much as his master, Alexander Pope. Instead, I would like to stick to the fact of Byron’s actual mentioning of literary names in *Don Juan I*.

At the outset of Canto I the narrator says: “Most epic poets plunge in ‘medias res’” (6), and towards the end of the same canto he tells his readers what sort of epic they are to expect:

“My poem’s epic and is meant to be
Divided in twelve books; each book containing,
With love, and war, a heavy gale at sea,
A list of ships, and captains, and kings reigning,

New Characters; the episodes are three:

A panorama view of hell's in training,
After the style of Virgil and of Homer
So that my name of Epic's no misnomer. (200)

This is a statement in which the narrator clearly declares that his poem is going to be an epic in his own fashion, and that at the same time he is very conscious of his "epic 'brethren' who have gone before him". (202) As we come to know eventually, the matter of the first canto is love, an epic theme. The greater part of Canto II treats 'a heavy gale at sea', and the theme of Canto VII is 'war', as the narrator says, "The Muse will take a little touch at warfare" (VI-120). *Don Juan* may be different as an epic from preceding ones, and can be called, as has been described by various critics, a parody of epic, anti-epic, modern epic and so forth. One thing is clear; we read Byron's *Don Juan* with other epic poems in mind, and we feel somehow comfortable about seeing ourselves constantly making comparisons between *Don Juan* and its epic forebears.

Thus Canto I, above all, reflects Byron's concern about the nature of the *genre* 'epic' and hence Byron introduces into the canto the names of epic poets and his ideas about the nature of 'epic'. Talking about Juan's education, his tutors have to "make an odd sort of apology", for teaching "Aeneids, Iliads, and Odysseys". (41) So we are made conscious of two great names in the epic world: Homer and Virgil, who naturally get mentioned elsewhere as well. The following quotation shows his interest in other poets of classical literature:

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*.'

Lucretius' irreligion is too strong

For early stomachs, to prove wholesome food;

I can't help thinking Juvenal was wrong,

Although no doubt his real intent was good,

For speaking out so plainly in his song,

So much indeed as to be downright rude;

And then what proper person can be partial

To all those nauseous epigrams of Martial? (42-3)

On these two stanzas Jerome McGann writes as follows: "The passage is deeply autobiographical, since these authors are all among Byron's favourites. Byron translated Anacreon, Catullus, and Martial; and Ovid, and Longinus, Virgil, Lucretius, Juvenal are frequently quoted or alluded to in his works. So is Sappho, only less so"⁽⁵⁾.

These poets mentioned in the stanzas quoted above all wrote love poems. Byron refers to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (VII, 10-12) when he says, "In fellings quick as Ovid's Miss Medea (I, 86) and he starts writing about what might be called Juan's love melancholy. As for Anacreon, his name immediately brings to mind the name of Byron's good friend, Thomas Moore, alias Anacreon Moore, once a resident of this fair city of Dublin. Byron describes him in *Don Juan* as 'that heathenish heaven / Described by Mahomet, and Anacreon Moore'. (I, 104) Even at the very end of *Don Juan*, Byron does not forget Anacreon, passion of his youth: "Anacreon only had the soul to tie an / Unwithering myrtle round the unblunted art / Of Eros". (XVI, 109) In his "To Thomas Moore" he writes, "Oh you, who in all names can tickle the town, / Anacreon, Tom Little, Tom Moore, or Tom Brown"⁽⁶⁾. By the way, Catullus is also associated with Moore, because Byron says in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* "Tis Little! Young Catullus of his day"⁽⁷⁾. As to Sappho, Byron was always interested in her. He brings in Longinus because this writer on the sublime praised Sappho's poem on love. We know that in *Childe*

Harold II Harold sees 'Leucadia's far projecting rock of woe', (II, 40) and Byron says in his note to Leucadia as follows: "From the promontory, 'the Lover's Leap', Sappho is said to have thrown herself"⁽⁸⁾. He also mentioned Virgil as pastoral poet and quotes facetiously one of his songs using the original Latin, "Beginning with '*Formosum Pastor Corydon*,'" (42) The list of love poets in these stanzas shows that the narrator was immersed in reading these poets, and their names are mentioned because love is the matter of *Don Juan I* and elsewhere in the poem.

