

**‘A wilderness of the most rare conceits’: Imagining politics in the English cantos  
of *Don Juan***

**Michael O’Neill**

But politics, and policy, and piety,  
Are topics which I sometimes introduce,  
Not only for the sake of their variety,  
But as subservient to a moral use (*DJ* 15.737-40).

The statement presents us with Byron as ringmaster of his themes, so many circus animals to be put through their paces and cajoled or commanded into displaying both their ‘variety’ and capacity for ‘use’. ‘Moral’, like many of Byron’s interventions into the arena of values, surrounds itself with ‘intonational quotation marks’,<sup>1</sup> to apply Bakhtin’s indispensable phrase. If Byron has implied that he is prepared to stoop and moralize his song when politics is concerned, to put a stop to any meekness or show of balanced impartiality ‘to show John / Bull something of the lower world’s condition’ (*DJ* 15.733-4), his manner in the stanza quoted above (93) is self-mockingly at odds with any polemical or homiletic matter. The spluttering plosives turn ‘moral use’ to putty, yet putty which Byron can reshape in surprising ways.

Stanza 93 reinstates the poet’s right to be at odds with himself since it lowers the polemical temperature after the explosion of political feeling at the close of stanza 92: ‘It makes my blood boil like the springs of Hecla, / To see men let these scoundrel Sovereigns break law’ (*DJ* 15.735-6). Byron’s hostility in this couplet is, tellingly, twofold: it is directed not only at ‘these scoundrel Sovereigns’, favourite butts of his

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<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 76.

contempt, but also at the fact that ‘men let’ them ‘break law’. The Shelleyan view that political tyranny takes two to tango finds its way into Byron’s verse. Shelley plays the dangerous but effective game of taunting those locked in the tyrant/slave struggle with the near-gibing use of these terms in close proximity: so he speaks in *Laon and Cythna* of how

they all pined in bondage: body and soul,  
 Tyrant and slave, victim and torturer, bent  
 Before one Power, to which supreme control  
 Over their will by their own weakness lent,  
 Made all its many names omnipotent (2.730-4).<sup>2</sup>

Shelley’s abstractions, ‘bent’ into intellectual submission by a syntax that understands self-abnegation, participate in an ensnaring process, as a result of which surrender of ‘will’ gives individuals their roles of ‘Tyrant and slave’. Oppression’s dismal script involves un-inventing one’s individuality, and Shelley’s diction sardonically mirrors ways in which human beings, with supine conformity, hand their independence over to a self-created ‘Power’.

Byron makes a comparable point in a different, more humorous manner. His typically attention-drawing rhyme of ‘Hecla’ and ‘break law’ tempers any possible stridency, and makes a performance out of political stance-taking. The dynamic of assertion, followed by qualification and imbued with self-mocking humour, raises the question whether Byron’s politics in *Don Juan* and, particularly, in the English cantos (11-17), add up to more than exhibitionist role-playing. It is this essay’s contention that they do, and do so, not by issuing from some final position above and beyond the text, but by ceaselessly monitoring their mode of utterance.

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<sup>2</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ Shelley, *Major Works* ~~160-xxx~~ PLEASE GIVE THE PAGE REFERENCE.

Nowhere is this more apparent than his treatment of ‘contradiction’. The word, rhyming with fiction, is the object of satire, albeit tinged with conscious self-incrimination, in a manner analogous to the treatment of the ‘sad trimmer’ poet of canto 3 (649).<sup>3</sup> It is also the condition of self-aware virtue:

If people contradict themselves, can I  
     Help contradicting them, and every body,  
 Even my veracious self? – But that’s a lie;  
     I never did so, never will – how should I?  
 He who doubts all things, nothing can deny;  
     Truth’s fountains may be clear – her streams are muddy,  
 And cut through such canals of contradiction,  
 That she must often navigate o’er fiction (*DJ* 15.697-704).

