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Byron, Kierkegaard, and the Irony of "Rotation"

by FREDERICK SHILSTONE

ONE OF THE most central and persistent controversies in discussion of the Romantic Age concerns the period's historical discreteness. Was Romanticism an isolated phenomenon, different in essence from any prior or subsequent episode in the history of ideas, or was it in fact only the dawn of modernism, the first major confrontation with the philosophic subjectivity that was to be played and replayed as the dominant theme of our most immediate intellectual heritage? At the poles of this argument, one finds Robert Langbaum speaking confidently of a "post-Enlightenment tradition that connects the nineteenth and twentieth centuries"¹ and Jerome McGann equally confidently deploring those who ignore the fact that Romantic works "are . . . completely true to themselves, . . . are time and place specific, . . . are—from our point of view—*different*."² Since the most original and, in many ways, most influential development in the modern vision has been the philosophy of existentialism, the attitude held by prime figures associated with that philosophy toward Romantic authors, works, and concepts certainly should be a major focus in any debate over the nature of the modern spirit. In the conversation over the years between the existentialists and their Romantic predecessors, one of the most important exchanges occurs between Kierkegaard and Byron—not directly, of course, but in the form of the philosopher's response to the idea that Byron, among the English, developed most fully of all: romantic irony.

The key statements in forging a comparison between Byron's and Kierkegaard's definitions of romantic irony are contained in *Don Juan* and *Either/Or*. In the later or "English" cantos of Byron's poem, the narrator offers an explanation of the actions of one of his characters, Lady Adeline Amundeville, that employs the term *mobilité*.³ Upon examination, that term comes to be far more significantly applicable to the narrator and his poet than to any of the work's characters. And as it begins to define the centrally ironic vision of Byron's poem, it also comes more

1. *The Modern Spirit: Essays on the Continuity of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. vii.

2. *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 2.

3. In *Byron's Don Juan: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Truman Guy Steffan and Willis W. Pratt, 2nd ed. (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1971), III, 547. I refer to this edition of *Don Juan* throughout the paper and, subsequently, cite the poem by canto and stanza numbers.

and more to resemble the position that Kierkegaard, two decades later, presents through the persona of the aesthete "A" in *Either/Or* as "The Rotation Method."⁴ For both Byron's narrator and Kierkegaard's A, the key to domination over an increasingly absurd universe is in the endless transmutations of the self, the progressive creation and destruction of provisional fictions that provide the artist with an escape from self-consciousness and an ironic control over his destiny. More than merely a superficial comparison, though, the juxtaposition of *mobilité* and "Rotation" addresses many major questions in modern intellectual history: those about the continuity of poetry and philosophy in nineteenth-century thought; about the centrality of romantic irony as the defining trait of Romanticism for the existentialists and others; and about the degree to which Kierkegaard and his philosophical successors regard Romanticism, and especially romantic irony, if not as a vision to be slavishly appropriated, at least as the one providing their primary intellectual tradition, one whose tenets are the main foundation upon which their ethos is to be built.

Byron's description of *mobilité* pinpoints Lady Adeline's theatrical facility at meaningful dissembling:

So well she acted, all and every part
 By turns—with that vivacious versatility,
 Which many people take for want of heart.
 They err—'tis merely what is called mobility,
 A thing of temperament and not of art,
 Though seeming so, from its supposed facility;
 And false—though true; for surely they're sincerest,
 Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest.

This makes your actors, artists, and romancers,
 Heroes sometimes, though seldom—sages never;
 But speakers, bards, diplomatists, and dancers,
 Little that's great, but much of what is clever. (XVI, 97-98)

Coming as it does near the end of Byron's lengthy fragment, this passage gives concrete definition to the poem's central perspective, not exclusively as represented in Adeline herself, but, rather, as pervasively illustrated in the personality of the narrator, this work's major focus. From the outset, this narrator has persistently deflected attention away from his plot and characters, even the alleged (if often nondescript) hero, Juan himself, and has used his forum to parade a willed, defiant inconsistency before his readers. Very early in the work, while reflecting on how Juan has quickly forgotten his first affair with Donna Julia while falling in love with the island girl, Haidée, the narrator berates Juan's heartless fickleness—

I hate inconstancy—I loathe, detest,
 Abhor, condemn, abjure the mortal made

4. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, tr. David F. Swenson and Lillian M. Swenson (1944; rpt. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1959), I, 281-96. All references to *Either/Or* are to this edition.

