

Don Juan, “a problem, like all things”

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From its first printing in 1819 till now—nearly two centuries later—readers have disputed the big ideas and real values of *Don Juan*. Its problematical genius appears to resist all ideological interpretations and themes. Scanning its ottava rimas, we sense something difficult to recognize and troublesome to name. Surely the blame for much of this trouble lies with Byron. In 1819—when Murray, Kinnaird, Crabbe and even Hobhouse blast *Don Juan* as depraved—Byron defends it as “most moral” (Marchand, *LJ* 6: 99). Yet he also opines it is “too free for these very modest days” and is “quietly facetious upon everything” (Marchand *LJ* 6: 67-68). Indeed he cautions his publisher, Murray, not to be “too earnest and eager about a work never intended to be serious. Do you suppose that I could have any intention but to giggle and make giggle?” (Marchand, *LJ* 6: 208). Nonetheless Byron confesses to Kinnaird *Don Juan* is dangerously “profligate” and “bawdy” (Marchand, *LJ* 6: 232). In the poem itself, though, he avows it is “merely quizzical” (9.41.3).¹ As a commentator on his own verse, Byron borders on incoherence.

His discordant remarks reverberate in the clashing observations of contemporary artists and critics. In the *Edinburgh Review* Francis Jeffrey charges that *Don Juan* displays not one “particle of respect for [noble sentiments] . . . or of belief in their intrinsic worth or permanent reality” (450). In his diary, Hobhouse complains of the work’s “blasphemy and bawdry” (2: 107). *Blackwood’s Magazine* attacks the “cool unconcerned fiend” who has authored such profanity and poured “scorn upon every

¹Throughout my discussion of Byron’s poetry, I use McGann’s edition (Byron).

element of good or noble nature in the hearts of his readers" (513). Keats grouses *Don Juan* comes from "a paltry originality, that of being new by making solemn things gay & gay things solemn" (Rollins 2: 134). Wordsworth warns that "the institutions of the country" are imperiled by Byron's poem (Morley 2: 850-51). Southey cries it commits "an act of high treason on English poetry" (C. C. Southey 5: 21). Thus Jeffrey and this band of detractors accuse *Don Juan* of the gravest offenses.

Conversely, Shelley praises it as an ethical piece which portrays "what is worst in human nature" and illustrates "what we should avoid" (Jones 357-58). Other critics of the period concur. Reviewing the first two cantos, Leigh Hunt attests to the propriety of the poem since it "does no more than relate the consequences of certain [social] absurdities" (702). John Wilson Croker agrees there is "very little offensive" material in it (Jennings 145), clearly "nothing so bad as *Tom Jones*" (Smiles 1: 414). Overall, Shelley and these latter critics read *Don Juan* as a moral tale whose singular sin is its probity.

In Shelley's, Jeffrey's and Byron's commentary, we discover a controversy enduring to this day, albeit critical progress has occurred. Whereas nineteenth-century readers rushed to join camps of condemners or partisans of *Don Juan*, present-day critics perceive stylistic and ideational refinements reaching far beyond rudimentary drills in evil and good. Yet the problem nowadays is that one still hears so many keen people saying such a riot of things. Like the legendary blind men who touch different parts of an elephant's anatomy, scholars continue to offer incongruous accounts of Byron's poem.

Ideal spirituality is the theme of Bernard Beatty, who avers that "in the midst of satire, farce and festivity" Aurora Raby incarnates "an indestructible spiritual reality on which comedy's celebration of the contingent rests." *Don Juan* "ends, like any comedy, with a joyously recovered starting point" (187). Beatty's perspective resembles that of a platonic-Christian satire, such as Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender* or Sidney's

The Arcadia. Like Sidney’s pious Pamela, Byron’s saintly Aurora is seen as the “realised ideal from which satire takes its energy and authority” (211). The “comic terminus” of *Don Juan* descends in the figure of this Catholic maiden, “an unmitigated exemplar,” whose physical endowment is surpassed only by her immaculate soul (197-99). Beatty surmises the work’s “religious beliefs are maintained despite . . . their incessant disputation” (205).

On first blush, his reading looks preposterous. How can we view the irreverent and racy *Don Juan* as the apotheosis of Christian idealism? On second thought, though, Beatty’s religious thesis proves not altogether unreasonable. In canto 15, where Aurora is introduced, Byron likens her to an angel sitting “by Eden’s door” and grieving “for those who could return no more” (15.45.7-8). The Catholic virgin’s platonism radiates from her “spirit” placed as it were “on a throne / Apart from the surrounding world” (15.47.6-7). Aurora the demoiselle is an ideal type on a par with Haidee the “Island girl,” the sentimental favorite among Juan’s many loves (15.58). Hence one might conclude Aurora’s Christian idealism marks the “comic terminus” of *Don Juan*.

Yet where is the terminus—religious or otherwise? Where the benediction? Certainly *Don Juan*, that monumental fragment, supplies no narrative closure, no all-embracing finale. In canto 17, there is simply an abrupt stop to the poem’s digressive flow. Indeed throughout *Don Juan* an image of moving water recurs, representing the fluidity of the work’s events and views. Regarding the world’s run of events, Byron says, “what I write I cast upon the stream” (14.11.7). Of course his river of ottava rimas never arrives at a clear dockage. Although “Truth’s fountains may be clear,” he platitudinizes, “her streams are muddy” (15.88.6). Fair Aurora herself is but

A beauteous ripple of the brilliant stream . . .
Which flow’d on for a moment in the beam
Time sheds a moment o’er each sparkling crest. (15.55)

Aurora and all her unworldly goods are going and gone with the world's flux. She—Beatty's icon of "indestructible spiritual reality"—is actually conceived by Byron as one of corporeal life's effervescent transients, "a guest . . . of the brilliant stream" (15.55.2-3). Such counter-arguments to Beatty's contention reiterate those of other critics who note the poem's robust naturalism, which undercuts "by stubborn material facts . . . various kinds of rarefied moralizing or sentimentalizing or idealizing" (Jump 18). Given this naturalism, it's doubtful *Don Juan* is a typical Christian comedy that presumes an ideal realm "from which satire takes its energy and authority."

