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## *Introduction: Byron and the poetics of digression*

More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors.  
 Elizabeth Bishop, 'The Map'

In April 1816 Byron's plans to leave England were well under way. He had commissioned the Napoleonic carriage which would carry him across Europe and on 21 April the deed of separation from Lady Byron was completed. Byron signed-off from his marriage with an epigram which 'the lawyers objected to . . . as superfluous':

A year ago you swore, fond she!  
 'To love, to honour', and so forth:  
 Such was the vow you pledged to me,  
 And here's exactly what 'tis worth.<sup>1</sup>

This bitter full stop is a textual manifestation of the experience of severance, but Byron's disengagement from the English public was not quite so terminal. Hidden among the well-known details of his departure – the selling of his library and the histrionic claims that his friends had forsaken him – is the record in the House of Lords Proxy Book for 1816 which states that from 3 April 1816 'George Earl of Essex hath the proxy of George Lord Byron.'<sup>2</sup> In other words, while flaunting his intention to shake the dust of England from his shoes, Byron was also preparing to re-engage with English politics via a different route. One abrupt change of direction is shadowed by an alternative and, in this case, opposite course of action. This discontinuously continuous relationship with England colours Byron's life history and also his poetics.

Our experiences of reading, teaching and studying Romantic poetics have been enriched over the last two decades by critical attention to historical context and gender. In the last five years, a resurgence of interest in form, genre and poetics has enabled us to reflect on how selective some of those early definitions of 'historical context' were. The recovery of socio-political and cultural contexts sometimes tended to overlook

the aesthetics of Romantic period works. More recently, however, critics have begun to unite the traditional strengths of close formal analysis with attention to the shaping dynamics of historical contexts.

Following Stuart Curran's absorbing study of the Romantic poets' uses of traditional poetic forms within eighteenth-century generic boundaries, Richard Cronin, Michael O'Neill, Jerome McGann and Susan Wolfson have redirected attention to the ways in which a text's relationship with its readers may sculpt and energise form.<sup>3</sup> Cronin's *In Search of the Pure Commonwealth: The Politics of Romantic Poetry* (2000), O'Neill's *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (1997), McGann's *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (1996) and Wolfson's *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (1997) have in different ways redirected attention to the aesthetic and affective contours of Romantic poetry, highlighting the extent to which poetic form had been neglected in earlier revisionary historicist studies of the period.

The recovery of women writers in the Romantic period has also provoked a reassessment of the aesthetic audacity of the canonical Romantic poets. The technical virtuosity of women writers, coupled with their decorous reticence within well-defined generic categories, are now seen to have inspired some of the formal experiments of the 'Big Six'. While Francis Jeffrey praised Felicia Hemans for her 'serenity of execution', however, he identified Byron's poetry with the disturbing experience of being 'at once torn and transported'.<sup>4</sup> The tension between continuity and rupture associated with Byron's poetry by Jeffrey and his contemporaries emerges subsequently as a determining characteristic in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Stanzas on the Death of Lord Byron' and Felicia Hemans's 'The Lost Pleiad'.

For Barrett Browning and Hemans, Byron is associated with a violent collision of presence and absence. 'He *was*, and *is* not!', Barrett Browning's poem begins, using Spenserian stanzas to circle round 'The awful tale of greatness swiftly o'er' (l. 34).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, for Hemans, the myth of the lost Pleiad preserves Byron's absent presence: 'And is there glory from the heavens departed? – / O! void unmark'd!'<sup>6</sup> Although the poem identifies steady feminine value in the 'Unchanged' sister Pleiads who 'Still hold their place on high', it keeps returning to the moment of fracture when Byron's orb 'started' away: 'Hath the night lost a gem?'; 'Couldst thou be shaken?'

The shock of Byron's death in Greece was registered as yet another textual fissure in William Hazlitt's *The Spirit of the Age*. News of the

poet's death literally interrupts the essay, creating a 'void' marked by a constellation of asterisks. Inscribing in print this sense of abrupt departure, displacement and interruption, Hazlitt, Barrett Browning and Hemans drew on a new syntax of disruption which was already marked as Byronic. Such instances when the reader is jolted out of secure knowledge can only be addressed in a line-by-line encounter with the text, not through any generalised overview. Byron's unsettling uses of the fragment, satire, mixed or medley forms, obtrusive allusion and Romantic irony are all moments when the reading process is disturbed by his art of digression.

