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DON JUAN'S TRANS-MEDITERRANEAN, TRANSATLANTIC AND TRANSTEXTUAL JOURNEYS: LATIN AND ANGLO-SAXON (CON)FUSIONS

Keywords: fiction; identity; intertextuality; myth; reality; sanity; seduction.

Abstract: This paper aims to trace the evolution of a remarkably mobile myth of Western literature across geographical spaces and literary traditions in an attempt to highlight the cultural relevance of modern reinterpretations of classical texts and the insights into issues of individual identity provided by works of fiction. After discussing the various ways in which Byron's Don Juan departs from the stereotypical image of the callous seducer associated with the Spanish versions, the analysis will focus on one of the most recent reiterations of the Don Juan story in Jeremy Leven's Don Juan DeMarco and will use the recycling of the English version of the myth in a contemporary context as the starting point of an inquiry into the complicated nature of identity in present-day North America, from the protagonist's questionable Italo-Mexican roots and upbringing to issues such as literary identification, infatuation with public figures, therapy and self-improvement. By applying a comparative and contrastive reading to these Anglo-Saxon versions of the myth, the paper will not only point out the differences between two apparently identical personalities but will also attempt to highlight the intricate identity of the Hispano-American Don Juan, whose profile is based on a fusion of literary sources that is at least as complex and rich as his cultural heritage. The analysis of Johnny DeMarco as the true descendant of Tirso de Molina's 'burlador' as well as of Byron's Don Juan will also entail references to the frequently ambiguous relationship between reality and fiction and to the discursive dimension of seduction.

Since the publication at the beginning of the seventeenth century of Tirso de Molina's *El burlador¹ de Sevilla y convidado de piedra*, the story of Don Juan has turned out to represent one of the most versatile Western myths, invading "every genre of literature, music and art, transcending time, space and its own cultural-ideological context" (Oyola 167) and being recycled not only in countless variations on the theme of the inveterate and more often than not callous seducer but also rewritten so as to feature a less stereotypically predatory male protagonist. In choosing to focus on two representatives of the second category, that is Byron's *Don Juan* and his intertextual

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¹ English renderings of the 'burlador' in the original Spanish title range from 'trickster', a term favoured by Dakin Matthews, Roy Campbell and Gwynne Edwards, 'joker' in Derek Walcott's version and 'rogue' in Robert O'Brian's text to 'playboy' in Oscar Mandel's translation and 'lady-killer' in Michael Kidd's, each choice capturing a particular facet of the protagonist's personality and potentially influencing the reader's response.

reincarnation as a self-destructive mental patient in Jeremy Leven's 1994 romantic comedy *Don Juan DeMarco*, this paper aims to discuss the extent to which these versions depart from the Spanish prototype and to explore the potential oversimplifications resulting from approaches relying on a perhaps too rigid dichotomy.

As part of the attempt to cope with the overwhelming number of narratives featuring some version of the Don Juan figure, most critics appear to have adopted the idea that the scores of avatars of the (in)famous seducer can be reduced to only two universal types, "the one that chooses Thanatos and is damned, and the one that chooses Eros and is saved" (Lauer 206), the former corresponding to the Spanish Dons, men of appetites, driven by power and lacking in ideas, the latter to their European (and later American) counterparts, men "driven by love and given to searching endlessly and dreamily for a lost feminine ideal" (Wright 10). While Leven's version features a fusion of the literal and metaphorical levels of this choice by means of an actual journey to the island of Eros, the elaboration of Byron's unfinished epic entailed a certain hesitation regarding the protagonist's final destination: "I had not quite fixed whether to make him end in Hell, or in an unhappy marriage, not knowing which would be the severest" (Marchand, *Byron's Letters VIII* 78) Notwithstanding the likelihood of Byron alluding to the rigid as well as hypocritical moral standards of his age rather than expressing a personal opinion regarding his protagonist's retribution, this remark can be also construed as an argument against the tendency to view the English Don Juan as an entirely innocent protagonist.