Of such quicksilver clay that in his breast
 No permanent foundation can be laid; (II, 209)

— only to recant, within the space of less than two stanzas, with the consideration that what

Men call inconstancy is nothing more
 Than admiration due where nature's rich
 Profusion with young beauty covers o'er
 Some favour'd object. (II, 211)

Later, and textually closer to the definition of *mobilité* in *Adeline*, the narrator makes his already obvious and often maddening credo explicit: "if a writer should be quite consistent, / How could he possibly show things existent?" (XV, 87). The narrator's *mobilité* may more involve permutations of perspective than literal changes of face, but they are nonetheless the disappearance of the self into apparent selves, of definition through diversity.

The voice of *Don Juan* finds one of its best metaphors in the motif of intoxication and its aftermath— "Man, being reasonable, must get drunk; / The best of life is but intoxication" (II, 179); "I say—the future is a serious matter— / And so—for Godsake—Hock and Soda water" (Rejected Stanzas, Canto I).⁵ Live for the moment, create an illusory fiction (an episode of intoxication), survive that fiction's demise (the hangover), and live on to enter a new self in a subsequent moment. This metaphor emphasizes how much the stance articulated here involves the obliteration of past and future, the escape from the mundane, forced consistencies of the society Byron portrays in the English cantos as "one polish'd horde, / Form'd of two mighty tribes, the *Bores* and *Bored*" (XIII, 95), as well as the role *mobilité* plays in offering, like intoxication, an escape from the ravages of *self*-consciousness. Through this medium, Byron finally reaches the artistic goal he sets for himself as early as in a journal entry of 1813: "To withdraw *myself* from *myself* (oh that cursed selfishness!) has ever been my sole, my entire, my sincere motive in scribbling."⁶

In reaching this goal, Byron turns increasingly to the drama, as does his contemporary Keats, as the model toward which all poetry should aspire. Byron wrote six complete "tragedies" and "mysteries," as well as a fragment of another play, while composing and publishing *Don Juan* at haphazard interludes during his Italian residence, and the existence of these often classically structured works is at least partially explained by the theatrical inconsistencies of the narrator in the more blatantly open-ended ottava rima poem. Byron was adept at dramatic posturing throughout his career, to be sure,⁷ but in *Don Juan* that adeptness becomes central to his

5. I explore the source and nature of this metaphor more fully in "The Dissipated Muse: Wine, Women, and Byronic Song," *Colby Library Quarterly*, 20 (1984), 36–46.

6. *Byron's Letters & Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, III (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974), 225.

7. For a lengthy analysis of this facility in Byron, and of its relation to his poetic voices, see Philip W. Martin, *Byron: A Poet before His Public* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982).

vision. Canto Eleven removes any doubt that the connection between *mobilité* and the actor's craft exists in Byron's mind. Echoing Shakespeare there, the narrator joins Macbeth's analogy to his own intoxicated vision:

. . . "Carpe diem," Juan, "Carpe, carpe!"
Tomorrow sees another race as gay
And transient, and devoured by the same harpy.
"Life's a poor player,"—then "play out the play,
Ye villains!" (XI, 86)

So pervasive is this connection that M. K. Joseph traces the central narrative method of *Don Juan* to the dramatic art of the Italian "improvvisatore,"⁸ while Frederick Beaty, in an enlightening article whose implications in comparing Byron's vision with Kierkegaard's will soon become apparent, ascribes the origin and treatment of the Don in the ottava rima poem to Byron's knowledge of pantomime burlesques of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, where the "harlequinade tradition" allows for the sort of "cross between a burlesque frolic and an operatic extravaganza"⁹ necessary to shun consistent, moralistic treatment of the Juan legend in favor of the kaleidoscopic changefulness Byron's narrator needs to embody the art and ethic of *mobilité*.