The lines move with a spry, despondent energy. The opening may look like mere logic-chopping wordplay, the poet playfully undoing his own undoings. But Byron, typically, excuses ‘contradicting’ oneself and holds it in complicated tension with what he calls ‘my veracious self’. Byron’s ‘veracious self’ is both a self that does and does not contradict itself, as well as ‘them, and every body’. ‘Contradicting’ is being contrary for the sake of contrariness, but it is also the natural stance of one who stands up to others. The phrasing implies a link between the vacillating self-contradictor and the rebel who is ‘born for opposition’ (*DJ* 15.176). At the same time, there is a flicker of comedy in that ‘every body’, as though the speaker were compelled to differ with others like an argumentative automaton. ‘But that’s a lie’ mimics such an impulse to quarrel, even with himself, even if the speaker is quarrelling with the idea that he is

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<sup>3</sup> See McGann, ‘Book of Byron’ 844, on the ‘palimpsest’ of presences located in the figure of the “sad trimmer” poet’.

prone to quarrel with himself. 'I never did so, never will – how should I?' **Byron** seeks to twist out of the labyrinth entered into by the Cretan Liar, who affirms that all men are liars and expects to be believed, through his emphasis on his own integrity, an emphasis that simultaneously offers itself as self-parodic.

**Comment [RB1]:** Not quite the point of Zeno's paradox, to which B does somewhere, I think, allude explicitly? (The original point is that you can't tell whether to believe the Cretan or not.) But the allusion seems to be to the Cretan liar -- my explanation of that paradox seems, in context, OK to me, but have cut since it seems to be unclear to you.

Quoting the stanza, James Chandler surmises that 'the poem is too quick to take refuge in the charm of contradiction'.<sup>4</sup> But the writing sallies forth as much as it takes refuge. The second half of the stanza mounts a spirited defence of 'doubt' and proposes an ambiguous alliance between 'Truth's fountains' and 'fiction' over which, as over a sea, truth must 'navigate'. 'He who doubts all things, nothing can deny' puts scepticism in its place, making the sceptic the dupe of credulity, and unlocking doors that lead towards belief by means of 'multiple possible understandings'.<sup>5</sup> As it cuts through 'canals of contradiction', 'truth' is both that which 'cuts through; in the sense of 'realizes the insufficiency of' and that which 'cuts through' in the sense of that 'makes its passage by means of'. 'Canals' is a word that implies waterways created or at least enhanced by human beings ~~rather than natural bodies of water~~, as Byron will have known from his experience of Venice, and thus suggests, at least in part, human responsibility for what is harmful and what is helpful about contradiction.

**Comment [RB2]:** Byron, with his experience of Venice, may not have seen it quite that way? Thanks –see rewrite

The stanza enacts a series of ambivalent defences: of 'fiction' as a device employed by the pursuer of 'truth', of contradiction as a means of shorting up the veracious self, of the veracious self as incapable of self-contradiction. It dramatizes, as *Don Juan* so often does, the very process by which any judgement can be made, tracing the process to its roots in ontology and metaphysics. Byron carries his penchant for philosophizing with zestful relish, but it is clear that his poetry conceives of its address to politics as covering and issuing from a responsiveness to the enigma

**Comment [KC3]:** Should this be 'shoring up'? Than ks

<sup>4</sup> Chandler, *England* 388.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson, *Byron's Philosophy* 179.

of being human as much as to topicalities. Stanza 89 of canto 15 offers Byron's own defence of poetry; if Shelley saw 'All high poetry' as 'infinite', capable of working in unexpected ways on successive generations thanks to the 'new relations' their cultural specificities made possible,<sup>6</sup> Byron argues that

Apologue, fable, poesy, and parable,  
                   Are false, but may be render'd also true  
 By those who sow them in a land that's arable.  
                   'Tis wonderful what fable will not do!  
 'Tis said it makes reality more bearable:  
                   But what's reality? Who has its clue?  
 Philosophy? No; she too much rejects.  
 Religion? *Yes*; but which of all her sects? (*DJ* 15.705-12).

Poesy and the rest 'Are false', the second line asserts, but 'may be render'd also true'. It is into the territory of 'contradiction' that poetic fiction takes us, into a dimension where 'parable' can coexist with, even, thanks to the inventive turns of comic rhyme, turn into 'a land that's arable'.

What ensues falls back on, yet questions, the Johnsonian idea that 'The only End of writing is to enable the Readers better to enjoy Life, or better to endure it'.<sup>7</sup> Where Byron differs from his forbear lies in his giving full rein to doubt-ridden questioning, 'But what's reality', he asks, 'Who has its clue?' And yet (a construction often enjoined on the critic by Byron's mode), the second question, there, tempers the absolute scepticism implied by the first, since 'Who has its clue?' is at once dismissive and open-ended, the latter quality leading into the consideration of 'Philosophy' and 'Religion' as potential guides. Those guides are invoked only to be

<sup>6</sup> Shelley, *Major Works*, 'A Defence of Poetry' 693.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, 'Review of Soame Jenkyns' 23.

set aside – Philosophy, one notes, with more decisiveness than Religion – and remind the reader, as the whole passage does, of the ways in which Byron’s self-cancellings, turns on a statement, metaphysical plate-spinning, and scepticism about scepticism increasingly absorb his creative attention without dulling his relish for realities.

