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Repetition in Byron's *Don Juan*: A Few Reflections

Ernest Giddey

I

In *A Writer's Diary* Virginia Woolf defines Byron's *Don Juan* as "an elastic shape which will hold whatever you choose to put into it" (3). And in fact *Don Juan* contains almost everything, which accounts for the variety of the judgments and interpretations produced by criticism. In *Don Juan* you can find the illustration and the defense of the values you are fighting for, but also a source of growing irritation. The poem admits of divergent readings. The readers who are disconcerted by the diversity and the movement of the poetic message (Virginia Woolf speaks of "the springy random haphazard galloping nature of its method") try to justify their own impression by using key-words that are supposed to reduce variety to what they regard as essential. Such key-words – comedy, wit, irony, satire, bitterness, escapism, dream, original sin, epic, anti-epic, novel, monologue, digression, etc. – are all adequate to a certain extent and cover part of the territory. But they are disappointing, necessarily, as they narrow the scope of poetry to the little that is revealed by a one-sided perception. I think the right keyword, or rather the less unsatisfactory one, is still to be found. Does it exist? I am afraid it will not be easy to coin such a word.

Could it be *repetition*? For the sake of argument I am tempted to answer positively, disregarding the obvious fact that most of the terms I have just mentioned refer to the essence of Byron's poetry whereas the word *repetition* alludes to the way such essence is brought to the reader's notice. Let me simply say that repetition, though it cannot sum up the richness of *Don Juan* nor express its deep specific nature, is a stylistic principle which is far from being insignificant or purely accidental.

II

Repetition, to begin with, is a consequence of Byron's mythic intentions or pretensions. The Don Juan Saga, even if approached with an almost total lack of deference, implies a sequence of love affairs. The hero's role – his fundamental *raison d'être* – requires a succession of sentimental campaigns. From Tirso de Molina to Shadwell and from Molière to Montherlant, not to mention other writers who tried to feature the great womanizer of literature, the game of seduction leads to the re-enactment of the same episodes, which are individualized by the real or would-be mistresses of the seducer: *mille tre*, according to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*; less than a dozen in Byron's poem, Julia, Haidée, the Sultana, Dudu, Catherine the Tsarina, Adeline, Aurora Raby One cannot help thinking of a letter written by Byron in January 1819, in which he catalogues his own conquests, John Cab Hobhouse and Douglas Kinnaird being his Leporellos: "Since last year, I have run the gauntlet: is it the Tarruscelli, the Da Mosti, the Spineda, the Lotti, the Rizzato, the Eleanora, the Carlotta, the Giulietta, the Alvisi, the Zambieri, the Eleanora da Bezzi. . ." (*Letters and Journals* Vol. 6, 92). The list has nine more names and ends with the words *cum multis aliis*. Don Juanism is a specialization based on repetition, even when the protagonist (such is the case in Byron's poem) is seduced as much as seducer. Libertines follow roads with compulsory stopping-places which become familiar when the successive journeys adopt the same itinerary; their sentimental map is not intrinsically different from the *carte du tendre* imagined by the *précieux* in 17th century France.

The repetitive pattern in *Don Juan* results not only from the inevitableness of amatory episodes but also from a symmetrical grouping of the characters involved in some of the love affairs. Peter J. Manning, in his *Byron and His Fiction*, gives emphasis to "the exactly parallel Julia-Alfonso and Gulbeyaz-Sultan scenes" (222) in cantos I and VI; he also lays stress on the structural correspondence of the two following units: Juan-Julia-Antonia-Alfonso and Juan-Haidée-Zoe-Lambro. And Manning adds that in *Don Juan*, "despite the speed and arbitrariness of the action and the apparently boundless digressive license of the narrator the structure of the plot has the clarity of a geometrical figure" (224). Byron himself, though he suggests that we should not take him too seriously, repeatedly proclaims

his epic intentions and pretends that his cantos have a sort of organizing framework based on the reappearance of certain motifs:

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 . . .
 (I, st. 200)

Epic repetition apparently is an endless development. *Don Juan*, Byron confesses, will grow, swell and bulge before reaching (God knows when) its final destination,

The very place where wicked people go.
 (I, st. 207)

In the meantime, the poet's pen scribbles innumerable stanzas. Canto XII is only the end of the introduction. No one can tell how long the quest will be:

I thought, at setting off, about two dozen
 Cantos would do; but at Apollo's pleading,
 If that my Pegasus should not be foundered,
 I think to canter gently through a hundred.
 (XII, st. 55)

III

This being said, I must admit that formal repetitions are more striking than those originating in the epic, or pseudo-epic, structure of the plot. Every reader of *Don Juan* knows that, in digressions and narrative episodes, Byron often increases the poetic or rhetoric strength of a passage by organizing the various elements of his thoughts or feelings in sentences introduced or sustained by the same verbal motif. In *Beppo*, he had already taken advantage of echoing words or phrases, as in the famous *I like* stanzas (st. 47-48), in which he mentions what he most appreciates in England; *I like* is used eleven times, the stress conveyed by repetition being amplified by the recurrence (st. 49) of the possessive adjective *our*: "our

standing army, our little riots, our trifling bankruptcies, our cloudy climate, our chilly women, our recent glories” *Beppo* was published in February 1818. A few months later, in July 1818, Byron began *Don Juan*: he had mastered the intricacies of the octave stanza and had discovered the rich possibilities of verbal repetition.