What Byron is expressing in these facets of *Don Juan*, in *mobilité* and its metaphors of intoxication and theatrical performance, is, of course, his version of romantic irony, the artistic and philosophic stance that has become the popular focus of most recent Romantic criticism. "Caught between his aspirations for an ideal he knows is beyond his reach and his limitations of which he is equally aware," writes one investigator of that stance, "the only possibility for the ironist is a continual dialectic process of ironic affirmations and negations."¹⁰ Another claims, with even clearer relevance to the process manifested in *Don Juan*, ". . . even as [the ironist] consciously deconstructs his mystifications of the self and the world, he must affirm and celebrate the process of life by creating new images and ideas."¹¹ *Mobilité* is an escape from the self into an endless succession of selves, each tentative, each ultimately destroyed, but all of them valid for the duration of their existence. Whether in art or life, that is the vision the Romantics—and especially Byron—forward as their means of positively dealing with the onset of a subjectively centered universe.

Few would dispute the judgments that Byron weaves romantic irony into the basic fabric of *Don Juan*, that that position is, for him, a way out of the romantic agony that dominates his earlier works and heroes, and that, therefore, his embracement of it in his final work is enthusiastic and unquestioning. That Kierkegaard, one of the founders of the root

8. *Byron the Poet* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1966), pp. 188–91. Byron's own most direct references to the art of the "improvvisatore" occur in *Don Juan*, XV, 20; and in Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), p. 138.

9. "Harlequin Don Juan," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 67 (1968), 401.

10. D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 201.

11. Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), p. 5.

vocabulary of existentialism, has a full understanding of romantic irony is, equally, a given. However, his attitude toward that vision and those who, for him, historically have welcomed it evokes no such consensus opinion. While it is clear that the persona A in *Either/Or* is a romantic ironist—one who indicatively styles himself an “aesthete”—the intermingling of him with other personae, who react to each other in *Either/Or* and in the more discursive *Concept of Irony*, results in a perceptual and stylistic riddle that eludes final, confident exegesis. Whether or not one agrees with the common view that Kierkegaard elaborates upon A’s position mainly to allow the personae in the second half of *Either/Or* and in *The Concept of Irony*—ones with ethical and religious orientations—to attack it¹² (I personally think that reading distorts Kierkegaard’s primarily nonjudgmental, dialectical structure in these works), the premise of these initial statements from Kierkegaard establishes beyond a doubt that Romanticism, clearly defined for him as romantic irony, is the primary intellectual tradition within which he feels his own statements must be made.

While Kierkegaard’s specific reference points are, for the most part, Germanic—Schlegel’s definition of romantic irony and Hegel’s largely skeptical reaction to it—A’s explanation of the “rotation principle” closely parallels Byron’s exposition of *mobilité*. At one point in *Either/Or*, A actually mentions *Don Juan*, if mainly to point out how a verbal representation of the Juan legend can never capture its essence as perfectly as does Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, A’s absolute ideal of art and philosophy (pp. 105–06). But since he himself is working in a verbal medium, his phrasing echoes Byron’s, indeed appears to reveal an intimate knowledge of details of the ottava rima poem. Like Byron’s narrator during his sojourn in English society, Kierkegaard’s A starts from the premise that “Boredom is the root of all evil” (p. 281) and traces the roots of that boredom to the same set of social conventions, such as marriage (p. 292), that creates the legion of the tedious in Byron’s English cantos: “Boredom is partly an in-born talent, partly an acquired immediacy. The English are in general the paradigmatic nation” (p. 286). To escape this fate, claims A, one must, like Byron’s narrator, dwell in the immediate: “No moment must be permitted so great a significance that it cannot be forgotten when convenient; each moment ought, however, to have so much significance that it can be recollected at will” (p. 289). The means of achieving such control in the face of such boredom, the “rotation method” itself, will, even in A’s hyperbolic definition of it, seem ever so familiar to the reader of Byron: “. . . one must . . . constantly vary himself. . . . For this purpose one must necessarily have control over one’s moods” (pp. 294–95); “The whole secret lies in arbitrariness. . . . You enjoy something entirely accidental; you consider the whole of existence from this standpoint; let its reality be stranded thereon” (p. 295).

