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Introduction

> The Eastern Gate, fourfold: terrible & deadly its ornaments:
> Taking their forms from the Wheels of Albions sons; as cogs
> Are formd in a wheel, to fit the cogs of the adverse wheel.
> William Blake, *Jerusalem*, Chapter 1

While no one has ever questioned Byron's immense historical and cultural significance – though many have deplored it – the eminence of his poetry and poetics has been controversial. Wordsworth and Keats were among the first distinguished witnesses for the prosecution just as Blake, Scott, and Shelley had a different view.

Understandably, *Don Juan* has shaped the recovery of Byron the Poet over the past fifty and more years. But the poetic character of the rest of the work is regularly obscured by *Don Juan*'s celebrity. This is unfortunate, especially for the poetry that established his international influence – the verse from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: A Romaunt* (1812) through the Oriental Tales to *Manfred* (1817). In key respects, those works are more impressive than the *ottava rima* masterpieces: for better and for worse, more driven, perhaps more dangerous, mostly less urbane.

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Indeed, *Don Juan* is such a spectacular performance one might take it for that "thing of words" Byron most despised, poetical Cant, written merely to "tak[e] the tone of the time."

> The truth is that in these days the grand "primum mobile" of England is *Cant* – Cant political – Cant poetical – Cant religious – Cant moral – but always *Cant* – multiplied through all the varieties of life. – It is the fashion – & while it lasts – will be too powerful for those who can only exist by taking the tone of the time – I say *Cant* – because it is a thing of words – without the smallest influence on human actions – the English being no wiser – no better – and much poorer … than they were before the prevalence of this verbal decorum.[1]

Of course *Don Juan* can be and has been read as such, and of course it most definitely takes the tone of its time. But its seductive charms are cunning and even dangerous because, though a mere "thing of words," it threatens an "influence on human actions."

That is why, though he could not know it at the time, from 1809 to 1817, Byron was in training for *Don Juan*'s insidious ways. It is also why, if we want to see what is happening in the earlier work, we have to pay the same kind of close attention to the language and versification of those years as we do to that of *Don Juan*. Early and late, as Bernard Beatty has suggested, Byron's verse is "addressed to the understanding."[2] By that he did not mean, any more than Goethe meant when he urged the same view, that Byron is a poet of ideas. He is not; he is rather what G. Wilson Knight once called him, a poet of action, of engaged performance.[3] His language and versification are not deployed to deliver ideas but to provoke and unsettle his readers.

Unworking (and mixing and confusing) a set of foundational literary forms – satire, lyric, narrative, and finally drama – Byron's poetry from 1812 forward was announcing a tectonic shift in what literature and especially poetry could or might do. With *Don Juan*, readers could see that no subject or language was out of bounds and, more pointedly, that both should be ready to take on any

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point of view, including views that Byron opposed. Under the regime of *Don Juan* – "born for opposition" – poetic forms had to answer the calls of Contradiction. So one directive takes the measure of the game's rules and moves:

> In play there are two pleasures for your choosing,
> The one is winning and the other, losing.
> (*Don Juan*, XIV. 12)[4]

The poetry of the Years of Fame laid the foundation for that poetical agenda, but it laid in a stony poetics of loss and defeat. Not that *Don Juan* tells a different story: flashing its way "o'er a waste and icy clime" (*Don Juan* VII. 2), the poem was dancing Juan to his execution during the Reign of Terror, an ending he may have forecast in the death of Haidee. Childe Harold's first pilgrimage is a tale of more urgent failures – from its outgoing fiasco, linguistic and personal, to its final home desolations – and the following five tales are all flights to disaster. But they are also pleasure domes and romantic chasms because their afflictions are laid in meticulous if also bewildering prosodies. The reader's mind is affected – pleasured – by being led through fields of carefully measured disorder.[5]

This is not verse composed as a mirror or a lamp, though it does both represent and reveal the world. It is rather a "mental net" poetics (*Lara* I. 381), its language woven and then broadly cast to snare and take minds "bred in darkness [and] unprepared" (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* IV. 127) to deal with their condition. Rigorously alienated throughout its content and medium, the verse proposes a new contract based in ruthless sympathy. It assumes that the available poetic resources, the mirrors and the lamps, regularly fail to bring themselves to more than sentimental judgment about what they do.

Sentimental judgment would lead Keats though a long poem that tries to persuade us "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever." Hearing him recite from it in 1818, Wordsworth called the effort – cruelly, if

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not untruly – "a pretty piece of paganism," and soon enough Keats would himself be glossing it "forlorn."[6] That judgment – it will pervade Keats's verse – would perhaps never have achieved its depth or complexity had he not put his dream of deathless beauty to the sore trial of *Endymion*.

Because Wordsworth's sentiment of beauty underwent (much earlier) a similar trial, he might have been less carping about Keats. From 1797 forward, this was the poetic tale that dominated nearly everything he wrote:

> We poets in our youth begin in gladness,
> But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.
> ("Resolution and Independence," 48–49)

We marvel at the many poignant ways he found to play out that story just as we marvel at the famous summary he gave them all: "Not without hope we suffer and we mourn" ("Elegiac Stanzas," 60). That turned out the refrain of a song Wordsworth sang "As if that song could have no ending" ("The Solitary Reaper," 26). "As if"; "Not without hope": those uncertain codes get reconceived each time they are run, from "Michael" through *The Prelude* to *The White Doe of Rylstone* and beyond.

