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THE IRONIC HERO

NARRATION IN LORD BYRON'S DON JUAN

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.

The narrator's emphatic presence questions the traditional relationship between hero and narrator, but also between narrator and reader. The narrator very early deconstructs these traditional – and probably also expected – relationships, instead of which, however, he does not give alternative new ones. This leads to the narrator's constantly changing status within the system of relations and thus 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 irony 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 through his reflections in detail and to show how exactly his irony works by virtue of his indecipherable character and position within the narrative framework he establishes. Also, we shall further inquire to study the text's self-reflexive value, including theoretical problems concerning the status of the work in question as well as literature or language as such. Last but not least, we shall also deal with the narrator–reader relationship, as far as the reader's position within the narrative framework is concerned, also pointing out the importance of this framework in order to understand the narrator's irony that may or may not target the reader.

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. Narrator and hero

The first question we would like to examine is the relationship between the narrator and his hero. It is a widespread assumption that in *Don Juan* the narrator is at least as much in the focus as Don Juan himself¹¹⁵. 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 his role as the narrator *of* Don Juan's life, and how this may define their relationship.

1.1. 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:

¹¹⁵ See for instance Tótfalusi's opinion on *Don Juan*: I. Tótfalusi, *Byron világa*. (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1975): 206–208. Note that since we are not particularly concerned with Byron's life, we – as opposed to Tótfalusi – do not intend to draw a parallel between Byron and the narrator either. This view is nevertheless prevalent in part of the literary criticism concerning Byron, as or 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.

*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.*¹¹⁶

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 poet, by definition needs something enabling him to narrate. His 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 poems¹¹⁷ and the narrator's subject will be

¹¹⁶ In writing this essay, we used the following edition: Lord G. G. Byron, *Don Juan*. (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 2004).

¹¹⁷ Tótfalusi: 208.

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.¹¹⁸ 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.*¹¹⁹

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 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

¹¹⁸ In a comparative study of Byron and Sterne, Horn claims that “in a way, ‘I’ is the keynote 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; both questions are to be dealt with later. A similar opinion can be traced in E. Koeppel, *Byron*. (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1913): 177.

¹¹⁹ Canto I, stanza 221.

of the text – the present one as well as other ones.¹²⁰ 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.¹²¹

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:

¹²⁰ See for instance: Canto I, stanza 5. We assume here that the narrator's self-portrait as an author is consistent throughout the whole work. Therefore we shall refer to the narrator as *narrator* even in cases where his author-role is stressed.

¹²¹ The question of the reader's expectations (and especially their overwriting by the narrator) is to be dealt with later.

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 his multiplied versions seen in the pantomime (which is, 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, rather on the contrary: he needs a hero who is neutral in the sense that he will not be obliged to focus on him 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'¹²². Twentieth 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'¹²³ 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'¹²⁴. 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'¹²⁵ – 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,

¹²² 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. Steffan, and W. W. Pratt, Editor's Note. Lord G. G. Byron, *Don Juan*. (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 2004): xxix–xxx.

¹²³ 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.

¹²⁴ Haslett: 75.

¹²⁵ Haslett: 77.

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.¹²⁶

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, 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.

1.2. 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:

¹²⁶ We shall return to the narrator's literary views and his self-portrait as an author in the next section.

*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.*¹²⁷

Each digression of the narrator thus means that part of the story remains un-narrated.¹²⁸ 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,
The rosy flood of twilight's sky admired.*¹²⁹

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

¹²⁷ Canto III, stanza 96.

¹²⁸ 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.

¹²⁹ Canto III, stanza 101.

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.¹³⁰ 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.¹³¹ 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:

¹³⁰ 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.

¹³¹ 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.

*Young Juan and his ladylove were left
To their own hearts' most sweet society.*¹³²

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”¹³³. 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*

¹³² Canto IV, stanza 8.

¹³³ Rimmon-Kenan: 53.

narrating, since the hero does not exist without narration. The only way the narrator can lack him is that he 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, 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.¹³⁴ 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.¹³⁵ 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.¹³⁶ 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

¹³⁴ 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.

¹³⁵ 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*.”

¹³⁶ 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 reflexiveness from a distance (...).”

concerned with the narration of the former.¹³⁷ 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).¹³⁸ 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 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

¹³⁷ Rimmon-Kenan: 91.

¹³⁸ 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 (...)”.

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.¹³⁹ 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 of Don Juan's parents, who tried to reconcile them.¹⁴⁰ 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.

¹³⁹ 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.

¹⁴⁰ See Canto I, stanza 24.

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.

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"¹⁴¹, since he otherwise portrays Don Juan as an

¹⁴¹ Canto I, stanza 203.

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.¹⁴²

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.¹⁴³

This setup also accounts for *Don Juan's* highly ironic tone, which to a great extent relies on the narrator's capacity to cut himself adrift from the story he narrates. This capacity not only shows itself in connection with the hero's treatment but possibly also in connection with other questions the narrator is enabled to pose.

To sum up what we have said so far we could say that the relationship of the narrator and the hero 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. We saw 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.

2. An epic of one's own

The above examined self-reflexivity shows itself also in connection with the narrator's views concerning literature and, accordingly, his self-

¹⁴² Canto VI, stanzas 92–93.

¹⁴³ 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.

portrait as the author of the text and an artist in general. Henceforth we shall discuss the narrator's reflections of this kind, studying how literature within literature works in the present text. First we shall study the reflections of the narrator concerning various other poets and literary genres, chiefly the epic; then we shall proceed to examine how the present text is created and what further problems may arise accordingly.

2.1. A literary debate and deconstructing the epic

The question of the present work's relation to other works is posed as early as the Dedication, where the narrator famously criticizes the poetry of Southey and to a minor extent of Coleridge and Wordsworth, and praises the works of such contemporaries as "Scott, Rogers, Campbell, Moore, and Crabbe" (stanza 7) and his predecessor, Milton (stanza 10).¹⁴⁴ This poetical hierarchy will frequently recur during the whole text, each time calling for the readers to measure the very text they are reading against the texts the narrator refers to. This creates a more or less constantly high level of intertextuality, especially because the narrator presupposes that the reader knows these texts, which are only loosely defined. Nevertheless, his discussion concerning these poets is not fully dialogical: his opinion prevails as he is the one who exclusively dominates the present text, within which the discussion could take place.

Besides referring to other texts, however, the narrator gives a self-portrait of him as an author:

¹⁴⁴ This aesthetical policy coincides with that of Byron (see the relative notes of the 2004 edition of *Don Juan* for instance). The present essay does not aim at estimating how much Byron's act of referring to his contemporaries in such a way affected contemporary literary discussion.

