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The Role of Food in Byron's *Don Juan*

Itsuyo Higashinaka

Throughout the poem the narrator-poet never becomes tired of stressing the objective truthfulness of his writing. As Byron says in one of his letters, "Almost all *Don Juan* is real life, either my own, or from people I knew,"¹ so the poet in *Don Juan* reiterates the same idea. He says, "I sketch your world exactly as it goes," (VIII, 89) or

... My Muse by no means deals in fiction :
She gathers a repertory of facts,
Of course with some reserve and slight restriction,
But mostly sings of human things and acts. (X W, 13)

These quotations show explicitly that *Don Juan* aims at depicting humanity as it is. This fact puts Byron in the group of so-called *moralistes*, who, like Montaigne or La Rochefoucauld, made it their aim to look into the very heart of human nature.

Byron, however, is a satirist as well as a *moraliste*, and employs such techniques as have been used by major satirists from Juvenal down to Pope. He reveals human weaknesses and follies. He debunks shams and hypocrisy. And he does not fail to ridicule and exaggerate these aspects of man. Thus the poet of *Don Juan* is both a satirist and a *moraliste*. Now, this paper

attempts to see how the narrator-poet has treated the theme of food, which, along with sex, governs 'human things and acts' in a more vital way than anything else.²

Byron treats the theme of food mainly in two scenes. The one is the shipwreck scene in Canto II, in which man faces complete lack of food, and the other is the banquet scene in Canto XV, in which food covers the table in profusion. This particular scene in Canto XV treats the dinner party at Lord Amunderville's, where all kinds of choice dishes exquisitely cooked and seasoned appear on the table one after another. The poet uses the form of mock-epic to describe this aristocratic feast :

Great things were now to be achieved at table,
 With massy plate for armour, knives and forks
 For weapons ; but what Muse since Homer's able
 (His feasts are not the worst part of his works)
 To draw up in array a single day-bill
 Of modern dinners? ... (XV, 62)

In total the poet devotes fourteen stanzas just to the description of this monstrously complicated, modern dinner. The use of mock-epic, piling up of innumerable dishes in French, the frequent playing upon words, constant allusion to classical heroes and personages—all these make the scene an infinitely comic and ironical one. The poet is a satirist here, but he is Horatian rather than Juvenalian, showing mildness to this obsession of man with food.

The poet, however, cannot help but show his surprise at the complexity at which civilization has arrived in the art of cooking:

Who would suppose, from Adam's simple ration,
That cookery could have called forth such resources,
As form a science and a nomenclature
From out the commonest demands of Nature? (XV, 69)

This complexity might mean the sway of art over nature; yet the poet sees the situation quite ironically when he summarizes the whole section by a playing upon the words, *gout* and *goût*:

And fruits, and ices, and all that Art refines
From Nature for the service of the *goût*—
Taste or the *gout*,—pronounce it as inclines
Your stomach! Ere you dine, the French will do;
But *after*, there are sometimes certain signs
Which prove plain English truer of the two. (XV, 72)

What he implies is clear. No matter how high man's art may soar, he cannot ignore the voice of his body. As is well-known, it was considered that excessive feeding caused gout.

If the voice of the body is loud at the banquet scene, it is still louder at the shipwreck scene in Canto II. Here the poet shows, with grim realism, what happens to man when there is no food to eat. In an extreme situation like that of Juan and his fellow passengers left foodless on their boat, man shows his

true self, and he does not quite become an angel because of that. That is, some passengers become cannibals, and eat Juan's tutor, Pedrillo. Byron also shows how Juan's romantic sentiment is destroyed by the sway of the body: in order to decide who is to be eaten first, of all things, Julia's pathetic farewell letter to Juan is used to draw lottery. "...Love must be sustained like flesh and blood," (II, 170) and without Ceres (goddess of the corn-bearing and of agriculture) "Venus will not long attack us." (II, 169) In an extreme situation like this ordinary human values are lost, and the body has complete sway over the mind.³ To use a modern jargon, *super-ego* fights a losing battle against *id*.

An episode in Canto V is yet another good example illustrative of Byron's handling of the theme of food. When Juan thinks of delivery from his slavery, being a fiery, romantic youth, more realistic Johnson, his fellow slave, who would sell his birth-right for beefsteak, says; "In Heaven's name let's get some supper now, / And then I'm with you, if you're for a row." (V, 47) And Juan himself thinks his friend's advice is good, when he smells the scent of "certain stews, and roast-meats and pilaus."

(V, 47) The poet is saying that the life urge is so strong that even a romantic aspiration must be put to a halt.

Thus far the theme of food has been explored to show negative aspects of human nature. Lastly the paper attempts to see if Byron probed any possibility for the realization of romantic aspirations with regard to the theme of food. This is where Juan comes in as a hero, if he can be called a hero at all. Generally speaking, Juan is a passive character, and the narrator

intrudes upon the narrative so often that he outshines Juan as a hero in many parts of the poem. Yet Juan does have his own character, and functions not always as a negative character. When he is starved, he does help himself to a paw of his spaniel, but that, after a long hesitation. He adamantly refuses to eat Pedrillo, his tutor. The narrator sees to it that those who have tasted human flesh go mad and die. In the same canto Juan protects with a pair of pistols the wine cellar of the sinking boat from sailors, saying, "let us die like men, not sink below/Like brutes." (II, 36) It is clear that Byron took pains to distinguish Juan from others, and that he gave Juan courage and humanity.

As a *moraliste* Byron sees man's urge to live as it is, and as a satirist he laughs at it sometimes with cynicism, and sometimes with good humour. Yet he does not forget to make Juan act like a true romantic in face of harsh reality. As Bowra puts it, *Don Juan* is "both a romantic epic and realistic satire."⁴

Notes

1. Quoted in L. A. Marchand: *Byron's Poetry: A Critical Introduction*. P. 159.
2. Love and marriage is one of the most important themes of the poem.
3. Guy Steffan: *Byron's "Don Juan", Vol. I: The Making of a Masterpiece*. P. 196.
4. C.M. Bowra: *The Romantic Imagination*. P. 173.

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