

THE CHANGING FACES OF THE IRONIC HERO (Narrator and Hero in Lord Byron's *Don Juan*)

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Byron's *Don Juan* poses several problems concerning narration, especially because the narrator, instead of remaining neutral and thus practically invisible for the sake of telling a story, constantly steps forward to stress the importance of his own role and person. His relationship towards his hero is on the other hand constantly reinterpreted by the narrator himself, thus leading to his constantly changing status and hardly (or not at all) definable character. The narrator's mobility is further increased by his highly ironic – and partly self-ironic – mode.

Much has already been said about Byron's ironical and satirical tone in general and about the narrator's neglecting his hero in *Don Juan*. The aim of the present essay is to examine the narrator's status with regards to his hero through his reflections in detail and to show the fundamental narrative structure on which his irony and satire may be based. It is a widespread assumption that in *Don Juan* the narrator is at least as much in the focus as Don Juan himself.¹ Besides that, it is crucial to study how the narrator characterizes this relationship and whether his several reflections can be reconciled at all. First we shall discuss how the narrator selects Don Juan as the hero of his poem and how this initial setup affects the whole work; then we shall turn to the question of the narrator's fulfilment of his role as the narrator of Don Juan's life, and how this may define their relationship.

The importance of Byron's narrative solutions is of crucial importance also because many survived in the works of his followers, notably in the those of Pushkin and Hungarian authors from the 1870s, such as János Arany, László Arany or Pál Gyulai. Our concern here, however, is not to examine the genre, but rather to focus on the individual text itself, with the aim of showing its complexity, which may account for the popularity of both Byron and the genre he created.

¹ See for instance: L. Imre, *A magyar verses regény*. (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1999): 15. On the other hand, note that since we are not particularly concerned with Byron's life, we do not intend to draw a parallel between Byron and the narrator. This view is nevertheless prevalent in part of the literary criticism concerning Byron, as for instance Thompson claims explicitly that "in *Don Juan* the narrator rapidly loses his separate identity and becomes a fictional version of Byron". J. R. Thompson, *Byron's Plays and Don Juan. Byron's Poetry*. Ed. F. D. McConnell. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978): 411.

1. A narrator in want of a hero

The very problem of the relationship between narrator and hero manifests itself as early as the beginning of the first canto, which is as follows:

*I want a hero, an uncommon want,
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till after cloying the gazettes with cant,
The age discovers he is not the true one.
Of such as these I should not care to vaunt;
I'll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan.
We all have seen him in the pantomime
Sent to the devil somewhat ere his time.²*

The basic relationship between the narrator and his hero can be traced back to these opening lines: the narrator *needs* a hero to be able to speak – what is more, he seeks *a hero in general*, which means that practically *any hero* would do for him, since the hero is just a pretence for him to speak. It is not yet quite clear what he actually wishes to talk about later on, but it is certainly not only the hero.

In a rather simplified way, we could say that the reader's expectation is very probably the following: a literary work having a hero is *about* the hero, the life of whom is narrated by someone who writes a poem because he wants to write *about* the hero. This is an expectation radically opposed by the narrator, who acknowledges that a poem – for some reason – must have a hero, but implicates that this does not necessarily mean that a poem is born because of the importance of the hero's person. Rather on the contrary: the narrator, who from the very beginning adopts the role of a poet³, by definition needs something enabling him to narrate. His

² In writing this essay, we used the following edition: Lord G. G. Byron, *Don Juan*. (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 2004).

³ We assume here that the narrator's self-portrait as an author or a poet is consistent throughout the whole work. Therefore we shall refer to him as *narrator* even in cases where his author-role is stressed. With this in mind, it is worth observing that the narrator at the beginning of the first canto in a way he in fact seems to continue what the implied author of the *Dedication* began: here the implied author steps forward as a poet – a poet considerably better than his contemporaries, to whom he “dedicates” the work yet to come. His person is overwhelmingly more important than either the poets he is referring to or the work itself. It is worth comparing this dedication with that of *Childe Harold*, for instance: the poet there rather concentrates on Ianthe and on the work in question (which is actually degraded by the poet, as opposed to Ianthe, who is in turn praised). However, since the dedication can be considered as a metatext, which by definition lacks the story about the narrator, the identity between the voice here and there is not a straightforward one and thus the narrator–hero relationship has to be (re)established and

being a narrator does not mean that he is subsidiary to the hero; the label *narrator* is primarily not an indication of a *function* but of an independent *person*.

