

BYRON, POETICS AND HISTORY

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Baskerville Monotype 11 / 12.5 pt *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Stabler, Jane.

Byron, poetics, and history / Jane Stabler.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in Romanticism; 52)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 81241 0

1. Byron, George Gordon Byron, Baron, 1788–1824 – Knowledge – History.
2. Literature and history – Great Britain – History – 19th century. 3. Byron, George Gordon Byron, Baron, 1788–1824. Don Juan. 4. Historical poetry, English – History and criticism.
5. Don Juan (Legendary character) in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PR4392.H5 s73 2002

821'.7 – dc21 2002022286

ISBN 0 521 81241 0 hardback

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*‘Scorching and drenching’: discourses of digression
among Byron’s readers*

Max Beerbohm’s picture of ‘Lord Byron, shaking the dust of England from his shoes’ (1904) captures the exquisitely self-conscious turn away from the English public Byron was seen to have made in April 1816. That moment of departure also signalled a turning-point in his reputation – or so the familiar outline of his career has led us to believe. The separation scandal is usually presented as the definitive break between Byron, London society and the adulation of his English readership.¹ There is strong evidence, however, to suggest that Byron’s readers were already alert to and unsettled by this kind of behaviour, not least because his poetics of rapid transition, modulation and subversive aside raised awkward questions from the start of his career. Critical expressions of unease offer us a reader-centred view of digressive poetics and a fresh way of approaching the unique texture of Byron’s verse.²

Scholars of Byron’s and other Romantic poets’ receptions in England have, of course, noted that his work was always controversial. But they have not analysed the peculiar kinds of misgiving expressed about Byron’s poetry, nor have they traced the evolving significance of this kind of critical discourse. The extensive reviews of Byron’s publications during his lifetime are evidence that, for his contemporaries, digression covered a multitude of sins including misanthropic or political perversion, contradictory principles, sudden changes of tone, and personal or cultural allusions in a variety of shapes and forms. This broader understanding of digression, rather than the strict structuralist definition of a (usually lengthy) deviation from the narrative subject, enables us to see the mixture of aesthetic and political factors that made Byron’s poetics so disturbing for his contemporary readers. A digression may be as short as a single word in parenthesis or quotation marks or it may extend, as it did for Byron’s readers, to include most of a canto or most of a career.

One important feature of Byronic digression is that it offers its readers the experience of an encounter with awkward historical particulars

coupled with the experience of conflicting textual worlds. When Byron interrupts his verse, readers are forced to accept a new thread of poetic development, while remaining aware of the relation of this new part to an altered concept of the poetic whole. While the ideal of the whole, unified work of art had been agreed by gentlemanly consensus for most of the eighteenth century, mirroring the ideal of a benign Nature, Byron's poetry raised the possibility that this ideal construction was partial and subject to accident and human intervention. 'All is exploded – be it good or bad' (l. 9), Byron wrote in *The Age of Bronze*, indicating that the stable collective sense of an 'all' had gone as well as the content of the 'all' which made up the traditional *ubi sunt* motif.

The reception of Byron's poetry during his life was a complex affair and cannot simply be glossed as massive popularity for melancholy narratives followed by ostracism for the sociable *mobilité* of *ottava rima* verse. Contemporary reviews reveal widespread concern about the unstable compounds of tone, mood and allusions in Byron's writing from the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. This early turbulent aspect of Byron's critical reception was overshadowed in the nineteenth century by the popularisation of the Byronic hero – 'the wither'd heart that would not break' – and in the twentieth, by an emphasis on the weight of Romantic self-consciousness – 'I write, write, write, as the Wandering Jew walks, walks, walks.'³

Critical emphasis on nature, sublimity and the transcendent mind reinforced the classification of late Byron as an 'anti-Romantic' or psychological oddity. M.H. Abrams famously omitted Byron from his discussion of Romantic literature in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) 'because in his greatest work he speaks with an ironic counter-voice and deliberately opens a satirical perspective on the vatic stance of his Romantic contemporaries'.⁴ This segregation seemed natural and inevitable because it fulfilled the 'either/or' canons of criticism that had always characterised the reception of Byron's work. But Abrams need not have read Byron's irony as the 'deliberate' undermining of Romantic vision: his choice of the musical metaphor 'counter-voice' suggests the co-existence of two or more voices in juxtaposition; 'the action of placing two or more things side by side' (*OED*) offers the possibility of oscillation or simultaneity.

Byron's 'counter-voice' questioned both traditional morality agreed by social consensus and the emergent aesthetic of individual sincerity defined against society. Nineteenth-century readers feared that Byron's juxtaposition of serious and comic elements would automatically undermine

all moral seriousness including the integrity of personal and social relationships. This worry contributed to the idea of Byron's 'perversion', the term used by Francis Jeffrey to characterise the perniciously active influence of *The Giaour* over its readers:

The sterner and more terrible poetry which is conversant with the guilty and vindictive passions, is not indeed without its use both in purging and in exalting the soul: but the delight which it yields is of a less pure, and more overpowering nature; and the impressions which it leaves behind are of a more dangerous and ambiguous tendency. Energy of character and intensity of emotion are sublime in themselves, and attractive in the highest degree as objects of admiration; but the admiration which they excite, when presented *in combination* with worthlessness and guilt, is one of the most powerful corrupters and perverters of our moral nature; and is the more to be lamented, as it is most apt to exert its influence on the noblest characters. The poetry of Lord Byron is full of this perversion. (RR, B: II, p. 847; my italics)

Jeffrey used the literal and technical meaning of 'perversion' – 'to turn round or about, turn the wrong way, overturn . . . to subvert' (*OED*). His phobia about 'combination' represents the conservative fear of hybridity, doubt and 'ambiguous tendencies' which may be traced back to Old Testament injunctions against mixture: 'Thou shalt not sow thy vineyard with divers seeds . . . Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together. Thou shalt not wear a garment of divers sorts, as of woollen and linen together' (Deuteronomy 22.9–11).