And verbal repetition became one of his favourite stylistic devices in *Don Juan*. In canto I, when Don Alfonso breaks into his wife’s room to convince himself that she is betraying him, Doña Julia rejects his accusations in a speech in which feigned indignation is voiced by various kinds of redundancies; it is, for instance, the presence of binary groups of nouns or verbs:

. . . “Yes, search and search,” she cried,
 “Insult on insult heap, and wrong on wrong!”
 (I, st. 145)

Or long sentences, built on the reappearing of the same rhetorical questions beginning with *It is for this . . .* or *Did not . . .* (I, st. 147, 148, 151). Previously, in the same canto, when Julia had responded to Juan’s tender feelings,

And whispering, “I will ne’er consent” consented,
 (I, st. 117),

Byron, in a digression on the true nature of pleasures, had made use of the same structural key, the phrase *Sweet is* or *T’is sweet*, repeated seventeen times to list various manifestations of human enjoyment culminating in the supreme happiness of love:

But sweeter still than this, than these, than all,
 Is first and passionate love – it stands alone,
 Like Adam’s recollection of his fall . . .
 (I, st. 127)

A similar framework is perceptible in the *No more* stanzas, also in canto I (st. 214-216), which are a meditation on passing time; in the *I have seen* motif of canto XI (st. 83-85); or in the episode when Catherine of Russia meets Don Juan, with the word *love* repeated eleven times (IX, st. 73-77) as if the poet was hammering in a lesson on the basic illusions of human

destiny. Other examples of verbal iteration are offered by the insistent recurrence of the same preposition (*by*, for instance, in canto VII, st. 3, 4), the same adjective or pronoun (*thy*, X, st. 69; *what*, XIV, st. 102), or by the same grammatical clause, as in canto XVII (st. 11), where adjectives qualifying Byron himself (*temperate, modest, changeable, patient, cheerful, mild*) are immediately followed by an adverb or a conjunction (*yet, but*) suggesting that such judgments should not be accepted as Gospel truth.

The best example however of structural repetitions based on verbal patterns can be found in the well-known *Where is* stanzas of canto XI (st. 76-80); they are composed of twenty-four rhetorical questions with the same opening words. The passage is a sarcastic denunciation of false glory:

"Where is the world" cries Young, "at *eighty*? Where
 The world in which a man was born?" Alas!
 Where is the world of *eight* years past? 'Twas *there* –
 I look for it – 'tis gone, a Globe of Glass!
 Cracked, shivered, vanished, scarcely gazed on, ere
 A silent change dissolves the glittering mass.
 Statesmen, chiefs, orators, queens, patriots, kings,
 And dandies, all are gone on the wind's wings.

Where is Napoleon the Grand? God knows:
 Where little Castlereagh? The devil can tell:
 Where Grattan, Curran, Sheridan, all those
 Who bound the bar or senate in their spell?
 Where is the unhappy Queen, with all her woes?
 And where the Daughter, whom the Isles loved well?
 Where are those martyred Saints the Five per Cents?
 And where – oh where the devil are the Rents!

Where's Brummell? Dished. Where's Long Pole Wellesley?
 Diddled.
 Where's Whitbread? Romilly? Where's George the Third?
 Where is his will? (That's not so soon unriddled.)
 And where is "Fum" the Fourth, our "royal bird?"
 Gone down it seems to Scotland, to be fiddled
 Unto by Sawney's violin, we have heard:
 "Caw me, caw thee" – for six months hath been hatching
 This scene of royal itch and loyal scratching.

Where is Lord This? And where my Lady That?

The Honourable Mistresses and Misses?

Some laid aside like an old opera hat,

Married, unmarried, and remarried: (this is

An evolution oft performed of late).

Where are the Dublin shouts – and London hisses?

Where are the Grenvilles? Turned as usual. Where

My friends the Whigs? Exactly where they were.

Where are the Lady Carolines and Franceses?

Divorced or doing thereanent. Ye annals

So brilliant, where the list of routs and dances is . . .