12. This opinion is exemplified in Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, pp. 242–47, and Mellor, *English Romantic Irony*, pp. 180–84.

The chapter on the “rotation principle” is quite brief, but it expresses the foundation upon which Kierkegaard’s entire apprehension of the romantic ironic vision, both in A’s papers and in the dissertation *The Concept of Irony*, is built. And as the principle is elaborated throughout those documents, its connection with Byron’s *mobilité* becomes even more apparent. Most centrally, A and the ethical/religious persona in *The Concept of Irony* agree with Byron’s choice of metaphors to express the nature of romantic irony. Repeatedly in both books the ironist is, whether for praise or for blame, described as in a state of almost perpetual intoxication. The dissertation perceives the ironist as a being “intoxicated as it were by the infinity of possibles,”¹³ while the enthusiastic A develops the metaphor through his appreciation of Mozart’s champagne aria:

[Giovanni] is here, as it were, ideally intoxicated in himself. . . . His life is like this, effervescent as champagne. And just as the bubbles in this wine ascend and continue to ascend, while it seethes in its own heat, harmonious in its own melody, so the lust for enjoyment sounds through the primitive seething which is his life.¹⁴ (pp. 133–34)

It can further be noted in passing here how the motif of seduction, which I have not mentioned previously, also links *Don Juan* to *Either/Or*—not surprisingly, given the legend they both use as their starting point. Byron’s Juan may be more seduced than seducing, but he nonetheless moves from woman to woman in a facile, uncommitted manner befitting a child of *mobilité*. More important, Byron himself, in describing the poem’s vision in his personal writings, regards it as a product of promiscuity, obviously the musings of someone who has “tooled,” in his phrase, everywhere from a “post-chaise” to “on a table . . . and under it.”¹⁵ Kierkegaard’s A is even more committed to seduction as the purest manifestation of his credo, both as it informs his aesthetic touchstone, *Don Giovanni*, and as it pervades the lengthy “Diary of the Seducer” with which Kierkegaard’s fictional editor has concluded A’s papers. The “Seducer,” styled Johannes to ring another variation on the sacred name of Juan, brings the “rotation principle” to its extremest point in his pursuit of amorous fulfillment: “The moment is everything, and in the moment, woman is everything; the consequences I do not understand” (p. 427).

The most impressive and convincing parallel between the metaphors of Byron and Kierkegaard, though, is their use of acting and the theater to represent the uncommitted vacillation that defines their ironists. Again, A exaggerates the dramatic references that appear sporadically in *Don Juan* to the status of a dominant motif, mentioned everywhere but best represented in his lengthy appreciation of *Don Giovanni*. Even in the less

13. *The Concept of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates*, tr. Lee M. Capel (1965; rpt. Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), p. 279; cited below, parenthetically in the text, as *Concept*.

14. To enforce further the comparison with Byron indicated here, see the passage in *Don Juan* where Lady Adeline, the woman of *mobilité*, is, in an elaborate conceit, compared to the “liquid glassful” that remains at the center of a bottle of frozen champagne (XIII, 37–38).

15. *Byron’s Letters & Journals*, ed. Marchand, VI, 232.

enthusiastic *Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard's persona notes in passing: "Life is for [the ironist] a drama, and what engrosses him is the ingenious unfolding of this drama. He is himself a spectator even when performing some act" (*Concept*, p. 300). And the connection also reverberates in his references to the ironist as a form of puppeteer (*Concept*, p. 267) and to his wanting above all "to become a fool in the world" (*Concept*, p. 298), these latter passages gaining further relevance once one has recognized the roots of Byron's *Don Juan* in the harlequinade. For A in *Either/Or* the ironist/actor analogy is anything but passing; it is in fact at the very center of the "aesthetic" life he is defining in this treatise. It appears in occasional observations, as in *The Concept of Irony*, and dominates the sections titled "The Immediate Stages of the Erotic" (the appreciation of *Don Giovanni*) and "The Diary of the Seducer," which in essence are two versions of viewing the ironist as operatic star. I noted earlier what Byron's *Don Juan* owes to Mozart's opera and, even more, to burlesques of it. Kierkegaard's embracement of that model is, thus, only one of greater degree and not of kind. Because for A, *Don Giovanni* is the ideal of "rotation" made manifest, an articulation that can be approached in the written arts in the drama, but one that can never be completely realized except in the divine abstractness of Mozart's music. "This force in *Don Juan*, this omnipotence, this animation, only music can express, and I know no other predicate to describe it than this: it is exuberant joy of life" (p. 100), writes A. And the opera offers no better expression of that joy than Leporello's "List Aria," which "lets us hear the variations in [Don Juan]" and shows how he "is omnipresent in the opera" (pp. 130-31). As *Giovanni* consumes the spirit of womanhood, so he consumes the spirit of life; his endlessly varying quests and conquests are the "rotation principle," are *mobilité*, carried to the furthest extreme.

