

A Hint from *Tom Jones*:
Byron's Versatile Adaptation of Epic Genre
in *Don Juan* ¹

Kyushu Institute of Technology Kei NIJIBAYASHI

INTRODUCTION

In *Romanticism, History, and the Possibilities of Genre*, Tilottama Rajan and Julian M. Wright show how the Romantic poets' association of styles, themes and forms is restricted, discussing some characteristics of their handling of genres: "the aesthetics of the long Romantic period correspondingly edges towards what seem 'modern' questions about genre, its historicity, the very viability of the category, and the viability of the hierarchies by which generic law is maintained" (Rajan 1). According to Stuart Curran, the Romantics tried to recreate the epic genre by interpreting it with great freedom.² He shows that, in spite of authoritative rules, it is susceptible of various forms and styles; "What makes the epic so fascinating a genre is precisely that there are so few examples, that the rules are so arbitrary and so arbitrarily insisted on by readers long after they have shed their critical relevance, and that, against that critical expectation, the only great successes come from bending or openly breaking those rules so as to reform the cultural link" (Curran 174). Such critical comments are verified by surveying the Romantics' attempts in epic.

Wordsworth's *The Recluse*, of which we have only *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*, ventured to fit the epic genre with the help of the authority of Miltonic blank verse to his own narrative voice and autobiographical style. Differently, Keats's *Hyperion* and the incomplete *The Fall of Hyperion* aimed to supply Miltonic grandeur to Hellenic mythology. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* is a modification of the grand epics into dramatic form. In the modifications, discontinuities and failures to complete in their handling the genre, it is observable that the Romantic poets were overshadowed or preoccupied with a sense of failure, anxiety and dissatisfaction in establishing their own epic; "only to find their aspirations turn into an onerous task or poignant failure" (Manning, *Reading* 132). The primal difficulty for them was to harmonize "epical" and personal themes in an appropriate style and form. According to the formalistic, stylistic and thematic patterns in the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, epic is to represent or record great historical or biblical events as real for the spirituality of the period. For the Romantics,

personal experiences were the main events of their poetic world, and even political and social incidents were often described indirectly as reflected onto the personal sphere.

However, this problem is almost untraceable in Byron's epic, *Don Juan*. Byron handled the epic genre successfully partly because, in contrast to the other Romantic poets, his source of inspiration was eighteenth-century literature. He admired and imitated Pope notably in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* and *Hints from Horace*, while he loved reading eighteenth-century novels. As A. B. England's landmark work, *Don Juan and Eighteenth-Century Literature*, shows, it is unarguable that eighteenth-century literature was one of the indispensable sources for Byron's epic poem. The paper focuses on Byron's adaptation of Fielding and Pope's literary ideas, tries to supplement England's argument especially in the moral tradition among these three writers and finally proposes *Don Juan* as an epic on the tradition of English literature.

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The best-known comparison between *Don Juan* and *Tom Jones* is found in Elizabeth Boyd's *Don Juan: A Critical Study* as well as England's *Byron's Don Juan and Eighteenth-Century Literature*. Boyd points out the poem's similarity to eighteenth-century Bildungsroman novels rather than to the *Don Juan* legend, ascribing the moral characters of Don Juan and Tom Jones to their "innate goodness."³ Although she shows the affinities between the poem and the novel, she does not fully explain how *Tom Jones* contributed to the idiosyncrasy of Byron's *Don Juan*. England, on the other hand, closely analyses the narrative and the representation of reality in the poem and in the novel eventually to show their differences through their similarities, attracting our attention to the contrastive endings of the two works: "In *Don Juan* the case is entirely different. As I have suggested, the hero's responsiveness there leads him to a final entanglement that represents a descent into compromise rather than the achievement of an ideal. The world of *Don Juan* is not one in which the energetic following out of impulse by a warmly responsive nature leads to harmony" (England 183). In this sense, England demonstrates how *Tom Jones* influenced *Don Juan* about plots and literary techniques and ideas. However, his focus is rather on minute examination between the two works to prove their similarities and differences than on the discussion of genre, though he occasionally comments on the common idea of "epic." This paper tries to supplement England's argument by deepening the idea of epic in *Tom Jones* and *Don Juan*. It begins with reconfirming the influence of the former on the latter, argues how Byron used the eighteenth-century literary ideas to justify his attempt at epic writing and proposes his basic poetic principle in morality as consolidation of his own epic idiosyncrasy.