In the course of Byron's poetic career, Jeffrey's very precise use of the idea of perversion was overlaid by the more generalised apprehension of moral depravity – a process which continued throughout the nineteenth century. John Addington Symonds's essay on Byron (1880) displaced the active sense of perversion in Byron's writing with the view that the poet's judgement had been 'prematurely warped' before he began to write poetry and that his 'perverse ideas' were reflexes of self-defence acquired as a child.⁵ By re-examining the first responses to Byron's poetry, we can recover the textually de-familiarising effects of digression and the ways in which it brought to a crisis the relationship between poet and reader in early nineteenth-century Britain. The rest of this chapter focuses on the cultural significance of digression in the period between the appearance of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) and the last complete cantos of *Don Juan* (1824).

Byron began his 'years of fame' with an apology for 'variation'. His first draft of *Childe Harold* involved more abrupt changes of tone, incongruous material and digressive allusions to contemporary social and

political circumstances than the version which was finally published, but the digressive tendency of what remained, even after censorship, caused a stir amongst reviewers.⁶ Their varying degrees of critical objection depended on a number of factors including the political affiliation of the periodical and its intended readership. In June 1812 the *Critical Review* (at this time moderately Whig) was one of several to question Byron's invocation of James Beattie as a model:

The use of the burlesque in this poem is, we think, not sufficiently justified by the opinion of Dr. Beattie, which the author has quoted in his preface. The general complexion of the work is serious, and even melancholy. The occasional bursts of humour are, therefore, unpleasant, as breaking in too abruptly upon the general tone of the reader's feelings. What mind can, without very disagreeable sensations, turn on a sudden from the ridiculous picture of the Convention, before alluded to, to the contemplation of the Childe Harold's melancholy mood, and again to the description of a Cockney-Sunday? The latter is, also, pourtrayed in a style of *hackneyed*, not to say vulgar, ridicule, which could not have been much relished, even in a work of lighter composition. (*RR*, B: II, pp. 616–17)

This critique reveals a subtle link between the canons of classical criticism, social class and the criteria of Christian moral judgement: 'vulgarity' or a mingling with quotidian detail is regarded as a shocking intrusion.

During Byron's lifetime, the emphasis of literary criticism was shifting away from general rules of literary taste towards an interest in the psychological effects of literature on individual readers. This shift is manifest in the critical essays of Anna Barbauld, the preface to Joanna Baillie's *A Series of Plays* (1798), and later, the Shakespearean criticism of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Hazlitt, and Thomas De Quincey. But eighteenth-century stylistic proscriptions lingered on besides the newly evolving attention to the individual. Critics like the Earl of Shaftesbury, Edmund Burke, Dr Johnson, Lord Kames, George Campbell, Sir Joshua Reynolds and James Beattie had all decreed that 'incongruity' and 'harsh combinations' were to be avoided as departures from established literary form. According to eighteenth-century critical discourse, unexpected juxtapositions – 'turning on a sudden' – would be condemned by the classically-educated reader as a lapse of decorum. For many nineteenth-century critics, in addition, abrupt juxtapositions of pathos and humour appeared as a form of social transgression that might corrupt readers – especially increasing numbers of non-classically educated women.⁷

One of the effects of Byron's writing was to bring the reader to question Johnsonian constructions of normative decorum and taste in

poetry. This clash of different cultural values is encapsulated by Maria Edgeworth's description of a party in 1822 at which *Don Juan* was read aloud by Edward Ellice – much against the better judgement of those present:

He *would* read passages of Don Juan to us and to tell you the truth the best of us & Lady Elizabeth herself could not help laughing. Lady Hannah turned her face almost off her shoulder and picked the embroidered corner almost out of her pocket handkerchief and she did *not* laugh.⁸

Edgeworth's letter offers graphic evidence – 'to tell you the truth' – of how unacceptable it was for women to share in public the humour of Byron's poem. The account of Edgeworth and 'the best of' her female companions physically struggling to suppress their laughter shows how values of order and propriety (the embroidered pocket handkerchief) came to be 'unpicked' by Byron's verse. In this instance, the force of the conflict was embodied by the strong reaction of the audience; more often, however, a sense of disjunction, of cultural values buckling under the force of poetic collision, was displaced on to Byron himself.

Voicing a Protestant, dissenting point of view in June 1812, the *Eclectic Review* regarded the asides in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* as a flaw in the Childe's characterisation:

There are, however, some inconveniences attending this arrangement of the several parts, appropriated to the author and to the hero of the poem. Sometimes the Childe forgets (accidentally, we believe,) the heart-struck melancholy of his temper, and deviates into a species of pleasantry, which, to say the truth, appears to us very flippant, and very unworthy of the person to whom it is attributed. (*RR*, B: II, p. 706)

As with Edgeworth's parenthetical 'to tell you the truth', the reviewer's effort 'to say the truth' points to an awkwardness in attempts to define reaction. Byron's 'inconvenience', his 'deviance' and 'species of pleasantry', failed to keep within eighteenth-century conventions of witty incongruity epitomised, for example, in the ultra-conservative essays of James Beattie.⁹

By contrast, the more forward-looking critic William Hazlitt's 'Essay on Wit and Humour' (1818), explored the positive aesthetic fascination of 'juxta-position':

it is the mirror broken into pieces, each fragment of which reflects a new light from surrounding objects; or it is the untwisting chain of our ideas, whereby each link is made to hook on more readily to others than when they were all bound up together by habit.¹⁰