By this stage in the poem, thinking about thinking results in virtuoso rehearsals of a problem that wants to be a paradox and ends up as a conundrum. How can a fiction tell the truth, especially about the here and now, or, indeed, the there and then of English society and politics? In canto 16, Byron returns to the ‘contradiction’ and ‘fiction’ dynamic, but he does so this time, as he begins his shrewdest delineation of English manners, with a jaunty self-assertiveness:

But this I must say in my own applause,  
Of all the Muses that I recollect,  
Whate’er may be her follies or her flaws  
In some things, mine’s beyond all contradiction  
The most sincere that ever dealt in fiction (*DJ* 16. 9-16).

The self-congratulation may be self-mocking, even as the mock-humility (the reference to ‘follies’ and ‘flaws’) forms a kind of boast. But the poetry is affirming its worth as well sending itself up when Byron speaks of his Muse as he does in the last line and a half. Byron now uses ‘contradiction’ in a more conversational, less philosophical, way than he employed the word in the previous canto. The doubts of that canto give way to the assertions of this one, in which we are reminded of the poem’s capacity for enlivening description as Byron goes on in the next stanza to say:

And as she treats all things, and ne’er retreats  
From any thing, this Epic will contain  
A wilderness of the most rare conceits,

**Comment [RB4]:** read more naturally – OK? Fine.

Which you might elsewhere hope to find in vain (*DJ* 16.17-20).

The passing from 'treats all things' into 'ne'er retreats / From any thing' has a rapid bravado that is verbally clever and affecting in its intensification of the guarded self-assertions that characterize the canto's opening. It manages, in little, to capture the attitude to reality which gives Byron's poetry its power in the realm of politics. This is a poem that does, indeed, 'treat all things', to the degree that any poem can ever be said to do so; the claim that it 'ne'er retreats / From any thing' is warranted, too.

The 'wilderness' on which Byron trains his gaze in canto 16 is not an exotic elsewhere. Indeed, the word highlights an opposition between the 'the most rare conceits' of which the poet-jester is capable, and the tame and tamed society at which they are directed. The canto describes a return to what feels like home, the fallen Tory-Whig Eden of Norman Abbey,<sup>8</sup> presided over by Lord Henry Amundeville, whom we see 'Burrowing for boroughs like a rat or rabbit' (*DJ* 16.602): a simile which casually knocks the noble peer from the 'perpendicular' (*DJ* 14.568) stance that he is said, with a possible hint of threatened sexual impotence, invariably to keep.<sup>9</sup> Here the rarity of Byron's conceit lies in its unexpected sharpness, its descent from urbane detachment into biting sarcasm, its further proof of what Jane Stabler terms 'the liberating valency enjoyed throughout by the narrator'.<sup>10</sup> Lord Henry, patrician in his manner, never losing face, looks foolish in the glare shone by Byron's repartee, which finds further occasion for amusement in hitting on rhymes for rabbit: 'the Scotch Earl of Giftgabbit' (16.604) and 'the Honourable Dick Dicedrabbitt'

<sup>8</sup> See *PC*, note to canto 16, stanza 70 and the phrase '*Other Interest*' (*DJ* 16.607), where Cochran states that 'the supposed distinction is between Whig and Tory, but B. nowhere says which Sir Henry is [because ...] the two are identical, offering voters no choice'. This lack of a distinction may hold true so far as 'Giftgabbit' (16.604) and 'Dicerabbit' (16.606) are concerned. But B would seem still to maintain an at least vestigial loyalty to the Whig cause (see *DJ* 11.631-2).

<sup>9</sup> See Sha, *Perverse Romanticism* 250.

<sup>10</sup> Stabler, *Byrons* 149.

(16.606). Anticipating Dickens's practice, names are mockingly revealing, here suggesting the illicit parcelling out of gifts and the practice of dicing (either gambling or divvying up).