THE IRONIC HERO

*For me, who, wandering with pedestrian Muses,
Contend not with you on the wingèd steed,
I wish your fate may yield ye, when she chooses,
The fame you envy and the skill you need.
And recollect a poet nothing loses
In giving to his brethren their full meed
Of merit, and complaint of present days
Is not the certain path to future praise.
He that reserve his laurels for posterity
(Who does not often claim the bright reversion)
Has generally no great crop to spare it, he
Being only injured by his own assertion.¹⁴⁵*

The narrator's superiority is clearly shown in the above cited stanzas. It is particularly emphatic because the narrator places himself in an opposition against other poets in a way that leaves him possibly quite alone, since even those authors he mentions as counter-examples are not active participants in the discussion going on. The narrator is ready to *use* his text in the discussion he has created – both as a *means* of discussion and as a *proof* of his poetical capacities. Meanwhile, he takes a position appropriate for his ironic mood: he distances himself from the other poets. First, he suggests that the fame Southey envies and the skill he needs are properties he does not the least lack, especially because the degree of neither fame nor skill is exactly defined (for instance, measured against a canonized poet like Milton). Thus the extent of Southey's favourable improvement is solely dependent on the narrator's judgement, since Southey is measured against him, and his fame and skill are estimated by himself. Second, he claims that a poet's genius is best judged by posterity, which means that even if Southey is famous and is said to have talent, his oeuvre may fall a victim to time. The judgement of posterity defines which works are a-temporal and thus worthy for eternity and which are subject to time and ultimately confined to be forgotten.

¹⁴⁵ Dedication, stanzas 8–9.

Interestingly, the narrator seems to be in a superposition, if we seek to reconcile the above-mentioned manifestations. He claims that it is ultimately posterity that will judge a poet's genius, but at the same time he suggests that he *knows* posterity, by implicating that Southey *will not* gain future applause. Also, measuring Southey against himself equally results in the fact that it is actually the narrator whose judgement counts. Whether it is so *outside* the present text is of course rather questionable, but the narrator creates the illusion that the text he speaks in (or out of) is dialogical by conversing with Southey, partly creating another illusion that the world is absorbed into the present text via language.

The narrator is thus undoubtedly superior, both in the sense that he masters the text and in the sense that he stresses his superiority. This is further encouraged by his attitude concerning his Muses, whom he calls *pedestrian*, indicating that his aesthetical project is closer to the everyday world (and everyday speech) than that of Southey. The question arises how far the poem yet to come can be considered as down-to-earth, especially as it bears the title *Don Juan*, immediately connecting the text with the legendary, demonic hero. The narrator's treatment of the hero, as we discussed in the previous section, certainly accounts for this: Don Juan will be de-mystified to an everyday level¹⁴⁶, sometimes resulting even in the story's getting close to farce (consider the discovery of Don Juan's affair with Donna Julia for instance). Nonetheless, this does not alter the fact that the narrator's definition concerning the text – to which the dedication he is talking in is a kind of supra-text – very early formulates the narrator's image as a poet, ultimately resulting in the reader's preconception concerning the work not yet read.

We have already dealt with the narrator's reflections on his poetic scheme at the beginning of the first canto, which question the relationship between poetry and hero. The narrator's reflections, however, do not end after selecting Don Juan for the second time: he begins to talk about the beginning, first saying:

¹⁴⁶ See also: L. Imre, *A magyar verses regény* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990): 22.

*Most epic poets plunge in medias res
(Horace makes this the heroic turnpike road),
And then your hero tells whene'er you please
What went before by way of episode,
While seated after dinner at his ease
Beside his mistress in some soft abode,
Palace or garden, paradise or cavern,
Which serves the happy couple for a tavern.*¹⁴⁷

The narrator, when referring to *most epic poets*, actually refers to the genre epic, as he will do later on as well, what is more: he even defines his work as an epic, not actually by calling it *epic* but by referring to diverse elements of the epic tradition:

*My poem is epic and is meant to be
Divided in twelve books, each containing,
With love and war, a heavy gale at sea,
A list of ships and captains and kings reigning,
New characters; the episodes are three.
A panoramic view of hell's in training,
After the style of Virgil and Homer,
So that my name of epic's no misnomer.*¹⁴⁸

What is it that makes an epic? The narrator here *lists* all the necessarily elements for an epic, suggesting that a work containing these elements is an epic, irrespectively of its poetic qualities, which is to say that the genre as such is practically empty.¹⁴⁹ It is also crucial to note that the narrator makes this statement at the end of the first canto, which is as far from the epic as possible. What is more, in the eight canto he refers back to this

¹⁴⁷ Canto I, stanza 6.

¹⁴⁸ Canto I, stanza 200.

¹⁴⁹ That the narrator's reflections on his work are rather problematic is pointed out by Ackermann, who claims that the narrator's plans should rarely be taken seriously. Ackermann: 150. Naturally, *Don Juan's* narrative technique affects the reading process in such a way that a verbatim interpretation of the narrator's reflections is practically impossible; nevertheless, they are worthy to be examined since they may reveal *how* certain effects of the text are achieved.

promise he made, claiming that he kept his word, since the necessary features were all present in the text.¹⁵⁰

Thus the narrator plays not only with genres¹⁵¹, but also with the notions of genres and their definitions set by literary authorities. In other words, he seems to claim that a definition is merely a definition and nothing more, being incapable of apprehending the very essence of the literary work, and it follows that works created according to the rules will only be the realisations of these rules, instead of being what they ought to be. This is the reason why the narrator *may* treat his work as an epic: even if, based on the first canto, the reader very rightly feels that the present work's epic character is rather dubious, there is no factual and theoretical evidence that *Don Juan* is *not* an epic.

One might claim that the subject-matter of *Don Juan* is not quite appropriate for an epic and that *Don Juan* is consequently not an epic at all. The narrator is, however, prepared to defend his standpoint even against this argument, saying:

*There's only one slight difference between
Me and my epic brethren gone before,
And here the advantage is my own, I ween
(Not that I have not several merits more,
But this will more peculiarly be seen).
They so embellish that 'tis quite a bore
Their labyrinth of fables to thread through,
Whereas this story's actually true.*¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Canto VIII, stanza 138.

¹⁵¹ Playing with the epic tradition especially by a mocking tone is in itself not Byron's invention: similar instances can be found in poems of the Augustan Age, notably in the works of Pope. See C. Rawson, *Byron Augustan: Mutations of the Mock-Heroic in Don Juan and Shelley's Peter Bell the Third. Byron: Augustan and Romantic*. Ed. A. Rutherford. (London: Macmillan, 1990): 83–85. Thus Byron is strongly related to an obviously pre-Romantic tradition, which, however, does not support the claim of Hegedűs that he would actually contrast the entire Romantic tradition. Hegedűs: 128, 134. Byron's relation to Romanticism in *Don Juan* is examined by Bowra in detail. M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980): 149–174.

