

THE IRONIC NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN *EUGENE ONEGIN* AND *DON JUAN*

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Lord Byron's influence on Alexander Pushkin has been largely discussed since *Eugene Onegin* was published, as early as 1831. The purpose of this study is not to offer a new and different aspect of that influence, but an analysis of a matter that has seldom been considered over the years of Byron and Pushkin criticism. I am talking about the sometimes parodic and always ironic role of the narrator in Byron's *Don Juan* and Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. In a very similar vein, the two romantic poets achieve their purpose differentiating the narrator, the characters and the writer. Although the objective they pursue seems to be the same, the devices both Byron and Pushkin make work are quite dissimilar, and ultimately they show us two different perspectives on the manifestation of the romantic hero.

First of all, I am going to discuss the complex narrative hierarchy that Pushkin creates in order to establish a pecking order according to his preferences. Irony and the awareness of the reader are going to play a basic role here. Secondly, the delimitation of Byron's narrative techniques in *Don Juan* will help us to understand better the role of the narrator. Devices such as the use of the *ottava rima* and the satiric pose of Byron himself will be analyzed. Finally and very briefly, I will draw some comparative conclusions from the parallelism between the two works mentioned before.

As "implied readers" ¹ we can find irony, parody, and any kind of mockery all over the so-called novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*. This represents a great advantage and richness from the point of view of the discussion, although I will have to devote my time to just two or three aspects of the use of these literary devices.

It seems quite obvious to accept that Pushkin was writing something more than a mere sentimental or romantic novel. And it is striking how simple the plot is. We, experienced readers, keep saying to ourselves that there has to be something else. The first clue is given to us by the Russian critic Shklovskii. He says: "The true plot of *Eugene Onegin* is not the story of Onegin and Tatiana, but the

manipulation of this situation” (Shklovskii, 211)². Thus, the first issue to be discussed must be how Pushkin manipulates both the situation and the reader.

Some critics have pointed out that Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* was actually a parody of the romantic and sentimental novels so widespread in his day. After enumerating some of the techniques that Pushkin develops in his novel in verse to accomplish this parody effect I will analyze in detail what probably is the most significant example of parody, that is to say, Lensky’s elegy.

Works of literature are always directed toward an audience. Just as we distinguish between the author of a literary work and the image the author creates of himself within a work, so must we distinguish between the real individual who reads a book and the fictitious person we become in the process of reading it. A text, then, places certain demands on us, it imposes a role on us. A successful reading depends on the assumption of that role by the reader, in which case, the name we give to those readers is “implied reader.”

In *Eugene Onegin* the reader is explicitly mentioned on numerous occasions, and the references are frequent and direct. At the beginning of the work the narrator turns to the reader and says

Onegin, a dear friend of mine,
Born where Nev• flows, and where you,
I daresay, gentle reader, too
were born ... (EO, I, 2)³

At the end of the novel, Pushkin also says goodbye to his faithful reader. In the next to the last stanza he says: “My reader-friend or not, whichever / You were ... ” (EO, VIII, 49). If we read this stanza with close attention we realize that the “implied reader” is addressed to reinterpret and reconstruct the meaning of Pushkin’s words. The writer is anxious to part with the “mock reader” (as I am going to call him from now on) on good terms, but that does not mean that we have to identify ourselves with him. On the contrary, there is a large distance between “mock” and “implied reader.”

The “mock reader” addressed by the narrator as “sweet reader” (EO, IV, 20), “respected and deserving” (EO, IV, 22), and “kindly reader” (EO, VII, 5) is associated with a whole set of values that the author rejects. On the other hand, the “implied reader” is the narrator’s real intimate, and that intimacy is created by means of irony. As Booth said in his *Rhetoric of Irony* “the author offers an unequivocal invitation to reconstruct” (Booth, 233). In other words, we are required to make a series of judgements, and with this engagement we get closer to the author. Let me quote Wayne Booth again with the purpose of clarifying this point

The author I infer behind the false words is my kind of man, because he enjoys playing with irony, because he assumes my capacity for dealing with it and — most important — because he grants me a kind of wisdom; he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my reconstruction is built (Booth, 28).

