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Don Juan: Delightfully Digressive

Byron published Don Juan's final canto in 1834, before he died later that year fighting for Greek independence. Stylistically speaking, its publishing was at least one hundred and fifty years ahead of its time. With Don Juan, Byron established a literary model for the experimentation in form and style that is pervasive in contemporary Post-Modern literature. Edward Bostetter notes that "The major tendency of present criticism is to emphasize the negative, indeed the nihilistic, character of Byron's view of life-the extent to which he seems to anticipate and fit in with the existentialist and absurdist trends in modern literature" (13). Byron shifted the emphasis away from plot and narrative and placed the focus on the narrator, who acts as a go-between for the author, the narrator, and the characters of the work. The ideas presented by the author emerge as the pinnacle of the work. As Boyd points out, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (57). Iconoclasm and satire are other traits Byron shares with his literary heirs, the Post-Moderns. Indeed, Byron shares much with the Post-Modern writer Kurt Vonnegut. Both men are iconoclasts, satirists, and humorists, although Byron's humor is not quite as black, it would have had he been alive during the twentieth century. Stylistically, they are also very similar, both prone to digression, flippant iconoclasm, colloquialism, and

participation in the course of the narrative. Vonnegut most closely approaches the style of Don Juan in the novels Breakfast of Champions and Timequake. Byron's mastery of digression unifies Don Juan and its conversational style makes it a delightful read. One feels as if one is sitting and listening to Byron reciting the story in person upon reading Don Juan.

The digressive nature of Don Juan stems from Byron's particularly inconsistent personal philosophy, which was spurred by his abhorrence of rigid structure. This digressive nature "Imitates the essential movement of life as Byron sensed it" (Bostetter 87). The poem seems to follow his meandering thought process, which gives rise to a conversational dialogue between Byron and the reader. Byron is most commonly associated with the narrator of Don Juan, but traits of his personality are also found in the character of Don Juan. Three identities manifest themselves, they are: Byron, the narrator, and Don Juan. Each individual of this literary trinity acts as a mouthpiece for their creator. Byron assumes different roles at different times during the course of the poem. At some points, the digression is pure Byron. At other times, Byron creates distance between himself, the narrator, and Don Juan. A similar literary effect is present in Kurt Vonnegut's Breakfast of Champions, in which Vonnegut, the narrator, and Vonnegut's alter-ego Kilgore Trout each act as the mouthpiece for their creator's philosophy. Vonnegut participates in the action of Breakfast of Champions, "I was there to watch a confrontation between two human beings I had created: Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout" (197). Byron similarly involves himself in the action of Don Juan, when Don Juan pushes him down the stairs in canto one. This digressive nature of both works is supremely evident. This kind of style robs the narrative of its generic purpose as the pinnacle of any literary work of this nature. McGann touches upon this when notes that, "Byron is a good deal less interested in the story [...] than he

is in the possibilities it offers to his digressive imagination” (283). Dowden concurs by stating that, “The story is only half the poem; the other half is a racy commentary on life and manners” (Kumar 200). Byron and Vonnegut are seamlessly able to intersperse their own witty commentary into the course of their respective works without severing the unity of each. They are able to do this because they act as the unifying force of their respective works. They utilize a literary form of the first-person monologue that develops an intimate relationship between author and reader.

The poem so abandons the literary modes of its times, that some critics would go so far as to categorize Don Juan as a novel (Bostetter 103). This further emphasizes the similarities between Byron and contemporary writers, because the novel is the quintessential form of contemporary literature. Bostetter acknowledges Byron’s impact on contemporary writers by stating, “This is certainly one reason for its appeal today, when writers in revolt against traditional generic structure are engaged in creating new ones which reflect the formlessness and absurdity of human life as they see it” (Bostetter 12). The novel that best exemplifies this trend is Vonnegut’s Timequake. In Timequake the line between fiction and non-fiction blurs so intensely that it is difficult to differentiate between the two. Vonnegut tells the reader that the novel is the result of a failed novel that he reworked. It is in the prologue that Vonnegut tells us that the novel is, “A stew made from the best parts mixed with thoughts and experiences” (xiv). This style is also characteristic of Hunter S. Thompson’s gonzo journalism.

