Byron's Doubts
A Critical Study of Byron's Poetry, 1807–24



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Abstract

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This thesis offers a literary and critical reading of Byron's poetry, and a study of his doubts about whether he should have written poetry at all. Despite the energy and variousness of his career as a poet, Byron was often openly irreverent about his art, claiming to have 'no great esteem for poetical persons'. It is the claim of this thesis that behind that habit of disparagement lay more serious unresolved uncertainties about the value and purpose of poetry. Although Byron's scepticism is readily acknowledged, extraordinarily little attention has been paid to the quality of his doubt and how it might have affected his creative practice. Yet as this study shows, his doubts were vitally related to his artistry as a poet.

While we might usually think of doubt as a negative or critical force, likely to perplex or erode creativity, this thesis argues that it profoundly shaped Byron's creative intelligence and had significant implications for his formal and stylistic choices. My introductory chapter introduces the perspectives of poets and critics who have felt that Byron 'wanted faith' in poetry. The chapters that follow aim to trace the most significant creative consequences of that want of conviction. Chapter 1 introduces Byron's doubting temper and examines his early preference for self-reflexive literary forms, including literary satire, that might give expression to his early inclination to be in two minds about literature. Byron's revisions and self-revisions are the subject of Chapter 2, which considers the compositional development of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in light of the creatively resourceful scepticism involved in literary revision; it argues that his doubts were vitally related to the restless experimentation that defined his career as a poet. Chapter 3 turns to *Beppo*, *Don Juan*, and the activity of entertaining doubt in light verse, offering a close stylistic analysis of Byron's comic rhymes to show how his distrust of more serious forms of art was profitably realised as a matter of style.

Over the course of his career, Byron's scepticism of the ordinary preoccupations of poetry led him into a creative effort to expand what the medium could do. These experiments are the subject of Chapter 4. In the later cantos of the poem, Byron cultivated a style that was in some ways consciously unliterary, reflecting his openness to the influence of discursive and ambivalently literary forms including the essay. Chapter 5 turns to the English cantos of *Don Juan*, which Byron claimed to have scribbled in improvisatory style. It describes a poetry that makes an art of not being poetical—and raises questions about its relation to prose. Together these chapters are designed to show that Byron's irresolved doubts had a profound and affirmative influence on his art.

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Contents

Note on texts and short titles …… vi

Introduction …… 1

Chapter 1 – Inheriting …… 15

Chapter 2 – Spending …… 51

Chapter 3 – Promising …… 86

Chapter 4 – Returns …… 125

Chapter 5 – Throwing it Away …… 159

Conclusion …… 186

Bibliography …… 192

Note on texts and short titles

Short titles

Full citations are provided for works when they first appear and abbreviated versions thereafter. The following abbreviations are used for frequently cited works:

Works by Byron:

BLJ	*Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London: John Murray, 1973–94).
CMP	*Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. by Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
CPW	*Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–93).

Biographical Accounts:

BC	*Lady Blessington's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. by Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969; repr. 2015).
HR	Leigh Hunt, *Lord Byron and some of his Contemporaries; with Recollections of the Author's Life*, *and of his Visit to Italy,* 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1828).
HVSV	*His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. by Ernest J. Lovell Jr. (New York: Macmillan, 1954).
MC	*Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. by Ernest J. Lovell Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966; repr. 2015).
MLJ	Thomas Moore, *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron, With Notices of His Life*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1830; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Other Works:

Burns, *Poems*	*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. by James Kinsley, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

Browning, *Poems*	*Robert Browning: The Poems*, ed. by John Pettigrew, 2 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981; repr. 1996).
Dryden, *Works*	*The Works of John Dryden*, ed. by ed. by Vinton A. Dearing and others, 20 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956–2000).
Hazlitt, *Works*	*Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd, 1930–34).
Johnson, *Lives*	Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets: With Critical Observations on Their Works*, ed. by Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
Johnson, *Yale*	J. H. Middendorf, ed., *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 16 vols (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1958–1990).
McGann, *BI*	Jerome J. McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985, repr. 1998).
McGann, *DJC*	Jerome J. McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (London: John Murray, 1976).
McGann, *RI*	Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
Montaigne, *Essays*	*Essays of Michael Seigneur de Montaigne*, trans. by Charles Cotton, 1st edn, 3 vols (London: T. Basset, 1685).
Parker, *SL*	Fred Parker, *Scepticism and Literature: An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne, and Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
Pope, *Correspondence*	*The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. by George Sherburn, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).
Pope, *Works*	Alexander Pope, *Pope: Poetical Works*, ed. by Herbert Davis (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).
Prior, *Works*	*The Literary Works of Matthew Prior*, ed. by H. Bunker Wright and Monroe K. Spears, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).
Stabler, *BPH*	Jane Stabler, *Byron, Poetics, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
Swift, *Correspondence*	*The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. by Harold Williams, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963–65).
Swift, *Works*	Jonathan Swift, *Swift: Poetical Works*, ed. by Herbert Davis (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

Tennyson, *Poems*	Alfred Tennyson, *The Poems of Tennyson: in three volumes*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, ed., 2nd edn (Harlow: Longman, 1987).

Further note on texts

All references to Byron's poetry and prose are taken from *CPW* and *CMP* respectively.

Quotations from Horace and Juvenal refer to the *Loeb Classical Library*:

> *Horace: Satires, Epistles*, trans. by H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929).
>
> *Juvenal and Persius*, trans. by Susanna Morton Braund (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

Quotations from Shakespeare refer to *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, general editors Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

References to the *Oxford English Dictionary* are to the *OED Online*.

Further details of all other works are listed in the Bibliography.

Introduction

> His whole heart and mind, his whole soul and strength, Byron could not give to the idea at all; neither to art, nor freedom, nor any faith whatever.
>
> Algernon Swinburne[1]

> He wanted faith in the interior of poetry, to relish it, unpruned and unpopular.
>
> Leigh Hunt[2]

Byron's doubts surround our thinking about him as a poet. 'In short, I deny nothing, but doubt everything,' he remarked in a letter in 1811, speaking in that case of religious doubts that he could not 'shake off'.[3] Similar irresolutions played a role not just in his thinking about religion, but in his politics, his intellectual life, and in his life as a poet; they recur across his poetry and letters, taking every possible form between deep perplexity and detached irreverence. Almost everything we know about Byron tells us that he was, as Christopher Ricks has written, 'a profound and generous sceptic'.[4] Evidence of his sceptical intelligence occurs across the full range of his work, but it was most fully and openly realised in *Don Juan*: 'Oh, Doubt!' the narrator cries in the first of the English cantos, 'thou sole prism / Of the Truth's rays,' an appeal that might be said to characterise the method of the poem as a whole, as Arthur Symons summarised so well: 'it doubts everything, as everything must be doubted before it can be understood rightly and rightly apprehended'.[5] It is the underlying argument of

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[1] Algernon Swinburne, 'Notes on the Text of Shelley', *Fortnightly Review*, 11 (May 1869), 539–61 (p. 556).
[2] *Lord Byron and some of his Contemporaries; with Recollections of the Author's Life, and of his Visit to Italy*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), I, 77–78 (hereafter, *HR*).
[3] Letter to Francis Hodgson, 4 December 1811, in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London: John Murray, 1973–94), II, 136 (hereafter, *BLJ*).
[4] Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 146.
[5] *Don Juan* XI (1823), ll. 13–15, *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980–1993) (hereafter, *CPW*); Arthur Symons, *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry* (1909), in *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Andrew Rutherford (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 497–505 (p. 502).

this thesis that Byron's inclination to doubt was too deep a habit for his writing life to be exempted from this scrutiny.

'In general I do not draw well with Literary men—not that I dislike them but—I never know what to say to them after I have praised their last publication', Byron remarked in one of the 'Detached Thoughts' he composed in Italy in the early 1820s.[6] 'His conversation was anything but literary, except when Shelley was near him', remembered Edward Trelawny, who knew Byron at Pisa; 'He never shews the author,' remarked Thomas Medwin in similarly approving terms.[7] Thomas Moore recalled him taking pleasure in putting 'completely to flight all poetical … associations' in conversation, a demystifying instinct that was pungently expressed across his comic verse and letters.[8] Byron had an irrepressible instinct for literary satire. This was first exercised in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, in 1809, and only grew more incisive after his emigration in 1816: one of the pleasures of *Beppo* is the affronting swagger of its sallies at literary people as he aimed to give the English scene some parting kicks. The poem contains a splendid display of what Seamus Perry has called Byron's 'mistrust of literariness':

> One hates an author that's *all author*, fellows
> In foolscap uniforms turned up with ink,
> So very anxious, clever, fine, and jealous,
> One don't know what to say to them, or think … [9]

These lines are characteristic of Byron's impatience with the vanities surrounding 'litter*atoor*' and his growing distrust of the preoccupations of 'literary England'.[10] But Byron's reservations about the 'Literary men' can be explained only to some degree by this notorious disdain for those with 'the pen peeping from behind the ear—

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[6] 'Detached Thoughts', no. 53, *BLJ* IX, 30. These were written by Byron at Pisa and Ravenna between October 1821 and May 1822.
[7] Edward Trelawny, *The Last Days of Shelley and Byron: Being the Complete Text of Trelawny's 'Recollections',* ed. by J. E. Morpurgo (London: Folio Society, 1952), pp. 29–30; *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. by Ernest J. Lovell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966; repr. 2015), pp. 265–6 (hereafter, *MC*).
[8] *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. by Ernest J. Lovell (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 233 (hereafter, *HVSV*).
[9] Seamus Perry, 'Hail, Muse!', *LRB*, 25.3 (6 February 2003); *Beppo* (1818), ll. 593–6.
[10] Letters to Moore, 28 February 1817, *BLJ* V, 176; and Murray, 24 September 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 221.

& the thumbs a little inky or so'.[11] Across his letters are signs that behind the patrician aloofness about 'sweating poesy' there were more serious misgivings.[12]

'Who would write, who had any thing better to do?'… 'what are they worth? what have they done?'… '*who* was ever altered by a poem?' [13] Byron asked these kinds of questions from the beginning to the end of his career, and though they were often lightly entertained, he also expressed a lifetime of more serious doubts: 'I do not think it my vocation', he recorded with a degree of real perplexity on more than one occasion.[14] His suspicion that art was culpably withdrawn from active life was lifelong and there were times when he really does seem to have thought that there was something seriously amiss about 'the preference of *writers* to *agents*—the mighty stir made about scribbling and scribes'.[15] Despite his great productivity, he was subject to periods of disenchantment with writing: 'I am tired of scribbling', he said in 1820; and then there was the deeply equivocal late letter to Augusta Leigh from Greece: 'I hate reading verse—and always did…'[16] Behind much of this was his recurrent intuition that he was 'wasting the best part of life'.[17] An apprehension at 'having lived so long, and to so little purpose' appears across his letters, and he feared more than anything becoming a mere 'spectator' of life.[18]

Behind the flippant habit of disparagement, then, was a more profound reserve. That these doubts were sustained alongside an energetic career of writing and therefore might be said to contain an element of contradiction is perhaps not surprising: 'if a writer should be quite consistent, / How could he possibly show things existent?' as the narrator of *Don Juan* observes.[19] Byron was a man and a poet of 'conflicting impulses,' as Ricks points out; and although he often forswore it, there was in practice almost no period in his life when he was not writing poetry.[20] The five chapters of this thesis trace the fluctuations of these unsettled doubts over the course of Byron's career as a poet.

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[11] Letter to Murray, 25 March 1817, *BLJ* V, 191.
[12] Letter to Murray, 6 April 1819, *BLJ* VI, 105.
[13] Journal entries, 24 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 220; and 31 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 41; Letter to Murray, 3 November 1821, *BLJ* IX, 53.
[14] Letters to Moore, 28 February 1817, *BLJ* V, 176; and Annabella Milbanke, 26 September 1814, *BLJ* IV, 183.
[15] Journal entry, 24 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 220.
[16] Letters to Hobhouse, 8 June 1820, *BLJ* VII, 115; and Augusta Leigh, 23 February 1824, *BLJ* XI, 121.
[17] Letter to Augusta Leigh, 26 March 1813, *BLJ* III, 32.
[18] Journal entry, 21 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 32.
[19] *Don Juan* XV (1824), ll. 690–7.
[20] Ricks, *Allusion,* p. 146.

Byron's cultivation of a lofty indifference to his art was fully present to his contemporaries. Colonel Leicester Stanhope, an agent of the London Greek Committee who knew Byron in 1824, recalled him insisting that 'he had no love or enthusiasm for poetry':

> I shook my head, doubtingly, and said to him, that although he had displayed a piercing sagacity in reading and developing the characters of others, he knew but little of his own. He replied, 'Often have I told you that I am a perfect sceptic. I have no fixed opinions, that is my character.'[21]

What this account almost certainly delivers to us is a version of Byron playing himself. Several of his contemporaries recorded their impression of his 'common habit of mystifying', and Byron himself reportedly confessed to his susceptibility to 'the mischievous spirit of the moment to vex the person or persons with whom I am conversing.'[22] Lady Blessington, another of his interlocutors, described this as an inclination 'to talk for effect, and to assert what he does not believe'.[23] And yet his claim to have 'no fixed opinions' does convey a truth about his character. In his unwillingness to be committed to any one version of himself, he emphasises the freedom and flexibility of mind that he valued.

Byron's sometimes heroic dismissiveness of his art has inevitably invited variously ungenerous interpretations. Several of his contemporaries cited 'his evident desire of being considered more *un homme de societe* than a poet,' and his dislike of 'being treated as a man of letters, instead of as a Lord and man of fashion'.[24] His doubts have also tended to elicit corresponding critical reservations. The idea that he lacked the truly artistic sensibility has long been an element in his reception; later poets, especially, have often wondered whether Byron was a poet only in a qualified sense. Although Tennyson remarked that 'he is endlessly clever, and is now unduly depreciated', he would reportedly say that 'Byron is not an artist or a thinker, or a creator in the higher sense'.[25] Matthew Arnold esteemed Byron for his rebellion against the 'established facts and dominant ideas' of his age, or 'what we call British Philistinism', but also came to the view that in any deeper

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[21] *HVSV*, 546. On Byron's habit of deliberately confounding 'those who he knew or suspected were taking notes on his conversation': see *HVSV*, p. xi; *MC*, p. 16; *Lady Blessington's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. by Ernest J. Lovell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969; repr. 2015), p. 186 (hereafter, *BC*).
[22] *MC,* 16; *BC*, 186.
[23] *BC*, 358.
[24] *BC*, 45; Edward Trelawny, *The Last Days of Shelley and Byron: Being the Complete Text of Trelawny's 'Recollections'*, ed. by J. E. Morpurgo (London: Folio Society, 1952), pp. 29–30.
[25] Hallam Lord Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir,* 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), II, 287.

sense he had lacked 'the artist's nature and gifts'.[26] T. S. Eliot passed the equivocal judgment that his best work was the happy outcome of him renouncing 'his most ambitious attempts to be poetic'.[27]

In some ways, then, this thesis sets out to explore some of the critical implications of what Eliot remarked on in that essay, though with negative consequences in mind, as 'the kind of interest, and the kind of lack of interest, that he took in poetry.'[28] Byron's distrust of art has been addressed occasionally, though not at length, by subsequent critics. In a 1968 lecture, Anne Barton captured the element of curiosity in this: 'at a time when the value placed on poetry and the imagination was reaching a height inconceivable in the sixteenth, seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, the most celebrated poet of Europe …regarded his art with a suspicion amounting at times to a contempt.'[29] Michael O'Neill believed that there was 'considerable significance in Byron's virtuoso exhibitions of disdain for poetry'.[30] Christopher Ricks has appreciated the Byron of *Don Juan* for appreciating an idiom that casts 'a cold eye on art and its high hopes'.[31]

There have always been readers and critics who have valued the ambivalences in Byron's artistic sensibility. In Moore's *Life of Lord Byron*, published in 1830, Byron emerges as a man divided between the claims of art and those of the world at large: 'and though it may be granted that he would have been more purely and abstractedly the poet, had he been less thoroughly, in all his pursuits and propensities, the man, yet from this very mixture and alloy has it arisen that his pages bear so deeply the stamp of real life …'[32] Later in the century, John Morley was inclined to think that Byron had been fortunately deficient in the 'rarer qualities of the specially poetic mind'.[33] Writing in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1870, he wrote approvingly of Byron's capacity to be creatively stirred by 'the every-day debate of the world', unlike 'more spiritual natures' (he was

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[26] Matthew Arnold, 'Byron', *Essays in Criticism, Second Series* (London: Macmillan, 1888), 163–204 (pp. 193, 198). Arnold's relation to Byron has been examined in detail by Matthew Ward: see 'Arnold's Ambivalence and Byron's Force and Fire', in *Byron Among the English Poets,* ed. by Clare Bucknell and Matthew Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 269–86.

[27] T. S. Eliot, 'Byron' (1937), *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Ronald Schuchard and others, 8 vols (London: Faber & Faber, 2014–2019), V, 430–48 (p. 438).

[28] *Ibid*., p. 430.

[29] Anne Barton, 'Byron and the Mythology of Fact', *Byron Foundation Lecture* (Nottingham, 1968), series ed. by Matthew J. A. Green (Nottingham: Byron Foundation Lectures Online, 2009), p. 4.

[30] Michael O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 93.

[31] Ricks, *Allusion*, p. 127.

[32] Thomas Moore, *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*, ed. by Thomas Moore, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1830; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), II, 592 (hereafter, *MLJ*).

[33] John Morley, 'Byron', *Fortnightly Review*, 8 (December 1870), 650–673 (pp. 654).

thinking of the contrast with Shelley).[34] Swinburne had the same comparison in mind when contributing to the same journal the year before with a piece on the editing of Shelley, when he turned to Byron with a reservation:

> With all reserve of reverence for the noble genius and memory of Byron, I can no more accept him as a poet equal or even akin to Shelley on any side but one, than I could imagine Shelley endowed with the various, fearless, keen-eyed, and triumphant energy which makes the greatest of Byron's works so great. With all his glory of ardour and vigour and humour, Byron was a singer who could not sing … Byron, with a noble admixture of brighter and purer blood, had in him a cross of the true Philistine breed. [35]

Eventually it was that latter side of Byron's 'highly composite nature' which would come to seem uppermost to Swinburne, who by 1884 was marshalling evidence of Byron's artistic insensibility and calling into question his very 'claim to the title of poet'.[36]

Yet the earlier reservation was more perceptive. In *Poets in Their Time*, Barbara Everett identified in the English poetic tradition a strain of 'obstinate artlessness that is sometimes antagonism to art,' described by her as an 'often brilliantly talented and intelligent philistinism'; and one persuasive way of reading Byron, as Seamus Perry has suggested, is in precisely those terms: that in his 'art-distrusting art' and respect for worldly realities there is an element of the resourcefully philistine.[37] This scholarship, including Everett's work on Robert Browning, is of considerable background interest to this study; and so too are the insights of Peter Porter on Rochester, Claude Rawson on Swift, and John Bayley on Keats, all of whom offer stimulating accounts of poets whose doubts about art have been vitally related to their creativity.[38] What emerges from these studies is a sense that the merits of doubt—perhaps more readily acknowledged in intellectual life—might be similarly recognised and valued in artist endeavour. 'One of the things that a poet might most fruitfully hold in honest

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[34] *Ibid.,* pp. 653–4.
[35] Swinburne, *Fortnightly Review*, pp. 556–7. Swinburne was responding in part to Arnold's earlier remarks on Byron in his essay on 'Heinrich Heine', *Essays on Criticism, First Series* (1865)*,* 4th edn (London: Macmillan, 1895), 156–93 (p. 177). Cronin has recently traced the revival of interest in Byron led by Swinburne and Arnold in the last decades of the nineteenth century: see Richard Cronin, 'A. C. Swinburne and Byron's Bad Ear', in *Byron Among the English Poets*, pp. 287–302.
[36] Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Wordsworth and Byron' (1884), *Miscellanies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1886), p. 78.
[37] Barbara Everett, *Poets in Their Time: Essays on English Poetry from Donne to Larkin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 262; Perry, 'Hail, Muse!'.
[38] Everett, *Poets in Their Time*; Peter Porter, 'The Professional Amateur', in *Spirit of Wit: Reconsiderations of Rochester,* ed. by Jeremy Treglown (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), pp. 58–74; Peter Porter, *Saving from the Wreck: Essays on Poetry* (Nottingham: Trent Books, 2001); Claude Rawson, *Swift's Angers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); John Bayley, 'Keats and Reality', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 48 (1962), 91–125.

doubt is poetry itself', as Perry has observed, writing on Tennyson.[39] In one of his studies of Eliot, Ricks refers to the 'artistic self-scepticism' that is a faculty of artists, arguing that one element that 'distinguishes art from rhetoric' is that art 'does not exempt from its 'suspicious and interrogating eye' its own procedures'.[40] What he describes is a sceptical vigilance that is applied by art to itself. Self-doubt, by these accounts, may be a vital aspect of the literary imagination.

Scepticism may run the risk of appearing as something less desirable: as mere want of conviction, or cynicism and irresponsibility. As Jane Stabler has demonstrated, the 'indeterminacy and relativism' and 'inconsistencies in his style' elicited hostile criticism within Byron's own lifetime: 'Doubt is dangerous', as she remarks.[41] Byron's scepticism has received surprisingly little sustained critical attention, but has occasioned uneasiness: in a mid-century essay, Michael G. Cooke considered whether his doubts were not so comprehensive and unresolved that he 'stands as a major poet affirming nothing'.[42] This is not a study of Byron's religious doubts, nor of his engagement with philosophical scepticism, although to the extent that these are expressions of the same instinctively sceptical temper there is inevitably some overlap with this study's more specifically literary concerns.[43] From what Byron called the 'desponding … scepticism' of the first cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, through to the thoroughly ventilated speculations of *Don Juan*, his poetry very often did become a medium for the varieties of doubt and agnosticism that perplexed and animated his thinking.[44] For although Byron's doubts were sometimes deeply disillusioning, they were far from simply negative. Though he was sometimes troubled by want of faith, he did not necessarily seek to be more affirmative or aspire to consolation or firmness. Rather than seeking to banish the voices of scepticism, he often found an irreverent way of profiting from them. This thesis argues that that capacity to make an art out of the unease of doubt—to turn potentially disabling sceptical perplexity into artistic endeavour—was a large part of his achievement as a poet. If Byron's doubts were the source of his restlessness, his introspection, and his

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[39] Seamus Perry, *Alfred Tennyson* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2005), p. 12.
[40] Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 8.
[41] Jane Stabler, *Byron, Poetics, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 23 (hereafter, Stabler, *BPH*).
[42] Michael G. Cooke, 'The Limits of Skepticism: The Byronic Affirmation', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 17 (1968), 97–111 (p. 99). In another mid-century study he appears as an 'uncomfortable' sceptic who is 'unwilling to commit himself': see Elizabeth French Boyd, *Byron's Don Juan: A Critical Study* (New York: Humanities Press, 1958), p. 162.
[43] Anthony Howe has made a study of Byron's philosophical scepticism and aimed to place him within 'intellectual history'. See *Byron and the Forms of Thought* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 15.
[44] Suppressed prose note to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812), *CPW* II, 45, 27n.

discontent, they also fostered his tolerance, his mobility, his sense for comedy, and his saving self-irreverence; they accounted in large measure for the liberation of his thought and art, for 'his excellent contempt for things contemptible', as Swinburne said, and ultimately for his deep honesty as a poet.[45] Far from being an incapacity, they were the making of him as a poet. Morley thought that it was the heart of Byron's genius that he could produce poetry out of something 'so intrinsically unfavourable to high poetry as doubt,' for it was his view that Byron 'was without a faith. That is to say he had no firm basis for his conceptions, and he was aware he had none.'[46]

It is the way that Byron's doubts collaborated with his creativity that has not always been sufficiently appreciated. Recovering this may be a matter of looking 'to the creative possibilities of skepticism, to the boundary skepticism shares with commitment when it is fully cognizant of itself', as Cooke proposed, but those possibilities need not be discovered only where doubt is set aside ('Byron's skepticism has its limits too', Cooke writes).[47] Instead this thesis aims to appreciate those points where Byron's lack of conviction become, perhaps paradoxically, creatively resourceful, and where it influenced his choices of literary form and style. This approach is informed in part by Fred Parker's *Scepticism and Literature*—a study of writers including Montaigne, Pope, Swift, Sterne, and Johnson, all of whom were read and appreciated by Byron—in which Parker looks beyond the 'negative arguments' of scepticism to 'that more affirmative activity of 'sceptical thinking' which is given literary realisation'.[48] Byron's scepticism was less a matter of conscious intellectual commitment than it was the outcome of instinctive habits of mind, which makes Parker's broad conception of 'this desirable quality of intelligence'—'sceptical thinking'—particularly useful. His thesis is that sceptical thinking may be most fully realised in literature:

> … for it is the literary artist who understands how, even in discursive writing, words can mean more than they say, and who best knows how to prevent the flow of intelligence from hardening into mere propositions. The sceptical thinker and the literary artist have, by this account, a certain natural affinity …[49]

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[45] Algernon Swinburne, *A Selection from the Works of Lord Byron* (London: Edward Moxon & Co., 1866), p. viii.
[46] Morley, *Fortnightly Review*, pp. 652–3, 665.
[47] Cooke, 'The Limits of Skepticism', p. 99.
[48] Fred Parker, *Scepticism and Literature: An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne, and Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 42, 55 (hereafter, Parker, *SL*).
[49] *Ibid.,* pp. 2–3.

The authors named in Parker's study were all influences on Byron. The remarkable breadth of Byron's engagement with past poets has been surveyed by the recent volume *Byron Among the English Poets: Literary Tradition and Poetic Legacy*. This thesis is similarly concerned with Byron's debts to literary tradition and their influence on his maturing literary styles. Among the several literary traditions in which Byron can be read, one of the most curiously neglected has been that described by Ronald Bottrall in his classic essay on 'Byron and the Colloquial Tradition in English Poetry'.[50] This is a line of descent that might be said to include Dryden, Rochester, Pope, and Swift, Samuel Butler and Matthew Prior, all of whom had a significant place in Byron's literary imagination and continue to be understated in critical accounts of his work. Conceived broadly, this tradition points forwards, by some accounts, to the tradition of 'serious light verse' of T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden, and encompasses techniques that can be seen as leading, for example, to the poetry of Robert Browning.[51] These literary contexts have implications for the way we read Byron's doubts. When Leigh Hunt observed in *Lord Byron and some of his Contemporaries* that Byron had 'wanted faith in the interior of poetry', what he had partly in mind were Byron's relations to past poets: 'He affected to doubt whether Shakspeare [*sic*] was so great a genius as he has been taken for,' he remarked, 'Spenser he could not read; at least he said so. All the gusto of that most poetical of the poets went with him for nothing.'[52] This was clearly an example of Byron attempting 'to vex the person or persons with whom I am conversing'. Hunt was recalling his acquaintance with Byron in 1822, by which time Byron determined to distance himself from Englishness as well as the 'most poetical' elements of poetry.

Byron was not, of course, the first poet to express a scepticism of his own art, though perhaps no poet before him had made such an art of doing so openly, with the possible exception of Swift. Swift, in his ruthless eye for what Byron called 'Cant poetical', must be one of Byron's most significant predecessors; and the relation between the two of them was surely a great literary affinity—though one that has largely fallen from critical

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[50] Ronald Bottrall, 'Byron and the Colloquial Tradition in English Poetry', in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. by M. H. Abrams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 210–227 (pp. 210–11).

[51] Ian Higgins and Claude Rawson, 'Introduction' to *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), p. xxi; cf. W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), p. 164.

[52] *HR,* I, 77–78. Byron, of course, was thoroughly familiar with Shakespeare, as Jonathan Bate, Bernard Beatty, and others have shown: see Beatty, 'Byron and Shakespeare', in *Byron Among the English Poets*, pp. 19–34; Bate, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 222–47.

view.[53] In Swift and Butler, Byron also discovered a rich seam of art-questioning art. Both of these predecessors may be viewed within that tradition of light verse which Barbara Everett described as containing an 'antipathy to the aesthetic – or, if not an antipathy, at least an adulteration of it'.[54] As this suggests, there may be an inherited—and therefore elusively literary—quality to the distrust of serious art that these poets shared. A fuller recognition of these writers and influences in Byron's work casts light on his own appetite for styles and forms that might reflect the less purely aesthetic virtues, including light verse and literary satire.

Byron's scepticism was often at one with elements of his literary style. 'In short, I deny nothing, but doubt everything': referring to this passage In *Allusion to the Poets*, Ricks remarks that 'what makes this an embodiment of Byron and Byronism is not only the sentiment but the form: it all hinges on *but*.'[55] One of the merits of Byron's scepticism was its vital connection to his capacity for revision. Just as in his intellectual life Byron was committed to revising beliefs and opinions that were only ever provisional, so too he was always relinquishing or revising earlier styles. In his two major long poems, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*, he worked according to provisional designs in works that remained open to addition. His distrust of art surfaced in other ways: in his worldly scorn for 'what is sometimes called poetic diction,' and his conviction that art must not be indifferent to the reality of things.[56] Perhaps most importantly, his doubts continually awakened the need to discover new styles. One of the surest signs of their creativity was that his dissatisfaction with the ordinary boundaries of poetry led him to expand the possibilities of the medium. His scepticism continually led him into literary experiment.

When Hunt remarked that Byron 'wanted faith in the interior of poetry' what he seems to have had in mind was Byron's inability or unwillingness to follow poetry into itself. One sign of this was the openness of Byron's poetic composition to the influence of more discursive, ambivalently literary forms, like the verse epistle and the essay. As he got deeper into the writing of *Don Juan*, he increasingly tested the uncertain boundaries between speech and writing, poetry and prose, travelling to that 'debatable borderland' in which Swinburne located his better writing.[57] 'I mean it for a poetical T Shandy—or Montaigne's Essays with a story

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[53] *Letter to* **** ****** [John Murray] *on the Rev. W. L. Bowles's Strictures on the Life and Writings of Pope* (1821), *CMP,* 128 (Hereafter, the 'Letter to John Murray'). The rich connection between Swift and Byron, rarely acknowledged in Byron studies, is addressed in Chapter 1 of this thesis.
[54] Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 260.
[55] Ricks, *Allusion*, p. 143.
[56] *Don Juan* VIII (1823), ll. 17–19; 681–8.
[57] Swinburne, 'Wordsworth and Byron', p. 70.

for a hinge', he said, after writing the last complete canto.[58] In Montaigne's *Essais*, as Parker notes, 'the vitality of Montaigne's scepticism is communicated at least as much through the manner of his writing as through his explicit declarations', and the same might be said of Byron when he started connecting his writing of *Don Juan* to the activity of 'essaying'.[59] 'The doubt that afflicts us,' W. W. Robson remarked, '…crystallises into the question: how much of it is poetry?[60] These questions are explored in the final two chapters of this thesis.

Byron's allegiances to the world 'outside poetry altogether' have been highly significant to the work of Jerome McGann.[61] All readers of Byron are indebted to McGann's edition of Byron's *Complete Poetical Works* (1980–1993), and its invaluable annotations. But it is notable that his influential critical studies have tended to place Byron in a predominantly critical relation to the poetry of his own time: McGann's responsiveness to Byron's 'skeptical mind' contributes to his portrait of a poet for whom the imagination was 'not a creative but an analytic instrument'.[62] His critical methods have valuably emphasised the strength of Byron's ethical commitments and demonstrated the benefits of drawing out the 'specific historical perspectives' that inform his work: in his later historicising works, in which *Don Juan* has often featured as an exemplary case, the poem emerges as 'a comprehensive survey and explanation' and 'political and social critique' of its times.[63] But McGann's are sometimes 'uncompromising claims', as Robert Douglas-Fairhurst notes, and it is difficult not to conclude that out of the ambition to appreciate Byron's historical consciousness other critical sacrifices have been made.[64] McGann's theoretical claims often seem inadequate to the mixed impulses of the Byron's work and to seek a degree of comprehensiveness and resolution which Byron's own thinking tends to resist.

By consciously looking beyond the insularity of 'aesthetic principles', the historicist method risks overlooking much of what makes *Don Juan* the poem it is*:* its comedy, its fidelity to its narrative, its elements of formal virtuosity.[65] This is because tracing Byron's distrust of art inevitably leads to an encounter with a counter-current, so that just as his commitment to poetry was met by a countervailing scepticism about art, so

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[58] Letter to Douglas Kinnaird 14 April 1823, *BLJ* X, 150.
[59] Parker, *SL*, p. 32.
[60] W. W. Robson, *Critical Essays* (Routledge, London, 1966*)*, p. 151.
[61] Jerome McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (London: John Murray, 1976), p. 163 (hereafter, McGann, *DJC*).
[62] Jerome McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 265; McGann, *DJC*, p. 165.
[63] Jerome J. McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 255, 266–7, 365–7 (hereafter, McGann, *BI*).
[64] Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 72.
[65] McGann, *DJC*, p. 163.

too his most bracing doubts tended to encounter a contrary instinct: his wish to champion the independent claims of 'Art and the Arts', to borrow from one of the unpublished prose defences of Pope.[66] In the early stages of writing *Don Juan*, Byron informed Murray that the poem was meant to contain 'as little poetry as could be helped'.[67] But even when he brought his poetry to the border between writing and speaking, or allowed his style to collaborate with more discursive forms like the essay and the novel, there remains a certain irreducibly literary element to his style. Byron's doubts about art might be described as most compelling when they lead to their counterclaim: that vigorous defence of the literary interest that was also a constituent of his art.

This thesis considers Byron's poetry chronologically, admitting for some flexibility, across five chapters. These are intended to pay most attention to those points where his doubts were most fully realized or where his scepticism is at its most creatively resourceful. Each chapter seeks to draw out a particular stylistic question in detail—broadly speaking, allusion, revision, rhyme, digression, and improvisation—but not to the exclusion of other concerns. Much of the focus of this thesis is on Byron's two major long poems, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*, but these have been placed in the context of his other work, including the often-overlooked critical prose he wrote at Ravenna in 1820 and 1821.

Chapter 1 examines some of Byron's earliest collected and unpublished poetry and satires, paying close attention to his early preference for structurally allusive forms, including satire and burlesque, that might give expression to the doubled, undecided rhythms of his early thinking about poetry. Such forms insist on their secondary relation to more elevated literary genres and yet are among the most self-conscious of all literary modes: in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, Byron harnessed that ambivalence to position himself at once inside and outside the literary world.

Christopher Ricks has referred to the exercise of 'creative scepticism' that may be involved in literary revision. Chapter 2 applies that recognition to the eight-year period of composition of *Childe Harold* (1809–1818) to demonstrate the close relationship between Byron's doubts and his restless artistic instinct always to 'try something new'.[68] Though Byron often professed trust in his first thoughts, this chapter argues that his

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[66] *Observations Upon "Observations." A Second Letter to John Murray, Esq. on The Rev. W. L. Bowles's Strictures on the Life and Writings of Pope* (1821), first published in *Works* (1832), *CMP,* 181-2 (hereafter, 'Observations Upon Observations').
[67] Letter to Murray, 12 August 1819, *BLJ* VI, 208.
[68] Christopher Ricks, *Decisions and Revisions in T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), p. 56; Letter to Lady Melbourne, 8 April 1814, *BLJ* IV, 90.

capacity for revision was vitally related to the formal variety and experimentation that defined his career as a poet. It proposes the excellence of his capacity to be moved to a 'better opinion' and 'amend it still farther, if possible.'[69]

Chapter 3 turns to the works in *ottava rima*. In *Beppo* (1818) and the first cantos of *Don Juan* (1819), Byron developed a light verse manner incomparably well suited to entertaining doubt. In these comedies of infidelity, written under the liberating influence of the departure from England, a range of comic techniques are designed to communicate a distrust of the most serious pretensions of poetry. A close analysis of his comic rhyming shows him to have been drawing on a burlesque tradition, exemplified by Butler and Swift, in which rhyme functions as an irreverent technique for interrogating the authority of art. This chapter goes on to consider Byron's claims to prefer 'something better still, so very real' over the claims of art and his scepticism of poetry as a medium for conveying the truth.[70]

Chapters 4 and 5 continue to trace Byron's developing styles across and beyond *Don Juan*. In the middle and later cantos of the poem, composed as Byron continued to travel across Italy, he sought out literary techniques that might emphasise his worldly perspective and his distance from 'literary England'. Chapter 4 begins by addressing his insistence that poets should 'see what's what in fact', a conviction that he sometimes translated in *Don Juan* into a pointedly unliterary style.[71] The second part of the chapter turns to his cultivation of a digressive method, said to be sceptically open to not knowing where it is going: 'I can't tell where it may not run'.[72]

Chapter 5 turns to the English cantos of *Don Juan*, in which Byron freely experimented with an improvised, conversational style. 'I can't help scribbling once a week,' he informed his readers, even as he considered new undertakings, including what his contemporaries recorded was a desire 'of applying himself to prose writing.'[73] This chapter then traces several revealing allusions to Pope, Swift, and Prior used by Byron to mediate his ironic reflections on the condition of having been 'rather famous in my time'.[74] Indeed, much of

[69] Journal entries, 28 and 29 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 38–39.
[70] *Beppo* (1818), ll. 97–99.
[71] *Don Juan* XII (1823), l. 316.
[72] *Don Juan* XV (1824), ll. 171–2.
[73] *Don Juan* XIV (1824), l. 77; *BC*, p. 19.
[74] *Don Juan* XIV, l. 71.

this increasingly frankly doubting poem was written, according to Byron, from beyond the 'the poetical period of life' altogether.[75]

These chapters seek to draw out Byron's engagements with the poets already mentioned, and to bring his later poetry into relation with some of the last writers he was known to be reading: Swift and Montaigne.[76] Together they emphasise the artistic significance of Byron's doubts and the resourceful creativity of an intelligence that remained unconvinced.

[75] 'Detached Thoughts', no. 82, *BLJ* IX, 41.
[76] See accounts by Edward Trelawny and James Hamilton Brown in *HVSV*, p. 385–88.

Chapter 1 – Inheriting

NOTHING so difficult as a beginning
In poesy, unless perhaps the end;
For oftentimes when Pegasus seems winning
The race, he sprains a wing, and down we tend,
Like Lucifer when hurl'd from heaven for sinning;
Our sin the same, and hard as his to mend,
Being pride, which leads the mind to soar too far,
Till our own weakness shows us what we are.

But Time, which brings all beings to their level,
And sharp Adversity, will teach at last
Man,—and, as we would hope,—perhaps the devil,
That neither of their intellects are vast:
While youth's hot wishes in our red veins revel,
We know not this—the blood flows on too fast;
But as the torrent widens towards the ocean,
We ponder deeply on each past emotion.

As boy, I thought myself a clever fellow,
And wish'd that others held the same opinion;
They took it up when my days grew more mellow,
And other minds acknowledged my dominion:
Now my sere fancy 'falls into the yellow
Leaf,' and imagination droops her pinion,
And the sad truth which hovers o'er my desk
Turns what was once romantic to burlesque.

Don Juan, Canto IV[1]

[1] *Don Juan* IV (1821), st. 1–3. These stanzas were composed by Byron in late 1819, during his final months at Venice.

I

In his journal in 1813, Byron recorded his disinclination to 'rate poetry, in general, and my rhymes in particular' very 'highly':

> To withdraw myself from myself (oh that cursed selfishness!) has ever been my sole, my entire, my sincere motive in scribbling at all; and publishing is also the continuance of the same object, by the action it affords to the mind, which else recoils upon itself. If I valued fame, I should flatter received opinions, which have gathered strength by time, and will yet wear longer than any living words to the contrary. But, for the soul of me, I cannot and will not give the lie to my own thoughts and doubts, come what may. If I am a fool, it is, at least, a doubting one; and I envy no one the certainty of his self-approved wisdom.[2]

This conveys the shrewd and salutatory disbelief that was one expression of Byron's sceptical intelligence. Vigilant about all claims to 'certainty' and committed to questioning everything, he was determined to stand independently among 'received opinions' and unexamined beliefs; hence his conviction that it is better to be a 'doubting fool' than to be deceived. These were lifelong habits of mind: the ironic advice late in *Don Juan* that ''Tis always best to take things upon trust' conveys his scorn for the most rooted and comfortable kinds of orthodoxies.[3]

This was a sceptical scrutiny that he extended to the writing of poetry, as his letter suggests, where 'scribbling' appears as justifiable only 'for the action it affords to the mind'. 'God help him!' who wants to be a poet, he exclaimed in another journal entry in 1813, opining that 'no one should be a rhymer who could be any thing better. And this is what annoys one,' he added, thinking of some of his contemporaries, 'to see Scott and Moore, and Campbell and Rogers, who might have all been agents and leaders, now mere spectators …'[4] The following day he continued these thoughts: 'Who would write, who had any thing better to do? … Actions—actions, I say, and not writing,—least of all, rhyme. Look at the querulous and monotonous lives of the 'genus';—except Cervantes, Tasso, Dante, Ariosto, Kleist (who were brave and active citizens), Aeschylus, Sophocles, and some other of the antiques also—what a worthless, idle brood it is!'[5] His suspicions that

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[2] Journal entry, 27 September 1813, *BLJ* III, 225.
[3] *Don Juan* XVI (1824), l. 44.
[4] Journal entry, 23 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 217.
[5] Journal entry, 24 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 220.

literature was divided from the properly real reached back to the beginning of his career as a poet. The notion that men should be 'agents and leaders' lay behind some of the ill-advised wording of the 1807 Preface to his first volume, *Hours of Idleness*: 'Poetry, however, is not my primary vocation; to divert the dull moments of indisposition, or the monotony of a vacant hour, urged me 'to this sin''.[6] In the face of Byron's claim that life had higher claims on him than scribbling, it was perhaps inevitable that the ill-disposed reviewer at the *Edinburgh Review* should have closed his review with the relieved witticism that his first volume was 'the last we shall ever have from him.'[7]

Despite the early pretence to be publishing 'merely at the Request of my Friends' there is, of course, every reason to think that the early Byron felt of poetry—in his own way perhaps as much as Keats—'how great a thing it is'.[8] His early letters convey a cultivated indifference and barely-maintained aloofness:

> Nothing so fretful, so despicable as a Scribbler, see what *I* am, & what a parcel of Scoundrels I have brought about my ears, & what language I have been obliged to treat them with to deal with them in their own way;—all this comes of Authorship, but now I am in for it, & shall be at war with Grubstreet, till I find some better amusement.[9]

In this 1811 letter, his pleasure in the supposed disreputability of being a 'Scribbler' is evident. The poem that had set Byron 'at war with Grubstreet' was *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers (English Bards).* It was fitting, given his divided thinking about 'Authorship', that the first work to bring him to real public attention should have been a satiric attack on the contemporary literary scene. The satire was conceived in London in 1807 as a satiric appraisal of 'the poetry of the present Day' and was expanded over five editions until it represented a wholesale assault on the Edinburgh and London 'Literati'—critics and 'poetical persons' alike.[10] It included vigorously indiscreet attacks against a range of contemporary literary figures; not just Bowles, Wordsworth, and the critics, but also people who later became friends, including Moore and Scott:

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[6] Preface to *Hours of Idleness* (1807), *CPW* I, 32–3.
[7] Henry Brougham, review of *Hours of Idleness, Edinburgh Review* 11 (January 1808) 285–88 (p. 288). Byron believed it to have been written by Francis Jeffrey, who he retaliated against in lines and a prose postscript added to *English Bards* for that purpose.
[8] Letter to William Bankes, 6 March 1807, *BLJ* I, 112; letter from Keats to Leigh Hunt, 10 May 1817, in *The Letters of John Keats 1814–1821*, ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (Harvard University Press: 1958), I, 139.
[9] Letter to Augusta Leigh, 2 September 1811, *BLJ* II, 88.
[10] Letter to Ben Crosby, 22 December 1807, *BLJ* I, 141; *English Bards*, l. 770; and Preface, 228.

> Behold! in various throngs the scribbling crew,
> For notice eager, pass in long review:
> Each spurs his jaded Pegasus apace,
> And Rhyme and Blank maintain an equal race …[11]

In the Preface, Byron positioned himself not as an aspiring poet, but as a critical observer of the literary world: 'my object is not to prove that I can write well, but, *if possible*, to make others write better'.[12] In Juvenalian fashion he claims to be provoked into writing only by his disesteem for contemporary writing. 'Still must I hear?', asks his poet, 'And I not sing …?'[13] In this tradition the satirist is generically positioned at once inside and outside the world of letters. In *Hints from Horace*, a 'sequel' to *English Bards* and loose imitation of the *Ars Poetica*, composed in 1811, Byron took up a similarly ambivalent position, vowing not to 'write at all, unless to teach the Art / To those, rehearsing for the Poet's part' (translating Horace's claim that 'I write naught myself'—*nil scribens ipse*—though 'I will teach the poet's office and duty').[14] Satire is defined generically as a parody of epic; as one of Horace's modern editors reminds us, it goes 'even so far as to deny that it is poetry at all.'[15] This element of double vision makes satire—especially literary satire—a suitable vehicle in which to be in two minds about poetry.