Therefore, we play an active role in constructing a higher meaning of the author's words. Standing beside the author, we look down on the victims, fostering a sense of self-esteem by the means of the irony and the knowledge we acquire. We, as "implied readers", are always moving toward a higher level of accomplishment, where we can share the real work with the author.

But if the "mock reader" is a victim that remains outside the author by means of irony, what can be said about the "friends", the intimates to whom the narrator tells his story? Of course they are not outsiders, they have been too long close to Pushkin, who treats them as confidants and reveals to them his thoughts and feelings, and calls them "Brothers" (EO, IV, 37), "good people" (EO, VII, 36), and "dear friends" (EO, III, 41). He chats with them in an informal mode about their poetry

These days I often listen to
a certain question, friends, from you:
"For whom, then, languishes your lyre?
Among the maiden's jealous thong?
To whom do you inscribe your song?" (EO, I, 57)

Who are these friends, this intimate circle with whom the narrator talks and in whom he trusts so faithfully? Pushkin first identifies the group by focusing attention on an absent member: "O bard of feasts and languid sorrow / Would that you were still with me here / I should have boldly sought to borrow ... " (EO, III, 30). If there were any doubts as to identify this poet, Pushkin himself identifies him in a note as Eugene Baratynsky. On the basis of the former quotation we infer the "friends" are Pushkin's fellow poets, the well-known Pushkin Pleiad. But are those fellows totally identified with Pushkin, or on the contrary, does himself set apart from the group?

This question is answered in chapter V, where the relationship between poet, "mock reader," friends, and "implied reader" is clarified. In the opening lines the author accuses the "mock reader" of not liking his poetry

To you this kind of nature writing
May be of limited allure;
It's all low-style and unexciting,
Shows scant refinement, to be sure (EO, V, 3)

He goes on to say that the "mock reader" likes the "refined" poetry of the group

A bard of more exuberant lyre,
With inspiration's god afire,
Portrayed the virgin snow for you
A winter's charms in every hue:
I dare say you're devoted to him

As he depicts with lyric glow
 Clandestine outings in the snow (EO, V, 3)

In the notes Pushkin identifies the poet (Vyazemsky) as well as the work (“First Snow”). We can draw out of this that the Pleiad poets and their poetry are linked with the “mock reader”. At the end of the stanza is where Pushkin confronts his friends: “I’ve no intention to outdo him / Or challenge him in this regard, / Nor you, the Finland maiden’s bard!” (EO, V, 3). Again, the poet and the work are identified as Baratynsky and “Eda.” This stanza is highly ironic in the sense that the author draws a line between himself and the group. It also indicates that Pushkin sees his poet fellows as rivals more than as friends. In this stanza he is also conducting a polemic against the kind of poetry his friends write, and we are wisely manipulated into taking his side. Before we realize, we find ourselves protesting that we do like Pushkin’s poetry, and that his is, in fact, superior to that of the group. Again, it is by means of irony that we are manipulated. The device here works in the “implied reader” as a threat: we rush to join the author, afraid that otherwise we too will become an object of ridicule.

From this “privileged position,” if we want to use Iser’s terminology, we can look down on “mock reader” and poet-friends alike, aware that we are the true friend.

The distances among the different levels of hierarchy in *Eugene Onegin* are even more complex. If we examine some passages from chapter VI we will find out that there is a pecking order between the “mock readers” and the “mock friends” as well.

In that chapter, the poet Lensky has impetuously challenged Onegin to a duel, angered by his friend’s flirtations with Olga. Onegin is afraid of being ridiculed if he does not fight. He accepts Lensky’s challenge and shoots and kills his friend. Following the description of the duel, Pushkin explores the implications of Lensky’s death, and, doing so, gives the answer of each narratee to this event. First, we find the reactions attributed to the “mock reader”

But, futile, reader, to uncover
 What once his future might have held’
 Dead lies our dim young bard and lover,
 By friendly hand and weapon felled (EO, VI, 40)

It is easy to see the “mock reader” exclaiming: “how awful!”. He assumes the proper pose, and we also deduce that, because he makes so much of it, his concern is rather artificial and that he is covering a feeling of indifference. In fact, I would dare say that the “mock reader” is not moved by the event at all.