Byron is of course a satirist, and Don Juan is a brilliant satire that encompasses the entire spectrum of western civilization. No institution escapes the wrath of his sometimes playful, sometimes caustic wit. The satiric tools Byron employs are: “Variety, paradox, incongruity,

surprise, bathos, and irony” (West 107). In this epic satire, Byron even manages to mock the pretentiousness of the epic form itself, which greatly contributes to the playfully satiric tone of a large percentage of the poem. His pervasive use of colloquialism and slang satirize the typically elevated language and theme of the traditional epic. A prime example would be when Juan’s thoughts of love and Donna Julia give way to him vomiting. What is ironic about this is that typically Byron espoused neoclassical literary values as opposed to his Romantic brethren, who more heavily relied on imagination and improvisation than imitation. One fine example is within the first canto when Byron mentions that most epic poets plunge in “medias res,” but he will begin with the beginning (623). Another aspect of Don Juan that contributes to its satiric style is the use of ottava rima. The use of ottava rima “Allows Byron to build an ideal picture in order to undercut it in the closing couplet” (Test 239). The significance of this playful rhythm is prevalent throughout the work and prevents it from delving too far into darkness. It is a source of a great deal of the humor in the poem. Byron also adds an ironic twist to the poem by using Don Juan as the name of his protagonist. Don Juan is always equated as being a malevolent seducer of women; however, Byron reverses these roles and makes Don Juan vulnerable to be preyed upon by women. He assumes the role of the seduced as opposed to his legendary status as an unrivaled seducer. This could be seen as an attack of traditional gender roles. Whether or not this is conscious or unconscious on Byron’s part is debatable, however, it is a likely manifestation of Byron’s own sexual experiences. His pre-pubescent innocence was shattered by his nurse, and thus he felt preyed upon by women all of his life. Don Juan’s reversed role is the manifestation of this unfortunate loss of innocence. Further evidence of this is the fact that the women Juan is involved with are typically older and in positions of power. Byron’s satirical

portrait of war is one that is shared by many contemporary writers. This view, that generals profit from the bravery of their soldiers is also contemporary, but can also be translated to the way businessmen profit from the hard work of their workers. While much of the poem is humorous, it is also didactic. Its intended purpose is social reform. The inherent paradox is that Byron is advocating social reform by attempting to show life as essentially meaningless. This can be explained as an essential conflict within Byron, his belief that life is meaningless balanced against his belief that life can be improved by accepting life on its own terms, as opposed to creating a grand facade.

The great wars of the twentieth century engendered an abundance of iconoclasm throughout the whole of Western culture, much the way the French Revolution and its aftermath shaped the nineteenth century. These conflicts equally destroyed the idealism that preceded them. Iconoclasm has become a consistent characteristic of much of the literature since that time. Contemporary writers share disillusionment with traditional morals and values, much as Byron did during his lifetime. Byron and contemporary writers seem to be combating the moral vacuum that disillusiones the world after such destruction. The only way for such men to deal with this desolation, is through the creation of new morals and values that would replace the outmoded ones that always seem to fail when they are in most dire need. This is the role of the iconoclast, to act as a check against the dogmatic ideas of society at large. Don Juan is the manifestation of this desire in Byron, much the way Breakfast of Champions is for Vonnegut. Both men castigate their respective societies in the same whimsical fashion. Vonnegut refers to the national anthem of the United States as “Pure balderdash, like so much they were expected to take seriously” (7). Byron mocks his society equally, making disparaging remarks about every

aspect of life during the Romantic period. These criticisms result not only from the desire to create new value systems, but also to show the flaws inherent in any rigid system. The ultimate purpose is for society to turn its eyes inward and introspectively examine its own ridiculousness. This kind of personal introspection is present in the work of both Byron and Vonnegut. They are able to look at themselves as they really are and laugh at their own absurdities. During the course of their work they even make comments regarding their supposedly flawed work. Creating an iconoclastic character was, at least on Byron's part, therapeutic. It afforded him the ability to truly be himself, while avoiding social reproach and scorn. This comes from alienation between society and the individual. The social repression that Byron felt gave rise to the Byronic hero, who is a manifestation of this alienation. The causes of Vonnegut's alienation resulted more from the dehumanizing aspect of contemporary society than from social scorn. Evidence of this surfaces in the protagonist of Breakfast of Champions, Dwayne Hoover. He reads a novel by Kilgore Trout, which causes him to believe he is the only individual the creator of the universe endowed with free will, and that all other people are machines. They are merely operating under programming.

Byron was truly a literary pioneer and consummate individual. His work, especially Don Juan, has undoubtedly influenced modern literature. He is an illustrious master of satire, iconoclasm, and digression. All of these constituents are bound together flawlessly by Byron in Don Juan. It is his intrepid departure from traditional form and style that has left an indelible mark on modern literature. Its impact is clearly culminated in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut. Not only does Byron deserve attention for his literary prowess alone, but also for the ideals he fought and died for. Indeed, Don Juan deserves a firm status among the greatest literary achievements

of all time, and so Byron deserves a position of distinction among the great literary figures.

Unfortunately, he was probably born at least one hundred and fifty years too soon. Byron would have been more at home in America during the 1960's than as an aristocrat in nineteenth century England.

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