None of these rejoinders can deny, though, that throughout *Don Juan* spiritual concerns arise. Not the least of these is what George Ridenour has called "a secularized version of the myth of the Fall" (147). In *Don Juan* the theme of the Fall may be secular in a sense; but the poem is also profoundly religious, stating Augustinian views on platonism, sex, loss of innocence, dread of retribution, man's fate, human iniquity and universal vice. Beatty has a point, then, as he spotlights the "tenacity with which religious beliefs are maintained despite . . . their incessant disputation" (205).

But it's precisely this religious "disputation" that deepens the problem of *Don Juan*. Although the poet's mood about Aurora announces his nostalgia for medieval Christianity, Byron's moods are famously mobile. In the drift of Byron's art, Aurora's ideals float no more securely than those of any other guest on the grand houseboat of life. *Don Juan* "affirms the subjection—at least in some degree—of soul to body, mind to matter, spirit to flesh," writes J. D. Jump (10). Bernard Blackstone also espies the primacy of animal appetite in the poem (301), a primacy looming in the naturalistic way characters are controlled by physically perceptible, if not grossly materialistic phenomena. Poring over Julia's farewell letter, Juan is foiled by seasickness and retching (2.19-20). While she nurses Juan back to health, Haidee's "charity" enlarges as she beholds the boy's "black eyes"

(2.131). Christian dogmas are scarcely immune to materiality’s contagions. Owing to illness, Byron’s narrator admits he waxes more “orthodox” in his faith (11.5-6). Disease and maladies may even “prove” the certitude of “the Virgin’s mystical virginity” (11.6.1-3). In canto 2, amid the storm at sea, there is nothing that “so much the spirit calms / As rum and true religion” (2.34.1-2). In *Don Juan* religious beliefs are not just “disputed” by materialism: they are radiantly and shamelessly mocked.

What appears to be an “incessant disputation” and mockery of multiple belief-systems in *Don Juan* manifests itself in current critics’ disarray. They are like earthlings glimpsing the anomalous traces of a monster from outer space. In light of all the conflicting reports about the Thing, one must wonder what *Don Juan* looks like as a whole. One must ask if there is even one whole thing present inside the critical arena. One must question if there is any hope of finding a governing viewpoint to Byron’s amusing and ambiguous *bête noire*, *Don Juan*. Perhaps this very ambiguity when grasped in its manifold details amounts to the work’s ruling viewpoint. Or maybe there is nothing so definite as even that. But before we surrender to the indeterminacy of transactive theories we might consider more of the hermeneutic alternatives.

Downcast sentimentalism induces Robert Gleckner to disaffirm both a naturalistic and Christian reading of *Don Juan*. For him, the problem of evil transcends the natural facts and the deity’s will. Evil is the occasion for lachrymose woe, an invitation to public-spirited pity and love. To be sure—in *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*—Gleckner depicts *Don Juan* as a “chaotic, digressive panorama of the world’s waste and the unending self-destruction and corruption of man” (329). Yet his pessimism is softened by a reading predicated also on sentimentality and love. Notwithstanding its “grim[ness],” he insists Byron’s masterpiece is “an immensely compassionate poem” which “does have a heart” (330, 336-37). “[T]his heart,” Gleckner urges, “weeps over the carnage of Ismail” and celebrates “the Haidee

episode" as "the symbolic core of the entire poem" (337). Yet is this heartfelt rendition of *Don Juan* credible?

Maybe so. Often the poem surges with sentiments vivifying certain individuals and events. Unlike Julia, for instance, Haidee appears to be a lover who is sentimentally correct. Her "first love, and her last" for Juan is told in a tone of unfeigned feeling and pathos (2.173). And yet the sympathy the reader is seduced into experiencing for Haidee is strangely maligned by the writer. At the outset of Byron's ambivalent idyll, the deadliness of Haidee—"Nature's bride"—is stressed. The girl's "eyes / Were black as death" (2.117.1-2). "[S]till as death," she overhangs the fallen Juan (2.143.7). Glances shot out from Haidee's eyes "as the snake late coil'd, who pours his length, / And hurls at once his venom and his strength" (2.117). As Frederick Garber notes about the fallen world of *Don Juan*, "The only place comparable to a garden . . . is Lambro's island, the locale of the idyll of Juan and Haidee" (308-09). Given Byron's metaphor of the Fall, then, Haidee is viewable not only as "Nature's bride" but also as Eve or "the snake in the garden," tempting Juan into yet another Fall.

Indeed—despite Leslie Marchand's conviction "she was above all [Byron's] other heroines the embodiment of his youthful ideals of innocence, beauty, and tenderness" (*Poetry* 187)—Haidee's sentimental value is debased by the poem, which at times colors her like a harlot. Like a Calvinistic preacher, Byron sometimes equates feminine purity and virtue with unadorned grooming and dress. Contrariwise, he links feminine lewdness and vice to sophisticated appearances and clothes. On this appraisal, he paints Haidee not unlike a Whore of Babylon. In the banquet scene, for example, the setting and costumes evoke the intemperance of Spenser's "Bower of Bliss" and the voluptuous orientalism of Beckford's *Vathek* (3.61-78). At the feast, Haidee is dyed, coifed, coutured, bejeweled and made up like a "Turkish" Jezebel (3.72). When her father invades the party, he hears "no music of the spheres, / But an unhallow'd, earthly sound of fiddling!" (3.28.3-4). In this scene, Haidee devolves

into Byron’s personification of Christian caveats against the flesh, degenerates into a Presbyterian’s allegory for lust. All in all, Gleckner’s blanket description of *Don Juan* as a sentimental work whose “heart . . . envisioned a Haidee” sounds only half-convincing at best (337).