First of all, *Tom Jones* and *Don Juan* are similar in plot. *Tom Jones* is a Bildungsroman describing the hero travelling in the biblical image of the "prodigal son"

through his rural and urban lives. It includes a love story between Tom Jones and Sophia Western, the father-son relationship in Allworthy's disowning of him, anecdotes of affairs with Molly and Mrs. Waters, lives in upper-class corrupt society with Lady Bellastone, unveiled military life in the dragoon and the dark manoeuvres of his brother in law, Blifil. It adroitly covers all the themes required for an epic. The narrative cleverly defines the novel as epic, implying that all these mock heroic events might have happened even to traditional heroic figures like Ulysses, if their surroundings had been modern; to modern eyes, Circe's enthrallment by enchantment and love would not have been very different from Molly's coquetry to Tom Jones.

Similarly, *Don Juan* displays the young hero's immoral love with Julia, the shipwreck and his hardship, his pure love with Haidée, his enslavement and travesty at a harem, his commitment in a war at the siege of Ismail, his service at Catherine's court, his ambassadorial journey to London and his life and love in English high society. The poet provides a variety of the hero's experiences through different social stages in his travel. Byron openly asserts the ironical representation of the hero as the inevitable parody of grand epics: "You have now / Had sketches of love, tempest, travel, war, / All very accurate, you must allow, / And epic" (VIII 138).

As for characterization, Fielding avoided making a traditional complete hero of virtue and unselfishness. Instead, he introduced an imperfect, morally weak hero, avoiding idealization and criticizing Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* as he had done in *Shamela* and *Joseph Andrews*. He comments about Tom's habit of chasing after women: "And this Tom innocently improved to better advantage by following only the dictates of his natural gallantry and good nature, than he might, perhaps, have done, had he had the deepest designs on the young lady" (144). As Kroeber points out in comparison with *Don Juan*, this half-comical, half-sarcastic tone softens and changes Jones's lecherous propensity and waywardness to "natural gallantry and good nature," an admired characteristic among young men: "Tom Jones is a burlesque hero of a more generalized kind – his naturalness (animal vitality and only average intelligence) parodies the superhuman virtue and rich mental endowments of all the protagonists of heroic literature" (Kroeber 104). For Fielding, a hero did not mean a perfect character, but a means of unravelling reality by exposing both his weakness and virtues: "we do not pretend to introduce any infallible characters into this history, where we hope nothing will be found which hath never yet been seen in human nature" (117). Fielding distinguishes natural propensity, which can be also observed in epic masterpieces like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as an innocent fault from a graver fault like the malicious ambition of Blifil.

Byron, too, never hesitates in undermining the idealistic features of Don Juan. Juan loudly sings his poetic farewell to Julia, his first love, on board, sailing out from the port, only to retch and make his eloquence "inaudible." He loves women according to his passion, and his love with Julian and Haidée is considered to provide both idealistic and

melodramatic romances. His instinct under the temptation of Fitz-Fulke and the political pressure of Catherine seems to disgrace his innocence and to make a contradiction with his declaration against Gulbeyaz's sexual intimidation: "Love is for the free! / I am not dazzled by this splendid roof. / Whate'er thy power, and great it seems to be, / Heads bow, knees bend, eyes watch around a throne, / And hands obey – our hearts are still our own" (V 127). But, like Tom's yielding to sexual wiles of Mrs Waters and Bellaston, Juan's acceptance of such loveless sexual relationships can be understood as separated from his sincere emotions. Byron realistically represents such dichotomy between body and soul again, describing Juan at the siege of Ismail fighting and killing in his vigorous pursuit of glory, and "following honour and his nose, / Rushed where the thickest fire announced most foes" (VIII 32). This obviously shows that he is prompted no less by curiosity than by courage. Far from such instinctive pursuit of brutality in war, Juan can simultaneously be sympathetic with a girl and save her from violence. As Tom's folly is associated with his youth and ignorance, Juan's virtue and violence are adroitly rendered as consonant with his inexperience and innocence. Instinctive desire and drive insistently check and deform humanistic sympathy and can finally create epic worlds of sanguine actions and brutal passions. Byron comically represents this inexplicable disintegration between body and soul with modern interpretation elsewhere: "For ever and anon comes indigestion / (Not the most 'dainty Ariel') and perplexes / Our soarings with another sort of question" (XI 3). Although Don Juan's behavior remains quite instinctive and selective of the given choices, it ironically reveals the true human nature as pardonable, and Byron's view is based on a positive interpretation of human nature: "always without malice; if he warred / Or loved, it was with what we call 'the best / Intentions'" (VIII 25). This kind of realistic representation of human nature as imperfect but potentially virtuous quietly rejects classic archetypal heroes, suggesting modern individualism instead. Don Juan is a representative of the modern people as Candace Tate comments on his assimilation into the hypocrisy of society: "The narrator lambasts society; Byron refuses to differentiate between Juan and mankind. While the narrator delivers scathing descriptions of hypocrisy, Byron shows Juan indulging in the same peccadilloes. Juan is doomed to the ordinary, and in London he seems shallow and insignificant without his mythical trappings" (Tate 99). Such modern heroism or anti-heroism both pays respect to classic epics and proposes its own originality in its parodying and self-mocking reference to them.

