

In The Name of God

the Most Compassionate, the Merciful



University of Isfahan
Faculty of Foreign Languages
Department of English Language and Literature

M.A. Thesis
Don Juan: A Dialogic Reading

Supervisor:
Dr. Helen Ouliaei Nia

Advisor:
Dr. Hossein Pirnajmuddin

By:
Monireh Yarmand

June 2012

کلیه حقوق مادی مترتب بر نتایج مطالعات، ابتکارات

و نوآوری های ناشی از تحقیق موضوع این پایان نامه

متعلق به دانشگاه اصفهان است.



دانشگاه اصفهان

دانشکده زبانهای خارجی

گروه زبان انگلیسی

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دکتر هلن اولیایی نیا

امضا

با مرتبه‌ی علمی استادیار

دکتر حسین پیرنجم الدین

امضا

با مرتبه‌ی علمی استادیار

دکتر پیام عباسی

امضا

با مرتبه‌ی علمی استادیار

دکتر سعید کتابی

استاد داور خارج از گروه

امضای مدیر گروه

از طرف دکتر لویزی

Acknowledgments

Words fall short of expressing my indebtedness to numerous people including my well-wishers, my friends, and my professors who supported, and encouraged me academically and emotionally in the process of writing this thesis.

At this moment of accomplishment, first of all, I pay homage to my supervisor, Dr. Helen Ouliaei Nia, for this thesis grew out of a series of dialogues with her. Through her Socratic questioning, she brought me closer to the reality I had initially perceived, eventually enabling me to grasp its rich complexity. Her comments on chapter drafts are themselves a course in critical thought upon which I will always draw. Her capacity to combine critique with an immediate empathy and commitment towards my thesis will always inspire me. With incredible wit and imagination amid the chapter drafts, she was always there to offer quiet encouragement, with extraordinary kindness.

This study also drew upon the knowledge and experience of my advisor, Dr. Hossein Pirnajmuddin, whose editing suggestions and precise sense of critique contributed to the final copy. He provided decisive and energetic ideas during the write-up stage, clearing the path towards thesis completion.

My appreciation also goes to the dean of the English Department and to all lecturers at the English Department of University of Isfahan. Moreover, on the personal front, my special thanks are not enough extended to my beloved husband, sisters and brothers who kept encouraging me to go on fighting in times of loneliness and trouble.

*In loving memory of my dearest parents,
who granted my childhood the beauty of
education, for their affectionate
protection and unfailing love...*

Abstract

Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the novel, specifically polyphony and dialogism argue that the variety and multiplicity of voices, styles, and points of view in a polyphonic novel cannot be reduced to a homogeneous discourse. Dialogism takes place between different entities at various levels simultaneously. The narrative becomes a dialogue between many participants and evolves into a search for finalized meaning and truth. Multiplicity is seen even within the same character, since a person has a different voice and point of view at different times, in different situations and contexts. Further, according to Bakhtin, a character can see himself or herself not only as "I," but also as an object of his or her own attention, as an "other." When the novel was born, the object of artistic representation was becoming degraded to the level of contemporary reality. The novel was no longer a static, fixed, finalized entity, but inconclusive, fluid, decentered, and open-ended. We see this open-endedness, polyphony and dialogic interpretations in Byron's *Don Juan* (1818-1824). The poem apparently opens with a single autobiographical novel-poem, where one normally expects a kind of unity: one hero, one voice, one genre and one perspective. However, in the very first cantos it gives us a hint of a multitude of stories, voices and contradictory points of view. The presupposed unity of the autobiography deconstructs itself into a growing knowledge of ever-increasing difference and variety that cannot be overcome in any simple, unifying composition. Byron's comments on the nature of his narrative work and Bakhtin's theory of polyphony indicate that the narrator's version reflects only one view, while the novel as a whole is the site of contesting voices. As such, the present study will focus on the polyphonic and dialogic nature of Byron's *Don Juan* in the light of Bakhtin's related theories.

Keywords: *Don Juan*, Byron, Bakhtin, Polyphony, Dialogism, Novelistic Discourse.