Gleckner’s equally sentimental elucidation of the poem’s military adventures is contested by Malcolm Kelsall. Although Gleckner feels the work’s “heart . . . weeps over the carnage of Ismail,” Kelsall repudiates the sentiment, pointing out Byron’s humane and liberal “outbursts have no correspondent action in the poem” (151). Often in fact Byron’s chronicle of combat is baldly heroic, brazenly unsentimental and downright mean. Nonetheless—in support of Gleckner’s generous reading—not a few lines from *Don Juan* do satirize “the noble art of killing” (7.58.4). Dramatizing the battle of Ismail, Byron conjures up before us “[a]ll that the Devil would do if run stark mad” (8.123.4). This benignant gush over war’s hellishness, however, is subverted by other lines making light of wartime barbarities and betraying esteem for martial heroics. Writing of Russian troops besieging enemy positions, Byron recounts that

Being grenadiers they mounted one by one,
Cheerful as children climb the breasts of mothers,
O’er the entrenchments and the palisade,
Quite orderly, as if upon parade.
And this was admirable. (8.15.5-16.1)

Lamentation over “the carnage of Ismail” is dismissed more cruelly when Byron shifts from approbation for militarism to nasty jokes on rape. Owing to “cold weather and commiseration,” he banters, “all the ladies” of Ismail, “save some twenty score, / Were almost as much virgins as before.” Because of battlefield darkness, though, “six old damsels, each of seventy years, / Were all deflowered by different Grenadiers.” Still, “on the whole,” the soldiers’ “continence was great,” which “disappoint[ed]” some “waning prude[s]” who wished to be molested as well. Several “buxom” widows who had yet to

encounter the conquering horde were even “heard to wonder in the din . . . ‘Wherefore the ravishing did not begin!’” (8.129-32). Wittily naturalistic these verse lines may be. Tearfully sentimental they are not. Not infrequently, Byron’s so-called anti-war cantos flaunt their naturalism and heroics as much as their pity.

Not the pity but the heroics of *Don Juan* are accented by Jerome Christensen in *Lord Byron’s Strength*. What Christensen notes about the shipwreck and lifeboat cannibalism of canto 2, he also says about the majority of the poem: “In other hands,” Juan’s story “could be treated with more pathos than Byron was willing to spare” (247). All told, Christensen’s reading is unsentimental, unchristian, anti-materialistic, anti-rational and only dubiously liberal. Doubtless his perspective is one of lofty heroics, picturing Juan’s tale as “the *resistance* of an aristocrat” (xix). Christensen’s heroic reading is illustrated in the lifeboat episode, depicting a lottery deciding who is sacrificed for the surviving crew’s salvation. When Juan’s tutor, Pedrillo, is selected, he relinquishes his life to preserve the group. Taking an unchristian (and illiberal) tack, Christensen professes that Pedrillo’s “consent” is invalid and that “he dies from the failure of . . . self-assertion” (246-47). Like Nietzsche, Christensen prizes egoistic assertiveness in an individual who overrides group interest and egalitarian choice. Christensen holds that “the sublime imperative [which] Byron directs to every modern poet” is that the artist must “give rules to himself” (251).

So, Nietzsche’s ideal of “the strong man” informs Christensen’s idea of “Byron’s strength.” Like Christensen’s “strong poet” who “gives rules to himself” (xviii), Nietzsche’s superman provides for himself “a goal, a why, a faith” (18). All this chat about self-given goals suggests such private innovation creates something brand-new. Indeed, praising Byron’s “ethos of invention” and “improvisation,” Christensen hints the poet’s “strength” is a development new-sprung on the planet (xviii, 246). Of course it is not. Both Nietzsche’s concept of “the will to

power" and Christensen's notion of Byron's strength originate in traditions of romance chivalry and egoistic heroics. Apropos style, Byron's bold improvisations in *Don Juan* derive from the renaissance Italian practice of burlesquing epic romances like Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* or earlier Carolingian material.²

Fundamentally Christensen knows all this. Claiming that Byron advances a bygone "rhetoric of the commonplace" against modern "technosterilization of the language," Christensen highlights history and culture (xix, xxv). Yet he underestimates the weight of cultural motifs like Christianity and sentimentalism in *Don Juan*. He overlooks compelling aspects of Beatty's religious standard and of Gleckner's "weep[ing]" heart and overrates heroics. Even Byron's innovatively "strong" rhetoric is borrowed from renaissance verse mocking chivalric romances like *Orlando*. How could any work having a hero like Juan escape being mock-heroic? *Don Juan* probably ridicules heroics and chivalry more than it salutes them. Nevertheless—because of their own heroic values—both Christensen and Nietzsche can shock Christian, liberal and sentimental sensibilities. As an example, Christensen dares to suggest the war cantos of *Don Juan* express "the glamour of fascism" (314). Admittedly some scholars observe that—despite his notorious inertia—Juan at times is brilliantly heroic, as reflected by his "fierce" pursuit of the ghostly Black Friar (16.119), by his swordplay with the sultan (8.108-09), and by his gunplay with the highwayman, Tom (11.13). Christensen's heroic reading has its share of striking points, to be sure.

Regardless of his contempt for reactionary liberalism (xxiv), however, Christensen's zest for heroics lapses at suitable limits. Nearing his book's end, he reassures us that "rhetoric"—including the strong verse of *Don Juan*—"always touches on the ethical" (318). The "ethical" signifies the benevolent or liberal, since

²Rutherford, Vassallo, Beatty, Boyd and Jump delineate the style of *Don Juan* in terms of Italian burlesque.

here the critic insists Tom the heroic mugger is not cavalierly dispatched but rather is granted a kinder gentler adieu by Byron (318-19). Possibly, Christensen applies this quick humane gloss to *Don Juan* because he fears his reading of it as a product of the “egotistical sublime [and] Romantic irony” has grown too successful (316). As Christensen confesses, the demi-hero Suwarrow—subjugator of Ismail—“is as close as *Juan* gets to Napoleon, the greatest infirmity of Byron’s noble mind” (315). Apparently even this proximity to the “egotistical sublime” comes too close for Christensen’s comfort. Displaying his own gift for romantic irony, he finally construes the poem as a benign roar of liberal “self-assertion.”