In asserting modern humanity, *Tom Jones* and *Don Juan* require effective narratives in order to give multi-faceted significances to the heroes' personal experiences and finally to establish new heroism.⁴ As Hermione de Almeida implies in her discussion of *Don Juan*, the relation between the narrator and the hero is closer than ever in a modern epic: "No longer the man of vigorous action of the old epics, the modern hero prevails as an observer: acute, perceptive, curious, with a thoroughly active mind" (de Almeida 73). More and more the narrator interferes with the hero and the story, more and

more his judgement naturally influences the reader.

Each of the eighteen books of *Tom Jones* has a narrator's chapter at the beginning. Not only does the narrator comment on the characters in, the plot and the policies of the novel, but also he addresses the reader and defies the critics, especially when defending the use of digression: "Reader, I think proper, before we proceed any farther 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" (33). This claims the importance of licence in narration as an indispensable component in a modern epic, defining digression as "as a rule necessary to be observed in all prosai-comic-epic writing" (181). He believes that such narrative style contains "sound and good reasons at the bottom" (182) for representing modern humanity realistically. He insinuates that a modern epic cannot help describing the "reality" in the factual details of a "prosaic-comic" personal sphere, which, he admits, is a dwindled version of the great epics.

In this the ancients had a great advantage over the moderns. Their mythology, which was at that time more firmly believed by the vulgar than any religion is at present, gave them always an opportunity of delivering a favourite hero. Their deities were always ready at the writer's elbow, to execute any of his purposes; and the more extraordinary the invention was, the greater was the surprise and delight of the credulous reader. Those writers could with greater ease have conveyed a friend from one country to another, nay from one world to another, and have brought him back again, than a poor circumscribed modern can deliver him from a gaol. (773)

Since the role of epic has changed from transcription of the spiritual history of a nation, race, people or religion, to that of personal truths of a non-eminent man, a modern epic is justifiable only when it encapsulates ordinary but eventful lives and refers to past masterpieces as ironical supplements (like James Joyce's *Ulysses*).⁵ Following this theory, Fielding has every reason to use epic similes to events in the novel: Tom's flirtation with Mrs. Waters, his chase after Sophia, his imprisonment, Allworthy's disownment and Molly's quarrel with other women in the village.

In the first chapter of the first book, Fielding declares the goal of the novel as sheer representation of "human nature." To transcribe the reality of a personal history, he considers it necessary to acquire "a new vein of knowledge" by his theory of contrast: "This vein is no other than that of contrast, which runs through all the works of the creation, and may probably have a large share in constituting in us the idea of all beauty, as well natural as artificial" (183). Without mythological or religious system, a modern epic has to form itself on a principle of relativism, which accepts multiplicity of matters

but never establishes a dominating thought. According to his theory of contrast, nothing can be absolutely defined but everything is presented with the various aspects of the moral and aesthetic natures of humanity, and the reader naturally has no other option than to rely on the digressive narrative.