Leaving literary merit aside, Byron's poem has been in turn commended and criticised for portraying an "affable hero instead of the old legendary rake" (Wolfson 417), wilfully misreading and indeed reversing the tradition which gave rise to the original version of the myth (Donelan 18), turning the legendary Spanish arch-womanizer into an "inexperienced youth . . . easily seduced by various women" (Bloom 221) and elaborating "the first major adaptation of the Don Juan myth to portray the protagonist not as a villain but as the good-natured recipient of women's libidinous advances" (Franklin 66). It has also been argued that in the process of turning the story "inside-out and upside-down by making his Juan a passive charmer who is seduced by a succession of women" Byron employed the "already established term for a notorious womanizer" (Watt 213) as a purely ironic label for a "slave of circumstance" (Elfenbein 70), "more victim than victimizer" (Douglass 15), that does not even qualify as a "reduced copy of the great and terrible figure . . . Titan of embodied evil, the likeness of sin made flesh, which grew up in the grave and bitter imagination of a Spanish poet" (Swinburne 382).

As far as the more recent Anglo-Saxon rewriting is concerned, Johnny² DeMarco appears to function on two separate planes of existence, an intertextual one consisting of a series of episodes from Byron's epic retold in a slightly more modern key for the benefit of contemporary audiences, and a considerably more prosaic one featuring a quite tormented young man. In the 'real world', Johnny's inability to cope with his family problems and

² The protagonist's first name, while preserving little of the glamour of the Spanish equivalent, echoes the numerous other avatars of the famous seducer – Don Juan, Dom Juan, Don Giovanni, Don John, Jack Tanner, etc. – but above all Byron's affectionate reference to his protagonist as "Donny Johnny" (Marchand 1976: 207) in an 1819 letter to John Murray.

hopeless infatuation with a supermodel result in an identity crisis, identification with an unlikely literary model in the hope of becoming more desirable to the object of his affection and a failed suicide attempt, following which the protagonist finds himself confronted with the challenge of persuading his doctor to accept his rather implausible life story and the perhaps even more difficult task of working out his true identity.

Jack Mickler, the psychiatrist who dissuades DeMarco from putting into practice his elaborate suicide scenario and then finds himself gradually drawn into his patient's magical realist universe, appears to be blissfully unaware of the daunting range of versions of the story and his casual use of the definite article³ – “You . . . are the Don Juan?” (Leven) – confirms his association of the name with the “universal myth” (Lauer 206) created around the figure of the Spanish seducer. It would be quite interesting to speculate on the reasons why the protagonist, whose bedside table features copies of both *El burlador de Sevilla* and Byron's epic, chooses to answer with a terse “This is correct” (Leven) and even more so on the discourse delivered in front of the medical evaluation board, in which his sources of inspiration are mysteriously reduced to a single text: “I'd been reading a book, this book” (Leven). Even if one were to assume that the book in question was Byron's epic – a veritable catalogue of other authors and voices woven around the persistent subtext of Byron's own public life (McGann 37) and reminding readers of how little is “unborrowed” among the “different texts which make up consciousness and identity” (Stabler 108) – DeMarco's personality would continue to preserve much of its mystery. Although Mozart's *Don Giovanni* only features as part of the film's soundtrack, its protagonist's emphatic “Who I am you'll never know!” – “Chi son io tu non saprai!” (Fisher 6) – quite accurately captures the complex nature of identity. The removal of the mask – an accessory which can be traced back to José Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio* and which Johnny's grandmother associates with Zorro, in a humorous reminder of the frequent (con)fusions of myths in collective mentality as well as of Don Juan's ability to move fluidly, “staging encounters between the literary and the popular, between culture and its reception by a public” (Wright 15) – does not solve this quandary, even though the protagonist's firm rejection of the parallel drawn with yet another famous lover – “I am not Casanova. I am Don Juan.” (Leven) – implies a certain detachment from the category of stereotypical seducers.

Interpretations that rate DeMarco as a more innocent and less complex figure than Byron's ultimately amoral protagonist (Santas 142) or jocularly suggest that his excessive youth and vulnerability are likely to “overwhelm one with schmaltz” (Lauer 206) appear to disregard the gap between the modest list of affairs of the latter and DeMarco's considerably more impressive repertoire:

Don Juan: Including you, there have been, exactly, one thousand-five-hundred and two.