That the narrator is person-like and personal is supported by the first line, where he steps forward as an *I*. The emphasis is on his person, since there is nothing else to put an emphasis on. This initial setup is much similar to that of lyrical poems⁴ and the narrator's subject will be likewise stressed throughout the whole work. Moreover, the narrator's being *the I* and Don Juan's being *a hero* is a crucial difference manifesting itself here linguistically, not only in the sense that it is a difference expressed in language but also in the sense that it is a difference deeply embedded and deriving from language.

The narrator's *I* stands in itself, in its absolute value as an *I*, which means that he is not required to define himself as a person.⁵ What is more, additional information concerning the narrator's person may be defined by way of this *I*:

*But for the present, gentle reader, and
Still gentler purchaser, the bard – that's I –
Must with permission shake you by the hand,
And so your humble servant, and good-bye.*⁶

Don Juan, on the contrary, can only be subsidiary to the narrator, who selects him from an undefined number of possible heroes in a more or less arbitrary way. This is also indicated by the fact that at the very beginning the poem actually lacks a hero – meanwhile, it does not lack a narrator. This setup produces a certain paradox: even the narrator assumes that a poem has to have a hero, therefore a poem having no hero is either no poem at all, or the narrator very early questions the truth of this thesis. Moreover, in the first case we have a none-poem with a

(re)interpreted in Canto I. For this reason, we shall emphasize the importance of Canto I as the beginning, concentrating on the narrator's reflections on the text from this beginning onwards.

⁴ Imre: 15.

⁵ In a comparative study of Byron and Sterne, Horn claims that “in a way, ‘I’ is the key-note of both *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Juan*: they are characterized by (...) a preponderance of the subject, self-assertion on the part of the author. This is manifest in two forms: first, in the all-pervading presence of Byron and Sterne; then, in the assertion of their arbitrary will.” A. Horn, *Byron's “Don Juan” and the Eighteenth-Century English Novel*. (Winterthur: Buchdruckerei Geschwister Ziegler & Co., 1962): 28. The dominance of this poetic *I* is crucial in understanding how the narrator of *Don Juan* dominates the text and the reader, the question of which cannot be dealt with in this essay. A similar opinion can be traced in E. Koeppel, *Byron*. (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1913): 177.

⁶ Canto I, stanza 221.

narrator, which points to a narrator existing not only without a story to narrate, but also without a text to narrate in. This is naturally in connection with the narrator's self-identification as a poet, as the author of the text – the present one as well as other ones.⁷ The narrator is thus seemingly enabled to step out of the text and to reflect on it.

Why is the hero no other than Don Juan? The narrator provides a catalogue of diverse heroes in stanzas 2–4, to be extended in stanza 5, which shows that the catalogue is practically endless: heroes without a name may also belong there:

*Brave men were living before Agamemnon
And since, exceeding valorous and sage,
A good deal like him too, though quite the same none,
But then they shone not on the poet's page
And so have been forgotten. I condemn none,
But can't find any in the present age
Fit for my poem (that is, my new one);
So, as I said, I'll take my friend Don Juan.*

First and foremost, Don Juan is selected by the narrator because he is fit for his poem. This of course reassures the point we previously made: the literary work – or at least the present one – is, according to the narrator, dependent on the person of the hero only in a technical sense, that is: in order to produce the text, the narrator needs a hero – which is probably a requirement of the reader rather than of the narrator.⁸

Moreover, it seems that heroes are dependent on poets and poetry as such: the only way for them to remain living in public recollection is to be recreated (or maybe even created) in poetry, otherwise they will soon be forgotten, their destiny ultimately being left without a name: these probably real heroes – as opposed to those referred to in the opening stanza – bear the collective label *brave men* and nothing more. What distinguishes a hero from a brave man is that the former has a name: being a hero is thus linguistically determined; and it is the task of poets to recreate heroes in language.