Digression in *Don Juan* is more closely connected to its whole structure than that in *Tom Jones*. The story's plot, the characterization and the tone are all controlled by the digressive narrative. More complicatedly, the narrator plays with the idea of fiction by subverting the reality of the story and by inserting real events of the world: "recollect the work is only fiction" (XI 88). He also refers to the public participation in creatively developing the poem, as Peter J Manning comments: "Byron lays open to view the operations by which writers and reviewers together mapped the contours of the contemporary institution of literature" (Manning, "*Don Juan*" 223). The digressive narrator distinguishes and intentionally confuses the fictionality and the reality of the poem according to his desire in order to achieve the best representation of humanity.⁶ The collective representation of facts as of reality makes it almost impossible for the reader to constitute the hero's autobiography as coherent, and the poem's integrity itself becomes more dubious by the digressive narration.⁷ Moreover, contrastive enumeration of myriads of facets in matters and emotions ironically deprives the narrator even of his own judgement: "He who doubts all things nothing can deny" (XV 88). Such principle of the all-inclusive mode of representation and narration is contradiction about the reality, the narration and the poem itself. Contradiction engenders scepticism, which makes the narrator check his own narration self-critically: "Oh doubt (if thou be'st doubt, for which some take thee, / But which I doubt extremely), thou sole prism / Of the truth's rays" (XI 2). Since this scepticism overshadows the narration and the digression, the dispersed romantic scenes of love and courage are constantly demystified: "And the sad truth which hovers o'er my desk / Turns what was once romantic to burlesque" (IV 3). When one matter includes double or triple values, partial expression of it is always supplemented with mockery of another. Contradiction enables Byron to represent "truths" through scepticism, and it also renders mock-heroic, parody, cynicism and comical tone invaluable in constituting the poem as epic. As Fielding did by the idea of "contrast," Byron set contradiction as the means to represent the modern world, in which truths exist as mixed in ironical human actions to be excavated.⁸

Since modern society presents aspects which are too complex and contradictory to be systematically summarized, only a subjective view can create realism. Like the narrator in *Tom Jones*, the narrator in *Don Juan* relies on his subjective view to justify "reality." Byron writes to Thomas Moore on 5 January 1816: "I could not write upon any thing, without some personal experience and foundation" (5: 14). The letter suggests that he used the matter-of-factness of his experience as evidence of the truthfulness of the represented reality.⁹ In *Don Juan*, Byron sometimes defines Juan's personal experiences

as the only reliable foundation of the poem and as the truest to himself: "But then the fact's a fact, and 'tis the part / Of a true poet to escape from fiction" (VIII 86).¹⁰ For example, in his encounter with the monk ghost in Canto XVI, Juan's anxieties about the matter and the disclosure of Fitz-Fulke in disguise are all reality for himself. The narrator offers the episode as true in the sense that Juan faces and tackles with the mysterious incident and tries to discover the truth: "True is that which she is about to tell. / I said it was a story of a ghost. / What then? I only know it so befell" (XVI 4).¹¹ Even though it is a parody of mysterious encounters in classic epics, Juan's experience concisely holds to contemporary reality. Jerome J. McGann's comment is helpful for supporting my argument: "History, tradition, and facts are Byron's ground not because Byron is a materialist, but because, for him, use and act are logically, and humanly, prior to ideas. Matters are accomplished before they are understood, just as language is used before it is conceptualized. History, tradition, and facts are, in short, the forms of accomplishment" (McGann 114). Ideas of moral truths in reality are treated in the personal dimension of the poetic world.

Since Byron describes *Don Juan* in his letter to John Murray on 25 December 1822, as an epic "*satire on abuses of the present states of Society*" (10: 68), the poem clearly has a moralistic purpose through his creed of matter-of-factness.

But now I'm going to be immoral, now
 I mean to show things really as they are,
 Not as they ought to be, for I avow,
 That till we see what's what in fact, we're far
 From much improvement with that virtuous plough
 Which skims the surface, leaving scarce a scar
 Upon the black loam long manured by vice,
 Only to keep its corn at the old price. (XII 40)

Byron understood morality as the thematic core of the poem as it is with *Tom Jones*; the anecdotes like immoral love relationships, the modern battlefield and English society expose and caricature the hypocritical respectability of English society. Byron's idea about morality in poetry seems to have surprising similarities with those of *Tom Jones*.¹²

The narrator in *Tom Jones* also associates realism with matter-of-factness: ". . . it is our business to relate facts as they are" (329). Fielding considered that this kind of realism can disillusion the belief in classic epic as impeccable and emphasize its instructive and entertaining aspects: "teach and delight." The narrator argues that only through realistic representation of experience "can the manners of mankind be known; to which the recluse pedant, however great his parts or extensive his learning may be, hath ever been a stranger" (601). The moral and instructive aspect functions better when the

reader's imaginative participation in the novel is encouraged and exerted through realistic details and procedures. Stressing the efficiency of matter-of-factness in contributing to deeper understanding of human nature, Fielding invariably presents his fiction as a reality not as a model or a "system."