¹⁵² Canto I, stanza 202.

According to the narrator, there are two kinds of epic poetry, namely: the one that is conventionally referred to as such, and the one he now presents both by theoretically establishing it and by actually doing it. What is more, he regards the latter kind superior, for the reason it being *actually true*. The criterion of verisimilitude¹⁵³ can be connected to the narrator's description of his muses in the dedication (that they are pedestrian).

The narrator thus achieves to convince his reader that his kind of epic (and poetry in general) is superior, with the very simple device of making verisimilitude the exclusive standard of narrative poetry and measuring his work against a genre having absolutely no such criterion as verisimilitude. This again reassures the narrator's (super)position from which he may dominate practically everything, the present text having no standard to measure the narrator with – he remains inaccessible, inviolable and indecipherable. The strength of this position is stressed by the narrator's irony and occasional self-irony¹⁵⁴, the latter being an obvious sign of his self-assurance that he gives no surface for being attacked *even if* he seemingly does so by mocking himself.

Let us return to the narrator's reflection on beginning *in medias res*. His criticism fits in the wider context of his reflections on the genre epic, *in medias res* being one of its criterions. The narrator, however, does not intend to follow this narrative tradition, claiming that although *most epic poets* do so, he will not. This should mean that his work is actually no epic, but he very early torpedoed this analysis by saying that only *most epic poets* begin *in medias res*, but not necessarily all. The

¹⁵³ There is certainly a difference between a story being *actually* true and another one *resembling* a true story. Verisimilitude refers to the second case, therefore the narrator's claim is – at present – not only that his story is credible but that it is true. The reason why we talk about the criterion of verisimilitude instead of truth is that the narrator's chief argument against the epic is that the genre is not only *not true* but also *inconceivable*. The main emphasis is actually on literary value, and not on the presented story's veracity. We shall return to the question of how far Don Juan's story may be considered fictitious in the next section.

¹⁵⁴ See for instance Canto IV, stanza 3.

reader, presumably knowing well the epic tradition, may still think that an epic should begin *in medias res*, but this is no argument against the narrator, who is the only one able to *define* what makes an epic and what not, this time saying that beginning *in medias res* is altogether optional. This is again due to the fact that the narrator solely dominates the text, overwriting the well-established system of epic conventions.

The narrator then gives a detailed account of his own way of beginning:

*That is the usual method, but not mine;
My way is to begin with the beginning.
The regularity of my design
Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning,
And therefore I shall open with a line
(Although it cost me half an hour in spinning)
Narrating somewhat of Don Juan's father
And also of his mother, if you'd rather.*¹⁵⁵

The *ars poetica* cited above, based on the previous stanza, seems to be fairly straightforward at the first sight: the narrator begins narrating the story with the beginning of the story. This is true inasmuch as Don Juan's story does begin with its beginning if we consider its obvious linearity, or even before it. The poem itself, however, does not the least begin with the beginning of the story, given that it does not begin with the story at all. The first seven stanzas are entirely dedicated to the preparation of the story, further stressed by the narrator's present emphasis on the opening line yet to be come.¹⁵⁶

The first seven stanzas might be considered as a kind of preparation for the actual story. However, the narrator talks about *the regularity of his design that forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning*,

¹⁵⁵ Canto I, stanza 7.

¹⁵⁶ See also the opinion of Wolfson and Manning: "The 'beginning', of course, had been launched several stanzas earlier, and the poet's design is nothing if not a wandering by whims of inspiration, putting his digressions into the work of an epic's 'sinning' transgressions." Wolfson and Manning: xix.

which implicates that the poem itself should begin with the beginning of Don Juan's story, and the first seven stanzas are then actually digressing. Digression is of course, at least according to what the narrator says, entirely forbidden, from which it follows that the narrator is entrapped in his own network of self-definitions.¹⁵⁷

What does he mean by saying that his way is to begin with the beginning? On the one hand, it can be considered as an ironic self-reflection stressing his tendency to digress and *not* to follow his design, much similar to those examined in the previous section – with the only difference that here he does not admit that he has digressed: on the contrary, he pretends not to have done so, which contributes to the his self-mocking character. On the other hand, *to begin with the beginning* means actually what it is, namely that the narrator *has to* begin with the beginning, since whatever he begins with, is the beginning. In this case, which is not the least irreconcilable with the previous one, the narrator says little more than nothing, definitely not enough to make up for an *ars poetica*. He simply states the obvious, reflecting on the textual quality of narration, i. e. that the text is not what it allegedly *contains* or what it is *about*, but it is the text itself.

This is certainly not to say that the above analysis of the self-reflexive quality of the text would exclude the straightforward interpretation meaning that the narrator begins narrating the story with the beginning of the story. The two are simultaneously present in the text, targeting different levels of interpretation.

We have seen that the narrator frequently overwrites the epic tradition, constantly referring to the genre either by going against its established conventions, or by partly imitating them. The latter case is shown at the beginning of the third canto:

*Hail muse! et cetera. We left Juan sleeping,
Pillowed upon a fair and happy breast (...)*

¹⁵⁷ See also Horn: 40–41.

The narrator here obviously refers to the conventional invocation, indicating its conventionality by the notion *et cetera*. Besides not ending the invocation, the narrator violates the rules of the epic by placing the invocation at the beginning of the third canto instead of the first one.

It appears that there is no necessity for the narrator to have an invocation at all, since its original aim is not fulfilled: the narrator does not need to address the muse in order to speak. The only compelling force is then convention: an epic *must* have an invocation – and also, a literary work that *must* have an invocation is an epic.

It is of course rather questionable that *Don Juan* would be an epic, since the narrator violates practically all the constraints of the genre – not the least by his own emphatic presence.¹⁵⁸ What he really achieves to produce is the deconstruction of the epic. Various elements required for an epic are brought into his work *without* their original context, either completely overwritten or at least mingled with non-epic characteristics. The narrator, as we have already mentioned, thus plays not only with the notion of the *epic* or with genres, but also with the notion *genre* itself (if not even with *notion* as such): he questions the possibility of a well-defined genre, pointing out that the notion is only a notion, which does not inherently encode given conventions, since these are maintained by tradition, a certain kind of agreement between the reading audience and the author. Consequently, even if the author-narrator violates the established rules, it is much more about going against the above mentioned agreement than the genre itself, as the author may define what is meant to be the criterion of a given genre in an arbitrary way.

¹⁵⁸ Note that this is not altogether alien to the epic tradition: a certain subjectivity from the narrator's part in the works of Ariosto or in comic epics can also be observed. See Imre: 12–13.