These muted heroics are upstaged by Michael Foot’s resounding liberalism and pacifism. In *Don Juan* he hears Byron’s sustained cry of anguish and hatred against the warmongers of every breed and age, and most especially of his own. . . . [W]hat other poet has shown so resolute, so revolutionary, a political will? It was thus that he made *Don Juan* the greatest anti-war epic in our language or, maybe, any other. (397)

For reasons raised already, Foot’s single-minded thesis on “revolutionary” politics is difficult to defend. Foot is not wholly mistaken, though. Nor is Claude Rawson entirely wrong when he avers *Don Juan* voices “a ringing denial of the epic’s . . . military morality” (99-100). At times *Don Juan* does resonate with anti-war themes. Yet at other times, it sounds contrapuntal notes on combat. Evidently Lord Byron finds satire against “the noble art of killing” hard to keep up.

Clearly all the critics surveyed so far find any single-minded analysis of *Don Juan* tough to maintain. Understandably, in the last decade or more, a corps of scholars has underlined the poem’s valuational and thematic mobility. Stressing this, they assault a large problem about *Don Juan*: the likelihood that no single ideology nor any one compatible set of ideologies completely represents the capricious tale without distortion. Critics of *Don Juan* who recognize its contradictory ways may be called

“mobilists,” students of Byron appreciating his eternal return of multifarious moods and views, of sundry topics and techniques.

A bigger problem involves apprehending Byron’s hit-and-run mobility for what it is, a realization mobilist critics have yet to achieve. Like Jerome McGann, I think scholars fail to identify accurately the mobility of *Don Juan* because of their “political” concerns, where the word “political” functions as a euphemism and periphrasis for “liberal” (“Lyric” 35). Ironically, McGann himself seems to a considerable extent to be such a critic, misconceiving Byron’s mobility because of a bias for liberal and sentimental mores. Quite likely what boggles McGann and other mobilists like Anne Mellor, Peter Manning, Stuart Curran and Terence Hoagwood is the indiscriminate destructiveness of Byronic skepticism. Byron mocks unto death all the dissonant ideologies of *Don Juan*: Christianity, heroics, platonism, naturalism, liberalism and sentimentalism. Previously we have seen critics like Beatty and Foot plead that one or another of these credos is that single system defining the poet’s sympathies. The trouble is Byron temporarily (if sincerely) sympathizes with each of these often antithetical systems, in the process ultimately of debunking and demolishing them all. As he says, each “system eats another up” (14.1).

Signs of Byron’s philosophical cannibalism, then, emerge across the whole motley group of “non-mobilists.” In the five critical outlooks just reviewed, the range of Byron’s thematic mobility is sketched: Beatty’s Christian vision, Jump’s materialistic bent, Gleckner’s sentimental core, Christensen’s sensitive heroics and Foot’s liberal manifestoes. Although five critics who disagree among themselves cannot all be right, five critics of this caliber cannot all be wrong. In part they are each correct. Byronic mobility takes an incompatible series of joy rides with platonic Christianity, materialism, sentimentality, heroics and liberalism. But this mobility also taunts each belief-system and strips it of special privilege and unique authority. What can one make of a poem which is, by turns, self-consciously godly,

profane, gushing, hawkish and anti-war? One infers from such a work that no conceivable value or belief deserves esteem. One concludes that everything under (and over) the sun earns only derision.

The pivotal difficulty about *Don Juan* is nihilism, the devaluation of all values. As I discuss in *Born for Opposition*, all the major Western ideologies—materialistic naturalism, liberal sentimentality, Calvinistic Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, platonic rationality and heroics—are subverted in *Don Juan*. This conscious subversion voices unmitigated nihilism: an erosion of all received values and tenets, indicating no objective or universal ground is discoverable by which any value could be favored and held sacrosanct. At the hollow center of *Don Juan*, lurks the enigma of nihilism. Still, scholars balk at belling the beast or skirt around the subject altogether. Introducing *Don Juan* in a respected anthology, M. H. Abrams merely mentions the theme of nihilism to reject it at once (1656). Even “dark” critics like Gleckner and Christensen dismiss the possibility of the poem’s nihilism. Gleckner’s view of Byron’s dark side has a 24-carat heart of gold. And Christensen’s definition of nihilism—like Nietzsche’s frequently—turns the notion into an inactive phenomenon, too frail for any reading of *Don Juan* (237).

Abrams, Gleckner and Christensen are not alone in dismissing the work’s nihility. For various reasons, mobilists McGann, Mellor, Manning, Curran and Hoagwood also reject the concept expressly. Time and again, the poem’s intimations of nihilism are explained away by critics. And even while demonstrating tolerance they are glib, making brief remarks that invite more problems than solutions. In his cursory report on *Don Juan* criticism, Charles Clancy misidentifies several scholars (including the sentimentalist Gleckner) as nihilists. Brian Wilkie even misidentifies himself as a nihilistic critic when he claims to have encountered the work’s “philosophic nihilism” (189). Wilkie’s confusion about nihilism is as instructive as it is widespread. Like McGann, Mellor, Manning, Curran, Foot, Abrams, Gleckner

and others, he allows liberalism or sentimentality to impair his grip on *Don Juan*.

Wilkie confuses anti-heroic liberalism with nihilism, which is the notion that all values are groundless. He wrongly bases his nihilistic interpretation on the poem’s vilification of epic heroic achievement. The “polemical spirit” of *Don Juan*, writes Wilkie, assails “the tradition of epic heroism itself” (193, 207). Byron forges a “savage attack on war” and “endorses[es] love as the alternative to war” (214). Wilkie urges that “Byron continues throughout the poem to suggest . . . that love is a higher calling than war and other types of conventional prowess” (214). The critic adds that because of the work’s anti-war liberalism, Byron is a resolute feminist, who “revers[es] the antifeminism which is implied in one form or another by almost every traditional epic” before *Don Juan* (214). It is puzzling, though, how a “polemical” piece that routinely elevates love over war and promotes a feminist ethic can be labeled a nihilistic work or—quoting Wilkie—a poem which is “in every sense inconclusive” (211).