'The matter of digression is the key to Byron's method', Jerome McGann states, but we cannot fully understand this method if we confine our notion of digression simply to conversational deviation from the plot.<sup>7</sup> Rather, Byron's digressions comprehend multiple challenges to a placid readerly experience. Throughout his poetic career, Byron developed an ever-shifting repertoire of strategies for changing the subject. While popular contemporaries such as Walter Scott, Felicia Hemans, William Wordsworth and LEL perfected reassuring modes of readerly address, Byron's relationship with his public was marked by abrupt transitions and discontinuities. Even within the perceived sameness of the Byronic hero in the oriental tales, Byron aggravated his audience. 'I suppose you have read Lord Byron's *Giaour*', Anna Barbauld remarked in a letter to her friend, Mrs Beecroft (anticipating the discussion between Anne Elliot and Captain Benwick in Chapter 11 of *Persuasion*):

– and which edition? because there are five, and in every one he adds about fifty lines; so that the different editions have rather the sisterly likeness which Ovid says the Nereids had, than the identity expected by purchasers of the same work. And pray do you say Lord Byron or Bÿron? . . . And do you pronounce *Giaour* hard *g* or soft *g*? And do you understand the poem at first reading? – because Lord Byron and the Edinburgh Reviewers say you are very stupid if you don't, and yet the same Reviewers have thought proper to prefix the story to help your apprehension.<sup>8</sup>

Barbauld shrewdly envisages a publishing ploy behind the teasing serpentine release of *The Giaour*. Its narrative toying with an audience has provoked much critical debate, but most of this has tended to buttress a reconstruction of the Byronic hero. The effect of narrative unpredictability on the reader and the reader's subsequent part in the construction of meaning, registered at the time, were rapidly overshadowed by the potency of biographical myth.<sup>9</sup> It has taken a long time, but this traditional

focus on the character of the poet-hero has been challenged by the increasingly diverse contextualising energies of historical criticism.

For Byron's most sophisticated historicist critics, his digressive techniques called attention to the poems' self-reflexive relationship to their historical moment. Voicing the post-colonial concerns of the later 1980s, Nigel Leask considered 'Romanticism's sense of its own problematic *modernity*' exhibited in self-conscious antiquarian techniques, 'placing the "original" ballad within a discontinuous historical or geopolitical field and posing questions about the moral and cultural significance of heroic and epical values in the context of a "progressive" present'.<sup>10</sup> Leask argued that 'Byron's critique of empire broadens out into a critique of modernity itself', and he developed Truman Guy Pratt's 1957 reading of *Lara* by suggesting that the 'narrative anxiety' of that poem predicts the 'dark mythic forces of Fascism and totalitarianism'.<sup>11</sup> Leask's notion of a disruptive European modernity 'cut loose from tradition' anticipated Jerome Christensen's suggestion that 'the modernity of *Juan*'s dispensation is that neither the narrator nor anyone else can claim on cognitively reliable grounds to be its father. The narrator must forcibly institute the grounds of his own authority, summoning as he does so the maddening aporia of self-legitimizing authority.'<sup>12</sup> In Christensen's reading, 'cutting loose' from tradition paradoxically generates an acutely self-conscious reliance on tradition, as we can see in his discussion of the "'Carpe diem"' exhortation of *Don Juan* canto xi: "'Life's a poor player," – then "play out the play,"' (xi. 86):

The quotation marks are what Hazlitt calls an 'inflection of the present' on the incorporated maxim, the sign of a time when the existence of the 'common place' is itself at stake ... The citation attempts to generate for the maxim a normative transcendence of the moment of audition.<sup>13</sup>

As we shall see, placing quotation marks at 'the moment of audition' has implications for the reader as well as for the status of quoted material. Christensen's isolation of the 'aporia of self-legitimizing authority' affects both reader and narrator; the reader of Byron's poetry is always implicated in this heightened awareness of the 'now' of the text. From the beginning of Byron's career, an increasingly risky relationship between poet and reader generated the meaning of the poem as they collaborated – or not – in realising textual digressions within a tightly controlled formal patterning.

Christensen's emphasis on *Don Juan* as context rather than as an authored text extended Jerome McGann's foundational work on the moral

and generic parameters of digression within Byron's epic style. McGann's accounts of Byron's digressions depended upon 'the biographical substructure' of a mythic personality in *Fiery Dust* (1968) and the 'total field' of 'history, tradition, facts' in *Don Juan in Context* (1976).<sup>14</sup> Based on his perception of 'local consequences . . . injected into the larger field of the poem as a whole', McGann's unifying of Byron's style under a philosophical or moral ideal gradually but inevitably sacrificed a realisation of Byron's poetry at the level of the reading experience, a level I think we now need to recover.<sup>15</sup> As with Christensen, the critical conception of the whole ('the key words' or 'the most significant stylistic elements') tended to eclipse the particularity of the reading experience.<sup>16</sup>