2.2. Deconstructing the text

Having loosened the epic genre, the narrator loosens the structure of the present work as well. At the beginning (*Canto I*, stanza 7) he claims that his design is regular, forbidding digression. We have already discussed the narrator's tendency to digress; besides, however, he disagrees with himself also in his project of composition.¹⁵⁹ Towards the end of the first canto, he says:

*My poem's epic and is meant to be
Divided in twelve books (...)*¹⁶⁰

The second canto ends with the following:

*In the meantime, without proceeding more
In this anatomy, I've finished now
Two hundred and odd stanzas as before,
That being about the number I'll allow
Each canto of the twelve or twenty-four;
And laying down my pen, I make my bow,
Leaving Don Juan and Haidée to plead
For them and theirs with all who deign to read.*

Later on:

*But now I will begin my poem. 'Tis
Perhaps a little strange, if not quite new,
That from the first of cantos up to this
I've not begun what we have to go through.
These first twelve books are merely flourishes,
Preludios, trying just a string or two
Upon my lyre or making the pegs sure;
And when so, you shall have the overture.*

¹⁵⁹ As Thomson says, *Don Juan* „is unstructured by traditional form or plot”. Thomson: 414. The emphasis is on *traditional*, as it would be misleading to propose that *Don Juan* would have no structure at all.

¹⁶⁰ Canto I, stanza 200. See also Canto I, stanza 207.

*My Muses do not care a pinch of rosin
About what's called success or not succeeding.
Such thoughts are quite below the strain they have
chosen;
'Tis a 'great moral lesson' they are reading.
I thought, at setting off, about two dozen
Cantos would do; but at Apollo's pleading,
If that my Pegasus should not be foundered,
I think to canter gently through a hundred.¹⁶¹*

The above quotations show how the narrator changes his design about the length of his work, first saying there will be twenty cantos, then twenty *or* twenty-four and finally *maybe* a hundred.¹⁶² Besides the cantos increasing in number, the narrator becomes less and less precise in estimating that number: first he gives an exact number, then two numbers as an option and finally an approximate number indicating that narration is actually infinite. The increasing number of cantos is also due to the necessity of dividing some into two, as expressed at the end of the third canto¹⁶³:

*I feel this tediousness will never do;
'Tis 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 'twill be shown.*

This shows that not only the number of the cantos, but also their length is overwritten by the narrator. Length has to do with being *epic*, and the narrator now makes the very notion practically gradable: it is now not a

¹⁶¹ Canto XII, stanzas 54–55.

¹⁶² This phenomenon is also pointed out by Ackermann, though in less detail. Ackermann: 150.

¹⁶³ In this respect, the ending of the fourth canto is much similar, but without the complexity of the former one we wish to discuss.

genre as such to play with, but rather a general connotation of this genre, a well-known and not desirable characteristic.¹⁶⁴

That the poem gets longer and longer indicates that the text is actually not born out of a concept set in advance¹⁶⁵ but it is rather created in language, through linguistic presence: the narrator does not actually change his original plan by gradually making his poem possibly infinite – he rather acknowledges the fact that it is impossible to set up plans if his work depends much on his person, his act of speech. In the previous section we claimed that the narrator is unable to step out of the text, because it is the text that creates him (besides him creating the text); whenever he suggests that he steps out, the text ends and the narrator ceases to exist, even if he creates the illusion of his dominance over the literary work and language. Thus the only way for him to extend his potency, it seems, is to extend the text itself as far as possible.¹⁶⁶

The above cited stanza reveals one (more) paradox of the text. The narrator interrupts narration by saying that he will have to cut the present canto into two *in copying*.¹⁶⁷ This suggests that the present text is not yet affected by the narrator's intention of doing so, the act of copying

¹⁶⁴ Again, of course, the narrator clearly refers to “the difference in style and technique between *Don Juan* and the ‘other epics’”. G. M. Ridenour, *Don Juan: “Carelessly I Sing”*. *Byron: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. P. West. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963): 136.

¹⁶⁵ See also Christensen: 215, Manning: 183. This loosened structure also contributes to the poem's strongly improvisatory nature, which is, according to Robson, a solution for “the problem of the long poem”. W. W. Robson, *Byron as Improviser*. *Byron: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. P. West. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963): 92.

¹⁶⁶ The infiniteness of the text can be also connected to another literary design, that is the basically closed nature of the work having a beginning, a middle and an end. As Manning argues, *Don Juan* departs from “ (...) the Aristotelian precept that a work of literature should have a beginning, a middle, and an end: *Don Juan* is all middle. The epic conventionally begins *in medias res*, but at the actual middle point of epic is a stabilizing device, a place about which the story can be organized (...). In *Don Juan*, however, the condition of unfinishedness is not merely an aspect of the story, a temporary fiction exposed when the whole is complete, but one that attaches to the poet himself and influences the ongoing creation of his text.” Manning: 181.

¹⁶⁷ Since our concern here is to examine the narrative techniques of *Don Juan* we only mention here that Byron did actually cut the original Canto III into two. See for instance MacCarthy: 382.

referring to a future event. However, the actual organization of the text is that of two separate cantos, which should be a post-copying state or at least an insertion during copying. The problem in this case is that the narrator has no justified reason for inserting a now obviously unnecessary stanza at the end of the canto, an allegedly already edited text. The narrator's stopping at the end of the present canto may suggest that the text itself is yet unedited, and so the cutting of the canto into two is post-textual in the sense that it does not affect what is *in* the text, ultimately being rather a matter of form. That this is not so is shown by the beginning of the next canto:

*Nothing so difficult as a beginning
In poesy, unless perhaps the end;
For oftentimes when Pegasus seems winning
The race, he sprains a wing and down we tend,
Like Lucifer when hurled from heaven for sinning.*

The fourth canto obviously begins with the beginning in the sense that it is clearly not the direct continuation of the previous canto, therefore there is no reason to consider it as a second half of an original canto. Again, saying that this stanza would be a result of the copying process, is not sufficient either, as it was not in the case of the last stanza of the third canto. The very problem of beginning and its difficulties are present only when the narrator is about to begin narration. This is due to the mutual dependency between the narrator and language we have already discussed: the narrator can only begin to narrate something in language, thus he has to begin producing language out of void, of linguistic absence, which is paradoxical since the narrator does not exist without language, by which he is created. This paradox may be a cause contributing to the difficulty of beginning; as for the end, the difficulty is that since the narrator is dependent on linguistic presence, so ending the text also means that he will cease to exist, therefore he has to dissolve himself.