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CHAPTER ONE

Going Beyond Simply Describing Situations from Various Angles: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

This thesis explores the polyphonic aspect of Lord Byron's poem *Don Juan*. The essence of polyphony in a novel, following Mikhail Bakhtin, is the presence or use of different independent voices that are not merged into one dominant voice. The author, the protagonist, the narrator, the various other characters, the reader, the form and the content of the text, and even the voices from the world outside the text, all these participate in the polyphony. One is invited to explore multiple, co-existing meanings rather than to find a single, finalized meaning. In the age of rapid changes in concepts, styles, modes of representation, and technology, it is more profitable to direct our attention to multiple realities rather than to look for one definitive, unchanging meaning. Since the entities engaged in the polyphony take on different roles and voices in different contexts of time, space, and culture, the voices heard in the polyphony multiply. It demonstrates that reality can have different meanings. Reading a poem such as *Don Juan* as a polyphony or dialogue of different voices can serve as an analogy for a mode that one can adopt in his/her attempts to understand reality.

1.2. Thesis Statement

One of the central ideas of Bakhtin in the field of literary criticism is his insistence on and interest in the relation between the author and his characters in literary fiction especially in the “novel,” hence his notions of polyphony and polyphonic novel. We speak of polyphony when we distinguish different speaking subjects in a literary work, each one with his/her own ideological position, language, perceptions, prejudices, background knowledge, and so on, with the author being just one of such subjects. Bakhtin compared Dostoevsky's novel with that of Tolstoy: “Tolstoy's world is monolithically monologic” (1984: 56). In the former, the voice of the author is always only one part of the dialogue, while in the latter it takes the totalitarian position of an omniscient subject and almighty judge who always knows what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. Thus, a dialogical status of the author is opposed to an authoritarian (monological) position. In this thesis, Byron's *Don Juan*, having the same characteristics of the novelistic discourse, questions, explores, and justifies in what ways Bakhtin's ideas can be applied to the very narrative of the poem.

Although, paradoxically at first glance, *Don Juan* seems to be monologic and autobiographical, an exploration of the growth of an unsophisticated picaroon from childhood in the first canto on up to his maturity in the last one, it displays Bakhtinian dialogism and polyphony in several key respects. In dialogical terms, not only are there interior dialogues within the poet's self, the so-called digressions that are typical of Byron, as if refreshing his memory of the background information related to events and people: “The coast—I think it was the coast that I/ Was just describing” (Canto 2, 181), but also there exteriorly exists skeptic, cynic, loving and ironic addresses to a host of characters coexisting and interacting with the hero. In Polyphonic terms, there is variously shifting voices, both within and without, from the representation of pro/con remarks of Byron the poet/narrator/critic/observer; his participation in the public stereotype debates; and his engagement of ancient texts in a search for ways to appropriate classical tradition to his making of a new poetic genre. From without, the voices that are present in the text of *Don Juan* are those of the confidant, loquacious and experienced narrator and the meditative human consciousness who often stalls the action and comes to the front of stage to talk to the reader with confidence, his inexperienced, sexually-oriented, picaresque hero Juan or the spontaneous bodily

sensation (Franklin, *Byron* 66), the femme-fatale echoes of Donna Julia, Haidee, Gulbeyaz, Catherine The Great, Lady Adeline Amundeville, Duchess of Fitz-Fulke and Aurora Ruby, an Orientalist narrating the Greek and Turkish episodes, and an aristocrat in Russian and English courts (ibid. 71). The text also includes intertextual dialogues with literary precursors: the satiric echoes of the classics like Horace, Juvenal, Persius, Virgil and Homer (ibid. 72), and an Augustan voice that humiliates Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge and appreciates the neoclassic tradition of Milton, Dryden and Pope (ibid. 65).

There can hardly be any doubt that the characters in the poem are not merely “types” or “symbols,” but according to Bakhtin, they are independent, personal consciousnesses, those which have the same status as the author: “The character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word usually is” (1984: 7). The poem itself is a wide-scope novel. Juan’s story and his notorious adventures is only one layer of the poem; the other layers are giggling commentaries on life and manners through different scopes. Much of the poem consists of Byron’s disgust with the hypocrisy and corruption of his native England as well as the repressive climate of the Bourbones in France. Byron puts his ideas and criticism into the mouth of independent, consciously alive characters which are sometimes of more interest and vigor than the hero himself (Franklin, *Byron* 80).