Similarly, Edward Bostetter’s perception of Byronic nihilism is blurred by a narrow ideological focus. This critic confounds what he calls Byron’s “complete skepticism” or nihilism with what he identifies as Byron’s “grim” and “almost scientific” materialism or “[anti-]transcendental[ism]” (293-96). Indeed Bostetter avers Byron’s “ultimate position” is one of “Newton[ian]” materialism or naturalism as opposed to “sentimentalist leanings” (293-99). In this light, it appears Bostetter’s survey of Byron’s “infinite variety” (291) is not sufficiently infinite. John Watkins’s self-styled “emphasi[s]” on “nihilism” also blurs that philosophy with pessimistic naturalism (395). His phenomenological, “anti-teleological” reading interprets *Don Juan* in terms of an empirical naturalism harking back to David Hume (406). But it’s precisely this despairing naturalism that Byron’s poem deserts whenever he temporarily adopts sanguine ideologies like sentimentality or Catholicism. This valuational

“inconclusive[ness]” and subversion of standards constitutes nihilism. Hard it is to fathom, however, how *Don Juan* instances nihilistic “inconclusive[ness]” when scholars classify the work as drearily naturalistic or bravely liberal. Among critics, Byron’s putative nihilism—whatever that murky subject might be—is practically a commonplace. But what an astonishing commonplace it is: one commonly broached only to be summarily denied or grievously distorted.

This intellectual evasion is committed by the foremost Byronist, Jerome McGann. Confronting the nihilism of *Don Juan*, this psychological critic himself resorts to literary displacement and denial. For McGann, Byron’s mobile sympathies are “hypocrisy,”

the antithesis of sincerity. One can be sincere and yet speak incompletely, inadequately, or even falsely, but it appears a patent contradiction to . . . imagine that one could be sincere and at the same time speak deliberate falsehoods or develop subtle equivocations. To do so is to declare that one is “two-faced,” and hence lacking that fundamental quality of the sincere person: integrity. (*Knowledge* 38)

Integrity, thinks McGann, is missing from typical romantic poetry because—though “it involves a rhetoric”—it affects to be artless and sincere (*Knowledge* 42). So, Byron’s atypical romantic poetry is judged to be acutely hypocritical since it stresses “rhetorical modes of verse” (*Knowledge* 39-40). *Don Juan* and other Byronic works, McGann believes, represent “a critique of the idea of Romantic sincerity” (“Deception” 45). In this reading, Byron’s verse is “a satire upon a normative mode of romantic writing”: the poetry of sincerity (“Lyric” 30). Poetic sincerity is satirized when Byron exploits clashing rhetorical modes “to construct artifices of himself in his work” (“Lyric” 31). These counterfeit personas or “*figurae* are consciously manipulated masks” which dramatize, for McGann, the poet’s hypocrisy (“Lyric” 41). In short, Byron’s mobility is hypocrisy.

Another “mobilism” for Byron’s freewheeling insincerities is “satanism.” McGann complains that

Byronic mobility [is] “a most painful and unhappy attribute” in virtually every respect. . . . The Byronic text stands aloof from the dialectic of loss and gain, rewards and punishments. . . . Its satanism rests ultimately in that posture of aloofness, as if it were indifferent to questions of judgment and valuation. Good and bad, better and worse, are terms to be evaded. (“Lyric” 41)

For McGann, then, Byronic mobility puts an amoral and unfeeling emphasis on rhetoric. Such mobility composes a satire on sentimental writing, “a mask of romantic sincerity,” insinuating that Byron’s poetic shifts are not only insincere and unfelt but unphilosophical and non-ideological too (“Lyric” 34). Deliberately rhetorical verse like *Don Juan*, I believe, may incorporate within its polymorphic art any theme, any ideology, no matter how profound. McGann thinks otherwise as he laments that “Byron’s work pursued its ironies in an apparently unsystematic and nontheoretical way,” resulting in a lack of “depth and cultural seriousness” (“Romanticism” 737). Although McGann believes Byron’s shallow verse is “satanic,” he denies it is nihilistic. The values at odds (within the poem’s ironies) are not “nihilistically cancelled out” since everything is just “rhetoric” anyway (*Knowledge* 56, 63). If *Don Juan* is only wordplay, how could it “cancel out” anything of substance, much less everything of value?

McGann’s thesis dodges the sizable difficulty posed by *Don Juan*. Byron’s ironies are certainly unsystematically and perhaps untheoretically expressed, but so what? Merely because a work is conspicuously rhetorical and unsystematic does not mean it is unphilosophical or non-ideological. It does not even mean it is insincere. Sincerely Byron sympathizes at varying times with Christian, materialistic, liberal, heroic and—yes—sentimental creeds. Sympathizing with such a jumble of beliefs, he mocks and undermines them too. This is the irony about Byron’s ironies: his language-games convey serious subversion. His irrational rhetoric carries philosophical and nihilistic import. Ironically, his ideological contradictions honor a diversity of sincerities. His sentimental or romantic sincerity is sometimes opposed

by his Christian sincerity, or by his heroic sincerity, and so on. Does not McGann's fixation on Byron as a poseur of "romantic sincerity" blind the critic to a variety of ideologies and sincerities engaged in total war? Does not *Don Juan* mock other affairs beyond frank sentimentalism in verse? For a mobilist, Jerome McGann projects an awfully static view.

McGann's relative immobility stems not only from his focus on romantic sincerity or sentimentalism but also from his concentration on genre as a whole. No doubt in *Don Juan* Byron is often ironically unsentimental, especially when satirizing sentimental poetics. In the first canto, for example, the unromantic romance between Juan and Julia parodies amour as a genre. Mimicking the opening line of a lyrical romance, stanza 102 begins, "It was upon a day, a summer's day." The wit intensifies as Byron pairs this verse line of sentimental vagueness with one of crass specificity, equating "a summer's day" to "the sixth of June." Dryly, the poet explains he "like[s] to be particular in dates" (1.103). Clearly, he also likes to burlesque sentimental verse as a type.

But he loves to inscribe sincere and sentimental romance too. Gleckner's argument that "Byron's poem *does* have a heart" possesses some merit, as the Haidee episode's non-ironic mood of tragic passion frequently demonstrates. Out of loyalty, Juan spurns the lures and threats of the lecherous sultana. His loyalty to Haidee's memory constitutes a bona fide element of tragic and sentimental romance. It also denotes a sincere (if fleeting) endorsement of Juan's native nobility, a hallmark of sentimental romance. Admittedly Byron sometimes dwells on the diabolical side of romance, but to characterize this conundrum as "a satire upon a normative mode of romantic writing" evades the fervid Christianity often deepening his art. As noted, Byron casts Haidee not only as "Nature's bride" but also as Eve or the serpent of Eden. In conjuring up a satanic Haidee, he evokes the biblical Fall and vocalizes Augustinian (and Calvinistic) Christianity.