How do the “mock friends” respond to Lensky’s death? On the contrary, they are grieved by what has happened. In VI, 36 we can read their “collective” lament

My friends, you will lament the poet
 Who, flowering with a happy gift

Must wilt before he could bestow it
 Upon the world, yet scarce adrift
 From boyhood's shore ... (EO, VI, 36)

It is obvious from this stanza that the friends view Lensky as a fellow poet and mourn him as such. The irony in this passage is placed on the "misplacement" of the lament. The implication drawn from the stanza observed above is that Lensky was destined to be a great poet. Paradoxically, three stanzas later, Pushkin projects a very ordinary future for Lensky, which seems, in fact, more suitable for Lensky's character than the inflated image entertained by the poet-friends. For Lensky is nothing but a young man who writes bad poetry, and whose life would have ended in boredom and misery.

We shall see later how the lament of the poet-friends and the language in which it is written is highly connected with the style of the elegy, the genre associated with both Lensky and the poet-friends. Finally, the author demands an explicit response from the "implied reader" to Lensky's death. Clearly Pushkin does not ask for a shrug of the shoulders or for an effusive excitement; on the contrary, we are required to play a quite different role. We are put in the position of the friend who kills; therefore we must experience the duel from this perspective

What if your pistol-shot has shattered
 The temple of a dear young boy,
 Who flushed with drinking, may have scattered
 Rash words at random to annoy,
 Sly looks or inadvertent slander;
 Or has himself in sudden dander
 Incontinently called you out ... (EO, VI, 34)

Pushkin focuses our attention on the act itself, and he demands that we view this act as something awful, horrible because of its finality. He makes us realize that Lensky's death is terrible not because it is a tremendous loss to poetry, but because it is a murder. He impels us to make a moral judgement.

In *Eugene Onegin* proper responses are provoked in the "implied reader" mainly through the use of irony. He must learn to recognize the ironic attempt of the author and reconstruct literal meanings by making judgements. As a part of his training, he is invited to assume various mock roles which he must reject. Each of the mock audiences is identified with one of the work central characters: poet-friends with poet Lensky and reader with Eugene Onegin. Author and implied reader stand together and from above look down on the lost friends and the poetic colleagues.

Another important aspect of the irony in the text is the use of foreign words. They may be given in the foreign language (*comme il faut*, vulgar) or in Russian transliteration (*vasisolas*). The frequent attention that Pushkin gives to these words, and to the relationship of Russian vocables to foreign, ensures that this ironic situation is emphasized. For Pushkin, who spoke and wrote French fluently and was

interested in French culture, French had an obvious influence on the language and he expressed his feelings on the subject in his comments to Tatiana's letter to Onegin

That nonchalantly careless drawing,
That sweetly mispronouncing tongue,
To me its purl is still entralling
As once it was when I was young;
The Gallic touch, no use recanting,
To me will always be enchanting (EO, III, 29)

The mixture of Gallicisms and insertion of foreign elements are essential to Pushkin's irony.

Equally essential to the tone of the text are the literary allusions. In *Eugene Onegin* we do not simply have a narrator recounting some novelistic events to a reader. The author and the "implied reader" are assumed to be highly literate. Again, as with stylistic levels and foreign words, there is a paradigm of literary allusions. There are, first, the quotations which are explicit to the text and the author which is identified. Such are the quotations from texts given in the footnotes. Next to the identified and distinct quotations, stand the quotations, sometimes slightly altered, which are inserted in the verse. These are usually identified with their author, for example, the quotation from Griboedov (note 38). Next in line come the parodies; here, we must distinguish between those where the author is identified (in Chapter V, 25, note 34) and those where the allusion is hidden: "Betweentimes fresh young kisses sampling / for creamy-skinned and black-eyed maids" (EO, IV, 39), which as Nabokov discovered, is a hidden quotation from Chenier.

The number of such allusions is very high. From a specific quotation, as that cited, to the general stock of images and phrases of the pastoral tradition in poetry, the romantic and sentimental novel, classical literature, the text of Pushkin is an amalgam of literary allusions inserted in the context of the widely read narrator.

Among the many examples of parody in *Eugene Onegin* perhaps the most interesting is the lyric poem which the poet Lensky wrote before his duel with Onegin. Many critics have said that Lensky's poem was actually a parody of the elegy.