Hazlitt's stylistic desire to escape from reactionary 'habit' was, of course, something of an anomaly and, as we shall see, Hazlitt was less sure about the value of Byronic fragmentation when it confronted him on the page rather than as an abstract idea. In 1812 readers often attributed Byron's early poetic inconsistencies to 'accidental' misjudgements rather than to a deliberate 'untwisting' of the chain of ideas. However, a hint of the instability which shadowed early readings of Byron is evident when the *Eclectic* applied to Byron what Johnson said of Dryden, that he treads 'upon the brink of meaning where light and darkness begin to mingle'.¹¹ Having quoted extensively and approvingly from *Childe Harold* to illustrate its 'beauties' the reviewer noted reluctantly that

Lord Byron labours under a very unfortunate mistake as to his gifts and qualifications as a satirist . . . Can it be believed, that the author of the passages we have quoted could write such stanzas as the following? [I. 69–70] Can any thing be more flippant than the foregoing passage? – unless, indeed, it be the ingenious personification of the imp 'Convention,' . . . or the following caustic animadversions on a book called *Ida of Athens*, the production of a Miss Owenson, who, it seems, is just now a popular writer of novels. (*RR*, B: II, p. 709)

Caught between the desire to chastise Byron for an *ad hominem* attack on a woman and the instinct to patronise a woman novelist, this reviewer identified authorial instability in *Childe Harold*. The *Edinburgh Review*, the *Critical Review* and the *Quarterly Review* all objected to 'those attacks on private feeling' in Byron's notes to the poem, joining the *Eclectic* in finding in Byron's notes 'animadversions' and incongruities which reinforced the wayward digressiveness of the poem's text.¹² Some of the poet's endnotes expressed the topical satire which Murray had advised Byron to suppress – for example the 'expressions concerning Spain and Portugal which', Murray said, 'do not harmonize with the now prevalent feeling'.¹³ Murray's sense of a consensus of 'prevalent feeling' points to a new version of the eighteenth-century 'public sphere'. This consensus of domestic 'feeling' rather than Enlightenment debate was partly the result of Britain's war with France.

Internal rupture in the shape of civil war or civil disobedience is particularly threatening when national frontiers are also at risk. As we witness in relations between press and government today, it is still deemed 'bad form' to draw attention to blunders in British foreign policy while British troops are risking their lives abroad. But this is exactly what Byron's poem did. Murray's acute audience sensitivity anticipated the risk of satiric infection in what was otherwise a very popular genre. As Gary Dyer has recently demonstrated, satire persisted throughout the Romantic period,

but it was less present in public or literary discourse than in Pope's or Swift's day. Dyer also points out that both Neo-Juvenalian and Neo-Horatian verse satires tended to support a conservative outlook either because they were anti-Jacobin or quiescent.¹⁴ Byron's satiric interruptions were therefore doubly unexpected because they turned a conservative form against the Tory government of the day.

By far the most hostile reaction to the first cantos of *Childe Harold* came from the *Antijacobin Review* in a politically-motivated attack on the 'fractious, wayward, capricious, cheerless, morose, sullen, discontented, and unprincipled' character of the Childe (*RR*, B: 1, p. 11). For this irascible reviewer, the digressiveness of anti-Establishment poet/hero fractured the poem:

We object, then, to the political prejudices, to the unpatriotic defects, and to the irreligious principles, of this bastard of the imagination. He arraigns wars, generally, and indiscriminately, confounding the just with the unjust, the defensive with the offensive, the preservative with the destructive, not with the judgment of a sage, but with the settled moroseness of a misanthrope. (*RR*, B: 1, p. 11)

As the review progressed, similar accusations were extended to Byron's style and to his politics. Byron's comparison of British and Turkish governments was dismissed as the product of 'unsettled principles and wayward mind' (*RR*, B: 1, p. 18). In the period preceding the Reform Act in 1832 the Tory press applied this tag indiscriminately to reformist Whigs like Sir Francis Burdett and Burkean radicals like William Cobbett. Its appearance in reviews of Byron's early work indicates that his style was perceived as a threat to established social hierarchies.

Just as Byron identified himself with frame-breaking in the political forum of the House of Lords, his refusal to discriminate in matters of style was equated with democratic principles, while the 'straying' plot and 'mingled' character of the hero were presented as the 'bastard' images of a liberal imagination.¹⁵ The *Antijacobin* extracted the stanzas on Cintra (l. 24–6) and quoted Byron's note with the following comment:

The loose sneers, and sarcastic remarks, which an author, who suffers no restraint from principle, may introduce in the course of a poetical narrative, where they appear to be merely *incidental*, are calculated to do more mischief, because the ordinary reader is not on his guard against them; than laboured treatises, composed for the avowed purpose of attacking the settled order of things in any state or government. (*RR*, B: 1, p. 13)

Dated August 1812, this is one of the earliest political readings of Byron's digressive poetics. It is clear that the reviewer was concerned about the

'rant of democracy' (for example l. 37–44), but his concern extends to the politics of poetic style and the seemingly 'incidental' way in which this material is introduced into poetry: 'the bard seems determined, that the delight which his genius is able to impart shall be marred by the unseasonable intrusion of his offensive sentiments' (*RR*, B: I, pp. 15; 14). For this reason, the *Antijacobin* and other reviews italicised offending phrases in their extracts of Byron's poetry, enhancing the effect of an uneven poetic surface.

