

# THE READER'S PILGRIMAGE NARRATION AND TEXTUAL LEVELS IN CHILDE HAROLD'S PILGRIMAGE

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The aim of the present article is to investigate the narrative structure of Lord Byron's *Childe Harold*, with particular interest in its relation to the genre of the novel in verse, the first example of which is Byron's *Don Juan*. As has been noted for instance by Hermann Fischer and Mihály Szegedy-Maszák<sup>1</sup>, although *Childe Harold* itself is not a true novel in verse itself, it contains many traits that will be fully developed in *Don Juan*, thus it is one of the most important predecessors of the genre.

One key feature of *Childe Harold* is unquestionably the importance of the narrator: the figure thereof becomes overwhelmingly important in the text; furthermore, there is an intricate interdependency to be observed in the relation of the hero, the narrator, and the author. From the reader's point of view, this is mostly perceived as the loss of clear-cut boundaries among these figures. Apart from this, a second aspect that has to be considered is that there are several layers of the text: besides the cantos written in verse (the core text), there are a number of notes written by Byron (later of course also by the editors such as Murray), not to mention the prefaces that also contain Byron's comments. These are not only of a mere explanatory purpose but cause a certain playfulness in the text, forcing the reader to shift between the individual levels from time to time.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. The Eye and the Voice

The very first question to be asked is about the status of Childe Harold in the text: whether he can be considered to be a hero or not. Judging from the title, of course, the answer seems to be positive: a text entitled *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* should have a hero called Childe Harold, around whom the events should be centred.

Yet, Byron's preface to the first two cantos already indicates that there is something else going on; consider:

A fictitious character is introduced for the sake of giving some connection to the piece; which, however, makes no pretension to regularity. It has been suggested to me by friends, on whose opinions I set a high value, that in this fictitious character, 'Childe Harold', I may incur the suspicion of having intended some real personage: this I beg leave, once for all, to disclaim – Harold is the child of imagination, for the purpose I have stated. In some very trivial

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Kinga Földváry et al., eds., *HUSSE10-LitCult. Proceedings of the HUSSE 10 Conference* (Debrecen: Hungarian Society for the Study of English, 2011), 38–45.

<sup>1</sup> See Hermann Fischer, *Romantic Verse Narrative: the History of a Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, *Kubla kán és Pickwick úr: Romantika és realizmus az angol irodalomban* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1982), 81–82.

<sup>2</sup> The importance of Byron's notes is of course worth mentioning not exclusively in terms of structural relations holding in the text but also as a means of expressing Byron's ideas and thoughts concerning several issues, particularly on the state of contemporary Greece. See also Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron: A Portrait* (London: John Murray, 1971), 94; Paul Elledge, "Chasms in Connections: Byron Ending (in) *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* 1 and 2" in *Byron*, ed. Jane Stabler (London: Longman, 1998), 124–125.

particulars, and those merely local, there might be grounds for such a notion; but in the main points, I should hope, none whatever.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from separating himself in person from Harold, the author reveals an important quality of the text: Harold has a function – the function of making the text coherent – and his own character as such is thus merely subsidiary to this function.

That this is so is further reinforced by the appendix to the first preface, written by Byron a year later (in 1813):

I now leave 'Childe Harold' to live his day, such as he is; it had been more agreeable, and certainly more easy, to have drawn an amiable character. It had been easy to varnish over his faults, to make him do more and express less, but he never was intended as an example, further than to show, that early perversion of mind and morals leads to satiety of past pleasures and disappointment in new ones, and that even the beauties of nature, and the stimulus of travel (except ambition, the most powerful of all excitements) are lost on a soul so constituted, or rather misdirected. Had I proceeded with the poem, this character would have deepened as he drew to the close; for the outline which I once meant to fill up for him was, with some exceptions, the sketch of a modern Timon, perhaps a poetical Zeluco.

Basically, this is to say that Harold *illustrates* the consequences of 'early perversion of mind and morals': thus he is used as an example of a phenomenon naturally more general than himself. Again, this contributes to his functional character rather than a personal one.

Byron's interpretation of his hero is actually justified by the text itself. The narrative part of Harold's story is little more than this: after living a considerably sinful life, Harold starts suffering from a kind of disillusionment and therefore decides to leave his country and to travel. This raises the question of what the point of the whole work can be – after all, this is not too much to make a story. However, Harold's journey is not really about his deeds but rather about what he sees: the cantos mostly contain the descriptions of the places he is assumed to visit. In this sense, Harold is assigned the role of the focalizer instead of the focalized: he is not much seen but what he sees becomes important.