It is not enough, then, to accept Kierkegaard as having simply followed Hegel's lead, for religious or any other reasons, in deploring and thus rejecting romantic irony. It would be more accurate, I believe, to regard his full and often tonally ambivalent examination of that vision in and through the "rotation principle"—in every detail a reiteration of Byron's *mobilité*—as an initial attempt, and by no means a dogmatic one, to assess the new and imposing tradition of romantic irony and its possible continuance and adaptation in the remainder of the nineteenth century and beyond. Kierkegaard was among the first writers self-consciously to regard Romanticism as a historical phenomenon, and the vocabulary he uses in so regarding it reveals how that tradition could by no means be ignored. For even as he notes in *The Concept of Irony* (with what degree of seriousness I am not certain) the passing of the age of irony in favor of a world committed, as that of the English Victorians, to "the Idea of Community" (*Concept*, p. 264), he still has an acute sense of what the Romantics meant and what legacy they have left him. His forebears, Kierkegaard writes, lived during a "moment of transition" (*Concept*, p. 279) whose

“historical interest” (*Concept*, p. 278) lies in the fact that its conclusions cannot be neglected; it is in fact the ironist himself who “has advanced beyond the reach of his age and opened a front against it” (*Concept*, p. 278). For Kierkegaard, then, Romanticism is historically discrete, but only in the sense that it is the transitional birthplace of his own and, he suspects, subsequent ideas. As the tonal complexity of *Either/Or* and *The Concept of Irony* amply proves, Kierkegaard does not know finally how to regard romantic irony, but he does realize that he must regard it somehow.

In countering those who insist on a rigid, historically discrete definition of Romanticism, Lilian Furst, though not explicitly referring to Kierkegaard, helps to establish his place in the carrying forward of the romantic ironic vision: “The continuing relevance, indeed the crucial importance, of [romantic] irony to modern [literature] is cogent evidence of its transcendence of the limits of historicity.”¹⁶ Furst is most concerned with the legacy of romantic irony in contemporary fiction, but she—and we—should not ignore other evidence, the most relevant to the discussion here being the survival of *mobilité* and “rotation” even in Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the unquestionably modern existentialist’s treatise on the absurd man. Juxtaposed in that treatise are brief essays on “Don Juanism” and “Drama,” a bringing together a century after Kierkegaard of his and Byron’s hero and metaphor for their common vision: “What Don Juan realizes in action is an ethic of quantity, whereas the saint, on the contrary, tends toward quality. Not to believe in the profound meaning of things belongs to the absurd man”; “Don Juan has chosen to be nothing”; “Always concerned with better representing, [the actor] demonstrates to what a degree appearing creates being. For that is his art—to simulate absolutely, to project himself as deeply as possible into lives that are not his own”; “The actor’s realm is that of the fleeting.”¹⁷ That these quotations from Camus provide so appropriate a conclusion to this discussion enforces what Kierkegaard and, even, Byron knew long before critics of the last two decades worked their way to a sense of it: that romantic irony is very probably the most significant intellectual current brought to the foreground in the Romantic age, to such a degree that existential philosophy—not to mention its sister arts such as critical deconstructionism—if not always mimicking its precise vocabulary, at the very least regards it as the tradition from whence its ideas have, in the most direct of lines, sprung forth.

16. *Fictions of Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), p. 237.

17. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, tr. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), pp. 54, 59, 58.