The presence of elements not fitting in the context of the two cantos being originally one suggest that what we read is the post-copying,

edited text. But this is not only opposed by the narrator referring to copying as yet to come: it is not in keeping with the narrator's remark that *they* (presumably the reading audience) *will never find it out*, which is certainly impossible, because he does own what he actually should not. This rather suggests that the text we are reading is pre-copying and definitely not the final version.

The narrator's controversial reflections on his text again put forward the question of language. It is clear that the text cannot be at the same time a first version and a second version, especially if these two are supposed to be different, as the narrator implies. The only ground on which they can be reconciled is language: it is language that can hold the two linguistic utterances side by side without either of them being superior and regardless of what these utterances refer to, if they refer to anything besides being linguistic utterances at all.

From another aspect this confusion created by the narrator is a radical reflection on his dominant position – and also on his unreliability. We have already mentioned that he is indecipherable in character; this is only further increased by the present issue, which not only creates the problem of *who* is speaking but also of *when*. The problem of time is now not that of – let us call it so – absolute time, i. e. whether he is speaking from the eighteenth or nineteenth century. It is rather the problem of relative time: is the narrator speaking when writing the first version of the text, or right after it, or during copying or after copying? The question obviously remains unanswered, again emphasizing that the narrator may be controversial to this radical extent.

The last point we would like to mention in connection with the deconstruction of the text is the question of verisimilitude, a characteristic the narrator poses as something distinguishing his work from the epic genre, meaning also that his work is therefore essentially better. This is partly challenged by the narrator himself:

*What Juan saw and underwent shall be
My topic with of course the due restriction
Which is required by proper courtesy.
And recollect the work is only fiction
And that I sing of neither mine nor me,
Though every scribe in some slight turn of diction
Will hint allusions never meant. Ne'er doubt
This: when I speak, I don't hint, but speak out.*¹⁶⁸

Here the narrator reveals the basically fictitious character of his work – *explicitly* only regarding his person, namely that as the author of the text, he does not write himself into it, therefore the reader's attempt to seek connections between his person and what is narrated is in vain. As we have already established, it is impossible for the narrator to exist outside of the text is impossible; therefore, whatever he says actually constitutes him, whether he is narrating Don Juan's story or talking about something else.¹⁶⁹ A simple and justifiable solution is that the narrator tries to distinguish himself from his hero by indicating that Don Juan is not his self-portrait.¹⁷⁰

If the present work is fiction, then, it is impossible to control whether what the narrator says is true or not; that is, a statement made within the confines of the literary work (or literature in general) should only be interpreted there, without trying to measure their veracity in the external world. It follows that the story of Don Juan is fiction as well, which means that it is irrelevant whether it is true or not, since the question itself is irrelevant. Certainly, the narrator does not reflect directly on this fact; he rather plays with the duality of Don Juan being a

¹⁶⁸ Canto XI, stanza 88.

¹⁶⁹ The narrator's gesture we are discussing can naturally be interpreted as Byron's interfering, i. e. that he wished to separate his person from Don Juan and other characters (as well as the story). Our concern here is to examine the narrative framework within the text, thus we shall not discuss the response of the contemporary audience and Byron's reaction in turn.

¹⁷⁰ As Manning puts it: "Juan's crises are Juan's, never acknowledged as the narrator's." Manning: 183.

separate entity and a character created by him, similarly as we saw it in the previous chapter. Furthermore, he draws the reader's attention to the work's being fiction right after he indicates that Don Juan's story will be continued, suggesting that the reader is eager to know what will happen to Don Juan. Consequently, the narrator indicates that the present text is fiction party with the purpose of playing with the reader, namely that it is insensible from the reader's part to wait for hearing about Don Juan's encounters as if they were true, since they obviously cannot be true, for the very simple reason that it is all fiction that is presented to the reader.

The above mentioned reading that refers directly to Don Juan's story being fiction is overwritten by the narrator's emphasizing that *he* is not within fiction (the text). Still, provided that reading is a linear process, fiction will first be associated with Don Juan and overwriting operates later. The emphasis on the work being fiction naturally poses the question *how far* it is exactly fictitious, i. e. whether it affects Don Juan's story as well. This question is raised also because of the wider narrative context, in which the narrator constantly changes his attitude towards his hero (consider the beginning of the first canto for instance).

Previously we discussed that the narrator makes a distinction between the epic genre and his work on the basis of the criterion of verisimilitude, further emphasizing his superiority by claiming that his work is actually true. Verisimilitude is not questioned here either, but the truth of the story is: it *may* or *may not* be fictitious – the narrator gives no answer: rather, he poses a question he does not intend to answer, again stressing his dominance as the creator of the text.¹⁷¹

His credibility as to what is true and what is not can be questioned at other points of the text as well, for instance in the following case:

¹⁷¹ This is similar to what McGann claims from a different point of view: "What is true in the poem (...) always depends on context and circumstances. The concept of truth itself is revealed as open to change. What does not change (...) is the structure in which knowledge and truth are pursued and (however provisionally or idiosyncratically) defined. This structure is rhetorical and dialogical – not an internal colloquy but a communicative exchange." McGann, *Lord Byron's Twin Opposites of Truth [Don Juan]*: 50.

*Thus sung or would or could or should have sung
The modern Greek in tolerable verse.*¹⁷²

With these two lines the narrator refers back to the song the Greek poet (allegedly) sung for Haidée and Don Juan. The narrator now presents four possibilities; thus the previous text may be identical with what the Greek poet produced (if he *sung* so), or it may be identical with the text he did not actually produce (if he *would have* sung so), or it may be a sheer possibility he may or may not took the advantage of (if he *could have* sung so), or it may be different from what he produced (if he *should have* sung so). These possibilities are coordinated, not only in a grammatical sense, but also because the narrator does not choose any of them to be superior.

It follows that the narrator *may* have reproduced the text of the Greek poet, he *may* have altered it or he *may* have invented one of his own. The status of the text within the text is thus questioned, but so is the text itself. The narrator obviously knows – or should know – the answer, since as the author of the text he is supposed to know how he wrote it. The reason why he does not tell it is that he does not intend to: the listing of possibilities is merely a game with the reader, in which the narrator (again) shows his superiority by having the power both of questioning the status of his own text and of not answering these questions.

To summarize our thoughts we could say that the narrator very prominently stresses the importance of defining his poem against other poetical works and literary genres. The genre of the epic gains primary importance, and the narrator finally deconstructs it by partly fulfilling the requirements and partly challenging them. This very much emphasizes the omnipotent character of the narrator, who is the ultimate definer of the rules within the confines of his text. His dominance is further increased by the way he creates the text and how he loosens the structure in particular. The questions concerning the coherence of the text also

¹⁷² Canto III, stanza 87.

point to a kind of game and discourse with the reader of the text, the problem of which is discussed in the next section.