The passage quoted above includes not just love poets but Juvenal, a satirist. Byron says, "his real intent was good, / For speaking out so plainly in his song" (43), referring to his bitter tongue as satirist. Byron's mouth in *Don Juan* is going to be as bitter, and speak out his opinions as bluntly and plainly, as Juvenal. According to Frederic Beaty, Juvenal and Horace "were among Byron's principal models throughout his poetical career". Frederick Beaty brings our attention to the fact that Byron alludes more frequently to Juvenal's satires than to Horace's. He says that Byron liked "The Roman poet's direct approach, his powerful invective encouraged by righteous indignation, his bitter irony, and his uninhibited treatment of even the seamier aspects of sexuality fascinated Byron all his life"⁽⁹⁾.

As for Byron's love of Horace, one does not have to go to much extent. He wrote *Hints from Horace*, an imitation of Horace's *Ars Poetica*. The very motto of *Don Juan* is taken from Horace, "Difficile est proprie communia dicere"⁽¹⁰⁾. The matter of his song is about common things of humanity. Everything that has to do with humans comes to be treated by his pen. Byron says that he does not like Horace because he was forcibly pushed down his throat in school, but he does nostalgically talk about the Sabine farm, "the weary bard's delight" (*Childe Harold IV*, 183). Likewise, he quotes Horace's very words, "Non ego hoc ferrem calida juventa / Consule Planco" (212); a free rendering in English by Byron is found at the end of this stanza as "[I] would not brook at all this sort of thing / In my hot youth—when George the Third was King". Byron deftly changes Planco to King George the Third. In McGann's words,

“Byron gives a topical rendering of the passage”⁽¹⁾. Byron’s *Don Juan* is fused with more relaxed Horatian sort of satire as well as with more pungent satire of Juvenal, and he pays credit to their literary names in *Don Juan I*.

Furthermore, Byron refers, in the quoted passage above, to two other literary names: Longinus and Lucretius. They may not be poets, but their philosophical and critical writings have exerted much influence on the subsequent literature. Aristotle is also often mentioned. In stanza 120 he says he is taking liberty of poetic license, since he has “a high sense / Of Aristotle and the Rules”. Then, he skips about five months and is ready to depict the love scene of Juan and Julia. This is Byron’s ‘understanding’ or willful misunderstanding, to be more precise, of Aristotle’s idea of unity of time. He shows his knowledge of Aristotle and his theories expounded in *Poetics*, but enjoys breaking his rules with confidence.

He claims his poem is going to be epic, “with strict regard to Aristotle’s rules, / The *vade mecum* of the true sublime, / Which makes so many poets, and some fools” (201). Denigrating the profession of critics Byron calls “Every Poet his *own* Aristotle” (204). One can see that Aristotle is brought in, not because the narrator wants to abide by his ideas, but to show his good knowledge of this critic. He will go on his own way, unashamedly ignoring this great critic’s rules. Byron feels certain that his readers share his knowledge of classical authors, but he makes a point of using them in a twisted and facetious way. He says at the end of Canto III that his poem is getting tedious, because “Tis being too epic”, and that he must cut the canto into two. He adds, “I’ll prove that such the opinion of the critic is / From Aristotle passim.—See *Ποιητικς*” (III, 111).