Don Juan is clearly not one of these *brave men*: he is obviously not forgotten, and he is not even one who would be recreated in language for the first time. The narrator presents him very early as someone known to all, calling him first *our ancient friend* and then referring to

⁷ See for instance: Canto I, stanza 5.

⁸ Again, the question of the reader's expectations (and especially their overwriting by the narrator) cannot be dealt with in greater depth in the present essay.

his multiplied versions seen in the pantomime (which are, by assumption, known to all as well). He is not one of those temporary heroes either to whom the narrator refers to at the very beginning and who are partly listed in stanzas 2–4. He is rather an anti-hero: a pretence for the narrator to narrate and neutral in the sense that he is neither a hero presently in fashion nor a hero gone out of fashion. He is known to all, what is more: he is *too much known* – at least the narrator suggests that due to the pantomime everyone knows Don Juan’s story, especially its ending, by heart. The narrator’s aim is therefore not presenting Don Juan’s story as something new: on the contrary, the narrator needs a hero who is neutral in the sense the he will not be obliged to focus on this hero constantly, since he assumes that the reader knows the (original) story so well that the ultimate aim of reading the present work is not getting the story, but something else.

The hero is thus subsidiary to the narrator in at least two respects: narration as such is not contingent upon the presence of the hero, and the hero’s story is not necessarily of particular interest. The narrator, referring to Don Juan’s notoriety, establishes a context within which his work may be interpreted – but at the same time takes his version of Don Juan out of this context by demystifying him. Is it the same hero appearing in a vast range of works, or is each appearance a different version of him, or is each version a distinct hero? The narrator gives no answer to the question; he rather emphasizes that the question is indeed there. This question is of course in connection with another one we have already referred to: does the hero make the poem or does the poem make the hero?

It is very probably this fundamental treatment of the hero that distinguishes Byron’s *Don Juan* from other works based on the same subject-matter. This approach may account for the rather diversified critical response towards the relationship of Byron’s *Don Juan* and the Don Juan legend. Contemporaries, as Haslett points out, displayed ‘their own unanimity in interpreting Byron’s Don Juan as the traditional, amoral Don Juan of the legend’⁹. Twentieth

⁹ M. Haslett, *Byron’s Don Juan and the Don Juan Legend*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997): 76. For contemporary reception see also F. MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend*. (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2003): 348–349, 365–367, 441; C. E. Vulliamy, *Byron*. (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1948): 22, 164, 177–180, 231, or W. St Clair, *The Impact of Byron’s Writings: An Evaluative Approach. Byron: Augustan and Romantic*. Ed. A. Rutherford. (London: Macmillan, 1990):13–21, 23–24. For possible (and modified) sources of Byron’s *Don Juan* consider R. Ackermann, *Lord Byron* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter’s Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1901):149, or T. G. Steffan, E.

century readers, on the other hand, tended ‘to underestimate Don Juan’s rakish qualities’, chiefly because of ‘the missing context of the Don Juan legend’¹⁰ or rather because they ‘interpreted Byron’s Don Juan as being so unlike the traditional seducer that extended comparison between the two’ was ‘judged to be futile’¹¹. It is incontestable that Byron’s text is in connection with the Don Juan legend and all its manifestations – this is exactly what the narrator very early refers to. However, it is also the narrator who does not make it clear how far this connection can or should be extended. It is then ultimately ‘the reader who to some extent creates Byron’s Don Juan’¹² – both in the case of the actual reader, as Haslett means it, and in the case of the implied reader of the text itself.

The narrator finally seems to find a hero fit for his poem – nevertheless, the lack of the hero before the selection of Don Juan is present in the text. What is more, the narrator selects Don Juan twice, since he repeats his decision in the fifth stanza as well. The second selection is needed because the narrator, instead of placing Don Juan in the focus, discusses his views on literature and literary heroes, thus remaining in the centre himself. But even after this second selection, the narrator dedicates two additional stanzas to his literary principles, this time concerning the appropriate beginning of a poem, claiming that the actual beginning is yet to come.¹³

Don Juan is in a way clearly of secondary importance: the poem stands in itself even without him; moreover, the poem actually has a hero in the person of the narrator. Narration is bifocal in the sense that there is an overt hero (Don Juan), whose presence is by assumption needed to make a poem, and a covert hero (the narrator), whose presence is actually enough to make a poem, as we have already seen. In other words, the narrator in a way satisfies the possible expectation that the poem should be *about* the hero when he chooses Don Juan, but in the meanwhile he retains his position by overwriting Don Juan’s importance by the work itself,

Steffan, and W. W. Pratt, Editor’s Note. Lord G. G. Byron, *Don Juan*. (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 2004): xxix–xxx.