'Have we no living Bard of merit?—none?', cries Byron's satirist in *English Bards*, surely revoicing Pope's question at the end of the *Epilogue to the Satires*: 'Are none, none living? let me praise the Dead…'[16] It is significant that Byron should take as his point of departure in these lines Pope's last major satire in his high style—a work issued by Pope with a valedictory note describing it as his final 'Protest' and 'the last poem of this kind he would write'—for there is a real sense in which Byron was, as F. R. Leavis said, 'the poet who ends the line of great satirists that started with Dryden'.[17] Moore remembered him making a 'deep study of the

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[11] *English Bards,* ll. 143–6.
[12] Preface to *English Bards*, 228.
[13] *English Bards*, ll. 1–4. Byron's work is loosely based around Juvenal's First Satire: see Juvenal, *Satire*s I, ll. 1–2.
[14] *Hints from Horace*, ll. 485–6; Horace, *Ars Poetica,* ll. 305–6. *Hints from Horace* was not published in Byron's lifetime. Plans to publish it in 1811 fell through when Byron decided to suppress the fifth edition of *English Bards* with which it had been meant to be issued: see McGann, editorial notes, *CPW* I, 227, 150n.
[15] Robert Cowan, Introduction to *Horace, Satires and Epistles*, trans. John Davie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. ix.
[16] *English Bards*, ll. 576–77. Cf. Pope, *Epilogue to the Satires* (1738), II.250–51, *Poetical Works,* ed. by Herbert Davis (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 422 (hereafter, Pope, *Works*).
[17] Pope, note to the *Epilogue to the Satires*, *Works*, p. 423, 255n; F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936), p. 153.

writings of Pope' in preparation for the writing of *English Bards*, a satire which insistently recalls Dryden and Pope: 'to such times our lingering looks are cast, / When taste and reason with those times are past…'[18] But in fact these early satires stop short of claiming Pope's most serious pretensions as their own. In *English Bards* Byron largely abdicated the traditional moral authority of the satirist, offering himself instead as the 'least thinking of a thoughtless throng', a concession that profoundly disturbs the Popeian temper of the poem.[19] In *Hints from Horace* he went even further, proposing to show 'from my own example—what is wrong.'[20] This reflects not just his degree of reservation about his fitness for the role, but also some of the wider problems presented by writing formal verse satire in the nineteenth century. Byron was hardly unaware of the anachronism of casting his contemporaries as Grubstreet 'Poetasters'; indeed the whole premise of *English Bards* was a harking back to a Scriblerian age ('A caustic is here offered,' he wrote in the Preface, for the present 'rabies for rhyming.')[21] He was conscious that he was writing formal verse satire long after its high point; and for all its vigour and indiscreet aplomb, *English Bards* is marked by an awareness of that discrepancy.

William Dowling has linked Byron's early satires to the 'elegiac' notes of a late Augustanism, haunted by its sense of belated ineffectiveness.[22] Yet Byron's acknowledgement of his ironic distance from his Augustan models had other stylistic implications. One was that out of that doubt about efficacy came the introduction of the ambivalently serious note:

> Still there are follies, e'en for me to chase,
> And yield at least amusement in the race:
> Laugh when I laugh, I seek no other fame …[23]

Relinquishing higher aims, this satirist refers himself to more modestly literary purposes: 'scribbler's are my game'. Though *English Bards* contains some passages of indignant invective, it is also voiced by an ironic intelligence which, as in these lines, can put seriousness into question. Pope was a predecessor to whom Byron was always faithful (in 1820 he indignantly told Murray that his contemporaries 'deny God—in running down

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[18] *MLJ*, I, 157; *English Bards*, ll. 119–20; Preface, 229.
[19] *English Bards*, ll. 689–91.
[20] *Hints from Horace*, l. 488.
[21] *English Bards*, l. 1064; Preface, 229.
[22] William C. Dowling, *The Epistolary Moment: The Poetics of the Eighteenth-Century Verse Epistle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 115.
[23] *English Bards*, ll. 41–44.

Pope—').[24] The influence of Pope was fundamental: in these early satires and the *ottava rima* poetry—which in many respects transforms aspects of Augustan style—Byron often falls back into the remembered rhythms and rhymes of his predecessor, as if his work had been absorbed into his own speech. But this need not imply that Byron's early satires were an index of his 'incapacity' for writing like Pope, as Leavis thought.[25] If we sense that *English Bards* does not seem to have been begun out of any especially clear satiric or literary critical aims—it was more a 'smart lampoon' than 'vigorous satire', thought Byron's contemporary John Gibson Lockhart—this was partly the result of Byron's deliberately lighter hold on his purposes.[26] Even in his early poetry, Byron's use of his Augustan models was a spur to creative reinventions and departures.

Nor was Byron looking exclusively to Pope for his early models in satiric writing. In 1811, Byron wrote to his friend John Cam Hobhouse, then posted in Ireland, with reference to their mutual friends:

> You are exiled to Ireland, quite a military Swift!—We may now Swiftify & Popify as if we were wits of the last Century.—What shall we do with Davies? he is too facetious for a *Gay*, & not simple enough, the dog shall be a second hand St. John … *Cawthorn—Lintot*—and Dallas—the Duchess of Queensbury!—So we may play at wits, as children (no offence) at Soldiers.[27]

In common with many of his references to the literary past, this letter suggests a sensitiveness to something now lost: 'what wit!', as Byron exclaimed elsewhere in his journal: 'Our society is too insipid now for the like copy.'[28] Though he disparaged poets as an 'idle brood', Byron was also, of course, a widely read and instinctively allusive writer who was deeply stirred by the literary past. This backward look at the once grand Scriblerian fellowship is characteristic of his way of living in part in the past life of poetry. Fred Parker has recently given a detailed account of Byron's 'Popifying' as 'a kind of playing at being Pope, a mode of imitation where the disparity between them—and in particular the fact of coming after—matters as much as the affinity.'[29] The second question raised by this letter is what it might mean to 'Swiftify', an activity Byron handed on this occasion to Hobhouse, whose 'great Idol', he later noted, Swift was.[30] There is every sign that Byron himself

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[24] Letter to Murray, 4 November 1820, *BLJ* VII, 217.
[25] Leavis, *Revaluation*, p. 129.
[26] John Gibson Lockhart, review of 'The Life of Lord Byron', *Quarterly Review*, 44 (January 1831), 168–226 (p. 180).
[27] Letter to John Cam Hobhouse, 13 October 1811, *BLJ* II, 114.
[28] Journal entry, 10 March 1814, *BLJ* III, 249.
[29] Fred Parker, 'Byron's 'Popifying': Twice-Told Tales', in *Byron Among the English Poets*, pp. 66–83 (p. 67).
[30] Letter to Murray, 15 May 1819 *BLJ* VI, 125. Swift was a shared point of literary reference in letters with Moore as well as Hobhouse: see letter to Moore, 8 August 1822, *BLJ* IX, 191.

was interested in Swiftifying. Swift was given an admired place on his early reading list ('Ireland—Swift – a hist[ory] in himself'), and at some point before leaving England he bought Walter Scott's 1814 19-volume edition of Swift's *Works*, a work he later made a point of reacquiring in Italy.[31] It was in *Hints from Horace* that he made his most overt early tribute to Swift: there he is acknowledged alongside Samuel Butler, 'matchless Hudibras', for his mastery of the tetrameter line, which is praised for its advantages over 'long recurring rhyme'.[32] Byron's appeal in that poem to 'Swift's motto "Vive la Bagatelle!"' underlines his liking for 'Hudibrastics' and points forwards to the body of comic verse letters, lampoons and epigrams that he never lost interest in writing.[33]

Claude Rawson has remarked illuminatingly on Byron's debt to Swift, which, as he and Ian Higgins have noted, places both poets within that rich line of inheritance of 'serious light verse, in a tradition that runs from Skelton and Butler, to Byron, T. S. Eliot, and Auden'.[34] But with the exception of A. B. England, who has argued for the influence of Swift on the burlesque elements in *Don Juan*, this line of descent has been largely overlooked on the side of Byron studies.[35] No allusions to Swift are noted in the current scholarly edition of Byron's *Complete Poetical Works*. And yet there is persuasive evidence that alongside the more vigorously aired debt to Pope, Swift had a substantial place in Byron's literary imagination. In 1820, by which time Byron was declaring his age 'the declining age of English poetry', it was a joint defence that he sought to mount against the 'English Scribblers' who had 'abused Pope and Swift.'[36] The affinity was perhaps more apparent to Byron's

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[31] Scott's 19-volume edition of Swift's *Works* (1814) appears in the 1816 Sale Catalogue, at *CMP,* 241. It is not clear whether Byron owned a volume of Swift before acquiring Scott's edition, but a biography and wide selection of Swift's poetry is collected in vol. IX of Anderson's British Poets *The Works of the British Poets: with Prefaces, Biographical and Critical*, 14 vols (London: J. & A. Arch and others, 1795) (hereafter, *Anderson's British Poets*), which we know Byron read (*CMP,* 232). It also seems likely that Byron had acquired some familiarity with Swift's prose at Cambridge, if not before, for he alludes to *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) in his Draft Speech and Notes for the Parliamentary *Roman Catholic Claims Debate* (1812): see *CMP*, 29.

[32] *Hints from Horace*, ll. 397–410. Though Butler does not appear on Byron's early reading list, it is clear that he had read *Hudibras* by the time he arrived at Cambridge: see letter to Murray, 19 November 1820, *BLJ* VII, 230–4. Allusions in *Don Juan* suggest that Byron knew *Hudibras* well: see e.g. *Don Juan* VIII (1823), ll. 1105–9; and *Don Juan* XV, l. 190, alluding to *Hudibras*, I.i.4–5, and II.ii.225, ed. by John Wilders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 1, 131. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[33] *Hints from Horace,* ll. 342, 410. Cf. 'Farewell to Malta' in 'Hudibrastics' (1811), *CPW* I, 338; the 'Epistle from Mr. Murray to Mr. Polidori' (1817), *CPW* IV, 126. Swift's 'motto' is also quoted by Pope in one of his *Horatian Imitations: Book I, Epistle VI, to Mr. Murray*, ll. 126–9, Pope, *Works*, p. 359.

[34] Ian Higgins and Claude Rawson, 'Introduction' to *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), p. xxi; cf. *Swift's Angers*, p. 171; and *Satire and Sentiment: Stress Points in the Augustan Tradition, 1660–1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 103.

[35] A. B. England, *Byron's Don Juan and Eighteenth-Century Literature: A Study of Some Rhetorical Continuities and Discontinuities* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975), p. 18.

[36] Draft Dedication to *Marino Faliero* (1820), *CPW* IV, 300.

contemporaries than it has been to subsequent critics: Moore proposed in the *Life* that it was Swift, not Pope, who 'offers a far closer parallel to the fate of our noble poet' and Leigh Hunt also remarked (adversely) on what he supposed to be the influence.[37] Perhaps most compellingly, there are several accounts of Byron reading Scott's edition of Swift—among just a handful of works—on the voyage to Greece in 1823.[38] Swift is therefore one of the earliest and latest writers we know Byron to have been reading.

Together, Butler and Swift exemplify a line of descent within English poetry that is distinct from that inherited by Byron from Dryden and Pope. Verse in this tradition—usually written in the shorter line praised in *Hints from Horace*, rather than the heroic measure—articulates a secondary, interrogative relationship to the order of art; its burlesque mockeries are often aimed at overturning the high aesthetic ideals and formal decorum of more serious forms. This is a tradition in art that claims to be bracingly undeluded by art: Butler has often been viewed as a poet who was, perhaps paradoxically, 'highly suspicious of the imagination, and indeed of poetry', as David Farley-Hills has observed; Barbara Everett has described him as a forerunner in the kind of light verse that reacts against the aesthetic pretensions of 'Heavy Art'.[39] He was an expert in using the resources of poetry to undercut the pretensions of poetry. In Swift and his other descendants, this strain of poetry-scorning poetry flourishes into its own literary tradition. This line of descent was always a constituent of Byron's literary thinking. Indeed, it is with good justification that Rawson has suggested that 'for all his celebrated championship of Pope, it is from an alternative Augustanism of Butler, Prior, and Swift that Byron derived his most successful styles'.[40]

Swift's mastery of a vigorous, low style, which exposes neoclassical balance to the intrusion of realities, conveys an irreverence for the poetic medium in which Byron often shared. A provocative and amused Swiftian vein runs through his poetry and letters. Some of his most engaging early poetry is made up of parodic deflations, Swiftian in spirit, of love poetry: 'all th'unmeaning protestations, / Which swell with nonsense, love orations'.[41]

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[37] *MLJ*, I, 184–5; *HR*, I, 42. Swift was a shared point of literary reference in letters with Moore: e.g. 8 August 1822, *BLJ* IX, 191.

[38] See accounts of Trelawny and James Hamilton Brown in *HVSV*, pp. 287; 385–7; 433; and Chapter 5 of this thesis. Brown recalled that 'Byron chiefly read the writings of Dean Swift'; his other literary reading came from Montaigne's *Essais*, La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims,* and Voltaire.

[39] David Farley-Hills, *The Benevolence of Laughter: Comic Poetry of the Commonwealth and Restoration* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 50; Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 261.

[40] Claude Rawson, *Satire and Sentiment*, p. 98. The influence of Matthew Prior on Byron is addressed in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis.

[41] 'To a Lady Who Presented to the Author a Lock of Hair' (1807), ll. 3–4, *CPW* I, 140. Cf. 'Lines Addressed to a Young Lady' (1807), *CPW* I, 152.

In the *ottava rima* poetry he profits often from a Swiftian distrust of elevation; and then there is the gloriously Swiftian mock-serious prose piece, written in 1819, 'To the Editor of the British Review'.[42] But perhaps the most fruitful affinity between Swift and Byron was a matter of technique. Peter McDonald has described Byron's mind as 'inhabiting rhyme as the medium of its expression so fully that the rhyming in important ways *is* the intellect'.[43] Rhyme was also frequently the medium of his literary memory. Recalling his first meeting with Byron at Pisa with Shelley in 1822, Trelawny recalled riding out with Byron:

> As he was dismounting he mentioned two odd words that would rhyme. I observed on the felicity he had shown in this art, repeating a couplet out of Don Juan; he was both pacified and pleased at this, and putting his hand on my horse's crest, observed:
>
> > 'If you are curious in these matters look in Swift. I will send you a volume; he beats us all hollow, and his rhymes are wonderful.'[44]

This portrait of Byron, revealing in itself for seeming to catch him in a moment of handsome appreciation for a past poet and as casually poised between the active and literary sides of life, also conveys an important aspect of his character as an alluding poet—his strong intertextual rhyming memory. Swift's burlesque rhymes were a substantial influence on Byron's techniques in *Don Juan*, as the third chapter of this thesis will show. One revealing example from *English Bards* suggests the role of Swift in his literary thinking and conveys something of the difference between Popifying and Swiftifying in and beyond his early poetry.

One result of the wounding review of *Hours of Idleness* in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1808 was that in its second and subsequent editions Byron expanded *English Bards* to accommodate an extended attack on the literary reviewers.[45] The other effect this had on the poem was the introduction of a new strain of self-reference:

> I, too, can scrawl, and once upon a time
> I poured along the town a flood of rhyme,
> A school-boy freak, unworthy praise or blame;

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[42] This prose piece, which recalls Swift's *Vindication of Isaac Bickerstaff* (1709), was eventually published in 1822 in John Hunt's magazine *The Liberal*, 1(1) (1822), 41–50, under the title 'Letter to the Editor of "My Grandmother's Review" *CMP*, 78. See Nicholson, ed. notes, *CMP* 84, and 35n.
[43] Peter McDonald, *Sound Intentions: The Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.10.
[44] *HVSV*, p. 268.
[45] Letter to John Cam Hobhouse, 27 February 1808, *BLJ* I, 159.

> I printed—older children do the same.
> 'Tis pleasant, sure, to see one's name in print;
> A Book's a Book, altho' there's nothing in't.[46]

This is an extraordinarily confessional tone to find in a neoclassical satire. Yet despite the highly personal sound of the lines, Byron would have expected his readers to recognise that the final couplet contained an allusion to Pope. The reference is to the first lines of Pope's *Epilogue to the Satires* (a work echoed elsewhere in the satire, as has already been noted). Pope's late work is constructed as a dramatic dialogue, opened by the poet's friend and interlocutor:

> Fr. Not twice a twelvemonth you appear in print,
> And when it comes, the court see nothing in't.[47]

The idea here is that the great poet Pope, absorbed in his Horatian imitations, has grown too '*correct*' and 'nice' in later life. That charge is introduced, however, only so that it can be rebutted; what follows is a committed self-defence of the poet as serious moral artist: 'Pope at his most heroic and defiant,' as Frank Stack has written.[48] The borrowing is characteristic of Byron's interest in Pope at his most dramatically self-conscious, though in this case the concession that 'I, too, can scrawl' introduces into the poem a mode of self-deprecation unlike anything in Pope.

Parker has referred to Byron's Popifying as a mode of imitation which allowed Byron to stand 'in two places at once'; indeed the dramatically self-aware voice of the neoclassical imitator must always be to some extent double-voiced.[49] In the lines from *English Bards*, however, Byron may be considered to have been standing in more than two places at once, because close attention to the allusion suggests that Pope was, in his turn, borrowing a rhyme used before him by Swift. Swift's 'Epistle upon an Epistle' is a piece of playful raillery addressed to Swift's friend and 'bard', Patrick Delany:

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[46] *English Bards*, ll. 47–52.
[47] Pope, *Epilogue to the Satires in Two Dialogues* (1738) I.1–2, Pope, *Works*, p. 409. The literary reference in these lines is not noted in the current scholarly edition.
[48] Frank Stack, *Pope and Horace: Studies in Imitation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 275.
[49] Parker, 'Byron's 'Popifying', p. 67.

> I'd tell of yours in Rhyme and Print:
> Folks shrug, and cry, *There's nothing in't*.
> And after several Readings over,
> It shines most in the Marble Cover.[50]

These lines are much closer in sense to Byron's and are almost certainly what he had in mind (a comic epigram written while he was revising *English Bards* shares a conspicuous double rhyme with 'An Epistle upon Epistle', in turn borrowed from Butler's *Hudibras*).[51] And yet Byron was far too familiar with Pope not to be aware of his use of the rhyme, so we can assume that the lines were intended to carry a doubled piece of literary reference. Byron often welcomed allusions that had already been through more than one set of hands: consider, for example, his description of life as a passage between 'the gaping heir and gnawing gout' in *Don Juan*, where his 'gaping heir' is itself the legacy of Juvenal, Dryden and Johnson.[52] As that case and the lines from *English Bards* underline, it is principally what Reuben Brower called the 'generously allusive mode' of past poets of which Byron is the beneficiary.[53] There can have been few poets who have moved in a casually allusive medium with such sureness of footing: his literary reference is often so instinctive that it seems to suggest the practice of 'allusion as a form of thinking', as Bernard Beatty has observed.[54]

In this case, the difference between Popifying and Swiftifying is the divide between Pope's self-vindication—the satirist wielding his pen as the last 'sacred weapon! left for Truth's defence'—and Swift's

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[50] Swift, 'An Epistle upon an Epistle' (1730), ll. 11–14, *Swift, Poetical Works*, ed. by Herbert Davis (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 413 (hereafter, Swift, *Works*). This is one of the poems that Byron would have encountered in *Anderson's British Poets*, where it is collected in vol. IX, 111.

[51] The rhyme in question is 'fish up'/'bishop', in the cases of Butler and Swift, and 'wish up'/'*Bishop*' in Byron's lines. See 'On the King's speech to the Bishop of Bristol', ll. 1–8, *CPW* I, 226–7; Butler, *Hudibras*, I.ii.539–40; and Swift, 'An Epistle upon an Epistle' (1730), ll. 101–2.

[52] *Don Juan* XIII (1823), ll. 319–20. Dryden and Johnson both use the phrase when adapting Juvenal: see Samuel Johnson, *The Vanity of Human Wishes, The Tenth Satire of Juvenal Imitated* (1749), ll. 47–48, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. by J. H. Middendorf and others, 23 vols (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1958–1990), VI (1964), pp. 90–109 (p. 94) (hereafter, Johnson, *Yale*); John Dryden, *The Sixth Satyr of Juvenal* (1693), ll. 52–55, in *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. by James Kinsley, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), II, 697. The allusiveness of these lines is not noted in the current edition. A full analysis of Byron's liking for second-hand allusion is beyond the scope of this chapter, but one example, an allusion pointed out by Clare Bucknell, is Byron's line from *Beppo*—'England! with all thy faults I love thee still'—which is a quotation from William Cowper's *The Task* (1785), which in turn alludes to Charles Churchill's *The Farewell* (1764). See *Beppo*, ll. 369–70; *The Poetical Works of Charles Churchill*, ed. by Douglas Grant (Oxford, 1956), p. 375; *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. by John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford, 1980–95), II.144; and Clare Bucknell, 'Byron's Early Satires and the Influence of Churchill', *Essays in Criticism*, 66.3 (2016), 360–382 (p. 377).

[53] Reuben A. Brower, *Alexander Pope: The Poetry of Allusion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 13.

[54] Bernard Beatty, 'Byron and Shakespeare', in *Byron Among the English Poets*, pp. 19–34 (p. 21).

lightly accusing and unpretentious verse epistle to a friend.[55] Byron's allusion thus embraces two literary styles—a grand manner and a colloquial mode—as well as two rival views of the artist: the poet as a heroic figure, ignored in a philistine age, and the poet as he appears in Swift's epistle, a mere trifler. Straddled between the two precedents, Byron can also remain undecided between the two visions of 'Authorship': its high ideals and its inglorious realities. The rueful, self-accusing reference to a half-regretted early work suggests that *Hours of Idleness* had been a lesson in the vulnerability of seriousness. The uneasy idea that poetry might be merely written out of vanity, or scrawled in the absence of anything better to do, is not wholly disavowed. Ironic quotation of Pope, turned to self-incriminating effect, is something that Byron does elsewhere: 'One would not be unpublished when one's dead, / And, Hobhouse, let my works be bound in Red', goes one witty 1810 appropriation of Narcissa's last words from Pope's *Epistle to Cobham*.[56] This reference, like the other examples already given, is marked by a strong consciousness that the alluding poet necessarily comes late in time, which is another characteristic of Byron's modes of allusion. In his letter to Hobhouse, Byron cast their mutual friends as 'wits of the last Century' by assigning them the roles of the Scriblerians at 'second hand'. The lines from *English Bards*, which he borrows 'second hand' from both Pope and Swift, are an example of this consciousness of latecoming: ''Tis pleasant, sure, to see one's name in print; / A Book's a Book, altho' there's nothing in't.' Byron's lines contemplate the idea that to write poetry at all may be merely to 'play at wits' in a diminished present.

Byron's was an often instinctively sceptical mode of allusion, as these examples suggest: it honours no single line of influence and knows that nothing is said only once or finally. It is splendidly occasional, adapting and recombining quotation with an eye for the relative and the apposite; in *Don Juan*, as Jonathan Bate has observed, it makes 'a virtue of the incidental, the momentary, the superficial'.[57] Byron's habit of introducing well-known precedents with an amused and ironic consciousness suggests his alertness to the changed circumstances in which each new reference is made.[58] And so we find him alluding with irreverence: to Shakespeare, for example ('his British Godship'); alluding with qualification ('The poet meant, no doubt…');

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[55] Pope, *Epilogue to the Satires in Two Dialogues* (1738) II.212, 214, *Works*, p. 421.
[56] Compare the playful appropriation of Narcissa's last words from the *Epistle to Cobham* (1734) in Byron's 'Epitaph from a Sickbed' (1810), ll. 5–6, *CPW* I, 284–5; Pope, *Epistle to Cobham* (1734), ll. 248–51, *Works*, p. 290.
[57] Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 240.
[58] Cf. Jeremy Treglown's account of the flourishing of 'Scepticism and Parody in the Restoration', *The Modern Language Review*, 75.1 (1980), 18–47 (p.18).

and alluding to discredit ('The four first rhymes are Southey's every line: / For God's sake, reader! take them not for mine.')[59] His memory for the poetry he appreciated was 'no less tenacious', remembered Lady Blessington, 'in reciting the passages that have called forth his censure or ridicule'.[60]

When referring to the contemporary scene, Byron often appears divided between what was in some ways his deeply literary disposition, and a contrary impulse to overthrow the pride and dignity of the literary world: 'So very anxious, clever, fine, and jealous,' as he describes it in *Beppo*—another poem in which he exploits the literary satirist's ambivalent relation to the literary. In *English Bards* he aimed his abuse at 'the scribbling crew,' and yet the wit and energy with which he demystifies its claims is a reminder that literary satire, though in some ways ostensibly opposed to the literary, is also generated and compelled by it. The same genre that exposes the illusions of art to the disenchanted perspective of the satirist is, on another view, literature at its most introspective. In *English Bards*, the energy of the satiric attack creates a world in which 'the rhyming tribe' is in practice granted a largeness of scale—just as *Beppo*'s mockery of the fellows 'turned up with ink' rubs off on that poem, giving it a distinctly literary atmosphere.[61] Just as the satirist thrives on that paradoxical activity of writing poetry that is not poetry, the writer who sets out to demystify the claims of art finds that their energies are derived from the world of art. In fact most of Byron's early writing had this essentially literary kind of motivation. In addition to the early satires, which are explicitly placed within a tradition of English neoclassical imitation, much of his earliest poetry is made up various forms of imitation, translation, parody, and satire, all of which are forms of literary allusion.

In the lines from *English Bards*, Byron remains poised between two roles: the heroic satirist and the inglorious scribbler, in a way that points forwards to some of the divisions that shape his best work. Swift's determination to oppose the illusions of art to less flattering realities led his editor Herbert Davis to describe him as 'the most extreme example that we have ever had in England of reaction against the heroic or romantic view of the poet's function and art.'[62] According to Davis, Swift 'never showed the least inclination to set much value on the business of writing poetry', and yet he was a prolific poet; though his burlesque mode is sometimes

[59] *Don Juan* XIV, l. 596; *Don Juan* I (1819), st. 88, 89; and ll. 1775–6.
[60] *MC*, p. 154, 265; *BC*, p. 136.
[61] *Hints from Horace,* l. 39. Cf. his treatment of his earliest critics in 'To a Knot of Ungenerous Critics' (1806), *CPW* I, 19; Soliloquy of a Bard in the Country' (1806), *CPW* I*,* 25.
[62] Herbert Davis, *Jonathan Swift: Essays on his Satire and Other Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 167, 163.

associated with a parodic destructiveness, it is from its mockery of more serious forms that it derives so much of its creativity.[63] Byron, when he claims to set little store by his art, invites us to consider some of the same contradictions.

In Swift's 'On Poetry: A Rapsody', Swift's poet poses as 'an old experienc'd Sinner', issuing some shrewd advice to the 'young Beginner' entering onto the degraded literary marketplace.[64] This is a poem that Byron appears to have echoed by way of a borrowed rhyme in two early unpublished pieces (in which he poses as a 'young Beginner' and soon to be 'very harden'd sinner' in rhyme).[65] Swift's ironic self-portrayal represents the kind of quasi-dramatic assumption of the role of the poet in which Byron was also expert. In Swift's hands, the result is a 'scurrilous rap', as Derek Mahon put it so well, in which he 'set out his view of poetic vocation' as 'a lot of trivial nonsense'.[66] Rawson has also paid close attention to his poem, in which, as he points out, Swift's poet speaks at once as the champion of poetry denouncing a vicious and philistine age', and with a second, more self-implicating voice, 'complicated by a continuous unresolved scepticism about his own credentials, about the status of poetry (whoever the poet), and about the dignity of heroic postures.'[67] Importantly, Swift sustained these doubts in 'active ambivalence' over the course of his career as a writer, alongside 'a commitment to poetry which, despite occasional disclaimers, he never abandoned.'[68] Like Swift, Byron shared in the sorts of conflicted feelings that might sustain a lifetime of writing.

II

Byron's first claim that he was going to forswear poetry appears in an 1807 letter to a Harrow friend: 'I am tired of versifying, & am irrevocably determined to *rhyme* no more'.[69] What was in practice an almost uninterrupted career of writing poetry was punctuated by claims that he was going to give it all up. In the Preface to *Hours from Idleness* he announced his intention to 'resign' from poetry with his first volume, and at the end of *English*

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[63] *Ibid*.
[64] Swift, 'On Poetry: A Rapsody' (1733), ll. 71–6, *Works*, p. 571. This is collected in *Anderson's British Poets*, IX, 152.
[65] Byron, 'Egotism', ll. 13–16, *CPW I*, 201; 'To the Earl of C[lare]' (1807), ll. 61–66, *CPW* I, 96.
[66] Derek Mahon, 'On Swift's Poems', in '*The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift*, ed. by Ian Higgins and Claude Rawson (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), pp. 795–802 (p. 797).
[67] Rawson, *Swift's Angers*, pp. 213, 217.
[68] *Ibid*., p. 10.
[69] Letter to Edward Noel Long, 14 May 1807, *BLJ* I, 119.

Bards he promised not again to 'interpose / To stun mankind with poesy or prose', a pledge amended for the fifth edition—by which time he was revising *Childe Harold* for publication—to '—at least with Prose.'[70] One curious result of these renunciations is that critics have sometimes attributed to Byron an unhappily irresistible compulsion to write: Wilson Knight concluded that he wrote 'in his own despite'; more recently he appears in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poets* as a poet who 'was continually trying to give up 'scribbling', as he contemptuously called it, in favour of the world of action,' but who discovered 'his psychological inability to do so'.[71]

And yet to view Byron as having been at the mercy of a self-defeating literary habit does not seem very satisfactory. For one thing, some of his depreciations of poetry have an air of professional pride and commiseration, liberatingly indulged. This is a feature of his letters to Moore, with their conspiratorially literary dismissals of 'the *Muses*': 'now let us be literary;—a sad falling off …'[72] Other recantations are given away by their comic aplomb: 'I wish myself well out of it. … If I have a wife, and that wife has a son—by any body—I will bring up mine heir in the most anti-poetical way—make him a lawyer, or a pirate, or—any thing. But if he writes too, I shall be sure he is none of mine, and cut him off with a Bank token. Must write a letter-three o'clock.'[73] Others still have a distinctly literary character: 'For me, I am 'sick of Fops, & Poesy, & Prate' & I shall leave the 'whole Castlalian State' to Bufo or any body else,' he declared in a letter of 1811.[74] The reference in that case is to Pope's besieged poet in the *Epistle to Arbuthnot*, 'berhym'd so long', proudly declaring his independence from the 'race that write'. Byron was fully conscious of the fruitful contradiction in giving it all up, berhymed with a mouthful of Pope.

That last example is particularly telling because such renunciations fill the letters of Pope: 'The old conceits of fame, and idle pleasures of poetry are seriously over with me'; 'I really am so fatigued with scribbling'; 'I must again sincerely protest to you, that I have wholly given over scribbling'; 'I really very rarely

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[70] Preface to *Hours of Idleness* (1807), *CPW* I, 34; *English Bards,* ll. 1035–6, 1036n.
[71] G. Wilson Knight, *Lord Byron: Christian Virtues* (London: Routledge, 1952), pp. 104–5; Anne Barton, 'George Gordon, Lord Byron', *The Cambridge Companion to English Poets*, ed. by Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 238–43 (p. 330).
[72] Letter to Moore, 28 April 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 105. Cf. 5 July 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 147.
[73] Journal entry, 17 March 1814, *BLJ* III, 251–2.
[74] Letter to Francis Hodgson, 29 June 1811, *BLJ* II, 55, quoting Pope's *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735), ll. 229–30, *Works*, p. 334.

dip my pen. The vanity is over'.[75] As early as his twenties, Pope could be found expressing the very Byronic-sounding condition of feeling 'old in rhyme', and 'willing to leave poetry'.[76] On this point we have the tremendous scepticism that Samuel Johnson seems to have been able to bring to Pope: 'One of his favourite topicks is contempt of his own poetry. For this, if it had been real, he would deserve no commendation, and in this he was certainly not sincere'.[77] However much he 'might seem to lament his occupation', Johnson pointed out, he 'followed it with constancy'; his was a portrait of a man who was incorrigibly a poet. An inability to stop writing is characteristic of Pope's dunces, 'Whom, when they praise, the world believes no more / Than when they promise to give scribbling o'er.'[78] But when Pope attributed the quality to himself, he did so with self-irony and self-understanding. Consider his comic self-dramatisation in the *Epistle to Augustus:* 'I, who so oft renounce the Muses, lye …'[79]

This engaging activity of forswearing poetry in poetry may be considered a literary inheritance in its own right: 'from Horace onwards … through Rochester' and beyond, notes Peter Porter, the notion of using 'Poetry to do without Poetry' becomes 'a well-followed trope'; one thinks, too, of Burns's poet in 'The Vision', declaring 'That I, henceforth, would be *rhyme-proof…*'[80] What emerges is something like a literary tradition of making vows to stop writing. 'Heav'ns! was I born for nothing but to write?', Pope writes in *The Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, which may be surprisingly close to writing, 'Who would write, who had anything better to do?'[81] Byron's literary references come with such ease that it is easy to overlook the literary origins of some of his most apparently casual utterances. Wilson Knight was perceptive in this regard: Byron's letters, he pointed out, contain a direct, colloquial speech that 'is also, the more so for its wealth of literary reference and allusion, a literary speech …the language of a man in whom a literary heritage has become a natural colloquialism.'[82]

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[75] Letters from Pope to John Caryll, 10 January [1715/16], to William Broome, 16 June [1715], and to Caryll, 26 October [1722], 6 December 1730, in *Correspondence*, I, 326–7, 297, 140*;* III, 155.
[76] Letter from Pope to John Caryll, [13] July [1714], *Correspondence*, I, 236.
[77] Samuel Johnson, 'Life of Pope' (1781), *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets: With Critical Observations on Their Works*, ed. by Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), IV, 1–93 (pp. 59, 62) (hereafter, Johnson, *Lives*).
[78] Pope, *Essay on Criticism* (1711), ll. 594–5, *Works*, p. 80.
[79] *Epistle to Augustus* (1737), ll. 174–180.
[80] Peter Porter, *Saving from the Wreck*, p. 201; Burns, 'The Vision' (1786), l. 35, *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. by James Kinsley, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), I, 103 (hereafter, Burns, *Poems*). What is sometimes read as Horace's renunciation of poetry in *Epistles* I.i.10 has been treated as something as a *locus classicus* in this respect: Stephen Harrison, 'Horatian Self-Representations', in *The Cambridge Companion to Horace*, ed. by Stephen Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 32-3.
[81] Pope, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, ll. 272-4.
[82] G. Wilson Knight, *Poets of Action: Incorporating Essays from The Burning Oracle* (London: Methuen, 1967), p. 272.

As these examples suggest, Byron did not need to look outside of poetry to discover a language of scepticism about poetry. With his diffidence about riding his '*Pegasus*' with '*jingle* of *Rhyme*', the early Byron can sound a lot like a young Pope, who referred often in his widely-published correspondence to the supposed ignominy of attending to 'the gingling of rymes & the measuring of syllables'.[83] The Preface to *Hours to Idleness* was almost certainly modelled in part on the 1717 Preface to Pope's *Works*: Byron's concession that 'I might be, at my age, more usefully employed' closely recalls Pope's appeal to the claims on him of 'more serious employment, and more agreeable amusement' than poetry.[84] But what was in Pope's case accompanied by a certainty about his high calling was for Byron the cause of more serious reservations. These were concentrated by another of his inheritances: his hereditary right to sit in the House of Lords and the public career that was in some ways more proper to his class. Pope could write that 'I left no calling for this idle trade,' but Byron was not, like his predecessor, debarred, by religion, health, and inclination, from 'active life'.[85] In Byron a deeply literary temperament existed alongside an esteem for the practical and vigorous.

And yet the question of how to be otherwise 'active and useful' was by no means to be easily resolved either.[86] Declaring his ambition to be an agent and not one of the 'mere spectators' in 1813, Byron added: '… If I had any views in this country, they would probably be parliamentary.'[87] His time in Parliament, however, proved largely dispiriting and uncongenial; he was soon saying that 'I hate the thing altogether'.[88] Neither he nor the great world had seemed to live up to expectation: 'I doubt my ever becoming an orator', he recorded after making his second speech, taxing himself with 'laziness, or inability, or both'.[89] The scorn that he expressed ten days later at the thought that anyone who 'could be a parliamentary man' might want to be

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[83] Letter to John M. B. Pigot, 16 August 1806, *BLJ* I, 97; Letter to Elizabeth Pigot, [?] September 1806, *BLJ* I, 100. Cf. Letter from Pope to Sir William Trumbull, 16 December 1715, *Correspondence*, I, 324. Byron had ready access to Pope's correspondence, which had been widely-published since 1737, and seems to have known it well. In England he owned the 1803 edition of Joseph Warton's *Works of Alexander Pope* and William Lisle Bowles's 1806 10-volume edition of the *Works*, both of which contained the letters in their final volumes. See 'Sale Catalogue' (1816), *CMP,* 251, 240; and Jane Stabler: ''Foam is their Foundation': The Poetics of Byron's Letters', in *Romanticism and the Letter*, ed. by Madeline Callaghan and Tony Howe (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 163–81 (p. 166).

[84] Preface to *Hours of Idleness* (1807), *CPW* I, 33; Preface to *Works* (1717), *Selected Prose of Alexander Pope*, ed. by Paul Hammond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, repr. 2009), pp. 146–51 (pp. 149-50).

[85] Pope, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, ll. 129–30; letter to Atterbury, 20 November 1717, *Correspondence*, I, 454.

[86] Letter to Hobhouse, 9 November 1820, *BLJ* VII, 222.

[87] Journal entry, 23 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 217.

[88] Letters to Hobhouse, 9 November 1820, *BLJ* VII, 223; and Augusta Leigh, 26 March 1813, *BLJ* III, 32.

[89] Journal entry, 14 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 206.

anything else ('a plodder? a metaphysician?—perhaps a rhymer? a scribbler?') must therefore have been a form of self-scorn.[90]

The immediate topicality of much of Byron's satire suggests that he was far from being without belief in the immediate social efficacy of poetry ('You *must* publish the Juans—*now* is the time for the warlike Cantos', he urged in 1823), but there were times when he was equally subject to thoughts about the futility of doing anything at all; he had a strong feeling for 'the real *vacuum* of human pursuits'.[91] His 'strong love of liberty' almost always contended with a pessimism about the prospects of change: 'by the blessing of indifference, I have simplified my politics into an utter detestation of all existing governments', he remarked in 1814.[92] Nor was he persuaded that it is better to 'write pamphlets … and make speeches' like friends including Hobhouse, who had entered into the 'active life' of reforming politics.[93] There has sometimes been a reluctance on the part of critics to acknowledge these irresolutions as an expression of a serious question on Byron's part about how to spend life. Arriving at a justifiable basis for commitment and action is likely to be especially difficult for a sceptical thinker. 'Actions—actions,' I say, and not writing,' Byron counsels himself, but if action is what counts, then what should a man stand up and do? 'I have never thought very highly of poetry nor poets *merely as poets*—and my becoming one—if indeed I am so—is the result of temporary solitude & accident—it is not 'my vocation' and I once thought I was meant for something better—but that is past.—I wish yet to be good…'[94] It may be one thing to 'prefer the talents of *action*' and worldly incident and quite another to find a defensible basis on which to make a choice of life.[95]

This, of course, is the question articulated in Johnson's *Rasselas*, a work that Byron knew well; there it appears as an irresolvable question and the subject of potentially endless inquiry, a process which, by exposing the slender justifications for so many of our persuasions and beliefs, is likely to leave one asking, like Rasselas, "What then is to be done?"[96] 'Byron, who honoured Johnson,' as Christopher Ricks points out, was as subject

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[90] Journal entry, 24 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 219.
[91] Letters to Douglas Kinnaird, 3 March 1823, *BLJ* X, 115; and Hobhouse, 8 June 1820, *BLJ* VII, 116.
[92] *BC*, p. 220; journal entry, 16 January 1814, *BLJ* III, 242.
[93] Letter to Murray, 9 November 1820, *BLJ* VII, 223.
[94] Letter to Annabella Milbanke, 26 September 1814, *BLJ* IV, 183.
[95] Letter to Annabella Milbanke, 29 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 179.
[96] Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1759), *Yale*, XVI, p. 99. Byron refers to *Rasselas* in letters to John Murray, 31 October 1822, *BLJ* X, 22; to James Wedderburn Webster, 16 February 1823, *BLJ* X, 102; and in *Don Juan* XIII, l. 441.

as his predecessor to a pervasive suspicion that he might have better spent life another way.[97] 'At five-and-twenty, when the better part of life is over, one should be *something*', he wrote in his journal in 1813, behind which it is not difficult to hear a version of Johnson's 'Why a Man *must do something*'; and the same might be said of his late letter to Dr. James Kennedy, politely indicating that 'it were better to die doing something than nothing.'[98] Johnson, a man deeply burdened with fears of wasting life, was sceptically aware that the 'desires that predominate in our hearts' are profoundly contingent: 'Human characters are by no means constant; men change by change of place, of fortune, of acquaintance'.[99] Byron shared this apprehension of human inconsistency and restlessness and like Johnson he suspected that most of our persuasions are merely aimed at filling the "craving void"—to use a phrase from Pope that was remembered by both men.[100] These recognitions are likely to make settling for any single way of spending life difficult. One of their implications, as Johnson points out in one of the *Rambler* essays that Byron read as a young man, is that whole course of a man's life might therefore be determined by unknown forces 'mingled without design in the current of his ideas' while he is unaware and his 'judgment unsettled'.[101] Byron's claim that his becoming a poet was 'the result of temporary solitude & accident—it is not "my vocation"' likewise recognises the 'slender causes' that accidentally determine the course of our lives.

What Johnson described in another context as 'the necessity of doing something, and the difficulty of finding something to do,' might be described as one of the compelling questions of Byron's life.[102] 'I am not famous for decision', he reportedly told Lady Blessington as he prepared to go to Greece, where Trelawny unsympathetically reported his 'old routine of dawdling habits, plotting—planning—shilly-shallying—and doing nothing.'[103] Byron was himself fully self-conscious of his susceptibility to the 'Apathy' of disgust and

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[97] Ricks, *Allusion*, p. 121.
[98] Journal entry, 14 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 204; letter to James Kennedy, 4 March 1824, *BLJ* XI, 126. cf. Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Dr. Johnson by Mrs. Thrale: the 'anecdotes' of Mrs. Piozzi in their original form, 1741–1821*, ed. by Richard Ingrams (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984:) p. 33.
[99] Johnson, 'Life of Pope', *Lives*, pp. 44–45. On Johnson's fears of wasting life see Lawrence Lipking, 'Johnson and Genius', in *Samuel Johnson: The Arc of the Pendulum*, ed. by Freya Johnston and Lynda Mugglestone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 83–93 (p. 88); Roger Lonsdale, Introduction to Johnson*, Lives*, I, 1–186 (p. 2).
[100] Letter to Annabella Milbanke, 6 September 1813, *BLJ* III, 109. The phrase comes from Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717): 'No craving void left aching in the breast'. See letter to Hester Thrale, 15 June 1780, *The Letters of Samuel Johnson,* ed. by Bruce Redford, 5 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992–4), III (1992), 277; Pope, *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717), ll. 93-94, *Works*, pp. 112–13.
[101] Johnson, *Rambler* 141 (1751), *Works*, IV, p. 384. Also see 'Life of Cowley' (1779), *Lives*, I, p. 191. *The Rambler* is included in Byron's 1807 'Reading List', *CMP,* 6.
[102] Johnson, 'Life of Butler' (1781), *Lives*, II, p. 9.
[103] *BC*, p. 220; *HVSV*, p. 433.

often played it up: in the 1820s he claimed that if he ever returned to England, he 'should take a *decided* part in politics … but am not yet quite sure *what* part…[104] But what was so burdensome for Johnson could be a source of freedom for Byron. It allowed him to view his commitment to poetry as contingent rather than decisive: looking back on his early career, he would claim that 'having written once, I wrote on; encouraged no doubt by the success of the moment'.[105] In life, as Byron suggested on one occasion, '—to form decisive resolutions is idle—'[106] He was an individualist, with a lifelong distrust of the definitive commitment. This was always a subcurrent in his politics: 'I am and have been for *reform* always—but not for the *reformers*'.[107] In January 1809 he wrote to the family lawyer, John Hansen to say:

> I have not yet chosen my side in politics, nor shall I hastily commit myself with professions, or pledge my support to any man or measures… I shall stand aloof, speak what I think, but not often, nor too soon, I will preserve my independence, if possible …[108]

This is a good early example of the element of agnosticism in his politics, the disappointments of which were always partly an effect of 'feeling—as I trust I do—independently.'[109]

These examples suggest the difficulty and indeed undesirability, for a broadly sceptical thinker, of dedicating oneself to anything unreservedly. This was also deeply relevant to his life as a poet. When asked for advice by an aspiring poet in 1812, Byron counselled: 'never trust entirely to Authorship … a truly constituted mind will ever be independent'.[110] One of the most obvious results for his earliest work was his retention of the independent pose of the amateur. 'Like Byron later,' wrote Derek Mahon, Swift 'wrote not as an artist but as a gentleman amateur, or so he liked to imply.'[111] 'I thought that Poetry as an *art*,' Byron said on one occasion, 'not a *profession*'.[112] In fact this patrician show of disdain was always complicated by the example of Pope, and at other times Byron enjoyed sounding thoroughly the professional ('as for rhyme I am naturally no fair judge

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[104] Letters to Annabella Milbanke, 29 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 178–80; and Hobhouse 12 October 1821, *BLJ* IX, 240.
[105] 'Some Observations Upon an Article in Blackwood's Magazine' (1820), *CMP*, 110 (hereafter, 'Some Observations').
[106] Letter to Douglas Kinnaird, 30 May 1817, *BLJ* V, 230.
[107] Letter to Hobhouse, 26 June 1819 *BLJ* VI, 165.
[108] Letter to John Hansen, 15 January 1809, *BLJ* I, 186.
[109] Letter to Leigh Hunt, 29 January 1816, *BLJ* V, 19.
[110] Letter to Bernard Barton (a friend of Charles Lamb), 1 June 1812, *BLJ* II, 179.
[111] Mahon, 'On Swift's Poems', p. 796.
[112] Letter to Moore, 1 June 1818, *BLJ* VI, 47.