Again the poet highlights themes moving far beyond a parody of sentimentally sincere verse.

McGann’s thesis on hypocrisy sidesteps the fact that Byronic mobility imparts more than a send-up of sentimentally sincere verse. Why can’t Byron be unsentimental or unromantic without being insincere and hypocritical? Why can’t he be sincere without being romantically or sentimentally sincere? Throughout *Don Juan* he discloses a mix of contradictory but candid sympathies for Christianity, materialism and other ideologies. McGann’s insistence these contradictory sympathies are hypocritical betrays his sentimental assumption that sincerity and truth are simple and unmixed. Byron’s sincerity is complex and even contradictory. His contradictory mobility is all the more sincere and candid for its refusal to soften its incongruent edges. Byron’s “equivocations” are not “deliberate falsehoods” but conscious attempts to speak a truth stranger and funnier than fiction. “[I]f a writer should be quite consistent,” asks the poet, “[h]ow could he possibly show things existent?” (15.87.7-8). Byron’s “satanism” does not “stand aloof” from philosophies of “[g]ood and bad” but instead embraces at least a half-dozen of them.

Ideology aside, Byron’s integrity should be regarded as enhanced—not tainted—by his verse’s rhetorical vigor. If typical lyric poetry lacks integrity because of its affectation of artlessness, then the unaffected art of *Don Juan* should make it honest. McGann might have granted this when he minted yet another mobilism. In “Byron and the Poetry of Deception,” he re-christens the poet’s mobility “Byron’s feminine brain.” Here, McGann modulates from an accusatory tone about Byron’s contradictions to a more sympathetic one. Yet even here, the critic calls mobility a sequence of “conscious” insincerities and “brazen” lies, echoing his contention about Byronic hypocrisy and satanism (42). This is unfortunate, for the phrase “Byron’s feminine brain” might have alerted McGann to the poet’s defense of mobility in the person of Lady Amundeville: Byron’s

fictional alter ego, whose multiple personalities and moods vary not “for want of heart” or sincerity. People (or critics) who impugn the woman’s sincerity “err” because “surely they’re sincerest, / Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest” (*DJ* 16.97). Such “mobility,” Byron adds, animates the creations of “actors, artists, and romancers” like himself (16.98.1). He even divulges his own earnest mutability in temperament and belief (Lovell 220). Thus—in art and life—Byron’s mobility is neither sheer hypocrisy nor aloof satanism nor feminine deception. Feminine it may be; but deception it’s not.

McGann’s rejection of ideology and sincerity as components of Byronic mobility is understandable. If *Don Juan* means more than deceitful wordplay, a particular philosophical unpleasantness intrudes. If the poem uncovers painfully deep and insolvable contradictions about world ideologies, these value systems are indeed “nihilistically cancelled out.” In such case, the poem’s ironies are not just rhetorical tropes. For example, if Byron’s inhuman jesting about battlefield rape is as sincerely realized as his humane satire against war, then the naturalism and liberalism represented in these two textual threads are systems that clash. Each ideology undermines and mocks the other. Liberal satire scorns combat’s natural atrocities; naturalistic humor wounds wartime’s bleeding hearts. In Byron’s mock romance, this ideological cannibalism threatens to become the prime mockery, outperforming the more conventional burlesque of genre and form. Is it any wonder, in the face of this ideological savagery, an eminently humane and liberal critic like McGann would resist identifying accurately Byron’s mobility?

Is it any surprise Anne Mellor’s version of romantic irony also fails to pen the beast? Like McGann, Mellor aims to grasp the protean moods and modes of *Don Juan*. But she too is prejudiced by romanticism and sentimentality. The sentimental vogue for benignly positive attitudes toward nature and man informs the better half of Mellor’s interpretation. In this she

differs somewhat from McGann, who is largely negative about Byronic mobility, branding it satanic, hypocritical and so on. Although romanticism underpins Mellor’s approach as well, hers is a more benevolent and smiling one. McGann perceives the “unhappy” equivocation of *Don Juan*; yet Mellor reads it as the “greatest exemplar” of Friedrich Schlegel’s concept of romantic irony, which depicts existence as a comic duality of creation and ruin, a Manichaeian duplex of affirmatives and negatives. Romantic irony, Schlegel philosophizes, manifests an ontological absolute, a transcendent life-force ultimately creative despite its destructiveness. Thus Mellor portrays *Don Juan* as a burlesque piece that not only annihilates values but that “romantically engages in the creative process of life by eagerly constructing new forms, new myths” (4-5).

Quite rightly, McGann rebuffs readings of *Don Juan* based on romantic irony. Notwithstanding Mellor’s analysis, he thinks the poem’s

pretences are not all embraceable in a comic generosity. Benevolence may be universal, but it is not everything. Savagery and tastelessness are therefore *Don Juan*’s surest signs of a collapse of its integrity, a rupture in its pretensions to the truth. (*Knowledge* 61)

Byron’s “pretensions to the truth” set loose, I dare say, the nihilism pervading *Don Juan*. Though I assume McGann would demur, his point about truth’s “collapse” raises the ugly reality of mutually destructive ideologies. The poem’s intellectual cannibalism is not explained any better by Mellor’s hypothesis of romantic irony than by McGann’s series of mobilisms, however. To Mellor it may seem congenial to claim *Don Juan* generates “life” by spawning “new forms, new myths.” But under scrutiny the sentiment fades. As noted, the war cantos include passages promoting the myth of heroic action. Yet these lines do not construct a “new myth” engaged “in the creative process of life.” Instead they exploit an old myth, chivalry, now committed to the obliteration of life, in a yarn on the rape of Ismail.