**Comment [RB5]:** dividing up? Stet – want the slangy corrupt suggestion of 'divvying'?

Here as elsewhere, Byron out-aristocrats the aristocracy, asserting his membership of it in the same breath, yet also his access to a view from some other place. His stanzas on Lord Henry have a novelist's fascination with the stories that the character tells of himself. The narrative effect, for example, of canto 16, stanzas 70 to 77, only comes into clear focus, when, at the start of 77, Byron makes clear that most of what we have just read can be thought of as spoken by Henry in his electioneering at the hustings: 'All this (save the last stanza) Henry said, / And thought', adding, 'I say no more – I've said too much' (*DJ* 16.657-8): an addition that alerts us to the way in which the voices of narrator and Henry interweave, as the former plays a game of free indirect discourse with the latter. The result is of detachment, even exposure, combined with a kind of treacherous, ventriloquizing sympathy. When stanza 72 begins, 'A friend to freedom and freeholders – yet / No less a friend to government' (*DJ* 16.617), the play on 'freedom and freeholders' neatly points up Lord Henry's instinctive association between liberty and the ownership of property. Again, Byron mimics perfectly the unctuous way in which Lord Henry professes a lack of ambition: 'Heaven, and his friends, knew that a private life / Had ever been his sole and whole ambition' (16.633-4); 'sole and whole' has a self-pleased quality, capturing the speaker's consciousness of veering on, but avoiding, mere redundancy. 'In such moments,' as Matthew Bevis has commented in an acute reading, 'the audience is no longer succumbing to oratory, but resisting its blandishments.'<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Bevis, *The Art of Eloquence* 84.



Byron makes us aware, at these junctures, of language as debased, instrumentalist, a form of maintaining control over others. His political penetration lies in his ability to show and show up self-serving as it represents itself to itself. Lord Henry's practice with 'promises to all' (16.612) is a case in point: 'But what with keeping some, and breaking others, / His word had the same value as another's' (16.615-16). The flatness of the rhyme allows implicit self-extenuation to fall on its face, as when, to take a further example, we are told that '*He* gloried in the name of Englishman' (16.648), the italics a marker of his self-importance.

The brilliant skewering of Lord Henry's electioneering rhetoric demonstrates how winks and hints might masquerade as speaking out, another caricature against which the poet's mobile voice defines itself, enacting its own mode of truth-telling in the act of mimicking false notes. Indeed, though it savours its satirizing of Lord Henry's verbal manoeuvres, the satire seems, at any rate subliminally, to give rise to a longing for its opposite, access to another, less venal, less corrupted place or state. This condition finds expression in Juan's dazed indifference to his surroundings at the election lunch. He has seen a ghost, or what he thought a ghost, and so, at the meal, 'took his place, he knew not where, / Confused, in the confusion, and distraight' (16.238-9). Byron's word-play makes clear two modes of 'confusion': the general hubbub with 'every body out of their own sphere' (16.672), awkwardly mixed, and Juan's inward experience of bewilderment and turmoil. Yet, though he first disregards, and then over-compensates for disregarding, his neighbour's wish 'to have a fin of fish' (16.744), his attention turns to a possible embodiment of higher things: Aurora Raby's 'mere quiet smile of contemplation' (16.785), one that makes him grow 'carnation' (16.787), although 'she did not blush in turn' (16.793).

Here the rarity of Byron's conceits in the canto has to do with his wish to illuminate both the mundane and the supramundane, body and soul, matter and immaterialism, 'De rebus cunctis et quibusdam aliis' (16.24), to quote his supposedly Thomist tag (see *LBCPW* 5.766). The canto's windows open on **this** glimpse 'Of all things and some others as well'. Juan and Aurora Raby may sense in each other something beyond 'the substantial company engrossed / By Matter' (16.764-5), but the narrator notes how flesh and spirit mingle; intimations convey themselves physiologically, through a blush or absence of a blush, so that, here as elsewhere, social comedy fuses with Romantic yearning to yield tragicomic nuance:

so much materialized,

That one scarce knew at what to marvel most

Of two things – how (the question rather odd is)

Such bodies could have souls, or souls such bodies (16.765-8).

The jerky, jokey rhyme does not so much expose such marvelling as fatuous as awaken us to the fact that 'souls' have 'bodies' and, by implication, that 'bodies' really do have souls.

Dualistic but interdependent, the spheres of spirit and matter connect in ways that mirror other tensions operative in canto 16. For all Byron's sense of the mutable, he captures a world tending towards conservative self-perpetuation. His gaze is topical yet caught by what 'hovers' 'Between two worlds', as the previous canto concludes by saying (15.785). His political outlook may be nominally pro-Whig, yet it comes across as essentially undercutting of essences, subversive of all stances, oppositional. 'Born for opposition' (15.176), as already noted, is his apt self-description in canto 15 stanza 22, even if his immediate illustration is a '**strange** perversity of **thoughtpride**' to borrow from *Lara* (1.340) that would lead him to side

**Comment [KC6]:** Propose a change to 'this' to make it clear that this is a translation of 'de rebus ...'. OK – thanks.