But so matters fell out, and so I must relate them; and if any reader is shocked at their appearing unnatural, I cannot help it. I must remind such persons that I am not writing a system, but a history, and I am not obliged to reconcile every matter to the received notions concerning truth and nature. (568)

Obliquely criticizing the writers who create their stories exclusively in imaginative settings and eliminate factual details, he believes that the reading experience can be better accumulated and developed as knowledge and wisdom. England emphasizes the difference between Fielding and Byron in representing reality, claiming that the former eventually categorizes it into patterns of harmony and the latter leaves it as it is; "The world of *Don Juan* is not one in which the energetic following out of impulse by a warmly responsive nature leads to harmony" (England 183). However, as Fielding defines, the happy denouement of *Tom Jones* turns out to be the result of accumulated fortunate contingences. It is observable that the difference between the two authors is less significant than the affinities, and Byron seem to have been given hints to surmount the problem of coherence and integrity among the Romantics. Interestingly, Fielding's criticism of "systems" echoes in Byron's criticism against himself and the Cockney school, which again reinforces the strong affinity between *Tom Jones* and *Don Juan*.

In his letter to Shelley on 20 May 1822, Byron criticizes his own earlier works like *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and "The Turkish Tales" as "the exaggerated nonsense which has corrupted the public taste" (9: 161) for their lack of realism and for their egoistic tendency. The protagonists in these romances imaginatively develop their own psychological preoccupations and anxieties even to others' eyes; this mysterious atmosphere distorts the reality of their lives even to mystification. The same kind of criticism is applied against the Cockney School and the Lake poets. Byron considered them as egoistically establishing their own poetic principle: "Look back o'er ages ere unto the stake fast / You bind yourself and call some mode the best one" (XIV 2). In his letter to John Murray on 9 November 1820, he criticizes Keats' individualism as mere self-satisfaction in his indulging in fantastical settings: Keats is "viciously soliciting his own ideas into a state which is neither poetry nor any thing else but a Bedlam vision produced by raw pork and opium" (7: 225). As Gilbert Phelps points out, Byron considered that "the typical Romantic approaches contained the very dangers of imprecision and indulgence in ingrown fantasy which he had to avoid" (Phelps 57). But personal experiences, which undeniably remain so real and contradictory, cannot be

systematically represented. Byron's theory of contradiction challenges the contemporary literary tendency to conceptualize personal experiences into consistent interpretations. He questions whether a consistent poetic creed is compatible with the plausible representation of life: "But if a writer should be quite consistent, / How could he possibly show things existent?" (XV 87) Brian Wilkie too explains Byron's idea of the impossibility of idealizing facts:

. . . *fact* refers to the isolated, unrationalized phenomenon, frequently in opposition to the "ideal." When Byron writes, "fact is truth, the grand desideratum," he is not so much stating that the two words are semantically equivalent as hazarding a definition of the nature of things, which are what they are without reason or connection with one another, without a unifying "Idea." (Wilkie 82)

Calling the "unifying ideas" of the Lake poets and the Cockney school "systems," Byron criticizes Leigh Hunt's *Rimini* both in "Letter to John Murray" (1820) and in his letter to Thomas More on 1 June 1818: "His answer was, that his style was a system, or *upon system*, or some such cant; and, when a man talks of system, his case is hopeless" (6: 46). What he saw as "hopeless" and dangerous in Hunt's poem is expressed both as fictional insincerity and as vulgarity: "I remonstrated against it's vulgarisms . . . When a man talks of his *System* – it is like a woman's talking of her *Virtue*" (Byron, *Prose* 156). He suggests that fiction cannot be created as systematic because system suggests perfection. Perfection, as John Ruskin defines in *The Stones of Venice*, is not always the right purpose of an art: "But, accurately speaking, no good work whatever can be perfect, and *the demand for perfection is always a sign of a misunderstanding of the ends of art*" (Ruskin 203). Byron goes on to argue that a superficially elegant style can disguise insincerity, therefore can pose as vulgarity: "It is in their *finery* that the New-under School – are most vulgar . . ." (Byron, *Prose* 159). The vulgarity of the Cockney School is compared with Fielding's style: "It does not depend upon low themes – or even low language – for – Fielding revels in both — but is he ever *vulgar*? – No" (Byron, *Prose* 160). According to Byron's moral realism, poetry without sincere presentation of matter-of-factness is insufficient in its instructive function.

If the Essence of poetry must be a *Lie* — throw it to the dogs – or banish it from your republic – as Plato would have done – he who can reconcile Poetry with truth and wisdom – is the only true "*Poet*" in it's real sense – "the *Maker*" "the *Creator*" – why must this mean the "liar" – the "feigner" the "tale teller"? (Byron, *Prose* 149)

We can interpret “truth” as factual and “wisdom” as poetic expression; with a moral standard in his mind, a poet has to represent the world and life to be imaginatively experienced, not to be sentimentally imagined.