Byron's sentiments were 'offensive' because they questioned British foreign policy in a genre which was usually the vehicle for patriotic celebration. From the 1790s onwards, war in Europe provided the conditions for the travel poem in English to become a vehicle of cultural consolidation in which the stimulus of different landscapes and societies introduced reflections on the preferability of home. If satire did occur in the travel poem, it was at the expense of other nations. Henry Fox, the son of Byron's Whig mentor, remarked in his diary during a stay in Italy in 1823, 'the whole object of an Englishman when once ferried over Pas de Calais is to compare every thing he sees to the diminutive objects he has passed his existence with, and to make a sort of perpetual justification of his own superiority'.¹⁶ Byron's satire in text and notes directed against British non-achievement and mis-management abroad undermined the expected ideological basis of the literary tour. Anna Barbauld provoked similar outrage when she published the satire *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*. She was accused of transgressing generic propriety by producing Juvenalian satire, but critics like J.W. Croker also responded to the shock of a 'tour' of a London fallen into ruins, cultural corruption and moral decay. For Byron's reviewers the liberal and oppositional sentiments voiced directly in his poem were reinforced by the unpredictable turnings and inconsistencies of his style.¹⁷

Byron had claimed that the first two cantos of *Childe Harold* were experimental, a comment which encouraged most reviewers to anticipate greater completion and unity in his next production. Byron thwarted their expectations by producing a 'voluntarily mutilated' composition in full knowledge of the 'general horror of fragments'.¹⁸ Besides the choice of poetic form the *Antijacobin* detected a more dangerous instability of 'ambiguity' in *The Giaour*.

It is not that any marked absence of religious or moral principle is betrayed in any particular passages; but that there is a doubt left on the reader's mind by the loose and ambiguous manner in which allusions are made, in different places, to topics of the nature referred to. (*RR*, B: I, p. 30)

Doubt is dangerous. Byron's 'ambiguity' represented a threat to the religious and political status quo. His line, 'Even bliss -'twere woe alone to bear' was particularly objectionable, noted the reviewer, because

woe and bliss are incompatible; the moment woe comes, bliss is expelled from the heart; they cannot dwell together in the human bosom. We are not converts to the justice of the poet's general position. (*RR*, B: 1, p. 34)

Again, it is the experience of simultaneity which is seen as threatening. Hostile criticism of Byron's style derived from a negative moral assessment of indeterminacy or relativism. The *Antijacobin* succeeded in associating Byron's textual 'incompatibilities' with immaturity, malice, and (eventually) madness. They were delighted to point out that Byron's dedication of *The Corsair* to Thomas Moore represented a personal *volte-face*: 'he does not condescend to state to the public one single reason for the revolution which has taken place in his sentiments . . . This is treating the public rather cavalierly' (*RR*, B: 1, p. 41). Stylistic instability could be accounted for by an author 'whose opinions and whose principles are as unsettled as the wind; and who seems to take delight only in venting the splenetic effusions of a restless, wayward, and perturbed imagination' (*RR*, B: 1, p. 41). But their obsessive depiction of these characteristics suggests that reviewers were challenged by a poetry of disparate parts which questioned the construction of a consistent whole.

The organisation of works of art very easily tilts into discussions of general principles with political implications. Aesthetic oddity or singularity may be condemned because, as John Barrell has pointed out, it 'is always the sign of an adherence to private concerns, and an imperfect awareness of one's duties to the public'.¹⁹ In the seventh *Discourse*, Sir Joshua Reynolds remarked that 'the arts would lie open for ever to caprice and casualty, if those who are to judge of their excellencies had no settled principles by which they are to regulate their decisions, and the merit or defect of performances were to be determined by unguided fancy'.²⁰ The tradition of Reynoldsian criticism is consistently and solidly opposed to whatever is capricious, variable or transient. When Byron's poetry arrived on the public scene, Reynolds's fears about instability and flimsiness were seen to be embodied in the shape of an influential author, the poet of 'distorted fancy' (*RR*, B: 1, p. 44), whose characters embodied the same offensive mingling of attributes: 'a more hideous assemblage of detestable qualities were never surely compressed before within so small a space', the reviewer noted of Conrad (*RR*, B: 1, p. 45).

This kind of 'delusive compound' (*RR*, B: 1, p. 429) was identified by William Roberts as originating from 'modern poetry and the German

drama' (*RR*, B: I, p. 415). In the oriental tales Byron's adoption of the fragment form and his continued elaboration of an aesthetic of sudden mixture or variety was received as dangerously European. The pre-eminent instance of instability and dislocation for Byron's contemporaries and succeeding generations was, of course, the French Revolution. Behind the often invoked 'law of nature' in Tory reviews of Byron's poetry stood the political and philosophical writings of Edmund Burke. In contemplating the fragmented narration of *The Giaour*, Roberts found himself reminded of 'those who, in the language of Mr. Burke, are expert in "arrangements for general confusion"' (*RR*, B: I, p. 411). As Chris Baldick has shown, Burke's characterisation of the French Revolutionary 'political monster' was immensely influential throughout the nineteenth century:

Everything seems out of nature in this strange chaos of levity and ferocity, and all sorts of crimes jumbled together with all sorts of follies. In viewing this monstrous tragi-comic scene, the most opposite passions necessarily succeed, and sometimes mix with each other in the mind; alternate contempt and indignation; alternate laughter and tears; alternate scorn and horror.²¹

Burke's political preference for an organised whole was buttressed, as we have seen, by Reynoldsian aesthetics which aligned digressive characteristics with the unnatural: 'deformity is not nature', Reynolds argued, 'but an accidental deviation from her accustomed practice'.²² The trouble was that reviewers were beginning to suspect Byron of digressing not 'by accident', but by design. Burke's account of revolutionary miscegenation consistently informed Tory criticisms of Byron's style, and was used to classify him not only with the liberal Whigs but eventually, as we shall see, with confirmed opponents of the British Establishment – Radicals and Cockneys like Leigh and John Hunt.²³

In 1815–16 the early associations of the poet's 'wayward' interruptions with a democratic inclination were inflected by his participation in the new Drury Lane Theatre project.²⁴ Byron's membership of the management sub-committee complicated his relationship with contemporary readers in several major respects: it provided Byron with new models for the whimsical or capricious digressive aside, it offered his readership an image of its own role as spectator to a performance and it also emphasised Byron's role as an oppositional Whig. Public interest in the plans to reopen and run the Drury Lane Theatre under the direction of prominent Whigs like Samuel Whitbread and Lord Holland was widespread. One hitherto unexamined outcome of the scheme was that oblique references to the politicised theatrical world filtered into

reviews of Byron's style.²⁵ Tory attacks on Drury Lane's management and mismanagement merged with responses to the public drama of Byron's separation scandal. Josiah Conder's review of *Poems* (1816) in the *Eclectic* referred to 'the mind of the artist at leisure' who 'coolly [attends] to the costume of the passions he delineates', and Conder was led to remember that