While McGann discussed the digressive form of the English cantos of *Don Juan* 'in order to explain, if not to justify, Byron's procedure', the 'formalities of explanation' themselves come under scrutiny in James Chandler's thoughtful and ultra self-conscious scrutiny of Romantic texts in *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (1998).<sup>17</sup> Chandler developed a method of 'performative self-consciousness' to examine Byron's modernisation of epic form. In the novelistic *Don Juan*, Chandler suggested, Byron followed Scott in creating a new form of contemporaneity which itself anticipated the manoeuvres of Byron's historically self-conscious commentators in the late twentieth century. Identifying a tension between what is 'perspicuous' and what constitutes the 'labile ironies' in *Don Juan*, Chandler approached the texture of the poem's historical moment.<sup>18</sup> His 'work of explanation' ends when the critic finds himself 'suspended' in contradiction. By focusing on some of those points of contradiction and suspense, *Byron, Poetics and History* re-examines the poem's relationship with its reader at particular historical moments.<sup>19</sup>

The omnipresence of post-modern narrative in film, television and advertising has ensured that in the 1980s and 1990s the notion of the reader as co-producer became widely accepted in popular culture as well as literary criticism. Locating Romantic self-reflexiveness in relation to post-modern film narrative, William Galperin has examined the ways in which Romantic texts question an omniscient authorial position and acknowledge their own materiality. Efforts to make Byron into a modernist or post-modernist, he argued, derive from Byron's 'virtual exclusion from the more liberal, humanistic conceptions of the romantic achievement . . . by critics such as M.H. Abrams and Harold Bloom'.<sup>20</sup> Galperin's fascinating deconstructive analysis of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan* suggests that *Don Juan* might be less deconstructively

‘advanced’ than aspects of the first cantos of *Childe Harold*:

If the most mature aspects of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* represent a resistance to writing . . . and to the totalizing visions writing ordinarily serves, then *Don Juan* would seem to confirm Byron's claim that his earlier poems were more advanced than anything he had produced subsequently . . . For all of *Don Juan's* various subversions, it is also the case that these are circumscribed by writing.<sup>21</sup>

In this critique of *Don Juan's* ‘notable faith in writing’, literary production is exclusively author-centred, omitting any reference to the poem's anxieties about its readers. Galperin's separate discussions of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan* overlook the way that the later cantos of *Don Juan* revisit Byron's earlier poems in an ironic manner (which Galperin might well have connected with post-modern film and music). Both the narrator of *Don Juan* and the director of *Chinatown* (to use Galperin's cinematic example) use unexpected returns and recurrences to test and modify the relationship between reader and text.

In her stimulating analysis of an absent presence in *Don Juan* (more present for the poem's first readers than it is today), Moyra Haslett has explored the scandalous associations of the Don Juan legend in Byron's own time. Her book offers an illuminating survey of Regency attitudes to male and female libertinism, concluding with parallels between Don Juan and Baudrillard's definition of the ‘consummate seducer’.<sup>22</sup> The effect of the theoretical coda is to place both these texts in an a-historical continuum of ‘masculinist ideology’: ‘The subversive potential of both *Don Juan* and *De la séduction* collapses under, as indeed it returns to, the conventional asymmetry of the sexes’ (*Byron's Don Juan*, p. 288). Here we witness the surrender of the particular to the general which typifies considerations of the poem where formal texture is neglected: amidst all the meticulously researched detail about *Don Juan's* cultural contexts, there is no room for any discussion of the seductive potential embodied in feminine rhyme or the movement of *ottava rima*. The monograph's neglect of poetic form is emphasised by Clarendon Press's ironing-out of the irregularities of *ottava rima* with a justified left-hand margin.

Turning from historical considerations of Romantic poetry to more philosophical critical approaches, many theorists of Romantic irony have contemplated the impact of Byron's self-reflexive digressions. Irving Babbitt famously saw Byron's sudden transitions as an egotistical imposition on the reader: ‘It is as though he would inflict upon the reader the disillusion from which he has himself suffered. By his swift passage

from one mood to another (*Stimmungsbrechung*) he shows that he is subject to no centre. The effect is often that of a sudden breaking of the spell of poetry by an intrusion of the poet's ego.'<sup>23</sup> Babbitt's account of the working of Romantic irony in Byron's *Don Juan* depicts the reader at the mercy of the whims of the poet rather than participating in the breaks and qualifications in the poetic surface. It is a classic high Modernist conception of the arrogant artist, and it is unable to admit the possibility of the poet spilling tea or responding to reviews. Although the quotidian actions of the poet might seem the province of the biographer, they have as much impact on the production of texts as broader cultural contexts and help us to recover the nervous vulnerability of Romantic texts to their readers.<sup>24</sup> The legacy of Friedrich Schlegel's Romantic irony, in particular, has had the effect of elevating the poet to a god-like status, as if to fill the theological gap created by its first premises. It becomes a form of transcendence, rising infinitely above everything finite and accidental and is just as remote from the materiality of Byron's scrawled instructions to his publisher as Roland Barthes's conception of the author as textual 'function'.