Byron further defines such a moral quality in poets as deriving from “gentlemanliness” both in their technique and in their spirits: “there is Nobility of thought and Style – open to all Stations – and derived partly from talent -- & partly from education – which is to be found in Shakespeare – and Pope – and Burns – no less than in Dante and Alfieri – but which is no-where to be perceived in the Mockbirds & bards of Mr. Hunt little chorus” (Byron, *Prose* 159). This passage presents “gentlemanliness” as a fine balance between the subject and the style, and as controlled expressions or premeditated combination of words and thoughts, which he tried to imitate in his poems and plays like *The Two Foscari*: “the suppressed passions – rather than the rant of the present day” (8: 218). Gentlemanliness as the balance in representation is essential not only for artistic consummation but also for moral instruction, just as salt is indispensable for cooking “the *Salt of Society* – and the Seasoning of composition” (Byron, *Prose* 160). Surprisingly, when Fielding discusses good writings, he uses culinary terms too: “Where then lies the difference between the food of the nobleman and the porter, if both are at dinner on the same ox or calf, but in the seasoning, the dressing, the garnishing, and the setting forth” (30). Byron mentions “nobility” or “gentlemanliness” as a taste and as the crucial manner in handling human affairs in literary composition, suggesting that the success or approbation of the work largely depends on the whole spirit of the author.¹³ This affinity is hard to overlook when we consider Fielding’s influence on Byron. Fielding asserts that the “seasoning” consists of “invention, judgment, learning, empathy,” defining this “invention” as imagination:

. . . for by invention, I believe, is generally understood a creative faculty, which would indeed prove most romance writers to have the highest pretensions to it; whereas by invention is really meant no more (and so the word signifies) than discovery, or finding out; or to explain it at large, a quick and sagacious penetration into the true essence of all the objects of our contemplation. This I think, can rarely exist without the concomitancy of judgment; for how we can be said to have discovered the true essence of two things, without discerning their difference, seems to me hard to conceive. (424)

This remark of Fielding curiously covers again much of Byron’s theory of contradiction; imagination is no more than the act of finding a truth or even a reality, which is hidden under superficiality of multiple contrasts and contradictions. It is an ability to accept various facets of matters and judgements to understand their natures respectively. Byron’s gentlemanliness too, consisted of deliberate style and thought and giving harmony to the

whole poem, comes from “penetrating” an understanding of the world’s phenomena and of its proper representation. On this balanced style, Byron seems to have aimed at establishing his own epic mode between sincerity and reality and between classic placid sobriety and passionate lyrical sensibility. Particularly about the sense of balance, he recognizes Pope’s greatness both for his heroic and mock-heroic style and for grand and trivial subjects. Byron comprehends Pope’s “imagination” as a method to expose the hidden truths in common things or to describe the commonest things as uncommon in appropriate style:¹⁴

It is this very harmony particularly in Pope – which has raised the vulgar and atrocious Cant against him, – because his versification is perfect – it is assumed that it is his only perfection, – because his truths are so clear – it is asserted that he has no invention, and because he is always intelligible, it is taken for granted – that he has no Genius. We are sneeringly told that he is the ‘Poet of reason’ as if this was a reason for his being no poet. — Taking passage for passage I will undertake to cite more lines teeming with *imagination* from Pope than from any two living poets – be they who they may” (Byron, *Prose* 111).

Learning from Pope and using Fielding’s *Tom Jones* as the precursor, Byron found the way to reconcile and balance Romantic individualism and eighteenth century rationalism through the epical treatment of common matters, and the motto of *Don Juan* can be interpreted in this context: “*Difficile est proprie communia dicere.*” He succeeded in harmonizing the imaginative subjective sentimentalism and objective hilariousness of human beings. Indeed, this is the aspect in which Goethe saw his genius: “we become aware that English poetry is already in possession of something we Germans totally lack: a cultured comic language” (Rutherford 164-65). In his conversation with Eckermann, Goethe points out Byron’s handling of common matters as essentially poetic.

“In his *Don Juan*,” said I, “I have particularly admired the representation of London, which his careless verses bring before our very eyes. He is not very scrupulous whether an object is poetical or not; but he seizes and uses all just as they come before him, down to the wigs in the haircutter’s window, and the men who fill the streetlamps with oil.”