In terms of the relationship between the hero and the narrator, Harold is, as if it were, the *eye* and the narrator is the *voice*: Harold does not speak but what he sees and thinks is transmitted via the narrator. However, this is not perfectly so: the narrator's speech increasingly overwhelms Harold's perception and cognition and what the reader is presented is rather those of the narrator.

From time to time, the narrator shows the focalizer explicitly. This has two roles: on the one hand, it reassures the connection between the various parts of the journey, indicating that Harold is still there; on the other hand, these are also narrative gestures of alienation, whereby the narrator makes it clear that what has been said does not personally belong to him. Alienation is necessary because most of the text is shared between Harold and the narrator: this is the first merger in the text, blurring the boundaries separating the hero and the narrator. By way of alienation, the narrator tries to deny this and to reinforce the boundary.

However, Harold becomes less and less important as the text proceeds: this means a deconstruction of the established structure, which was based on the assumption that Harold was the central figure of the text (even if, as has been seen, the narrator did not always keep to this). The shift is gradual but can most strikingly be perceived in Canto III.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In writing this essay, I used the following edition of the work in question: Lord George Gordon Byron, *Selected Poems* (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 2005).

<sup>4</sup> On the turn exemplified in Canto III, see also Susan J. Wolfson and Peter J. Manning, introduction to *Don Juan*, by Lord George Gordon Byron (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2004), vii. A partly similar opinion can be traced in Galperin's essay: "(...) it is scarcely a surprise that (...) it would be Harold, whose access to the visible

First, there are certain personal references of the narrator; such as the beginning of Canto III, which contains the addressing of his daughter. Second, there appears some sort of shared experience between the hero and the narrator, which can best be described by the notion of spleen. Third, the narrator is no more only the source of the text but also becomes the theme thereof; consider, for instance, stanza 6 from canto III:

‘Tis to create, and in creating live  
A being more intense, that we endow  
With form our fancy, gaining as we give  
The life we image, even as I do now.  
What am I? Nothing: but not so art thou,  
Soul of my thought! with whom I traverse earth,  
Invisible but gazing, as I glow  
Mix’d with thy spirit, blended with thy birth,  
And feeling still with thee in my crush’d feelings’ dearth.

The shift in the relative importance of the two characters is also reflected in their roles. Initially, it is the narrator who accompanies Harold; later on, there is a change in the roles and so finally it is rather vice versa. Moreover, Harold ultimately disappears, which is also indicated linguistically: if he is referred to at all, he is referred to as “the Pilgrim” – thus his name is lost and he only becomes an iconic figure who has some role in the text. Together with all this, the narrator’s alienation from the hero is rather exchanged for an admitted merger, as exemplified by the end of Canto IV (stanzas 175–176):

But I forget. – My Pilgrim’s shrine is won,  
And he and I must part, – so let it be, –  
His task and mine alike are nearly done;  
Yet once more let us look upon the sea;  
The midland ocean breaks on him and me,  
And from the Alban Mount we now behold  
Our friend of youth, that ocean, which when we  
Beheld it last by Calpe’s rock unfold  
Those waves, we follow’d on till the dark Euxine roll’d  
Upon the blue Symplegades: long years –  
Long, though not very many, since we have done  
Their work on both; some suffering and some tears  
Have left us nearly where we had begun:  
Yet not in vain our mortal race hath run,

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(and whose visibility in turn) had previously separated the gaze from the constraints of authority, who is suddenly and henceforth *invisible*. For in the very way that he had earlier resisted thought, or had exposed the imposition of narrative upon life, Harold is, in the present mandate, unthinkable. The customary explanations for Harold’s disappearance, then – for example, that Byron no longer needs him or that Harold and the speaker are properly one – are not invalid so much as they are irrelevant. What matters now is that with Harold’s invisibility (after which he is no longer sightable, much less recognizable) the possibilities and subversions to which his visibility and the visible in general have provided access are absent in kind. (...) After all, no matter how much the ‘experience’ of *Childe Harold* 3 owes to Harold’s *disappearance*, it owes palpably more to the speaker’s *presence*, which, in the absence of a counter-example, furnishes the reader with a direct access to poetic authority. The pleasure that canto 3 has long afforded readers – and the critical approbation for which it has been responsible – is here to be derived, owing largely to the omniscience, the capacity to totalize, to which the reader, as much as the speaker, is suddenly exposed.” William H. Galperin, “The Postmodernism of *Childe Harold*” in *Byron*, ed. Jane Stabler (London: Longman, 1998), 140. However, it is important to note that Galperin emphasizes the importance of the turn whereas, as pointed out by the previous sections of the present paper, the relationship between the hero and the narrator is complex from the very beginning on and the change in Canto III results from a long and gradual process rather than a sudden turn.