& can like it no better than a Grocer does figs').[113] And yet a certain gentlemanly manner is a feature of the lightest, most colloquial, and perhaps some of the most successful of his early verses. In these, Byron's self-dramatisations can take a delightfully self-mocking form. In some uncollected tetrameter from 1807 the author appears as a writer of 'Trifles':

> A sucking *Peer* pretends to rhyme—
> Though many think the noble Fool
> Had better far return to School … [114]

He was always highly self-consciousness of the anomalies produced by his title. In the *Preface to Hours of Idleness* he referred—not without unease—to 'ranking 'amongst the mob of gentlemen who write', my readers must determine, whether I dare say 'with ease'.[115] At other times this was a case of relishing a lordly freedom of idiom, as when closing his reflections on Cambridge life in 'Granta, a Medley', with the following lines:

> But, if I scribble longer now,
> The deuce a soul will stay to read;
> My pen is blunt, my ink is low,
> 'Tis almost time to stop, indeed.
> …
> No more thy theme my muse inspires,
> The reader's tir'd and so am I.[116]

This reaches into the brilliant and complicated impersonations of Rochester's *Letter from Artemiza in the Towne to Chloe in the Countrey* (revoicing the final line of Artemiza's verse letter: 'But you are tyr'd, and soe am I. Farewell.') For both poets the determination is not to bore or be bored, for 'Readers must reape the dullnesse,

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[113] Letter to Lady Melbourne, 29 April 1814, *BLJ* IV, 108–9.
[114] 'The Edinburgh Ladies' Petition to Doctor Moyes' (1807), ll. 32–34, *CPW* I, 196.
[115] Preface to *Hours of Idleness* (1807), *CPW* I, 34. The reference is to Pope's description of the Restoration wits, ''The Mob of Gentlemen who wrote with Ease': see *Imitations of Horace, Book II, Epistle I, to Augustus* (1737), ll. 107–8, *Works*, p. 364.
[116] 'Granta, a Medley', ll. 93–100, *CPW* I, 102.

writers sow.'[117] It was on the grounds of such nonchalant independence that Hunt later remarked sourly that Byron had 'resembled' Rochester.[118]

As these pieces suggest, writing in doubt of poetry need not mean writing half-heartedly; Byron's doubts often came hand in hand with a degree of confident expansiveness. These pieces all benefit from the sorts of self-conscious ironies that suggest that Byron is not taking himself entirely seriously. They suggest how his uncertainty about the 'vocation' could free him from the necessity of being serious. A similarly self-irreverent mode surfaces in some uncollected lines from 1806:

> In Southwell there happened to be at this Time,
> A singular Creature, a Dealer in Rhyme;
> No very great praise of this Youth we afford,
> His merit consisted in being a Lord.[119]

'*Swift* had the Sin of Wit no venial Crime; / Nay, 'twas affirm'd, he sometimes dealt in Rhime', his predecessor had written in a similar spirit of sardonic self-reference.[120] And yet in this rich vein of witty self-disdain there is a hint, too, of a deeper unease and a more serious element of disparagement. Byron made several self-distrustful references to his rank across his early poetry. No 'Title's sounding charm can save / Or scrawl or scribbler from an equal grave', he acknowledged in *English Bards*, after the lines confessing the allure of seeing 'one's name in print'. 'Lords too are Bards', he tells us in later lines, 'Yet, did or taste or reason sway the times, / Ah! who would take their titles with their rhymes?'[121] He seems to have been unable to banish a suspicion that in the idea of being a 'rhyming peer,—we have several of the sort,' there might be an element of the ridiculous.[122]

'I am a fool & deserve all the ills I have met or may meet with.'[123] Byron's habits of detached self-irreverence could easily fall into more serious forms of self-accusation: 'I think *I* could write a more sarcastic

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[117] John Wilmot, Lord Rochester, *A Letter from Artemiza in the Towne to Chloe in the Countrey* (c. 1673–75), l. 260, 261–4, *The Works of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. by Harold Love (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 70; collected in *Anderson's British Poets*, VI, 407. Tom Lockwood has given an account of Byron's early reading of Rochester, identifying the reference to 'Wilmot's verse' in the uncollected 'Soliloquy of a Bard in the Country' (1806), l. 32, *CPW* I, 25. See Tom Lockwood, 'Byron and Rochester', in *Byron Among the English Poets*, pp. 51–65 (pp. 54–5).
[118] *HR*, I, 125.
[119] Parody of verses by Henry Bunbury (1806), l. 26, *CPW* I, 14.
[120] Swift, 'The Author upon Himself' (1714) 1735, 9–10, *Works*, p. 148.
[121] *English Bards*, ll. 53–4, 719–22.
[122] *Hints from Horace*, l. 722.
[123] Letter to Augusta, 26 March 1813, *BLJ* III, 32.

critique on *myself* than any yet published', he said ruefully of the early review of *Hours of Idleness*.[124] Moore has left us with an account of Byron's 'fancy for self-defamation' and his tendency to fall into a 'sort of dark and self-accusing mood'; Moore was sceptical of the sincerity of this habit, as was Lady Blessington, who thought this custom of self-accusation so marked that it amounted to a kind of vanity: 'He indulges in a self-complacency when talking of his own defects'.[125] Byron was equally vigilant about the immodesties of art, variously referring to 'the obnoxious egotisms of authorship', or 'the vanity of authorship.'[126] On this question he seems to have reserved 'the sharpness'—to borrow from Barbara Everett—'which a person may reserve for the concerns which most tempt or involve him.'[127] He seems to have felt deeply the experience of having allowed himself to think himself 'a *devilish clever fellow*' after a good early review of *Hours of Idleness*, and in the event being 'cut to atoms' by the *Edinburgh Review*.[128]

Byron's was a self-critical self-regard: 'How I do delight in observing life as it really is!—and myself, after all, the worst of any—' he observed in 1813; on another occasion, 'do I not deserve all this? and am I not in reality much worse than they make me?'[129] His affinities with Swift—and indeed Rochester—always amounted to more than a shared taste for writing rhymed *jeux d'esprit*. When Lady Blessington recalled Byron telling her in 1823 that 'I have such a detestation of cant, and am so fearful of being suspected of yielding to its outcry, that I make myself appear rather *worse* than better than I am', what either she or Byron seems to have had in mind was Johnson's description of Swift, whose 'dread of hypocrisy' was so strong, it was said, that 'instead of wishing to seem better, he delighted in seeming worse than he was.'[130] When Moore proposed Swift as the 'far closer parallel' to Byron than Pope, he was thinking of the common 'vein of bitterness' that had arisen from both poets' negative receptions in England.[131] Byron certainly shared in Swift's restlessness, in his darker, more incriminating view of the human condition, and his commitment to see the world for what it really is. One of the respects in which he was more the heir of Swift than Pope was in the self-implicating rigour of

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[124] Letter to the Rev. John Becher, 28 March 1808, *BLJ* I, 162.
[125] *HVSV*, p. 241; *BC*, p. 32. Hazlitt came to a similar conclusion: see William Hazlitt, 'Lord Byron', *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd, 1930–34), XI (1932), 69–78 (p. 70) (hereafter, Hazlitt, *Works*).
[126] Draft Preface to *Hints from Horace* (1811), *CPW* I, 288, 150n; journal entry, 22 May 1811, *BLJ* II, 47.
[127] Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 232.
[128] Letter to John Cam Hobhouse, 27 February 1808, *BLJ* I, 159.
[129] Journal entry, 17 and 18 December 1813, *BLJ* III, 240; letter to Lady Melbourne, [?] March 1814, *BLJ* IV, 75.
[130] *BC*, p. 75; cf. Johnson, 'Life of Swift' (1781), *Lives*, III, 189–214 (p. 210). This account of Swift was also included in *Anderson's British Poets*, IX, p. xvii.
[131] *MLJ*, I, 184–5; II, 649.

his satiric vision, which was similarly motivated by a vigilance about all forms of pride, complacency and self-deception, and the need to insist on his own disenchantment.

This vigilance about 'self-love' was also informed by the trust he placed in the maxims of La Rochefoucauld: 'We are all selfish … I believe in Rochefoucault about men,' he said in 1813.[132] Accused of rating down human virtue in *Don Juan,* it was Swift and La Rochefoucauld to whom he appealed when ironically taxing himself with a 'tendency to under-rate and scoff'.[133] There is a moral depth in Byron that is not always recognised, one source of which is suggested by his affinities with these predecessors. Byron was as sensitive as Swift and La Rochefoucauld to our irrepressible capacity for self-deception, and as full of scorn as Rochester for 'the pretending part of the proud World,' with its vanities, its 'False Freedomes, Holy Cheats and formal Lyes'.[134] His revolt against 'received opinions' and 'self-approved wisdom' similarly involved the necessity of facing unwelcome truths: 'I cannot and will not give the lie to my own thoughts and doubts, come what may…', as he said in his early letter.

Byron's restless self-discontent and the self-scrutiny it fostered may have had a good deal to do with the vestigial effects of having been 'bred in Scotland among Calvinists in the first part of my life'.[135] 'I do not know what to believe—or what to disbelieve—which is the devil—'[136] The sympathetic posthumous accounts of Byron's life that appeared in the 1820s and 1830s all insisted with good reason that he was never a 'confirmed unbeliever'; all contained accounts of his 'wavering faith' and 'unsettled' religious opinions.[137] According to Moore these doubts were fostered at Cambridge.[138] Too much of a sceptical thinker to subscribe to Shelley's 'speculative opinions', Byron was yet temperamentally unable to hold any belief in unexamined trust: 'but the whole thing is inscrutable.—It is useless to tell one not to *reason* but to *believe*——you might as well tell a man

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[132] Journal entries, 11 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 22; 17 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 210; 1 December 1813, *BLJ* III, 229. The *Maxims* were among his reading on the voyage to Greece: *HVSV*, p. 387.
[133] *Don Juan* VII (1823), l. 19.
[134] *A Satyre against Reason and Mankind* (c. 1674), ll. 174–8, *The Works of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. by Harold Love (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 62. As Lockwood points out, there are at least two references in *Don Juan* to *A Satyre against Reason and Mankind:* see *Don Juan* VIII, ll. 252–4; and XI (1823), ll. 214–16; Lockwood, p. 59.
[135] Letter to Annabella Milbanke, 26 September 1813, *BLJ* III, 119.
[136] Letter to Hobhouse, 14 April 1817, *BLJ* V, 216.
[137] See e.g. *MC*, p. 77; the account of Dr. James Kennedy (1830), collected in *HVSV*, p. 483; and *BC*, p. 68.
[138] *MLJ*, I, 131.

not to wake but *sleep*—'[139] What is certain is that he never entirely resolved his relation to religious belief: 'It is all a mystery. I feel most things, but I know nothing,' he wrote in his journal in 1821.[140]

Ben Brice has referred to 'the theoretical compatibility between philosophical scepticism and Calvinist theology', a connection that is also summarised in the classic account of scepticism by Richard H. Popkin.[141] Within his wide reading Byron would have encountered philosophical scepticism in its various forms: in classical writers including Cicero and Horace; in Bayle and the *Essais* of Montaigne; and in many of the eighteenth-century writers, including Voltaire, Locke, Hume, and Gibbon, who feature on his 1807 reading list.[142] Parker traces Montaigne's significant influence on English writers including Dryden, Pope, Johnson, Sterne, and Fielding, each of whom were influential on Byron; in their various ways, as he notes, 'all emphasized the limitations of the intellect, the impossibility of arriving at rational certainty on the great questions of human life.'[143] A combination of conditions, then, combined to foster a doubting temper. But a looser and perhaps equally relevant formulation of scepticism, cited by Christopher Ricks, is provided by T. S. Eliot:

> I mean by the sceptic, the man who suspects the origins of his own beliefs, as well as those of others; who is most suspicious of those which are most passionately held; who is still more relentless towards his own beliefs than towards those of others; who suspects other people's motives because he has learned the deceitfulness of his own.[144]

Byron believed that we must attempt to look with undeceived sight on what we hold to be true or valuable: 'All are inclined to believe what they covet,' as he remarked in 1813.[145]

This was a scrutiny that he extended to his art. Across his early work an obviously defensive insistence on the unimportance of poetry coexisted with more serious doubts. In Rochester's *Letter from Artemiza,* from which Byron borrows in his early verses, Artemiza reflects on the dangers of entering onto 'lofty flights of

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[139] 'Letter to Moore, 4 March 1822, *BLJ* IX, 119; Detached thoughts', no. 96, *BLJ* IX, 46.
[140] Journal entry, 28 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 37.
[141] Brice, *Coleridge and Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. 64, 45; Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, rev. edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 10–11.
[142] 'Reading List' (1807), *CMP*, 3. On Byron's reading of Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697) see editorial notes to *CPW* VI, 226.
[143] Parker, *SL*, pp. 44, 7. Also see Donald H. Reiman, *Intervals of Inspiration: the Sceptical Tradition and the Psychology of Romanticism* (Greenwood: Penkeville, 1988), p. xvi.
[144] Eliot, 'Notes of the Way', *Time and Tide* 16.1 (5 January 1935), 6–[7], *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Ronald Schuchard et al., 8 vols. (London: Faber & Faber, 2014–2019), V, 154, quoted in Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 9.
[145] Journal entry, 27 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 225.

dang'rous Poetry': 'Deare Artemiza, Poetry's a snare …'[146] This suggests a mistrust of poetry that also registers its high claims. Rochester's satire 'has a clearer target than human folly – its belief in itself,' suggests Porter.[147] Byron was similarly inclined to distrust where the poetic imagination might lead. Hence his efforts to distance himself from the unrealities endorsed by poets: 'the speculations of those mere dreamers of another existence …and spectators of this'.[148] In another early letter he promised to renounce 'the wildness of my imaginations' to undertake actions for his 'self-esteem & the good of others'.[149] As these examples suggest, his mistrust of the 'poetical temperament' was also an element of his self-suspecting ethical life.[150] They suggest a poet at once hungering for the life of literature, and sceptical of its claims.

III

Byron was aware that he was writing in an age that was conscious of its own 'demand for more profound speculation, and more serious emotion than was dealt in by the writers of the former century', as Francis Jeffrey put it in his 1816 review of Scott's edition of Swift (a volume that failed to persuade Jeffrey 'that Swift was in any respect a poet').[151] Byron, of course, felt as much as any of his contemporaries that Augustan forms were no longer capable of saying all there was to say, and he did not return to his 'early English Bards style' until *The Age of Bronze* in 1823.[152] When Thomas Babington Macaulay viewed Moore's *Life* in 1831, he characterised Byron as at once definitively of his age and at odds with it:

> … he was the man of the last thirteen years of the eighteenth century, and of the first twenty-three years of the nineteenth century. He belonged half to the old, and half to the new school of poetry. …He was the representative, not of either literary party, but of both at once…[153]

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[146] *A Letter from Artemiza*, l. 16.
[147] Peter Porter, 'The Professional Amateur', in *Spirit of Wit: Reconsiderations of Rochester*, ed. by Jeremy Treglown (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), pp. 58–74 (p. 71).
[148] Letter to Annabella Milbanke, 29 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 179.
[149] Letter to Annabella Milbanke, 26 September 1814, *BLJ* IV, 183.
[150] *BC*, p. 49;
[151] Francis Jeffrey, review of *The Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. by Walter Scott, in *The Edinburgh Review* 27.53 (September, 1816), 1–58 (pp. 8, 49).
[152] Letter to Douglas Kinnaird, 1 February 1823, *BLJ* X, 94.
[153] Thomas Babington Macaulay, review of Moore's *Life of Byron* (1830), *Edinburgh Review*, 53 (June 1831), 544–72 (p. 564).

The state of belonging to both parties 'at once' might be described as one of Byron's most characteristic positions more generally. An independence of mind that made it impossible to subscribe wholly to any one position characterised elements of his politics, as already noted, and this was paralleled to some extent in the reservations he expressed about religious scepticism: 'if you could knock up Adam & Eve and the Apple and Serpent—still what is to be put up in their stead?'[154]

It was Byron's sense that old models of what poetry should do had fallen into doubt that stimulated his first major long poem. One striking feature of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* ('*Childe Harold*') is that it is a poem which aspires to public significance, but which is not written in the forms of eighteenth century literary Augustanism. Once doubt had been cast on the adequacy of general standards of judgment, it became more difficult to speak with the authority of the satirist. Byron's awareness of being a latecomer in satire reflected not just his distance from his Augustan models, but also the fact that he was living in an age in which experience could no longer be assumed to be held in common. One response was to dramatise the search for significance in a world in which old authorities and sanctions no longer applied: the result, in *Childe Harold*, was something like a modern pilgrimage, undertaken without guiding principles.

What emerged in the first cantos was, in many ways, a pervasively doubting poem, a denunciation of the low dishonesties of European politics and a vision of nineteenth-century experience as surrounded by uncertainty. It 'not only speaks without any respect of priests, and creeds, and dogmas of all descriptions, but doubts very freely of the immortality of the soul, and other points as fundamental', observed Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review* (Jeffrey would later charge Byron with 'dogmatic scepticism').[155] In a withdrawn prose note to the second canto—which opens with several stanzas of perplexed religious doubt—Byron drafted a 'prose apology for my Scepticism', in which he sought to defend his 'cast of opinion' as 'desponding, not sneering'.[156] Jeffrey was quite wrong about the character of Byron's doubt. One of its most distinctive features was its openness: 'I should regret any *sceptical bigotry* as equally pernicious with the most credulous intolerance', he assured his wife before their marriage; Pietro de Gamba remarked on his 'complete toleration' and recalled his contempt for those with an 'affected contempt of every faith.'[157] 'The only foundation for

[154] 'Detached thoughts', no. 101, *BLJ* IX, 46–7.
[155] Francis Jeffrey, unsigned review of *Childe Harold*, *The Edinburgh Review* 19 (February 1812), 466–77 (p. 467).
[156] *CPW* II, 45, 27n; also see letter to Robert Dallas, 21 August 1811, *BLJ* II, 75.
[157] Letter to Annabella Millbanke, 15 February 1814, *BLJ* IV, 60; *HVSV*, p. 483.

toleration is a degree of Scepticism and without it there can be none,' said Charles James Fox; in Byron scepticism also appears as a vital part of the ethical imagination.[158] 'I know that all save England's church have shamm'd …', his speaker remarks sarcastically in *The Vision of Judgment*, a poem that argues in more than one respect for toleration.[159] As so often in Byron, that tolerance follows from his recognition that the world is large.

However convivial and sexually adventurous, Byron's early travels were never just a Grand Tour. There was an ethical character to his firmness on wanting to pass time abroad. As he told his mother, 'If we see no nation but our own, we do not give mankind a fair chance, it is from *experience* not *Books*, we ought to judge of mankind.—There is nothing like inspection, and trusting to our own senses.'[160] His determination to 'take a wider field' when travelling was also driven by his belief that writers might be 'spoilt by living in little circles and petty societies. London and the world is the only place to take the conceit out of a man'.[161] Behind this was an ambivalence about an inheritance he described as 'Aristocratical Scotch' and a determination to look beyond establishment English culture.[162] In some of his earliest poetry, it is his Scottishness that founds his self-portrait as a 'freeborn soul'.[163] Byron's national identity is a divisive topic, as Fiona Stafford has shown, but what Brean Hammond has referred to 'his un-Englishness' seems fundamental to his creative identity.[164] There was an outsiderly reserve, and not just a patrician pride, to his early diffidence about literary London and its 'poetical personages'.[165] These reservations about fashionable literary life were ones he never entirely relinquished, even when he found himself at its centre.

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[158] L. G. Mitchell, citing the *Commonplace Book of Samuel Rogers*, in *Charles James Fox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 243.

[159] *The Vision of Judgment* (1822), l. 108–10. Emrys Jones placed these lines within a 'a tradition of 'enlightened' anti-sectarian toleration' and demonstrated that they echo both Pope and Swift: see Pope's 'Thus Wit, like Faith, by each man is applied / To one small sect, and all are damn'd beside', in the *Essay on Criticism* (ll. 396–7), and the 'verbally closer' lines from Swift's 'Day of Judgment' (1773) 'You who in different Sects have shamm'd, / And come to see each other damn'd…' (ll. 15-18, *Works*, p. 516). See Jones, 'Byron's Visions of Judgment', *The Modern Language Review*, 76.1 (1981), 1–19 (p. 12).

[160] Letter to Catherine Gordon Byron, 2 November 1808, *BLJ* I, 172.

[161] Letters to Catherine Gordon Byron, 14 January 1811, *BLJ* II, 34; and Moore, 3 August 1814, *BLJ* IV, 152.

[162] Letter to Murray, 25 October 1820, *BLJ* VII, 212; Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron: A Biography*, 3 vols (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), I, 34.

[163] Uncollected 'Stanzas' (c. 1807 or 1808), ll. 1, 6–7, *CPW* I, 121. Cf. 'Lachin Y Gair', *Hours of Idleness* (1807), ll. 37–8, *CPW* I, 104.

[164] Fiona Stafford, 'England and Englishness', in *The Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism*, ed. by David Duff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 91–106 (p. 94); Brean Hammond, 'Byron', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 150–65 (p. 159).

[165] Letter to Hobhouse, 9 November 1811, *BLJ* II, 128.

In its first cantos, *Childe Harold*, perhaps more than any of Byron's other early works, shows his poetry to have been informed by the double context of nineteenth-century Romanticism and his ongoing loyalty to the Restoration and eighteenth-century writers, whose works filled his poetry and letters and continued to inform his techniques. This was a double allegiance in some ways suggesting rival views of the poet's function. The consequences for his poetry of this divided point of view were brought into particularly clear focus by his choice of the Spenserian stanza. Hunt's impression of Byron's indifference to Spenser, 'that most poetical of the poets', was in fact true in an important sense to the origins of the poem: in the Preface to the first cantos Byron appealed not to Spenser, but to Spenser's mid-eighteenth-century Scottish imitators, James Thomson and James Beattie, and to Ariosto.[166] What Byron admired in Beattie was that he had shown that the stanza could admit 'every variety' of tone, 'droll or pathetic, descriptive or sentimental, tender or satirical,' and as this suggests, what Byron sought in the form were qualities far removed from those exemplified by Spenser himself.

The extent to which this famously Romantic poem began in mixed impulses has not always been appreciated. In his review of the first cantos, Francis Jeffrey remarked on Byron's way of passing 'from the style of Spenser to that of his own age'.[167] He was referring to the traces of burlesque Spenserian diction ('Whilome', 'wight', 'yclad', 'ycrossed', 'hight', and so on) that are scattered through the first cantos.[168] David Hall Radcliffe has drawn attention to these 'profound anachronisms' in style and remarked on the role played by Spenserian burlesque in 'enabling Byron to bring eighteenth-century satire to bear on nineteenth-century romanticism'.[169] Thomson had used obsolete Spenserian diction in a burlesque spirit in *The Castle of Indolence* (1748). This was a form of ironic allusion to Spenser, intended to parody his poeticisms. In Byron's hands, the satiric element was sharper. He was fully conscious of the incongruity of introducing his hero with an 'Ah, me! in sooth he was a shameless wight'.[170] This was exactly the kind of diction that had been ridiculed by the Scriblerians (including by Pope in *The Dunciad*) and by Dryden before them.[171] Byron would also have been

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[166] Preface (1812), *CPW* II, 4–5; referring to William Forbes, *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie, including many of his original letters*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Arch. Constable and Co., 1807), I, 113–14.
[167] Jeffrey, unsigned review of *Childe Harold*, p. 468.
[168] See *Childe Harold* I, ll. 945–9; and 10, 14, 723; II, 360, 481, 697.
[169] David Hill Radcliffe, 'Byron and the Scottish Spenserians', *Studies in Romanticism,* 47.1 (2008), 53–74 (pp. 73, 58). Peter Vassallo also notes this 'dissonance': see *Byron, the Italian Literary Influence* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 51.
[170] *Childe Harold* I, ll. 14, 19.
[171] Pope mocks archaisms like 'besprent' and 'y-fed' in Book III of *The Dunciad* (1742), III.185–8, 188n: see *The Dunciad: in Four Books*, ed. by Valerie Rumbold (London: Longman, 1999), p. 243. Another example is John Gay's mockery of Ambrose Philips's Spenserian diction, which flowered into *The Shepherd's Week* (1714): see *John Gay:*

familiar with Johnson's dislike of revivals of 'the stile of Spenser', 'darkened with old words …remote from common use'.[172]

The poem began, then, in an ironic, allusive mode, designed by the Scriblerians to mock the serious attempts of bad poets. These were the sorts of descents from solemnity into 'the ludicrous or burlesque' that were regretted by Moore; when Byron returned from the East in July 1811 and revised the poem, they were largely dropped in favour of sustained seriousness.[173] Some, however, remained, including at the end of the first canto: 'If he that rhymeth now may scribble moe. / Is this too much? stern Critic! say not so…'[174] The sardonic, burlesque character of this intrusion into what is otherwise an account of the actualities of the Peninsular War is conspicuously discrepant. There is a satiric purpose at work here: Byron's choice of a demythologised hero and a diminished contemporary scene is meant to suggest that national epic has become impossible, which gives such moments the character of a bitter comedy of lost ideals.

Parody is among the 'double forms' that Isobel Armstrong has identified as being 'deeply sceptical'.[175] The parodist thrives on the disparity between subject and style—in this case, Spenserian idealisms parodically applied to the hollowness of an unheroic Regency to expose a war waged without honour. As an ironic reflection on the idealisms of art, this points forwards to Byron's unfaithful quotation of Spenser in the seventh canto: 'Fierce loves and faithless wars'—I am not sure / If this be the right reading—'.[176] In a passage added to the Preface to the 1812 cantos, Byron aimed his scepticism at the 'good old times', informing his readers that there never were any 'times of love, honour, and so forth'.[177] There is a distinctly burlesque character to the unillusioned way in which the past, too, is brought low, which brings to mind the mockery of heroic and romantic values in Butler's Spenserian burlesque *Hudibras*. Like Butler before him, Byron took the view that

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Poetry and Prose, ed. by Vinton A. Dearing, 2 vols (Oxford University Press, 1975), 'Proeme,' I, 92. And as Ian Jack notes, the terms 'whilom', 'hight' and yore' are used by Dryden to mock bad poetry in 'Mac Flecknoe', ll. 35, 67 (see *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. by Vinton A. Dearing and others, 20 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956–2000), II (hereafter, Dryden, *Works*); Ian Jack, *Augustan Satire: Intention and Idiom in English Poetry, 1660–1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 51.

[172] Johnson, *Rambler* 121 (1751), *Yale*, IV, pp. 285–6. *The Rambler* appears on Byron's 'Reading List' (1807), *CMP*, 6.

[173] *MLJ,* II, 328; letter to Charles Robert Dallas, 21 August 1811, *BLJ* II, 75.

[174] For example, 'Whilome', 'wight', 'yclad', 'ycrossed', 'hight', and so on—some of which survive in the published poem. See *Childe Harold* I, ll. 945–9; and 10, 14, 723; II, 360, 481, 697.

[175] Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry, Poetics, and Politics*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 12.

[176] *Don Juan* VII, ll. 57–8; cf. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, I.i.9, *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser: In Three Volumes*, ed. by J. C. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909), II, 3 ('Fierce warres and faithfull loues shall moralize my song.')

[177] 'Addition to the Preface' (September 1812), *CPW* II, 5.

the 'vows of chivalry were no better kept than any other vows whatsoever'.[178] This distrust of heroic values, applied to what Byron saw as the self-flattering delusions of the nineteenth century, runs through the poem, as it does through *Don Juan*.

The remains of Byron's burlesque idiom, and what was retained of the rhythms of Augustan satire, give the first cantos an undecided stylistic character. If the poem began in partly parodic and satiric impulses, it soon became something quite different. One of the most significant stylistic features of the poem is that the poem is allowed to change in character. The first two cantos alone prove its poet capable of both a demystifying cleverness and a distrust of fervency, and the sort of high feeling conveyed by his reverence at the foot of Parnassus in *Childe Harold*: ''tis, alas! with shame / That I in feeblest accents must adore.'[179] One impression open to the reader of these cantos, as Alan Rawes has reflected, is that 'Byron has not decided what kind of poem he was writing'.[180] Defending his freedom not to decide was an important element in his literary character.

In Byron, a literary sensibility and an imaginative and sometimes superstitious temper came into combination with worldly instincts that could be determinedly unromantic. The divided quality of his literary temperament was captured by Moore in the *Life*, describing the extraordinary range of Byron's writing during the early-1820s:

> In contrast to all these high-toned strains, and struck off during the same fertile period, we find his Don Juan—in itself an epitome of all the marvellous contrarieties of his character—the Vision of Judgment, the Translation from Pulci, the Pamphlets on Pope, on the British Review, on Blackwood,—together with a swarm of other light, humorous trifles, all flashing forth carelessly from the same mind that was, almost at the same moment, personating …the mighty spirit of Dante, or following the dark footsteps of Scepticism over the ruins of past worlds, with Cain.[181]

Some of the most productive of these creative divisions were brought into focus when Byron entered into the longstanding controversy over 'the Poetical Character of Pope' that was restirring in the 1820s.[182] 'Warton and Churchill began it', Byron remarked of what he viewed as the 'absurd and systematic depreciation of Pope' in

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[178] 'Addition to the Preface' to *Childe Harold* I and II (September 1812), *CPW* II, 5.
[179] *Childe Harold* I, ll. 623–4.
[180] Alan Rawes, *Byron's Poetic Experimentation: Childe Harold, the Tales, and the Quest for Comedy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 2, 8.
[181] *MLJ*, II, 647–8.
[182] William Lisle Bowles, *The Invariable Principles of Poetry* (London: Longman and others, 1819), p. 6.

his own time.[183] Joseph Warton had described Pope as lacking in 'poetical enthusiasm' and established the basis for a nineteenth-century critical vocabulary in which Pope and Swift, having written no 'pure poetry', were hardly poets at all.[184] The debate was revived in 1819 by the publication of William Lisle Bowles's *Invariable Principles of Poetry*, which declined to class Pope's works among 'the higher species of poetry'.[185] The very premise of this work immediately provoked Byron's mistrust of the categorical: what stuck in his throat, he wrote, was that Bowles was offering opinions 'that are to be taken as decisive authority'.[186] 'Away then with this cant about … "invariable principles of poetry"—' he wrote in his reply from Ravenna, the 'Letter to John Murray'.[187] What followed—a vigorous defence of Pope's 'Ethical poetry' as the 'highest of all poetry'—has not always been viewed as persuasive.[188] 'Why are Poets Indifferent Critics?', the editors of *Blackwood's Magazine* were moved to ask. 'Lord Byron may persuade himself, if he can, that Pope is, after all, the greatest of poets—and that he thinks him so; but he shall not persuade the public to believe either of these propositions'.[189] (By this time Byron had issued his 'poetical commandments' in the first canto of *Don Juan*, including the new article of faith: 'Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope…'[190])

Another writer provoked by Byron's defence of Pope was William Hazlitt, who issued a rejoinder titled 'Pope, Lord Byron, and Mr. Bowles'. Hazlitt was probably Byron's best contemporary critic—though he was usually a hostile one (thinking him incurably 'lordly' and, in a piece of misrecognition from a fellow sceptical thinker, 'dogmatical').[191] Hazlitt thought there was something deeply untrustworthy about Byron's defence of Pope: 'Lord Byron's notions of art and poetry are sufficiently wild, romantic … His Lordship likes the poetry, the imaginative part of art, and so do we…', he pointed out.[192] For Hazlitt in this piece, Pope appears as an

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[183] 'Some Observations', 104.
[184] Joseph Warton, *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*, 5th edn, 2 vols (London: W. J. and J. Richardson, 1806), I, iv; II, 402–3.
[185] Bowles, *Invariable Principles*, p. 6.
[186] 'Letter to John Murray', 150; cf. 'Observations Upon Observations', 161.
[187] *CMP*, 146.
[188] *Ibid.*, 143.
[189] Unsigned article, 'Why are Poets Indifferent Critics?', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 10.55 (September 1821), 180–182 (p. 183).
[190] *Don Juan* I, ll. 1625–34.
[191] Hazlitt, unsigned review of *Childe Harold* IV, *Yellow Dwarf*, 18 (May 1818), 142–144 (p. 142); 'Lord Byron', *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), *Works*, XI, p. 70. Among Byron's contemporaries Hazlitt was a notably sympathetic reader of Swift: see Lecture VI, *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818), *Works*, V, p. 112.
[192] Hazlitt, 'Pope, Lord Byron, and Mr. Bowles', *London Magazine*, III (June 1821), 593–607 (p. 600).

unimaginative, unspiritual poet who viewed 'art as a display of ingenuity' and who could trifle with one subject after another,

> … because while they amused his fancy and exercised his ingenuity, they never once disturbed his vanity, his levity, or indifference. His mind was the antithesis of strength and grandeur; its power was the power of indifference. He had none of the enthusiasm of poetry; he was in poetry what the sceptic is in religion.[193]

Here scepticism appears as a damaging half-heartedness and want of spirit. In contrast, Hazlitt insisted that good poetry should not have 'nothing romantic about it.'[194] Here, then, is what might be viewed as the negative side of being a 'sceptic' in poetry: merely indifferent, inconsistent, and wanting faith. Byron himself was sometimes accused in similar terms. In their response to the 'Letter to John Murray', the editors at *Blackwood's* charged him with instability in opinion:

> His opinions on poetry, even when he has endeavoured to rest them on first principles, or logical deductions, seem to have veered and varied all his life; and with his opinions, variable as they have been, his practice has generally contrived to be inconsistent.[195]

For similar reasons, Byron has sometimes been charged by later critics with 'not holding any 'theory of poetry', any high—or clear—conception of its nature, functions, and value.' [196] There is the difficulty, too, of determining his real beliefs: Lady Blessington felt that 'he exaggerated not only his misdeeds but his opinions'.[197]

In fact Byron's real views of Pope were somewhat obscured by his decision in the 'Letter to John Murray' to 'take him on his strong ground—as an Ethical poet'.[198] In his first piece of critical prose, 'Some Observations', which had been written the previous year but remained unpublished, he had taken a quite different approach, mounting an impassioned defence of the 'imagination' of the Augustan poets: 'do you wish

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[193] *Ibid*., p. 600, 607.
[194] *Ibid*., p. 602.
[195] Unsigned article, 'Why are Poets Indifferent Critics?', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 10.55 (September 1821), 180–182 (p. 182).
[196] Andrew Rutherford, *Byron: a Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1961), p. 4.
[197] *BC*, e.g. pp. 28, 241–2, 184.
[198] 'Letter to John Murray', 149.

for invention—imagination—Sublimity—Character? seek them in the Rape of the Lock, the fables of Dryden—the Ode on Saint Cecilia's day—& Absalom and Achitophel…' [199] Like his other pieces of prose criticism, this work owes much to Johnson, who Byron described as 'the profoundest of critics', and like Johnson he wanted to emphasise that Pope possessed imagination as well as judgment: 'Taking passage for passage I will undertake to cite more lines teeming with imagination from Pope than from any two living poets—be they who they may', he promised in that piece.[200] Claude Rawson has described Byron's defences of Pope as 'not very interesting or distinguishing documents'.[201] But despite their vigorous partiality, they do contain some intelligent and generous critical intuitions. They certainly suggest that Byron was alive to what many critics have felt to be the strain of profound imaginativeness, even Romanticism, in Pope.[202]

Byron first referred to 'the question of Romantic or Classical as they call it' in an unpublished annotation to the Dedication to the fourth canto of *Childe Harold*, by which time he had become conscious of the 'state of literary party' on this question in Europe.[203] But it was not until he added a supplementary note to the third edition of the 'Letter to John Murray' that he responded more fully to the idea. 'So far are the principles of poetry from being "*invariable*," that they never were nor ever will be settled' he insisted, in response to Bowles, before going on:

> Shakespeare and Milton have had their rise, and they will have their decline. Already they have more than once fluctuated, as must be the case with all the dramatists and poets of a living language. This does not depend upon their merits, but upon the ordinary vicissitudes of human opinions. Schlegel and Madame de Staël have endeavoured also to reduce poetry to two systems, classical and romantic. The effect is only beginning.[204]

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[199] 'Some Observations, 110–11. This piece was prompted by the unsigned article, 'Remarks on *Don Juan'*, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine,* V (August 1819), 512–18 (pp. 512–13).
[200] *MC*, p. 198; 'Some Observations', 111–12. Byron often recorded his esteem for Johnson: see e.g. 'Letter to John Murray', 150; letter to John Cam Hobhouse, 30 September 1818, *BLJ* VI, 72.
Cf. Johnson, 'Life of Pope', *Lives*, IV, p. 78.
[201] Rawson, *Satire and Sentiment*, p. 99.
[202] See e.g. William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951), p. 86; F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 94; A. D. Nuttall, *Pope's 'Essay on Man'* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1984), p. 29; Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 135.
[203] Dedication to *Childe Harold* IV (1818), *CPW* II, 123 (he was referring specifically to the 'state of literary party' in Italy).
[204] Supplementary note to the 'Letter to John Murray', 142. Byron was referring to August Wilhelm von Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, which, according to Stuart Curran, provided the origins of the 'British comprehension of the distinction between classical and romantic temperaments and cultures': Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 128. Byron had absorbed the distinction through

Byron's prediction of the decline of Shakespeare and Milton reflects what was his determination, by this time, to put the great English poets in their places. But it also comes in part from Johnson, who he esteemed for his sceptical vigilance as a critic: 'Johnson strips many a leaf from every laurel.'[205] His reference to 'a living language' likewise recalls Johnson's account of the English language as a yet 'living tongue'.[206] That appreciation for the vigour and changeability of the literary medium suggests that it would be foolish to divide too definitively between the judgment and imagination, and fosters his instinct that to divide poetry into two would be to 'reduce' it. This resistance to the classification of 'Romantic or Classical', the sort of general conclusion that his sceptical mind resisted, suggests, again, that he was alive to the counter-classical strains in the Augustan poets; it also epitomizes his antipathy to determinate positions and forms of 'decisive authority'.

These are important aspects of Byron's literary character. His sceptical emphasis on the 'ordinary vicissitudes of human opinions' suggests that it is the task of art and criticism to never rest in one position: no principle should be 'invariable', and all opinions should be open to revision; final judgement, therefore, should always be reserved. This is a perspective that does not seek a final resolution of doubt, but rather communicates the benefits of having unsettled beliefs. It was equally vital to Byron's art that he was free to come to his views independently. His determination not to be constrained by preconceived positions suggests another parallel with his remarks on religion. Thomas Medwin recalled Byron in conversation at Pisa, where he knew him in 1821–22:

> 'I always took great delight,' observed he, 'in the English Cathedral service. It cannot fail to inspire every man, who feels at all, with devotion. Notwithstanding which, Christianity is not the best source of inspiration for a poet. No poet should be tied down to a direct profession of faith.'[207]

'No poet' rather than 'no man' is a choice that suggests that his freedom from religious and other obligations was closely bound up with his creativity as a poet—especially given that so much of his poetry speaks to the freedom not to be 'tied down'.

Germaine De Staël's *Germany*, published in a three-volume edition by John Murray in 1813 that he owned in England, which contained a chapter entitled 'Of Classic and Romantic Poetry'. See 'Sale Catalogue' (1816), *CMP*, 234.

[205] 'Letter to John Murray', 150.

[206] *Ibid*. Cf. Johnson, 'The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language' (1747), *Yale*, XVIII, p. 89 (cf. pp. 103, 110).

[207] *MC*, p. 77.

'We need Byron's salutary scepticism', as Ricks notes, and this study likewise finds much to appreciate in the quality of his doubt.[208] As the following chapters will show, Byron found many vitally creative ways to be what Hazlitt called a 'sceptic' in poetry.

[208] Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 75.

Chapter 2 – Spending

I

When Byron first resolved to enter onto the debate about Pope in early 1820, he asked for the draft of the unpublished satire '"hints from Horace" written ten years ago' to be sent to him at Ravenna with hopes that 'that Popeian poem', written in Athens in 1811, might make good opening volley.[1] Looking back at his old poem with an eye to revision and publication, he wrote to Murray to say:

> As far as versification goes it is good—and on looking back to what I wrote about that period, I am astonished to see how *little* I have trained on—I wrote better then than now—but that comes from my having fallen into the atrocious bad taste of the times—partly.[2]

Writing on 'the self-questioning responses of the revising poet' with Tennyson primarily in mind, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst has described how a poet's encounter with an old work might elicit 'effects of self-confirmation and self-surprise', for just as we may become unfamiliar to ourselves over time, so 'the experience of confronting an old poem might confirm that it too has turned to something strange'.[3] One response open to the revising poet, who may or may not 'see eye to eye with his or her previous self', is a state 'held between astonishment and doubt'.[4] 'I am astonished', Byron indeed wrote in his letter to Murray, before turning his considerable doubt on everything he had written since. Writing to Murray again some months later, his first impression still seemed to hold good: he remained decided that 'I will omit nothing and alter little—the fact is (as I perceive)—that I wrote a good deal better in 1811—than I ever have done since.'[5] Byron's encounter with an old poem had, then, issued in a curious kind of 'self-confirmation', for his disposition to see so 'eye to eye' with the Popeian poet of 1811 was also a way of putting himself at odds with everything he had written since.

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[1] Letters to Hobhouse, 8 June 1820 *BLJ* VII, 114; Murray, 29 March 1820, *BLJ* VII, 61; William Lisle Bowles, *The Invariable Principles of Poetry* (London: Longman and others, 1819), p. 6.
[2] Letter to Murray, 23 September 1820, *BLJ* VII, 179. It took some months to receive the satire from England.
[3] Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives*, p. 249.
[4] *Ibid*.
[5] Letter to Murray, 11 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 60.