Don Juan (voice): I could see that this was a sum substantially greater than the one she had in mind, and not easy for her to assimilate, try as she might. (Leven)

³ In the case of Peter Handke's *Don Juan: His Own Version*, a similar use of the article suggests some awareness of the existence of multiple – six hundred to two thousand (Davis 160), to be slightly more specific – versions of the story, or at the very least, a firm conviction in the authenticity of the particular avatar facing the narrator: “I knew I had Don Juan before me – and not just *some* Don Juan, but *the* Don Juan”.

It might be appropriate to mention at this particular point in the analysis that while the experience of Byron's Don Juan is limited to "the married, and forward, Dona Julia; the beautiful Haidée; the sultana Gulbeyaz, whose amorous orders he refuses at the risk of his death; and Catherine the Great, having first undergone the necessary preliminary testing for the imperial lady by her tester or Epreuveuse" (Watt 213), with the possible addition of Dudu, the "sleepy Venus . . . fit to 'murder sleep'" (*Byron VI* 42), DeMarco is seduced under very similar circumstances by virtually unchanged versions of Julia and Gulbeyaz and the only reason behind his wider range of carnal encounters resides in the fact that he happens to spend two years rather than two days in a harem. Moreover, the protagonist appears to value the nights "spent with the fifteen-hundred young women" less for the physical gratification they undoubtedly provided and more for the development of a remarkable capacity for empathy that is likely to represent the true secret of his hypnotic effect on all those he encounters further on: "I had learned to love in a thousand ways. Each one a lesson in the soul of a woman" (Leven).

Notwithstanding the fact that he is barely twenty-one – incidentally the age Byron's protagonist would have reached under different circumstances, since his text was intended to span five years when completed (Bone 157) – there is one memorable instance in which Don Juan DeMarco appears to be as much the literary descendant of Tirso de Molina's trickster and José Zorilla's Tenorio as he is of Byron's protagonist, at least in terms of experience. Indeed, it is important to note that the opening lines of the film include a proud statement of the protagonist's exploits and the intention of performing yet another act of seduction:

My name is Don Juan DeMarco. . . . I am the world's greatest lover. I have made love to over a thousand women. I was twenty-one last Tuesday. No woman has ever left my arms unsatisfied. Only one has rejected me. And as fortune would have it, she is the only one who has ever mattered. This is why, at twenty-one, I had determined to end my life. But first... one final conquest. (Leven)

DeMarco's reiteration throughout the narrative of his vast experience and the self-assurance with which he approaches (and, within minutes, completely enthrals) a sophisticated New Yorker are reminiscent of the Spanish rather than the English Juan and suggest an alternative way of interpreting a remark which might have initially appeared a mere detail of his seductive discourse: "I am Don Juan. Directly descended from the noblest Spanish family" (Leven). However, the wish to put an end to an existence away from the only object of his affection and the considerate and essentially modern nature of his approach to women – "I never take advantage of a woman. I give women pleasure... if they desire it" (Leven) – represent the very opposite of the "phallic Lothario" of Spain and confirm the idea that "male fantasy can contradict patriarchy as well as agree with it: because myths as they develop can contain their opposites" (Donelan 18).

To continue the comparative and contrastive analysis of the English and the American Don Juan, one might argue that another conspicuous similarity between the two consists in their common capacity for authentic feelings as, notwithstanding the nature and number of their other affairs, both experience true love with equally innocent female

protagonists, Haidée and Ana respectively. However, even though they both seem to display the same “continued susceptibility to real emotion” that Donelan (175) regards as the distinctive feature of the English version and both experience pain at the loss of their soul mates, Byron’s Juan manages to cope with tragedy – it is only Haidée that dies of a broken heart – while DeMarco seriously considers taking his own life. Moreover, whereas the fidelity and interest of the former are directly proportional to the attractiveness of his partners – “Juan never left them, while they had charms” (*Byron VIII* 53) – the latter attributes his success to a remarkable capacity for making each one of them feel desirable: “I see these women for how they truly are... glorious, radiant, spectacular, and perfect... because I am not limited by my eyesight. Women react to me the way that they do, Don Octavio, because they sense that I search out the beauty that dwells within them” (Leven). It is up to the individual reader to decide whether to read this ability as the natural outcome of having an essentially pure heart and ample resources of empathy or merely as the result of intensive exposure to women’s magazines (in which context it might be after all worth remembering that in the ‘real world’ of late-twentieth-century New York DeMarco’s only glimpses of his Doña Ana take the shape of billboards and fashion centrefolds).