We have had our reward – and it is here;  
That we reap from earth, sea, joy almost as dear  
As if there were no man to trouble what is clear.

This is actually reinforced by Byron's preface to this last canto:

With regard to the conduct of the last canto, there will be found less of the pilgrim than in any of the preceding, and that little slightly, if at all, separated from the author speaking in his own person. The fact is, that I had become weary of drawing a line which every one seemed determined not to perceive: like the Chinese in Goldsmith's 'Citizen of the World', whom nobody would believe to be a Chinese, it was in vain that I asserted, and imagined that I had drawn, a distinction between the author and the pilgrim; and the very anxiety to preserve this difference, and disappointment at finding it unavailing, so far crushed my efforts in the composition, that I determined to abandon it altogether – and have done so. The opinions which have been, or may be, formed on that subject, are now a matter of indifference; the work is to depend on itself, and not on the writer; and the author, who has no resources in his own mind beyond the reputation, transient or permanent, which is to arise from his literary efforts, deserves the fate of authors.

One of the intricacies of *Childe Harold* thus lies in the complex relationship between the hero and the narrator, which also changes throughout the work. The question arises how this is all related to *Don Juan*.

## 2. Don Juan and Childe Harold – Playing (in) Different Narrative Games

One of the most obvious differences between the two texts is that in *Don Juan* a higher degree of reflexivity can be observed:<sup>5</sup> the narrator constantly reflects on both the diegetic and the extradiegetic level of the text, thus making his person more emphatic from the very beginning onwards.

As I have shown, in *Childe Harold* there is no radical separation of the narrator and the hero: they can be separated as the eye and the voice but even so, they seem to be various aspects of one person. This is further reinforced by the ultimate merger of the two figures. On the other hand, even if there is occasional distancing by way of alienation, this only gives the reader a negative definition of the narrator: he tells us what he is *not* but never what he actually *is*.

What can be observed in *Don Juan* is exactly the opposite; let us see the very beginning of Canto I:

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.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For details, see Julia Bacskai-Atkari, "The Ironic Hero: Narration in Lord Byron's *Don Juan*" *Első Század* 1 (2008): 45–89.

<sup>6</sup> The excerpts of *Don Juan* are from the following edition: Lord George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan* (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 2004).

Thus in *Don Juan* the dominance of the narrator can be traced from very early on: the narrator's *I* is strongly personified<sup>7</sup> and forceful. What is more, he chooses the fittest hero for his poem: his decision is in a way arbitrary, and definitely over-dominant, as in this sense the hero seems to be of secondary importance only. Last but not least, he chooses a story well-known to the readers,<sup>8</sup> which will also allow him to digress from it, since there is a limited need for satisfying the reader's interest.

Even so, the role of the story will be important in *Don Juan*: this makes possible a number of reflections both on the diegetic and the extradiegetic level of the text, which result in a complex but playful structure. Let us see one example from Canto I (stanza 207):

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.

The reason why there are no such reflections to be found in *Childe Harold* is quite simple: first, *Childe Harold* lacks a story and thus there is no story to reflect on; second, the narrator is not personified enough, which also leads to reduced reflexivity: reflections in *Don Juan* are done by a strongly personal narrator, who constantly keeps interacting with his readers.<sup>9</sup>

Besides this, there is of course a rather different treatment of literary norms: *Don Juan* tends to mock traditional genres, especially the epic.<sup>10</sup> Consider the beginning of Canto III:

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

<sup>7</sup> In a comparative study of Byron and Sterne, Horn claims that "in a way, 'I' is the key-note of both *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Juan*: they are characterized by (...) a preponderance of the subject, self-assertion on the part of the author. This is manifest in two forms: first, in the all-pervading presence of Byron and Sterne; then, in the assertion of their arbitrary will." András 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. A similar opinion can be traced as early as in Emil Koeppel, *Byron* (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1913), 177.

<sup>8</sup> See Moyra Haslett, *Byron's Don Juan and the Don Juan Legend* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 75–77. For contemporary reception see also Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 2003), 348–349, 365–367, 441; Calwyn Edward Vulliamy, *Byron* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1948), 22, 164, 177–180, 231; or William St Clair, "The Impact of Byron's Writings: An Evaluative Approach" in *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, ed. Andrew Rutherford (London: Macmillan, 1990), 13–21, 23–24. For possible (and modified) sources of Byron's *Don Juan* consider Richard Ackermann, *Lord Byron* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1901), 149.