Byron's determination to renew his defence of Pope had been stimulated most immediately by the publication of Bowles's *Invariable Principles of Poetry* (1819), and his retrieval of his early satire was in part an attempt to respond to the large changes that he felt had been undergone in literary taste and criticism 'only within the last twenty or thirty years'.[6] What seems to have equally struck him 'on looking back' were the changes undergone in his own style between 1811 and 1820, by which time he was four cantos into *Don Juan.* Some of the most substantial of these changes can be traced to autumn 1817, that period between the completion of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and his first experiments in the *ottava rima*. That September at Venice he wrote to Murray to say:

> With regard to poetry in general I am convinced the more I think of it—that he and *all* of us—Scott—Southey—Wordsworth—Moore—Campbell—I—are all in the wrong—one as much as another—that we are upon a wrong revolutionary poetical system—or systems—not worth a damn in itself—'[7]

This stirring sense of being 'in the wrong' was the outcome of a period of self-review prompted in part by a return over Pope, as the same letter makes clear:

> I am more confirmed in this—by having lately gone over some of our Classics—particularly *Pope*. … I took Moore's poems & my own & some others—& went over them side by side with Pope's—and I was really astonished (I ought to not have been so) and mortified …

His suspicion had the quality of a large second thought, unfolding itself over the course of his first years in Italy, 'the more I think of it'. 'As I told Moore not very long ago "we are all wrong"', he wrote in 'Some Observations', the first (unpublished) piece of critical prose he wrote at Ravenna in 1820.[8] In that piece he set forth his current 'opinion of the present state of Poetry in England'—which was not a favourable one—and professed to a sense of responsibility for not having 'endeavoured to correct rather than encourage the taste of the Day'.[9] By the time he looked over *Hints from Horace* in the following months he was, then, already well disposed to discover himself 'fallen into the atrocious bad state of the times'. Determined to view his old work through Popeian eyes,

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[6] 'Some Observations', 113.
[7] Letter to Murray, 15 September 1817, *BLJ* V, 265.
[8] 'Some Observations', 110.
[9] 'Some Observations', 109.

he sought also to distance himself from his imitators: to shake off the 'followers of Scott and Moore and Byron', as he told Murray.[10] Lady Blessington later recorded his way of 'not sympathizing with the general taste'; in this instance that habit extended to the taste he had created for his own work.[11]

Byron's determination to 'omit nothing and alter little' in the case of *Hints from Horace* may seem unsurprising, given he so often gave the impression that he hardly ever revised. Lines from *Hints from Horace* itself make clear its speaker's views on 'the paltry suffrage of 'Correct'!'[12] Correcting would be too much like 'sweating poesy', he often intimated, in which case 'a man had better be a ditcher'.[13] That year he told Murray 'With regard to what you say of retouching the Juans—and the Hints—it is all very well—but I can't furbish.'[14] In fact his return to *Hints from Horace* is significant in part because he so seldom returned to old works with a view to revision. What Douglas-Fairhurst describes in Tennyson are methods of composition by which old works might be 'adapted without being superseded' by a poet who was 'reluctant to settle for his own conclusions.'[15] Byron was equally reluctant to settle for his own last words on anything, but more typically he either treated old works as superseded or carried them forwards with additions, as he did with *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan.* Taking up his early satire again in 1820 was the only occasion in his career when he returned to a poem many years later with a view to revision and publication.[16] Most characteristically Byron was less interested in rewriting old work than he was in writing something new. He was a poet who was always putting something behind him.

That Byron lacked the revising instinct of the truly artistic sensibility has long been an aspect of his critical reputation. For critics including Hazlitt, Arnold, and T. S. Eliot, it has seemed the most serious deficiency in his artistic sensibility.[17] For Arnold this 'want of art', as he put it, 'made it impossible for Byron to produce poetic wholes'.[18] In a valuable corrective to this long tradition, Jane Stabler has stressed the 'opposite tendency' in Byron: that 'careful recording of second or third thoughts, which can be seen all over his manuscripts and are

[10] Letter to Murray, 11 September 1820, *BLJ* VII, 175; Cf. 'Some Observations', 107.
[11] *MC*, 43.
[12] *Hints from Horace*, ll. 417–18.
[13] Letter to Murray, 6 April 1819, *BLJ* VI, 105.
[14] Letter to Murray, 18 November 1820, *BLJ* VII, 229.
[15] Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives*, p. 182.
[16] In the event his plans to publish *Hints from Horace* in 1820 fell through, and as a result the poem became available to readers only when Moore first published extracts in his *Life of Lord Byron* (1830). The first complete text of the poem was published in Murray's edition of the *Works* in January 1831.
[17] Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, *Works*, XI, p. 72.
[18] Arnold, 'Byron', pp. 163–4, 176.

not quite the rare species that some critics want to believe.'[19] And yet with all due caution, it is fair to say that Byron devoted relatively little of his career to the work of revision and rewriting. In his study of *Decisions and Revisions in T. S. Eliot*, Christopher Ricks remarks that 'the creative dissatisfaction that marks the enduring artist may often be evidenced in the pertinacity of second thoughts, and of third if need be.'[20] In 1812 Byron tried to convince Lord Holland of something similar: 'second thoughts in every thing are best, but in rhyme third & fourth don't come amiss'.[21] But in fact this was an uncharacteristic response to the uncharacteristic pressures of a commissioned work, the much-emended address for the opening of the Drury Lane Theatre. Byron's more predominating habit was to profess trust in his first thoughts. Given the discipline of Eliot's own revisions, it is notable that the element of Byron's poetry he thought most betrayed 'the lack of interest, that he took in poetry', was his habit of writing too much: 'one would suppose that he never destroyed anything.'[22]

Thomas Medwin, who knew Byron as the author of *Don Juan*, enthused over the fairness of his manuscripts: 'He hardly ever alters a word for whole pages, and never corrects a line in subsequent editions.'[23] Although this cannot be strictly correct, what Ricks writes in mind of is a laudable 'scepticism about one's own phrasing', and although it would be wrong to think that Byron did not make that kind of textual revision—it has been shown that he altered his closing couplets in *Don Juan* more often than not, for example— it is also true to say that he did not very often return to earlier works in a corrective or self-refining spirit.[24] Literary revision need not relate only to the textual emendations that emerge out of the detail of composition, however. If revision is about the capacity to be 'repeatedly moved to a later opinion,' as Ricks writes in his piece on Eliot, then Byron emerges as a great poet of second and third thoughts: a poet, in fact, with a profound habit of revision.[25] For he always was being moved to a later opinion, including on his own work. His doubtful return over *Hints from Horace*, involving his half-surprised encounter with a former self, was characteristic of a capacity for detached self-scrutiny according to which he often arrived at a revised perspective on events. At a more conscious intellectual level this was paralleled by his affirmations of his freedom to revise his views in light of

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[19] Jane Stabler, 'Revision and Self-Citation', *Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism*, pp. 388–403 (p. 390).
[20] Ricks, *Decisions*, p. 2.
[21] Letter to Lord Holland, 26 September 1812, *BLJ* II, 210; *CPW* III, 20.
[22] Eliot, 'Byron', p. 438.
[23] Zachary Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 78; *MC*, 265.
[24] T. G. Steffan and Willis Winslow Pratt, *Byron's Don Juan: A Variorum Edition*, 4 vols (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1957), I, 313.
[25] Ricks, *Decisions*, p. 5.

experience: ‘Opinions are made to be changed—or how is truth to be got at? we don’t arrive at it by standing on one leg? or on the first day of our setting out—’[26]

It was not unusual for Byron to hold what he had written in doubtful esteem. On looking back to the period between 1811 and 1820, one major work that must have come into view was *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. One question raised by the revised perspective of 1820 is how far this later Byron continued to see ‘eye to eye’ with the author of the poem that had made his name. ‘Does the cant of sentiment still continue in England?’, Lady Blessington reported him asking in 1823 at Genoa. ‘‘Childe Harold’ called it forth; but my ‘Juan’ was well calculated to cast it into shade, and had that merit, if it had no other’.[27] As reported this carries a note of clipped bravado that suggests that Byron was almost certainly overstating his disapproval for his first major poem. But it is true that by 1820 if not earlier Byron had come to express an opinion that *Don Juan* ‘would live longer than Childe Harold’.[28] In the 1820s he would sometimes claim that ‘no one has done more through negligence to corrupt the language’, or that he had ‘helped to spoil the public taste’, for which he blamed both ‘the false exaggerated style of youth and the times in which we live’.[29] The extent of this apparent self-revolt against his own ‘sentiment’ may be in question, but the element of self-disparagement was deeply characteristic of him.

It was perhaps inevitable that he should have arrived at a later opinion of a poem that had made such full use of the self-questioning resources of revision originally. It is integral to the character of *Childe Harold* that it was added to over time. Begun in October 1809 in Albania and finished in January 1818 in Venice, it was not published as a single work until Murray’s two-volume edition was issued in 1819. This, moreover, was a feature of the work that Byron felt to be significant, for in ‘parting’ with his poem in his 1818 Preface, he threw a highlight on the ‘interval of eight years between the composition of the first and last cantos’.[30] Byron made his first return to the poem in April 1816, while sailing from England to Ostend. ‘Begun at Sea’, he recorded on the manuscript of the third canto, and in his opening stanzas, ‘Once more upon the waters! yet once more!’[31] Though he had been saying he wanted to leave England long before he did (and even before coming back the

[26] Letter to Murray, 9 May 1817, *BLJ* V, 220.
[27] *BC*, 233.
[28] Letter to Murray, 12 October 1820, *BLJ* VII, 202.
[29] Letters to Murray, 28 September 1820, *BLJ* VII, 182; Isaac D’Israeli, 10 June 1822, *BLJ* IX, 173.
[30] Dedication to *Childe Harold* IV, 120.
[31] *Childe Harold* III (1816), l. 10; editorial apparatus to *CPW* II, 76.

first time had felt decided that 'I have no wish to return to England, …it is no country for me'), there is no doubting the real sense of estrangement that marked this crossing.[32]

The last time he had worked on the poem had been in 1814, when he had added fifteen new stanzas to the second canto for inclusion with the poem's seventh edition.[33] This second instalment was accordingly begun on a revisionary note: 'Again I seize the theme then but begun,' the poet announces, with the claim that he may not be the man he once was: 'it may be, that in vain / I would essay as I have sung to sing.'[34] A revising poet may be especially conscious of the passage of time between composition and revision, and that sense of changed circumstances, of being distanced from what he formerly was, was underlined by the fact that the poem that made his name in Britain was begun and finished abroad. In 1820, a few days after observing to Murray that 'I wrote better then than now', he remarked wonderingly that 'I have now been nearly as long out of England—as I was *there*'.[35] His abiding sense of the gulf between 'then' and 'now' leaves its mark all over the third canto. If continuing on an old poem may be considered a form of literary revision—for by extending a work the poet inevitably changes it, and what might otherwise have been considered finished now seems 'but begun'—then the returning poet may at some level be both composing and revising. That double property of creation and revision can be heard early in the third canto, when that much-quoted proposition about the purpose of art—

> 'Tis to create, and in creating live
> A being more intense, that we endow
> With form our fancy,

—is followed by what Michael O'Neill aptly called 'a recoil of the mind upon what it has just been affirming'. 'Yet must I think less wildly', the poet counsels himself at the beginning of the next stanza, before returning again upon his own words:

> 'Tis too late!
> Yet am I chang'd; though still enough the same
> In strength to bear what time can not abate,

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[32] Letter to John Hansen, from Prevesa, 12 November 1809, *BLJ* I, 232.
[33] This included the well-known sequence 'To Ianthe'. See editorial notes, *CPW* II, 1.
[34] *Childe Harold* III, ll. 19–21, 30–31.
[35] Letter to Murray, 28 September 1820, *BLJ* VII, 182.

And feed on bitter fruits without accusing Fate.[36]

Here the self-revising refluxes of thought are recorded in the present tense of composition. First the poet doubts whether or not it is 'too late!' to change. Then comes the perplexity of 'Yet am I chang'd', in which the 'Yet' may act as an adversative, voicing resolve and keeping change at bay (as in the earlier line 'Yet must I think less wildly…'), or as an adverb, in which case the poet is still changing, yet composing, which may be closer to the no less inconclusive syntax of the draft line: 'Now I am changed yet'.[37] This portrait of the mind which, as he wrote elsewhere, 'recoils upon itself', is characteristic of a poem which, in its later cantos, is often representing acts of thinking and rethinking.[38] In dramatising the poet's condition of doubting self-alienation, the poem itself dwells in the mixed and provisional states of mind that characterise doubt.

It is significant that these lines should have invited a second thought in revision, so that the dramatisation of the recoil of the mind upon itself is paralleled by the poet's return over his own words in composition. In his study of *Decisions and Revisions in T. S. Eliot*, Christopher Ricks notes that revision may be especially invited 'when something in the very words of the original constitutes an acknowledgement of self-dissatisfaction, the words ill-at-ease'. 'And a particular form of this may be audible when a writer is engaged in some inquiry as to exactly what the self is, or as to the multiplicities of self that might be entertained'.[39] It was perhaps natural, then, that Byron should have returned to lines that already doubted his self-continuity. His alteration was made on the first draft, in that first interval that opens up between the creation and revision of work, as if to suggest that even within that period the poet had already become different from himself: ''Tis too late!', everything has already changed. 'Yet Time, who changes all, had altered him / In soul and aspect as in age', we are told of Harold a few lines later.[40] What is so telling in this instance is that Byron's revision does little to move the lines closer to certainty: instead the poet remains divided between his claim to the strength of

[36] *Childe Harold* III, ll. 46–8, 60–3; O'Neill, *Romanticism*, pp. 114–15.
[37] *Childe Harold* III, variant lines 55, 61, editorial apparatus to *CPW* II, 79. The poem in these later cantos is often close to a lyric mode, as Brian Nellist has traced, in 'Lyric Presence in Byron from the Tales to *Don Juan'*, in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, ed. by Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), pp. 39–77 (p. 41).
[38] Journal entry, 27 September 1813, *BLJ* III, 225. Cf. letters to William Gifford, 12 November 1813; Annabella Milbanke, 29 November 1813; Thomas Moore, 30 November 1813; and Madame de Stael, 30 November 1813; and in journal entries for 5 December 1813 (*BLJ* III, 161, 17–80, 184, 185, 230).
[39] Ricks, *Decisions*, pp. 49–50.
[40] *Childe Harold* III, ll. 69–70.

self-continuity and his continuing sense of difference from himself, so that the lines, like their speaker, remain in some sense 'ill-at-ease'.

Childe Harold, perhaps more than any of Byron's other works, was the product of revision. As noted in the first chapter, the poem began in an ironic mode that was largely dropped in favour of sustained seriousness. One result of this, and the long period between the composition and publication of the first two cantos, was that the early cantos are among Byron's most revised works. They were substantially reworked when he returned from his travels in July 1811, when the poem lost most, though not all, of its lighter rhythms and burlesque Spenserian diction.[41] But in the second two cantos, when the poem becomes increasingly dramatic and more interested in the poet's own mind, the refluxes of doubt that shape the work are more often allowed to stand, so that the poet's revisions in feeling, recorded as they unfold, are increasingly incorporated into the finished poem. By dramatising the poet's condition of doubting self-alienation, the poem itself often dwells in the mixed and provisional states of mind that characterise doubt.

As in the lines from the third canto quoted above, which recoil upon their premise about the purpose of 'creating', the poem has a habit of sceptically observing its own aspirations. Vincent Newey has described it as a poem willing to 'undo or set limits to its own affirmations', and this applies perhaps most of all to the propositions it makes about art.[42] Some of the most memorable of these are subject to the self-rescinding, disillusioned second thought: 'but this clay will sink'; 'but the weight / Of earth recoils upon us…'; 'But all too late,—so are we doubly curst.'[43] This self-questioning, self-revising instinct surrounds what many readers have remarked upon as the 'higher strain of inspiration' that enters the poem in the third canto, said to have been absorbed from Wordsworth by way of Shelley.[44] Dramatising acts of thinking and rethinking, patterns of doubt thrown off and doubt returning, these disconcerting rhythms of repeal recur everywhere across the final two cantos. 'The beings of the mind are not of clay…', goes the well-known fourth-canto affirmation of the 'immortal' qualities of art, before this is followed in the next stanza with a bitter reversal: 'Such is the refuge

[41] Letter to Charles Robert Dallas, 21 August 1811, *BLJ* II, 75.
[42] Vincent Newey, 'Authoring the Self: Childe Harold III', in *Byron*, ed. by Jane Stabler (Harlow: Longman, 1998), pp. 152–65 (p. 160). Also see O'Neill, *Romanticism*, p. 109.
[43] *Childe Harold* III, ll. 123–6. *Childe Harold* IV, ll. 460–4; *Childe Harold* IV, l. 1112.
[44] Thomas Medwin, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: H. Milford, 1914), pp. 147–8.

of our youth and age…'[45] These passages are characteristic of a poem with a distrust of its own utterance, which by insisting on disenchanting itself, rarely allows itself to dwell in the consolations of art.

The resulting drama of self-doubt and self-revision, a portrait of the self-consciousness of the artist, charting the difference between his past and present selves, often tracks a poet restlessly travelling away from himself. When Harold sets off at the beginning of the poem, he may go in want of faith, or in search of experience, or simply to undergo change itself:

> 'With thee, my bark, I'll swiftly go
> Athwart the foaming brine;
> Nor care what land thou bear'st me to,
> So not again to mine.[46]

Together with this hunger for the change that draws the self away from the self comes the Ulyssean recognition that the more we see and undergo, the further we are parted from what we formerly were: there is no unchanged shore to which we may return, no consoling reunion of the self with itself; and yet if we are made strange to ourselves, nor can we entirely lose ourselves: 'What Exile from himself can flee?' [47] The poem, which is full of such irreconciliations, is driven onwards by an unsettling intuition, voiced as the poet's 'theme', 'thus far', only as the third canto is drawing to a close:

> …to feel
> We are not what we have been, and to deem
> We are not what we should be,—[48]

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[45] *Childe Harold* IV, ll. 37–49.
[46] *Childe Harold* I, ll. 191–93.
[47] *Ibid.*, l. 857. The third canto of Childe Harold 'has lines relevant to' Tennyson's 'Ulysses', as Ricks has pointed out in his edition of Tennyson, comparing Byron's 'I live not in myself, but I become / Portion of that around me; …Are not the mountains, waves, and skies, a part / Of me and of my soul, as I of them?', to Tennyson's: 'I am a part of all that I have met': see *Childe Harold* III, ll. 680–1, 707–8; Tennyson, 'Ulysses' (1842), l. 18; editorial notes, *The Poems of Tennyson: in three volumes*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, 2nd edn (Harlow: Longman, 1987), I, 615–16 (hereafter, Tennyson, *Poems*). Andrew Elfenbein considered the connection between the two poems in *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 179–83, but further connections are there to be noticed: consider August 1816's 'Epistle to Augusta', in which the speaker's ambition, love, and fame, 'made me all which they can make—a Name.' (ll. 97–100;) cf. 'Ulysses', l. 11. And further cf. *The Prophecy of Dante* (1821), I.44–46.
[48] *Childe Harold* III, ll. 1032–34.

Here the poet's sense of being at issue with himself takes on a wider significance for a whole culture. In these lines we are not in possession of ourselves, and the discrepancy between past and present suggests the impossibility of being restored to ourselves. That consciousness of the irrevocability of the past was a particular preoccupation of Byron's in 1816. In a rare piece of blank verse written at the Villa Diodati that year, the poet sees a series of visions of himself as a younger man, and in each 'he was not / Himself like what he had been.'[49] This was a longstanding theme: 'Nor can we be what we recall, / Nor dare we think on what we are', he writes at the close of one of the *Hebrew Melodies*; in one of the Thyrza poems he steeled himself not to look 'On what I *am*—on what I *was*.'[50] A strong tendency to feel not 'like what he had been' is likely to have implications for the revising poet. In his study of Eliot, Christopher Ricks refers to what is 'revisited …with creative scepticism, in revision.'[51] Though Byron has often been held to lack the requisite self-critical instinct, his art very often brings him to that point which doubt becomes a creative resource.

II

When Byron looked back at *Hints from Horace* in 1820, it was with the claim that he 'wrote a good deal better' formerly. But there is every chance, especially for a poet with a capacity, 'on looking back', to find himself strange, the act of looking over an old poem might result in a less approving encounter with a former self. Byron was no stranger to feeling 'in the wrong', including in literary matters. At some point in 1816, not long before leaving England for the final time, Byron took up an edition of *English Bards* owned by Murray and made a series of marginal annotations which have been recorded in McGann's edition.[52] To the poem he now described on the fly leaf as a 'miserable record of misplaced anger', he added a series of self-recriminating notes, including against his attacks on Jeffrey, Wordsworth, and Bowles: 'This was not just.' 'All this is bad'; 'Unjust.' 'Too savage'.[53] Looking over his old poem had, then, issued in sense of dissent with a former self, or perhaps worse

[49] 'The Dream' (1816), ll. 109–10, *CPW* IV.
[50] 'They Say that Hope is Happiness' (1814), ll. 11–12, *CPW* III, 278; lines on Thyrza in letter to Francis Hodgson, 8 December 1811, *BLJ* II, 139.
[51] Ricks is referring to Eliot's own revised 'discussion of scepticism' in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture:* Ricks, *Decisions*, p. 56; quoting T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 29.
[52] McGann, editorial apparatus, *CPW* I, 227, 129n.
[53] *Ibid*., notes to lines 227, 231, 243, 236, 240, 689, and 251.

still, an unwanted kind of self-confirmation: '*Fool* enough certainly *then* and no wiser since'.[54] Byron had come to regret the satire almost as soon as he arrived back in England in 1811, by which time it had run into its fourth edition. 'At this period, when I can think and act more coolly, I regret that I have written it,' he wrote to Robert Charles Dallas, glumly predicting that it will be 'forgotten by all except those whom it has offended.'[55] 'I was angry—& determined to be witty', he told Leigh Hunt.[56] Byron was far from careless of offending, and he continued to refer to this 'undistinguishing' early error long after the satire had been suppressed in 1812.[57] 'I find, on dispassionate comparison, my own revenge more than the provocation warranted', he remarked in another letter.[58]

If literary revision may have relevance to the moral life, then Byron did not very often, like Pope (as described by Johnson), correct his work with 'indefatigable diligence, till he had left nothing to be forgiven'.[59] His unwillingness to correct always seems to have represented a deeper artistic habit than merely not being bothered, though that too may have been real enough. In part it reflected his strong instinct that the past is irretrievable and beyond correction: there is no going back to a time before we have offended. That sense that the past cannot be made good seems to have been absorbed into his approach to revision. Downheartedly accepting some 'bitter words' by a reviewer on matters of literary correctness in *English Bards* in 1813, he asked Murray to make the alterations even though the satire had already been suppressed, so 'that I may profit (though a little too late) by his remarks'. This, he told Murray, would be 'a satisfaction to me in the way of amendment.'[60] The alterations were made in the knowledge that it was 'too late'; on one view, this approach to revision may be closer to the limitations of life as it is lived. However much Byron came to regret his early satire, it was never disowned. Sending Leigh Hunt a copy in 1814, he warned him that 'There are in it *many* opinions I have altered—& some which I retain—upon the whole I wish that it had never been written'.[61] Byron generally held true to the Horatian wisdom that 'once publish'd books / Can never be recall'd—from pastry

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[54] *English Bards*, ll. 689, 697–8.
[55] Letter to Robert Charles Dallas, 28 June 1811, *BLJ* II, 53.
[56] Letter to Leigh Hunt, 18 October 1815, *BLJ* IV, 320.
[57] Draft lines from the Preface to *Childe Harold* IV, 122, 64n; Also cf. 'Dedication', *The Corsair*, *CPW* III, 149; *Don Juan* X (1823), ll. 145–6.
[58] Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, 20 February 1814, *BLJ* IV, 69.
[59] Johnson, 'Life of Pope', p. 64. Byron often recorded his admiration for Johnson's *Lives*: see 'Reading List' (1807), *CMP,* 5; letter to Hobhouse, 30 September 1818, *BLJ* VI, 72; 'Letter to John Murray', 138n, 150; *MC*, 198.
[60] Letter to Murray, 13 June 1813, *BLJ* III, 61, referring to an article in the *Morning Chronicle*; Frederick L. Beaty, review of *The Complete Poetical Works*, Vol. 1, *Studies in Romanticism* 21.3 (1982), 518–23 (p. 522).
[61] Letter to Leigh Hunt, 18 October 1815, *BLJ* IV, 318. This copy included manuscript corrections and alterations.

cooks!'[62] One result of this is that old works must be left honestly to stand. This was consistent with Byron's general conviction that a good man should be willing to be 'found in the wrong'.[63]

Byron's capacity for 'dispassionate comparison' of himself, which sometimes became a self-disparagement, often characterised his attitude to himself as a poet. He often depreciated his own work. Sometimes what was indicated was merely a gracious self-disdain ('It pleases me much that you like 'the Giaour' of which I had great doubts'), but at other times a real degree of uncertainty was involved: 'I have really & truly no notion whether it is good or bad', he said of *Manfred*.[64] On occasion an element of defensive carelessness was mingled with a genuine self-distrust about whether what he was writing was 'good or no': 'my opinions on my poeshie are always those of the last person I hear speak about them'.[65] Byron was deeply conscious of his capacity not to 'see eye to eye' with himself, and seems to have keenly felt in himself some version of 'that lurking demon / Of double nature' he describes late in *Don Juan*.[66] 'Changeable too—yet somehow *Idem semper*', the poet remarks of himself in the final unfinished canto: 'I almost think that the same skin / For one without—has two or three within.'[67] Describing Byron's personal 'mobility' in the *Life*, Moore referred to 'the danger in which it placed consistency and singleness of character'.[68]

Sometimes this apprehension of being several rather than single seems to have been a liberating one. In *Don Juan*, 'what is called mobility' is described as a temperamental 'versatility,' a capacity to play 'all and every part / By turns'.[69] To Lady Blessington he reportedly described himself as 'so changeable, being every thing by turns and nothing long,' a description which seems to have been borrowed from Dryden's portrait of Zimri: 'every thing by starts, and nothing long'.[70] This sense for the discontinuous and dramatic aspects of identity, which seems to have fostered his capacity for a detached self-observation, was translated in various ways into his habits of speaking and writing. He possessed a rapid and instinctive version of that much-

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[62] *Hints from Horace*, ll. 619–20.
[63] Unpublished draft note to *Childe Harold* IV, editorial apparatus, 122, 64n.
[64] Letters to Lord Holland, 3 April 1813, *BLJ* III, 34; Murray, 9 March 1817, *BLJ* V, 183.
[65] Letter to Hobhouse, 8 June 1820, *BLJ* VII, 115.
[66] *Don Juan* XIV, ll. 705–6.
[67] *Don Juan* XVII, ll. 83, 87–8.
[68] *MLJ*, I, 787. Cf. *BC*, 71.
[69] *Don Juan* XVI (1824), ll. 817–21.
[70] *BC*, 220. Byron recorded his admiration for *Absalom and Achitophel* in 'Some Observations' and also seems also to have borrowed from Dryden's portrait of Zimri in his account of Suwarrow in Canto VII of *Don Juan,* as Claude Rawson points out. See *Don Juan* VII, ll. 437–40; John Dryden, *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), ll. 548, *Works*, I (1972), 2–36, p. 21; Claude Rawson, *Satire and Sentiment: Stress Points in the Augustan Tradition, 1660–1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 117.

applauded quality of mind, the ability to return upon oneself, which in his case did not usually involve a scrupulous consideration of opposites, or a principled doublemindedness, but habits of thought that were spontaneous and offhand. These often led him into various forms of running self-revision, including his many local reversals of feeling in his letters, in which he often punctured his own eloquence ('I am not sure that I have not said this last superfine reflection before', he conceded, in one nice example, after some philosophising in a letter to Moore).[71] 'The pathetic he always burlesqued in reciting', remembered Thomas Medwin, referring to his habit of reading poetry with 'a mock-heroic air,' which points towards that element of self-revision that is characteristic of *Don Juan*: the poet's instincts to argue one point and then 'turn the other way,' as he says in one of the late cantos, or to 'turn round and *travestie* himself', as Hazlitt put it.[72] The apparent self-revolt against his own 'sentiment' that accompanied his view of *Childe Harold* in 1823 was characteristic of this.

But for Byron the capacity to differ from himself involved not just the pleasures of variousness, but also a more painful disposition to feel truly at odds with himself. This aspect of his character has appeared to subsequent poets: Elizabeth Barrett Browning described his character as having 'no completion nor entirety'; Oscar Wilde thought him an 'incomplete creature'.[73] With respect to his 'consciousness of doing wrong', he reportedly told Lady Blessington, 'I seem to have *two* states of existence, *one* purely contemplative… the other *active*, when I play my part in the drama of life'.[74] Though hardly reliable, this does suggest that a certain capacity to stand outside his own experiences encouraged his habits of self-scrutiny. He was highly vigilant about the human capacity for self-deception, which he fostered by his placing of his trust in the maxims of La Rochefoucauld: 'We are sometimes as different from ourselves as we are from other people', the seventeenth-century writer had observed; and 'I fear one lies more to one's self than to any one else', Byron noted in his journal.[75] Honesty demands that we recognise that we are all acting out versions of ourselves consistent with our self-love.

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[71] Letter from Byron to Moore, 28 October 1815, *BLJ* IV, 322.
[72] *MC*, 43; *Don Juan* XV, ll. 177, 182; Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, XI (1932), 69–78 (p. 75).
[73] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, review of Wordsworth's *Poems*, *The Athenaeum* 774 (27 August 1842), 757, quoted in McDonald, *Sound Intentions*, p. 312; Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist' (1890), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Russell Jackson, Ian Small and others, 10 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002–2019), IV (Josephine M. Guy, 2007), 123–206 (p. 198).
[74] *BC*, 75.
[75] *Maxims,* V:135, *Francois de la Rochefoucauld, Collected Maxims and Other Reflections*, ed. by E. H. and A. M. Blackmore and Francine Giguère (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 39. Journal entry, 6 December 1813, *BLJ* III, 233. Also Cf. Journal entry, 1 December 1813, *BLJ* III, 229.

Byron often gave expression to that disinclination to look back 'on what I *was*'. 'I can't read it over', he said of the journal he kept during his years of fame in London. 'God knows what contradictions it may contain. If I am sincere with myself … every page should confute, refute, and utterly abjure its predecessor.'[76] Though this was lightly entertained, there are grounds for thinking, with W. W. Robson, that for Byron 'the contemplation of the past is too painful …to accept it as a condition of the present.'[77] 'You must not talk to me of England', he would come to say. 'I had a house—and lands—and a wife and child—and a name there—once—'[78] 'But all too late,' as he says in *Childe Harold*; *Don Juan*, too, often reminds us that what is 'gone returns no more'.[79] 'I knew that nought was lasting, but now even / Change grows too changeable,' the narrator of *Don Juan* observes at the beginning of the English cantos.[80] For Byron that change is there to be observed, and perhaps deplored, but not redeemed; nor is there any wish to go back. 'Often he seems to have no self to come back to,' remarked the twentieth-century critic Oliver Elton, writing on what he took to be 'Byron's two central traits, his mobility and his self-consciousness'.[81] For Byron what defined the past was its decisive pastness: 'I look for it—'tis gone,' as he writes there.[82] The irrevocability of the past was a fact that Byron was capable of contemplating in a self-amused spirit: 'What the devil had I to do with scribbling? It is too late to inquire, and all regret is useless,' he wrote in his journal in 1814.[83]

Byron was always prone to Prufrockian feelings of growing 'old in days, / And deeds, and contemplation'.[84] From boyhood, he would say, 'I began to grow old in my own esteem—and in my esteem age is not estimable'; and he recorded a persistent intuition that 'the best of life is over'.[85] This seems to have been intensified by his emigration in 1816: 'Would not one think I was sixty instead of not quite nine & twenty?'[86] Byron often reflected with half-mocking 'regret' on 'an ill-spent Life'.[87] The pervasive idea that he might have better spent life another way was one he shared with Samuel Johnson, who he seems to have closely associated

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[76] Journal entry, 6 December 1813, *BLJ* III, 233.
[77] Robson, *Critical Essays*, p. 186.
[78] Letter to Hobhouse, 3 October 1819, *BLJ* VI, 226–7.
[79] *Don Juan* X, l. 683. Also cf. *Don Juan* XV, ll. 259–60.
[80] *Don Juan* XI, ll. 653–4.
[81] Oliver Elton, *A Survey of English Literature 1780–1880,* 2nd edn, 4 vols (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), II, 155, 176.
[82] *Don Juan* XI, l. 604.
[83] Journal entry, 17 March 1814, *BLJ* III, 251–2.
[84] *The Prophecy of Dante* (1821) I.44–46. Also cf. 'Epistle to Augusta' (1816), ll. 33–4.
[85] 'Detached thoughts', no. 72, *BLJ* IX, 38; Journal entry, 22 May 1811, *BLJ* II, 47.
[86] Letter to Augusta, 28 October 1816, *BLJ* V, 120. Also cf. *BC*, 49.
[87] Journal entry, 22 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 32. Cf. 'On this day I complete my thirty sixth year'*, CPW* VII, 79.

with growing old. ‘I feel decrepid’, he recorded at twenty-seven against Johnson’s reflections on ageing in his copy of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*.[88] This recurring suspicion that he was misspending life was closely related to his doubts about the wisdom of going on writing. In a lightly self-disdaining mood, he would say, ‘poetry is—I fear—incurable.—God help me—if I proceed in this scribbling—I shall have frittered away my mind before I am thirty’.[89] This was often expressed facetiously, but a deep fear of wasting life, and a reluctance to settle on one way of spending it, was a genuine element of his self-questioning ethical life. One characteristic expression of this is provided by a letter he wrote to Hobhouse on his birthday in 1819:

> “Carpe *diem*” is not enough—I have been obliged to crop even the seconds—for who can trust to *tomorrow*? *tomorrow* quotha? *to-hour—to-minute*——I can *not* repent me (I try very often) so much of any thing I have done—as of any thing I have left undone—alas! I have been but idle…[90]

This was not the only occasion on which he suggested that his regrets were reserved for ‘what I *might* have done’.[91] This letter is characteristic for the trust it places in the claims of the present. ‘I hope you are not dreaming of any plan for Murray’s money—except spending’, he warned Hobhouse from Venice: ‘life is too precarious to buy annuities’.[92] The following year he conveyed similar views ‘about *income*’ to his friend and banker Douglas Kinnaird: ‘I must have it all—how the devil do I know that I may live a year or a month?—I wish I knew that I might regulate my spending in more ways than one.’[93] Byron always had a strong sense for life’s dissipations; not just those that relate to being worn out from voluptuousness, but those in which we are all implicated, time being a medium in which we cannot regulate our spending.

That idea that ‘“Carpe *diem*” is not enough’ runs through Byron’s attitudes to composition and revision. Signing off from a wonderful letter sent to Moore from Venice, he said, ‘I must to bed; up all night—but, as George Philpot says, “it’s life, though, damme it’s life!” … Excuse errors—no time for revision. The post goes out at noon, and I shan’t be up then.’[94] This insistence that there is ‘no time for revision’ was one that he often

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[88] Note (1815), *CMP*, 218. Johnson’s fears that he should have spent life differently have been discussed by Lawrence Lipking, ‘Johnson and Genius’, p. 88; and Roger Lonsdale, Introduction to Johnson, *Lives*, I, p. 2.
[89] Letter to Murray, 5 October 1816, *BLJ* V, 112.
[90] Letter to Hobhouse, 20 August 1819, *BLJ* VI, 211; Richard Kirkland, ‘Byron's Reading of Montaigne: A Leigh Hunt Letter’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 30 (1981), 47–51 (p. 50).
[91] Journal entry, 22 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 32.
[92] Letter to Hobhouse, 15 or 16 June 1818, *BLJ* VI, 51.
[93] Letter to Kinnaird, 26 October 1819, *BLJ* VI, 232.
[94] Letter from Byron to Moore, 1 June 1818, *BLJ* VI, 48.

stood by in relation to his poetry. In 1821 he said of *Cain*, 'There is no occasion for a *revise*—it is only losing time.—'[95] In that letter he was to remind Murray that 'I can never *recast* anything'. 'You must take my things as they happen to be', he told him in another letter.[96] His interest in a poem could wane quickly: 'at the end of a week—my interest in composition goes off', he would claim; 'I will try & reform it … but the impulse is gone'.[97] There was a defensive carelessness as well as a patrician side to this distaste for meticulousness that was also profoundly true to his character. 'I never looked beyond the Moment of Composition', he claimed in one characteristic early letter: 'Johnson has shown us that *no poetry* is perfect, but to correct mine would be an Herculean Labour'.[98]

But later in life this seems to have become a more conscious commitment. 'Like paintings, poems may be too highly finished', he is reported to have said in conversation with Shelley.[99] In Tennyson, Douglas-Fairhurst has described a habit of resurrecting old or unfinished compositions, so that no work need be 'irrevocable' or 'finished only once'.[100] Though Byron's more predominating habit was to treat old works as superseded, he was often similarly sceptical that he had said all he needed to say. A key aspect of his character as a revising poet was his habit of treating poems as susceptible to addition and therefore as only provisionally finished. Byron may not have held out the same hope as Tennyson of discovering 'the abiding in the transient', but his instinct for supplement, which he generally preferred over adaptation, rewriting, or correction, may be viewed as a way of differently ensuring that his poems should not be too finally 'finished'.[101] 'You must take my things as they happen to be', does not indicate his final satisfaction with his works, or a certainty in his conclusions, but a commitment to revising his views in light of his enlarging experience. This may be analogous to the intellectual value of putting opinions and beliefs to the test of experience: as Johnson said, 'we may examine, indeed, but we never can decide, because our faculties are unequal to the subject: we see a little, and form an opinion; we see more, and change it'.[102] Likewise, just as anyone might seek out more experience in the hope of reaching some conclusions about it, so too might a poet keep adding to their poem.

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[95] Letter to Murray, 3 November 1821, *BLJ* IX, 54.
[96] Letter to Murray, 18 November 1820, *BLJ* VII, 229.
[97] Letters to Murray, 26 April 1814, *BLJ* IV, 107; 14 April 1817, *BLJ* V, 211.
[98] Letter to William Bankes, 6 March 1807, *BLJ* I, 112.
[99] *MC*, 114.
[100] Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives*, p. 183.
[101] *Ibid*.
[102] Johnson, *Adventurer* 107 (1753), *Yale*, II, p. 444.

The most revealing case of this is *Childe Harold*, in which there was always meant to be a close association between a poem 'written, for the most part, amidst the scenes which it attempts to describe', and the nature of experience itself.[103] The experience of the composing poet over time demands to be seen not just as the poem's subject, but as an aspect of its development. The poem, accordingly, like experience itself, was always susceptible of addition: in Greece 'for the present the poem stops', Byron told his readers in the Preface to the first cantos, 'these two cantos are merely experimental'.[104] In an essay on Byron's revisions, Peter J. Manning has referred to the 'loose construction' of both of Byron's long poems, with 'their episodic structure and additive, aggregative character,' and Bernard Beatty, in an account of *Childe Harold*'s 'accretions', has observed that the finished poem 'feeds expectancy rather than realized expectation' and in this respect is 'like life itself'.[105] Like life itself *Childe Harold* remained open to supplement. The third canto was finished in its first form in early June 1816 and Byron began extending the poem the following day: 'Additions. I know not whether to make these part or no as yet.'[106] He continued to add to the poem at Diodati over the month of June, and between the composition of the first draft and the final fair copy the canto grew by 22 stanzas. This was characteristic of the composition of the poem as a whole: each canto was extended as a result of additions, and each was longer than the canto that preceded it. Of course the increase of experience may do little to resolve a poet's doubts, and everything to foster them, giving them an unending task. Indeed, Byron never came to a decision that he was finished with his first major poem: although the fourth canto was offered to its readers as the 'conclusion of the poem', at some point after that Byron told Murray that he '*might* write another Canto'.[107] At one level, then, the inconclusive quality of experience was reflected in the form of a poem that was only ever provisionally complete. ('Why—man—I could have spun the thought of the four cantos of that poem into twenty—', he would later remark.).[108]

At some point, Byron's preference for addition over correction seems to have become something of a self-conscious commitment. 'I can't correct—I can't—& I won't', he insisted to Murray in 1820, adding that

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[103] Preface to *Childe Harold* I and II, 3.
[104] *Ibid*.
[105] Peter J. Manning, 'Don Juan and the Revisionary Self', in *Romantic Revisions*, ed. by Robert Brinkley and Keith Hanley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 210–26 (p. 215); Bernard Beatty, 'Improvisation and Hybrid Genres: Reading *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*', *The European Legacy*, 24.3–4 (2019), pp. 264–282 (p. 274).
[106] McGann, editorial notes to *CPW* II, 76.
[107] Dedication to *Childe Harold* IV, 120; letter to Hobhouse, 19 March 1823, *BLJ* X, 126.
[108] Letter to Murray, 6 April 1819, *BLJ* VI, 105.

'Nobody ever succeeds in it great or small… Pope *added* to the "Rape of the Lock"—but did not reduce it.'[109] In fact one of his most significant predecessors in this respect was Michel de Montaigne, whose translated *Essais* Byron owned in two editions in England and later borrowed at Pisa in 1822 from Leigh Hunt, who kept a record of the essays that Byron had specially marked.[110] In one of these Montaigne had declared, 'I add, but I correct not':

> … for what concerns my self, I fear to lose by the change: my Understanding does not always go forward, it goes backward too. I do not much less suspect my Fancies for being the second or the third, than for being the first, or present, or past; we oft correct our selves as foolishly as we do others. I am grown older by a great many years since my first Publications, … but I very much doubt whether I am grown an inch the wiser. I now, and I anon, are two several Persons; but whether the better, now, or anon, I am not able to determine.[111]

However reliable an account of Montaigne's actual approach to revisions, this portrait of a writer distrustfully entertaining second and third thoughts brilliantly entertains the implications for revision of feeling oneself to be 'several Persons'. Byron's own familiarity with this condition, and his keen instincts for the inconstant and plural aspects of identity more generally, often seems to have led him to Montaigne. To Lady Blessington he reportedly described himself as 'changeable' and 'strange *melange*' and confessed the 'extreme *mobilité* of his nature, which yields to present impressions'.[112] 'Byron is a perfect chameleon,' she remarked, describing him as being 'conscious' of 'taking the colour of whatever touches him.' This image had been famously evoked by Montaigne to describe the radical human tendency to 'shifting, and inconstancy': 'wafted by the breath of occasion', he wrote, dominated by the forces of instinct and passion, we 'change like that little Creature, that

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[109] Letter to Murray, 18 November 1820, *BLJ* VII, 229.

[110] In Byron's English library were two three-volume editions of the *Essais* translated by Charles Cotton (the 1802 and 1811 editions): see 'Sale Catalogue' (1816), *CMP*, 239, 240. For accounts of Byron's later admiration for and familiarity with the *Essais*, see *HR*, I, 78; *HVSV*, 387. At Pisa in Summer 1822 Byron borrowed a volume of the Cotton translation of the *Essais* from Leigh Hunt, who kept a record of the essays that Byron had specially marked by dog-earing the pages. These were provided by Hunt to the *New Monthly Magazine* after Byron's death. See unsigned letter by Leigh Hunt, 'Passages marked in Montaigne's Essays by Lord Byron', *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* 19 (January 1827), 26-32; Richard Kirkland, 'Byron's Reading of Montaigne: A Leigh Hunt Letter', p. 49. The passages reportedly dog-eared by Byron (in the order they appear quoted in Hunt's letter) come from: 'Of Practice', 'Of the Education of Children', 'Of the Useful and Honourable', 'Of Repentance', 'Of Vanity' and 'Of Experience'. I return to the influence of Montaigne's essays on *Don Juan* in Chapter 4.

[111] Michel de Montaigne, 'Of Vanity', *Montaigne's Essays*, trans. by Charles Cotton, 1st edn, 3 vols (London: T. Basset, 1685), III, 303 (hereafter, Montaigne, *Essays*).

[112] *BC*, 71, 220; Montaigne, 'Of the Inconstancy of our Actions', *Essays*, II, 3; cf. Byron's note to *Don Juan* XVI, l. 820.

receives its colour from what it is laid upon'.[113] Montaigne's sense for the inconstant, fluctuating condition of our minds results on an emphasis on the way that we differ from ourselves over time. 'I may presently change,' writes Montaigne in a famous passage describing himself as so radically inconsistent that he can account for himself only 'from Day to Day, from Minute to Minute', a recognition which is translated in the *Essais* into a whole way of writing.[114] As Richard Kirkland notes in his study of 'Byron's Reading of Montaigne', this passage, which occurs in one of the essays marked by Byron at Pisa, was almost certainly what Byron had in mind when he declared that '"Carpe *diem*" is not enough.'

Montaigne's description of the gulf between 'I now, and I anon,' when reflecting on having 'grown older by a great many years since my first Publications,' is nicely parallel by one of the 'Detached Thoughts', in which Byron looked back at the author of *Childe Harold* as a man who had 'anticipated life':

> My earlier poems are the thoughts of one at least ten years older than the age at which they were written,—I don't mean for their solidity—but their Experience—the first two Cantos of C[hild]e H[arold] were completed at twenty-two—and they were written as if by a man—older than I shall probably ever be.—[115]

Byron's strange impression of having had more experience formerly registers a similar intuition to Montaigne's impression that the 'Understanding does not always go forward, it goes backward too.' This is consistent with Byron's general sensitivity to events 'retrograding' (including the possibility of 'going down hill in the world of scribbling') and with his way of claiming that 'age is not estimable'.[116] By 1820, when he looked back on his earlier works and declared that 'I wrote better then than now', he was also claiming that his was 'the Age of the Decline of English Poetry'.[117] This was also a more personal intuition. As when he looked over the old copy of *English Bards* and remarked, '*Fool* enough certainly *then* and no wiser since', Byron, like Montaigne in this passage, was prone to doubting 'whether I am grown an inch the wiser'.