The elegy was the dominant lyric genre in Russia in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Young Pushkin wrote elegies. Some of the models of the period were the French poets such as Parny, Gillbert and Milleuoye. In a few words, the elegy was a lament associated with the death of a young poet, usually male, and always in love. A sense of mourning is also reflected in the elegy, but the consolation was found in the thought that his beloved, as a result of her undying love, would come to weep over his grave. In its most popular variant, that grave was always situated near a stream, under the shade of a tree, that is, in a pastoral setting. Needless to say, certain images and vocabulary occurred over and over in

those elegies; for instance, “flower”, “blossom” which suddenly “withers”, “golden age” and so on. All this framed by an archaic flavor and by the continuous use of the lyrical personal “I” formed the elegy.

Lensky’s verses in *Eugene Onegin* followed that familiar elegiac pattern: the lyrical “I” lamented the fact that his youth had passed so quickly and that he would soon die. In fact it has been proven by some critics that Pushkin deliberately borrowed passages that were common in the elegy of the period⁴. But, it is important to consider the way in which Pushkin introduced Lensky’s lines and the tone of his commentary. First of all, Lensky did not voice his own lament, as it would be supposed by the given conventions of the elegy: his poem was quoted by the narrator, and it did not begin a stanza, but abruptly followed the narrator’s introduction: “By chance these verses did not wither / With him; I have them; thus they go: / ‘Days of my springtime ...’” (EO, VI, 21).

This is the first clue Pushkin gives the “implied reader” to discover that Lensky’s elegy is not a real elegy. The second one is the bombastic tone of the first lines of the elegy

“Days of my springtime, wither, wither
Have you withdrawn your golden glow?
What bodes my noonday in its passage?
In vain my glances probe its message,
Deep mist has veiled it from my sight” (EO, VI, 21)

The first lines of the conventional elegy should be, if anything, moving. And what makes the verses sound that way is the abrupt change from a conversational style to a highly poetic one. Through these switches, Pushkin created an ironic effect, moving from stylization to parody.

Although the ironic intonation in *Eugene Onegin* is the main factor which makes Lensky’s elegy a parody, there are other factors as well. As it was mentioned before, the continuous allusions to the artificial vocabulary of the elegy play an important role in Pushkin’s parodic attempt.

In order to see more clearly Pushkin’s parodic intention in Lensky’s elegy, let me mention two other significant examples of this effect. In VI, 21 Pushkin says

No matter; Fate’s decree is right.
And if I perish, overtaken
By its swift arrow, or am spared
All is for good. (EO, VI, 21)

This is highly ironic, since Lensky was not shot by a “swift arrow”, but shot in cold blood by a friend. While the season traditionally associated with the elegy was spring, Lensky fell instantly dead in the cold snow.

On the other hand, Lensky consoled himself with the thought that Olga, the woman he loves, will come to weep over his grave, but she soon falls in love with another man, marries and goes away.

Byron's *Don Juan* marks a recovery of the tradition of satire after a period of relative respectfulness. The myth of Don Juan in its transformed Byronic form is altered so that the active libertine of Tirso de Molina's and Moliere's dramas becomes a highly passive sufferer of the distortions imposed by the early nineteenth-century society. This change to a passive hero demonstrates Byron's sensitivity to contemporary changes of feeling and the need for new literary procedures to deal with them.

The means Byron uses to universalize his myth extend not only to the story, with its shifting scenes both within and outside Europe, but also to the form of his narrative and the literary genres which it draws together within its episodes. In *Don Juan* the divisions among kinds of narrative, such as epic, lyrical, and satirical, are fused. The early Cantos of *Don Juan*, for instance, can put together an overall framework of parody with lyricism of Juan and Haidee's love affair on the island. And whether satirical or sentimental, the tone of an incident or its meaning in the epic situation is liable to change at any moment by the interruptions of Byron's wise narrator. Or an effect may be abandoned by the absurd power of one of Byron's final couplets: "Beloved Julia, hear me still beseeching! / (Here he grew inarticulate with retching)" (DJ, II, XX).