<sup>9</sup> See also Jerome 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." About contemporary reception of this particular tone, see G. Steffan, "Don Juan: A Thousand Colors" in *Byron: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Paul West (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 96.

<sup>10</sup> 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 Claude Rawson, "Byron Augustan: Mutations of the Mock-Heroic in *Don Juan* and Shelley's *Peter Bell the Third*" in *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, ed. Andrew Rutherford (London: Macmillan, 1990), 83–85.

In *Childe Harold*, however, there is no room for travesty. *Childe Harold* does not deliberately violate and question the epic, as *Don Juan* does, but it does not refer to it either, thereby lacking one important aspect of reflexivity.

### 3. Textual Levels

For all these concerns, *Childe Harold* is highly problematic as a verse novel: it lacks a number of characteristics thereof and even if the narrator is an important participant in the text, this is no reason in itself for considering *Childe Harold* a verse novel. Yet, the question arises whether there is nothing in *Childe Harold* that would make it resemble the later genre.

The answer is positive if one considers the notes as well: there is an interaction between the core text (the cantos written in verse) and the notes, which contain a number of personal remarks – something that is also found in *Don Juan*. A number of notes are merely of an explanatory nature;<sup>11</sup> however, there are ones that cannot be solely categorised as such. In Canto I, for instance, the narrator talks about Lisbon and the dangerous situation there (stanza 21); he explains this in a note:

It is a well known fact, that in the year 1809, the assassination in the streets of Lisbon and its vicinity were not confined by the Portuguese to their countrymen; but that Englishmen were daily butchered: and so far from redress being obtained, we were requested not to interfere if we perceived any compatriot defending himself against his allies. I was once stopped in the way to the theatre at eight o'clock in the evening, when the streets were not more empty than they generally are at that hour, opposite to an open shop, and in a carriage with a friend: had we not fortunately been armed, I have not the least doubt that we should have 'adorned a tale' instead of telling one. (...)

As for mere explanation, the first part of the first sentence seems to be enough; however, the author goes on talking about a personal experience, which of course does contribute to a better understanding of the situation but is far from being necessary. Naturally, the ironic tone of the quotation is also reminiscent of the narrator of *Don Juan*.

Though not always as complex as this, the notes still often include personal remarks. In Canto I, stanza 29 the narrator says the following:

But here the Babylonian whore hath built  
A dome, where flaunts she in such glorious sheen,  
That men forget the blood which she has spilt,  
And bow the knee to Pomp that loves to varnish guilt.

In the corresponding note, the following is added:

The extent of Mafra is prodigious: it contains a palace, convent, and most superb church. The six organs are the most beautiful I ever beheld, in point of decoration: we did not hear them, but were told that their tones were correspondent to their splendour. Mafra is termed the Escorial of Portugal.

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<sup>11</sup> This was naturally a means that facilitated the interpretative task of the contemporary reader as well. As Vulliamy observes: "One of the chief reasons for the popularity of *Childe Harold* was the great ease with which almost anyone could read it: there was nothing metaphysical, abstracted, or even particularly imaginative, in the poetry of Byron. He himself was remarkably candid in giving the reader full information, historical, literary or topographical, in a series of notes." Vulliamy: 84.

Occasionally, then, it may happen that the narrator, for some reason, does not explicate something; if so, the authorial notes may be used for continuation. This of course leads to the second merger of the text: the author of the notes is merged with the narrator of the core text, as the former merely continues the thoughts of the latter. This is how the three figures of the hero, the narrator, and the author are intertwined by the text: there are no clear-cut boundaries between any two of them. I am of course far from claiming that the three figures would be the same; however, even if they are theoretically and structurally different (and should be kept so), the text does everything to play with the merger of them, thereby creating an intricate narrative structure for the reader.

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Of course, to claim that *Childe Harold* would be a novel in verse proper would still be misleading and rather inappropriate: the merger of the narrator and the hero, and also the lack of story simply prohibit it from being one. Yet, the text becomes quite complex when one takes all layers into consideration, as there is a vast amount of interaction between these. One of the key features of *Don Juan* is that there the reflections on the text are not attached to the core text in a separate layer but are present in the very same level. This means that the reader simply cannot avoid the narrator's reflections, as one may with *Childe Harold* by neglecting the notes; on the other hand, the reader of *Childe Harold* is at the same time invited to shift from one level to another, which renders a different structural complexity that is worth exploring.

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