In his study of T. S. Eliot's revisions, Christopher Ricks refers to Eliot's 'discussion of scepticism' in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, which was 'revisited by [Eliot], with creative scepticism, in revision'.

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[113] Montaigne, 'Of the Inconstancy of our Actions', II, 3.
[114] Montaigne, 'Of Repentance', *Essays*, III, 27.
[115] 'Detached thoughts', no. 80, *BLJ* IX, 40. Also see no. 72, *BLJ* IX, 38.
[116] Journal 23 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 217–18; Letter to Kinnaird, 27 May 1822, *BLJ* IX, 166. Also Cf. Letter to Moore, 6 January 1814, *BLJ* IV, 16.
[117] 'Some Observations', 104.

In that work, as Ricks notes, 'On second thoughts, scepticism becomes: "the habit of examining evidence and the capacity for delayed decision."'[118] The passage from Montaigne describes a more radically sceptical position with respect to revision which leads a writer to entertain all thoughts with equal self-distrust. It looks not to the strength of 'a delayed decision', but on the contrary to the value of setting down what occurs to a writer in the present, in the knowledge that those thoughts will never be the same again.

'Nobody ever succeeds in it', wrote Byron of revision, in which there was more than an element of Montaigne's radically self-distrustful view that 'we oft correct our selves as foolishly as we do others'. Out of that lack of faith that a later self will necessarily make changes for the better comes a trust in the spontaneity of first thoughts. This, increasingly, was a view that came to predominate for Byron. A version of this sentiment emerges in the near-final lines of *Childe Harold*:

> what is writ, is writ,—
> Would it were worthier! but I am not now
> That which I have been—[119]

These lines recall the passage already quoted from the beginning of the third canto ('We are not what we have been…') and the same construction would resurface again in *Don Juan*'s lament for middle age ('we are not what we were…').[120] What would be the point of going back when everything is already so different? Broadly speaking, Byron's disclination to go back with revisions became stronger over the course of his career. 'I told you long ago—that the new Cantos were *not* good,' he told Murray, of the third and fourth cantos of *Don Juan*:

> … but I can alter nothing—I have erased the six stanzas about those two imposters Southey and Wordsworth—(which I suppose will give you great pleasure) but I can do no more—I can neither recast—nor replace—but I give you leave to put in all the fire if you like—or *not* to publish … but *you would* have it—so I sent it to you … but I can't piece it together again.[121]

This letter, just one of Byron's many decisive refusals to revise his poem, suggests how that self-revising word 'but'—'the vocable for a profound and generous sceptic', as Ricks points out—might lend itself especially well

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[118] Ricks, *Decisions*, p. 29.
[119] *Childe Harold* IV, ll. 1661–3.
[120] *Don Juan* XII, ll. 5–8.
[121] Letter to Murray, 23 April 1820, *BLJ* VII, 82.

to a discussion of literary revision.[122] The letter was extended in a postscript: 'But if *one half* of the two new Cantos be good in your opinion—what the devil would you have more?—no—no—no poetry is *generally* good—only by fits and starts—'[123] In this case, an extraordinary series of revisions resolves into a characteristic defence of his right not to revise. This points to one largescale change undergone in Byron's approach to revision over the course of his career, which is that as he went on with *Don Juan*, he broadly became less willing to accept emendations. He did not of course stop making textual revisions, but he no longer professed the same willingness to 'tag rhymes, & turn Stanzas, as much as you please' as he had done when writing *Childe Harold*.[124] This was in part because in the *ottava rima* poetry he had found a vehicle in which he could exercise his liberty to make running revisions—or indeed not to revise: 'I cannot stop to alter words once written', as he informs his readers.[125]

Byron's frequent determination to 'alter nothing', and his view that there is no such thing 'as rhyme all perfect', as he told Murray in this letter, led Zachary Leader, who made a study of Byron's revisions, to refer to the role in his career of 'a thoroughgoing scepticism, one that works to undermine hopes not only of perfection but of improvement'.[126] The passage from Montaigne indeed describes a level of self-distrust that could in theory be disabling to an artist, a danger on which Eliot touches in his reflections on scepticism: 'Scepticism is a highly civilised trait, though, when it declines into pyrrhonism, it is one of which civilisation can die. Where scepticism is strength, pyrrhonism is weakness, for we need not only the strength to defer a decision, but the strength to make one.'[127] But in fact Byron's doubts never worked on him to discourage hopes of 'improvement.' Doubt was a stimulus to his inventiveness, to various acts of rethinking, and as his letter suggests, it sometimes, paradoxically, led him to a notable decisiveness about his work. In the essay already referred to, Montaigne gave another reason for favouring addition over correction:

> … because I conceive, that a man having once parted with his Labours to the World, he has no farther right to them; let him do better if he can in some new Undertaking … My Book is always the same,

[122] Ricks, *Allusion*, p. 146; See e.g. Letters to Hobhouse and Kinnaird, 19 January 1819, *BLJ* VI, 91; Hobhouse, 19 January 1819, *BLJ* VI, 93; Douglas Kinnaird, 6 March 1819, *BLJ* VI, 101.
[123] Letter to Murray, 23 April 1820, *BLJ* VII, 83–4.
[124] Letters to Murray, 5 September 1811, *BLJ* II, 90–1; Dallas, 5 September 1811, *BLJ* II, 91.
[125] *Don Juan* IX (1823), l. 612.
[126] Leader, *Revision*, p. 84. Leader's account of the later cantos of *Don Juan* is in some ways deeply unsympathetic (see pp. 114–15).
[127] Ricks, *Decisions*, p. 56, quoting Eliot, *Notes*, p. 29.

> saving that upon every new Edition, (that the Buyer may not go away quite empty) I take the liberty to add (as it were by an ill-jointed in-laying or faneering) some few insignificant things over and above.'[128]

Byron's own marked inclination to add 'over and above' extended to a habit of making post-publication additions. *English Bards,* for example, gained 350 lines between its first publication and the release two months later of the second edition.[129] Most remarkably, *The Giaour* lengthened by nearly a thousand lines between the issue of its first edition in June 1813 and its seventh seven months later.[130] 'I have but with some difficulty *not* added any more to this snake of a poem,' Byron told Murray, while only part way through this process of extension.[131] In both these cases the balance of revisions was heavily in favour of additions. His susceptibility to the appeal of the 'new Undertaking' was one that defined his career as a poet.

'I have had my day, and there's an end', Byron told Moore in 1814, on one of the many occasions on which he had resolved to stop writing. 'The upmost I expect, or even wish, is to have it said in the Biographia Britannica, that I might perhaps have been a poet, had I gone on and amended'.[132] This makes it all sound 'too late', but of course Byron always did go on with amendments. In fact the word 'amendment' may be one with a particular salience to his life and work. Byron liked to quiz female acquaintances, especially, with 'hopes of my amendment', variously reassuring them that he would 'reform most thoroughly & become 'a good man and true''.[133] 'I have reflected seriously on all my faults, and that is the first step towards amendment', he told Lady Blessington; 'whether I am a *better* man for my self-correction remains to be proved'.[134] There was also a more serious edge to this self-scrutiny: reflecting on his participation in the House of Lords in 1813 he expressed his self-disgust in his journal: 'I am thus wasting the best part of life daily repenting & never amending.'[135]

Byron was highly vigilant about all forms of habit and complacency, including in himself, and this extended even to casting off his most successful styles. He was rarely so dismissive about poetry than during

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[128] Montaigne, 'Of Vanity', 302.
[129] Jerome McGann, editorial notes, *CPW* I, 227.
[130] *English Bards* continued to receive minor additions up until its fifth and final edition: see McGann, editorial notes, *CPW* III, 413. Also see William. H. Marshall, 'The Accretive Structure of Byron's The Giaour', *Modern Language* 76.6 (1961), 502–9 (p. 409).
[131] Letter to Murray, 26 August 1813, *BLJ* III, 100.
[132] Letter to Moore, 9 April 1814, *BLJ* IV, 92–93.
[133] *BC*, 75; letter to Lady Melbourne, 18 September 1814, *BLJ* IV, 175. A related joke about his personal 'reformation' runs through *Don Juan*: see Canto I, ll. 951–2; XV, 748.
[134] *BC*, 75, 186.
[135] Letter to Augusta Leigh, 26 March 1813, *BLJ* III, 32.

the period of his greatest success in London. In the journal that he kept over that period, between November 1813 and April 1814, he recorded the hollowness of his social life in London and his sense of time running uselessly away from him, filled with 'scribbling' and 'this, that, and the other'.[136] It was in that journal that he made some of his most famous disparagements of writing and some of his most heartfelt appeals to 'Actions—actions'.[137] It was also during this period that he was writing his great tales of action. These, which he often said were merely scribbled offhand, he claimed to be unable to like 'after the 1st. week'.[138] 'He won't like the latter, and I don't think that I shall long,' he remarked, despatching *The Bride of Abydos* (1813) to Lord Holland along with some other works.[139] In an instance of the kind of dissatisfaction he seems to have been able to discover in success, the very popularity of his narrative tales seems to have intensified his misgivings. What had always been partly a boast of fluency in composition—tales 'written, the Bride in four, and the Corsair in ten days'—soon started to give way to a real unease, and by the Spring of 1814 he had come to think that he had showed 'want of judgment in publishing': 'I have had my day—& have done with all that stuff—& must try something new—'[140] This was accompanied by a disquiet about his own 'facility'.[141] By 1816 he was conceding more definitely 'I have written too much'.[142] He would have recognised T. S. Eliot's criticism of him.

During this period, these doubts were often continuous with questions about the wisdom of going on writing at all: 'No more rhyme for—or rather, from—me', he told various correspondents during this period. 'I wish myself well out of it.'[143] In the Preface to *The Corsair* he resolved publicly to publish nothing more 'for some years to come', and although he broke this resolution a little over three months later when he began writing *Lara* (1814), it was clear that he had cultivated a manner and a type of hero that needed to be shaken off.[144] In practice, of course, he was always bringing himself round to 'something new'. Over the course of his career there was very little rest between poems. Characteristically, it was his doubts, or his sense of boredom, that led him on to the 'new Undertaking'. The narrative tales are a good example of this. The first of these, *The Giaour* (1813), was very closely modelled on the metre and manner of Scott's verse romances, but as Byron went on

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[136] Letter to Murray, 5 October 1816, *BLJ* V, 112; Journal entry, 7 December 1813, *BLJ* II, 236.
[137] Journal entry, 24 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 220.
[138] Letter to Murray, 26 April 1814, *BLJ* IV, 107.
[139] Journal entry, 16 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 207.
[140] Letters to Moore, 3 March 1814, *BLJ* IV, 77; Lady Melbourne, 8 April 1814, *BLJ* IV, 90.
[141] 'Dedication', *The Corsair*, *CPW* III, 149.
[142] Letters to Murray 2 January 1816, *BLJ* V, 13; Moore, 8 March 1816, *BLJ* V, 45.
[143] Letter to Moore, 9 April 1814, *BLJ* IV, 92; Journal entry, 17 March 1814, *BLJ* III, 251–2.
[144] 'Dedication', *The Corsair*, *CPW* III, 149.

with them, he began to vary his metrical schemes in a self-conscious spirit of experimentation. Indeed he came to describe the tales as an 'experiment' of writing in '*each measure*', in each 'to try at something different from my former efforts'.[145] The appeal of the 'merely experimental' would recur across his career. As he said of his dramas in 1821, 'whatever the merits or demerits of these pieces may be it will perhaps be allowed that each is of a different kind and in a different style…'.[146] His strong consciousness of the irrevocability of the past often came together with an acute sense of the need of going forwards. 'But, *onward*!': Byron was always resolving to go 'On—on—on!' in the face of doubts and misgivings.[147] Byron's truest character as a revising poet emerges not from the detail of textual correction, but from this habit of relinquishing one style for another, so that that for all his relative lack of interest in rewriting, revision defines his work as much as it does the poet interested in scrupulous correction.

In 1820, with tongue in cheek, Byron proposed that the 'Sign of amendment' by which the age might rectify its depreciation of 'good writing' would be 'new and frequent Editions of Pope and Dryden.'[148] Johnson's portrait of Pope's conscientious self-correction contrasts with his account of Dryden, who is said to have preferred pursuing 'the grand and the new' over revisiting the old and to have 'published without correction'.[149] As a critic he thereby 'enlarged or rectified his notions, by experience perpetually increasing', in Johnson's account, though one result was that he was 'by no means constant to himself'.[150] The element of variability within the extraordinary range of Byron's work has often elicited reservations among critics. 'He was wont to try many things at once, and to do one well and another badly, at the same time', wrote Elton; 'one wonders whether it would not have been better that Byron should have written nothing but *Don Juan*', remarked George Saintsbury.[151] As these comments suggest, the price of a commitment to experiment is the risk of unsuccess. This was a condition of writing of which Byron was fully conscious. One reason that Byron tended not to hold back draft work was because he was committed to putting his poems to the proof of readers. In the preface to

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[145] Letters to Moore, 12 March 1814, *BLJ* IV, 80; Murray, 20 February 1816, *BLJ* V, 28–29.
[146] Letter to Murray, 19 December 1821, *BLJ* IX, 58–59 (of the dramas he wrote in 1821 while on a hiatus from *Don Juan*).
[147] Journal entry, 9 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 20; Letter to Kinnaird, 27 December 1823, *BLJ* XI, 86.
[148] 'Some Observations', 109–10.
[149] Johnson, 'Life of Pope', pp. 66, 63.
[150] Johnson, 'Life of Dryden', *Lives*, II, 79–164, (pp. 120–21).
[151] Oliver Elton, *A Survey of English Literature 1780–1880,* 2nd edn, 4 vols (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), II, 137; George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody from the Twelfth Century to the Present Day,* 2nd edn, 3 vols (London: Macmillan, 1923), III, 101.

the first cantos of *Childe Harold*, he told his readers that whether his poem would be continued 'its reception will determine'.[152] 'If they are understood and approved,' he said of the first cantos of *The Prophecy of Dante*, 'it is my purpose to continue the poem in various other cantos…'[153] Of *Don Juan* he remarked, 'if it don't take, it will be discontinued.'[154] Byron was therefore always resolving to 'try the experiment': 'I would rather follow any one's judgment than my own', he said on one occasion; on another: 'I have doubts about the lines being worth printing … has any one seen & judged of them? that is the criticism by which I will abide—'.[155] This was consistent with his belief that we should aim to release ourselves from all forms of 'self-approved wisdom'. Just as our beliefs and opinions can only benefit from being tested by countervailing viewpoints, his general conviction was that every literary work must 'take its chance'.[156] To Hobhouse he said that 'I dare say your opinion about 'Cain' is the right one—but as there are opposite opinions upon it—and of sensible men too… why—as Fielding said 'Damn them let them find that out!'[157]

III

Byron returned to *Childe Harold* with a new canto for the final time in June 1817 at Venice. In the months leading up to its composition he told Moore:

> If I live ten years longer, you will see, however, that it is not over with me—I don't mean in literature, for that is nothing; and it may seem odd enough to say, I do not think it my vocation. But you will see that I will do something or other—the times and fortune permitting—that, "like the cosmogony, or creation of the world, will puzzle the philosophers of all ages." But I doubt if my constitution will hold out.[158]

The self-revising motion of this passage ('But you will see …But I doubt…') carries forward the syntax that characterises the beginning of the letter, its description of the Venetian Carnival: 'though I did not dissipate

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[152] Preface to *Childe Harold* I and II, 3.
[153] Preface to *The Prophecy of Dante*, *CPW* IV, 214.
[154] Letter to Moore, 19 September 1818, *BLJ* VI, 67–68.
[155] Letters to Hobhouse 23 November 1821, *BLJ* IX, 68; Murray, 25 April 1814, *BLJ* IV, 103; 13 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 163; Moore, 19 September 1818, *BLJ* VI, 67–68.
[156] Letter to Hobhouse 23 November 1821, *BLJ* IX, 68.
[157] *Ibid*.
[158] Letter to Moore, 28 February 1817, *BLJ* V, 176.

much upon the whole, yet I find "the sword wearing out the scabbard", though I have but just turned the corner of twenty-nine.'[159] In that half-facetious appeal to 'something or other' else was another expression of Byron's need always to 'try something new.' It was characteristic of him that he should be dismissive of literature at the same time that he was bringing himself round to a new undertaking. Within a month of writing this letter, the idea of a journey to Rome had begun to take shape. Again he was starting to think better of being finished with his old poem: he told Kinnaird that 'I have done—not much—but enough for me—& having just turned nine & twenty I seriously think of giving up altogether—unless Rome should madden me into a fourth Canto—which it may or may not.—'[160] By July he had completed his first draft of the fourth canto (in 'rather a different style from the last …which at any rate will be a variety').[161]

Like the third canto (no sooner finished than, 'Additions'), this was a work over which Byron liberally exercised his 'liberty to add'. After making some preliminary additions to his first fair copy in August, between September and early January 1818 he added more than 40 additional stanzas to the poem, which made the fourth canto the longest of the poem by some distance.[162] Byron's approach to these revisions is revealing. When he made his fair copy of the first draft in August he left, according to McGann, 'ample space for additional material', for each stanza was 'written at the top of a single foolscap leaf, and he copied his later additions into the spaces he had left empty.'[163] This way of knowing in advance that he was likely to think better of being finished suggests his deep familiarity with his own creative temperament. That gaps could be left in the composition, in the expectation of having more to say, indicates a degree of careless trust in his own fluency; on the other hand, there may be something essentially sceptical about projecting space for additions in this way, in making such ample allowance for what is not yet known.

Given that the poem was intended in part as a record of travel it is perhaps not surprising that Byron should have used a compositional technique capable of accommodating expansion. Over the period in which he was making these additions, he was also collaborating with Hobhouse on the canto's extensive geographical and historical notes. But in fact what occurred in large measure during this period of expansion was that Byron filled the projected spaces in the poem with extended doubts. In these months, he interpolated into the existing

[159] Letter to Moore, 28 February 1817, *BLJ* V, 176.
[160] Letter to Kinnaird, 31 March 1817, *BLJ* V, 196.
[161] Letter to Murray, 15 July 1817, *BLJ* V, 251.
[162] McGann, editorial notes to *CPW* II, 120.
[163] *Ibid*.

descriptive passages on the ruins of Rome new stanzas that are among the most pessimistically sceptical of the whole poem: 'What from this barren being do we reap? / Our sense narrow, and our reason frail,' begins one series of stanzas added to the poem during this period.[164] This series also includes the well-known stanza beginning, 'Can tyrants but by tyrants conquered be', which moves itself to its close with a series of agonised questions: 'Does Europe have no Washington?'

> Has Earth no more
> Such seeds within her breast, or Europe no such shore?
>
> But France got drunk with blood to vomit crime,
> And fatal have her Saturnalia been
> To Freedom's cause, …[165]

'But France', here, seems to have no preceding clause, grammatically speaking, to turn against, so that its discontinuity in syntax resembles the fearful historical breach it describes. That this unanswered question dwells in the irresolute space between stanzas is characteristic of these additions, which move restlessly between desponding scepticism and the return of hope, encouraged by what Byron referred to as his 'experiments' in having 'the stanzas running into each other'.[166] The beginning of the next stanza brings a reversal of doubt:

> Yet, Freedom! yet thy banner, torn, but flying,
> Streams like the thunder-storm *against* the wind …[167]

This moment of self-corrective resolve—which Shelley used as the headnote to his 'Ode to Liberty' (1820)—may have been the result of a yet further revision, for according to McGann it was drafted on a separate scrap of undated manuscript not collated with the rest of the additions.[168] Its introduction suggests Byron's irresolution between the claims of a rational confidence in liberty and his tendency to a sceptical view of humanity as

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[164] *Childe Harold* IV, ll. 829–30. See espec. st. 93–97; 125–127.
[165] *Ibid*., ll. 863–7; and see st. 93–98.
[166] Letter to Moore, 1 June 1818, *BLJ* VI, 46. This new stylistic habit was defended by Scott and condemned by Hazlitt: see Walter Scott, review of *Childe Harold* IV, *Quarterly Review* 19 (December 1818), 215–32 (pp. 230–31); William Hazlitt, Unsigned review of *Childe Harold* IV, *Yellow Dwarf*, 18 (May 1818), 142–144 (p. 142).
[167] *Childe Harold* IV, ll. 874–5.
[168] 'Ode to Liberty' (1820), *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd edn (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), p. 307.

surrounded by intellectual darkness: 'Opinion an omnipotence,' as he says the stanza referred to above, and 'our reason frail'.[169] In these stanzas, humanity is at once reasoning and unwise, free and not free, divided between our wish to be free from illusions and our inability to relinquish them:

> … we see too sure
> Nor worth nor beauty dwells from out the mind's
> Ideal shape of such; yet still it binds
> The fatal spell, and still it draws us on…[170]

Here Byron offers us a portrait of the disenchanted mind, at once bitterly disillusioned and 'yet still' bound. But true to the restless character of these stanzas, he avoids even the complacency of despair. Four stanzas later, his despairing 'yet still it binds' is translated into another kind of 'yet', a resolution that brings this series of additions to a close:

> Yet let us ponder boldly—'tis a base
> Abandonment of reason to resign
> Our right of thought—our last and only place
> Of refuge; this, at least, shall still be mine:[171]

Fred Parker has reflected on scepticism as 'an activity of thinking that, although profoundly sceptical about its own outcomes, never claims that it can set itself aside'.[172] These lines, with their refusal to be unreflective or unthinking, may be considered a good expression of that process, 'though imbued with scepticism, yet still thinking, and though thinking, yet still sceptical.'[173]

The restless fluctuations of these stanzas are replicated across a canto which tends to resist what might settle into final shape. Its refusal of its own satisfactions, its way of dwelling between propositions, reflects the difficulty of bringing its restless inquiries to a completion. The resulting poem is dramatic and testing and remains undecided on its most important subjects. In the fourth canto there is, as Hazlitt saw:

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[169] *Childe Harold* IV, l. 833.
[170] *Ibid*., ll. 1101–4. This was one of the preliminary additions he made to his fair copy in June and July 1817.
[171] *Ibid*., ll. 1135–8.
[172] Parker, *SL*, p. 49.
[173] Parker, *SL*, p. 2.

> … in every line an effort at brilliancy and a successful effort; and yet, in the next, as if nothing had been done, the same thing is attempted to be expressed again with the same labour as before, the same success, and with as little appearance of repose or satisfaction of mind.[174]

That inability to possess his own success was characteristic of Byron; Shelley thought the fourth canto the work of a man 'heartily & deeply discontented with himself'.[175] One outcome of this restless dissatisfaction is that the prolonged final lengths of the fourth canto have a way of approaching and falling back from various possible climaxes. These were the outcome of Byron's recurring scepticism about being finished and his familiar way of forestalling finality by adding more on. In the art of 'saying a thing once for all in its right and final form, and then holding his peace', Byron was deficient, thought Oliver Elton.[176] That this effect may have a good deal to do with doubt is implicit in Browning's criticism of Swinburne: 'Nothing said and nothing done with, left to stand alone and trust for its effect in its own worth.'[177]

Byron was a poet who was often unwilling to close on his doubts. What is particularly interesting about all the 'yets' and 'buts' that characterised his additions to the fourth canto was that during the period of revision they were crossing between the poem and his letters. In September 1817, shortly after beginning his expansion of the fourth canto, Byron wrote to Murray to say:

> I look upon C[hild]e Harold as my best—and as I begun—I think of concluding with it—but I make no resolutions on that head … however—I fear that I shall never do better—& yet—not being thirty years of age for some moons to come—one ought to be progressive as far as Intellect goes for many a good year—but I have had a devilish deal of wear & tear of mind and body—in my time—besides having published too often & much already. God grant me some judgment! to do what may be most fitting in that & everything else—for I doubt my own exceedingly.[178]

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[174] Hazlitt, unsigned review of *Childe Harold* IV, p. 144.
[175] Letter from Percy Bysshe Shelley to Thomas Love Peacock, 17 or 18 December 1818, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), II, 57–8.
[176] Oliver Elton, *A Survey of English Literature 1780–1880*, 2nd edn, 4 vols (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), II, 154. Also cf. Peter J. Manning, 'Don Juan and the Revisionary Self', in *Romantic Revisions*, ed. by Robert Brinkley and Keith Hanley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 210–26 (p. 215).
[177] Letter from Browning to Isabella Blagden, 22 March 1870, in *Swinburne: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Clyde Kenneth Hyder (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 115.
[178] Letter to Murray, 15 September 1817, *BLJ* V, 265.

Here Byron advances by returning over himself ('but… however … & yet …but…for I doubt') with an extraordinary series of conjunctions. What is notable is the extent to which this self-revising syntax is in sympathy with the character of the additions that he was either making or about to make to the fourth canto at the time of writing ('But France… Yet, Freedom… yet still… Yet let us ponder boldly'). This is a grammar deeply in tune with this period in which he was leaving behind one poem and embarking on something new. Byron was never between works for very long, but his creativity thrived on provisional states. The letter exemplifies a state of constructive indecision grounded in the wisdom of making 'no resolutions' very firmly.

In the event this decided irresolution would bear fruit, for this was the same letter in which Byron reported feeling 'really astonished' on having put his poetry 'side by side with Pope's' and in which he first stated the needfulness of a larger kind of revision: '*all* of us … all in the wrong'. Soon after writing to Murray—probably within a week—Byron would be shown John Hookham Frere's '*Whistlecraft*', which would serve in part as the creative stimulus for *Beppo*.[179] The full implications of Byron's growing conviction that he had formerly been writing 'upon a wrong revolutionary poetical system' were not made evident to readers until the 'Letter to John Murray' was published in March 1821. Among those who had taken the wrong course, 'I *have* been—(or it maybe still *am*)—conspicuous', he confessed in that piece.[180] To many this seemed a puzzling and even affronting repudiation of the work that had brought him such success: 'he depreciates himself', concluded the editors of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.[181] In the *Life*, Moore described Byron's apparent preference for his early Popeian satires over 'the sublime musings of Childe Harold' to be 'an error or caprice of judgment, unexampled, perhaps, in the annals of literature', not least for seeming to 'depreciate that peculiar walk of the art in which he himself so grandly trod'.[182]

These months in 1817 have perplexed the critics ever since. In his review of Moore's *Life*, Macaulay concluded that Byron's true 'tastes and inclinations' had always belonged to the age of Pope, and that to the 'revolution in English poetry' of his own age he had contributed 'unwillingly, and with constant self-reproach and shame'.[183] Speaking of the 'Romantic' character of 'most of his poetry, indeed some of his best,' the deeply

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[179] Letter to Murray, 25 March 1818, *BLJ* VI, 24.
[180] 'Letter to John Murray', 148.
[181] *MLJ*, II, 366, 369n.–370n; 'Why are Poets Indifferent Critics?', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 10.55 (September 1821), 180–182 (p. 183).
[182] *MLJ*, II, 263, 366, 369n.–370n.
[183] Thomas Babington Macaulay, review of Moore's *Life of Lord Byron* (1830), *Edinburgh Review,* 53 (June 1831), 544–72 (p. 563).

knowledgeable Leslie A. Marchand suggested that 'it is necessary to understand that in his deepest being he did not completely approve of it.'[184] Among readers who have appreciated Byron for coming to think better of his 'sublime musings', there has been an inclination to view the balance of his work as somehow 'fake' (T. S. Eliot) or not 'the authentic Byron' (W. H. Auden).[185] This has been the case at least since 1821 when John Gibson Lockhart assailed his 'humbug Harolds'.[186] Such accounts have tended to view the later works as the correction of earlier misjudgements. Ronald Bottrall felt that for Byron being 'able to write in the objective and detached manner which distinguishes his best work' meant being 'able to attack the cult of sentimentality and romantic pessimism for which he was in part responsible'.[187]

This detached, self-critical side of Byron has often been available to subsequent critics. It has been much emphasised by those who have read him through the lens of 'Romantic Irony', like Anne Mellor, who sees in his career from the fourth canto of *Childe Harold* onwards a process of deconstructive 'self-parody' of which *Don Juan* was the culmination.[188] Though 'the romantic ironist must begin skeptically', this critical method has been applied to Byron with a notable prescriptiveness.[189] Aside from the difficult questions of reception involved in making *Don Juan* the 'greatest exemplar' of 'Friedrich Schlegel's concept of romantic irony', any critical method which seeks to devote Byron to 'an artistic program' risks misunderstanding his creative and intellectual temperament.[190]

Although he makes different theoretical claims, McGann's portrait of Byron as a 'deeply self-critical and revisionist' poet' tends to demand roughly the same progress of him.[191] The fourth canto has an important place in *The Romantic Ideology*, in which it is exemplary for having achieved a 'level of *critical* (as opposed to

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[184] Marchand, Introduction to *BLJ* I, 12.
[185] W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (Vintage: London, 1963), p. 396; Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957; repr. 1990), p. 195.
[186] John Gibson Lockhart, *Letter to the Right Hon. Lord Byron, by John Bull* (London: William Wright, 1821), pp. 31–2.
[187] Ronald Bottrall, 'Byron and the Colloquial Tradition in English Poetry', in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. by M. H. Abrams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 210–227 (pp. 212, 220). Cf. Manning, 'Don Juan and the Revisionary Self', p. 221.
[188] Anne Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980; repr. 2014), pp. 5, 31–38. Also see Frederick Garber, *Self, Text, and Romantic Irony*: *The Example of Byron* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).
[189] Mellor, *Irony*, pp. 4–5. Both Michael O'Neill and Jane Stabler have pointed out the limitations of this critical method for an understanding of Byron. See O'Neill, *Romanticism*, p. xxi; see also p. 106; also see Stabler, *BPH*, p. 7.
[190] Mellor, *Irony*, pp. 4–5.
[191] Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 110, 77 (hereafter, McGann, *RI*).

imaginative) intensity'.[192] For McGann, it was during those months in 1817 when Byron first described feeling 'in the wrong' that he undertook 'his whole revisionist project in poetry', meaning his 'conscious reaction' to 'the entire Romantic Movement'—a 'project which was to reach fulfilment in *Don Juan*.'[193] Making Byron into an exemplary critic and self-critic, this describes him as progressively liberating himself from earlier work so that he might be free to write poetry that is 'an illustration of the sort of critical stance Romantic poetry ought to take toward itself.'[194] In *The Beauty of Inflections* that argument is applied in turn to the later cantos of *Don Juan*, which are read as a 'vision of self-judgement,' and a 'critical-revolutionary reading of the limits and blindnesses' of the earlier cantos.[195] This emphasis on the shedding of illusions responds to one side of Byron's character as a poet in *Don Juan*:

> But time strips our illusions of their hue,
> And one by one in turn, some grand mistake
> Casts off its bright skin yearly like the snake.[196]

Similarly ironic self-reflections are characteristic of the later cantos; but 'irony may be transformative without being destructive', as Barbara Everett observed.[197] There are limitations to treating Byron's poetry as if it were a record of an uncompromising effort to be freed from his illusions.

One of the central assumptions of McGann's models is that revision is a predominantly self-critical faculty, which is why Ricks's notion of a 'creative scepticism' is indispensable. Byron's doubtful return over his own poetry in 1817 was a creative change of heart, as well as an exercise in self-judgment, and it involved something more than the merely critical, rational mind. In the pivotal letter to Murray already quoted from above, what is indicated is a mixture of self-criticism ('*all* of us …all in the wrong'), self-doubt ('I fear that I shall never do better'), and a sheer creative impulse, too, a feeling for wanting to make 'something new' ('& yet—'). This was a reimagining as well as a rethinking. Another difficulty of McGann's approach is its tendency

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[192] *Ibid*., pp. 75-76.
[193] McGann, editorial notes, *CPW* IV, 129, 247, 340n.
[194] McGann, *DJC*, p. 107.
[195] McGann, *BI*, p. 292. McGann is applying the point especially to the more politically inflected cantos that were published by John Hunt, from Canto VI onwards.
[196] *Don Juan* V, ll. 166–8.
[197] She notes this in a quite different context – Shakespearean comedy – but the point must apply broadly. See Barbara Everett, 'Or What You Will' *Essays in Criticism,* 35.4 (1985), 294–314 (p. 304).

to imply that Byron was a clearsighted critic of his contemporaries, when there are grounds for thinking—with the Shelleys, for instance—that Byron had more reliable creative than critical instincts. Mary Shelley regretted that he became 'dull' as he 'became more critical'; he wrote better, she thought, 'where his critical ideas did not intrude to mar'.[198] It was with some justification that Leigh Hunt claimed that in matters of literary criticism Byron generally had 'himself …mixed up somehow with every thing, whether to approve it or disapprove'.[199]

Another objection is that Byron continued to defend the 'passion' of his first major poem well after embarking on *Don Juan*: 'is Childe Harold nothing?'[200] His discontinuation of old styles and lines of thought did not necessarily involve their repudiation. If Byron was a poet who was always putting something behind him, that could include his doubts: in one of the 'Detached Thoughts' he wrote that 'Of the Immortality of the Soul—it appears to me that there can be little doubt … I used to doubt of it—but reflection has taught me better'; 'he latterly came to doubt some aspects of his own scepticism', Marchand observed.[201] These reflections did not always travel in one direction. The same applies to his way of scrapping old styles and experimenting with the new, a process that involved thinking better of poems and then sometimes thinking better of them again. By 1817, for example, he had arrived at a different view of the verse tales that he had come to regret: 'I am very sorry that I called some of my own things 'Tales', because I think they are something better.'[202] What was involved in all of this was not a determined exercise in progressive self-judgment, but the ordinary condition of looking back and discovering in oneself '*many* opinions I have altered—& some which I retain', as Byron said of *English Bards*.

One revealing example of the character of Byron's self-revising sceptical intelligence is provided by an encounter we do know he had with the works of Friedrich Schlegel, whose *Lectures on the History of Literature* he read in early 1821 at Ravenna. Beginning by recording his instinctive 'dislike', he recorded his impressions of the work in journal entries made over two days:

> I have been reading W.F.S. (brother to the other of the name) till now, and I can make out nothing.
> …

[198] Letter from Mary Shelley to John Murray, 8[?] June 1832, in *Letters of Mary W. Shelley*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1944), II, p. 61; cf. letter from Percy Bysshe Shelley to Mary Shelley, 7 August 1821, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, II, 316–17. They were speaking primarily about Byron's dramas.
[199] *HR*, I, 77–78.
[200] Letter to Murray, 6 April 1819, *BLJ* VI, 105.
[201] 'Detached thoughts', no. 96, *BLJ* IX, 46; Marchand, Introduction to *BLJ* I, 14.
[202] Letters to Moore, 25 March 1817, *BLJ* V, 186; cf. Murray, 25 March 1817, *BLJ* V, 191.

> Continuing to read Mr. F S. He is not such a tool as I took him for, that is to say, when he speaks of the North. But still he speaks of things all over the world with a kind of authority that a philosopher would disdain, and a man of common sense, feeling, and knowledge of his own ignorance, would be ashamed of.
>
> …
>
> My to-day journal consists of what I omitted yesterday. T0-day was much as usual. Have rather a better opinion of the writings of the Schlegels than I had four-and-twenty hours ago; and will amend it still farther, if possible.[203]

What is so telling about these journal entries is the way that Byron's response to his reading is advanced provisionally, recorded over time, and modified under review, as he moves from distrust to circumspection and then towards a reserved open-mindedness. His antipathy to what he seems to have read in the first instance as Schlegel's ambition to comprehensive intellectual explanation is typical of his sceptical revulsion from confidence of opinion, and it is equally characteristic that he should be willing to arrive at 'rather a better opinion' than he started with, and to 'amend it still farther, if possible.' This is an indication of his more general conviction that one should not have 'fixed opinions', and a reminder of his belief that the principles on which poetry should be judged 'never were nor ever will be settled', for they depend as much as anything else on 'the ordinary vicissitudes of human opinions.'[204] It is significant that he ends these entries on a suspension of opinion, rather than arriving at a final position, so that his thoughts remain in motion. They are a good example of what Fred Parker has described as the sceptic's 'understanding of thinking as an open-ended, ongoing process where conclusions are at best partial and provisional'.[205] Byron's insistence that a good man should possess 'feeling, and knowledge of his own ignorance' means that they are also a revealing portrait of a temperament that was willing to be found 'in the wrong.'

There is an integrity to this openness to rethinking that translated into Byron's artistic life, where his willingness to be moved to a later opinion was closely related to his wish always to 'try something new'. This

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[203] Journal entries, 28 and 29 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 38–39. A two-volume edition of Friedrich von Schlegel's *Lectures on the History of Literature* (1818) was listed in the 'Sale Catalogue' (1827) for Byron's library in Italy (see *CMP,* 252), and Marchand confirms that this was the Edinburgh edition translated by John Gibson Lockhart, i.e. *Lectures on the History of Literature, Ancient and Modern*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1818): see Marchand, editorial note, *BLJ* VIII, 38, 2n.

[204] Supplementary note to the 'Letter to John Murray', 142 (as discussed in the previous chapter).

[205] Parker, *SL*, p. 232.

way of always looking to the ‘new Undertaking’ would be illustrated by the next amendment in style on which he embarked—the experiment in light verse represented by *Beppo*.

Chapter 3 – Promising

I

'I have no great esteem for poetical persons', Byron noted in his journal in 1813, 'they have so much of the 'ideal' in *practics*, as well as *ethics*.'[1] *Beppo* richly extends on this pronouncement. Written at Venice in Autumn 1817, in the weeks after Byron first expressed his suspicion that in poetry "We are all wrong", it was conceived as an 'experiment' which will 'shew them—that I can write cheerfully, & repel the charge of monotony & mannerism.'[2] It was begun, then, at a time when that familiar instinct to 'try something new' was being felt as especially imperative. At every turn *Beppo* announces its freedom from the sorts of ideals to which 'poetical persons' supposedly subscribe. Early in the poem, the expatriate narrator relates his visit to the Manfrini Palace in Venice, where among all the 'truth and beauty' on display, it is the artist Giorgione who is most to be admired, for he has depicted 'love in life!'

> Love in full life and length, not love ideal,
> No, nor ideal beauty, that fine name,
> But something better still, so very real …[3]

If this suggests an appreciation for art that puts art in its place, then Byron upon his own visit to the Palace in Spring 1817, claimed to 'detest' painting 'unless it reminds me of something I have seen or think it possible to see'.[4] He insisted particularly on finding the 'Laura & Petrarch' there 'hideous', apparently confirming him in his long-held dislike of Petrarch's own 'puling, petrifying stupidly platonic compositions'.[5] This aversion reflected his pride, by this time often-expressed, in dealing 'less in *fiction*—than most bards—I will venture to

[1] Journal entry, 26 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 221.
[2] Letter to Murray, 25 March 1818, *BLJ* VI, 24.
[3] *Beppo*, ll. 96–99.
[4] Letter to Murray, 14 April 1817, *BLJ* V, 213.
[5] Journal entry, 17 and 18 December 1813, *BLJ* III, 240. Cf. *Don Juan* V, ll. 7–8.

say—than almost any of *the day*.'[6] And yet he was surely going out of his way to sound a little philistine; a few days later he conceded to Murray that the galleries of Florence had left him feeling 'drunk with beauty'.[7]

Beppo would prove incomparably well adapted to entertaining that encounter between the 'ideal' and the 'very real'. A comedy of infidelity, supposedly relayed from an anecdote of real Venetian social life, the story begins with Beppo's disappearance at sea, and with Laura's disinclination to wait until her husband 'should return from his long cruise, / And bid once more her faithful heart rejoice'.[8] Byron's inconstant Laura is fortunately possessed of a considerable *savoir-faire*, and soon finds another partner:

> The Count and Laura made their new arrangement,
> Which lasted, as arrangements sometimes do,
> For half a dozen years without estrangement;
> They had their little differences, too;
> Those jealous whiffs, which never any change meant:
> In such affairs there probably are few
> Who have not had this pouting sort of squabble,
> From sinners of high station to the rabble.
>
> But on the whole, they were a happy pair,
> As happy as unlawful love could make them;
> The gentleman was fond, the lady fair,
> Their chains so slight, 'twas not worth while to break them:[9]

The swiftness of Laura's recovery from the 'sort of morbid feeling, half poetic' that first overcomes her on her husband's departure is an irreverent foil to the unreality of 'love ideal' and a sign of the poem's sceptical appreciation for the way that time is likely to test fidelity of all kinds.[10]

The Count and Laura's 'new arrangement' is marked instead by a spirit of worldly compromise: their affair can survive their 'little differences' for they are free from ideals and illusions. Theirs is the sort of happy expediency which has 'lasted, as arrangements sometimes do,' but which is unlikely to last forever:

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[6] Letter to Annabella Millbanke, 27 October 1814, *BLJ* IV, 226.
[7] Letter to Murray, 26 April 1817, *BLJ* V, 218.
[8] *Beppo*, ll. 325–6.
[9] *Beppo*, st. 53–54.
[10] *Beppo*, ll. 217–18.

> But they were young: Oh! what without our youth
> Would love be! What would youth be without love!
> Youth lends it joy, and sweetness, vigour, truth,
> Heart, soul, and all that seems as from above;
> But, languishing with years, it grows uncouth—
> One of few things experience don't improve,
> Which is, perhaps, the reason why old fellows
> Are always so preposterously jealous.[11]

Because its metrical scheme exacts significant responsibilities in rhyme, the *ottava rima* is a form well suited to asking questions of constancy. Here Byron begins by dryly pairing 'youth' with 'truth', and 'love' with 'above' to form conventionally happy unions in rhyme. But constancy is unlikely to survive the test of experience, or so the stanza tells us, and his rhymes accordingly dwindle to half-matches, so that by the end of the stanza they have modelled restlessness rather than steadfastness. True to the spirit of *Beppo,* they chart the divergence between ideals and experience and accept the disparity as the ground for comedy. In this respect it is the poem's imperfectly happy rhyming pairs which are most significant: couples like 'fellows' and 'jealous', 'nothing' and 'clothing', 'ready' and 'lady', 'shall' and 'all', 'squabble' and 'rabble', which by resembling each other only 'on the whole', speak of 'little differences' reconciled 'without estrangement'. These rhymes, which remind us that words, like people, tend to coincide only in relative and partial ways, model the sort of happy compromise on which the Count and Laura's relationship is sustained. To Byron they offered an antidote to the kinds of idealisms in love and art that he associated in his letter with the 'stupidly platonic'.

They are superbly well adapted to his purposes in *Beppo*, a poem in which 'Scepticism's natural relation to comedy,' as Fred Parker describes it, is richly realised as a matter of subject and style.[12] With its spirit of realism and its liberating celebration of sensuousness, the narrative comes together beautifully with its poet's determination to scorn the 'fellows / In foolscap uniforms turned up with ink'.[13] Few poets have so fully explored the full resources of comic rhyme as Byron, and *Beppo* begins to demonstrate some of the close affinities between this element of his style and aspects of his scepticism. Rhyme, which may engage questions of trust and doubt, faithfulness and infidelity, has the capacity to sound out 'questions of determination and

[11] *Beppo*, st. 55.
[12] Parker, *SL*, pp. 190–91.
[13] *Beppo*, ll. 593–4.

accident, necessity and freedom,' as Robert Douglas-Fairhurst has written, and so may bring into focus questions likely to be of interest to a sceptical thinker.[14]

In an admiring review of *Beppo* in the *Edinburgh Review*, Francis Jeffrey praised its author for casting the language of 'the most light, familiar, and ordinary conversation' into 'difficult versification', as if speech had been allowed to 'fall into verse by some unaccountable and happy fatality'.[15] Rhyme is a formal device which operates at the 'conjunction of chance and choice', as Peter McDonald has noted, for it depends on likenesses of sound that are (for the most part) a coincidental feature of the language.[16] Where a relationship is established between rhyme words, therefore, 'an illusion of intention is generated, in close proximity to something very like its opposite: the accidental, the independent, or the contingent.'[17] These unpredictable literary elements have a further relevance to *Beppo*, as commentators have sometimes stressed the sheer accident by which Byron arrived at the *ottava rima* form in 1817.[18] Jerome McGann has described the 'happy accident' of the arrival of the Kinnairds at Venice with John Hookham Frere's '*Whistlecraft*' as an instance of 'the remarkable pattern of apparent fortuitousness in Byron's life', and on that slender chance, too, W. H. Auden proposed that Byron avoided being consigned to history as 'a very minor poet'.[19] However there was also an important sense in which Byron was already looking for a new form for the long poem, and indeed had already partly found it in his first major poem, for *Childe Harold* had always been, as Moore disapprovingly remembered, an 'experiment' in 'mixing up the light with the solemn' in imitation of Ariosto; and to 'refer the Spenserian stanza to possibilities inherent in the Italian octave is to refer back through Spenser to his precedents', as Bernard Beatty has noted, for the 'Spenserian stanza is, in its origins, an attempt to provide an

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[14] Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, 'Alexander Pope: 'renown'd in Rhyme'', in *Literary Milieux*: *Essays in Text and Context Presented to Howard Erskine-Hill*, ed. by David Womersley and Richard McCabe (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), pp. 230–57 (p. 238).