Byron was, as a satirist, influenced by the Augustan Age, but he accomplished a revolutionary task in *Don Juan*. The poem must be considered as not only reaching beyond the Augustan tradition, but also essentially beyond a direct concern for any tradition. Byron's attacks on the traditions of marriage, religion and the military are found everywhere in *Don Juan*, but his literary iconoclasm is probably the most delightful element in the poem. He mocks the sacred "rules" of Aristotle when Byron's narrator says in Canto I, 201 about the *Poetics*: "Vade mecum of the true sublime, / which makes so many poets, and some fools" (DJ, I, 201). Then he proposes a plan for writing a *Poetics* of his own

If ever I should condescend to prose,
I'll write poetical commandments, which
Shall supersede beyond all doubt all those
That went before: in these I shall enrich
My text with many things that no one knows,
And carry precept to the highest pitch:
I'll call the work "Longinus O'er a Bottle,
Or, Every Poet His Own Aristotle" (DJ, I, 204) ⁵.

With this assertion, Byron has established his own authority, reducing tradition to absurdity. If there is any consistent thing about *Don Juan*, it is its inconsistency. This inconsistency can be seen in the words of the narrator: "The soul of such writing is license ... " and license indeed gives the poem a great freedom of expression. It is evident through the poem that he will not allow his freedom of expression to be restricted by any literary standards

... Kind reader! Pass

This long parenthesis (I could not shut
 It sooner for the soul of me) and class
 My faults even with your own, which meaneth, put
 A kind construction upon them and me,
 But that you won't. Then don't; I am not less free (DJ, VI, 56)



Therefore, in order to understand the nature of the poem satire, we must begin with a recognition of the narrator's complete renunciation of tradition. The satire in *Don Juan* reflects this rejection, and praises Byron's personal values. The role of these personal values in the poem satire can be seen through two perspectives — satiric technique and satiric pose.

Satiric technique consists of devices employed to accomplish an attack; irony is the best conventional example. As far as the term "satiric pose," I use it in a neutral sense, that is to say, with no connotation of falsity. This term also suggests Byron's relationship with his audience.

The satiric technique employed in *Don Juan* reveals much about the poem and its implied values. The *ottava rima* stanza, which he had already used in *Beppo*, here matches perfectly the irreverent narrator. The *ottava rima* stanza lends itself to informal, conversational language. Byron's values were unconventional (for example, his attacks were often directed against the conventional religious, social and political issues of his time), and the *ottava rima* gave him a larger framework to accomplish his attacks.

The strength of Byron's poem had to rest upon the personality of the narrator, not upon what he said. The *ottava rima* allowed the narrator to change his tone, to insert his humor and the force of his personality. In the first six lines of the stanza he leads the reader to a typical response to a given situation and in the last two lines he discredits his former assertions. In the first Canto, for instance, Juan is portrayed as the man taken by love to great metaphysical considerations on which Byron comments in the final verses: "If you think't was philosophy that this did, / I can't help thinking puberty assisted" (DJ, I, 93).

One of Byron's main purposes with *Don Juan* was to expose the inadequacy of tradition, of systems of any kind, and to provide an adequate means of dealing with the constant instability of the modern world. That is why for Byron the juxtaposition of the low and high in poetry was not parody of abuses in poetry and society, but an attempt to portray a quality for real life which must be recognized. Byron's use of this device (as we saw quoted above) let him show that love, philosophy, and puberty are inseparable elements of human existence, an existence in which incongruity is the rule rather than the exception. For Byron, tradition and system exclude what cannot be excluded; they are artificial attempts to confine a world in which change, incongruity, and instability are reality.

Although it is not the purpose of this essay to show the complex Byronic use of the *ottava rima*, we can affirm that it enabled him to overcome one of the major problems of the Romantic satirist. He refused to cling to traditional values in which he could not believe, and stood alone asserting his personal values that were unique

and discomforting. Therefore, he had to win his reader by force of personality. If we accept Byron's radical rejection of traditional values, and his critique of a world in which tradition and systems separate men from the ends for which they were constructed, it is not hard to understand why *Don Juan* is an unsystematic poem. Byron's logic asserts that all systems and forms are, by nature, inadequate to life, so the poet describes things as unsystematic. And, as the narrator remarks in Canto XV "But if a writer should be quite consistent, / how could he possibly show things existent?" (DJ, XV, 87).