**Comment [KC7]:** The lines are 'But in some strange perversity of thought / That swayed him onward with a secret pride' (*Lara* 1.340-1). THANKS!

with the forces of reaction ‘Who now are basking in their full-blown pride’ (*DJ* 15.179), were they to experience a ‘tumble’ (15.182):

I should turn the other way,  
And wax an Ultra-royalist in loyalty,  
Because I hate even democratic royalty (15.182-4).

This quizzes, leaves us uncertain, the poet both at the mercy of impulse and in possession of his own version of high ground, his mobility vindicated by the strength of a ‘Because’ followed by the unanswerably active verb ‘I hate’ (Byron adapting to his own ends the intransigent inflections of Shakespeare’s Iago, ‘I hate the Moor’, *Othello* 1.3.366).

Malcolm Kelsall remarks perceptively that the stanza shows how for Byron ‘the price of liberty is eternal denial of all forms of hegemonic power whether of government or opposition’.<sup>12</sup> The one form of power that Byron can exercise, as Kelsall notes, is the ‘power of poetry to free the spirit’.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, spirit takes some hard knocks in canto 16, as when we are told with deadpan yet colloquial mock-seriousness that ‘immaterialism’s a serious matter’ (*DJ* 16.958), the tone recalling the famous cancelled stanza: ‘I say – the future is a serious matter – / And so – for Godsake – Hock and Soda water’ (*LBCPW* 5.88). But Byron’s ingenuity shows in the near-instinctive way he subjects ideas to verbal play; ‘supernatural water’ (16.956) has been suggested in this stanza by ‘A noise like to wet fingers drawn on glass, / Which sets the teeth on edge’ (16.953-4): the immaterial, or the foxing and foxy notion of the immaterial, rendered through something unpleasantly, vividly material.

In its dealings with politics, canto 16 anticipates Foucault in its sense of power’s pervasiveness; it has a sure sense of the ‘disciplines’ or ‘procedures’, which.

<sup>12</sup> Kelsall, ‘Byron’s politics’ 863.

<sup>13</sup> Kelsall, ‘Byron’s politics’ 862.

as Foucault says, ‘this is Foucault, which allow the effects of power to circulate in a manner at once continuous, uninterrupted, adapted, and “individualized” throughout the entire social body’.<sup>14</sup> If that sounds abstract, Byron is all concreteness of revelation, as in the comedy of social class played out at Lord Henry’s electioneering ‘public feast’ (*DJ* 16.669) with

The squires familiarly formal, and

~~My lords and ladies proudly condescending;~~

The very servants puzzling how to hand

Their plates – without it might be too much bending

From their high places by the sideboard’s stand ... (16.673-7)

In its inventiveness, as in the flicker of an oxymoron in ‘familiarly formal’, or the rhyming here, whose ‘bending’ inflections tease the stiff-backed servants, the canto is a paean to the ‘hegemonic’ power of the imagination. Byron may sense how the self is caught up in networks of complicity, yet his language generates an exhilarated sense of freedom. Anthony Howe points to Byron’s ‘trick of undoing doubt into endless possibility’,<sup>15</sup> and Byron excels in the English cantos at ‘undoing doubt’: a suggestive formulation that suggests a conjuror’s adept facility allied to a quasi-philosophical stance of rare agility. As Howe also intimates, there is profundity, too, in the poem’s ‘receptiveness to the possibilities of literary language’.<sup>16</sup> Canto 16 purposefully follows St Augustine (standing in for Tertullian) in recommending that we must ‘Believe: – if ’tis improbable you *must*; / And if it is impossible, you *shall*’ (16.42-3). Its homeliness admits the unhomely; ‘real’, an awkward customer verbally, can end up on surprisingly good and revitalized terms with its sparring (and rhyming) partner

**Comment [KC8]:** Phrasing seems awkward - perhaps rephrase as suggested?  
Fine

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault, ‘Truth and method’ 61.

<sup>15</sup> Howe, *Byron and the Forms of Thought* 144.

<sup>16</sup> Howe, *Byron and the Forms of Thought* 37.