In a later account of Romantic irony, Anne K. Mellor connected Byron's 'exuberant *mobilité*' with the texts of Yeats, Joyce and Nabokov which 'play between order and chaos' and allow the reader to participate in 'liminality'.<sup>25</sup> For Mellor, the texts of Byron and other Romantic ironists offer 'pleasure, psychic health, and intellectual freedom'; more than this, 'Romantic irony . . . can potentially free individuals and even entire cultures from totalitarian modes of thought and behaviour.'<sup>26</sup> Mellor's Romantic irony is a positive inverse of Jerome McGann's Romantic ideology – a kind of global, democratising process which liberates texts and readers across continents. Yet, we may be wary that this generous, liberal panoply is nevertheless a-historical in its treatment of literary modes, and inattentive to other crucial textual dynamics.

In Mellor's early work – as also in the influential studies of the 1970s and 1980s by Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Tilottama Rajan and David Simpson – Romantic irony helped to efface consideration of historical context and gender. While appearing to celebrate the possibilities of undecidability and openness, it tended to consolidate a male-dominated canonical Romanticism rooted in high Modernism. For Mellor, Byron the Romantic ironist was 'Schlegel's hero, the urbane man of liberal imagination and tolerance' (*English Romantic Irony*, p. 31). Likewise, Tilottama Rajan presented Byron's approach to 'radical modernism' as an heroic quest: 'In *Don Juan* he tries to become a modern poet



and to make irony into a *modus vivendi*. But . . . in that very process he declares the need for the resolution forged by Keats and Shelley, whose final poems reach beyond Byron's precisely because they do not reach as far.<sup>27</sup> Rajan described the self-irony of *Don Juan* as a momentary apprehension of the high Modernism of Wallace Stevens, insulating art from natural or historical process (*Dark Interpreter*, p. 137). Her searching study of Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley in the light of modern existentialism suggested that it was the hitherto unquestioned domination of high Modernism by male theorists which led to the relative neglect of what we might see as the 'feminine' aspects of Byron's poetic texture and (until recently) literature across the Romantic period.

The poet appeared again as masculine Enlightenment hero in Frederick Garber's eloquent and compelling study of Byron as a Romantic ironist. Garber argued that Byron's discursive variety 'is strung on an obsessive singleness of seeing, a vision of the world's radical discordance and of the fearsome and pervasive threat that discordance poses to all the symmetries of the self'.<sup>28</sup> In this reading, Romantic irony was aligned (as in Babbitt's reading) with Swiftian satire as a way of countering the 'destructive ironies of the world' and answering 'assaults on the self'.<sup>29</sup> Garber acknowledged that Swift was 'as devious' as Byron in his 'implication of the reader', but was primarily concerned with the 'mastery' of the ironist's performance in the 'perpetual making and remaking of self and text'.<sup>30</sup> This emphasis drew what Garber calls the 'commonplaces' of illusion-breaking and sudden shifts of tone into a unified and stringently Modern project: 'His purpose was to purify the language of the tribe.'<sup>31</sup> Garber's quest for stability is a traditional one, close to William Empson's much earlier anchoring of ambiguity: 'The object of life, after all, is not to understand things, but to maintain one's defences and equilibrium and live as well as one can.'<sup>32</sup> The importance of critical control over digressive and discordant possibilities is, of course, a masculine ideal which has persisted since Plato banned poets from his Republic.

Among all the deconstructive explorations of Romantic irony, Michael G. Cooke was the only critic to suggest that it might be a mode receptive to 'new potential and new risks . . . inseparable from the feminine figure'.<sup>33</sup> Once we shake ourselves free from the demand that poetry and criticism should express a manly, unified purpose, we can discover the possibilities of affiliation between Byron's poetics and a more feminised aesthetic theory. In particular, I consider the role of 'feminine Caprice' as vital to Byron's digressive mode and an important adaptation of his



eighteenth-century Popean legacy in the light of a very different sense of the readership.