I summarize this familiar myth of Romantic passage because Byron's is so different: from despondency and even madness, Byron moves to the gay science of *Don Juan*. Now we regularly use the latter to take the measure of what came before, as if Byron spent ten years trying to unlearn an inheritance of spurious versifying. But if we take that line, we will start at a deficit of attention that his contemporaries – admirers and detractors both – did not have because Byron's art – *Beppo* and *Don Juan* as much as *Childe Harold* or *The Giaour* – gave them no peace. Whatever else we might think of Byron's poetry of 1809–1816, it is plainly every bit as deliberated as *Don Juan*. Early and late, Byron never lets his

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readers forget that he has them in his sights and writes to demand their attention.

Take a notable passage from *The Giaour*. Byron wrote poetry as fine as this, but he rarely wrote anything better, and, in *Don Juan*, very little as powerful. It pays if you pay attention.

****

The Mind, that broods o'er guilty woes,
  Is like the Scorpion girt by fire,
In circle narrowing as it glows
The flames around their captive close,
Till inly search'd by thousand throes,
  And maddening in her ire,
One sad and sole relief she knows,
The sting she nourish'd for her foes,
Whose venom never yet was vain,
Gives but one pang, and cures all pain,
And darts into her desperate brain. –
So do the dark in soul expire,
Or live like Scorpion girt by fire;
So writhes the mind Remorse hath riven,
Unfit for earth, undoom'd for heaven,
Darkness above, despair beneath,
Around it flame, within it death!

****

(*The Giaour*, 422–438)

Start with the evidence of those asterisks, which interrupt *The Giaour*'s narrative twenty-six times.[7] The poem is a notoriously difficult read and the asterisks are largely responsible, signaling as they do the presence of a catastrophic textual loss pervading Byron's "Fragment of a Turkish Tale." What we are reading – we only learn this in the poem's last note – is his (invented) memorial reconstruction of a modern epic he heard by chance in a Levantine coffeehouse in 1810–1811. This passage is a parody of an epic simile – as it happens, one of three in the poem – and *The*

Giaour is a narrative elegy for the loss of poetry in England and Europe, with Homeric verse offered as the emblematic measure of the loss.

Because these two sets of asterisks are the seventh and eighth the poem has thrown out, we are familiar with the incomprehension they come to declare. But we are not reconciled to it. On the contrary, each time they appear, they serve to unnerve us once again, a remorseless reminder and revival of the poem's long-drawn-out torment of reading. Most immediately, these two become typographical signs of a specific disfunction, reflecting the reflection of the disordered "Mind" – brooding, remorseful, guilty – that the simile considers. But as all *The Giaour*'s asterisks strip the poem of crucial explanatory context, we are here dislocated from the simile's point of reference.

The passage follows immediately upon a long section (398–421), also asterisk-framed, that introduces the first of the poem's epic similes, a meditation on what Byron's note identifies as "The blue-winged butterfly of Kashmeer." Only as we get further into the poem do we recall both similes as fractured figurations of the star-crossed lovers Leila and the Giaour, but then we also come to realize they resonate much further. Leila and that butterfly are explicitly a seductive "Beauty" (396), and the subject of the scorpion passage is more than precisely the Giaour. The poem's paratactic structure – think of *The Waste Land* – sends us prying much further into its textual abyss. This Mind is equally Byron's in his tale's first-person introduction, bent over the corpse of Greece. It is also the narrator's of the original Turkish Tale, and it is the minds of all the speakers that narrator ventriloquizes. And perhaps most of all it becomes a simile of the reader's mind who has been drawn into a sympathetic relation with a poem explicitly organized to bewilder us with questions that are raised up and left hanging. (Why is Mind gendered female? For that matter, and thinking forward to *Don Juan*, why is Truth [*Don Juan* XV. 88]?)

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Or consider closely the legendary figuration that is the focus of the passage. The scorpion has not been tossed into the ring of fire by some sadic agent. The tormented Mind is not the scorpion; it is the fire-ringed scorpion being "inly searched" by its own fiery pain. But when that figure lifts its thought to the desperate hope of suicidal relief (428–433), the verse turns sharply away, closing with a pair of couplets that shut off the remarkable music (422–434) that plays with its three repeating rhymes: woes, fire, vain. That finale designs for this closing Mind a closed placeless space ("above, beneath, around, within"), "Unfit for earth" (clearly) but also – what could it mean? – "undoomed for heaven." "Undoomed"?

The prosody is turning an adverse wheel against the poem's obdurate figurations, unbuilding it for his readers from a thoughtful music perhaps more dreadful – certainly more sharply defined – than Tennyson's city built to music. Setting an example of thoughtfulness for his reader, Byron steps away to add an explanatory prose note:

> Alluding to the dubious suicide of the scorpion, so placed for experiment by gentle philosophers. Some maintain that the position of the sting, when turned toward the head, is merely a convulsive movement; but others have actually brought in the verdict "Felo de se." The scorpions are surely interested in a speedy decision of the question; as, if once established as insect Catos, they will probably be allowed to live as long as they think proper, without being martyred for the sake of an hypothesis.
>
> (*CPW* III. 418)

Oddly – subtly – that enlightened pose has recharged Byron's dark simile. In *Don Juan*, Byron will lift that kind of footnote-aside out of prose *recitative* and recompose it as digression. Each of those two kinds of poetic move is very different and many now would judge *Don Juan*'s digressive style more artful, as perhaps it is. But *The Giaour*'s resort to this ironical prose note leaves the reader in a far more disturbed poetic field. Because that enlightened

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commentary is clearly – too clearly – posed, the poetic tale itself is set more free to display and explore its sinister ways.

It is a nice question which to prefer: the beauty of *The Giaour*'s inflections, or the beauty of *Don Juan*'s innuendoes. That is the question I want to raise in this little book. I'll confess right now that, on Mondays, Wednesday, and Fridays, I incline one way, on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, another. I rest on Sundays.