[15] Francis Jeffrey, unsigned review of *Beppo*, *The Edinburgh Review*, 29 (February 1818), 302–310 (pp. 302–3).

[16] McDonald, *Sound Intentions*, p. 32.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 34.

[18] *Beppo*, st. 62.

[19] Jerome McGann, *DJC*, pp. 51, 100; W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, p. 394. Byron probably read Frere's *The Monks and the Giants*, a *Prospectus and Specimen of an Intended National Work, by William and Robert Whistlecraft* for the first time on 21 September 1817 after the poem, which had been published by Murray earlier that year, was brought to Venice by the Kinnairds. The first draft of *Beppo* was probably written on 9 and 10 October. See John Cam Hobhouse, *Recollections of a Long Life*, 6 vols (1909; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), II, 280; McGann, editorial notes, *CPW* IV, 129.

English equivalent for the stanza of *Orlando Furioso*'.[20] It was fortunate, then, that the Kinnairds brought Frere's poem to Venice, but the step between Byron's two major poems was not so large as might be imagined.[21]

The most significant formal feature held in common by the Spenserian and *ottava rima* stanzas is that both demand great resourcefulness in rhyme for poets writing in English. The Scottish poet James Beattie, to whom Byron appealed in choosing the measure for *Childe Harold*, had praised the Spenserian form for being particularly 'well adapted' to the English language, which 'abounds in diversified terminations, and consequently renders our poetry susceptible of an endless variety of legitimate rhymes'.[22] Samuel Johnson, though generally convinced of 'the advantage of rhyme', had expressed reservations about the stanza for the same reason:

> our words end with so much diversity, that it is seldom convenient for us to bring more than two of the same sound together. If it be justly observed by Milton, that rhyme obliges poets to express their thoughts in improper terms, these improprieties must always be multiplied, as the difficulty of rhyme is encreased …[23]

As these commentaries suggest, rhyme may bring into especially clear focus matters of legitimacy and propriety—with inviting comic implications for the poet inclined to light verse. Indeed such questions have a special kind of appropriateness to the tale of conjugal infidelity related with such verve and conviviality in *Beppo*.

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[20] *MLJ*, II, 328, 227; Bernard Beatty, 'Lord Byron: Poetry and Precedent', in *Literature of the Romantic Period 1750–1850* ed. by Reginald Thorne Davies and Bernard Beatty (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1976), pp. 114–34 (p. 129). Also see Preface to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812), *CPW* II, 5.

[21] Peter Vassallo, Nicholas Halmi and others have traced Byron's extensive if unsystematic early reading in the serio-comic Italian Renaissance poets. By the time he read Frere at Venice, he had also appreciated John Herman Merivale's *ottava rima* poem *Orlando in Roncesvalles* (1814), written the 'Epistle to Augusta' in the same measure, in August 1816, and was also likely to have read John Gay's *ottava rima* verse epistle to Pope—mock heroic in flavour—'A Welcome from Greece'. See Peter Vassallo, *Byron, the Italian Literary Influence* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 1; Nicholas Halmi, 'The Literature of Italy in Byron's Poems of 1817–20', in *Byron and Italy,* ed. by Alan Rawes and Diego Saglia (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), pp. 23–41 (pp. 24–25); letter to John Herman Merivale, January 1814, *BLJ* IV, 12; and John Gay, 'Epistle IV, To Mr Pope, on his having finished his Translation of Homer's Iliad. 'A Welcome from Greece'' (1776) was one of the poems collected in Anderson's *Complete Edition of the Poets of Great Britain,* 14 vols (London: John & Arthur Arch and others, 1792–1795), VIII (1794), 304.

[22] Preface to *Childe Harold* I and II (1812), CPW II, 4, quoting from William Forbes, *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie, including many of his original letters*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Arch. Constable and Co., 1807), I, 113–14.

[23] Johnson, 'Life of Milton' (1781), *Lives*, I, 242–95 (p. 294).

Despite the seemingly 'endless variety of legitimate rhymes' available to the English poet, the comic rhymer is likely to look for unconventional partners, seeking out matches that might satisfy in their 'unlawful love'. In the *ottava rima* stanza it is the triple demand on the *a* and *b* rhymes that most conspicuously tests the inconvenience of 'bringing more than two of the same sound together' (and in a poem which invites comparison with the story of Desdemona and her 'cavalier servente', the accommodation of the third party to the rhyme may be apt).[24] One of the best-known instances is Beppo's *bravura* passage of triple rhyming on the word 'philogyny', (which is joined in rhyme to 'mahogany' and 'dog any').[25] This example points to a special distinction of the rhyming wit in *Beppo*, which is the appeal of its lines about having many partners, in which the rhyme sounds are themselves multiple:

> They have a number, though they ne'er exhibit 'em,
> Four wives by law, and concubines 'ad libitum'.[26]

In these lines the joke is really on English pieties about love and marriage, 'An honest friendship with a married lady' being their sardonic English counterpart in *Don Juan*.[27] In that poem, in which serial seduction is of course the premise of the narrative, a first-canto aside by the narrator touching on Don Juan's lineage culminates in the following lines:

> But there's a rumour which I fain would hush,
> 'Tis said that Donna Julia's grandmamma
> Produced her Don more heirs at love than law.[28]

Here the capacity of compound rhyme to make the single into the several brilliantly conveys the breaking of wedlock. Signalling his distrust of English virtues, and his scepticism of English convention, such rhymes are an essential aspect of Byron's mood and method of liberation in the *ottava rima*. In this case, propagation of the sounds in 'grandmamma' irresistibly suggests the notion of illegitimate offspring, multiplying the impropriety.

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[24] *Beppo*, ll. 136, 141–4.
[25] *Beppo*, st. 70.
[26] *Beppo*, ll. 559–60.
[27] *Don Juan* III (1821), l. 195.
[28] *Don Juan* I, ll. 462–4.

Byron was an expert in using rhyme to express his vigilance of conventional values and established truths. His instinct in the *ottava rima* was to cast doubt on the 'happy fatality' of rhyming pairs like 'truth' and 'youth' which by so often being united in rhyme have been lent an illusion of inevitability that 'seems as from above'. One way of viewing well-tested rhymes such as these is that they offer a stay against 'the mess and confusion of a changing world', as Douglas-Fairhurst has written of *Don Juan*, so that although Byron's hero 'keeps falling for the same short-lived promises of the heart', 'Byron's narrator …shows in his rhymes that a writer too can be moved by intentions which outlast any one utterance.'[29] And yet if rhymes, as he writes elsewhere, 'give us in great measure our morality, our politics, our social code, our art of life,' Byron's rhymes are often at their most compelling precisely when they test the limits of such 'mutual understandings'—'the social agreements' that have been 'gradually carved out in a language by the pressures of repeated use'.[30] As in the examples given above, rhyme can also express dissent from the supposed mutuality of consensus (and so provide a counter to what Byron calls, in *Childe Harold*, the measures of 'custom's falsest scale').[31] Rhyme, as Byron knew, can also test the longevity of promises, compromise good intentions, and corroborate our sense of exposure to elements beyond our control. It is possible to see how the formality of a highly rhymed stanza, which is so peculiarly exposed to the contingent and accidental, might therefore have a particular appeal to the sceptical temper.

As Peter McDonald has noted, 'in rhymed poetry, intentions need to have luck, and to know about luck'.[32] 'And as for Fortune—but I dare not d—n her,' remarks the narrator of *Beppo*, 'She gives us luck in lotteries, love, and marriage; / I cannot say that she's done much for me yet …'.[33] This recalls, as it was meant to, Byron's own disastrous marriage and separation. Byron would later give an account of the 'horror of matrimony', via a memory of his father, that 'came over me very strongly at my wedding. Something whispered me that I was sealing my own death-warrant. I am a great believer in presentiments.'[34] Though deeply unreliable, this account does convey the way that Byron seems to have been capable of feeling both unlucky and foredoomed (he later observed that time '*changes* all things… *except man himself*, who has always been, and

[29] Douglas-Fairhurst, 'Alexander Pope: 'renown'd in Rhyme'', p. 245.
[30] Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives*, pp. 177–8.
[31] *Childe Harold* IV, ll. 832–33.
[32] McDonald, *Sound Intentions*, p. 30.
[33] *Beppo*, ll. 490–1.
[34] *MC*, 55.

always will be, an unlucky rascal').[35] Alongside his sometimes fatalism, he had a strong sense for the arbitrary in life. To some degree, the lines from *Beppo* give comic expression to the same, deeply pessimistic, intuitions of the final canto of *Childe Harold*, in which Byron offers a stark vision of a world governed by 'Circumstance, that unspiritual god', in which

> Few—none—find what they love or could have loved,
> Though accident, blind contact, and the strong
> Necessity of loving, have removed
> Antipathies—[36]

Far from discovering relations 'without estrangement', the lines suggest that experience reveals only unlikeness, separation, and a diversity of independent lives between which affinities are merely accidental. This vision of the differences between people may parallel the divisibility, difference and self-dissent that Byron seems often to have detected within himself, that element of radical personal inconstancy discussed in the last chapter.

It is a large part of Byron's art in the *ottava rima* poems that he can take such elements of unease and transform them into comedy. Rhyme, which makes sense out of the arbitrary relations between sounds, has a key role to play in this. Given that comic rhyming tends to be founded in the 'incongruity or unlikelihood in the coupling', as W. K. Wimsatt notes in his classic essay on rhyme in this tradition, it is an art that will thrive where there is a large 'difference or separation between the things to be bound'.[37] A regard for matters of union and separation has long been a feature of theories of comic rhyme. In 1776 James Beattie defended the burlesque rhyming of Butler and Swift in an 'Essay on Laughter' in which he accounted for comic rhyme as the 'inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous …considered as united'.[38] This is where rhyme's capacity to bring together the unlike will be brought into play, though its 'tendency to settle differences', as Douglas-Fairhurst has put it, may be tested to its limits.[39] Of Butler, Johnson remarked, 'what poet has ever brought so many remote images so happily together?'[40] And yet a comic rhymer might acknowledge the less 'happily' united,

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[35] Journal entry, 9 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 20. In an early letter he wrote that 'I consider myself as destined never to be happy, although in some instances fortunate' (Letter to Edward Noel Young, 16 April 1807, *BLJ* I, 114).
[36] *Childe Harold* IV, ll. 1083, 1117–20.
[37] Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, p. 164.
[38] James Beattie, 'An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition', *Essays: On Poetry and Music, as they Affect the Mind*, 3rd edn (London: E. and C. Dilly, 1779), pp. 295–450 (p. 320).
[39] Douglas-Fairhurst, 'Alexander Pope: 'renown'd in Rhyme'', p. 245.
[40] Johnson, 'Life of Butler', *Lives*, II, p. 7.

and Beattie's diverting account of the art of bringing 'unsuitable' partners into 'mutual relation' also introduces the comedy of the unwillingly bound.[41] As for rhyming partners like 'fellows' and 'jealous' which test matters of computability by remaining yoked although at odds, it is within the scope of rhyme to convey the bondage of the unhappily unsuited.

Although Byron sometimes attempted to write off the unhappy end to his own marriage as a bad 'run of luck', there is no doubting his true wretchedness at the 'calamitous difference' that had opened up between two people who would, as it turned out, remain irreconcilably parted.[42] Byron sometimes recorded a general conviction that life rarely makes good on its promise: 'as to the *future*—what promise did *it* ever keep to any human being?'[43] This seems to have been made especially clear to him by his marriage: one thinks of him writing to Lady Melbourne beforehand to say, 'I have great hopes this match will turn out well', and really sounding as though he does.[44] Naturally enough this particular kind of want of faith often inclined him to a *carpe diem*, 'for who can trust to *tomorrow*?'[45] A strong sense for the essentially temporary quality of all human experience might well cast doubt on the merits of permanent union, and it is indeed part of the comedy of *Beppo* and *Don Juan* to propose the senselessness of making vows by which ''tis "so nominated in the bond," / That both are tied till one shall have expired'.[46] Instead, these poems remind us that partners may be joined without exacting final vows. This is underlined by the fact that some of the most memorable rhymes in *Beppo* are allowed to recouple elsewhere, seemingly according to the demands of the moment. *Beppo*'s 'jealous', for example, reappears in *Don Juan*, in the first of that poem's many scenes of infidelity, where it encounters 'tell us' in lines on suspicious husbands; 'squabble', too, is rematched in the fourth canto, where it meets with a 'literary rabble' before countenancing a further possibility: the poem's fall from grace 'While the right hand which wrote it still is able'.[47] Nothing lasts forever.

This is a rhyming method which recognises that no words—not even 'youth' and 'truth' or 'love' and 'above'—are finally paired off, and that few words will find only one rhyming partner. In its regard for the

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[41] James Beattie, 'An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition', p. 313.
[42] Letter to Lady Byron, 15 February 1816, *BLJ* V, 27 (also see letters to Murray 27 December 1816, *BLJ* V, 151; Kinnaird, 27 November 1816, *BLJ* V, 135).
[43] Letter to Lady Melbourne, 10 January 1814, *BLJ* IV, 21.
[44] Letter to Lady Melbourne, 7 January 1815, *BLJ* IV, 252.
[45] Letter to Hobhouse, 20 August 1819, *BLJ* VI, 211.
[46] *Don Juan* III, ll. 53–4.
[47] *Don Juan* I, ll. 783–4; IV, ll. 785–92.

demands of the occasion and its openness to the chance encounter, it is well attuned to the sensuous ambience of *Beppo*, with its facetious allowance for partners 'ad libitum'. Rhyme may contemplate the dissolution of union, as these and Byron's compound rhymes demonstrate. But if the workings of blind accident make a prosperity in 'Fortune's matrimonial bounties' unlikely, then the emphasis may fall instead on the circumstantial, the unsanctioned, and the temporary, so that the poet appears in rhyme, as his Count is in life, 'in his pleasures of great liberality'.[48] These examples suggest how the 'diversified terminations' of rhyme words might lend themselves to a poet alive to the plural claims of the sensory world. Indeed they may convey something of Byron's own experience of the diverse pleasures of Venice, where Shelley was disturbed by his many sexual partners.[49] As a matter of composition, too, they tend towards a celebration of more instinctive and immediate pleasures: rhymes are brought together into liberatingly unbinding arrangements, as if modelling intimacy without further responsibility. Indeed all of this might approach a kind of libertinism in rhyme, an aspect of the art of not being 'tied down'—as Byron said in respect of religion—'to a direct profession of faith'.[50] Certainly it discovers in that analogy between the bonds of rhyme and 'the matrimonial tether' the possibility of more accommodating relations.[51]

Byron's arrangements in rhyme have not been at issue in modern critical readings of his poetry as often as one might expect. In fact, the word 'arrangement' is one on which Jerome McGann happens to place considerable importance in his highly influential account of the poem in *Don Juan in Context*, but in that work, it appears as a term in a critical vocabulary which consciously does not refer to aspects of poetic form like metrical arrangement, but looks instead to 'an idea of form that is larger than, more important than, the simpler concept of purely internal poetic congruence.'[52] In McGann's reading, *Don Juan* is understood in light of commitments that are primarily social and ethical, and literary techniques that are, above all, instrumental, for Byron, it is said, '"arranges" the elements of his poem not on the aesthetic principles of "the poem itself", but on the rhetorical principles of the poem in its relations with men and affairs outside itself.'[53] This is a theoretical perspective which attempts to relate the 'form' of the poem to the contingent factual order that lies beyond it:

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[48] *Don Juan* XI, l. 708; *Beppo*, ll. 239–40.
[49] Letter from Shelley to Thomas Love Peacock, 17 or 18 December 1818, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, II, 57–8; also see letter from Byron to John Cam Hobhouse and Douglas Kinnaird, 19 January 1819, *BLJ* VI, 91–2.
[50] See *MC*, 77.
[51] *Beppo*, l. 142.
[52] McGann, *DJC*, p. 109.
[53] *Ibid*.

'Form in *Don Juan* is what comes about. It is the means by which arrangements are actually made'.[54] For McGann, these 'arrangements' include the points at which the poem is encountered by readers, which make up the necessarily unfinished reception history of the work, but to the extent that his argument relates to composition, his emphasis is on the unarranged and unplanned, so that Byron himself is 'continually being surprised by what his own poem unearths before his eyes'.[55]

This is a critical method with interesting consequences, and to some degree, it is well exemplified by *Beppo*. One way of looking at the Count and Laura's 'new arrangement' is that it is precisely an example of the sort of thing that 'comes about'—the kind of temporary provision that we do 'in fact make' in response to the unforeseen. This may bear some resemblance to Byron's own 'new arrangement' at Venice. In 1819 he wrote to Hobhouse to report:

> … now I am a Cavalier Servente.—by the holy!—it is a strange sensation.—After having belonged in my own and countries—to the intriguing—the married—and the keeping—parts of the town—to be sure an honest arrangement is the best—[56]

Shelley, after Byron's inconstancy at Venice, approved of this new 'permanent sort of liaison' with the Contessa Teresa Guiccioli.[57] McGann's arguments are closely related to his sense of Byron's attitude to life more generally: what he describes approvingly as Byron's habit of 'giving in completely to the surprises of his life', and being 'against the idea of planning anything' in his art, is said to be contrary to the 'usual attitude of poets', which is to seek to reveal the 'harmony of life in the correspondent harmony of their poetry.'[58] This way of yielding to what happens to happen is attributed to Byron more generally: 'he did not mean to continue writing poetry, but he did anyway…'.[59]

Byron may well have sometimes felt that 'it is useless to form plans, and most of all for me to do so', as he remarked in the months following the separation, and to some degree, that is the recognition of *Beppo*, which depends for its comic resolution on the willing surrender of all parties to the unforeseeable (the

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[54] *Ibid*., p. 116.
[55] *Ibid*., p. 115.
[56] Letter to Hobhouse, 3 October 1819, *BLJ* VI, 226.
[57] Letter from Percy Bysshe Shelley to Mary Shelley, 7 August 1821, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), II, 316–17.
[58] McGann, *DJC*, pp. 100, 103.
[59] *Ibid*., p. 100.

dénouement of Beppo's unexpected return to Venice).[60] It is that openness to narrative contingency—also such a marked feature of *Don Juan*—that is usefully drawn out by McGann's emphasis on the 'spontaneity' of a poet capable of being 'surprised' by himself.[61] And yet this only tells half the story. McGann's view is that 'what form means in *Don Juan*' is that 'the form of things and events is precisely what is not conceivable, what is surprising.'[62] But although this may be true of the order of the narrative events in *Don Juan*—which can surprise us—it inevitably has significant limitations when it comes to providing a full account of the poem. For one thing, 'surprise' has an aesthetic life, and has long played a role in technical descriptions of rhyme. In Wimsatt's account, 'the "surprise" which is the pleasure of rhyme' is prominent, especially in the case of 'the extravagant double or triple rhymes of a Butler, a Swift, a Byron, or a Browning' (*Beppo*'s 'philogyny' rhyme is one of his examples).[63] Beattie, too, located the power of comic rhyme in the 'surprise' of encountering an unanticipated similitude: 'that unexpected discovery of resemblance between ideas supposed dissimilar, which is called Wit'.[64]

McGann may be right to stress Byron's preference for not proposing himself to an arrangement in advance. Much of Byron's rhyming in the *ottava rima* implies his familiarity with an art of rhyming *ad libitum* ('at will, as one pleases', according to the requirements of the occasion, as well as with extempore skill).[65] And yet there may be a considerable art to giving into the unpremeditated. As Beattie notes, comic and compound rhymes 'surprise the more, the less they are expected, and the less they seem to be sought for', and accordingly will be less successful where they give themselves away as 'the effect of art'.[66] To some degree, this is paralleled at the level of narrative in *Beppo*. At the end of the poem what is notable is the good grace with which the parties adapt themselves to the comic singularity of the circumstances. Despite the awkward reappearance of the third party, matters are concluded 'courteously' and in the same spirit of broadminded compromise with which the poem began (a snub to the senseless fate of Desdemona—one half of Venice's unhappy pair).[67] True to the poem's promise of a world 'without estrangement' sundered parties are reunited, infidelity is forgiven, and with

[60] Letter to Augusta Leigh, 14 September 1816, *BLJ* V, 93.
[61] McGann, *DJC*, p. 115; also see *RI*, p. 126.
[62] McGann, *DJC*, p. 115.
[63] Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, pp. 164–5.
[64] Beattie, 'An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition', p. 340–41, 300.
[65] *Don Juan* XI, l. 708; *OED Online*, '*ad lib, adv.*'
[66] Beattie, 'An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition', p. 340–41.
[67] *Beppo*, ll. 714–15.

inimitable aplomb the virtues of an 'honest arrangement' are conveyed by the poem's last words on Beppo: 'I've heard the Count and he were always friends.'[68] Our impression is that this is a mature, and in the circumstances, stylish, accommodation to a surprising turn of events. If *Beppo* is the kind of comedy that seems to promise that we are not, after all, parted by irreconcilable differences, then we sense that this is a function of the parties' *savoir-vivre*, their art of life.

In *Beppo*, Byron implied a degree of clarity in his allegiance to the 'very real' over the realm of art. But this view is far from simply upheld by the poem, which although it in many respects carries out a liberating impulse to overthrow literary dignity ('One hates an author that's *all author*'…), also leads a distinctively artful life of its own.[69] It is characteristic of Byron's character as a poet that out of his distrust of ideals, including the idealisms of art, there should emerge a new kind of artistic resourcefulness.

II

In *Don Juan*, the emphasis falls everywhere on questions of style, and this extends in some respects to Byron's portrait of 'our ancient friend Don Juan'. Like the parties in *Beppo*, Juan seems to have mastered the art of making his way through life with a measure of good grace.[70] He is '*debonnaire*' and always readily received by 'the best society', and this, as we learn in one of the English cantos, is a matter of manners:

> In fact, his manner was his own alone:
> Sincere he was—at least you could not doubt it,
> In listening merely to his voice's tone.[71]

These social graces almost certainly owe something to Coleridge's account in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) of the enduring appeal in European literature of the 'character of *Don John*', in which he had emphasised the libertine's possession of the 'manners and feelings, of a highly bred gentleman'.[72] By this time Byron had declared himself wholly out of sympathy with that 'man of wonderful talent', but he had read 'Coleridge's life' by late October 1817, by which time he was preparing *Beppo* for publication.[73] What Coleridge describes in

[68] *Beppo*, l. 788.
[69] *Beppo*, ll. 593–4.
[70] *Don Juan* I, l. 6.
[71] *Don Juan* XII, ll. 673–4; *Don Juan* XV, ll. 100–2.
[72] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), ed. by Adam Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 389–91 (p. 389).
[73] Letter to Moore, 28 October 1815, *BLJ* IV, 322.

Don Juan is an ideal of self-possession, closely related to a freedom from religious dread, marked by an 'interpoise of wit, gaiety, and social generosity':

> Rank, fortune, wit, talent, acquired knowledge, and liberal accomplishments, with beauty of person, vigorous health, and constitutional hardihood,—all these advantages, elevated by the habits and sympathies of noble birth and national character, are supposed to have combined in *Don Juan*…[74]

Byron's Don Juan shares in some of these advantages. In addition to the dubious 'accomplishments of chivalry', he possesses, or so we learn in the early cantos, 'youth,' 'talent and good humour', 'promise', 'goodliness and grace'.[75] His good manner goes a long way to carrying him through his various adventures and eases his social successes wherever he goes, and may have something in common with what Barbara Everett has called 'that highly English social phenomenon, the use of manners to get away with almost anything'.[76]

And yet there is more to this good manner than an aristocratic self-confidence or lordly urbanity. In Juan's case, the *sang-froid* of the notorious atheist is translated into something closer to an ideal of sincerity and natural spontaneity. Coleridge associated the speculative opinions of Don Juan with life abandoned to the 'gratification of the passions and appetites' and lived according to 'each individual's self-will'.[77] In the early cantos of *Don Juan*, Byron makes Juan as susceptible as any other young man to the irrepressible dictates of the body, and is keen to offer evidence of instances in which the spirit is ruled by the senses, including in the episode in which Juan, in soulful mood, 'turn'd, without perceiving his condition, / Like Coleridge, into a metaphysician':

> If *you* think 'twas philosophy that this did,
> I can't help thinking puberty assisted.[78]

In Coleridge's account it is the 'super-human *entireness* of *Don Juan*'s agency' which makes the character such a splendidly appealing figure, in spite of his wickedness, and which gives him 'the means of carrying into all

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[74] Coleridge, *Biographia*, pp. 389, 384.
[75] *Don Juan* I, l. 301; XII, 677; XIII, 117–18, I, 385.
[76] Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 91.
[77] Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 384.
[78] *Don Juan* I, ll. 727–8, 743–4.

its *practical* consequences the doctrine of a godless nature'.[79] The good-natured Juan has, of course, no such intentions. Generally the sport of fortune, and in his sexual encounters merely yielding to his present feelings, Juan, in all his guilelessness and goodheartedness, tends to be swept from one misadventure to another, so that if he lives according to accident this is not because of a self-willed dedication to a doctrine of personal gratification, but because his ability to act on his own account is continually tested by forces beyond his control.

As a narrative, this often brings *Don Juan* to that intersection of scepticism and comedy described by Fred Parker, who describes a 'spirit of sceptical comedy' which may oppose the spontaneous to the merely intellectual and celebrate 'the instinctual spontaneity of the body'.[80] Literature of this kind will value the spontaneous and unreflective impulse over the systematic and reasoned, and is likely to offer a 'vision of human contrivance and deliberation as foolish and futile', as he notes.[81] In Juan's mixed fortunes, these elements are very often much in play. To a large extent, many of his sexual and social successes are a matter of going with the flow, of yielding to what comes about.

And yet we also sense that Juan adapts himself to various vicissitudes with a degree of tact, resourcefulness and courage. Thrown back on his own resources, he has the capacity to respond to events with a degree of flexibility and poise, though he may be *ad libbing*, for he possesses—as we learn in one of the late cantos—'the art of living in all climes with ease.[82] This is exactly what is called for when arriving at the court of Catherine the Great:

> Though modest, on his unembarrassed brow
> Nature had written 'gentleman.' He said
> Little, but to the purpose; and his manner
> Flung hovering Graces o'er him like a banner.[83]

In this case, having a good manner means having the facility to rise to the occasion, and being able to encounter surprises with a degree of equanimity, and in such moments, Juan seems to be carried through his misadventures with the luck available only to someone who has mastered 'the art of living' with a degree of success. This

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[79] Coleridge, *Biographia*, pp. 386, 384.
[80] Parker, *SL*, pp. 190–91 (speaking of Sterne, and more generally—this thesis turns to some aspects of the influence of Sterne on Byron in the next chapter).
[81] *Ibid*.
[82] *Don Juan* XV, l. 88.
[83] *Don Juan* IX, ll. 661–4.

manner of encountering the doubtful conditions of life with an ambition to make the most of his fortunes, and even to turn unluck into luck, may correspond with the wit and imagination of the rhyming poet who is capable of making an art out of accident.

As this suggests, the good manner of Byron's hero may be very closely related to his own manner of writing in *Don Juan*: there is the informality of style, the facility of its technique, and the ease with which its conversational tone is reconciled with the formality of rhyme. In his review of *Beppo,* Francis Jeffrey described the poem as 'characterised, exactly as good conversation is, … by its constant ease and amenity', and remarked on its 'politeness, and good humour'.[84] For this the *ottava rima* poetry looks back in many respects to Augustan models, finding in Dryden and Pope a stylistic ideal that relates the techniques of successful poetry to the ease of 'good conversation'. In *An Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1668), Dryden had canvassed the risks and skilfulness involved in turning 'ordinary Conversation' into rhymed poetry, and Byron was similarly conscious of his handling of what should, on the face of it, be the unfeasibility of adapting the rhythms of speech to rhymed verse.[85]

Pope, too, had insisted that there was an art to appearing artless: 'True ease in writing comes from Art, not Chance, / As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance.'[86] As noted in the last chapter, Byron embarked on *Beppo* having 'lately gone over some of our Classics—particularly *Pope*', and it is Pope's 'ease in writing' that the ironic appeal in *Beppo*, 'Oh that I had the art of easy writing…' is probably intended to recall.[87] It is essential to the character of the *ottava rima* poetry that it does not always possess a polite social manner: as F. R. Leavis observed of Byron—with Pope's 'complete and formal urbanity' in mind—'not only is he not polite, the very essence of his manner is a contemptuous defiance of decorum and propriety'.[88] But if Byron sometimes openly revolted against these Augustan models, his self-consciousness of his own formal resources was deeply in tune with them. Dryden remarked that Milton's reason for the 'abolishing of Rhyme' was 'plainly this, that Rhyme was not his Talent; he had neither the Ease of doing it, nor the Graces of it'.[89] Byron expressed a similar

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[84] Jeffrey, unsigned review of *Beppo*, p. 303.
[85] *An Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1668), *Works*, XVII (1972), 8–81 (p. 70). Dryden was concerned more specifically with a defence of rhymed verse as a serious medium for dramatic poetry.
[86] Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, ll. 362–3, *Works*, p. 74.
[87] Beppo, l. 401.
[88] Leavis, *Revaluation*, p. 150.
[89] John Dryden, *Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* (1692), *Works*, IV (1974), 2–90 (p. 15). Cf. Samuel Johnson, in his 'Life of Milton', p. 294.

view in 1820 when conveying his distaste for 'Blank Verse', which 'no one except Milton ever wrote who could rhyme—'[90]

Byron's regard for his rhymes is one of the clearest signs that he was deeply interested in the sorts of internal 'aesthetic principles' which McGann's theoretical model consciously looks beyond. By applying a methodology that defines 'form' as the sum of the 'arrangements that we do in fact make because of our running experience of our lives in the world' it is possible to refer to the 'notorious lack of form in *Don Juan*', but on any other view, 'what form means' in the poem is a question of stanzaic arrangement, rhyme, and other matters of 'internal' design.[91] 'Even the least obtrusive rhyme', as John Creaser points out, 'establishes the essential threshold of artifice for entering an artistic experience'.[92] Events do not occur in rhyme, and Dryden's speaker acknowledges in the *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, 'no man in ordinary conversation speaks in rhime'.[93] According to Dryden, having the 'Graces' of rhyme is a question of having 'the Ease of doing it'. This notion that rhyme should be a test of the poet's *savoir-faire* is reflected in Byron's own trust in his technique: 'I'm fond of rhyme, / Good workmen never quarrel with their tools,' he remarks in the first canto of *Don Juan,* using a phrase he would revisit in the 'Epistle to John Murray', where he insisted that 'the poet who executes best—is the highest'.[94] This might even approach a kind of faith in rhyme: not in rhyme as a revelation, but a trust in its chances, held by a poet who knows himself to have the 'Graces' of it.

III

In March 1819, Murray wrote to Byron at Venice with an entreaty:

> … everyone is expecting & asking for something from you – here is Foscolo at my side – deploring that a Man of your genius will not occupy some Six or Eight years in the Composition of a Work & Subject worthy of you – & this you have promissed to Gifford long ago & to Hobhouse & Kinnaird – since –[95]

[90] 'Some Observations', 112.
[91] McGann, *DJC*, pp. 116, 114.
[92] John Creaser, 'Rhymes, Rhyme, and Rhyming', *Essays in Criticism*, 62.4 (2012), 438–460 (p. 454).
[93] *Dramatick Poesie*, p. 70.
[94] *Don Juan* I, ll. 1605–6; 'Letter to John Murray'*,* 142–3, 146.
[95] Letter from Murray to Byron, 19 March 1819, *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*, ed. by Andrew Nicholson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 267. See also Murray to Byron, 15 June 1813, p. 34.

By this time Byron was resolving on bringing out *Don Juan* anonymously, having been repeatedly advised by Albemarle St. that '*it will be impossible to publish this*', and by that July it would be in print.[96] Murray's appeal is notable for coming at a time when Byron was tending to release himself from obligations, or at least from obligations in particular. He felt disinclined to sweat over a 'great work'—or so he claimed in his reply to Murray—and that was the same temper that characterised his first reference to the poem: 'It is called "Don Juan", and is meant to be a little quietly facetious upon every thing'.[97] Murray's plea that Byron fulfil his promise raises a question about the obligations of a poem in which there is much to suggest the pleasures of irresponsibility.

In *Beppo* he did much to openly relinquish higher artistic commitment, as if carrying into effect his long-held habit of looking askance at other poets who venture on 'exquisite stuff, when they clap on sail, and aim at fancy'.[98] To a significant extent these elements of style are carried forward into *Don Juan*, which in many ways pursues a pointedly conversational, poetry-scorning technique, communicating a distrust of the seriously literary and announcing its freedom from serious artistic obligation: 'you are 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?—a playful satire with as little poetry as could be helped'.[99] Light verse, as this suggests, may be an apt medium in which to entertain doubts about poetry.

Of course, Byron's claim that he wished to be merely 'a little quietly facetious upon every thing' is hardly to be taken at face value. There have always been critics who have thought that, on the contrary, as Ronald Bottrall wrote, it is only on leaving England 'that Byron begins for the first time to take himself seriously either as a man or as an artist'.[100] This view has been taken very far in some of the modern criticism. According to Jerome McGann, Byron viewed 'invention or creativity as a means to an end', and his poem bears an instrumental relation to more serious moral and ethical commitments: '*Don Juan*'s inventions serve an intellectual (and, ultimately, moral) purpose'.[101] This is a critical method that seeks to exact significant

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[96] Letter from Hobhouse to Byron, 5 January 1819, *Byron's Bulldog: The Letters of John Cam Hobhouse to Lord Byron* (Columbus: University of Ohio Press, 1984), p. 257.
[97] Letters to Murray, 6 April 1819, *BLJ* VI, 105; Moore, 19 September 1818, *BLJ* VI, 67–68.
[98] Letter to James Hogg, 24 March [1814], *BLJ* IV, 85.
[99] Letter to Murray, 12 August 1819, *BLJ* VI, 208.
[100] Ronald Bottrall, 'Byron and the Colloquial Tradition in English Poetry', in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. by M. H. Abrams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 210–227 (p. 212).
[101] McGann, *DJC*, pp. 161, 165.

obligations from Byron. Historically, though, the opposite view—one stressing the poem's irresponsibility—has more usually prevailed. To his contemporaries *Beppo* seemed to have announced a new disposition to lightness; before that, the editors of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* informed him, 'if you were an immoral and an unchristian, you were at least, a serious, poet'.[102]

In fact, *Beppo*, though so seemingly uncomplicated by thoughts of poetry's more weighty responsibilities, was also meant to contain 'politics & ferocity', as Byron warned Murray.[103] He was referring to the poem's sardonic praise for English liberties: 'I like the freedom of the press and quill; / I like the Habeas Corpus (when we've got it)…', a passage which is crowned with a final piece of irony:

> God save the Regent, Church, and King!
> Which means that I like all and every thing.[104]

This is almost certainly meant to echo Pope's mock panegyric for the sovereign in the *Epistle to Augustus*:

> Oh! could I mount on the Maeonian wing,
> Your Arms, your Actions, your Repose to sing![105]

Pope's account of the relations between politics and poetry in his time includes a wonderfully ironic passage entertaining the case against poets:

> We Poets are (upon a Poet's word)
> Of all mankind, the creatures most absurd:
> The season, when to come, and when to go,
> To sing, or cease to sing, we never know …[106]

This poised piece of mock self-depreciation leads to Pope's proud defence of the modern poet, whose moral and social responsibilities are affirmed in the highest terms. Byron's lines from *Beppo* have none of the same

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[102] 'Letter to the Author of Beppo', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, III (June 1818), 323–9 (p. 329).
[103] Jeffrey, unsigned review of *Beppo*, p. 303. See letters to Murray, 19 and 27 January 1818, BLJ VI, 7, 9.
[104] *Beppo*, ll. 372–4, 383–4.
[105] Pope, *Epistle to Augustus* (1737), ll. 394–5, *Works*, p. 372.
[106] *Ibid*., ll. 358–61, p. 371.

moral pretension, but that is not to say that the idea at their centre, the poet's liking for the 'freedom of the … quill', is being taken lightly.

And yet a responsibility of a different kind is affirmed when the poet in *Beppo* raises the question of his fidelity to his 'present measure'. His story is running on at length, he confesses, because

> … just as the stanza likes to make it,
> It needs must be—and so it rather lingers;
> This form of verse began, I can't well break it,
> But must keep time and tune like public singers…[107]

This ironic submission to the demands of rhyme underlines Byron's preference for a scheme which demands substantial metrical obligations of its poet. The lines—with their deliberately bad rhyme of 'lingers' and 'singers'—raise a joke about the prospect of a poet comically at the mercy of his own medium, but in fact Byron did become unusually and 'cursedly' worried about printing errors in *Beppo*: 'it spoils both sense & rhyme'.[108] His seriousness about a formal effect which otherwise conveys such a large element of happy irresponsibility indicates the profound importance to him of rhyme even in his lightest poetry.

As the lines from *Beppo* suggest, rhyme may raise questions about where the poet's obligations are owed. Behind this is a more general question about the capacity of any rhymed poetry to be faithful to the truth—one of which Byron was fully conscious. 'I doubt if *laureate* and *Iscariot* be good rhymes', he noted on the fair copy of the 1818 Dedication to *Don Juan*, against some draft lines insulting the Poet Laureate Robert Southey:

> but must say as Ben Jonson did to Sylvester, who challenged him to rhyme with
> I, John Sylvester,
> Lay with your sister.
> Jonson answered, 'I, Ben Jonson, lay with your wife.' —Sylvester answered, 'that is not *rhyme*.'—'*No*,' said Ben Jonson; 'but it is *true*.'[109]

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[107] *Beppo*, ll. 499–502.
[108] Letter to Hobhouse, 3 March 1818, *BLJ* VI, 19. See also letters to Murray, 25 February 1818, *BLJ* VI, 15, and Hobhouse, 5 March 1818, *BLJ* VI, 21.
[109] Unpublished Dedication to *Don Juan* (1818), variant lines at 87–8n (making Southey 'a hackney Laureat' and 'scribbling self–sold soul–hired scorned Iscariot'). In the event Byron thought better of the rhyme and changed it to one on 'Castlereagh'.

This pungent witticism, with its scenario of unfaithfulness, recognises that truth and rhyme may not always lie happily together (in the event the rhyme was cancelled, suggesting that in this case Byron's doubts may have prevailed). Rhyme, as this recognises, is a formal feature of poetry which may or may not sort well with the truth. Indeed he was often disposed to put 'good rhymes' first. One instance is the well-known solecism in the final canto of *Childe Harold*: 'there let him lay' (not 'lie', so that it might rhyme with 'bay'), a rhyme apparently 'botched up for the minute', as George Saintsbury complained.[110] 'I have a doubt about lay,' William Gifford noted on one of the proofs in early 1818. Byron wrote back: 'So have I—but the *post* and *indolence* and *illness!!*' [111] This sounds like a surrender to the contingencies that surround composition. But although the lines have been much remarked upon, Byron's own final words on the matter do not yet seem to have been brought into the debate: 'The wicked necessity of rhyming retains "lay"—in spite of sense & grammar', he had decided a few days after writing to Gifford, which seems to have less to do with carelessness (the charge usually brought against the lines) than it does with a reluctance to forsake a rhyme that had come to seem right originally ('I can't, I can't').[112]

Byron revisited his phrase in an 1821 *jeu d'esprit* on Wordsworth, 'The perusal of whom (as I told you at Mestri) / I owe, in great part, to my passion for pastry.' Sending this sally to Moore he conceded that 'it was from Fusina that you and I embarked, though "the wicked necessity of rhyming" has made me press Mestri into the voyage.'[113] Raising a traditional doubt about the fidelity of rhymed poetry to the truth by recalling Dryden's commentary on 'the necessity of a rhime' from the *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, this comment underlines Byron's general preference for the bondage of rhyme over the greater liberties of unrhymed verse. [114]In McGann's view,

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[110] *Childe Harold* IV, l. 1620; Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody*, III, 96.
[111] *Childe Harold* IV, 1620n.
[112] Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody*, III, 96; letter to Hobhouse, 5 March 1818, *BLJ* VI, 21 (this letter was not included in Prothero's edition and so was not available to early readers). It was E. H. Coleridge who first drew attention to the solecism: see editorial note, *The Works of Lord Byron. Poetry*, 7 vols (London: John Murray, 1898–1904), II (1899), 458, 2n. For more recent discussion of the lines, see Erica McAlpine, *The Poet's Mistake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), pp. 3, 9; Gavin Hopps, 'Byron and Grammatical Freedom', in *Liberty and Poetic Licence: New Essays on Byron* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), pp. 166–80 (p. 166). The lines generated an improbably lively debate in *The Times* in 1873, after Robert Browning mocked them in *Fifine at the Fair* (1872), LXVII.38–40, *Robert Browning: The Poems,* ed. by John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins, 2 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), II, 38; *The Times,* 2 January 1873, quoted in Andrew Nicholson, 'Byron's Copy of Childe Harold IV: Emendations and Annotations,' *The Byron Journal.* 35.1 (2007), 19–25 (p. 23).
[113] Letter to Moore, 22 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 68.
[114] *Dramatick Poesie*, p. 69.

Byron was dedicated in *Don Juan* to 'the truth, or truths, which could be brought to light with the aid of the devices of poetry,' meaning 'the truth about something outside poetry altogether.'[115] But a poet may also have obligations that lie elsewhere. The poet of *Don Juan* often makes a joke about being compelled by his rhymes (*'*the verse / Requires it, that's to say, the English rhyme…'), so that if the poem calls into question the entireness of the agency of its hero, the same may be said of its poet, whose capacity to exercise his liberty in rhyme represents a continual test of will.[116] This allegiance to what Dryden calls the 'Dominion' of rhyme must complicate McGann's assertion that the verse Dedication to *Don Juan*—even with its appeal to Milton and rhyme of 'Laureate' and 'Tory at'—is as 'republican in its literary theory as it is in its politics'.[117] McGann's premise is that 'Aesthetic form restricts the possible arrangements of the materials to the laws of internal coherence', but it is on such limitations that Byron's best styles depend: in the debate between rule and freedom, he welcomed the necessity of rhyme as the greater test of skill.[118]

The truth is that Byron was incorrigibly susceptible to the appeal of a good rhyme—perhaps even to a fault: 'A good rhyme about *particle* and *article* was not to be given up', remarked Leigh Hunt dryly of Byron's lines on Keats's death in *Don Juan*.[119] And there was his droll stroke of wit in 1820 when taking up again with *Hints from Horace*, a poem in which he had indiscreetly abused so many people who later became friends: 'The "Hints &c." are good are they? As to the friends we can change their names unless they rhyme well—in that case they must stand.'[120] Rhyme, as this suggests, may ask questions of a poet's loyalties. In *The Beauty of Inflections*, McGann directs our attention to the process of a 'poem's socialization' by countless readers who will each—as he says of *Don Juan* in his earlier work—'make arrangements with it'.[121] This directs our attention to the poet's allegiances to what lies 'outside poetry altogether.' And yet there may also be an element of sociability in a poet's fidelity to his rhymes (one thinks of Pope's teasing gallantry to the Blount sisters: 'I intended to have put this last into Verse, but in this Age of Ingratitude my best Friends forsake me, I mean my

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[115] McGann, *BI*, p. 1601; McGann, *DJC*, p. 163.
[116] *Don Juan* VI, 137–8.
[117] Unpublished Dedication to *Don Juan*, ll. 1, 3; McGann, *DJC*, p. 111; Dryden, *A Defence of An Essay of Dramatique Poesie* (1669), *Works*, IX (1966), 3–22, (p. 7).
[118] McGann, *DJC*, p. 110.
[119] 'Poor fellow! His was an untoward fate: — / 'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle, / Should let itself be snuffed out by an Article.' See *Don Juan* XI, ll. 479–80; *HVSV*, 311 (51n).
[120] Letter to Hobhouse, 21 September 1820, *BLJ* VII, 178.
[121] McGann, *BI*, p. 51; McGann, *DJC*, p. 116.

Rhimes —')[122] There is an attractive comic humility in this idea of a poet fulfilling duties not merely in rhyme, but to rhyme, implying a deference to their seeming independence (recalling the sociable disposition of the free-thinking rhymes in *Beppo*), as well as a responsibility to art itself.