¹⁰ Haslett: 77. For such views see for instance G. Hegedűs, *Byron*. (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1961):126, or S. J. Wolfson, and P. J. Manning, Introduction. Lord G. G. Byron, *Don Juan*. (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 2004): xiii.

¹¹ Haslett: 75.

¹² Haslett: 77.

¹³ This is also worth examining with respect to the narrator’s literary views and his self-portrait as an author, for which we shall not venture here.

which can to some extent be considered as the embodiment of the narrator: the narrator, instead of being a sheer voice producing a text about something, is actually constituted by the very text he produces.

2. A hero in want of a narrator

The narrator is thus not the least in want of a hero: rather, on the contrary, he has two at once. This initial setup remains by and large intact throughout the whole text, at times even resulting in the hero wanting a narrator: namely that the narrator, discussing various issues that are – except for their starting point – not connected to the story itself, leaves the hero to himself. The hero's story nevertheless goes on in the background, which means that certain parts of his life that *may be* worthy for narration, are not at all narrated, and that this non-narration is irrevocable. This is a phenomenon the narrator himself reflects on:

*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.*¹⁴

Each digression of the narrator thus means that part of the story remains un-narrated.¹⁵ The narrator quite frequently reflects on his tendency to digress, and he almost always digresses for a second, sometimes even for a third time. The above quotation shows a particularly ironic example of this, since the narrator, after admitting digression, begins to digress on digression itself. Finally, when he indeed returns to the story, he says the following:

*T' our tale. The feast was over, the slaves gone,
The dwarfs and dancing girls had all retired.
The Arab lore and poet's song were done,
And every sound of revelry expired.
The lady and her lover, left alone,*

¹⁴ Canto III, stanza 96.

¹⁵ The narrator chooses various parts of the story to be left un-narrated in a rather arbitrary way, i. e. he often digresses even in crucial moments, as we shall see later on. Thus it is not quite the case of filling in 'dead periods' of the story, as it is often so when transition between the diegetic and the extradiegetic level is not marked and "the discreteness of levels is transgressed". S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. (London–New York: Routledge, 1997): 93.

*The rosy flood of twilight's sky admired.*¹⁶

When leaving his hero in stanza 87, the narrator suggests that the feast is still in its full swing: the bard has just finished his song. The stanza cited above, however, depicts a state which takes place obviously and significantly later, which is further stressed by the narrator's listing all the people and signs of amusement that have disappeared from the scene.

More importantly, the narrator not only leaves the feast un-narrated, but the situation concerning Lambro sinks into oblivion as well. The latter is presumably of crucial importance, inasmuch as it may also endanger Don Juan's life.¹⁷ The narrator nonetheless digresses even for a third time, when the possible danger evidently increases as the young couple is left alone with Lambro, who has by now seen enough.¹⁸ After being engaged in meditations on twilight in stanzas 102–109 (partly beginning already in stanza 101), the narrator interrupts himself rather sharply in stanza 110:

*But I'm digressing. What on earth has Nero
Or any such like sovereign buffoons
To do with the transactions of my hero,
More than such madmen's fellow man – the moon's?*

The second half of the stanza, together with the last one, is again dedicated to the narrator's self-evaluation concerning his tendency to digress and the consequent necessity of ending the present canto. This time, however, the narrator not only leaves the hero's story un-narrated, but he actually stops the current of events: the story, without the sheer presence of the narrator, does not and cannot go on, as shown in the next canto, where the narrator continues the story exactly where he left it, saying:

Young Juan and his ladylove were left

¹⁶ Canto III, stanza 101.