Garrick, in the most pathetic part of *King Lear*, had his mind sufficiently at leisure to observe the aspect of his audience, and to whisper, with a low oath, to a fellow actor, 'Tom, this will do.' (*RR*, B: II, p. 737)

The scandal of this anecdote comes in the combination of high passion and a 'low oath'. Indulgence in low behaviour was, of course, an aristocratic prerogative. 'One of the many advantages of birth is', Byron remarked to Lady Blessington, 'that it saves one from . . . hypocritical gentility.'²⁶ To a certain extent, Byron was licensed to use 'common thoughts' and 'common words', knowing that 'what would have been deemed originality and spirit' in him would have been condemned as 'a natural bias to vulgar habits' in writers who were not part of the same aristocratic, cosmopolitan coterie.

In May 1816 William Roberts had reviewed 'Fare Thee Well' unfavourably as 'a phenomenon [of] the gloomy-gay world', written not by 'a German, or Frenchman, or Italian, but an *Englishman*' (*RR*, B: I, p. 437). Aristocratic privilege was seen to tip over into a self-indulgence increasingly under attack from the Evangelical middle-classes which formed the readership of the *British Critic*. Roberts's disquiet only increased when he came to review *Childe Harold* canto III. Amongst the 'play and pliability of Lord Byron's genius' he found a 'foul admixture' of scenes allied to 'the sport of a tumultuous assemblage of undisciplined feelings', 'wayward temper', 'fretful moods and inconsistencies', 'discordant principles' and altogether a 'strange jumble' (*RR*, B: I, pp. 439–50). Clearly, Roberts had recognised that 'play' or 'variety' were essential constituents of Byron's poetry and he continued to read such volatility as a dangerous 'sport'. Reviewing *Manfred* in August 1817, he summarised his position:

The mischief that lurks in all Lord Byron's productions is this – they are all lying representations of human nature; they bring qualities of a most contradictory kind into close alliance; and so shape them into seeming union as to confound sentiments, which, for the sake of sound morality and social security, should for ever be kept contrasted, and at polar extremities with respect to each other . . . These representations go beyond mere contradictoriness of character; they

involve a confusion of principle, and operate very fatally and very diffusively in strengthening prejudices, which are at the bottom of our falsest estimations of men and things. (*RR*, B: 1, p. 453)

Roberts's use of the word 'diffusively' is an indication of the breadth of influence he feared Byron to have, and his point about 'social security' shows exactly the kind of disruptive, revolutionary potential that Byron's performances were believed to contain. By 1816–17 Byron's writing had acquired a reputation for 'contradictoriness' which could be traced to characterisation, plot, Byronic 'performance' and more generally as an operating principle within the text.

Beppo and the first instalment of *Don Juan* appeared as a confirmation of Byron's most unsettling traits just at the time that *ottava rima* was recommended to the English public in a smooth and palatable form. In April 1819 the *Quarterly Review* published a detailed article on 'Narrative and Romantic Poems of the Italians'. It embraced reviews of two poems: *Whistlecraft*, by John Hookham Frere and William Rose's *The Court of Beasts*.²⁷ The essay was by Ugo Foscolo but 'rendered into good English' by Francis Cohen (later Francis Palgrave).²⁸ As an authoritative account of what the nineteenth-century English reader should expect from the Italian serio-comic form, it provides a crucial context for the publication of Byron's *ottava rima* poetry.

Although the Italian model offered a precedent for mixing mood and allusion, English adapters of the same form prided themselves on their ability to tone down sudden contrasts. In discussing the poetry of Giambattista Casti, Foscolo's article argued that during the sixteenth century the spirit of chivalry could be blended with licentiousness. 'A thousand such contradictions may be found in the history of civilized society', he wrote, but he reminded his readers, 'we cannot judge of ancient decency by a modern standard'.²⁹ The satirist Casti was judged to be inappropriate for the English audience of 1819:

We may or may not be purer in our morals than our ancestors were; but it is quite evident that our taste is more chaste. It therefore becomes the duty of every writer to avoid offending delicacy; and if he sins against the feeling of the age, the genius which he prostitutes will not redeem him from contempt. ('Narrative and Romantic Poems', p. 490)

Distaste for 'such contradictions' is here seen as a mark of a more refined 'delicacy'. Rose was congratulated for having 'purified his satire' so that 'his allusions to the foibles of individuals are poignant without being ill-tempered'.³⁰ This accords with the polite preference for Horatian,

rather than Juvenalian satire recently documented by Gary Dyer, and the gradual turn away from satire as a distinct genre in the 1820s and 1830s when British culture was taming its more abrasive literary modes.³¹ Similarly, the author of *Whistlecraft* was commended for ‘uniting great playfulness with poetical dignity’:

We hope that he will be induced to continue this style in chastening and correcting the extravagant fancies of Pulci and the romantic poets. The acumen and acquirements of the man of letters, and the originality of the poet, will undoubtedly enable him to mellow and harmonize the materials which he derives from these writers, and perhaps to create a style which, while retaining the blithesomeness and ease of his models, will become completely English, and be truly naturalized by English wit and English feeling. But he must do his best to gain the suffrages of the ladies, who, in every country, and particularly in England, are, after all, the supreme arbiters of the destiny and reputation of the new poetry. (pp. 508–9)