As far as discourse is concerned, according to several critics Byron’s protagonist is “mostly passive and nearly always silent” (Donelan 175) and therefore “something of an empty centre of the narrative, in contrast to the confident, loquacious, older and experienced man who tells his story” (Franklin 66). Indeed, a shrewd reader would be more likely to discern the real Don Juan, “a voyeur rather than a participant in the story”, precisely in this “satiric and worldly-wise voice” (Watt 213). The film displays the same dichotomy if one is to contrast the shy and not particularly articulate boy drifting from one adventure to another with the only slightly older but infinitely more sophisticated man narrating his story in the psychiatric hospital and providing the voiceover. It has been observed that the seductive potential of Don Juan (the text, that is, rather than its protagonist) was “legendary before the first cantos were published” (Stabler 148), with Byron skilfully “translating the aristocratic pastime of seduction into a textual encounter” (Stabler 58), and Leven’s first-person narrator clearly displays the same biting sarcasm and talent for exposing the hypocrisy and ridiculousness of the various individuals he encounters (and above all his own) as well as the ability to enthrall all those who listen to his narrative.

DeMarco’s charismatic personality causes havoc among the medical staff, with “more nurses on Valium than patients” (Leven) and the one male nurse assigned to him leaving his job to move to Madrid, yet the true test of his powers of (narrative rather than romantic) seduction entails convincing Dr Mickler not to administer the pills that would put an end to his alternative existence. Indeed, in addition to the focus on a variety of exotic landscapes and Oriental beauties, both texts share the Arabian Nights narrative atmosphere, in which “tales and episodes can be spun indefinitely” (Beatty 8), yet in the case of the film the protagonist’s attempt to negotiate the parameters of his hospital stay also reveals how much depends on his story-telling abilities: “I am not deluded. I am Don Juan. And if you will not medicate me for these ten days... I will prove it to you. Do we have an agreement? Do I have these ten days to tell you my story?” (Leven). As far as

this modern-day Scheherazade is concerned, a convincing narrative might make the difference between life and death if not quite literally then at least in terms of his constructed identity, which, given his earlier suicide attempt, is likely to be regarded by the protagonist as of greater value than his mortal frame.

The psychiatrist's assessment following the first sessions – “Obsessive compulsive disorder, with erotomanic features. Confirm delusional disorder. Confirm depression with obsessional features. Possible hysterical personality” (Leven) – appears to indicate the failure of the patient's attempt to prove the validity of his worldview and also prompts further parallels with the first version of the Don Juan story, approached as early as the beginning of the twentieth century through the terminology of clinical psychology in articles such as Corpus Barga's “Don Juan y los doctores” (1926) and Hernani Mandolini's “Psicopatología del Don Juan” (1926) to give but two examples.⁴ It does not take long however for the effects of Don Juan's seductive discourse to become visible in the psychiatrist's renewed interest in romance and life in general and in his ultimate immersion in the fictitious world he was supposed to eradicate: “I must report, that the last patient I ever treated . . . the great lover, Don Juan DeMarco, suffered from a romanticism which was completely incurable. And even worse, contagious . . .” (Leven).

Before allowing his patient's narrative to completely contaminate his own understanding of reality, Dr. Mickler oscillates between moments of reckless creativity that scandalize his peers – “You told him that you were Don Octavio del Flores? You told a delusional patient that you were a seventeenth-century Spanish nobleman?” (Leven) – and a jaded and occasionally obtuse response to his patient's compelling stories. The prosaic question that follows DeMarco's initial revelations and the plausible explanation it elicits reveal not only the psychiatrist's inability to envisage the necessary adaptations undergone by the Don Juan myth in late-twentieth-century America but also the extent to which Leven's cinematic narrative appears to be the product of a creative imagination reminiscent of Byron's talent for “finding surprising equivalents for inherited motifs” (Beatty 6):

Jack Mickler: Are you Italian, Mexican or Spanish?