¹⁷ See also Barton's opinion: „The narrator (...) is, of course, constantly interrupting and retarding his own story-line. (...) the situation which gives rise to them [the narrator's excuses] is quite unique. In the first place, Lambro's maddeningly protracted advance in the direction of the unsuspecting Juan and Haidée is (...) that of Nemesis itself. Juan will be Haidée's first and also her last lover. The looming confrontation between father and daughter must destroy her. It will also shatter a paradisaic episode, the centre in many ways of the entire epic (...). A. Barton, *Don Juan Reconsidered: The Haidée Episode*. Byron. Ed. J. Stabler. (London: Longman, 1998): 195. Such delaying digressions are present in previous works as well, notably in Fielding. Rimmon-Kenan: 125–126.

¹⁸ Similar digressions can be found throughout the whole work, notably in Canto VIII (see stanzas 48–52 for instance) or in Canto XVI (stanzas 77–78). Since our aim is to examine the structure and mechanism of such instances in Byron's text, we shall not discuss all of them.

*To their own hearts' most sweet society.*¹⁹

What is the exact relationship between narrative time and story time? Measuring their distance is highly problematic, as we shall see later on; nevertheless, with respect to narration as such, some fundamental characteristics seem to manifest themselves. Namely that as far as narration is going on, the narrator creates the illusion that narrated time likewise passes (i.e. that the narration and the story are simultaneous), no matter whether he is telling the story or is talking about anything else. When the narration is interrupted, however, narrated time ceases to exist as well. Neither case corresponds either to the traditional ellipsis, “where zero textual space corresponds to some story duration” or to descriptive pause, “where some segment of the text corresponds to zero story duration”²⁰. Rather, it seems that story duration is entirely dependent on textual space.

The narrated story is ultimately dependent on time, since a series of actions can only take place in time. Time within the literary work is dependent on language: it is language that creates time, irrespectively of what language refers to. The narrated story is thus, together with the hero, dependent on language too: that is, besides being temporal, it is also lingual. The existence of the story and the hero is dependent on linguistic presence as such: the narrator talking about something completely different is likewise presence, even if it is negative presence (absence). Language does not need to be referential: it is not reference, not talking *about* something that creates the story and the hero (and the literary work) but the very nature and presence of language.

In other words, it seems that instead of the story and the hero creating the literary work, it is the literary work that creates both the story and the hero. The narrator's being in want of a hero at the beginning is thus even more paradoxical: the narrator in fact cannot *lack* a hero *before* narrating, since the hero does not exist without narration. The only way the narrator can lack him is that he by definition lacks him at the very beginning of the narration, and Don Juan will be created later via language.

The second paradox is in connection with the narrator. We said that according to the beginning of the poem, it seems that the narrator – as opposed to Don Juan – is able to step out of the text and to reflect on it. However, since the narrator also forms part of the narrated story,

¹⁹ Canto IV, stanza 8.

²⁰ Rimmon-Kenan: 53.

he is also dependent both on the literary work and language: it is the literary work that creates the narrator, it is language that constitutes him.²¹ The very existence of the narrator is dependent on the literary work, whilst the very existence of the literary work is also dependent on the narrator. Language produces the narrator, since the only medium via which we get to know him is language – but on the other hand it is the narrator who creates language.²² There seems to be a system of mutual dependency among the narrator, the literary work and language.

It follows that the narrator cannot actually step out of the text or language, since he is confined to exist within both. His double role as the creator and the creature of language (and the literary text) at the same time points to the fact that the text has two levels.²³ Narrative fiction is in general (and by definition) characterized by having at least two narrative levels: the diegetic and the extradiegetic level, the latter being concerned with the narration of the former.²⁴ What is specific in Byron's text is its strongly self-reflexive value: it is the text itself that reflects on the existence and the relationship of the two levels.

The self-reflexive value of the text derives from the capacity of the extradiegetic level to relate to the diegetic one and to create a distance between the two. The narrator can reflect on both levels; his capacity to reflect on the extradiegetic one is possible because the diegetic level can be ignored – but it is still present, since extradiegesis by definition implies the existence of diegesis (and vice versa).²⁵ That is: he can reflect on *what* is or has been narrated (for instance on the hero's deeds) and on *how* something is or has been narrated (in other words, the

²¹ This does not mean, however, that the narrator would be less person-like, since his self-assertion as a person, a bodily person, is very emphatically present throughout the text. See also Horn: 35–37.