This view allows the narrator an inconsistency of tone, especially shown with the frequent use of digressions. In fact, the digressions contain most of the poem satire. Since Byron must win his objective as satirist through the force of the narrator's personality, the importance of his digressions lies in their observations of life inside and outside the poem. Digression, the major instrument of Byron's inconsistency, is also the use of the poet's freedom.

Irreverent digressions had also been used by Italian poets, such as Francesco Berni or Giambattista Casti, but Byron goes beyond them. Byron's are longer and more frequent than those of the Italians and his use is more effective. The narrator reveals Byron's purpose in the use of this technique in lines like: "Oh pardon me digression — or at least / Peruse. 'Tis always with a moral end / That I dissert, like grace before a feast" (DJ, XII, 39). The narrator's use of the word "moral" is, of course, ironic. He is not referring to traditional moral didacticism, but his observations on life contain the singular "morality" of Byron's personal values, which are implicit in his satiric technique and are unique.

He has joined neither the Augustan tradition nor the mode of the writers of the "Italian spirit", but has chosen the best satiric devices of both and developed them. In the end Byron created a technique of his own.

One of the most original things about Byron's satire in *Don Juan* is his satiric pose. As a satirist of the Romantic period, he could not help rejecting a satiric tradition that demanded a position based on values he could not accept. Byron, then, established his pose as a satirist not on the basis that he was morally superior to his victims, but that he was free of the abuses of tradition and system and his victims were not. Byron, therefore, appears as a satirist who celebrates the Romantic virtues of freedom and individuality, values also asserted by Blake, Keats and Shelley, although the object of these poets' attacks was a highly personal negative force with the resultant loss of identity. On the other hand, freedom is the clearest positive value in *Don Juan*.

In other words, we can affirm that Byron's narrator is separated from his victims not by moral superiority but simply by his freedom. There is, however, an unusual link between Byron and his audience. The narrator's use of colloquial language and his personal asides make the reader feel that he has been taken into the narrator's confidence. This also shows that Byron, unlike many of his contemporaries, is aware that he has a reader.

At this point it can be stated that there are a variety of levels between writer and reader. In *Don Juan* Byron exploits to the fullest extent the technique of

commenting on the writing as it goes, digressing, apologizing, and teasing the reader by involving him/her in the fiction, and withdrawing from it while reminding him that it is only fiction: “But to my subject — let me see — what was it?” (DJ, III, 81) or ” ... Kind reader! pass / This long parenthesis: I could not shut / It sooner for the soul of me) ... “(DJ, VI, 56), or ” ... I’m ’at my old lunes’ — digression, and forget / The Lady Adeline Amundeville ... “ (DJ, XIII, 12).

It is fair to mention here that this method had already been mastered by Fielding in *Tom Jones* and by Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*. Fielding claimed the right to comment as he pleased on life and literature at the beginning of his novel

Reader, I think proper, before we proceed any further together, to acquaint thee, that I intend to digress, through this whole history, as often as I see occasion; of which I am myself a better judge than any pitiful critic whatever. (Fielding, Bk I, Ch II, 43).

And Sterne provided Byron with an example of digression used even more informally, as a major structure of the book

... in all my digressions ... there is a master-stroke of digressive skill, the merit of which has all along, I fear, been overlooked by my reader ... and it is this: That tho’ my digressions are all fair, as you observe, — and that I fly off from what I am about, as far, and as often too, as any writer in Great Britain ; yet I constantly take care to order affairs so that my main business not stand still in my absence.

Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; they are the life, the soul of reading! — take them out of this book, for instance, — you might as well take the book along with them; — one cold eternal winter would reign in every page of it; restore them to the writer; — he steps forth like a bridegroom, — bids All-hail; brings in variety, and forbids the appetite to fail (Sterne, Bk I, Ch XXII, 56).

Don Juan was, in fact, described by some as “a *Tristram Shandy* in rhyme” (Hazzlit, 75). As I mentioned before, one must be aware of two or possibly three levels of narrators in *Don Juan*: there is the picaresque centered on Juan, there is the narrator, who is the fictitious persona; at a third level, there is Byron himself. It, then, must be emphasized that there exists a disassociation of the hero and the narrator in *Don Juan*.