Don Juan: That is all you have to say? You want to know my nationality?

Jack Mickler: No. Your name is DeMarco, that's Italian. You were brought up in Mexico, and when you speak English, you speak it with a Castilian accent.

Don Juan: Well, my accent has been coloured by my many travels. Very well, I will answer your question. I was raised in Mexico, my father was born in Queens, his name was Tony DeMarco, he was Italian. The dance-king of Astoria. (Leven)

A detail worth highlighting is DeMarco's reference to his accent as an outcome of his numerous journeys, which he elaborates on during his subsequent therapy sessions and which, according to Ian Watt, represent a common denominator of all “the imitations

⁴ Although Tirso de Molina's text contains no clear references to mental illness, it would be interesting to speculate on the possible meanings of the term ‘condition’ in Don Juan's apparently casual reference to his inability to control his proclivities: “Si el burlar es hábito antiguo mío, ¿qué me preguntas, sabiendo mi condición?” (52).

of the original Don Juan . . . great travellers (if only because they have imperative reasons for getting away from where they currently are)” (217). It could be however argued that the label hardly applies in equal measure to Tirso de Molina’s protagonist, whose trajectory only includes his native Seville, Naples and Tarragona, and the hero of Byron’s cosmopolitan epic, whose odyssey covers “an enormous European and near-Asiatic sweep geographically” as well as culturally (Bone 157), featuring landmarks as distant and diverse as Seville, Cadiz, the isles of Greece, Constantinople, Ismail, Saint Petersburg and London.

As far as DeMarco is concerned, his geographical scope interestingly enough never entails actually setting foot on the Iberian peninsula. Following a failed attempt to reach Cadiz, the itinerary presented to Mickler takes the protagonist from his native Mexican hacienda to “an obscure Arabian Sultanate” – with the somewhat perfunctory description of this exotic location serving the double purpose of precluding potentially difficult questions and ironically hinting at the West’s still incomplete understanding of numerous Oriental spaces –, from there to an idyllic island presumably located in the Greek archipelago and finally to New York. Far from singling this element out as clear evidence of delusion, readers willing to enter the fantasy world created by this contemporary Don Juan might choose to suspend their disbelief regarding the unlikelihood of Tirso De Molina’s text having a noticeable impact on one’s accent and locate the sources of DeMarco’s Castilian pronunciation in his intertextual rather than his geographical travels. As regards the heavily edited version of his movements presented at his final hearing, it is quite interesting to observe that not only does it entail a trajectory confined to the continental US – “I was born in... in Queens. Me and my parents moved to, er, Phoenix when I was a kid.” (Leven) – but it is also delivered in an accent free of any Hispanic reverberations.

It has been observed that Byron set out to create the kind of hero that could function as “a pure transitional object, with as few obstacles to identification as possible”, a figure through whom to “describe the real historical world of the Mediterranean in the late eighteenth century” and indeed a “poetic equivalent of the oceanic diaspora of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial history”, giving a form to the real or imaginary experiences of mostly passive and nearly always silent transnational subjects, ‘nobodies’ created by colonialism (Donelan 176), and exemplifying the organic process of “individual reconciliation with national identity” (Gu 65). By extending the same logic to Leven’s narrative, one might see in Johnny DeMarco an embodiment of the intricately constructed and often highly tormented personalities of contemporary Westerners and the challenges of discovering one’s true nature beneath the layered masks of family heritage (more often than not involving a complex ethnic and cultural blend), education, not to mention occasional identification with fictional protagonists and infatuation with media-promoted personalities. If we accept that at least some of the value of “the twice-told tale” resides in challenging the reader to watch for discrepancies (Burwick 162), we might argue that in the case of a protagonist such as Johnny DeMarco the reenactment of a timeless myth might ultimately prove of use in promoting a deeper understanding of one’s background, contemporaries, and indeed of one’s own identity.

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