‘ideal’ in stanza 107, when Byron says that Aurora renewed in Juan ‘feelings which, perhaps ideal, / Are so divine, that I must deem them real’ (16.903-4). The canto is Popeian in its incisiveness, ~~its driving away dullness from and~~ injecting wit and vigour into phrase and image, but it has little of Pope’s implicit trust in an ideal, though much of a quasi-Shelleyan yearning, transposed into an ironic mode. Byron associates Pope with Adeline (16.423-4), by no means to her discredit, but what has just been called ‘a quasi-Shelleyan yearning’ whether or not ‘transposed into an ironic mode’, is linked to the figure of Aurora and her ‘Shakespearian’ (16.428) dimension in lines that constitute the strongest expression throughout the poem of a longing for elsewhere:

The worlds beyond this world’s perplexing waste  
                     Had more of her existence, for in her  
                     There was a depth of feeling to embrace  
                     Thoughts, boundless, deep, but silent too as Space (16.429-32).

Peter Cochran brusquely if bracingly dismisses this account of Shakespeare as ‘trying to sentimentalize him out of existence’.<sup>17</sup> But Byron’s point is that the playwright knows about ‘depth of feeling to embrace / Thoughts’, about longing and the impulse to expand beyond scepticism; ‘existence’, the word Cochran pulls out of the text, has in the stanza a more subtly individual inflection, ‘her existence’. Shakespeare, Byron prompts us to recognize, is the dramatist, not only of some sturdily commonsensical reality, but also of figures who believe that ‘There are more things in heaven and earth [... /] Than are dreamt of in your philosophy’ (*Hamlet* 1.5.166-7).

Peter W. Graham argues sensitively that

**Comment [RB9]:** a little awkward as written. Could ‘from’ be omitted? Thanks – rewritten.

<sup>17</sup> Cochran, *Burning* 213.

The Norman Abbey episode, going back as it does not only to patterns previously enacted in *Don Juan* but also to Byron's days in the Great World, can be seen as a sort of meditation on things that return – a poetic equivalent of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* or Anthony Powell's *Music of Time* series of novels.<sup>18</sup>

Byron's 'meditation on things that return' takes the form of virtuosic mock-lament, in the accelerated 'ubi sunt?' stanzas of canto 11 (601-48) when, though 'A silent change dissolves the glittering mass' (11.606), the language glitters with remembered particulars as it announces dissolution. Continually, things return through recollected details, through a knowledge of the seeming laws that govern society: friends, for instance, 'Who, 'stead of saying what you now should do, / Own they foresaw that you would fall at last' (*DJ* 14.397-8).

Proust highlights, more than Byron, the fact of 'Oblivion'. Thinking about why he suddenly felt a pang in Balbec at hearing a reference to 'the head of the Ministry of Posts and his family', at a time of growing indifference to the fact of 'being parted from Gilberte', the narrator recalls a chance conversation between Gilberte and her father in which 'allusion was made to the Secretary to the Ministry of Posts and his family'. Precisely because such a detail was of no importance, it serves as 'the last treasure that the past has in store, the richest, that which, when all our flow of tears seems to have dried at the source, can make us weep again'. It is because it was hidden in 'oblivion' that the detail survived, allowing the narrator access to a past self. Yet this past self lives again because it is dead, other: of his past self, and,

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<sup>18</sup>

Graham, *Don Juan* 181.

indeed, all our past selves, the narrator declares that ‘he loved what now leaves us indifferent’.<sup>19</sup>

Such revelations of involuntary memory are the essence of Proust’s handling of ‘things that return’. Byron, again, manages to control opposites with great verve: the past returns with nonchalant ease, yet the reader is conscious, after the ‘ubi sunt?’ passage, among others, of an astonishing labour of recall. We seem to inhabit a present world, but we are conscious of it always as a social world that has been perfectly preserved in memory. Although the very existence of the English cantos speaks of a work of elegiac reconstruction, there is little sense of the preservative being that of sentimentality or even nostalgia. Rather, experience is rendered with what Caroline Franklin rightly describes as ‘novelistic complexity’.<sup>20</sup> Its political meanings are not to be drawn out of it as explicit or coded messages. They inhere in the range of observation and the depth of the ‘watcher’s diving’ (*DJ* 2.1574).

Such qualities show in the presentation of women in canto 16: Adeline, Aurora, her ‘frolic Grace – Fitz-Fulke’ (16.1032) whose ‘hard but glowing bust’ (16.1019) upon which Juan presses a searching hand puts to flight any supernatural soliciting at the canto’s close. Adeline, one senses, longs for freedom from the role of manipulative charmer which she performs to such perfection when ‘watching, witching, condescending / To the consumers of fish, fowl and game’ (16.802-3). So adept is she in this role that Juan starts to ‘feel / Some doubt how much of Adeline was *real*’ (16.815-16). She embodies something of the ‘unreality’ of the power-relation she reinforces.