3. The gentle reader

We have already mentioned that the text of *Don Juan* is clearly not dialogical in the sense that the narrator very emphatically defines what the reader may and may not think. His domination of the text, however, does not mean that he does not converse with the reader in some way. The conversational nature of the text is actually very emphatic both in the sense that Byron uses a strongly conversational language and that there seems to be a constant conversation, communication going on throughout the whole poem.¹⁷³

This seems to be crucial in the critical reception of *Don Juan*; as Steffan points out, “some readers and critics of *Don Juan* have complained that its conversational facility deteriorates into trivial and frivolous volubility”¹⁷⁴. Our concern here is to show that the narrator–reader relationship is compatible with the narrative framework we have discussed so far, in particular with the analysis of narrative levels and the narrator’s domination of the text. Moreover, we also claim that the narrator creates a position fit for irony also by the way he treats his reader.

The conversational nature of the present work is shown as early as the beginning of the first canto, mainly by the narrator’s mood when explaining why he has chosen Don Juan. An explanation is needed only if there is someone to whom the narrator can and must explain his choice.

¹⁷³ See also J. McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 120: „(...) the structure of the work is communicative exchange. Throughout his career Byron’s books cultivate direct communication with the people who are reading them – addressing such people (often by name) and responding to what they are themselves saying (as it were) to Byron’s poems, His work assumes the presence of an audience that talks and listens – an audience that may hear as well as overhear, and that may have something to say in turn.”

¹⁷⁴ G. Steffan, *Don Juan: A Thousand Colors. Byron: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. P. West. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963): 96.

*(...) I condemn none,
But can't find any in the present age
Fit for my poem (that is, for my new one);
So, as I said, I'll take my friend Don Juan.*

What is more, he explains the expressions *my poem* as well, which would be clearly unnecessary if he were no talking to someone *directly*, that is: narration by definition means that what is narrated is narrated *by* someone and narrated *to* someone else, but what makes Byron's text special is that the text is not a means of transporting information from one subject to another but rather the ground of it, the conversation going on constantly by writing and by reading the text, in continuation. This is characteristic later on as well:

*(...) I shall open with a line
(Although it cost me half an hour in spinning)
Narrating somewhat of Don Juan's father
And also of his mother, if you'd rather.*

The narrator here not only implies that there is a reader he is speaking to, but he directly addresses him by partly offering a choice or at least a variety of possibilities concerning what will be narrated. The mode he uses is conversational¹⁷⁵, colloquial and confidential. This obviously differs from the tone of the *Preface*, where the narrator was talking to Southey, which indicates that although the whole work is allegedly dedicated to Southey, the conversation is one he cannot participate in.

How far the reader is defined in character is a question best answered by taking into consideration the context of the system of relationships established by the narrator, which includes not only the narrator and the reader but also Don Juan and the present work, all embedded in literature as such and in language. This means that the reader actually presented in the text is part of a system governed by the

¹⁷⁵ See also Canto I, stanza 93, where the reader's probable opinion is partly opposed by the narrator's; or Canto V, stanza 78, where the reader's wish seems to be fulfilled.

narrator, from which it follows that the reader is constructed by the narrator. Naturally, the narrator aims at targeting a reader outside the text, just as he very often portrays himself as the author existing out of the text, which is, as we have discussed, rather paradoxical and therefore we suggested that an analysis of two explicitly present narrative levels be introduced. The reader can actually well be located in this analysis: the narrator projects the reader into the extradiegetic level, the one from which they both can reflect on the diegetic level.¹⁷⁶

The primary role of the reader is that of the reader of the text, such as the narrator has the role of the narrator, his other reflections being rather controversial. This does not the least exclude the possibility of a more precisely defined reader but when this happens the narrator rather selects a certain group of his wider reading audience than actually limiting the reader's potentials.¹⁷⁷ Consider the following:

*I don't choose to say much upon this head,
I'm a plain man and in a single station,
But – oh ye lords of ladies intellectual!
Inform us truly, have they not henpecked you all?*¹⁷⁸

Here the narrator obviously selects a given part of his audience to speak to, now asking some of his male readers. He may as well choose women, which obviously shows his capacity to divide the reading audience just as he wishes:

¹⁷⁶ As Rimmon-Kenan points out, this is naturally so. Rimmon-Kenan: 104. *Don Juan* is in this respect specific because this phenomenon is also constantly being reflected on within the text itself. In other words, the reader (narratee) is made overt, perceptible. Rimmon-Kenan: 104.

¹⁷⁷ See also Rimmon-Kenan: 104: "The narratee is sometimes fully personified, sometimes not. In any case, the narratee is the agent addressed by the narrator, and all criteria for classifying the latter also apply to the former."

¹⁷⁸ Canto I, stanza 22.

*Oh 'darkly, deeply, beautifully blue',
As someone somewhere sings about the sky,
And I, ye learned ladies, say of you.
They say your stocking are so (heaven knows why,
I have examined few pair of that hue),
Blue as the garters which serenely lie
Round the patrician left legs, which adorn
The festal midnight and the levee morn.
Yet some of you are most seraphic creatures,
But times are altered since, a rhyming lover,
You read my stanzas, and I read your features;
And – but no matter, all those things are over.¹⁷⁹*

The reader is thus not specified in gender, as opposed to the narrator, who very strongly presents himself as a man.¹⁸⁰ This is relevant besides gender as well, as the poem in general “is remarkably unprescriptive of its reader”.¹⁸¹ The narrator may select any smaller group within his larger reading audience¹⁸² he at present wishes to talk to. This has an impact on the nature of the narrator’s irony as well: irony may target one group of the reading audience (such as learned ladies) *against* the rest of the audience, which means that part of the readers will share the narrator’s dominant position we have described in the previous section, whilst others will actually suffer by that, being inevitably targeted. Thus the narrator may divide his audience in a particularly sharp way, since irony as a dividing line makes the targeted group subject not only to the narrator but also to the vast majority of the readers.

The above quotation shows at least one more characteristic of the narrator–reader relationship. That is, the narrator suggests that he used to have a certain kind of relationship with the bluestockings he addresses,

¹⁷⁹ Canto IV, stanzas 25, 110–111.

¹⁸⁰ Similar examples can be found throughout the whole work, see for instance Canto XII, stanza 28. The technique is much similar to the narrator’s addressing Southey in the Preface or, for instance, the tsar Alexander in Canto VI, stanza 93.

¹⁸¹ Manning: 190.

¹⁸² See also J. J. McGann, *Lord Byron’s Twin Opposites of Truth [Don Juan]*: 38–39.

which is now irrelevant, since their relationship has definitely altered: no matter what connection they had in the past, now they are reader and narrator (or author), whose relationship actually cannot be other, since at least the narrator is dependent on the text.

