

BB5 ... And before that?

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

Somehow I have **begun** this series of short talks on Don Juan by talking about the poem's end. And then I followed Byron off on some of his rambling diversions.

My apologies. This is being too Byronic. I'll try, from now on, to be more orderly. But since I've started at the end, I suppose that means moving backwards.

Oh well...

In Canto XV, the charming Lady Adeline Amundeville – the “fair most fatal Juan ever met” – has been considering whether to make a marriage match for Juan who is her house-guest. Among the possible candidates, however, she ignores, perhaps out of envy, the beautiful young orphan heiress, Aurora Raby.

One night Juan finds himself seated at the dinner table between the two women who limit their conversation to a chilly politeness. He is attracted by Aurora – who like Juan is a catholic – but is unable, at first, to find a way to warm her interest. Still he's a sincere lad and quite handsome as Aurora is bound to notice.

Then, just as she starts to respond, Byron turns our attention away from the scene – at verse 85 – to a discussion of metaphysics that seems to be **a propos** of nothing much.

LXXXV

Aurora, who look'd more on books than faces,
Was very young, although so very sage,
Admiring more Minerva than the Graces,
Especially upon a printed page.
But Virtue's self, with all her tightest laces,
Has not the natural stays of strict old age;
And Socrates, that model of all duty,
Own'd to a penchant, though discreet, for beauty.

LXXXVI

And girls of sixteen are thus far Socratic,

But innocently so, as Socrates;
And really, if the sage sublime and Attic
At seventy years had phantasies like these,
Which Plato in his dialogues dramatic
Has shown, I know not why they should displease
In virgins – always in a modest way,
Observe; for that with me's a "sine quâ."

LXXXVII

Also observe, that, like the great Lord Coke
(See Littleton), whene'er I have express'd
Opinions two, which at first sight may look
Twin opposites, the second is the best.
Perhaps I have a third, too, in a nook,
Or none at all – which seems a sorry jest:
But if a writer should be quite consistent,
How could he possibly show things existent?

LXXXVIII

If people contradict themselves, can I
Help contradicting them, and every body,
Even my veracious self? – But that's a lie:
I never did so, never will – how should I?
He who doubts all things nothing can deny:
Truth's fountains may be clear – her streams are muddy,
And cut through such canals of contradiction,
That she must often navigate o'er fiction.

LXXXIX

Apologue, fable, poesy, and parable,
Are false, but may be render'd also true,
By those who sow them in a land that's arable.
'T is wonderful what fable will not do!
'T is said it makes reality more bearable:
But what's reality? Who has its clue?
Philosophy? No: she too much rejects.
Religion? Yes; but which of all her sects?

XC

Some millions must be wrong, that's pretty clear;
Perhaps it may turn out that all were right.
God help us! Since we have need on our career
To keep our holy beacons always bright,
'T is time that some new prophet should appear,
Or old indulge man with a second sight.
Opinions wear out in some thousand years,
Without a small refreshment from the spheres.

XCI

But here again, why will I thus entangle
Myself with metaphysics? None can hate
So much as I do any kind of wrangle;
And yet, such is my folly, or my fate,
I always knock my head against some angle
About the present, past, or future state.
Yet I wish well to Trojan and to Tyrian,
For I was bred a moderate Presbyterian.

XCII

But though I am a temperate theologian,
And also meek as a metaphysician,
Impartial between Tyrian and Trojan,
As Eldon on a lunatic commission –
In politics my duty is to show John
Bull something of the lower world's condition.
It makes my blood boil like the springs of Hecla,
To see men let these scoundrel sovereigns break law.

XCIII

But politics, and policy, and piety,
Are topics which I sometimes introduce,
Not only for the sake of their variety,
But as subservient to a moral use;
Because my business is to dress society,
And stuff with sage that very verdant goose.
And now, that we may furnish with some matter all
Tastes, we are going to try the supernatural.

So, what have we here? It's another brilliant Byron miscellany. Sarcastic excuses for his own inconsistency; reflections on the nature of truth and fiction; mockery of religious sects; a blasphemous call for a Second Coming; *lèse-majesté*; a hint about rigid definitions of lunacy which may be a wink at his own experiences; and a culinary pun that leads to a clever metaphor about wising-up the 'verdant goose' of society.

Then just for good measure, and no doubt to show off his classical chops, Byron adds insincere praise of himself as a "moderate presbyterian" who shuns metaphysical factions. These he compares to the warring Romans (fabled in the *Aeneid* as descendants of the Trojans) and the Carthaginians (actual descendants of the Tyrians or Phoenicians).

If that sounds like a mad jumble of widely disparate ideas... well, it is. Byron, like any good anthologist, is *interested* in ideas, and in the contrasts and clashes that arise from their assembly. He's the ring-master at his own intellectual zoo. Still, it's mostly the slick verse and its momentum that holds the performance together long enough to allow some sniping at his usual targets and to prolong the romantic tension at the dinner table.

But, there's a third purpose, too, in this particular diversion. For Byron manages at the end to lead us back to his narrative, via metaphysics, opening the way for a story of the supernatural.

If you've read or listened to my first talks, you'll recall that he is about to plant a plump but jolly worm in the budding romance between Juan and Aurora. And it's a ghost that does it.

#Byron/Bits