Previous discussions of Byron's digressive relationship with the reader through historical self-consciousness or intertextuality exemplify similar critical procedures: the critic selects a premise for comparison and proceeds to decontextualise the modern text and Byronic text as if historical contingencies of reception might threaten critical continuity. Hermione de Almeida's linkage of Byron's and James Joyce's 'serious attempt to emulate and rival' Homeric myth typified this transcendent assumption about the stability of poetic form. 'By seeming to digress', de Almeida observes, 'Byron and Joyce show the domination of their immortal minds.'<sup>34</sup> Literary modes and figures of speech are bound to recur in later and still later works of literature, but as they reappear, they acquire different meanings which are contingent on historical contexts and the role of the reader.

Although it is an instinctive and entrancing critical gesture to trace parallels between different writers, it is of limited critical usefulness to point out that bits of Byron are like bits of Joyce, or Auden, or Nabokov, or Melville or Muldoon (although the temptation to record these resemblances remains very strong and at times, irresistible). What I think we recognise when we make such a-historical connections (the reader's version of literary allusion) is the way that certain textual manoeuvres invite contingency into the text, leaving more room for the reader within the activity of composition. To put it another way, in the process of reading, we tend to experience texts as the author's contemporary (whereas when we reflect critically on them, we place them historically). That experience of contemporaneity and historical difference is one of the most distinctive qualities of reading Byron.

This book examines, in a necessarily speculative manner, the ways in which Byron's digressive contingency is historically rooted and develops in relation to particular readers. Although Byron imagines a future readership ('But ye – our children's children! think how we / Showed *what things were* before the world was free!'), the aim of this book is not to explore what Andrew Bennett calls 'the culture of posterity', but to examine how networks of anticipated and actual reading responses affected Byron's texts at the time of composition and publication.<sup>35</sup> One context which has dominated discussion of Byronic digression since the nineteenth century is the concept of poetic *mobilité* which Byron discussed in his famous footnote about Adeline in *Don Juan* canto xvi. In subsequent criticism, however, this concept has resulted in the unifying of diverse effects under

the imprint of a biographical personality and distracting attention from the reader's experience of the 'painful and unhappy attribute'.<sup>36</sup>

Closer attention to the texture of Byron's poetry at the level of the reading experience helps to recover the dialectical relationship between Byron's readers and his mobile poetic surface. For this reason, I have chosen to focus my book on Byron's satirical works, especially *Don Juan*. Satire is a notoriously digressive mode and its hybridity was one reason Stuart Curran excluded it from his study of Romantic poetic form. Since Curran's work, however, Frederick L. Beaty, Stephen C. Behrendt, Steven E. Jones and Gary Dyer have published important studies which correct the critical neglect of satire in Romantic culture.<sup>37</sup> Building on their research, this book considers some of Byron's less well-known writing from *Fugitive Pieces* (1806), *Hours of Idleness* (1807), *Hints from Horace* (1811 and 1820–1), the *Letter to John Murray Esqre.* (1821) and *The Age of Bronze* (1823), revealing the ways in which Byron's art of digression developed in response to various readers – whether individual acquaintances, critics, or the English reading public as variously conceived between 1812 and 1823 (including the ghostly existence of an ex-readership).

My book is concerned to recover the vitality of formal matters in Byron's poetry, but this consideration of form is intended to be alert also to the contingencies of readerly participation and the historical matrices of literary composition. Andrew Elfenbein's *Byron and the Victorians* set out to 're-examine the historicity of influence' and 'to suggest how historicising the workings of influence, with particular reference to Byron, enables a rethinking of the significance of Victorian texts'.<sup>38</sup> Whereas his work offers a valuable analysis of Byron's relationship with the later nineteenth century, *Byron, Poetics and History* is more concerned with Byron's immediate impact on early nineteenth-century readers. The main focus of Elfenbein's study was writing of the inner self, so that although he successfully complicated the concept of the Byronic hero in Victorian literature, he devoted little attention to the ways in which Victorian writers received the materiality of Byron's *ottava rima* writing. In his chapter on Carlyle, for example, Elfenbein concentrated on Teufelsdröckh as a means of supplanting the Byronic hero with the character of a professional intellectual. By contrast, my book points forward to a re-examination of the 'labyrinthic combination' of *Sartor Resartus* or the 'glaciers' Ruskin found in Robert Browning's poetry, and the 'holes', 'ledges', 'bits' and 'breaks' Browning himself defended.<sup>39</sup>

In common with the earliest dedicated studies of digression in Byron's writing by E.D.H. Johnson, William T. Ross and Joel Dana Black, critics