(XI, st. 76-80)

The *Where is* movement is prolonged by a tune with the word *some* as a key-note (“Some die, some fly, some languish . . . , Some who once set their caps at cautious Dukes . . . , Some heiresses . . . , Some maids . . . , some merely mothers . . . ”; XI, st. 80-81) and by the *I have seen* modulations mentioned above.

IV

Versification also supports the idea that mortality is an uninterrupted rehearsal of the same tragicomedy. A very brief allusion to Byron’s treatment of the *ottava rima* is not totally inadequate. Without discussing the reasons that persuaded our poet to adopt the octave stanza for *Beppo* and *Don Juan*, and not the Spenserian nine-line stanza he had so skilfully handled in *Childe Harold*, may I simply say that the eight line verse, though difficult with only three rhymes (ab ab ab cc) offered rich possibilities of repetitive developments. The stanza is often composed of two units: a rising section, with the first six lines (ab ab ab), which paints a growing flow of ideas or emotions, followed by the last two lines (cc), which are a downward movement bringing about an anticlimax. Such a paradigm can be superficially defined by opposite phrases or contrary concepts: dream and disillusionment; intellectual aspirations and sexual appetites; spiritual delight and black dejection; factitious exaltation scattered to the winds of irony; artificial hopes baffled by cold reality assuming all its rights.

Stanzas following this pattern can be found in almost all the cantos of

the poem. In canto I, a stanza (st. 93) beginning with a reference to "true wisdom, longings sublime" and "aspirations high" ends with an allusion to puberty and reduces love to the level of some kind of common skin disease, like acne. In the next stanza, the movement is from flowers, the voice of the winds, wood nymphs and the goddesses of love to Juan's missing his dinner. In canto II, after evoking the atmosphere of peace surrounding those who "die in righteousness" protected by the angel of death, Byron abruptly speaks of frying eggs and "provisions from the basket" (st. 144), the respect for the dead being compatible with the welfare of the living. At the end of the same canto, he reminds us of the deeds of Caesar, Pompey, Mahomet and Belisarius, who

Have much employ'd the muse of history's pen.

(II, st. 206)

They were, all four of them, heroes, conquerors, and . . . cuckolds.

Much could be written on Byron's attitude and intentions in such passages: he plays upon the opposition between lofty sentiments and narrow-minded propensities; he enjoys disenchanting his reader and making him realize how childish and ridiculous he is: a nincompoop in a world of petty desires. In order to cure his illness, man must take his remedy regularly, a daily potion of realistic details provoking a deflating process; the process can be called *meiosis*, the term conveying the idea of understatement it sometimes has in linguistics but keeping its biological meaning of division and reduction.

Mythic re-enactments, verbal duplications, recurrence of similar movements in the structure of the *ottava rima* are three aspects of Byron's iterative mood. It would not be difficult to find other manifestations of this frame of mind. Let us now try to decode the general literary significance of Byron's repetitions. What do they mean?

V

An obvious answer is that they are part of a game, the comedy played by the different characters of the plot and by the author himself. They should be looked into together with other comic or farcical elements such as exaggeration, incremental developments, puns, innuendoes, mixed

metaphors, the choice of proper names, the use of foreign words or phrases, etc. They amuse the reader and incite him to make fun of whatever is stiff, pompous or silly. They belong to a field of stylistic devices which appear as soon as attention focuses on notions like irony, burlesque, grotesque, parody or caricature. Repetition, Bergson wrote in his often-quoted little book on *Le rire*, is an essential ingredient, together with opposition, in the concoction called *comic*. Molière, like Shakespeare and many other dramatists, was aware of the potential resources of repetition (the famous "Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère" in the *Fourberies de Scapin* is a good example) and knew that it was a way of making the audience laugh at the social and psychological inconsistencies of mankind.

But I am not primarily concerned with repetition in *Don Juan* as a source of cheerfulness and merriment. Much has been written on the subject by very competent critics. My contention, on the contrary, is that seriousness and even sadness often emerge from the periodic returns of similar circumstances and similar figures of speech. The different stages of love affairs are always the same, with minutes of excitement and hours of disillusionment. Political and military glory never lasts; it is soon replaced by the routine of common existence. Most of the victorious monarchs are ultimately vanquished and survive only in histories or tales narrating invariable experiences. The decline of individuals and social groups is a relentless process, which inevitably brings about ruin, recalling the sentence passed on Adam and Eve after the original sin. In *Don Juan*, meditation on the loss of Eden is an undercurrent, which sometimes has the strength of an obsession. Every man must live through episodes that reproduce the myth of the Fall. The eastern tales written before *Beppo* and *Don Juan* already showed that the author was preoccupied with the idea of damnation. In *Don Juan*, as Robert F. Gleckner has shown, Byron is assailed again and again with hopes and doubts centering upon the impossibility of building anything on the ruins of Paradise. He dreams of a girl who, like Haidée, would be "a fair and sinless child of sin" (IV, st. 70), the paradoxical opposition of words stressing here the permanent uselessness of human efforts. Man is and will remain a prisoner of his original condition; he is subject to constant returns of the same experiences. I think that Jerome J. McGann is right when he asserts that Byron is prone to reducing history to "a blind series of cycles, totally without morality as such" (249). And Frederick Shilstone is far from being mistaken when he asks himself if Byron, in his discovery of Italian culture