The heroics of the war cantos sabotage if not demolish another myth, anti-war liberalism. This ideology itself is no more created or constructed by Byron than are the half-dozen others employed. Moreover, not all but most of the poem's stanzas are rooted in skeptical, negative, pessimistic, lewd, violent, masculinist and toxic material found in irrational, heroic, naturalistic, Calvinistic and Augustinian philosophies. Failed romance, lost glory, spent youth, cosmic vanity, worldly doubt, reductionistic materialism, natural human rapacity, feminine sexual voracity, dire fate, man and nature's Fall, the infamy of conservative pols and poets, the incessant fight for honor are the themes in *Don Juan* that dominate. Certainly the laudation of liberty and the damnation of war-making are recurrent topics in cantos 7, 8 and 9. Yet even here, in the war cantos, Byron's Juvenalian thrust is probably more violent and corrosive than affirmative and liberal. It's like an anti-war movie full of stirring scenes of mayhem and gore: the very brutality of Byron's assault on war violates his anti-war satire.

Satire is inherently negative and abusive, but the type displayed in *Don Juan* is virulent. Nay-saying suffuses this black comedy, whose crucial case of nay-saying—its ideological cannibalism—never quits. Byronic mobility may not be satanic but it is a deal more devilish than Mellor reckons. The global destructiveness, carnality, naturalism, Calvinism, heroics, militancy and skepticism of *Don Juan* determine that. Despite its skepticism and often because of it, the poem gravitates toward materialism. Seldom does one detect in *Don Juan* traces of any ideal spiritual domain. Just the opposite, mostly. So Mellor's Manichaeism thesis of romantic irony must be digested with a pinch of salt. After all, Manichaeism is the ancient belief that material objects are evil and ethereal things good. Byron himself projects this religious definition when he implies a "Passion[ate]" mistress is half-good (or "Manichean") because of the "heaven[ly]" devotion in her earthly attachment (6.2-4). But again, in *Don Juan*, evidence of any ideal dimension looks damned scarce,

indicating a fair share of affirmation and renewal is unrealizable in the material life (or any life) we experience.

Furthermore, owing to the extensive materialism and anti-idealism of *Don Juan*, it seems singularly unsuitable to read it as an expression of Schlegel's German absolute idealism. Byron derided "transcendental philosophy and German metaphysics" as unpoetic and "unintelligible" (Marchand, *Biography* 2: 598). In *Don Juan* he repeatedly defames Wordsworth's transcendental verse of nature, condemning it too as "unintelligible" (D.4, 1.90, 1.91, 1.205, 1.222, 3.94, 3.95). Discrediting romantic idealism in general, Byron insists his own poetry is "the result of [personal] experience and not the philosophy of Nature" (Nicholson 110). His aversion for idealism is pertinent as it attests that the ideological contradictions of *Don Juan* possess nothing like Schlegel's transcendental "life-force" to reconcile and ground them in some all-embracing absolute. Hence ultimately Byron's mutual subversion of values is only destructive, his ideological warfare only annihilating, for idealistic systems are themselves mired in mundane life's valuational battles; and no overarching transcendent life-force can save them. For Byron, ironically, the tangible experience of life points to no ontological life-force but only to *nihil*. As he boasts, "I . . . hold up the Nothingness of life" (7.6.7-8). On balance, regarding *Don Juan*, Mellor's (and Schlegel's) romantic irony is at once too romantic and not ironic enough by half.

Like Mellor and McGann, Peter Manning avoids nihilism out of partiality for liberal or sentimental values (260-61). The intellectual fruit of this bias is a pungent inconsistency. Remarkably, Manning underscores Byron's "definition of man as a social being in saving contact with his fellows" while also emphasizing the poet's supreme skepticism (233, 263). Nevertheless this critic's confusion of sovereign skepticism with humane commitment is just as understandable as McGann and Mellor's denial of nihilism. Michael Cooke and Andrew Cooper are two more scholars who—like Manning—stress Byron's extreme skepti-

cism yet incongruously underline and privilege his kindly morals. Evidently none of these critics can stomach Byron's bitter draft of 100-percent nihility and doubt.

Initially in *Byron and His Fictions*, Manning pays homage to skepticism's sway in *Don Juan*. For this critic, the unconscious metaphor or mobilism for nihilism is "Byron's fictions of reality." Manning discerns that the poet's contradictory contexts and moods originate in British empiricism (230-35). Byron's fluid loyalties to Christian and heroic norms are like streams of Lockean sense data or of Humean impressions, representing "the fictional character of mental activity" (234). Manning's concept of Byronic fictions approximates McGann's conception of poetic hypocrisy. The distinction, though, is that whereas Byronic hypocrisy is sentimentally incorrect owing to its purported insincerity, "fictions" like heroics are happily "devalued" by the poet's "sanative demythologizing" and liberal agenda (Manning 237-38). Never mind that Manning's analysis now adulterates the poet's fictions with the absolute standard of liberalism. Never mind Manning's thesis on Byron's post-Lockean "relativism" is suddenly refuted by a privileged politics (230). Manning hardly seems to mind as he writes that the "task of the poet" is to "demythologiz[e]" martial feats and suchlike "fantasy" (237). Continuing this bloodless crusade, the critic brands the victor of Ismail, General Suwarrow, "a bad man" because of "the chaotic and destructive contradictions of his character" (246). Of course a comparable indictment could be drawn up against the poet himself; and McGann's charge of Byronic satanism almost does just that. But Manning will have none of that.

Instead, rather like the Christian scholar Beatty, the liberal critic Manning envisions *Don Juan* as a comedy grounded in moral absolutes "from which satire takes its energy and authority." Fantasies of chivalrous heroics are allegedly punctured by the piercing realism of Byron's liberal mind. That being so, Manning's book might be better titled *Byron and His Realities*, not

Byron and His Fictions, for Manning seems practically to overthrow his own notion of *Don Juan* as an instance of superlative skepticism and subjectivity. In its place he erects the standard of liberalism, making Byron a moral satirist judging an inhumane universe by humane ideals: “Over the arbitrary and chaotic world of Juan’s experience stands a perceptive intelligence,” banishing “fears of incoherence and nihilism” (261). According to Manning, Byron’s “chaotic and destructive contradictions” are transcended by his resolve “to show things really as they are” (261).