Byron, of course, often brought his poem into very different relation with the 'necessity of rhyming' than had been envisaged by Dryden or Pope. In the *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, Dryden's defence of rhyme was founded on an argument that it might be made 'as natural' as blank verse: he did not have comic poetry in mind.[123] Although Dryden's stylistic ideal is sometimes what Byron has in mind, at other times it is far from his purposes, and indeed he often looked elsewhere within the history of English poetry for models. After writing *Beppo*, he insisted of his poetry in the *ottava rima* that 'the style is not English—it is Italian', but it did have English affiliations; if Byron's 'manner was his own alone', this was partly a matter of taking what he admired of the 'excellent manner' of Frere and making it his own.[124] Frere himself had referred *Whistlecraft* back to the example of *The Rape of the Lock*; 'no better since the days of Swift', Hobhouse reported delightedly, on reading Frere's work for the first time with Byron at Venice.[125] Although critics have sometimes differed over whether *Don Juan*'s primary generic relationship is with epic or romance, it is clear that the poem—which Byron variously described as both an 'epic' and a 'burlesque poem'—maintains good relations with both: to mingle elements of Pope's mock-heroic style with the lower idiom of the burlesque mode is one aspect of its happy art of bringing different styles together.[126]

But it is that second line of descent, the distinct burlesque tradition exemplified by the light verse of Butler and Swift, which has been more often overlooked (though it is the context in which Wimsatt considers *Beppo*'s 'philogyny' rhyme).[127] Its traditional property is 'double Rhyme,' which Dryden described as 'a

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[122] *Letter from Pope to Martha and Teresa Blount*, [September 1714], *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. by George Sherburn, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), I, 252.
[123] *Dramatick Poesie*, p. 68.
[124] Letters to Murray, 25 March 1818, *BLJ* VI, 24; 21 October 1817, *BLJ* V, 267.
[125] *The Works of John Hookham Frere in Verse and Prose*, ed. by W.E. Frere, 3 vols (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1872), I, p. clx; John Cam Hobhouse, *Recollections of a Long Life*, 6 vols (1909; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), II, 280; letter to Murray, 25 March 1818, *BLJ* VI, 24.
[126] Claude Rawson, for example, concentrates on the poem's 'pervasive fixation on epic or mock-heroic', while Richard Terry and A. B. England have emphasised the burlesque elements of the poem: see Rawson, *Satire and Sentiment*, p. 99; Richard Terry, '*Hudibras* Amongst the Augustans', *Studies in Philology*, 90.4 (1993), pp. 426–441 (p. 441); A. B. England, *Byron's Don Juan*, p. 85. For Byron's own descriptions of the poem's genre, see *Don Juan* I, l. 1593; Letter to Kinnaird, 26 October 1819, *BLJ* VI, 232; also *Don Juan* IV, ll. 21-24.
[127] Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, p. 164.

necessary Companion of Burlesque Writing'.[128] As noted in the first chapter of this thesis, it was by his 'wonderful' rhymes that Byron recalled Swift. The burlesque technique is a significant influence on Byron's rhymes throughout *Don Juan*, and a direct presence in some of his most audacious comic rhymes. *Beppo*'s 'fantastical' / 'gymnastical' / 'ecclesiastical' rhyme, for example, recalls that most famous of compound rhymes in Butler's *Hudibras*: 'Ecclesiastick,' / 'instead of a stick'.[129] In that case it is by way of Byron's flair for 'that unexpected discovery of resemblance between ideas supposed dissimilar, which is called Wit' that the dignity of the ecclesiastical is comically embarrassed. Byron's *bravura* 'intellectual' / 'hen-peck'd you all' rhyme from the first canto of *Don Juan* is in much the same spirit; and when he more than once compromises the dignity of 'philosopher'—by pairing it with 'amiably err', in one case—he is rhyming squarely within the tradition of Butler and Swift ('Experience is the chief philosopher,' he notes on that occasion).[130] Such rhymes are designed to signal the poet's freedom from the usual obligations: 'Hudibrastic rhymes', Beattie remarked, are 'unsuitable to all serious poetry, and even to the affected solemnity of the mock-heroic'.[131] But they do traditionally have a serious purpose, functioning as a constructive, disillusioning technique capable of undermining a whole variety of spurious human claims to importance. Though the casual irreverence is Byron's own, many of his rhymes take their cues from this tradition. In Byron's hands such rhymes become a sharp instrument that might be wielded against all forms of cant.

Rhymes of this kind might be considered one of the most bracing stylistic expressions of Byron's sceptical intelligence. The shift from intellect to experience performed by that last example is characteristic of a witty vein of disparagement of philosophical and intellectual explanation that is often on show in *Don Juan.* As in his festive assault on the pride of the 'intellectual', the technique is especially compelling where the integrity of the rhyme word is undermined (as is also the case when he sounds out the false virtue of 'Donna Julia's grandmamma'). It is a method he deploys brilliantly throughout the poem to convey his distrust of the single-minded or comprehensive explanation by insisting on its divisibility (this technique, and a conviction that claims to truth should be tested against experience, is implicit in the reference to his own supposed cynicism

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[128] Dryden, *Discourse*, p. 82.
[129] *Beppo* (1818), ll. 19–21; cf. Butler, *Hudibras*, I.i.11–12, p. 1.
[130] *Don Juan* I (1819), ll. 174–6; XV (1824), ll. 129-33. Among examples of this kind Butler uses '*Philosopher* / *Ross* over', and Swift 'philosopher'/ 'gloss over': see *Hudibras*, I.ii.1–2, p. 29; Swift's 'To a Lady' (1733), ll. 97–8, *Works*, p. 564. Also see Byron's lines from Canto III: 'He loved his child, and would have wept the loss of her, / But knew the cause no more than a philosopher' (ll. 207–8).
[131] Beattie, 'An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition', p. 349.

in his appeal to 'Diogenes, / Of whom half my philosophy the progeny is').[132] Across the *ottava rima* poetry this arises as a technique that might be applied to a whole range of unsound theories and creeds, each of which, according to Byron,

> leaves behind
> As many doubts as any other doctrine
> Has ever puzzled Faith withal, or yoked her in.[133]

Here the compound rhyme wittily undermines the pretensions of 'doctrine' to finality or comprehensiveness. As so often in *Don Juan*, it is the rhyme itself which functions as a shrewd expression of a salutary disbelief. In this case the rhyme is intended to cast doubt on human ambitions to resolve uncertainty, but, as in all of these examples, its irreverence also extends to art itself. Traditionally the burlesque technique functions as a bracing release from the illusions of art: it is said to spring from a distrust of art, and a wish to make a mockery of its conventions, and represents one means of turning 'the resources of poetic language against itself', as one critic of Swift has said.[134] Byron's comic rhymes often discharge this double function: in a rhyme like 'hen-peck'd you all' it is the high-minded artist as well as the intellectual who is cut down to size.

Another thing that Byron inherits from these predecessors is a high degree of self-consciousness about rhyme. When in the ninth canto of *Don Juan* the poet tells us that—

> Besides Platonic love, besides the love
> Of God, the love of Sentiment, the loving
> Of faithful pairs—(I needs must rhyme with dove,
> That good old steam–boat which keeps verses moving
> 'Gainst Reason—Reason ne'er was hand–and–glove
> With rhyme, but always leant less to improving
> The sound than sense)—besides all these pretences
> To Love, there are those things which Words name Senses;—

his parenthesis almost certainly remembers *Hudibras*:

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[132] *Don Juan* XV, ll. 583–4.
[133] *Don Juan* XIII, ll. 325–28.
[134] Oswald Johnston, 'Swift and the Common Reader', in *In Defence of Reading: A Reader's Approach to Literary Criticism*, ed. by Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York: Dutton, 1962), pp. 174–190 (p. 180).

(… For Rhyme the Rudder is of Verses,
With which like Ships they stear their courses.)[135]

Byron's stanza turns on his wordplay on 'sense', which may be either allied to reason and therefore opposed to rhyme, or, because the sound of a rhyme makes an appeal to the senses, allied to rhyme and opposed to reason. (Given that puns are based on words that are the same in sound but different in sense, there must be a special appeal in punning on the sense of 'sense'—which is another way of dealing in multiples.) In the essay on rhyme by W. K. Wimsatt already mentioned, which deals so illuminatingly with Byron's compound rhymes, rhyme is described as being made up of a 'harmony of sound and distinction of sense' and therefore as a 'wedding' of 'the sensory and the logical'.[136] Supposedly willing to be steered by his rhymes, the poet in this stanza declares his allegiance to the sensory realm twice over: by rhyming more according to 'sound than sense', and by making his appeal to the 'Senses' of the body over the pretended fidelity of 'faithful pairs'. And once the sensory appeal of rhyme is acknowledged, it is possible to see how allowing oneself to be led by sound in rhyme may indeed be like surrendering to 'those things which Words name Senses' in body.

Rhyme, which depends on accidents in sound, may, then, have a close affinity with what lies beyond reason, and it is that element of senselessness that is sardonically acknowledged by Byron's stanza. A strong consciousness of the 'half senseless' demands and limitations imposed by poetic form lies behind Paul Valéry's remark that 'Skilled verse is the art of a profound skeptic.'[137] By his account, aspects of poetic formality, 'compulsory meters, rhymes, fixed forms, and all that arbitrariness, adopted once and for all and ranged against ourselves,' may be viewed as 'fetters' which remind us that the conditions of our thinking may be 'no less fortuitous or futile than the conditions of a charade.'[138] Byron's stanza on rhyming ''Gainst Reason' is at once a mockery of poets who rhyme as 'needs must' merely because they lack ingenuity, and a statement about what it is to be a rhyming poet: driven by formal demands which must at some level be non-rational.

Where 'Rhyme the Rudder is of Verses,' we are likely to be in the realm of light verse. When Dryden wrote about 'the Graces' of rhyme his assumption was that the poet's words should be 'so order'd that the

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[135] *Don Juan* IX, ll. 585–92; Butler, *Hudibras* I.i.456–7, p. 14. (The allusion is not noted in the current edition).
[136] Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, p. 165.
[137] Paul Valéry, 'Concerning Adonis', *The Art of Poetry*, trans. by Denise Folliot (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958; repr. 1985), pp. 8–34 (pp. 16, 18).
[138] *Ibid*.

Rhyme naturally follows them, not they the Rhyme.'[139] This principle is one that Byron's comic rhymes were often designed to test. It was natural that in a stanza in which 'rhyme and reason are not 'hand–and–glove', he should allude to the author of *Hudibras*. In an essay on 'Reason' Butler expressed a deep suspicion of the irrationality of poets, who as a class are all too prone to 'propose Wit and Fancy for their End, and take in Sense and Reason only as circumstantial and on the Bye.'[140] In *Hudibras* Butler includes a satire on his character Whachum, a charlatan and poetaster who makes rhymes on the astrological calendar appearing to presage real events, 'With their *Returns*, in *Doggerel*'— 'a senseless project', as one of his modern critics points out.[141] Given that a rhyme sound, once chosen, has a determining effect on the next, it is possible to see how rhyme may be viewed as having a predictive force.

A willingness to give priority to sound is often a feature of comic rhymes, which is why some kinds of light verse may provide us with 'glimpses of an art in which words come first', as Seamus Perry has said of nonsense verse, referring to W. H. Auden's comments from *The Dyer's Hand*: 'The effect of a comic rhyme is as if the words, on the basis of their auditory friendship, had taken charge of the situation, as if, instead of an event requiring words to describe it, words had the power to create an event.'[142] Related questions of sound and sense are a feature of sociable rhyming games like *crambo*. During the separation proceedings in 1816, Lady Byron recalled making 'Bout-rimés Nonsense at Seaham' with Byron in the first months of their marriage, including the following rhyming pairs, with her contributions in italics:

> If rhymes be omens what a fate is ours—
> *And bread and butter eagerly devours*.
>
> *My husband is the greatest goose alive*
> I feel that I have been a fool to wive.[143]

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[139] *Dramatick Poesie*, pp. 78–9.
[140] Samuel Butler, *Characters and Passages from Note-Books*, ed. by A. R. Waller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), p. 340.
[141] Butler, *Hudibras*, II.iii.357–62, p. 162; David J. Rothman, ''Hudibras' in the Doggerel Tradition', *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660–1700*, 17.1 (1993), 15–29 (p. 19).
[142] Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, p. 380; quoted by Seamus Perry, 'Auden's Lear', in *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Bevis and James Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) pp. 300–16 (p. 313).
[143] *CPW* III, 283, endorsed by Lady Byron as 'Bout-rimés Nonsense at Seaham 1815.' Also see Malcolm Elwin, *Lord Byron's Wife* (London: Macdonald, 1962), pp. 275-6; McGann, editorial notes, *CPW* III, 282.

'If rhymes be omens', then a writer of verse might entertain the possibility of foredoomed in rhyme; this sportive after-dinner verse-making, wedding two hands in rhyme, in retrospect assumes a portentousness, prophesying not union but a ruinous lack of mutual understanding (late in *Don Juan* Byron refers to his marriage as the moment when 'Those became one who soon were to be two').[144] Robert Douglas-Fairhurst has written that 'because its returns of sound arch across boundaries of sense, it is possible for rhyme to construct a scaffolding of faith that evades the demands of rational thought.'[145] So too might rhyme be allied with other non-rational intuitions, like superstition, and Byron's senseless idea of being fated in rhyme, like his later claim about his 'presentiment' about the unhappy fatality of his marriage, engages what was always an active side of his temper. It is interesting to note that it was another great rhymer who soon sprung to his mind in relation to his marriage. A month after the wedding he wrote to Moore to say, 'I am awake, and find myself married. … Swift says "no wise man ever married;" but, for a fool, I think it the most ambrosial of all possible future states.'[146] The marriage certainly fulfilled Moore's own growing 'doubts and misgivings', indeed 'foreboding', ahead of the wedding, about Byron's 'fitness, under any circumstances, for the matrimonial tie….'[147] 'What a fool I was to marry', Byron would continue to repeat after the estrangement.[148]

There may, of course, have been more than an element of self-justification in Byron's fatalism about his marriage, a comfort in the idea that it was a preordained disunion. In the *bouts-rimés* from 1815, the element of determinism in rhyme, entertained within the arbitrary limits of a charade, may suggest the surrender of responsibility that may be involved when a writer of verse chooses to submit to rhyme. Byron's most daring comic and compound rhymes were designed in part to announce his freedom from the ordinary responsibilities of verse. Writing on *Hudibras*, Saintsbury described 'doggerel of the right kind' as poetry in which 'a wilful licentiousness which is excused by the felicitous result.' The good comic poet is '*is* justified by his result—and if he is not, he falls at once into the other class', that of the poet who writes 'merely bad verse'.[149] Many of Byron's comic rhymes have a self-justifying element to them: rhymes like 'hen-peck'd you all' which although they may have a satiric purpose also invite admiration in their own right. Speaking of the 'philogyny' rhyme in

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[144] *Don Juan* XII, l. 302.
[145] Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives*, p. 252.
[146] Letter to Moore, 2 February 1815, *BLJ* IV, 263.
[147] *MLJ*, II, 589.
[148] Letter to Augusta Leigh, 17 September 1816, *BLJ* V, 95.
[149] Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody*, I, 392.

Beppo, Wimsatt remarked that 'What convinces us that "dog any" belongs in this stanza is not so much its inevitable or appropriate meaning as the fact that it does rhyme.'[150] Poets who choose to 'stear their courses' by rhyme, by overturning the usual relationship between sound and meaning in verse, may also call into question the usual primacy of intention in composition. In his study of rhymed poetry in the nineteenth century, McDonald writes that the involvement of chance in rhyme makes 'the question of intention, and its limitations, a pressing one.'[151] This question was of course no less pressing or interesting for Byron than the authors primarily canvassed by his study, though it was one that he was prepared to test in part by being open to this more daring activity of living according to results.

Such rhymes tend to bring questions about purpose to a point. Dryden's reservations about Butler's double rhymes were mitigated by his appreciation for 'his good Sense': 'We pass through the Levity of his Rhyme, and are immediately carri'd into some admirable useful Thought'.[152] Butler himself cautioned that poets should treat 'Stile only as Instrumentall,' and not mistake their 'Tooles, for that which they only serve to worke upon', and Byron, as already noted, more than once referred to his rhymes as his 'tools'.[153] These debates between 'Levity' and utility in rhyme may be particularly relevant to the burlesque poet, whose rhymes are intended to question the formal conventions and therefore the authority of art itself. The constructive irreverence of the burlesque technique is designed to release the reader from illusions, including the illusions of art, which is why Butler is often viewed as a poet hostile to the aesthetic interest, even, as David Farley-Hills has written, a 'poet who despised the poetic'.[154] In this respect, of course, 'Butler runs into contradiction: you can only defy poetic convention by to some extent obeying it,' as Farley-Hills notes.[155] Indeed Butler's own style arguably points in some respects away from his criticism of 'those, who mistake their Ends,' by treating style as something more than instrumental, because audacious multiple rhymes like 'Ecclesiastick,' / 'instead of a stick' inevitably make a claim to attention in their own right, and may even start to appear as ends in themselves.[156] Butler wanted to restore sense to poets who, being too much employed 'upon Fancy and words', are prone to

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[150] Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, p. 165.
[151] McDonald, *Sound Intentions*, p. 29.
[152] Dryden, *Discourse*, p. 82.
[153] Butler, *Characters*, p. 340, quoted in David Farley-Hills, *The Benevolence of Laughter: Comic Poetry of the Commonwealth and Restoration* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 188.
[154] Farley-Hills, *The Benevolence of Laughter*, p. 50.
[155] Farley-Hills, p. 188.
[156] Farley-Hills, p. 188.; Butler, *Characters*, p. 340.

losing their grip on 'their Reason, and Judgements'.[157] On another view, however, precisely because the rhyme comes 'thick upon us', as Dryden said, *Hudibras* is a poem in which words predominate.[158] The business of ridiculing poetry in poetry may be especially paradoxical in rhymed poetry, in which it will be very difficult to evade the element of the literary: rhyme, as John Creaser remarks, may be 'the epitome of literariness through sound, as the pun is through sense'.[159]

Rhyme must similarly complicate any portrait of Byron as a poet with a predominantly instrumental view of style. In McGann's account, the Byron of *Don Juan* was 'definitely' committed to the idea that 'form in art is function, or the use to which the poem is meant to be put.'[160] This perspective provides a useful counterweight to the long critical tradition in which *Don Juan* has been viewed as lacking in serious purpose, but in addition to overlooking the fact that the poem is full of the kind of self-sufficing comedy that dissolves such instrumental concerns, it is very hard to square with Byron's peerless virtuosity as a comic rhymer—his willingness, in some moods, to entertain 'good rhymes' over good sense, his weakness for the self-vindicating pleasures of rhyme. ''Tis always with a moral end / That I dissert,' the poet of *Don Juan* indeed informs us, but this is often far from clearly the case, and the poem of which McGann can state confidently that 'invention or creativity was a means to an end' is the same work of which George Ridenour could say, 'the difficulty seems to arise …from the aimlessness, the apparent pointlessness of it all'.[161] These critical debates are not limited to rhyme, but they are brought into focus by rhyme with a particular clarity.

This question of means and ends may be of particular relevance to *Don Juan*. Indeed a case could be made that in *Don Juan*, means are everything. It was a possession of worldly means that Coleridge emphasised in his account of Don Juan in *Biographia Literaria*. With his accumulation of personal advantages, including his gentlemanly manner, 'the character of *Don John* consists in the union of every thing desirable to human nature, as *means*, and which therefore by the well known law of association become at length desirable on their own account.'[162] This worldly regard for means, which may be closely associated with sexual success, invites an ethical confusion between means and ends that might be replicated at the level of poetry. Seamus Perry

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[157] Butler, *Characters*, p. 340.
[158] John Dryden, *Discourse*, p. 82.
[159] John Creaser, 'Rhymes, Rhyme, and Rhyming', *Essays in Criticism*, 62.4 (2012), 438–460 (p. 454).
[160] McGann, *DJC*, p. 109.
[161] *Don Juan* XII, ll. 306–7; McGann, *DJC*, p. 161; George Ridenour, *The Style of Don Juan* (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1969), p. ix.
[162] Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 389.

describes the 'distinction between ends and means' that is 'fundamental to Coleridgean ethics', and also deeply relevant 'to his thinking about poetry and poetic unity'.[163] In this respect, as Perry writes, the poetic imagination for Coleridge 'to some degree emulates the unificatory impulse of the Reason, "reducing multitude to unity"'.[164] In *Don Juan* Byron often relishes doing something very like the opposite: the narrative makes its pointed appeals to multiplicity over monogamy; and a similar instinct is at work in some of the poem's most serious affronts to respectability: whether the poet is dissolving the union of holy matrimony ('Surely 'tis nothing wonderful to see / One person thrice in holy wedlock bound!'); or facetiously multiplying the Trinity ('I devoutly wished the three were four, / On purpose to believe so much the more').[165] This is also evident in his compound rhymes, which so often make a multiple out of a unity, and otherwise do so much to offend against the idea that the ideal poet should among other things properly reconcile 'the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry', as Coleridge writes elsewhere in *Biographia Literaria*.[166]

In poetry, as in life, means might improperly become ends in themselves. Among Byron's contemporaries, it was William Hazlitt who seems to have been most aware of those elements in Byron's work that might suggest his pursuit of means over ends as a matter of style. (He was also, perhaps not coincidentally, the contemporary who seems to have been most bothered by Byron's means in life—his 'lordly' manner with its seeming 'assumption of superiority'.[167]) Indeed at some level he seems to have thought that Byron's poetry was all means: 'He seldom gets beyond force of style, nor has he produced any regular work or masterly whole', he charged in *The Spirit of the Age*. 'He cares little about what it is that he says,' so long as 'he shows his superiority of execution… Whatever he does, he must do in a more decided and daring manner than anyone else'.[168] Though obviously deeply unsympathetic, this account responds to Byron's own esteem for the poet who is justified by his technique: 'the poet is always ranked according to his execution…', as he wrote in the 'Letter to John Murray'.[169] That emphasis on technique is most fully illustrated by the willing subversion of means and ends that may be implied by *virtuoso* rhymes, in which it is the technique which compels our attention: the rhyme itself becomes a display of means. What Hazlitt read as evidence of Byron's pursuit of 'the

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[163] Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 189, 192.
[164] *Ibid*., p. 192; Coleridge, *Biographia*, pp. 389–90.
[165] *Don Juan* V, ll. 156–7; *Don Juan* XI, ll. 47–8.
[166] Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 213.
[167] Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, *Works*, p. 75.
[168] *Ibid*., p. 72.
[169] 'Letter to John Murray', 141.

ways and means of procuring admiration' is also, of course, one of the pleasures of *Don Juan*, which communicates at every turn its self-consciousness of its considerable formal means, so that our sense of its stylistic resourcefulness, including its ease of manner, becomes essential to its effect.

The properly reciprocal relations between means and ends in poetry are open to being overturned by the comic poet. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge remarked that double and triple rhymes 'form a lower species of wit, and attended to exclusively for their own sake may become a source of momentary amusement'.[170] In *Don Juan* we are often invited to appreciate the independent appeal of good rhymes, and the tendency of these may be to appear as a succession of ends in themselves, each entertained 'for their own sake.' To the extent that its rhymes appear as a succession of independent gratifications in metre, they may even parallel the Don Juan story. This points towards one way in which rhyme relates to narrative in *Don Juan*, which is in expediting the poem's art of moving on. This is nicely illustrated when Juan must part with Catherine the Great:

> So much did Juan's setting off distress her,
> She could not find at first a fit successor.[171]

In this final couplet (another multiple rhyme about having multiple partners), what is indicated is not union but succession—an accumulation of partners without final significance, each entertained on their own account. In the Russian episode, if there is a 'union of every thing desirable to human nature, as *means*,' it belongs to Catherine the Great, for the idealised resources of the libertine have been converted into the sexual comedy of the diverse claims on Byron's diffident hero. Catherine lives according to the multiple gratifications of the sensory realm, and in these lines her worldliness in that respect is conveyed by a double rhyme which is a gratification in itself. This sexual encounter has all the elements of a self-justifying comic episode and is a good example of that superb component of narrative comedy which remains largely unaccounted for in McGann's description of a predominantly 'rhetorical and pragmatic' poem.[172] Encounters of this kind preserve a degree of irresponsibility towards the poem as a whole, as do Byron's comic rhymes, which often resist attempts to read them as instrumental in more serious ends.

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[170] Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 254.
[171] *Don Juan* X, ll. 75–6.
[172] McGann, *DJC*, p. 109.

Hazlitt's sense that Byron was all about 'ways and means'—all style—may respond to that same element in his poetry that leads McGann to suggest that he admired 'order and reason' because they were 'methodical—ways rather than states of being', but with the opposite intuition. Both ways of looking at Byron draw attention to his unwillingness to gather his materials into a 'masterly whole'. The longstanding critical distrust of the poem's irresponsibility in this regard was well summarized in 1960 by George Ridenour:

> One of the principal obstacles to an appreciation of *Don Juan* on the part of many serious readers of poetry in our day has been what seems to them the irresponsible nature of Byron's satire. They feel that clever as the poem undoubtedly is in parts, taken as a whole it is immature, exhibitionistic, lacking in integrity.[173]

Here the problem arises when the poem is 'taken as a whole', when its lack of integrity from an artistic as much as an ethical perspective appears to be deeply subversive of responsibility. This view reflects the sense in which *Don Juan* is without 'singleness of character'—as Moore said of Byron himself. That view that *Don Juan* is 'lacking in integrity' has often been accompanied by a hope that the more offensive parts of the poem might be severable. John Sterling, for example—one of the poem's relatively few early Victorian admirers—felt that it would be a greater poem 'were some trivialities struck out, as they so easily might be'.[174] But the question of its formal integrity is an interesting one, because although Byron showed little interest in bringing his poem into an overall unity, at another level, he defended its wholeness when affirming his right not to revise: 'in short, Don Juan shall be an entire horse or none.'[175] This reflects his determination not to part with its more inflammatory satirical content, of course, but it hints too that there might be an artistic level at which the poem might be viewed as an indefeasible whole, and perhaps even an end in itself. This is implicit in the criteria against which Byron often insisted that *Don Juan* should be measured*:* 'good English & poetry'; 'fun & poetry'; 'I tell you *it is poetry*.'[176]

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[173] George R. Ridenour, 'A Waste and Icy Clime', in *Critical Essays on Lord Byron*, ed. by Robert Gleckner (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 11–32 (p. 11).
[174] John Sterling, review of Tennyson's *Poems*, 1842, *Quarterly Review*, 70 (September 1842), 385–416, in *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry, 1830–1870*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong (London: Athlone Press, 1972), p. 132.
[175] Letter to Hobhouse and Kinnaird, 19 January 1819, *BLJ* VI, 91.
[176] Letters to Richard Belgrave Hoppner, 29 October 1819, *BLJ* VI, 237; Kinnaird, 6 March 1819, *BLJ* VI, 101; Murray, 31 August 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 192.

In such moments, Byron reserves the rights of his poem to be irresponsible towards circumstances outside the poem. It was this sentiment that came to the fore in the *tour de force* of letters Byron dispatched to Albemarle St. between January and May 1819 while the publication of *Don Juan* was being debated:

> I *protest.*—If the poem has poetry—it would stand—if not—fall—the rest is "leather and prunella"… Dullness is the only annihilator in such cases.—
>
> If they had told me the poetry was bad—I would have acquiesced—
>
> The poem will please if it is lively—if it is stupid it will fail—
>
> —the question is to be reduced to this—is the poem clever or not?—if not—burn it—if well-written, publish.[177]

These letters, which are a wonderful thing in themselves, suggest that the idea that the good comic rhymer is 'justified by his result' might at some level hold true for the entire poem. Insisting that *Don Juan* be judged on its own account, they describe a poem that is at liberty to be nothing other than art. After the period of doubt leading up to the composition of the poem, there is a pleasure in their sureness, in their uncompromising insistence on poetry's right to be nothing other than good poetry. Again, all of this is difficult to square with McGann's confident proposition *Don Juan* is not 'its own reason for being' (that the poem might be read in the opposite way is suggested by Hazlitt's charge that it was, on the contrary, 'a poem written about itself').[178]

In many respects *Don Juan* responds to that tradition in light verse which contains what Barbara Everett described as an 'antipathy to the aesthetic – or, if not an antipathy, at least an adulteration of it'.[179] And yet the poetry that results can also be a paradoxically pure form of art—a celebration of good writing on its own account. In response to the charge of licentiousness, Byron adduced in his defence 'all the best Italian and French' poets, Pulci, Berni, and Voltaire, Chaucer, 'the Restoration writers,' Prior, Swift, Johnson, indeed '*Something* of most

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[177] Letters to Murray, 25 January, 1 February, and 6 April 1819, *BLJ* VI, 94, 99, 105, and to Kinnaird, 20 May 1819, IV, 136. 'Prunella and leather' is from Pope's *Essay on Man,* Epistle IV.204, *Works*, p. 274.
[178] McGann, *DJC*, p. 165; Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, p. 75.
[179] Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 260.

who have written before Pope …and much of Pope himself'.[180] What Byron offers, on 'a poet's word'—as Pope has it—is the word of other poets. 'The end of all scribblement is to amuse,' Byron remarked after reading some Walter Scott in 1810; this was an idea that he had always been willing to entertain, and the defence mounted in the letters of 1819 was one that he had long maintained about his work: 'if the poem is a *poem,*' he said of the objections to the first cantos of *Childe Harold,* 'it will surmount these obstacles, and if *not*, it deserves its fate.'[181]

IV

Byron's conviction that writing might be justified by being 'clever' or 'well-written' extended (up to a point) to what was written against him. Examples include a negative review of *The Giaour* ('the Article is very well written …I really think the writer in most parts very right')*;* John Gibson Lockhart's 'John Bull's letter' ('diabolically well written …I must forgive the dog whoever he is'); and, in 1819, 'I have received a very clever letter from Hobhouse against the publication of Don Juan…'[182] In response to this last objection, Byron repeatedly claimed that *Don Juan* was 'not intended to be serious'.[183] Of *Cain*, likewise, he denied that 'such things can have any *serious* effect—*who* was ever altered by a poem?'—and in the Preface to *The Vision of Judgment* he appealed to Swift among his 'cases in point of the freedom' available 'in works not intended to be serious.'[184] This did not mean that his poetry was conceding to unimportance. But it is significant Byron should claim for himself the licence of a writer of light verse, or 'at least the *liberty* of that *licence* if one likes'.[185] Releasing himself from the usual obligations, he could write out of the freedom of his conscience. There are serious implications to this right to be light-hearted, as this suggests, and the fact that he was able to publish *Don Juan* at all is one of the reasons Byron could call it 'the most moral of poems'.[186] It is therefore far from trivial that *Don Juan* should possess the freedoms of a poem merely 'meant to be a little quietly facetious upon everything'.

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[180] See letters to Hobhouse, 11 November 1818, *BLJ* VI, 77; Hobhouse and Kinnaird, 19 January 1819 *BLJ* VI, 9; and Murray, 25 January 1819, *BLJ* VI, 94; also see his self-defence via a rollcall of artists and thinkers in Don Juan VII, st. 3–4.
[181] Letters to Francis Hodgson, 3 October 1810, *BLJ* II, 20; Robert Charles Dallas, 7 September 1811, *BLJ* II, 92.
[182] Letters to Murray, 12 October 1813, *BLJ* III, 141; 29 June 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 145; Kinnaird, 27 January 1819, *BLJ* VI, 98.
[183] Preface to *The Vision of Judgment*, 311; letter to Murray, 12 August 1819, *BLJ* VI, 208.
[184] Letter to Murray, 3 November 1821, *BLJ* IX, 53; Preface to *The Vision of Judgment*, 311.
[185] Letter to Murray, 12 August 1819, *BLJ* VI, 208.
[186] Letter to Murray, 1 February 1819, *BLJ* VI, 99.

Far from absolving itself of all obligation, *Don Juan* is a poem with a profound interest in questions of responsibility. Indeed, in many respects it is a satire on the human incapacity for fidelity, of which sexual inconstancy is just one instance. Underlying the comedy of Don Juan's affairs is a pessimistic moral intuition about the obstacles to living a moral life: Juan, although far from heartless, is in practice incapable of constancy. *Don Juan* is full good intentions overruled by the senses, overtaken by events, or otherwise compromised. Often this translates into an amused acceptance of the weakness of the will: of how easily the 'vow takes wing,' as the narrator observes in himself.[187] On questions of sexual infidelity, the poem tends towards a portrait of human fallibility that is without righteousness, approaching what David Farley-Hills has described as a 'detached, sceptical comic literature that apportions neither praise nor blame'.[188] To some degree, this is a question of manner: when the events in *Beppo* are concluded 'courteously' we sense that this relates to civility in its largest sense—a counsel of tolerance extending beyond matters of love and marriage. Writing of Byron in the *Life,* Moore remarked on 'the kind courtesy and facility of his manners'; one serious function of Byron's light verse manner is that it aims to restore sensibilities.[189]

But *Don Juan* does not always extend such a benevolent spirit to those who are unfaithful to their vows. Byron is far less tolerant of the self-flattery of those who take pride in thinking that their 'intentions were the best', and the poem is fully aware of the more serious aspects of the human capacity for self-deception against which sexual misdemeanours appear merely human.[190] Byron had a deep sense of the hypocrisies of his age, and the poem in some lights is a largescale portrait of humanity's faithlessness. One representative figure is Lord Henry Amundeville, the politician making liberal promises: 'what with keeping some, and breaking others, / His word had the same value as another's.'[191] This was a faithlessness that extended to poets: 'To keep *one* creed's a task grown quite Herculean,' Byron remarks in his address to Southey in the Dedication. [192] *The Vision of Judgment*, a superbly light but substantial poem, an indictment of a lying Laureate, is also marked by the generous instinct by which it withholds judgment. In the Preface Byron informs us that in contrast to Southey, he writes 'as an honest man' and also 'more tolerantly'.[193]

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[187] *Don Juan* I, l. 949.
[188] Farley-Hills, *The Benevolence of Laughter*, p. 16 (in relation to his study of Rochester).
[189] *MLJ*, II, 649.
[190] *Don Juan* XIV, ll. 699, and see st. 85–88.
[191] *Don Juan* XVI, ll. 615–16. Also see. e.g., *Don Juan* II, ll. 290–2; XI, st. 6.
[192] Unpublished Dedication to *Don Juan*, ll. 134–6.
[193] Preface to *The Vision of Judgment*, 310.

Byron's use of a light verse manner does not imply that he is treating all matters lightly. Indeed what we often encounter in *Don Juan* is something closer to an ironic imitation of a social manner. Donald Davie put this well when he described the defining 'urbanity' of 'the manner of *Don Juan*' as 'an assurance never occupied but only acknowledged'.[194] Much of Byron's satire is aimed at the codes of civility that conceal dishonesty, in which case the stylistic grace and ease of manner that Byron inherits from Dryden and Pope can be turned to brilliantly ironic effect. This is the case for his wonderfully ungracious summing up of the behaviour of Lord Wellington: 'twas shabby, / And like some other things won't do to tell / Upon your tomb in Westminster's old abbey.'[195] This gains much of its effect from being an ironic form of a social manner, an inversion of the 'politeness, and good humour' of *Beppo*. This irreverent and deflating idiom is distinct from the ironic elevations of mock epic—and again Byron is indebted to a burlesque technique—though in its casualness this is quite different from anything to be found in Butler or Swift. The poem is full of offhand and abbreviated nods to epic: 'Thrones, worlds, et cetera,' 'human power and virtue, and all that'; and a range of other casual diminutions from a poet who tells us he is writing 'With no great care for what is nicknamed glory'.[196] Sometimes the effect is a charming comic bathos, as when the poet refers to 'our mighty passions and so forth,' for example, but at other times, the deprecating rhythms are there to respond to the ignominy of the contemporary scene.[197]

Don Juan, of course, contains much unmannerly insistence on various uncomfortable truths, and that question of how to write as 'an honest man' is in many ways the central creative concern of the later cantos. Whether this demands a fidelity to reality, a direct representation of 'the truth about something outside poetry altogether', as McGann puts it, is another question. That *Don Juan* possesses the liberty of verse 'not intended to be serious' continues to define the poem even when its material is far from light. This is particularly evident in the cantos that Byron wrote when he returned to *Don Juan* at Pisa in 1822, after his year's break from the poem, with his new publisher John Hunt. It was at this point that Byron first introduced a refrain which never really leaves the poem: 'I detest all fiction even in song, / And so must tell the truth, howe'er you blame it.'[198] Byron described this part of the poem as a 'satire upon heroes and despots and the present false state of politics

[194] Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), p. 130.
[195] *Don Juan* IX, ll. 10–12.
[196] *Don Juan* VI, l. 25; *Don Juan* XII, l. 20; *Don Juan* XV, 147.
[197] *Don Juan* VI, l. 22.
[198] *Don Juan* VI, ll. 59–60.

and society.'[199] 'Some of the incidents attributed to Don Juan really occurred,' he informed his readers in the 1823 Preface, among which he included the episode at the centre of these cantos, the Siege of Ismail.[200] At this point in the poem McGann highlights Byron's use of a 'precise historical event'; Claude Rawson remarks that Byron intends to jeer 'at epic expectation by contaminating it systematically with the 'plain truth' of modern warfare'.[201] 'All very accurate,' Byron indeed tells us, 'And *Epic*, if plain truth should prove no bar'.[202] But although he described the episode as 'a technical description of a modern siege' in large part it is not.[203] Its effect and originality are as much a question of style as of devotion to truth as historical accuracy.

When the civilian dwellings of the town of Ismail are about to be bombarded with all the 'poor souls' still inside, it is notable that Byron should be moved to a light verse technique:

> The City's shape suggested this, 'tis true;
> Formed like an amphitheatre, each dwelling
> Presented a fine mark to throw a shell in.[204]

In these lines a light verse rhythm and a rhyme which risks triviality are lent to a piece of faithful reporting on the pitilessness of war. The final couplet essentially owes itself to comic verse: the rhyme is not so different from one like 'doctrine' / 'yoked her in', though its bathos is turned to different effect, its flippancy conveying a note of bitterly disillusioned clarity. Across this part of the poem Byron frequently recurs to a light verse idiom and he often similarly courts a stylistic bathos. Another example is provided by a later passage, in which the poet refers to

> the very bravest, who were knocked
> Upon the head, before their guns were cocked.[205]

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[199] Letter to Kinnaird, 24 August 1822 *BLJ* IX, 195–6.
[200] Preface to Cantos VI–VIII (1823), *CPW* V, 295.
[201] McGann, editorial note, *CPW* V, 409; Claude Rawson, *Swift and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 128.
[202] *Don Juan* VIII, ll. 1100–1.
[203] Letter to Kinnaird, 24 August 1822 *BLJ* IX, 195–6.
[204] *Don Juan* VII, ll. 182–4.
[205] *Don Juan* VIII, ll. 343–4.

Here the rhyme is probably directly owed to *Hudibras*, with its distrust of heroes and their liking for 'Slaughter, and knocking on the head; / The Trade to which they all were bred'.[206] Though traditionally unsuited to 'serious poetry', the burlesque mode is inherently well adapted to bringing about a deflation of the glories of war, and in such lines, Byron fully deploys the possibilities of that ironic relation to epic. In Byron's lines, the disillusioning force of the comic technique introduces a note of objectivity that is key to conveying the impersonal outrages of war. It is with a detached and unflinching consciousness that he describes the fall of the town of Ismail, in the eighth canto:

> But still it falls with vast and awful splinters,
> As Oaks blown down with all their thousand winters.[207]

Here the impersonality of the light verse technique, and the bathos of 'vast and awful', work together to convey a kind of moral clarity.

What is remarkable about these passages is that light verse becomes the right medium for these truths. In these examples it is impossible to draw a strong distinction between 'the aesthetic principles of "the poem itself"' and the life of 'the poem in its relations with men and affairs outside itself'. A poet may hold true to more than one commitment, and questions of moral and artistic responsibility cannot always be separated so clearly in *Don Juan*, in which questions of truth tend to be inseparable from questions of style. Across these cantos Byron writes both as a man who is bound to 'tell the truth' and as a poet. This includes sounding out his own kind of 'honest arrangements' in rhyme, so that for all the poem's evasions of responsibility, including in metre, the fact that he holds true to his metrical scheme may represent a considerable integrity. This is another reason that he can say, as the Siege of Ismail episode is drawing to a close, 'Reader! I have kept my word'.[208]

To resolve the question of how to speak as an honest man, Byron sometimes made an appeal to the kinds of truths that can be verified by direct experience: 'fact is truth, the grand desideratum! [209] This is addressed in the next chapter of this thesis, which traces Byron's restless literary experimentation across and beyond the middle cantos of *Don Juan* in light of his commitment to liberty in writing.

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[206] Butler, *Hudibras,* II.321–24, p. 38.
[207] *Don Juan* VIII, ll. 703–4.
[208] *Don Juan* VIII, ll. 1097–8.
[209] *Don Juan* VII, ll. 641–44.

Chapter 4 – Returns

I

'—What was I to write about? I live in a different world.'[1] This comes from the opening of a letter sent to Augusta Leigh by Byron from Ravenna in June 1821. Before the end of that year, he would be installed at the Casa Lanfranchi at Pisa with Shelley over the river Arno. At Pisa, Medwin reported Byron's resolution to shut his door against 'all the travelling English'.[2] It was also at Pisa that Trelawny reported that in conversation he was 'anything but literary, except when Shelley was near him'; Ernest J. Lovell suggested that for the benefit of English visitors to Italy he 'assumed his character of man of the world and anti-poet.'[3] There was satisfaction to be taken in his distance from English preoccupations: 'here I am beyond the touch of the short arms of literary England—' he announced from Ravenna in another letter of 1821. Informing Murray that 'in Italy we know little of literary England & think less', he asked that he be sent no further English literary reviews, for he had come to the view that 'reading either praise or censure of myself has done me harm.—When I was in Switzerland and Greece I was out of the way of hearing either—& *how I wrote there!*'[4] This preference for being 'out of the way' was, he added, a matter of remaining '*free and* unbiased …To let my Genius take it's natural direction' [*sic*].

The freedom in feeling 'beyond the touch' of English concerns had implications for all of Byron's writing in this period. Among other things, writing in his 'character of man of the world' meant writing with some of the 'frank and open' qualities that he associated with Italian life and opposed to the 'hypocrisy' of the English.[5] This was driven by his revulsion from all forms of cant speech: 'There are but two sentiments to which I am constant,—a strong love of liberty, and a detestation of cant', as he reportedly told Lady Blessington.[6] In

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[1] Letter to Augusta Leigh, 22 June 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 139.
[2] *MC*, 52.
[3] Edward Trelawny, *The Last Days of Shelley and Byron: Being the Complete Text of Trelawny's 'Recollections'*, ed. by J.E. Morpurgo (London: Folio Society, 1952), pp. 29–30; Ernest J. Lovell, *Byron, The Record of a Quest: Studies in a Poet's Concept and Treatment of Nature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1949), p. 64.
[4] Letter to Murray, 24 September 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 221.
[5] *BC*, 29.
[6] *BC*, 220.

the 'Letter to John Murray' he made his disgust for this form of speech clear: 'Cant political—Cant poetical—Cant religious—Cant moral—but always Cant…a thing of words—without the smallest influence upon human actions—'[7] By the time he wrote the 1823 preface to *Don Juan* he was ready to describe 'the Cant which is the crying sin of this double–dealing and false–speaking time' as the distinction of 'the present English generation'.[8] This opposition to cant was of the few things about Byron to elicit Hazlitt's heartfelt agreement: it was, he said, the 'testimony of a lofty poet to a great moral truth'.[9]

Byron's resolve to freely exercise his right to 'tell the truth' had implications not just for his rhymes, but also for other elements of his style. Perhaps most importantly it seemed to demand the choice of a particular kind of language. Amid ubiquitous 'false-speaking' he turned in *Don Juan* to a diction that might expose habit, authority, and convention to the light of scrutiny, reflecting his old satisfaction in 'observing life as it really is!'[10] This involved a revolt against the use of hollow, pious, and dishonest words, and a resistance to merely poetic words: all preconditions to writing without 'Cant poetical'. In Canto VIII, this mistrust of poetic language came together with a conviction that poetry ordinarily pays insufficient regard to the facts:

> But then the fact's a fact—and 'tis the part
> Of a true poet to escape from fiction
> Whene'er he can; for there is little art
> In leaving verse more free from the restriction
> Of truth than prose, unless to suit the mart
> For what is sometimes called poetic diction,
> And that outrageous appetite for lies
> Which Satan angles with, for souls, like flies.[11]

Here full candour demands that the poetic medium itself should be exposed to honest scrutiny. For a poet on guard against the self-deceptions encouraged by art, the question of 'poetic diction' will become essential: the language of good poetry, this stanza shows us, should approximate the clarity and directness of the language of

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[7] 'Letter to John Murray', 128.
[8] Preface to *Don Juan* Cantos VI–VIII, 298, 296.
[9] William Hazlitt, 'Pope, Lord Byron, and Mr. Bowles', *London Magazine*, III (June 1821), 593–607 (p. 598).
[10] Journal entry, 17 and 18 December 1813, *BLJ* III, 240.
[11] *Don Juan* VIII, ll. 17–19; 681–8.

prose. Though Byron valued the verbal and irresponsible elements in rhyme, here the sound is latent and the discipline of art all but disappears, supporting the poet's claim to be speaking of worldly realities.