Bakhtin also believes that a polyphonic and dialogic novel avoids the presentation of one dominant point of view or consciousness. The author of a polyphonic novel:

Excludes all one-sided or dogmatic seriousness and does not permit any single point of view, any single extreme of life or thought, to be absolutized. All one-sidedness is handed over to the heroes, but the author, who causes them all to collide in the ‘great dialogue’ of the novel, leaves that dialogue open and leaves no finalizing period at the end. (1984: 165)

In the light of this general insight, the poem is filled with multiple points of view or perspectives; also it splits across a number of levels: political/social observation,

moral/spiritual/philosophical speculation, and straightforward satire on the marriage institution and adultery. Interpretations of the poem are, therefore, determined by whose point of view the poem is read. If, for example, we identify Juan with Byron, as many readers do, the poem, according to Harold Bloom, is “a delicious and deep description of love, of youth and hope and the terrific pictures of the misery of man and his most appalling sensations” (*George Gordon, Lord Byron* 222).

In “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse” (1967), Bakhtin quotes Belinsky calling Pushkin's novel “an encyclopedia of Russian life” (Lodge 111), a life that speaks in all its voices, in all languages and styles of the era. Fitting these remarks, *Don Juan* both uses and parodies many different genres such as autobiography, chivalric romance, historiography, satire, epic, picaresque legend, travelogue, gothic and so on. This eclectic nature of the narrative in the poem, as a good example of a polyphonic novel, suggests different views and conflicting philosophies well heard in every layer, all unfinalized, uncertain and so unreliable.

Don Juan incorporates dialogism in the very body of a polyphonic novel. The poem has no *single* style, for it is continually turning from one mode to the other. This view of the text as dialogic, multi-vocal and engaging multiple perspectives and genres would allow us to read the poem with scepticism towards all systems of human beliefs and nature mirroring its rise and fall.

1.3. Research Questions

Some of the major questions explored in the selected poem are as follows: what are Bakhtin's definitions of polyphony and dialogism and how his definitions can be applied to a narrative poem such as *Don Juan*? When applied, what are the inherent narratorial voices and how can they help the reader to better understand the poem and its time? Confirmed as a polyphonic novel under Bakhtin's theories, what are the multiple genres and points of view applied in the poem?

1.4. Methodology

Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of a new “polyphonic” type of fiction and “doubly-oriented” discourse (Lodge 105) are the motives for the present thesis. This study consists of six chapters and examines the dialogic and polyphonic undertones of Byron's masterpiece

Don Juan. In this research project, the suggestion is that the idea of the possibility of multiple voices and perspectives and diversity of genres, as proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his theory can shed light on *Don Juan*, which is enriched with unfinalized, decentred attitudes and interpretations. To demonstrate this, the researcher will examine in detail the parallel position of the poem, which may be read as the other side of the same monologic, autobiographical coin.

The current chapter offers an outline of the whole thesis project. The second chapter would be a brief introduction to Bakhtin's definition of polyphony and the conditions of a polyphonic novel such as: multiple voices and genres, separate ideologies, independent points of views and their attribution to the text of *Don Juan*. The third chapter would illustrate the underlying narratorial voices living and interacting side by side of the author. The fourth chapter would bring into the light the inherent and coexisting literary genres that can equally well be applied to the narrative of the poem, each one clarifying and illuminating one side of the poem, helping us as readers to better understand its context and time. The fifth chapter would study the different points of view and perspectives of *Don Juan*. The researcher will examine in detail how the poem can have different interpretations and meanings if narrated through the actions of different characters. The sixth chapter would be the conclusion of the previous five chapters with regards to both Byron and Bakhtin's theories of the novelistic discourse.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

***Don Juan* (1818–1824):** (Lord Byron insisted, with a pure English accent, to rhyme with “new one” and “true one”) (Flesch 104) is nowadays regarded as Byron's crowning achievement and his greatest long poem. Modeling probably as a burlesque of the Spanish legend of Don Juan, despite why critics regard the poem as one entity, *Don Juan* is a serial publication: with John Murray bringing out the first two volumes (Cantos 1–5) and the radical publisher John Hunt the next four (Cantos 6–16) and still the poem was unfinished at Byron's death in 1824 (Franklin, *Byron* 62). Metrically structured under Italian tradition of ottava rima burlesques by Luigi Pulci and Giambattista Casti, the poem's burlesque travesties the exalted chivalric values of romance making it anti-clerical or political satire (ibid. 63). The influence of the satiric