²² See also P. J. Manning, Byron's Imperceptiveness to the English Word. *Byron*. Ed. J. Stabler. (London: Longman, 1998): 191: Byron "unmasks the illusion of full meaning (...), asking us to recognize that poetry can be made not only by saturating the individual word but also by ceaselessly uncovering the paradoxes hid in the use of ordinary words. The contradictions at the center of an existence defined by a language that is creative but inevitably conventional, his but not his, a means of connection but a story of separation, a mode of recovery but an admission of loss, a fantasy of wholeness that is desired but resisted, Byron accepts and makes generate the elaborate play that enlarges the narrator and animates the words of *Don Juan*."

²³ See also J. Christensen, *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society*. (Baltimore–London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993):173: "The literary system called Byron (...) was imagined as possessing a second order of reflection capable of regarding its own reflexivity from a distance (...)."

²⁴ Rimmon-Kenan: 91.

²⁵ See also Rimmon-Kenan: 91–92: "Narration is always at a higher narrative level than the story it narrates. Thus the diegetic level is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator (...)."

narrative/literary quality of the text – his literary principles, the length of the cantos and digressions, rhymes etc.). The narrator's alleged stepping out of the text is thus creating the distance between the already existing levels and the stressing of his belonging to a level other than the one containing the narrated story.

The extradiegetic level manifests itself as early as the very beginning of the text, where the diegetic level is not yet created – or, rather, it is not yet filled: it is present without the hero. The diegetic level of the text is immediately created with the narrator's very act of reflecting on the void, since his reflective capacity stems from the text having two levels.

Furthermore, the existence of the two levels also accounts for the fact that whereas the hero may lack a narrator, the narrator cannot actually lack a hero – and also for the difference between the interruption of narrating the story and of narrating at all. The extradiegetic level is dependent on the diegetic one inasmuch as the former contains the latter. The narrator is therefore not only constituted by the language within the extradiegetic level, but also by the distance between the two levels, therefore he needs a diegetic level filled with something to narrate (which is by and large the hero). He is, however, able to step back from narrating the story and may either reflect on it or digress in some other way.

The two levels are fundamentally parallel. Consequently, whenever the narrator steps back from the diegetic level (i. e. ceases to narrate the story), the story within is licensed to go on. This is not so when the narrator suspends narration altogether, since then the course of the extradiegetic level cannot convey that of the diegetic one.

So far we have dealt with the relationship of the hero and the narrator from a more or less theoretical point of view. We claim that this relationship can be best described so, as the narrator's other reflections on their relationship are fairly ambiguous.²⁶ The setup we have discussed enables the narrator to write himself into the diegetic level (that of the story), the possibility of which is shown by the narrator in Canto I, where he suggests that he was a friend

²⁶ This is actually true for almost all of the narrator's reflections. As McGann puts it, "*Don Juan* develops its masquerade by pretending to be equal to itself and to all its heterodox elements. This pretence of understanding and truth is carried out, however, in the contradictory understanding that it *is* a pretence; and the ground of that contradictory understanding is the presence of others who are to observe and respond to the pretences being made." McGann: Lord Byron's Twin Opposites of Truth [Don Juan]. *Byron*. Ed. J. Stabler. (London: Longman, 1998): 48. This wider context of the narrator's unreliability actually lies in the very setup we are discussing, which emphasizes the narrator's power to be and remain undecipherable.

of Don Juan's parents, who tried to reconcile them.²⁷ This direct connection between the narrator and his characters is not quite in keeping with the narrator's relating Don Juan's deeds as generally known or at least as if he had learned them via investigation (as he does so with the siege of Ismail, or of Don Juan's life in Catherine's court in England).

This is in fact something the narrator very early reflects on: when selecting Don Juan as the hero, first – in the first stanza – he says:

I'll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan.

Whereas in stanza 5 he says:

So, as I said, I'll take my friend Don Juan.