This passage is worth quoting at length for the light it sheds on the feminisation of culture at the time: the use of Italian digressive romance is welcomed on the understanding that it is mellowed, harmonised and made respectable for the ladies. ‘English wit’, as Foscolo emphasised, was distinguished by its display of ‘correct’ morals (p. 490). This represents a considerable curbing of the energies of eighteenth-century digressive writing, and we can see how the culture of moral serenity, guarded by ‘ladies’ as the signifiers of ‘reputation’ was becoming dominant well before the Victorian period: ‘Women the ultimate Oracles of Morals’, Coleridge’s notebook records gloomily in 1804.³²

Byron’s *Beppo* was cited once in Foscolo’s article as a modern counterpart to the parodies of Niccolo Forteguerri, sharing the ability to present commonplace remarks ‘with fresh graces’.³³ Considered as a one-off in the tradition of Ariosto’s romance, the anonymous *Beppo* might appear innocuous but as soon as it was known to be by the author of *Childe Harold*, critical responses became markedly more hostile. When it reviewed *Childe Harold* canto iv in July 1818, the *Gentleman’s Magazine* objected to the way ‘Lord Byron closes a well-written preface on general topicks with a sudden plunge into politicks, painful to the admirers of the man of genius’ (*RR*, B: III, p. 1112). The abruptness of the ‘plunge’ had become so recognisable as a Byronic trope that it enabled the *Gentleman’s Magazine* to identify the author of *Beppo* a month later:

The Poem wanders on from digression to digression, occasionally pointed, or even sour and satiric, but chiefly in the easy and listless style in which verse is allowed to fashion sentiment . . . The Poem has been given to a large parentage;

but from some peculiar expressions, from its ardour in praise of foreign beauty, and its rapid turn from festivity to satire, we presume it to be Lord Byron's. (*RR*, B: III, p. 1115)

Josiah Conder suggested that the poem cohered 'by no other law than that of *juxta-position*' and returned to his picture of Byron as the disingenuous actor when he analysed the meditation on Rome in canto iv: 'in the midst of his enthusiasm, [Lord Byron] is still cool enough to be able to digress to his own domestic affairs; like the tragic actor, who, in the very paroxysm of his mimic agonies, has his feelings perfectly at leisure for a whispered joke' (*RR*, B: II, pp. 756–7).

The same sudden switches 'from festivity to satire' had led William Roberts in May 1818 to describe *Beppo* as 'a burlesque upon Lord Byron's manner . . . for the resemblance between the solemn banter, and epicurean sarcasm which mark every page of the *Childe Harold*, and the derisory ease and ironical pleasantry with which all serious things are treated in this poem of *Beppo*, is most successfully preserved' (*RR*, B: I, p. 456). Roberts objected in particular to 'little facetious, frolicsome attacks' which he saw as a dangerous species of 'French ridicule' (*RR*, B: I, p. 457). He followed this up by attacking canto iv of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* for its modern quality, 'bred out of the French revolution' and its 'most unnatural and contradictory [union of] the false philosophy of the continental schools, with all its anti-social and disorganizing principles, a creed . . . subversive of all established discipline' (*RR*, B: I, p. 462). Again we can see that the resistance to 'disorganization' adopts Burke's line on the French Revolution as something which destroyed the organic cohesiveness of society. Anything which touched on principles of organisation was received in the light of the upheaval it might cause to British social stratification.

Political objections can account for some of the outrage, but it is important to distinguish between political prejudice and the form it adopted in reviews. Byron's power to unsettle was not felt solely by the Tory critics. Hazlitt's review of *Beppo* in the *Yellow Dwarf* in March 1818, criticised 'the bitterness of the satirist' whom he depicted 'digressing from his digressions' (*RR*, B: v, p. 2335). But his criticism of *Childe Harold* canto iv went beyond mild rebuke to attack Byron for 'indigestion of the mind . . . Politically and practically speaking', Hazlitt asserted, 'a house divided against itself cannot stand' (*RR*, B: v, p. 2336). His comments here may reflect a wider concern about the messiness of opposition politics which fed, as we shall see, into Byron's digressive intertextuality in *Don Juan*. Although he discerned in the early Wordsworth a 'levelling muse', a

voice of nature which could challenge the establishment, Hazlitt found the versification and style of *Childe Harold* to be counter-productive – ‘as perverse and capricious as the method or the sentiments’ – and he objected both to the ‘alternate mixture of enthusiasm and spleen’ and to the disjointed mode of composition:

There is here and in every line an effort at brilliancy, and a successful effort; and yet, in the next, as if nothing had been done, the same thing is attempted to be expressed again with the same effort of labour as before, the same success, and with as little appearance of repose or satisfaction of mind. (*RR*, B: v, pp. 2336–8)

Hazlitt’s dislike of a ‘mass of discordant things’ (*RR*, B: v, p. 2338), here contradicts his ability to appreciate the ‘broken mirror’ brilliance of human wit. In Byron’s case he seems to have been disturbed because ‘alternate mixture’ dissipates the capacity of the human mind to be an agent of political change.

Interestingly, Hazlitt’s objections were not shared by Byron’s Whig mentor, Lord Holland who in 1818–19 was attempting to draw Byron back into moderate Whig politics (rather than Hobhouse’s reformist variety). An unpublished letter from March 1818 suggests that Holland had identified positive political action in *Beppo*:

Among many other good things in *Beppo* the excellence of your politicks ought not to be overlooked – Nothing can be worse than the system pursued since you left England – Arbitrary principles supported by the most hypocritical professions & the employment of spies to create the treason it was convenient to suppose have been resorted to by Government & sanctioned by Parliament till a positive disunion between the upper & lower classes of society seems really likely to be the consequence – In this state of things I have more than once regretted that your proxy was extinct with last session & half reproached myself with not sending you another – However I did not venture to do so till I had consulted Hobhouse whom I had expected every day but who did not arrive till lately – He tells me you would like to sign & I enclose it – It must be sealed with your arms or crest.³⁴

Holland held Byron’s proxy for the remainder of the session from 27 April 1818, but it was not renewed after that and the increasing gulf between Holland House and Byron’s politics and aesthetics will be discussed in a later chapter.³⁵ Holland’s political approval for *Beppo* suggests that he saw the conversational, digressive style of the poem as a method of countering the ‘disunion between the upper & lower classes of society’ promoted by the Tory government. Byron’s use of *ottava rima* renders

small scale accident in the texture of the poem as if to counter the larger scale uncertainties which afflict individuals under 'arbitrary' regimes. Holland's paternalistic dislike for 'positive disunion', however, follows the moral and political preference for a united whole which we have seen in Byron's other readers.