As for Longinus, much was talked about him in relation to Byron in the summer of 2004 at Moncton, New Brunswick since the topic of the International conference there was “Byron and the Sublime”⁽²⁾. Longinus is once again coupled with Aristotle. The narrator says, “knights and dames I sings... “Tis a flight / Which seems at first to need no lofty

wing, / Plumed by Longinus or the Stagyrte" (XV, 25). In Canto I Byron says he will write his 'poetical commandments' and that "I'll call the work 'Longinus o'er a Bottle, / Or, Every Poet his own Aristotle" (I, 204). Longinus is coupled with 'a Bottle' and not with the aesthetics of the sublime. When Juan is in love with Donna Julia, he acts like Wordsworth or Coleridge, pursuing "His self-communion with his own high soul" or turning "Like Coleridge into a metaphysician" (I, 91). When he thinks of Julia's eyes, he is said to entertain 'Longings sublime', but Byron says: "I can't help thinking puberty assisted" (93). When Juan rejects the Sultana's advances, her fury shows an example of the sublime. He says, "Nought's more sublime than energetic bile, / Though horrible to see yet grand to tell" (V, 135). Byron refers to the idea of the sublime often enough, and there is every reason to believe that he was very familiar with the idea of the sublime. His use of the notion of the sublime in *Manfred*, for instance, is quite serious,⁽¹³⁾ but in *Don Juan* and elsewhere he often uses the idea to ridicule human passions.

As for Lucretius, Byron's journals and letters contain a fair number of allusions to this philosopher. Lucretius is associated with irreligion there, and in his letter to John Murray of March 15 1822, Byron quotes a line from Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* on religion, which is rendered into English by McGann thus: "So potent was religion in persuading to evil deeds"⁽¹⁴⁾. The introduction of Lucretius in stanza 43 shows one facet of his attitude to orthodox religion in *Don Juan*.

Byron is fond of referring to another philosopher, Plato. He says: "Oh Plato! Plato! you have paved the way, / With your confounded fantasies, to more / Immoral conduct by the fancied sway" (I, 116). The word 'Platonic' is also used twice in *Don Juan I*. In stanza 79 Byron talks about Platonic love, which, the narrator slyly says, "matrons want to believe themselves experiencing". The phrase, 'platonic squeeze' is also used in stanza 111 in connection with Platonic love. He employs Plato and its derivatives, Platonic, Platonism, Platonical 12 times in all in *Don Juan*, but in none of these cases is he seriously talking about Plato and his ideas. Plato is there to be made fun of because of his Platonic love,

which Byron makes use of to show that man is made of flesh, and that it is not easy to rebel against it. Human nature in all its facets will have its own way, and this is one of the major themes expounded in *Don Juan* throughout. He once refers to Plato's 'dialogues dramatic' when he talks about Socrates' "penchant...for beauty" (XV-86). He mentions a Platonic idea when he says, "flesh is form'd of fiery dust". Plato is even called 'a pimp' (V, 1), and Platonic love is seen in the light of "senses"... those movements...in our bodies" (IX, 74-5). Elsewhere, Byron uses the expression 'Platonic blasphemy' (X, 43). Although he does say that the noblest kind of Love is 'Love Platonical', we know he does not quite mean that. Juan is said to possess 'the purest Platonism at bottom of all his feelings' (X-54), but it is very easy for him to forget them. Platonism is said to lead 'women astray'. (XIV, 92). Thus Platonism is something quite unpractical in this world of senses. On the whole, Byron uses Platonism to show that flesh is frail, thus showing how impractical Platonism is for men and women in love to practice. Of course, Plato said many other things, but Byron remains very selective in talking about Plato.

In addition to classical writers, Byron also refers to many literary names of his own times as well as those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The narrator says: "Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope; / Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey" (I, 205). In this stanza are also listed the names of the contemporary poets he favors: Crabbe, Campbell, Samuel Rogers and Thomas Moore, as against "Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey". The latter three are already treated in the *Dedication* in a similar vein, and they are attacked from both literary and political points of view. In the *Dedication* Byron makes use of Milton as a contrast to the lake poets. He gives the reason why the word Miltonic comes to mean 'sublime.' This is because Milton did not change his political credo as the lake poets have done in Byron's view. He was able to stand against the reigning monarch. In the poem itself Milton is depicted thus, "Dante's Beatrice and Milton's Eve / Were not drawn from their spouses, you conceive" (III, 10). The narrator says

further that Milton was not a model person in schools and so forth, even though he is 'the prince of poets'. He is said to have been "whipt at college—a harsh sire—odd spouse, / For the first Mrs. Milton left his house" (III, 91). Interestingly, however, this comment on Milton is again followed by a denigrating comment on Southey, Wordsworth and Coleridge:

All are not moralists, like Southey, when
He prated to the world of 'Pantisocracy';
Or Wordsworth unexcised, unhired, who then
Season'd his pedlar poems with democracy;
Or Coleridge, long before his flighty pen
Let to the Morning Post its aristocracy;
When he and Southey, following the same path,
Espoused two partners (millners of Bath.) (III, 93)

In spite of his domestic troubles, Milton's political position is highly extolled and considered to be antithetical to that of those three poets.

Dryden appears in Canto III (100 and 105) where he calls for the shades of Dryden and Pope, saying "Oh! Ye shades of Pope and Dryden, are we come to this?" (100) Thus, whenever Byron mentions Dryden and Pope, the lake poets are brought in as a contrast. As for Pope, however, since he is Byron's hero, he is more often referred to in *Don Juan*. In total the name of Pope is used eleven times. We know he is quoted frequently in *English Bards* and *Hints from Horace*. This is the case with Dryden too, but to a lesser degree. So when he talks about these Augustan poets, his purpose is to praise them and to talk about them in contrast to the lake poets. Whether Byron in practice follows and hands down the tradition of the Augustans whom he so much admires or not is a totally different matter. They are there again to stand as a case of antithesis to the lake poets.

So what does the cataloguing of literary names mean to Byron? In *Don Juan I*, he wants to convince the reader that he is writing an epic

in his own right and fashion, and that the theme of his poem is love. In order to do this he freely refers to literary names, the bearers of which either wrote epics or sang about love. He also sets forth his idea of what poetry and politics ought to be by talking about Milton, Dryden and Pope as against Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey. The abundance of literary names found in *Don Juan I* tells how much Byron depends upon the literary tradition he has been brought up with, to create his own poetry.

Notes

- (1) All the quotations from *Don Juan* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* are from *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980-93), 7 vols. This edition is cited hereafter as *CPW*.
- (2) Lord Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (London, John Murray, 1973-82), 12 vols, V, p.131. This edition is cited hereafter as *BLJ*.
- (3) *Ibid.*, p.129.
- (4) For the literary tradition concerning the Fall of Terni, see Itsuyo Higashinaka, *Byron and Italy: A Study of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage IV* (Kyoto, Academic Society of Ryukoku University, 2002), pp.85-90).
- (5) See his McGann's note in *CPW*, p.676.
- (6) "To Thomas Moore, Written the Evening Before his Visit to Mr. Leigh Hunt in Cold Bath Fields Prison, May 19, 1813", *CPW*, III, p.88. ll.1-2.
- (7) *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, l.285. *CPW*, I, p.237.
- (8) See the note in *CPW*, p.287.
- (9) Frederick, Beaty, *Byron the Satirist* (DeKaleb, Northern Illinois University, Press, 1985), p.125.
- (10) *CPW*, V, p.1. McGann says in his note to this motto thus: "Byron once translated the motto as "Tis not slight task to write on common things" (*CPW*, V, p.670).
- (11) See McGann's note to this stanza in *CPW*, V, p.681.
- (12) See *Revue de l'Université de Moncton: Des Actes sélectionnés du 30e Congrès international sur Byron* 《*Byron and The Romantic Sublime*》 sous la direction de Paul M. Curtis (Université de Moncton, Moncton, 2005).
- (13) See Itsuyo Higashinaka, "Manfred and the Sublime" in *ibid.*, pp.63-74 on Byron's use of the idea of the sublime in a serious vein.
- (14) See McGann's note in *BLJ*, IX, p.126.

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