

Where to start?

Text of **Byron Bits No.1** by Peter Gallagher available on MadBadDangerous.com

I thought I might record some short talks on Byron and his greatest poem, Don Juan. But, first, I had to decide where to start.

Don Juan is a big topic. It's a very long poem by any standards: more than 19,000 lines. It's about almost anything; and its author is one of the biggest personalities in English poetry; maybe in English history.

There's a myriad places to start, but which one should I pick?

Byron **claimed**, of course, to be well aware of the problem.

The first lines of Canto IV of Don Juan are

"Nothing so difficult as a beginning
In poesy, unless perhaps the end;"

Is that true? Well, perhaps. Or perhaps **not**.

Byron's in mid-flight by the start of the Fourth Canto; so it's too late for him to offer excuses about how hard it is to get started.

Then, we could read the line "Nothing so difficult as a beginning" as a reference to the challenge of starting each Canto.

But that's Byron's joke here. Canto IV posed no such challenge, because he'd already **finished** it before he inserted these two lines at the start.

How could he have finished the Canto before he drafted the opening lines? Well, it's because the Fourth canto was created by cutting an over-long draft of Canto III into two parts. Byron admits as much – even **boasts** of it – at the end of the present Canto III.

And as for the beginning of the poem as a whole: it just flowed onto the paper in July 1818, as far as we can tell from the manuscripts. He claims some momentary puzzlement over his lack of a hero for his story.

But this is just a misleading excuse for choosing a pantomime version of himself.

From start to finish, Canto 1 of Don Juan seems to have been as much fun for Byron to write as for us to read.

And, what about the end of his epic? How difficult was that to write?

Well... we'll never know because he never reached it.

As far as we can tell, Byron intended one day to continue his last, unfinished Canto XVII and maybe to add many more.

But he spent most of the last year of his life in Greece, cooling his heels and agitating his temper during the early stages of the Greek rebellion against the Ottoman Turks. He was irritated at not being able actually to engage in the heroic battles of which he'd dreamed.

During all those months in which he wrote very little, Juan sat at a breakfast table in Nottinghamshire, looking pale as if he hadn't slept... waiting, we suspect, for an embarrassed confrontation about the events of the previous evening.

Or maybe just for a sausage, or some bacon.

Byron gives a little resumé of the situation beginning at verse 12 of his unfinished draft of Canto XVII:

XII

Our Hero was, in Canto the Sixteenth,
Left in a tender moonlight situation,
Such as enables Man to show his strength
Moral or physical: on this occasion
Whether his virtue triumph'd – or, at length,
His vice – for he was of a kindling nation –
Is more than I shall venture to describe; –
Unless some Beauty with a kiss should bribe.

XIII

I leave the thing a problem, like all things: –
The morning came – and breakfast, tea and toast,
Of which most men partake, but no one sings.
The company whose birth, wealth, worth, has cost
My trembling Lyre already several strings,
Assembled with our hostess, and mine host;
The guests dropp'd in – the last but one, Her Grace,
The latest, Juan, with his virgin face.

XIV

Which best it is to encounter – Ghost, or none,
'T were difficult to say; but Juan look'd
As if he had combated with more than one,
Being wan and worn, with eyes that hardly brook'd
The light that through the Gothic window shone:
Her Grace, too, had a sort of air rebuked –
Seem'd pale and shiver'd, as if she had kept
A vigil, or dreamt rather more than slept.

OK. That hints but doesn't say outright **what** was bugging Juan.

Still, readers of the sixteenth Canto would have a pretty good idea.

If you haven't got that far with Don Juan, I'll try to fill you in on all the goss, next time.

#Byron/Bits