Holland's appreciation of *Beppo* was also informed by his aristocratic enjoyment of the robust wit of Dryden, Swift and Pope. Representing the conservative instincts of the more middling class of readers, John Murray expressed pleasure in Byron's new medley style through a conventional analogy with Shakespeare's changeability, but his letter also reveals a thinly veiled anxiety:

Mr. Frere is at length satisfied that you are the author of 'Beppo'. He had no conception that you possessed the protean talent of Shakespeare, thus to assume at will so different a character. He, and every one, continues in the same very high opinion of its beauties. I am glad to find that you are disposed to pursue this strain, which has occasioned so much delight. (Smiles, *A Publisher and His Friends*, 1, p. 393)

Murray then added cautiously 'Do you never think of prose?' He was inclined, perhaps, to be wary of Byron's protean potential. As we shall see in Chapter Three, Murray attempted in vain to steer Byron's digressiveness into a more commodifiable form while friends like Douglas Kinnaird enjoyed Murray's discomfort. Meanwhile, in the *Quarterly Review* Foscolo's taste-shaping essay was followed by an advertisement for new poetic publications. The anonymous final entry was '*Don Juan* 4to. 11. 11s. 6d.'³⁶ Byron's notorious poem arrived on the public scene at the very moment when *ottava rima* had been recommended to English readers in a 'naturalized' verse form. It was doomed never to gain 'the suffrages of the ladies'.

The consternation of Byron's friends and publisher when they read *Don Juan* has been well-documented. But an important response to the first cantos, not widely known, is contained in a letter to John Murray by Francis Cohen postmarked 16 July 1819 which Murray shared with Byron. Cohen was a trusted adviser who had been a regular contributor to the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly* (including his translation of Foscolo's article on Italian narrative poetry discussed above). Coming from someone who had experience of Italian verse, the letter allows us to see why Byron's contradictions were regarded as a departure from both English and Italian precedent. 'Like Shakespeare', Cohen wrote, 'he shows that

his soul can soar well into the seventh heaven & that when he returns into this body he can be as merry as if sublimity ne'er was known.':

but Lord B. should have been grave & gay by turns; grave in one page & gay in the next; grave in one stanza, & gay in the next; grave in one line, & gay in the next. And not grave & gay in the same page, or in the same stanza, or in the same line. – If he had followed <Pulci more closely> Ariosto more closely, he would have produced a masterpiece & not a sport of fancy. Nothing can be better calculated to display the talent of a great poet, than a composition admitting of a ready transition from fun & drollery to sublimity & pathos, but then they must be interchanged, they must not be mixed up together: they must be kept distinct – though contemplated jointly. If we stand on a mountain we gladly view a storm beating on one side of the horizon & dark clouds impending & the sun shining bright & calm in the other quarter of the heavens, but we are never drenched & scorched at the same instant whilst standing in one spot.³⁷

In correcting his mention of Pulci and substituting the name of Ariosto, Cohen is following the English preference for romance over satire. His letter to Murray tells us that it is the frequency of Byron's transitions which disturbed contemporary readers: to change tone 'by turns' (of the page) would have been acceptable but transitions which threaten proper tonal segregation are not. Cohen's tactile 'drenched & scorched' metaphor emphasises that, like other readers, he was responding to a surface texture, not to metaphysical depths.

There have been several studies of the reception of *Don Juan* in England but the obsessive critical preoccupation with the poem's surface texture and its relationship with Byron's earlier poems has been overshadowed by the poem's content. A few early reviewers felt that the satiric strain of the poem licensed its heterogeneous mixture. One writer for the *Literary Gazette* applauded the 'singularly felicitous mixture of burlesque and pathos', and used a Shakespearean image to characterise Byron's genius: 'like the dolphin sporting in its native waves, however grotesque, displaying a new hue and a new beauty, the noble author has shewn an absolute controul over his means' (*RR*, B: IV, pp. 1412; 1410). Such 'control', however, soon came to be seen as threatening. Contemporary criticism of the poem built on the patterns of inconsistency which had been perceived in Byron's writing since 1812, and which were recognised as threats to Burkean and, later, Coleridgean organic principles of criticism:

the occasional profanity which defiled his graver, and the indecency which stained his lighter productions, are here embodied in the compactness of a

system, and have been madly exalted from their station as humble though repulsive accessories of his theme, to be its avowed end, purpose and consummation. (*RR*, B: II, p. 799)

It was the suspicion of a 'system' at work which caused much of the hostility. As David Simpson has shown, the aversion to 'systems' often came from a Tory suspicion of abstraction and theory associated with the French Revolution.³⁸ This prejudice was usually combined with a celebration of English (Shakespearean) irregularity, but Byron's systematised disorder confounded national stereotypes. Far from finding a humane Shakespearean plurality when they encountered Byron's poetic irregularity at close quarters, reviewers decried his methodical process of 'degrading' human experience. Blame was frequently attached to Byron's distance from his readers and his own work as if, like Stephen Dedalus's artist, he could be seen 'indifferent, paring his fingernails'.³⁹ 'Byron' became a signifier for a paradoxical mixture of extreme separateness from society, an aloof and isolated authorship together with a textual experience of simultaneity, or contradictory areas of experience '[jumbled] in one undistinguished mass' (*RR*, B: III, p. 1181). It is as if readers felt Byron to be in a realm of untrammelled space beyond his poems while they were relegated to an urban existence of crush and clamour. William Roberts, for example, argued that the poem's simultaneity destroyed the possibility of readerly empathy:

it delights in extracting ridicule out of its own pathos. While it brings the tears of sympathy into the eyes of the reader . . . a heartless humour immediately succeeds, showing how little the writer participates in the emotion he excites. Skilful to play upon another's bosom, and to touch with mysterious art the finest chords of sensibility himself, he is all the while an alien to his own magical creation. (*RR*, B: I, p. 490)