did not unconsciously adopt some of the ideas of Giambattista Vico. We cannot prove that the English poet was familiar with the *teoria dei ricorsi*, but a certain analogy is perceptible in the judgments of both writers on the cyclic movement of history (240-241, 273).

In this respect, another influence should be mentioned, which partly accounts for Byron's belief that progress is an illusion and history often chronicles episodes of decadence: Edward Gibbon and his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In an article printed in the *Byron Journal*, I tried to point out that in Byron's poetry Gibbon's heritage is more significant than usually acknowledged. Byron is fascinated by the vision offered by Gibbon's major work: the fatal downfall of one of the greatest states that ever existed, shaken by "the fury of civil war", by "years of discord and confusion" (*Decline and Fall* 383), by "a disgusting repetition of assassination and rebellion" (Jordan 118-119) and by the epidemic triumph of vulgar instincts and appetites. Both Gibbon and Byron reach the conclusion that war is inevitable; they are pervaded by the feeling that kings and generals often reveal their ridiculous weaknesses and that the ruins that cover the earth are symbols of an omnipresent decay. Even Venice - "stinking ditches" for Gibbon (*Letters* 193), "the greenest island of my imagination" for Byron (*Letters and Journals* Vol. 5, 129) - is accepted by the historian and by the poet as an example of repeated misadventures ending in decline and death.

In this context, the *Where is* and the *No more* motifs of *Don Juan* have accents of sad resignation. Human creatures must learn their lesson several times:

Men who partake all passions as they pass,
Acquire the deep and bitter power to give
Their images again as in a glass,
And in such colours that they seem to live

(IV, st. 107)

VI

A few years ago, the *Groupe de recherches esthétiques* of the French National Research Centre edited a collection of studies under the title *Création et répétition*. One of the articles, written by Michel Zéraffa, is

entitled "Fiction et répétition." Byron is not mentioned. Though he alludes to various English or American novelists (Fielding, Emily Brontë, Thackeray, Dickens, Melville, Conrad, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, Dorothy Richardson), the author remains on the level of general principles. But the conclusion I have tried to draw from my superficial examination of some of the repetitive patterns in *Don Juan* can be integrated with the theoretical aspects of the subject. They enable us to determine the poet's position in the literary landscape with greater accuracy, without forgetting however that iterative tendencies reflect only one side of Byron's poetic personality.

Zéraffa, in his analysis of *fiction* (the French word does not cover exactly what in English is known as *fiction*) classifies novels - *Tom Jones*, for instance, *Moby Dick* or *To the Lighthouse* - according to their adhering to history or myth. A true historic and chronological novel implies the acceptance of an ideal truth to be reached by "a positive advance towards an end that is better than the starting-point" ("une progression positive vers un but meilleur que ne l'était son point de départ"); a narration nurtured by myth is based on the assumption that moving forward is a "repeated deceit" ("un leurre répété"). History implicitly proclaims its faith in a linear progression resulting from "un principe de destination, de non-retour du même" whereas myth offers structural returns, in which stability is not troubled by the variations of the fundamental theme. Through history novelists sometimes try to give mythic truth a new consistency, but their hope is often futile. In fiction, all things considered, mythic reenactments and historic reality are incompatible values. They may coexist, but cannot cooperate and keep their own independent ambitions. Ultimately a choice is necessary. In *Tom Jones*, history is predominant; in *Don Quixote* and in the novels of the marquis de Sade the permanence of heroic dreams or sexual fantasies cannot be conceived without a repetitive rhythm which discards linear time and favours the cyclic duration of mythic creations.

In *Don Juan*, Byron refuses to conform to the rules of a single literary genre. His changing perspective can be ascribed to his acceptance of both history and myth. The siege of Ismail in cantos VII and VIII is a page of history; the shipwreck of canto II and the harem scenes of canto V have mythic undertones that can easily be perceived. Like Juan's mother, Doña Ines, Byron adopted attitudes which

. . . sometimes mix'd up fancies with realities.

(I, st. 20)

Virginia Woolf was right. In *Don Juan*, the elastic shape can hold everything. *Childe Harold* is an "odd . . . mixture." But Byron had "superb force" and "a very fine nature." And she added: "A novelist, he might have been" (*Diary* Vol. 1, 180 and Vol. 3, 287-88).

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