The essential method of the poem consists not only of a presentation of a whole set of human experiences, but in a technique of simultaneously presenting and commenting upon these experiences. The experience is presented to the reader as a reality, but at the same time it is distanced by the continual interposition of Byron himself.

In a conversation with Lord Byron, Medwin tried to identify the poet with *Don Juan*, as well as with Harold (another Byron’s hero). Byron “laughed at the remark” (Lovell, 53). Probably it was the laughter of polite non-agreement, since he

achieved a complete disassociation from his hero in *Don Juan* through the device of the narrator. Paul West said about this issue: “Byron repudiates even the persona of Don Juan” (West, 12). Of course — and this is why he wishes to insist that it is a persona — because he wants to avoid the romantic confusion of mask and face. His true persona is that of the narrator. Obviously, Byron is well aware that he is using it as a distinctive part of *Don Juan*. He says in Canto III

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 (DJ, III, 96).

Byron is conscious that he is now narrating, now commenting, depending upon the mood that takes him. In Canto XIV he even denies that the poem is intended as a narrative at all: “This narrative is not meant for narration, / But a mere airy and fantastic basis, / To build up common things with common places” (DJ, XIV, 7).

This sharp division among persona, narrator, and poet enables us to appreciate the whole poem as something incongruent, but it can also be stated that there is a larger structure, although this is not a topic to be discussed here.

To conclude this essay I would like to draw some conclusions as to the extent and intensity of Byron’s influence on Pushkin, and more specifically of *Don Juan* on *Eugene Onegin*.

It is not normally denied that a relationship between Byron and Pushkin existed, although no consensus has yet been reached as to the duration and nature of Byron’s influence on Pushkin.

To begin with, *Don Juan* starts out in the Picaresque tradition; Byron moves his hero through a rapid succession of episodes, but after the tenth Canto, which brings Juan to England, there is no more migration in space and at the end of the sixteenth Canto Juan is still in England. The resemblance with *Eugene Onegin* of these last Cantos of *Don Juan* reveals an obvious parallelism that can be confirmed by an analysis of some of these events.

First, *Eugene Onegin* starts with the description of Onegin’s social life in Saint Petersburg; in Cantos XI-XII Byron describes Juan’s social life in London in a similar way. Secondly, in both poems the action shifts to the country and there occurs in both poems a party. The guests are described satirically. Thirdly, Aurora Raby becomes Don Juan’s partner much as Tatiana plays the same role in *Eugene Onegin*. Finally, Juan, more sophisticated now than at the beginning of the poem, and not very susceptible to female charms, is moved by his meeting with Aurora in the same way as was Onegin by his meeting with Tatiana. In several ways, from the eleventh Canto, *Don Juan* is a parallel with *Eugene Onegin*. But the main point that I wish to stress here is the one about the role of the narrator in both works. Pushkin,

as we saw before, tried to distance himself not only from his narrator, but also from his characters. He is up there, in a privileged position from where he controls everything in the “novel in verse”. Equally, Pushkin subtly disassociates the narrator from his hero, cleverly reminding us through ironic comparison that Onegin is not a poet.

On the other hand, and although Byron himself denied it, we can assume a closer relationship in *Don Juan* between the narrator and the poet than in *Eugene Onegin*. Byron’s poem, as well as Pushkin’s, implies a distance, a disparity between narrator and characters precisely the opposite of the emotional identification characteristic of the romantic poem. Byron shifts that relationship to Don Juan and himself, whereas Pushkin looks for an identification with his “implied reader.”

Notes

- ¹ I will explain the term “implied readers” later in the paper; it should be mentioned that it has already been used by Holsington and Clayton in their Pushkin Studies.
- ² From now on, all the citations will appear with the author’s name and number(s) of page(s) in parentheses.
- ³ Eugene Onegin’s quotations belong to the translation of Walter Arndt, and will be indicated with the initials EO and the number of chapter and stanza in parentheses.
- ⁴ Nabokov addresses this matter in the introduction to his translation of *Eugene Onegin*.
- ⁵ The underline is mine.

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