

BB4 Diverting himself

Text of **Byron Bits No.4** by Peter Gallagher available on MadBadDangerous.com

No doubt you know that the story of Byron's hero, Juan, is not the main focus of the poem that bears his name. Byron's "epic" **could** be described as series of monologues and observations, rather loosely connected by the adventures of his mild hero, especially after the first two or three Cantos.

Byron once described his poem once as "Montaigne with a story for a hinge", referring to the personal, philosophical essays of the 16th century mayor of Bordeaux.

This is pretty accurate. One way or another, each of the many diversions in the poem are little essays, allegedly about Byron himself.

Sometimes he is arch and insincere, at other times cynically honest. He regrets the sins of his twenties without in fact telling us much truth about them. He worries about growing old, although he's barely 30. He claims to be indignant at the way the world has treated him in his headlong plunge from fame to infamy. He uses his pretended injuries to justify jibes against his enemies; some are nothing more than amusing rudeness, but others amount to scandalous libels.

Still, Byron's genius is to make what sounds like a bitter litany into verse so slick that he can make eight-rhymed-lines sound like the natural rhythm of speech.

His view of himself in the poem is certainly unreliable. He doesn't hide the fact that he's joking a lot of the time. But, even when shocking – especially when shocking – his summary of human folly is much more robust and relatable than the introspection of the romantic poets who were his contemporaries.

In Canto III, he even boasts about how these admitted faults place him in the company of the greatest poets:

XCI

Milton's the prince of poets – so we say;

A little heavy, but no less divine:

An independent being in his day –
Learn'd, pious, temperate in love and wine;
But, his life falling into Johnson's way,
We're told this great high priest of all the Nine
Was whipt at college – a harsh sire – odd spouse,
For the first Mrs. Milton left his house.

XCII

All these are, certes, entertaining facts,
Like Shakspeare's stealing deer, Lord Bacon's bribes;
Like Titus' youth, and Caesar's earliest acts;
Like Burns (whom Doctor Currie well describes);
Like Cromwell's pranks; – but although truth exacts
These amiable descriptions from the scribes,
As most essential to their hero's story,
They do not much contribute to his glory.

He goes on to contrast Bacon's bribes, Caesar's roaring bisexual youth, and Burns' drunkenness with the graceless peccadilloes and treachery of his rivals:

XCIII

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 (milliners of Bath).

XCIV

Such names at present cut a convict figure,
The very Botany Bay in moral geography;
Their loyal treason, renegado rigour,
Are good manure for their more bare biography.
Wordsworth's last quarto, by the way, is bigger
Than any since the birthday of typography;
A drowsy frowzy poem, call'd the "Excursion."
Writ in a manner which is my aversion.

XCV

He there builds up a formidable dyke
Between his own and others' intellect;
But Wordsworth's poem, and his followers, like
Joanna Southcote's Shiloh, and her sect,
Are things which in this century don't strike
The public mind, – so few are the elect;
And the new births of both their stale virginities
Have proved but dropsies, taken for divinities.

Fortunately, Byron knows he can't allow his wandering mix of philosophy and jibes to spin out too much. The biggest sin, in his book, is to be boring. Even if boredom is a sort of hallmark of all the **other** Epics.

XCVI

But let me to my story: I must own,
If I have any fault, it is digression –
Leaving my people to proceed alone,
While I soliloquize beyond expression;
But these are my addresses from the throne,
Which put off business to the ensuing session:
Forgetting each omission is a loss to
The world, not quite so great as Ariosto.

XCVII

I know that what our neighbours call "longueurs"
(We've not so good a word, but have the thing
In that complete perfection which ensures
An epic from Bob Southey every spring),
Form not the true temptation which allures
The reader; but 't would not be hard to bring
Some fine examples of the epopée,
To prove its grand ingredient is ennui.

But Byron can't seem to help allowing his conversational verse to wander. It's not for another twelve stanzas that he realises, or pretends to realise, that he's done it again. This time he's diverted into a curious meditation on evening, the fair face of the Virgin Mary, and the possibility that love might redeem even the Roman Emperor Nero.

With a show of pretended exasperation, he brings Canto-the-third to an abrupt end:

I feel this tediousness will never do –
'T is being too epic, and I must cut down
(In copying) this long canto into two;
They'll never find it out, unless I own
The fact, excepting some experienced few;
And then as an improvement 't will be shown:
I'll prove that such the opinion of the critic is
From Aristotle passim. – See *poietikes*.

#Byron/Bits