tradition of the Classics (Roman poets Horace, Juvenal and Persius in Canto 5) and Neoclassics (Milton, Dryden and Pope in Canto 1) may often be seen in the rhetoric of individual passages. However, as a piece of Romantic nonconformity, *Don Juan* is definitively Romantic: an individual's protest against social standards. It is also experimental and autobiographical in adapting a conversational, apparently improvisatory and digressive voice to narrate a big amount of material, and Byron cited Chaucer, Ariosto and Prior as forbearers having developed such a colloquial style (ibid). Considering the layer of narrative, *Don Juan* has sometimes been compared to eighteenth-century fictions *Tom Jones* and *Tristram Shandy* in its ironic questioning of the nature of fiction. Byron is constantly commenting on it: not only on the rhymes, but on his process of composition, what he thinks of the poem or its characters, where or how the narrative might unfold next (Stabler 46). Powerful and suspenseful pieces of writing give way to moments of sudden and comic bathos, and Hazlitt complained that this meant Byron was using the powerful moments only parodically, rather than with any ambitious poetic intent (Flesch 105). For example, his dedication to Robert Southey and the Romantic Lake School Poets is a bitter attack under the sugarcoated appreciation of them. This does not mean that *Don Juan* is only satire. Satire provides its basic tonality, but it does so, only because for Byron, satire was the form that was adequate to the strange and irreconcilable varieties of life. Byron manages an amazing number of different tones within *Don Juan*: tenderness, love, regret, and asperity. Considering the layer of narrative, *Don Juan* has sometimes been compared to eighteenth-century fictions *Tom Jones* and *Tristram Shandy* in its ironic questioning of the nature of fiction. But it is a poem, all its great effects are poetic effects, and while it may not be the most intense work of poetry written in the 19th century, it certainly combines more varieties of intensity than any other 19th-century work.

Polyphony: One of Bakhtin's most original and enduring concepts is the idea of polyphony. Taken from the study of music, the term originally referred to any complex, contrapuntal, multi-instrumental pieces. Bakhtin recognized a similarity to this phenomenon in the novels of Dostoevsky. His first major work of criticism, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), states that polyphony is the most appropriate description of Dostoevsky's unique genius. Although he never explicitly defined it in the Dostoevsky

book or elsewhere, it describes a way of thinking and visualizing that presupposes the third, most general sense of dialogue:

A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the events. (ibid. 6)

According to Bakhtin, polyphony suggests that a work contains multiple voices, which are ideologic, independent of each other and the author, unfinalized or open-ended, and defined by their role in dialogic exchange. By multiple voices Bakhtin means many “consciousnesses expressed in discourse” (ibid. 88). Nearly every novel contains reported speech, in other words dialogue and statements from various characters. Many convey a sense of the inner speech of some characters, but in polyphony, the depth of the inner world is offered in greater detail and fluidly mixed with the authorial voice and other characters. Bakhtin believes that polyphony occurs when the characters' voices embody certain ideas. In other words, the characters and their ideas are inseparable:

We must remember that the image of an idea is inseparable from the image of a person, the carrier of that idea. It is not the idea in itself that is the 'hero of Dostoevsky's works,'... but rather the person born of that idea. (ibid. 85)

Stating this, Bakhtin also emphasizes that each of the voices is independent of each other as well as of the author. Although he stresses that most of Dostoevsky's novels have “conventionally literary, conventionally monologic endings” (ibid. 39), the novels themselves are always open-ended and unfinalized and resists any conclusive interpretation.

Dialogism: In the context of his work of literary theory; *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) and in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), Bakhtin uses the term dialogism. Dialogue or Dialogism refers to the fact that every utterance is by nature dialogic. An utterance can never be abstract, but must occur between two consciousnesses, a speaker and a listener, a creator and an audience. Second, dialogue in this first sense can be either monologic (empty and lifeless utterance) or dialogic. As opposed to monologism, a dialogic novel does not have one *single* consciousness; rather, there are multiple, independent consciousnesses. Dialogue, therefore, is epistemological: only through it do we know ourselves, other persons, and the world. Bakhtin stresses that unlike a monologic novel, in Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels there is a complete lack of systemization of thought. They are never drawn together into any type of unified system. Again referring to Dostoevsky, Bakhtin writes:

Dostoevsky's novel is dialogic. It is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other. Not only does the novel give no firm support outside the rupture-prone world of dialogue for a third, monologically all-encompassing consciousness—but on the contrary, everything in the novel is structured to make dialogic opposition inescapable. (1984: 18)

For Bakhtin, dialogism is fundamental to truth and to human relationships. Life and truth in general are found in the interaction of multiple consciousnesses. Dialogism is not simply an artistic tool used in the composition of novels. It is foundational to human relationships. Therefore, one key to polyphony is dialogism, the interaction and conflict of multiple, independent consciousnesses; it is in this way that the author expresses truth.