“Our German aesthetical people,” said Goethe, “are always talking about poetical and unpoetical objects; and, in one respect, they are not quite wrong; yet, at bottom, no real object is unpoetical, if the poet knows how to use it properly.” (Rutherford 280-81)

Goethe’s comment explicates Byron’s understanding of imagination. Other than mystic

experiences and individual thoughts, imagination must work with the objective enumeration of facts, things, places, names and events. Since everything is linked with human activity and experience, it can be interpreted morally and disseminated instructively through the touch of a poet who knows how to express. As McGann comments: “Byron’s imaginings in *Don Juan* are directed toward clarifying the truth about the world, and especially toward expanding our perception of moral issues, problems, behaviors” (McGann 163). It might be rather unexpected, but the tradition of English poetry, which tends to associate artistic qualities with instructive morality, is certainly inherited in *Don Juan*.

Tom Jones was a breakthrough in subverting the serious and perfect image of traditional heroes in laughter or comic style. Byron’s *Don Juan* inherited the contradictory mode and influenced later generations, providing the genre with a new comic possibility.¹⁵ We can trace the epic tradition from Fielding to Byron and even to Joyce. In the modern world full of sorrow and disappointment, laughter is a sad but essential truth in epic.

A versified aurora borealis,
 Which flashes o’er a waste and icy clime.
 When we know what all are, we must bewail us,
 But ne’ertheless I hope it is no crime
 To laugh at all things, for I wish to know
 What after all are all things – but a show? (VII 2)

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¹ This is the electronic version of my article with the same title published in Volume 56 of *The Bulletin of Kyushu Institute of Technology* (2008) with some minor corrections after peer review. All quotations of the poem and the novel are from T. G. Steffan, E. Steffan and W. W. Pratt, eds, *Lord Byron: Don Juan* (London: Penguin, 1973) and John Bender and Simon Stern, eds, *Henry Fielding: Tom Jones* (Oxford University Press, 1996). The former is cited by numbers of canto and stanza; the latter by page number. All Byron's letters are quoted from Leslie A. Marchand, ed., *Byron's Letters and Journals*, 12vols (London: John Murray, 1973-82) and are indicated by numbers of volume and page.

² For example, Jerome J. McGann exemplifies the case of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*: "Wordsworth is equally in danger of his own 'voice,' of his matter-of-fact style. For he was writing in no style, was equally uneasy with both traditions upon which he principally drew" (McGann 93).

³ Cf. "The formal education of Tom Jones was neutralized by the intellectual quarrels of his tutors, and he was cast into life to act instinctively according to his innate goodness. Juan, likewise, released from the rigid and meaningless governance of his mother, may be expected to show a combination of numb bewilderment and instinctive animal courage. His innate good disposition carries him through every trial. (Byron professed to believe in innate feelings, but not in innate ideas.) He learns discretion and worldly wisdom, and he shows fortitude in enduring hardships and sorrow, though he cannot altogether avoid the physical and psychic reaction natural after all his brutal, crowded experiences. He is not completely cured of folly and hot-blooded impulses, but he certainly shows at the end of the poem that he is ready to consider more seriously his own behavior and the deeds and professions of others" (Boyd 38). Unlike many other critics, she claims a sign of Juan's development at the end of the story, characterizing it as a "promise": "Tom Jones and Candide eventually learn from their experiences, and Don Juan gives promise of doing so" (Boyd 37).

⁴ Cf. Laura Claridge defines that Juan is "colorless, a transparent marker of whatever sign the narrator, the poet-legislator, wishes to name" (Claridge 251).

⁵ Almeida acknowledges Don Juan as the first modern hero: "The poet (in *Don Juan*) was one of the first writers to make profound examination of the possibility of heroic action in a democratic milieu. His conclusions were those Joyce also reached: that mere humans cannot perfect their lives and that heroism as an ideal constant state cannot exist" (de Almáida 62).

⁶ This seems to be almost contrary to Claridge's understanding of the poem. Claridge says that "*Don Juan* announces that life imitates art, that reality is modeled upon language, a language that both speaks and is spoken by the desire of the poet" (Claridge 245). The poem certainly constructs its own reality from fragmentary facts, but my point is that the poem also destroys it paradoxically to make it more convincing. The art therefore represents the disclosed reality of the world. Byron admits that words are things not just because the former create the latter but because the former often imitate the latter.