The conversation with the reader may affect either levels of the text. The above examples are instances where discussion is not about the text itself, but rather about a topic posed by the narrator's digression. Very often, however, the narrator starts discussing the value of the present work, especially from a moral point of view:

*If any person should presume to assert
This story is not moral, first, I pray
That they will not cry out before they're hurt,
Then that they'll read it o'er again and say
(But doubtless nobody will be so pert)
That this is not a moral tale, though gay.
Besides, in canto twelfth I mean to show
The very place where wicked people go.*¹⁸³

The narrator for some reason feels it necessary to defend his poem against some readers; his criticism does not intend to affect all readers, just those whose opinion is identical with the one he opposes. He strongly stresses that his work is moral¹⁸⁴ and if some readers do not think so, then it is their fault, not his. Within his own text, the narrator may explain practically anything and the reader has no chance to intervene and defend his (or her) own standpoint. Besides, the narrator's mode obviously suggests that he is superior to his readers, at least those for whom it is enough to send "wicked people" to hell in order to constitute a moral tale. This requirement set by some readers is challenged by the narrator in the sense that even if he intends to fulfil it, he explicitly shows that this is a requirement basically any kind of tale can easily fulfil. This is similar to what we have seen in connection with the requirements of the epic genre,

¹⁸³ Canto I, stanza 207.

¹⁸⁴ For similar examples see also Canto IV, stanzas 4–7, Canto V, stanza 130 and Canto XII, especially stanzas 28, 39–40, 50–80, 86.

namely that requirements are in themselves empty and consequently a literary work least resembling the genre epic may be called an epic if certain requirements are fulfilled – similarly, a literary work least seeming to be moral may be considered moral provided that it will end in a moral lesson. The narrator’s mode suggests not exactly that he would despise moral values as such, but rather that he does not find them necessary criteria for a literary work. Such requirements are set against literature in a sense that they invariably come from outside, either from the part of readers or literary authorities. Within the confines of literature, however, these forces do not necessarily operate, as the narrator shows by constantly challenging them.

The reader’s position is not clearly defined in the debate between the narrator and *some readers*. Thus the narrator rather leaves the choice to the reader whether he considers himself as part of the group of *some readers* or as a reader independent from them, who rather agrees with the narrator. In the latter case, of course, the reader will enjoy superiority together with the narrator. This seems to be crucial as the narrator continues to criticise part of his reading audience:

*The public approbation I expect
And beg they’ll take my word about the moral,
Which I with their amusement will connect
(So children cutting teeth receive a coral).
Meantime, they’ll doubtless please to recollect
My epical pretensions to the laurel.
For fear some prudish readers should grow skittish,
I’ve bribed my grandmother’s review – the British.*¹⁸⁵

The narrator’s criticism is particularly harsh when comparing a probably large part of his audience to children or to old(-fashioned) people; however, he uses the third person plural form, which means that he does not the least address his reader(s) directly. Grammatically, then, there is more chance for the reader to escape criticism. At the same time,

¹⁸⁵ Canto I, stanza 209.

the reading audience is divided into two parts in a more radical way than before, since one group is not only selected against the unnamed other (such as *lords of ladies intellectual* or *learned ladies*) but it is also in an opposition created, defined and judged by the narrator. This also affects the operation of irony: the reader is almost invited to take the narrator's position *against* others, though he may refuse to do so and subject himself to irony.

The power of the narrator to do so obviously stems from the fact that he dominates the text. This means that even if the reader's opinion is presented in the text in some way or another, the narrator is still dominant as it is him who produces and limits the text of the reader. The reader is linguistically present; otherwise there would be no discussion between him and the narrator, who is dependent on language.

Discussions may take place also between the narrator and the reader, this time the reader as such being directly addressed:

*Here my chaste Muse a liberty must take.
Start not, still chaster reader, she'll be nice hence—
Forward, and there is no great cause to quake.*¹⁸⁶

Here the narrator expects a certain kind of reaction from the reader, to which he indirectly refers. By indirect reference we mean that although he explicitly names the reaction of the reader, he does not formulate this reaction into language. Which is to say that the debate between the narrator and the reader is completely dominated by the narrator, since the reader is not at all given a text to debate with. The reader cannot refute the narrator's supposition that he would start at the muse's liberty and he similarly cannot object to the ironic adjective *chaste(r)* used by the narrator. This means that the reader may have to be subject to the narrator's irony and overwhelming textual dominance *directly*: that is, it is not merely a possibility now, as it is in the cases we previously examined, where the reader may choose whether to agree with the readers the narrator opposes or not.

¹⁸⁶ Canto I, stanza 120.

Another way for the narrator to show his superiority is to leave the reader partly uninformed. For instance, the narrator may claim that he does not know the exact piece of information the reader is probably curious about:

*This licence is to hope the reader will
Suppose from June the sixth (the fatal day,
Without whose epoch my poetic skill
For want of facts would all be thrown away),
But keeping Julia and Don Juan still
In sight, that several months have passed. We'll say
'Twas in November, but I'm not so sure
About the day; the era's more obscure.*¹⁸⁷

The narrator pretends not to know the exact date of the event (or events) he intends to narrate: he is definitely not sure about the day, or at least he explicitly says so, but he shows uncertainty in connection with the month as well. What is more, he strongly suggests that he does not care about it either. What really matters is that the story enables him to narrate, thus to create himself by and out of language; the exact details of the story may or may not interest him, as indicated by the difference between June the sixth and the day only circumscribed.

The uncertainty of the narrator again poses the question of the narrator's credibility and whether the story itself is credible or not. If the narrator says that he does not know the exact date, the reader is reassured that the story is one that the narrator writes down instead of creating. However, the very same act of the narrator calls attention to the narrator's power to possibly modify the original story, that is: if he does not know the exact date and is not sure even about the month, he will *say it was in November*, thus obviously stressing the creative aspect of writing. The posing of the question is set in a wider context we have already dealt with, namely that the narrator constantly challenges the story's status,

¹⁸⁷ Canto I, stanza 121. A similar instance can be found in Canto I, stanza 134.

forwarding his own importance and the story's ultimate role as something enabling him to narrate.

Information may be left out of the text consciously in the sense that the narrator does not even pretend that he would not know the answer:

*But to our tale. The Donna Inez sent
Her son to Cadiz only to embark;
To stay there had not answered her intent.
But why? We leave the reader in the dark.*¹⁸⁸

On the one hand, the narrator here denies information from the reader in a more radical way since it is his intention not to tell the reader why Donna Inez did as described, especially because he talks about her *intent*, which should obviously be specified as the reader cannot be informed of a character's intentions without the narrator's aid. On the other hand, denying access is in answer to a question allegedly belonging to the reader. Thus, the dialogical nature of the text here is fairly straightforward, at least as far as the narrator attributes a question to the reader – a question both posed and answered by the narrator. Naturally, the reader has no choice but to accept the text offered or constrained by the narrator, together with the narrator's irony now targeting him directly, though less sharply than in the case of some readers or Southey.