The poet's detachment was recurrently contrasted with the reader's baffled experience of palpable disjunction. The fame of Byron's misanthropical heroes, however, has since overshadowed the way in which the style of the poem itself was felt to be misanthropical.

Don Juan was regarded as a work of deliberate provocation by evangelical Tories like Roberts, but – surprisingly, perhaps – also by educated liberals and reformists. In the circle of writers that included Leigh Hunt and John Keats, for example, there is evidence of strong resistance to Byron's mingled style. On 20 September 1819 Richard Woodhouse (who may be taken as a barometer of taste for educated readers with strong

liberal sympathies) wrote to John Taylor about Keats's proposed alterations to 'The Eve of St Agnes':

[Keats] has altered the last 3 lines to leave on the reader a sense of pettish disgust, by bringing Old Angela in (only) dead stiff & ugly. – He says he likes that the poem should leave off with this Change of Sentiment – it was what he aimed at, & was glad to find from my objections to it that he had succeeded. – I apprehend he had a fancy for trying his hand at an attempt to play with the reader, & fling him off at the last – I shd. have thought, he affected the Don Juan style of mingling up sentiment & sneering; but that he had before asked Hessey if he cod. procure him a sight of that work, as he had not met with it, and if the 'E. of St A.' had not in all probability been altered before his Lordship had thus flown in the face of the public.⁴⁰

Keats may have adopted a Byronic mode to forestall criticism of his work as weak and sentimental: he was determined to write 'for men' and *Don Juan*, as Moyra Haslett has recently pointed out, 'was addressed conspiratorially to masculine intimates, but was not unaware that women would overhear'.⁴¹

Under the cover of concern about how the poem might threaten female readers, Byron's reviewers also expressed fear of an invidious feminine style. The image of the prostituted muse combined allegations of Byron's 'perversion' or degradation of his genius with earlier responses to his imaginative fertility. The *British Critic*, for example, created the image of a 'non-descript goddess' presiding over *Don Juan*:

In the first canto we saw her elegant, highly talented, and graceful, and lamented her deflection from virtue. We can trace her subsequently through each stage of deterioration, till we find her a camp-follower at Ismail, still possessing allurements of a coarse and sensual sort, and though thoroughly depraved, full of anecdote and adventurous spirit . . . her conversation a mixture of metaphysical scraps picked up in the course of her former education; with broader slang and more unblushing indecency, than she had as yet ventured upon. (*RR*, B: 1, pp. 339–40)

Reviewers had hinted before at a feminine prolixity in Byron's style: 'The muse of Lord Byron is so extremely prolific, that if she does not actually bring forth *Twins*, her offspring succeed each other with such wonderful rapidity, that it becomes almost impracticable to complete the examination of the beauties and deformities of one, before another bursts upon us.'⁴² A feminine mutability had been detected in his digressive characteristics, and this was confirmed by the triviality of *Beppo* which Jeffrey called 'a mere piece of lively and loquacious prattling . . . upon all kinds of frivolous subjects, – a sort of gay and desultory babbling'

(RR, B: II, p. 889). *Don Juan*, however, extended fickle caprice into harlotry and the concept of the prostituted muse led to criticism of the increasing 'infection' of the poem (RR, B: IV, p. 1426).

What prompted this violent dislike was the fear that *Don Juan* could nihilistically undermine all political and philosophical positions. The radical publisher William Hone protested about the 'character' of the poem, claiming in 1819 that *Don Juan* 'keeps no terms with even the common feelings of civilized man . . . It wars with virtue, as resolutely as with vice.'⁴³ Hone's troubled response parallels that of Byron's friend Hobhouse who criticised 'the whole turn of the poem' because he felt that those opposing the corruption of the Establishment should uphold an unimpeachable moral standard.⁴⁴ While classically educated aristocrats might enjoy the wit of the poem, they could not cope with the politics of *Don Juan* and the liberals and radicals who might have welcomed the politics were thrown by the poem's asides on religious and moral codes. The poem was indeed 'non-descript'.

The perversion of national genius by hybrid foreign influences was, of course, increasingly threatening to an imperial power. Byron's *Don Juan* recalled the protean variations of Shakespeare without the security of English national pride: 'it is true', wrote William Roberts,

that this existence is a medley of joy and sorrow, close upon each other's confines; and that moral and pathetic representations of life in prose or verse proceeding in correspondence with the reality, admit of being chequered by grave and gay, pensive and playful moods; but they must not be suffered to run into one another and disturb each other's impressions. Sorrow is engrossing – nor can the heart at the same time lend itself to two opposite emotions. (RR, B: I, p. 490)

Roberts attempted to distinguish between a just imitation of the varied human lot and Byron's world of contradiction where constant collisions and qualifications of experience led to a sense that no stable emotional states existed. In the background of this criticism is Johnson's appreciation of Shakespeare which provided a pattern for acceptable mixture. Shakespeare's plays, according to Johnson, exhibit 'the real state of sublunary nature':

which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and expressing the course of the world, in which the loss of one is the gain of another; in which, at the same time, the reveller is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend; in which the malignity of one is sometimes defeated by the frolick of another; and many mischiefs and many benefits are done and hindered without design.⁴⁵