The narrator seemingly repeats what he said a few stanzas before; in fact, this is something he did not say, since Don Juan was first *our ancient friend*, as opposed to his present introduction as *my friend*. The difference is not particularly harsh because the notion *our friend* by assumption includes *my friend* as well. The notion *our ancient friend* is absolutely in keeping with the narrator's point that Don Juan is known to all – at least from the pantomime –, that is: he is *our friend* in the sense that there is a common knowledge (and probably also a common attitude) towards him, his figure having an established position and reception, as opposed to the temporary heroes, and he is *ancient* in the sense that he has been embedded in the tradition for considerable time, therefore his established position is presumably more important than his person, the latter being distanced in time. The notion *my friend*, on the other hand, has no such implications; it rather suggests the narrator's personal contact with Don Juan and that he knows Don Juan better than others do, also with the possible meaning of the narrator and Don Juan being contemporary.

The two levels of the text enable the narrator to vary the distance between himself and Don Juan, once bringing the hero as close as a personal friend, at other times alienating him as a common, ancient hero. Don Juan is clearly the narrator's friend in the sense that he is a version of the common, original hero with whom he has a likewise constantly varying relationship. Don Juan's indecipherable position is rather the narrator's reflection on his own capacity to reflect on the diegetic level of the text, foregrounding its fundamentally fictitious nature.

²⁷ See Canto I, stanza 24.

This is also true for the ambiguous handling of time in *Don Juan*. The narrator makes frequent allusions to events taken place at the beginning of the 19th century (either concerning literature or politics or anything else), which is not in keeping with his early self-portrait as the friend of Don Juan's parents or of someone who saw Don Juan's "last elopement with the devil"²⁸, since he otherwise portrays Don Juan as an 18th century hero. The generational distance is clearly shown for instance in Canto VI, where the narrator makes it clear that the story takes place in the empress Catherine's time, whilst the time of narration is that of the emperor Alexander, Catherine's grandson.²⁹

The discrepancy between the narrator's various reflections concerning his relationship with Don Juan can be resolved if we accept that their relationship is actually that of the narrator and his hero and nothing more in the sense that there is no tangible connection between them.³⁰ This setup also accounts for *Don Juan*'s highly ironic and satirical tone, which to a great extent relies on the narrator's capacity to cut himself adrift from the story he narrates.³¹

²⁸ Canto I, stanza 203.

²⁹ Canto VI, stanzas 92–93.

³⁰ That this is not necessarily so in a narrative work is proved by several examples where the narrator accurately describes his relationship to the narrated story, persons, events etc. Consider Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* or the narrator's more significant self-distancing in *Don Quixote* by Cervantes.

³¹ This capacity not only shows itself in connection with the hero's treatment but also possibly in connection with the narrator–reader relationship. This question, however, falls out of the scope of the present essay.

Conclusion

In this essay we examined Byron's *Don Juan* from a narrative point of view, aiming at giving an analysis that may account for the paradoxes found in the narratological framework and for the ironic/satirical character of the text, concentrating on the narrator's reflections concerning his relationship towards his hero. We saw that although the presence of the hero is allegedly of crucial importance, the narrative framework rather suggests that the presence of the narrator is prior, the hero being a pretence for the narrator to narrate, a fact also reflected by the difference between the absolute *I* of the narrator and Don Juan's necessary introduction and dependency on the narrator's will.

On the other hand, we showed that the narrator's self-portrait as the author of the text does not mean that he would be able to step out from his text, as he is actually created by it. Based on this, we proposed a two-level analysis of the text, which accounts for the narrator's distanced reflections on the story he is narrating and for his dependency upon linguistic presence. Also, the distance thus created explains the narrator's power to be overwhelmingly ironic and satirical, besides the fact that both the selection of the hero and the narrator's frequent intermission of the story can be derived from the text explicitly having two levels and the consequent strong self-reflexive quality.

As a conclusion we could say that the relationship of the narrator and the hero in *Don Juan* is highly complex, and a theoretical approach examining the connections among narration, the literary work and language is crucial in understanding how the narrator–hero relationships works in spite of the narrator's rather controversial reflections not only concerning his own position but also the hero's role in the literary work.

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