There seems to be a mutual dependency between the narrator and the reader, namely that the narrator needs the reader in order to assure that the communicative aspect of the text is fulfilled – and also, the reader needs the narrator, otherwise there would be no text to read at all. Even this setup suggest the narrator's superiority, since the existence of the text is dependent on the narrator, whereas it may exist without the reader, even if it does not (and cannot) function. Therefore, the narrator may stress his superiority towards the reader in radical ways, since the reader either accepts the role he is given, or choose to step out of the text, which would mean giving up his very readership. Moreover, since the reader is as well dependent on – and created by – the text as the narrator, if he is

¹⁸⁸ Canto II, stanza 8.

built (written) into the text, such as in the cases examined above, he cannot even step out of it.¹⁸⁹

This does not necessarily mean that the narrator would not assign a role to the reader that enables him to be supra-textual. We have already seen that the narrator presents himself as the author of the present work, which is a way of distancing himself from the diegetic level, creating the illusion that the narrator has the capacity to step out of the text. Something similar in connection with the reader is shown below:

*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.
We meet again, if we should understand
Each other; and if not, I shall not try
Your patience further than by this short sample.
'Twere well if others followed my example.¹⁹⁰*

If the *narrator* (the narrating *I*) is in contrast with the *reader*, then the *author* (the *bard*) is in contrast with the *purchaser*, who is seemingly out of the confines of the text. This is only apparently so since this purchaser is also created by the text and by language. We can note, however, that this purchaser-role of the reader has to do with the extradiegetic level, namely that the reader, much similarly to the narrator, is able not only to reflect on the diegetic level (the story of Don Juan), but also to exist without – or rather above – it. In other words, the discussion of the narrator and the reader is not dependent on the diegetic level; in this respect the reader's capacity is similar to that of the narrator.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ As Rimmon-Kenan puts it, "the reader is (...) both an image of a certain competence brought to the text and a structuring of such a competence within the text". Rimmon-Kenan: 118.

¹⁹⁰ Canto I, stanza 222.

¹⁹¹ See also Manning: 190. This status of the reader also accounts for the possibility of the reader's superiority against other readers, such as in Canto I, stanzas 207 and 209, as we have mentioned.

This is crucial in understanding the complexity of the narrator–reader relationship: so far we have mainly concentrated on the narrator’s overwhelming dominance, although we also stressed the fundamentally conversational nature of the text. The narrator is certainly in a superior position but only to an extent which enables him to treat the reader equal, at least as far as dialogue requires it. This can be explained via the analysis of narrative levels: the narrator writes the reader into the text much similarly to the way he does himself, so that the reader is defined by him, but at the same time given the capacity both to reflect on the diegetic level and not to reflect on it. The latter case involves interruption of a reading process, i.e. reading the story, the diegetic level. Another reading process, however, must be still on, since otherwise there would be no way of communication between the narrator and the reader; this is where the extradiegetic level manifests itself.

Consequently, if the reader has the capacity to reflect on the text, he is also able to take an ironic position similar to that of the narrator. For this the reader has to be able to distance himself from the diegetic level, which is fulfilled if he is written into the extradiegetic one. It is also crucial that he has to be written into the text; otherwise he could not take the narrator’s ironic position within the discourse and against others, since he would not have a position at all. However, the requirement of being written into the text gives way to the narrator’s irony actually targeting the reader, as the text is dominated by the narrator.

That the reader cannot actually step out of the text – being encoded in it¹⁹² – enhances the importance of the approaching end of the text. The reader and the narrator have to separate (“shake hands”) since the end of the text, of linguistic presence means that there is no space to be a narrator or a reader in: a narrator by definition narrates something and similarly, a reader by definition reads something. They are both dependent on the text and on each other: the narrator is the creator of the

¹⁹² See also McGann, *Lord Byron’s Twin Opposites of Truth [Don Juan]: 39.* “Byron’s calculations are meant to draw readers into the orbit of the poem, to insist upon their presence.”

text but it is the reader who enables the text to fulfil its communicative function.

The mutual dependency of the author and the purchaser is reflected in the above cited stanza as well: for the bard the purchaser is dearer, *gentler* than the reader as he as an author lives by purchasers, who in turn may have a need for an author to produce certain poetical works. This playful reflection of the narrator is, however, only subsidiary to how the whole work actually constitutes the above-mentioned narrator–reader relationship, the nature of which is ultimately linguistic and textual.

In this section we looked upon the reader–narrator relationship of the text, mainly concentrating on how the reader may be set within the narrative framework we previously established, based on the text’s having two levels and the narrator’s domination of the text. We saw that although the narrator may specify the group of readers he is talking to, this is rather a selection from the wider reading audience, as various groups may be addressed. Since there is no consistent definition for the reader other than the reader of the text, we claim that this is exactly the role the reader is assigned by the narrator. We also discussed how the narrator dominates the reader via dominating the text itself, as the linguistic presence of the reader is subject to the narrator’s will. On the other hand, the reader has a crucial part in the working of the text, not only by his status as reader but also because the narrator enables (and constrains) him to distance himself from the diegetic level of the text. Thus we can deduce that the reader’s role is well established in the narrative framework of the text.

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 character of the text. We concentrated on the narrator’s reflections concerning his relationship towards his hero, his work and his reader, pointing out the importance of their mutual dependency.

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 proved 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.

We showed that there is a mutual dependency between the narrator and language, both having the capacity of creating the other, which first of all gives the narrator the power of exclusively dominating the text, enabling him to define its genre and literary value and further strengthening his position fit for irony. Secondly, the narrator's dependency on language forces him to extend the text as far as possible, resulting in the seemingly infinite length of the poetical work. In the meanwhile, this is all done in a conversation with the reader, as we saw in the last section. The reader's role is not confined as far as characteristics are concerned; however, his role within the narrative framework is well settled, both because he is written into the extradiegetic level and because he is dominated by the narrator. The reader's double role accounts for the fact that whilst sometimes he shares the narrator's point of view and may relate ironically to certain phenomena, at other times he is actually the target point of the narrator's irony.

As a conclusion we could say that the narrator's irony and the self-reflexive quality of the text stem from a complex narratological framework established by the narrator, which, despite all the paradoxes, can be maintained throughout the whole work and may account for various phenomena, such as the nature of the narrator–hero and the narrator–reader relationship.

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