At the same time, canto 16, a wilderness of doubles, is the stretch where Adeline emerges as Byron’s own alter ego, ‘half a poetess’ (16.306), in her husband’s

<sup>19</sup> Proust, *Remembrance* 692-3.

<sup>20</sup> Franklin, *Byron’s Heroines* 161.

account, and wholly an embodiment of ‘mobility’ (16.820). Her ballad of the Black Friar is sung from an inscrutable motive, the subject of the narrator’s half-teasing surmises (16.449-56), but it has the desirable (or undesirable) effect of allowing Juan to regain his ‘self propriety’ (16.458), a quality required by those who ‘wish to take the tone of their society’ (16.460), where ‘take’ means ‘get the measure of’ as well as ‘absorb’, and who need to ‘wear the newest mantle of hypocrisy’ (16.463). A reviled condition, necessary to social survival, is close kin to the ‘truth in masquerade’ (11.290), without which ‘annals, revelations, poesy, / And prophecy’ (11.294-5) would not be possible. Yet to urge the reader, as the narrator does later in canto 11, to ‘Be hypocritical, be cautious be / Not what you *seem*, but always what you *see*’ (11.687-8) is to complicate matters. On this account, hypocrisy takes the form of not identifying seeming with being, an unusual redefinition, since it is normally regarded as mode of dissimulation whereby the hypocrite passes off seeming identity as real being.

Hypocrisy here resembles mobility, a matter of assuming the identity of that which one perceives; the narrator defines and defends Adeline’s mobility as a question of being ‘strongly acted on by what is nearest’ (16.824). Byron blurs and brings together his recommendation of hypocrisy, and Adeline’s ‘vivacious versatility’ (16.818), one shared by performers and persuaders, ‘speakers, bards, diplomatists, and dancers’ (16.827), and ‘A thing of temperament and not of art, / Though seeming so from its supposed facility’ (16.821-2). Hypocrisy turns out to be a means of unearthing or distortedly reflecting the truth of and about others, and we should not be surprised when, simplifying and complicating in the same breath, Byron says towards the end of canto 11: ‘Ne’er doubt / *This* – when I speak, I *don’t hint*, but *speak out*’ (11.703-4). Well, does he? Or is this assertion of honest, open speaking,



another mask, Byron as a bluff, honest Iago, albeit using his trickery for complicatedly virtuous purposes? The effect of this uncertainty is to question reductive cynicism about others' mode of speaking, to suggest how hard it is to avoid complicity with the human impulse to disguise motive, dissimulate, and 'masquerade', even if and perhaps especially when one is the poet 'taking the tone' of a society.

Aurora Raby, a fugitive from a different world, offers Juan hope of redemption, 'with something of sublime / In eyes which sadly shone' (15.354-5): 'She look'd as if she sat by

Eden's door, / And grieved for those who could return no more' (15.359-60), a couplet that performs a grammatical rhyme with the earlier sardonically expressed couplet: 'They grieved for those who perish'd with the cutter, / And also for the biscuits casks and butter' (2.486-7), one of Byron's best bitter jokes about human dependency on the physical. As he feelingly recalls that earlier moment, Byron corrects it, too, implying an unassuageable human longing for the ideal, and demonstrating how rhyme implies in *Don Juan* a potentially endless interplay between harmony and discord. Bernard Beatty persuasively sees Aurora's 'smile' as one that

mediates between flesh and spirit, seriousness and laughter, in a poise of rest which the poem has constantly traversed but never previously attained as distinctive presence.<sup>21</sup>

Yet that 'poise of rest' is an intimated hope rather than an achieved 'presence'. 'She look'd as if' is a formulation that begs the question 'looked to whom?' The answer is

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<sup>21</sup> Beatty, 'Byron's *Don Juan*' 520.

partly Juan, mainly the narrator, who both offers a forcible impression and retreats from total commitment to it via the 'as if' that points up the rarity of the conceit.

Byron shows a society held together by reservations, suppressions, yearnings, repressions – by the way in which freedom may consist only in the capacity to be what in his special sense is a 'hypocrite', an actor, however decorously, slyly or angelically. These aristocratic women belong to and shore up a class: they uphold the political status quo against which it is suggested that Adeline and Aurora covertly strain. Byron shapes for us, with anecdotal drawl, sharp wit and a poetic novelist's genius a world though which power, position, longing for some elsewhere, and sexual drama all trawl their faintly baleful, all too human nets.