Novelistic Discourse: In "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," Bakhtin defines the novel as a discourse composed of a series of interlocking, inter-illuminating language strata. Bakhtin believes that it is the novelistic images of language themselves

that function as the primary means of representation. Language represents language. The author himself is “almost completely outside” these language images; it is only the author’s “parodic and ironic accents that penetrate this language of another” (1981: 44). Novelistic discourse, according to Bakhtin, in its finest incarnation embodies polyphony. Voices are free to exert their own unique stances and are not trapped in a monologic narrative wielded at the service of an all-knowing author. In Dostoevsky's novels, the author's discourse about a character is organized as discourse about someone actually present, someone who hears the author and is capable of answering him (1984: 63). Bakhtin also offers a study of novelistic discourse that emphasizes the history, culture, and construction of language used in modern novels. Bakhtin begins his essay by outlining the history of the novel, as well as the history of and introduction to the study of novelistic discourse. He mentions several other traditional approaches to the study, explaining the flaws associated with each. In the second section of his essay, Bakhtin analyzes several different works of ancient Greece and argues that these works should not be “contained within the narrow perimeters of a history confined to mere literary styles” (1981: 83). Bakhtin concludes his essay by reviewing the major points of his argument, and stating that novelistic discourse should not be narrowed by the study of linguistic tendencies, style, and abstract languages but it should be viewed, rather, as “a complex and centuries-long struggle of cultures and languages” (ibid). In addition, Bakhtin states, novelistic discourse should be closely related to language and especially the changes that take place within language.

1.6. Review of Literature

In *Adventurous and Contemplative: A Reading of Byron's Don Juan* (1987), Catherine Anne Addison begins her dissertation with a history and analysis of the stanza form. Since ottava rima is a two-fold structure, comprising an alternately rhyming sestet followed by an independent couplet, it encourages the expression of dialectical ideas. Byron's prosodic virtuosity uses this potential to create a multivalent tissue of tones which is essentially—and almost infinitely—ironic. A view of prosody is developed in this work which is unique in its perception of the poem's existence in terms of a reading that unfolds in real time.

In *Thomas Hardy's Experiments in Narrative Discourse in Five Tragic Novels* (1992), James Christopher Farrell examines Hardy's tragic novels in the context of Bakhtin's writings on the dialogic modes of discourse in novels. Bakhtin's analysis of the dialogic structuring of divergent voices in novels is useful in tracing Hardy's development as a novelist toward open-ended and composite forms of narrative discourse.

In *The Return of the Native, The Mayor of Casterbridge, The Woodlanders, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, and Jude the Obscure*, Hardy creates experimental forms of narrative discourse which place increased stress on the subjective solitude of his characters, on the unreliability of his narrators, and on the cruelty which he finds in the relations between the individual, society, and nature. With the dialogic structuring of narrative voice and individual consciousness in these works, Hardy's vision of modern tragedy achieves its most complex and challenging expression.

In *Interior Dialogue in Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence:" A Dialogic Reading* (2000), Erinç Ozdemir presents a close reading of Wordsworth's *Resolution and Independence* from a dialogic perspective, making use of the method of discourse analysis developed by Bakhtin in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. More broadly, the essay draws on the socio-linguistic theory of discourse and literature expounded by the Bakhtin School. It argues that when such a perspective is applied to the poem, it emerges as an intricate dialogic text ultimately figuring the inner dialogue of the narrator. Such dialogue is presented in the poem as enacting the narrator's response not only to himself but, through himself, to another and to the world. The reverse is equally true. This is in keeping with Bakhtin's notion of dialogue as the inevitable addressivity of the individual—the fact that one cannot escape the condition of having to form a mental response to life, that is, to others, and to oneself in relation to others. In this respect, the poem offers an implicit illustration of the basic tenet of dialogism that the subject is constituted in relation to others, and that otherness is the condition of identity.

In *Polyphony and Fiction: a Reading of James Joyce's Ulysses* (2002), Nisha Frances Alapatt makes an attempt to study James Joyce's novel, *Ulysses*, using the theoretical framework of Bakhtin. What is unique about this dissertation is that within the constraints of a dissertation, it attempts to make a study about *Ulysses* using the very