⁷ M. K. Joseph emphasizes the interaction between narration and commentary by the narrator, which makes it extremely difficult for a reader to have a consistent opinion about the characters in the poem: "It consists, not only in a rapid presentation of a whole panorama of human experience, but in a technique of simultaneously presenting and commenting on this experience. The experience is conveyed to the reader

as emotional reality: in the same moment, it is distanced from him by the continual interposition of the commentary. We are with Juan in Julia's bedroom, in the sinking ship, in the harem, on the battlefield, at Catherine's court and at the house-party; at the same time, all these are but speaking pictures, held up for our laughter, sympathy and judgement by the half-masked figure of the commentator" (Joseph 32). Since all descriptions are controlled by the narrator's interference, Boyd's comment on Don Juan's development seems to be misleading: "he certainly shows at the end of the poem that he is ready to consider more seriously his own behavior and the deeds and professions of others" (Boyd 38).

⁸ England distinguishes between Fielding's principle of contrast and Byron's of contradiction, suggesting that the former contributes to forming patterns of protagonists' characters and the latter just ends up with representing the chaotic reality: "In *Don Juan*, on the other hand, we are given very little sense that the many and varied materials that constitute 'human nature' fall into such clearly divided patterns" (England 173). Cf. "*Don Juan* is constantly trying to remind Byron's contemporaries, and us, that the meaning of events passes beyond human perception because the contexts of events are always larger than our own awareness" (McGann 157).

⁹ Byron's sincerity about facts and reality in the poem has some affinities with Rousseau's *The Confessions*. Byron read the book, and as we know, Rousseau is shown as one of the most problematic central figures of the period in his works like Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Byron denies his being similar to Rousseau in personality in his "Detached Thoughts" on 15 October 1821: "I can't see any point of resemblance" (9: 10-11). Simpson's comment is helpful for the argument: "The 'unparalleled . . . truthfulness' of the *Confessions* is thus a declaration of untruth, to a degree that has reasonably made Rousseau's writings the paradigm for so much deconstructive exegesis. Nothing can be 'really a lie' when there is not place from which to judge it so, not least because 'memory' itself is hopelessly fallible" (Simpson 140-41).

¹⁰ Frederick Garber reconfirms the significance of Don Juan as a whole embracing point of view: "It is a massive act of self-reflexiveness, an end that is both comment and culmination. And if *Juan* is inclusive of all that the canon has tested, it also enfolds all those sights to which the testing has been a response. *Don Juan* holds so much because so much has been seen. Its inclusiveness is both an acknowledgment and a record" (Garber 295).

¹¹ England makes a full examination of Juan in the ghost scene in context with Byron's epistemology: "Thus, when Juan rises from his prostrate position to 'disclose' the nature of the phenomenon about which he is 'puzzled' and 'curious' (XVI. 122), achieving a small triumph of empirical investigation, he acts in a manner that brings him at least into the zone of behavior that his author attributes to Newton and seeks to emulate himself" (England 60).

¹² Here, I would like to suggest that Byron's satire functions against not only the accepted society but also human nature itself including himself, as his deep scepticism indicates. So I disagree with Stuart Curran's notion of incompatibility of epic with satire: "Epic can accommodate such a radical skepticism, but satire cannot" (Curran 197).

¹³ Claude Rawson points out that the narrative tone in *Tom Jones* is self-consciously aristocratic, and that affects the whole story: "What is aristocratic about Tom is not himself but his author's tone of voice when talking about him, the hauteurs of Fielding not of Tom, the relaxed attitude to sexuality evinced by the narrator matching a relaxed sexuality (but not relaxed *attitude*) in Tom himself, the poetic suggestion of nobility which is built into the idea of Tom's illegitimacy, the urgent implied redefinition of gentility to include the aristocrats of the good heart" (Rawson 137).

¹⁴ McGann here again offers us acute observation on Byron's understanding of Pope's language: "Pope's verse is to show that the meanings of words and events are often 'acquired characteristics,' and hence that we cannot merely do with them what we will. They have their own wills and life, which they have gained in the contexts of long use" (McGann 157).

¹⁵ J. Drummond Bone shows how *Don Juan* was innovative and modern and how it is much more modern than postmodernism: "Late Byron is as much post his own Romanticism as Postmodernism is and is not postmodern. Byron's endings look postmodernist, his attitude to experience as art looks post-modern, and in contrast postmodernist endings substituting aesthetic for metaphysical transcendence can look remarkably Romantic. On closer inspection, late Byron therefore might usefully

be thought of as less protopostmodernist than some of his Romantic colleagues. It is not likely to be accidental that Shelley has loomed so large in postmodernist critical discourse” (Bone 84). William Ruddick’s study too shows how the style was passed on from Byron to some later nineteenth century writers. See Ruddick 38, 43.