One female figure in canto 16 who illustrates Byron's political imagination, how it operates within an imaginative 'wilderness of rare conceits', is the pregnant country girl in 'a close cap / And scarlet cloak' (16.531-2). She is a singular personage surrounded by doubles. She appears with 'two lawyers busy on a mortgage / Lord Henry wished to raise for a new purchase' (16.521-2) and 'two poachers caught in a steel trap / Ready for jail, their place of convalescence' (16.529-30): an unsmiling joke which in its studied heartlessness and hint of sympathy says more about a system of social control than pages of protest might. These pairings emphasize the plight of the single girl, though she or her 'unclosed' (16.535) cloak 'Presents the problem of a double figure' (16.536).

The narrator-poet (Byron plays on their interchangeableness in this canto as in the poem more generally) indicates that his fiction tallies with personal experience:

(I hate the sight to see, since –

Since – since – in youth, I had the sad mishap –

But luckily I have paid few parish fees since) (16.532-4)

The speaker confesses his complicity, and sends up the process of confession with the mimic faltering; sniggering behind the back of his hand, he refuses to put himself in any kind of virtuous light (except for the causal liberality of the 'parish fees' he may 'have paid'). And yet the effect is highly affecting: it works to throw the girl entirely on a readerly sea of ineffectual sympathy and thus make us enact the gap between feeling and political action.

The episode illustrates one aspect of Byron's dealings with politics in the canto. For him, politics is inseparable, sooner or later, from a sense of people as caught in steel traps or gilded cages of one sort or another, states of entrapment that make overt protest or compassion seem a false rhetoric. So, he follows his bantering joking, 'A reel within a bottle is a mystery' (16.537), with a description of the girl as a 'poacher upon Nature's manor' (16.544) and a humorous, playful stanza, written solely, it would seem, for the final jaunty couplet: 'Preserving partridges and pretty wenches / Are puzzles to the most precautionous benches' (16.551-2). 'Preserving', however, functions almost as a Freudian slip; it allows us suddenly to glimpse 'the reel' within this poetic 'bottle', bearing as it does near-inadvertent witness to the kindling of imaginative interest in the singular person. Briefly, having been rhymed upon, the category of 'pretty wenches' drops away, and Byron, himself a poetic poacher, reconceives his subject, looking at the girl in a new light, conferring upon her a touch of the heroic aura that Haidée takes on when confronting Lambro in canto 4.

The country girl's being, in an exhilarating change of tone, speaks its own kind of truth to power: details tell against the 'higher dames' (16.555) with whom she is contrasted. She is every inch as much a challenge to adequate understanding as she endures her 'trembling, patient tribulation' where the adjectives (via an echo of

Romans 12.12, noted in *LBCPW* 5.768) ) play fear against courage, as are Aurora or Adeline. Mimetically stanza 66 forgets her, only to recall her, forgotten, 'left in the great hall' (16.577) while Scout, 'the parish guardian of the hall' (16.578), 'Discussed [ ... ] A mighty mug of *moral* double ale' (16.579-80). She is left the butt of Byron's humour as the whimsical moon of compassion wanes, but the effect is less callousness than to associate the poet with her, as himself 'not a sentimental mourner, / Parading all [his] sensibility' (16.564-5).

If any true ghost emerges from the hocus-pocus mock-Gothic of the supposed Black Friar's manifestations it is this 'poor girl' (16.577), wandering in and then out of Byron's aristocratic narrative like a phantom, waiting to find her voice in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* (1891). Byron can be proleptic, even prophetic by virtue of his evenness of observation; his very negligence, his refusal to see the country girl as a case, his curiosity and his readiness to adjust tone and stance, conspire to endow her with a capacity to haunt. Finally, however, it is Byron's voice itself that is the poem's enduring spectre, returning again and again with each reading of the English cantos, presiding over a wilderness of the most rare conceits as it animates and analyses a particular set of social relations. He prompts in us a relish for that 'from which', as Samuel Johnson writes of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, 'we have a thousand times turned fastidiously away'.<sup>22</sup> He sponsors, too, a recognition that we cannot avoid being drawn to, allured by, and left wanting to weigh the full significance of 'thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls' (*Hamlet* 1.4.56).

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<sup>22</sup> Johnson, *Lives* 4.188-9.

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