BB6 The point of Don Juan

Sure, Don Juan has a lot of pretty slick verse and clever provocations. And it's shockingly funny in parts.

But what's the **point**? Did Byron **have** a point in Don Juan? Or did he just go on because he couldn't stop?

Maybe there is something of that. Writing the poem **was** probably a remedy for his melancholia.

It's likely Byron was still <u>trying</u> to discover the point when he started Canto I. But by the time it was published, after months of wrangles with his publisher, I believe he had discovered what his poem was for.

I think Byron <u>tells</u> us the point in his selection of the revised epigraph to Don Juan that was printed at the head of the first four Cantos. This is a quote from the Roman poet Horace whose solemn advice to young poets was to stick to mythology and "poetic" subjects.

It was difficult, Horace said, to write poetry about what everyone knows.

Besides, as Horace didn't say, just look at poets that did write about low-brow subjects or politics. Either they were scurrilous like the epigrammist Martial or exiled soft-porn peddlars like Ovid.

But Byron, who admired some things about Horace, typically seems to take this advice as a challenge. He decided to do just what Horace counselled against by writing about what everyone knows but won't discuss.

He was happy to run the risk of being compared to Martial or Ovid.

Byron was widely read, like the great French essayist Michel Montaigne. Like Montaigne, he could call on a wide range of classical scholarship and even more low experience. But he has less philosophy than Montaigne and a greater taste for the reform of government or maybe for rebellion.

Like England's greatest satirist, Alexander Pope, Byron's irony is sharp and his mockery stings. But Pope's target of choice was folly. Byron wanted to aim at power.

Now, you might think it's completely nuts to take aim at sovereigns and their repressive governments armed only with a poem.

I think we can all agree that poetry is generally pretty floppy and un-explosive. Also, tyrants are liable to strike back with something a lot more bruising. Not even self-exile on the sunny Italian Riviera – say, Genoa – would guarantee your safety.

But Byron's verse had the power to draw attention. To judge from sales, by the 18-teens, before his self-exile, he had built a strong reputation and following among wealthier readers with **Childe Harold**. Probably among women most of all; although that's just my guess.

His later notoriety only increased his reach. By the mid-1820s, less expensive editions of Don Juan might have been read by hundreds of thousands of readers of every class and income. From such a platform he was in a much better position than Shelley, for example, to lob stink-bombs at the rogues of the late Regency.

Poetry served his purpose, for a few years, because he wasn't interested in mobilizing his readers. He wasn't a radical, like Thomas Paine or a social reformer like Mary Wolstonecraft. He certainly wasn't a revolutionary like Shelley. He wasn't much interested in politics, like Henry Hunt or Jeremy Bentham or even his friend Cam Hobhouse.

Today, we'd call him a libertarian. He was perfectly happy to see a privileged role for people of wealth and nobility, like himself. He was no democrat. His objection was to the limits on personal liberty – of thought, religion and, probably, sexual preference – that the witless and cruel power of outdated tyrants imposed on him, on his country and on Europe as a whole in the first decades of the 19th century.

He found mockery was a satisfying way to wound such power, if only slightly. It had to be entertaining. But Byron knew how to do **that**, for sure. Behind a literary shield, although deprived of Crown Copyright, he could indulge slanders of his enemies and even some real savagery.

No doubt many readers enjoyed his **sangfroid**. There's nothing more fascinating – then or now – than watching a rich and famous renegade rip into the rich and famous. But he

knew, too, there were limits. He suppressed the worst attacks – or tried to – like the scurrilous "Dedication" to Don Juan.

His method was what we'd call, these days, **viral**. It was to talk about ordinary things that were never acknowledged in the literature of polite society or in the watery verse of the favoured Lake Poets for example.

It was a lateral attack on power, not a frontal assault, that he mounted by crossing the bounds of the 'bon ton'.

Byron's subjects were the **unrefined** matters of everyday experience: foolish attachments, youthful follies, the disappointments of age, the fragility of religious faith, greedy politicians, insolent prelates, the power and vacancy of wealth, the vanity of fame, the opposition of love and marriage, the intrigue of adultery, sexual desire in women and the bloodiness of even the most admired sovereigns.

At first, he pretended to give ground to his critics, and his publisher, who demanded he cease this raillery:

'T is all the same to me; I'm fond of yielding,
And therefore leave them to the purer page
Of Smollett, Prior, Ariosto, Fielding,
Who say strange things for so correct an age;
I once had great alacrity in wielding
My pen, and liked poetic war to wage,
And recollect the time when all this cant
Would have provoked remarks which now it shan't.

But the pretence was short-lived. His poem was his riposte to the bombast and lies that propped-up a rotten establishment. The cant of the official gazettes, the bishops, the courts; the hypocrisy of high-living Wellington and literary sycophants like Southey; the Liverpool government's cruel repression of liberty in Britain and its connivance with, and bribery of, the odious **anciens regimes** of Europe.

It was a literary campaign, for sure: not a political platform. For a while, he took the shocked reactions as evidence it was working. Still, ultimately, it seems, Byron found the power of poetry unsatisfying. In 1823, he finally chose action instead.

But with dreadful consequences.