For Manning the difficulty about *Don Juan* is that when its author does “show things really as they are,” he concocts another batch of “chaotic and destructive contradictions.” As Byron says, “if a writer should be quite consistent, / How could he possibly show things existent?” Hence humanism and liberalism are overthrown as much as any other ideology in *Don Juan*. Michael Foot’s consistent thesis on Byron’s anti-war liberalism is not hard to uphold for nothing. Very likely Byron found satire advocating any consistent set of ideals impossible to sustain. Liberal satire against the siege of Ismail is shattered by the poet’s outbreaks of militarism and bon mots about rape. Badinage and heroics like this surface in the cavalier and naturalistic traditions of Lovelace, Rochester and others. Byron appears to be as sincerely affected by these illiberal impulses as he is by progressive ones. His ideological contradictions are no more fictions and fantasies than they are romantic ironies or hypocrisies.

Similar to Manning, Stuart Curran accentuates the “insistent relativism” and “radical skepticism” of *Don Juan* (195-97). Yet also like Manning and others, Curran finally contends that Byron privileges a liberal or humanist standard. *Don Juan* bases itself on “an ethics and a general humanity” indicative of Horatian or benevolent satire (197). Such benevolence, Curran thinks, causes Byron to welcome disparate attitudes and genres in *Don Juan*. Thus “he only reinforces . . . [the] hold” of such beliefs and forms “on the human imagination—his own imagi-

nation, self-conscious in its independent creativity" (198). The poet's "generic capaciousness" recreates the contradictory creativity of the world itself (198). So, Curran surmises, Byron's masterpiece "forestall[s] a nihilistic end" (198).

In the end, Curran's analysis echoes that of Mellor. Focusing on Byron's exploitation of diverse genres, Curran concludes on an upbeat note of romantic irony. "As the world we live in depends on opposites for its ongoing life," he proclaims, "so must its microcosm *Don Juan*" (198). Yet Curran becomes as liable to charges of sentimentalizing as Mellor, and for like reasons. As McGann has said, Byron's ironies "are not all embraceable in a comic generosity." Significantly when Curran affirms the "general humanity" and liberality professedly "implicit" in *Don Juan* (197), he rejects his other assertion about its "insistent relativism." One should not be naive, though. Even the most advanced liberalism is an ideology like any other, one which assumes its absolute righteousness and which assails (not welcomes) its enemies. Byron's liberal attack on the conservative Castlereagh—that "intellectual eunuch" (D.11.8)—is savage. This ferocity is overlooked by Curran as he dwells on Byron's "creativity" and "capaciousness," qualities supposedly moving the bard to embrace all attitudes. Yet most likely the overriding attitude is destructive in *Don Juan*, where even liberalism grows hostile and mean. Once more, the poem's warring worldviews rob each other of authority and privilege. When Byron seizes upon all values, his embrace of them is not "creativ[e]" but crushing.

Byron's mobility of values is examined also by Terence Hoagwood. Yet this scholar fails to identify the systems at odds, denies Byron's polythematic sincerity, and ultimately characterizes the poet's skepticism as liberal. Indeed—like McGann—Hoagwood holds *Don Juan* to be intellectually disengaged and insincere and hence ideologically harmless (*Dialectic* 66). Such trivialization, however, Byron in fact strives to avert, featuring as he does in *Don Juan* the sincere "mobility" of "artists, and

romancers." Byron's ideological volatility, therefore, is not what Hoagwood terms the "freedom from belief" (82). Rather, if anything, it is the enslavement by an unstoppable cycle of beliefs. The sincerity with which all these irreconcilable beliefs are voiced by Byron is precisely what mutually negates them as real ideologies and not simply as rhetorical poses. Yet predictably Hoagwood's inattention to this volatile sincerity tempts him to underrate the destructiveness and negativity of Byron's multifaceted perspective and even to picture it as "positive" and "humane" (71, 151). As a result Hoagwood repeats the sentimental and liberal bias of many other critics.

So what in actuality is the governing mood and viewpoint of *Don Juan*? Is it liberal, naturalistic, Christian, heroic, sentimental or something else altogether? Scholars raise a cacophony of claims about the work and even mobilists seem confounded by a chaos of liberal and sentimental preconceptions. If the poem vocalizes what seems to be an infinite variety of moods and modes, does this make it romantically ironic, hypocritical, fictional or what? How can one best describe this masterpiece's protean nature?

Generally *Don Juan* is a set of antagonistic ambiguities: global paradoxes reappearing throughout the long poem as some half-dozen ideologies engaged in a vicious cycle of opposition. *Don Juan* is a contradictory but premeditated miscellany of creeds: Christianity, naturalism, sentimentality and so on. These are the chief belief-systems of modernity, systems antedating Byron and persisting up to the present-day. Critics of this ideological approach may declare it nominalistic, categorical, reductionistic and totalizing in its depiction of *Don Juan*. Yet I maintain that the ideologies at war are real living belief-systems not only in the poem but in our world and that none of them is a categorical imperative. Moreover, my notion of nihilism reduces itself to no standard ideological category or label but rather distinguishes nihilism as an expansive collection of value systems in irreducible and irresolvable conflict. In contrast—as

discussed—numerous other critics do reduce *Don Juan* to liberal sentimentality or to pessimistic naturalism or to some other totalizing formula.

I suggest, though, no such formula exists save that of nihilism's explosive ideological ambiguities. In our world and in *Don Juan* the clash between naturalism, Christianity, heroics, liberalism and so forth is constant and fratricidal. This valuational warfare is not hypocritical, not affirmative, not just ironic and not just fictional. It is frequently all too real. It is signified in the honest observation that nationalistic bloodshed is as natural as an infant on a mother's "breast" (8.15). Revealed in the despairing insight that a nature goddess like Haidee is also a venomous "snake" (2.117). Epitomized in the strange truth that an autocratic butcher like Suwarrow is a "Hero" as well (7.55). What does one call a piece of poetry which composes mutually subversive antitheses like these? Subversion like this, I would say, is versified nihilism. *Don Juan* is a burlesque romance along the theme of unmitigated skeptical nihilism. The poet may well have left his masterpiece "a problem, like all things" (17.13.1). Still the problem—and solution—that now critical minds must face is *nihil*: Byron's "Nothingness of life."

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