This mistrust of 'poetic diction' extended into all aspects of Byron's writing after leaving England. It was central to his ambitions for the blank verse dramas that he wrote in 1821 while *Don Juan* had been aside: of *Sardanapalus* he explained to Murray that 'I have broken down the *poetry* as nearly as I could to common language'.[12] Despite its demanding formality, *Don Juan* likewise values ordinary English words and phrases—the diction necessary to the keen observer as 'life as it really is.' According to F. R. Leavis, who remarked on 'the use of spoken idiom and the speaking voice' that Byron shared with Pope, it is when poetry is 'cut off from speech' that it is most likely to commit the error of 'focussing rather upon words than upon perceptions, sensations, or things.'[13] Byron's use of the spoken word in *Don Juan* communicates a resolution to look on the reality of things with clear sight. This resolve was redoubled when he turned his attention to England:

> But now I'm going to be immoral; now
> I mean to show things really as they are,
> Not as they ought to be:[14]

This promise to write with a disillusioned clarity directly opposes Byron's style to cant: 'always Cant…a thing of words', a mere form of words, divorced from reality, '—the English being no wiser—no better—and much poorer—and more divided amongst themselves—as well as far less moral—than they were before the prevalence of this verbal decorum.—'[15] In contrast to this language which divides us from the actuality of things, *Don Juan* values a style that eschews the merely verbal in favour of words which relate closely to reality. This is an enterprise which values directness and accuracy, as summed up by the memorable final lines of Canto XIV:

> Were things but only call'd by their right name,
> Caesar himself would be ashamed of Fame.[16]

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[12] Letter to Murray, 14 July 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 152.
[13] Leavis, *Revaluation*, pp. 148; 49–50.
[14] *Don Juan* XII, ll. 313–15.
[15] 'Letter to John Murray', 128.
[16] *Don Juan* XIV, ll. 815–16.

This almost austere emphasis on clarity of sense was not entirely new. Byron had long made claims for the factual correctness of his poems, expressing a degree of defensiveness about the relation of his art to reality (*The Giaour*, he told Lord Holland diffidently, was 'founded I believe on facts').[17] But it was not until *Don Juan* that this regard for accuracy came together so fully with his satiric purposes: that unsparing observation of men and women which rests on a belief that the world cannot be reformed until we 'see what's what in fact'.[18]

What Lovell called Byron's 'highly developed sense of fact', has been often appreciated, especially by readers alive to the poem's evident ethical commitments.[19] These have included Ruskin, who felt that in Byron he 'had found a man who spoke only of what he had seen, and known', and Auden, whose impression of this unusual regard for 'factual accuracy' led him to reflect on Byron's presumed method: 'The material of his poems is always drawn from events that actually happened, either to himself or to people he knew …When he stopped work on *Don Juan*, he had by no means exhausted his experience…'[20]

Some of this might suggest an adherence to the facts that would make Byron vulnerable to Keats's charge, in an 1819 letter, that 'they are very shallow people who take everything literal'.[21] 'You speak of Lord Byron and me. There is this great difference between us: he describes what he sees. I describe what I imagine. Mine is the hardest task. You see the enormous difference.'[22] Keats's attribution to Byron of an unromantic literalism, and his mistrust, in this letter, of the merely sensory, points towards a real divide between the two poets, in this case between Byron's scepticism of merely poetic kinds of truths, and Keats's suspicion of a poet for whom everything merely is what it seems. T. S. Eliot, offering one definition of the romantic artist, proposed that 'the romantic is deficient or undeveloped in his ability to distinguish between fact and fancy'.[23] Resolved to be undeceived, and in his ambition 'to show things really as they are' sounding confident in his capacity to divide the true from the false and the real from the imagined, the Byron of *Don Juan* can be glimpsed as he

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[17] Letter to Lord Holland, 3 April 1813, *BLJ* III, 34. Cf. *Childe Harold* III, 853n, 310; the discussion in O'Neill, *Romanticism*, p. 94.
[18] *Don Juan* XII, l. 316.
[19] Lovell, *Byron, The Record of a Quest*, pp. 40, 23.
[20] Ruskin, *Praeterita,* ch. VIII, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by Edward Tyas and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), XXXV, 149; Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, p. 405.
[21] Letter from Keats to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 February – 4 May 1819, *The Letters of John Keats*, II, 67.
[22] Letter from Keats to George and Georgiana Keats, 17–27 September 1819, II, 200.
[23] *The Criterion*, ii (October 1923), 39–40, quoted in Ricks, *Decisions*, p. 66.

appeared to Keats in his letter: a poet who viewed everything beyond what he had observed as merely imaginary, who sought, seemingly, to reimprison the Romantic soul in fact.[24]

Keats's view of Byron as a poet confined to the world of sense would only have been confirmed by the 'Letter to John Murray', in which Byron, defending Pope, objected to 'the fashion of the day to lay great stress upon what they call "Imagination" and "Invention" the two commonest of qualities'.[25] And yet this was far from a complete reflection of Byron's view of Pope, as outlined in the first chapter of this thesis. When Byron put contemporary poetry including his own 'side by side with Pope's' in 1817 what he emphasised was not just 'the ineffable distance in point of sense' but in 'harmony … *Imagination* Passion—& *Invention*—'[26] Though Byron sometimes set great store by historical facts, his allegiance to real life and actual events in his poems was rarely as straightforward as his own claims might suggest. His respect for rhyme was one complication. Another was that his 'sense of fact' was itself characterised by mixed impulses. Byron may have distrusted the talents of 'pure invention', as he described them, but as Claude Rawson has noted, he also inherited from Pope, Swift and Fielding 'a traditional contempt for mere particulars, and for types of utterance that aim or are content to report facts for no other reason that that they are facts.'[27] This strain of literary conservativism which always made up one element of his character as a writer came to the fore in his reply to Bowles in the 'Letter to John Murray'. In this piece he expressed his distaste for a concern in poetry with 'petty minutiae of this that and the other', which he characterised as a fatuous demand that art be 'unsophisticated' (like describing a phoenix down to the last feather—by way of an anecdote of Sheridan's—"Like a Poulterer").[28] His arguments reflect a traditional neoclassical objection to reality 'followed too closely' with too much 'scrupulous Exhibition of Particulars'.[29] This resistance to the merely matter-of-fact was also an aspect of his criticism of Wordsworth.[30] In his reply to Bowles he insisted that 'the great Artist does not give you a literal copy …he invents & composes one', and went on to defend art as a proper subject for art, pointing out that Homer was 'a great describer of works of

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[24] See Basil Willey, *More Nineteenth Century Studies: A Group of Honest Doubters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956; repr. 1980), p. 78.
[25] 'Letter to John Murray', 143–44.
[26] Letter to Murray, 15 September 1817, *BLJ* V, 265.
[27] Letter to Murray, 2 April 1817, *BLJ* V, 203; Rawson, *Swift*, p. 125.
[28] 'Letter to John Murray', 146, 135.
[29] André Dacier, note to Horace's *Ars Poetica,* ll. 371–18, Philip Francis, *A Poetical Translation of the Works of Horace*, 8th edn, 4 vols. (London: W. Strahan and others, 1778), IV, 251.
[30] See Byron's criticism of 'The Thorn' from *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems* (1800) in the unpublished Preface to *Don Juan*, *CPW* V, 81; *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952–59), II (1952), 240. Cf. Coleridge, *Biographia*, pp. 306–7, 309.

art.'[31] Though he knew there to be circumstances in which the facts are essential, these reservations suggest that his appeals to factuality later in *Don Juan* had divided origins.

A respect for the facts is a feature of McGann's historicist method. 'The truth of Imagination in *Don Juan*', he has proposed, is 'not poetical imagining but actual fact—realities of time, place, circumstance.'[32] Byron's teasing and oblique representations in *Don Juan* of 'living characters' and his claim that his poem was made up of 'merely some situations—which are taken from life' have provided compelling material for a method which 'moves in constant pursuit of …all the verbal and eventual matters-of-fact' to which a literary work might be connected.[33] In Byron's case this has often involved an effort to discover in the 'imagined' circumstances' of the poem 'the actual truth lying behind the fictions of *Don Juan*'.[34] In the Clarendon edition of *Don Juan*, several of McGann's editorial notes, by establishing the 'recollective' character of events in the poem, or demonstrating when 'Byron is recalling scenes he himself saw', demonstrate how a critical effort to bring alive these 'unrealised points of reference' might be productive.[35] The width of Byron's experiences and what his contemporaries remembered as his 'inexhaustible' store of 'anecdotes of life and living characters' provide support for this critical ambition: Barbara Everett, writing on literary biography, remarked that 'Poets like Milton, or Byron, are exceptions; most poets, being 'inward', don't do that much actual living'.[36] And yet the pursuit of objectivity may uncover something less than straightforward, as Byron well knew (*The Giaour* being 'founded I believe on facts') and as McGann himself acknowledges, of the anecdote said to lie behind *Beppo*, for example, '(it was not, in fact, true)'.[37] It is possible to tie even the apparently fantastic inventiveness of the crossdressing scenes at the Sultana's Court in Cantos V and VI to real events, for the episode can seemingly be linked to Byron's recollection of an adventure recounted by the dandy Daniel Mackinnon, 'who, it was said, managed during the Peninsular War to enter a Portuguese convent in a nun's habit.'[38] As this suggests, though these are interesting contexts, they do not always point to the sorts of 'realities of time, place,

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[31] 'Letter to John Murray', 135–6, 146.
[32] McGann, *DJC*, p. 163.
[33] Letter to Hobhouse, 11 November 1818, *BLJ* VI, 76–77; McGann, *Social Values and Poetic Acts: The Historical Judgment of Literary Work* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 129.
[34] McGann, *DJC*, p. 163. Cf. McGann, *BI*, pp. 266–7.
[35] McGann, *Social Values*, p. 129. See e.g. *CPW* V, 82 (53n), 170 (229-32n); 559.
[36] *MC*, 265–6. Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 127.
[37] *CPW* IV, 129, 320n.
[38] McGann, editorial note to st. 155, *BLJ* V, 290; R. H. Gronow, *The Reminiscences and Recollections of Captain Gronow: being anecdotes of the camp, court, clubs, and society* (New York: Scribner & Welford, 1889), p. 62.

circumstance' which the historicist method desiderates. In this case, criticism's pursuit of 'eventual matters-of-fact' unearths an incident which seems very remote from the usual quality of real life—an escapade pulled off in great style, with an apparently heroic dedication to life lived from an aesthetic perspective.

In 1820, undertaking 'passage for passage' 'to cite more lines teeming with imagination from Pope than from any two living poets—be they who they may', Byron chose as his example the lines on Lord Hervey from the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735): 'the character of Sporus—with all the wonderful play of fancy which is scattered over it—'[39] This is the same passage to which Christopher Ricks turns in his essay on 'Literature and the Matter of Fact' with appreciation for Pope for finding 'imaginative truth' in the factual.[40] Barbara Everett has pointed out the Augustan impulse to play 'difficult games with fact and factuality'.[41] This was also an area in which Byron was fully capable of misdirection. 'What has the "*doubt*" to do with the poem? It is at least poetically true', he insisted when cautioned that there was 'some doubt' factually as to one of his complaints against Lady Byron, adding, 'I have no reference to living characters.'[42] Having released *Don Juan* from the necessity of being always 'serious', he seems to have considered himself free to move between irresponsibility and accuracy on questions of fact as on all other matters. A related intuition was realised by Hobhouse and Frere as they attempted to dissuade him from publication on the basis of indecency: 'But you knew all these arguments before and in fact have run riot for fun—'[43] In judging the artist's responsibility towards the facts Ricks suggests in his essay that 'we should prefer writers to be right'.[44] When Byron was faced in 1821 with the idea that '"no reader cares any more … about the authenticity of the tale of Troy"', which he characterised as the 'defence of inaccuracy' in poetry, he answered: '—we *do* care'.[45] But his indignance also arose when people could not see that you can have both: 'because his truths are so clear—it is asserted that he has no invention,' as he said of Pope.[46] Byron seems to have sought an art that could do both: being resolved not to lend himself to untruths,

[39] 'Some Observations', 111–12; Pope, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735), ll. 305–33, *Works*, pp. 336–7. Byron was following the emphasis of Johnson ('He had *Invention,* … He had *Imagination*,'), in the 'Life of Pope', p. 78.
[40] Christopher Ricks, *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 289.
[41] Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 122.
[42] Don Juan I, ll. 217–19, 218n.
[43] Letter from Hobhouse to Byron, 5 January 1819, in *Byron's Bulldog*, p. 259.
[44] Ricks, *Essays*, p. 281–2.
[45] Journal entry, 11 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, p. 22; Also Cf. *Allusion to the Poets*, p. 136.
[46] 'Some Observations', *CMP,* 111.

not to 'keep always from saying—what may not be pleasing to the hearer—or reader', and to seek out facts while knowing them to be just one kind of truth.[47]

McGann proposes that 'In the end, Byron's 'imagination' is not creative (in the Romantic sense), it is analytic and critical (in the philosophical sense).'[48] The size of these parentheses, especially, makes this a difficult claim to answer, but one of Byron's great strengths was that he almost always used words in their ordinary sense, and there is nothing to suggest that he thought the 'imagination' possessed predominantly analytical and critical functions. Quite the opposite is suggested by the terms in which he esteemed Pope: 'play of fancy'; 'harmony … *Imagination* Passion—& *Invention*'. During these years in Italy Byron often expressed his scorn for the unworldly, and yet elements of Moore's portrait in the *Life* of a man in whom 'the effects of a too vivid imagination, in disqualifying the mind for the cold contact of reality, were visible' can be glimpsed too.[49] Byron hated dullness, and seems to have needed life to be more than commonplace, and there is much to suggest that his great appetite for life did not necessarily extend to the 'cold contact' of the ordinary. In his determination to grasp the facts and not to be one of the 'mere dreamers', he often seems to have been divided from himself: in his ambition to lay out the facts seemingly resolved to be 'anything but literary', and yet turning to imaginative writing with a degree of resistance to bare actuality and crude fact.[50] It is this, in part, that underlies his skill as a letter-writer and narrative poet: one result is his way of charging life with the more than ordinary; his general determination, in art as in life, 'to "make a silken purse out of a Sow's ear"'.[51]

Another sign of this is that for all his distrust of 'poetic diction' Byron seems to have spent very little time dwelling on the inadequacy of words. 'I do believe, / Though I have found them not, that there may be / Words which are things,—hopes which will not deceive,' the poet affirms in the third canto of *Childe Harold*, though seemingly without much hope; 'But words are things,' and 'true words are things', he occasionally upheld in later poetry.[52] But in fact he seems rarely to have entertained this kind of suspiciousness of words. We never feel him likely to say, with Shelley's Julian in *Julian and Maddalo*, for example, 'How vain / Are words! I thought never to speak again…'[53] In line with his pragmatic resolution not to quarrel with his 'tools',

[47] Letter to Murray, 6 June 1822, *BLJ* IX, 168.
[48] McGann, *DJC*, p. 161.
[49] *MLJ*, II, 290–4; 590–93.
[50] Letter to Annabella Milbanke, 29 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 179.
[51] 'Letter to John Murray', 146.
[52] *Childe Harold* III, ll. 1054–7. *Don Juan* III, l. 793; *Marino Faliero*, V.i.270–96.
[53] Shelley, *Julian and Maddalo* (1819), ll. 472–6, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p. 131.

he seems to have accepted, in a compromising spirit, that if words are not synonymous with the realities to which they refer, they can nonetheless bring us close enough to appreciate 'things really as they are'.

This element of common-sense confidence in his capacity to apprehend the world beyond language is essential to the character of his writing. It is reflected in the way that he refers to *Don Juan* in letters, one of the best-known of which was sent to Kinnaird in October 1819:

> As to "Don Juan"—confess—confess—you dog—and be candid—that it is the sublime of *that there* sort of writing—it may be bawdy—but is it not good English?—it may be profligate—but is it not *life*, is it not *the thing*?—Could any man have written it—who has not lived in the world?—and tooled in a post-chaise? in a hackney-coach? In a Gondola? against a wall? in a court carriage? in a vis a vis?—on a table?—and under it?—[54]

This describes poetry brought to the border with the '*that there*' of actual experience—distinguished, in the vigorous worldliness of its supposed origins, from the kind of 'this that and the other' writing that Byron condemned in the 'Letter to John Murray'. Here he defends an uneuphemistic, unevasive language that springs from experience in the world of sense, and conveys, as John Bayley observed, the notion of a poem that is 'unusually real'.[55] And yet this emphasis on '*the thing*' itself does not entirely exclude the other sense that is also in play in Byron's letter: the word as it was understood colloquially, by Goldsmith, for example ('quite the thing'), or Boswell ('to use the vulgar phrase, not *the thing*'), instances tracked by the *OED* as meaning 'that which is proper, requisite, befitting ...just the thing'; 'the embodiment or epitome of stylishness, fitness'.[56] That is to say, the emphasis can equally fall on, 'but is it not good English?' in which case style is the thing. This was a word Byron used often to refer to his own poetry, as when waving of his hand at various 'things of mine' ('I am glad you think the thing is tolerably *vamped*…'): *The Vision of Judgment,* for example ('one of my best things').[57] Three days after writing his letter to Kinnaird he began his translation of Pulci's 'Morgante Maggiore' of which he would later say, 'the Pulci I am proud of—it is superb—you have no such translation—

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[54] Letter to Kinnaird, 26 October 1819, *BLJ* VI, 232.
[55] Bayley, 'Keats and Reality', 91–125 (p. 92). In the later version of the essay, in *The Uses of Division*, the point was revised to: 'oddly enough, there are hints of the same sort of thing in Byron'. See Bayley, *The Uses of Division: Unity and Disharmony in Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976), p. 108.
[56] See *OED Online*, '*Thing, n.*1' sense 7.a.
[57] Letters to Leigh Hunt, 26 February 1816, *BLJ* V, 52; Murray, 23 May 1813, *BLJ* III, 51; Murray, 8 June 1822, *BLJ* IX, 168.

It is the best thing I ever did in my life', in which case his pride was in a translation said to be 'word for word, and verse for verse'.[58]

Barbara Everett remarked that 'Literature has its own factuality …words matter.'[59] It is clear that alongside his esteem for actual facts Byron also valued this kind of accuracy. In his letter to Kinnaird, he decried the 'the *Cant*' involved in the opposition to *Don Juan*, which appears to him clearly as a man with 'the benefit of experience'. But although that impulse was a worldly one, what his letter also describes is the discovery of an absolutely fitting poetic medium: 'the sublime of *that there* sort of writing'. The historicist method, as Douglas-Fairhurst has noted, does not always seem to 'consider that some facts of a poem (such as details of idiom or style) will be as significant to its writer as the facts contained in that poem'.[60] Byron's emphasis on grasping reality with the right words is another sign that the fact of style mattered deeply to him in *Don Juan*: 'In fact, his manner was his own alone', as he tells us of Juan. His repudiation of cant speech, that 'thing of words', meant calling 'things … by their right name'. His distrust of poetic language did not lead him away from words, but towards them: 'still there is a choice to be made of the best words,' remarks Dryden's speaker in the *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, when justifying how a good poet might 'cloath ordinary things' in common English.[61] For this there must be a conversion into words: "English sterling *genuine English*," as Byron repeated delightedly of some praise relayed from Albemarle St in 1820.[62]

For Byron writing 'good English' meant having the freedom to use the right words. 'Why Man the Soul of such writing is it's [*sic*] licence?' Byron made this point about to Murray in another well-known letter of 1819. Murray's acquaintance Francis Cohen had praised Byron's 'extraordinary' new poem *Don Juan* but cautioned that his 'fun & drollery' had become too mixed up with 'sublimity & pathos', when 'we are never drenched & scorched at the same instant while standing in one spot.'[63] When this critique was passed on to Byron, he responded by defending his 'quick succession of fun and gravity' with a scintillating passage of invective, characterised by a mock-affront. 'I will answer your friend':

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[58] Letter to Murray, 28 September 1820, *BLJ* VII, 182. See 'Morgante Maggiore Di Messer Luigi Pulci', *CPW* IV, 247, and ed. notes.
[59] Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 129.
[60] Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives*, p. 191.
[61] Dryden, *Dramatick Poesie*, pp. 77–78.
[62] Letter to Murray, 11 September 1820, *BLJ* VII, 175. Byron repeated this remark by William Gifford with pleasure in further letters: also see letters to Murray, 8 October 1820, *BLJ* VII, 194; Hobhouse, 17 October 1820, *BLJ* VII, 205.
[63] Letter from Francis Cohen to Murray, 16 July 1819, *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*, p. 279.

> His metaphor is that "we are never scorched and drenched at the same time!"—Blessings on his experience!—Ask him these questions about "scorching and drenching".—Did he never play at Cricket or walk a mile in hot weather?—did he never spill a dish of tea over his testicles in handing the cup to his charmer to the great shame of his nankeen breeches?—did he never swim in the sea at Noonday with the Sun in his eyes and on his head—which all the foam of ocean could not cool? Did he never draw his foot out of a tub of too hot water damning his eyes & his valet's? did he never inject for a Gonorrhea?—or make water through an ulcerated Urethra?—was he ever in a Turkish bath—that marble paradise of sherbet and sodomy?—was he ever in a cauldron of boiling oil like St. John? or in the sulphureous waves of hell? (where he ought to be for his "scorching and drenching at the same time") did he never tumble into a river or lake fishing—and sit in his wet cloathes in the boat—or on the bank afterwards "scorched and drenched" like a true sportsman?— —"Oh for breath to utter"— — but make him my compliments—he is a clever fellow for all that—a very clever fellow.— —You ask me for the plan of Donny Johnny—I *have* no plan—I *had* no plan …[64]

Byron's reply not only begins by asserting the priority of 'experience' over 'metaphor' ('Blessings on his experience!') but goes on to enact this, expanding according to a syntax that values the actual over the figurative, so that over the series of interrogatives that follow, the metaphor of being 'drenched & scorched' is converted into a plurality of examples taken from physical life. By rebutting Cohen's criticism with the counterclaims of accumulated experience, the passage demonstrates the hazards of trying to say something representative: the comically proliferating refrain 'did he never', which is apparently set off by Cohen's use of the absolute 'never', offers proof that the variousness of life will defeat our best attempts to be definitive. This vigorous, unpremeditated writing allows itself to be carried away by its own vitality, expanding outwards as it alludes to the variousness of the sensuous world. From everyday experience (cricket, walking, swimming, bathing), to the uneuphemistic specificities of embodied life, Byron introduces examples that themselves come in 'quick succession'; at first quotidian, and then running away with themselves, until we find that solidity has given way and he is speaking of something other than actuality: 'was he ever in a cauldron of boiling oil like St. John? or in the sulphureous waves of hell?'

It is that movement that makes this passage so particularly revealing. The letter embodies in prose some of the qualities it defends in the poetry, including the ambition to speak directly and candidly of actual things. It is characteristic of Byron's vigorous way of conveying the incidents of his life 'without metaphor' in his

[64] Letter to Murray, 12 August 1819, *BLJ* VI, 207.

familiar letters from Italy.[65] It was also in this letter that Byron declared his intention to write *Don Juan* 'with as little poetry as could be helped', which makes its esteem for the realities of experience over literary categories particularly appropriate. But if metaphor is converted into experience in this passage, it soon grows into something else: somewhere around the shift in adverb from 'did he never' to 'did he ever', when Byron invites Murray and Cohen to exercise their imaginations, we sense that the passage has renounced its grasp of the actual, so that out of the allegiance to life there has come a verbal world—one which gathers its energies from the metaphor it supposedly condemns. This is language that can take creative delight in its capacity to 'take everything literal'.

Byron ends this passage with a congenial pivot away from the direction in which his energies have been carrying him: 'but make him my compliments—he is a clever fellow for all that'. This is a comic self-reversal of a kind familiar from his letters, which often turn on similar expressions of relativity: 'But … for all that', or 'but, withal,' phrases which apprehend precisely that mixing of 'fun and gravity' that the letter defends and of which he was so aware in life: 'I wish you were here, but you *will* be *here*, & we shall laugh again as usual & be very miserable dogs for all that.'[66] In this way the letter, like the poem it defends, responds closely to the variousness of experience itself. But in so doing it also encounters a contrary, imaginative impulse, which in this case is also a literary one: '—"Oh for breath to utter"—' the quotation is from Falstaff (describing his encounter with the 'rogues in buckram suits' at Gadshill); the allusion points us to a scene in which the shifting facts, and the rash, ascending fantasies, tell us that something has been carried away in the pleasure of the telling—the same quality of which Byron has become belatedly aware in his own passage of comic vituperation.[67]

This letter sets out by valuing the sensory over the imagined and the actual over the literary. And yet its 'non-literary momentum' carries it into an allusion and its characteristic appeal to wide experience is accompanied by an imaginative amplitude. It might be a case study in what Wilson Knight was describing when he observed that in Byron, as in Shakespeare, there is 'a vigour which we feel to be in essence non-literary,

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[65] Letter to Murray, 9 November 1820, *BLJ* VII, 223.

[66] Journal entry, 1 December 1813, *BLJ* III, 228; Letters to Hobhouse, 30 August 1811, *BLJ* II, 84. Cf. Augusta, 8 September 1816, *BLJ* V, 91.

[67] Letter to Murray, 12 August 1819, *BLJ* VI, 207. See *1 Henry IV*, II.iv.237–40, *The Oxford Shakespeare: Henry IV, Part 1*, ed. by David M. Bevington and Jenny Ackland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 191. In his letter to Murray Cohen had compared Byron's wit to Shakespeare's: see letter from Francis Cohen to Murray, 16 July 1819, *The Letters of John Murray*, 279.

which yet finds perfect expression through words'.[68] Byron's conviction that writing must not become abstracted from the reality of things was deeply held. And yet, out of his deep distrust of 'poetic diction' and his determination to convey worldly knowledge rather than merely poetic truths, comes a rich colloquial style and a language that is in some ways irreducibly literary.

II

During his first years in Italy, Byron often underlined his preference for being 'out of the way' of Englishness, variously warning friends, 'do not let me be obliged to return to England'; 'never calculate on my return to England—which I may or may not but never willingly.'[69] This was a sentiment he repeated throughout the 1820s: 'You still ask me to return to England—Alas to what purpose?—you do not know what you are requiring…'; 'Judge of my detestation of England and of all that it inherits, when I avoid returning to your country'.[70] At Pisa this sentiment was emphasised by his resolution not 'to make a show-bear of himself' for the English abroad, which seems to have involved the satisfaction of posing as thoroughly unspiritual and generally insisting on his status as a 'man of this world.'[71] In this period, he often drew attention to the more worldly claims on his attention, as if to counter Romantic hopes that poetry might claim its place at the centre of life: 'Do you think I lay a stress upon the merits of my "poeshie"—I assure you I have many other things to think of.'[72] Recalling *Beppo*'s esteem for 'Men of the world, who know the world like men, / … Who think of something else besides the pen', comments like these are designed to convey the perspective of a man who has taken a good measure of poetry's true place in the world.[73]

It was largely at Ravenna and Pisa that Byron wrote the middle cantos of *Don Juan*, in which he conducted his hero from Spain to Turkey and onward to the Russian Court. In these parts of the poem the narrative is entangled in episodes of historical moment, real and imagined, and other worldly affairs; and the excursiveness that is inherent in the mock epic elements of the narrative increasingly comes together with the style of writing. 'Some have accused me of a strange design / Against the creed and morals of the land,' his poet

[68] Wilson Knight, *Poets of Action*, p. 279.
[69] Letters to Douglas Kinnaird, 30 May 1817, *BLJ* V, 231; Hobhouse, 25 March 1818, *BLJ* VI, 26.
[70] Letter to John Murray, 1 March 1820, *BLJ* VII, 48; Draft letter to Lady Byron, 1 March 1821, *BLJ* VII, 89.
[71] *MC*, 52; Letter to Moore, 5 July 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 146.
[72] Letter to Murray, 6 July 1820, *BLJ* VII, 124.
[73] *Beppo*, ll. 602, 604.

remarks, 'But the fact is that I have nothing plann'd…'[74] Uncurbed by any definite literary design, he chooses a digressive manner of writing that is also a means of travelling out into the wider world. This is also a style that raises questions about the relationship of the artist to the world beyond art: 'They know nothing of the world; and what is poetry, but the reflection of the world?'[75] This was his objection in 1814 to Wordsworth and Coleridge; a similar sentiment later marked his characterisation of Leigh Hunt and 'his Keats': of Hunt he remarked in 1822, 'I do not know what world he has lived in—but I have lived in three or four—'[76]

So that his narrative poem might go abroad into life, Don Juan also travelled away from poetry in its purer forms. Reflecting on his choice of the tetrameter for *The Giaour*, in 1813, Byron remarked, 'I merely chose that measure as *next* to *prose* to tell a story…'[77] In his hands, the ottava rima can equally seem '*next* to *prose*.' In fact, a degree of resourceful indecision between poetry and prose had always been indicated by his choice of the stanza. In *Beppo* the narrator decides to 'take for rhyme, to hook my rambling verse on,' but with 'half a mind to tumble down to prose'.[78] When Byron claimed that *Don Juan* was merely a species of 'wandering with pedestrian Muses', he was alluding to the English tradition of imitations of Horace: in his verse *sermo,* the Latin poet had claimed to be writing something 'more akin to prose'.[79] 'For my own Part, / I claim no Portion of the Poet's Art', goes the standard eighteenth-century verse translation of this claim.[80] Within this tradition, Byron's easy ambivalence about the status of his poem recalls the pretended agnosticism of Pope ('Verse-man or Prose-man, term me which you will'), and Burns (in doubt, he claims, as to whether he scrawls 'in rhyme, or prose, or baith tegither, / Or some hotch-potch that's rightly neither').[81] The impression of unconstrained freedom Byron obtains from the *ottava rima* similarly reflects the influence of the loose, conversational form of the informal verse epistle, suggesting that his poem is poised between speaking and writing, poetry and prose.

These stylistic allegiances introduce into the poem a discursiveness that puts it at a distance from more purely aesthetic forms. It was this impurity that Swinburne had in mind when he proposed that Byron 'had in

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[74] *Don Juan* IV, ll. 33–34, 38. Cf. Byron's letter defending his "scorching & drenching".
[75] Letter to Moore, 3 August 1814, *BLJ* IV, 152.
[76] Letters to Murray, 20 July 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 166; 10 November 1822, *BLJ* X, 69.
[77] Letter to Lord Holland, 17 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 168,
[78] *Beppo*, ll. 411, 415.
[79] Unpublished Dedication to *Don Juan*, ll. 57–8; Horace, *Satires* I.iv.38–43, *Horace: Satires, Epistles, The Art of Poetry, Loeb Classical Library*, trans. by H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), pp. 42–3.
[80] Translation of Horace, *Satires* I.iv.55–6, Philip Francis, *A Poetical Translation of the Works of Horace*, 8th edn, 4 vols. (W. Strahan and others, 1778), II, 47–79; Horace, *Satires* I.iv.38–43, pp. 42–3.
[81] Pope, *Imitations of Horace, Book II, Satire I, to Mr. Fortescue*, l. 64, *Works*, p. 343; Burns, 'Second Epistle to Lapraik' (1786), ll. 33–42, *Poems*, I, p. 91.

him a cross of the true Philistine breed', and when he later came to argue that Byron was sovereign only over 'a province outside the proper domain of absolute poetry …the debateable borderland to which Berni has given his name'.[82] The spatial metaphor has long had a salience in criticism of Byron. When Hunt came to his view that Byron 'wanted faith in the interior of poetry', he drew on his recollection of lending Byron his volume of Spenser at Pisa in 1822: 'That he saw nothing in Spenser is not very likely; but I really do not think that he saw much. Spenser was too much out of the world, and he too much in it.'[83] At some level, then, to be in the world of real things may be to be on the outside of inwardness. There have been more positive critical assessments of the same quality: John Morley, who admired Byron's 'poetical worldliness, in its enlarged and generous sense of energetic interest in real transactions, and a capacity of being moved and raised by them', remarked on Byron's sympathy with 'the impressions and impulses of the outer forms of life'.[84] Less approvingly, George Saintsbury wrote of 'the feeling that we are, with Byron, in the outer courts of poetry'; he was thinking of Byron's 'inability to reach the most sacred and highest places of poetry', and, as so often, he had the comparisons with Keats and Shelley in mind.[85] The critical problem, often, was Byron's expansiveness: in 1884 Swinburne remarked that 'Lord Tennyson has put more passion into the six little stanzas of a poem published at the age of twenty-four than could be distilled by compression out of all that Lord Byron ever wrote.'[86] Nearer to Byron's own lifetime, it was on similar grounds that Leigh Hunt concluded that Byron did not understand Keats: 'the sort of poetry in which he excelled, was not accustomed to these poetical concentrations.'[87] This was, in large part, because Byron consciously articulated a different relationship between the world of art and the world at large. His unfavorable view of 'your literary everyday man' may have had a good deal to do with his degree of distaste for poets of the '*Suburban School*', like Keats and Hunt, but behind the self-conscious urbanity that often accompanied his much-defended worldliness lay more serious convictions.[88] When first going abroad, he expressed his belief in the necessity of looking outwards rather than 'staying at home with the narrow prejudices of an Islander'.[89] Similar instincts lay behind his antipathy to what he dryly called the 'Egotism' of supposing

[82] Swinburne, 'Notes on the Text of Shelley', pp. 556–7; 'Wordsworth and Byron', p. 70.
[83] *HR*, I, 77–78.
[84] Morley, 'Byron', pp. 653–4.
[85] Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody*, III, 102.
[86] Swinburne, 'Wordsworth and Byron', pp. 93–4.
[87] *HVSV*, 311, 51n.
[88] Letter to Murray, 20 July 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 166. Also see Letter to Murray, 10 November 1822, *BLJ* X, 69.
[89] Letter to Moore, 3 August 1814, *BLJ* IV, 152.

that 'all's ideal—all *ourselves*'.[90] His scorn for insularity and his determination always to 'take a wider field' reflect his understanding of our ethical responsibility to look outside ourselves and to keep revising our opinions and beliefs in light of the larger perspective.[91]

In *Don Juan*, digression appears as the technique necessary to a writer who believes that understanding is to be found in experience in the world. That task of apprehending 'things really as they are' also meant looking beyond received opinions and unexamined beliefs, which for Byron could be achieved only through the exercise of doubt. The narrator, with his disenchanted knowledge 'Of what is called the world, and the world's ways', exhibits a sceptical pessimism about our ordinary ability to grasp the truth:

> I leave it to your people of sagacity
> To draw the line between the false and true,
> If such can e'er be drawn by man's capacity:[92]

Here, an acknowledgement of the fallibility of our judgments—our boundless capacity to arrive at the wrong conclusions—suggests the difficulty of arriving at certainty on any question. All pretensions to knowledge of the truth should therefore be considered suspect, or at best provisional, and no important claim should go unexamined. Unsurprisingly, then, the indubitable can enter the poem only as a dry sarcasm, especially on the questions that matter most: war ('the Gazette—which doubtless fairly dealt / By the deceased'); sex ('the passions have, alas! but one vent. / … Devotion, doubtless'); heroes ('Europe doubtless owes you greatly', as the poet remarks of Lord Wellington); and society ('Doubtless it is a brilliant masquerade').[93]

Byron's habit of calling matters into doubt required a form flexible enough to accommodate perplexity and to be open to revision. As he led his poetry to the uncertain territory between poetry and prose, he could look to his Italian models, and the form of the English verse epistle, as models for the kind of expansiveness he sought; but he was also increasingly drawn to other literary forms that might share a border with poetry. One of these—not often noted—was the form of the literary essay. To his idea that Byron was too worldly to appreciate Spenser, Hunt added his impression that 'The only great writer of past times, whom he read with avowed

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[90] *Don Juan* XI, ll. 10–11.
[91] Letter to Catherine Gordon Byron, 14 January 1811, *BLJ* II, 34.
[92] *Don Juan* XVI, l. 907; *Don Juan* XIV, 716–18.
[93] *Don Juan* VI (1823), 256–7; VIII, 138-9; IX, 18–19; XIV, 133.

satisfaction, was Montaigne'. It was Hunt's copy of the *Essais* that Byron was reading at Pisa in the summer of 1822.[94] The presence of the essayist is most overt in the cantos that Byron wrote at Pisa in the following months:

> 'Que sçais–je?' was the motto of Montaigne,
> As also of the first Academicians:
> That all is dubious which Man may attain,
> Was one of their most favourite positions.
> There's no such thing as certainty, that's plain
> As any of Mortality's Conditions:
> So little do we know what we're about in
> This world, I doubt if doubt itself be doubting.[95]

This speculative stanza is characteristic of the self-conscious commentary that surrounds the narrative in the middle and later cantos. One of the most striking features of *Don Juan*, especially in these cantos, is the intermixing of the comic narrative with passages of discursive commentary, made up in large part of mingled personal reflection, loosely philosophical speculation, and eclectic references to learned opinion, much of it sceptical and essayistic in character. As Richard Kirkland has shown, Byron's rereading of Montaigne at Pisa directly influenced not just the increasingly open philosophical scepticism of the middle and later cantos, but also his growing habit of including of 'lengthier and more frequent digressions and personal observations'.[96] This was an influence that worked on the poem at the level of style as well as content. As a literary form, the essay offered Byron a natural medium for his doubts: 'It is through Montaigne that 'essay' enters the English language, with its multiple meaning of a piece of writing, an attempt, and (as in 'assay') a testing', as Parker points out; and, as his work shows, intimate links may be traced between scepticism and the essay form as it is inherited from Montaigne by English writers including Pope, Sterne, and Johnson.[97] Byron also has a claim to be counted among Montaigne's successors in essayistic writing: 'You must not mind occasional rambling I mean it for a poetical T[ristram] Shandy—or Montaigne's Essays with a story for a hinge', he told Douglas

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[94] *HR*, I, 78; unsigned letter by Hunt, 'Passages marked in Montaigne's Essays by Lord Byron', *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* 19 (January 1827), 26–32 (p. 26).
[95] *Don Juan* IX, ll. 129–36.
[96] Kirkland, 'Byron's Reading of Montaigne', p. 50.
[97] Parker, *SL*, p. 42. See also 'The Sociable Philosopher: David Hume and the Philosophical Essay', *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 115–32.

Kinnaird after writing the last complete canto of *Don Juan* in April 1823.[98] Perhaps surprisingly, the implications of this fruitful statement of the poem's generic hybridity have never been fully addressed.

Byron's reference to his 'occasional rambling' suggests that he approached the essay as a literary form that embodies the virtues of writing unsystematically. In the *Essais*, Montaigne encourages his wit to 'wander' and his style to 'ramble indiscreetly'.[99] Unrepentant about the loose organisation of his poem, Byron likewise considers himself free to wander at will. The loose, digressive character of what he called his 'rambling verse', which is open to being waylaid by inclination and impulse, has much in common in this respect with the immethodical spirit of the Montaignian essay, which is said to possess nothing 'other than accidental Order, Coherence, or Proportion'.[100] The long associations between the essay and freedom of inquiry suggests another natural affinity with Byron's unsanctioned style in the *ottava rima*. In *Don Juan*, the poet defends his right to 'solicit free discussion / Upon all points no matter what'.[101] The essay nurtures such free-thinking, claiming, as Thomas Karshan has observed, a 'licence to take in anything and everything.[102] That Byron considered himself similarly at liberty is made clear by his caustic opening of Canto VI, which begins with an appeal to Socrates, before he addresses his readers:

> Dogs, or Men! (for I flatter you in saying
> That ye are dogs—your betters far) ye may
> Read, or read not, what I am now essaying
> To show ye what ye are in every way.[103]

Here the liberty of the essayist unites with the manner of the satirist. Byron will not, he warns, adopt the congenial manner of the polite essayist; but will, instead, offer himself as the undeceived observer of life, the exposer of vanity, pride and corruption, and his activity of 'essaying' as a means of apprehending men and women really as they are. Traditionally, the essay, being experimental in spirit, looks to experience in the world at large, rather than to theory, as the source of any truths it might offer. Kathryn Murphy notes 'the essay's

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[98] Letter to Kinnaird 14 April 1823, *BLJ* X, 150.
[99] Montaigne, 'Of Vanity', *Essays*, III, 359.
[100] Montaigne, 'Of Friendship', *Essays*, I, 321.
[101] Don Juan XVII, ll. 41–2.
[102] Thomas Karshan, 'What is An Essay? Thirteen Answers from Virginia Woolf', *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 31–55 (p. 32).
[103] Don Juan VII, ll. 49–52.

perennial preoccupation with experience …as the ground of knowledge.[104] In these lines, any authority the satirist can provide is derived from an understanding of life derived from wide experience, and it is this that unites the activity of 'essaying' with the force of his satiric criticism.

The loose, provisional character of essayistic writing is well adapted to dealing in the kinds of truths that are, as Parker writes, 'too subtle or too evasive to be accessible to direct rational inquiry or impersonal philosophical discourse.'[105] The essay that is the legacy of Montaigne can accommodate contradiction and irresolution in ways that reasoned discourse cannot; it is also flexible enough to stage encounters between different kinds of truths—qualities which suggests its potential affinities with Byron's sceptical manner in *Don Juan.* Given that the emphasis of the essayist tends to be on provisional inquiry, rather than the pursuit of objective truths, Byron's interest in the activity of 'essaying' suggests a further reason to be cautious of McGann's claim that 'imagination in *Don Juan* is not a creative but an analytic instrument'.[106] McGann's argument is that 'Byron admired order and reason primarily as they were methodical—ways rather than states of being. Order was a way of making things more clear.'[107] This is complicated in the first place by Byron's mistrust of analytical minds: 'The lawyer and the critic', for example, to whom 'nought remains unseen, but much untold…'[108] In its emphasis on the 'analytical and critical', McGann's perspective overlooks some of the qualities that *Don Juan* shares with the essay form: the openness to loose and imaginative associations; the invitation to 'free discussion' rather than analytical investigation; and the fostering of irony rather than the pursuit of objectivity. A better model for some of what McGann describes might be provided by the activity of essaying, which does not depend in the same way as analytical writing on the possibility of resolution. Montaigne writes: 'Could my Soul once take footing, I would not Essay, but resolve: but it is always learning and making tryal.'[109] The essayist's emphasis on testing and 'making trial' is reflected in some of Byron's most characteristic habits of thinking. It defines the attitude of mind that characterised his war against cant: 'whether

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[104] Kathryn Murphy, 'The Essay, Experience, and Experiment', *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, pp. 78–97 (p. 80).
[105] See esp. Murphy, 'The Essay, Experience, and Experiment', pp. 80, 95; Parker, *SL*, p. 46.
[106] McGann, *DJC*, pp. 165, see also 161–3.
[107] *Ibid*., p. 138.
[108] *Don Juan* X, ll. 105–7. This passage has much in common with Burns's descriptions of the critics as 'Bloody dissectors' in 'To R[obert] G[raham] of F[intry], Esq.', ll. 37–40, which, as Christopher Ricks points out, Burns takes from Pope. See Burns, *Works*, II, 587; *Allusion*, p. 51; *Imitations of Horace, Book II, Epistle II* (1737), ll. 70–71, *Pope, Works*, p. 375. See *Don Juan* X, 105–12.
[109] Montaigne, 'Of Repentance', *Essays*, III, 27.

I succeed or not—the experiment will be made'; and, for that matter, the composition of *Don Juan* itself, which he began with the resolve to 'try the experiment'.[110]

Further evidence for Byron's interest in the activity of essaying comes from the final unpublished piece of prose criticism he wrote at Ravenna, 'Observations upon Observations.' Defending *Don Juan* against the charge of licentiousness, one of the arguments he marshalled was that 'the works of Rousseau and de Staël' are, by contrast, 'far more formidable than any quantity of verse':

> They are so—because they sap the principles—by reasoning upon the passions—whereas poetry is in itself passion—and does not systematize.—It assails—but does not argue—it may be wrong—but it does not assume pretensions to Optimism.[111]

There are a number of elements to this passage, which, by describing poetry as an unsystematic, non-'reasoning' medium, recalls Byron's ambivalent confession, the previous year, that 'almost all I have written, has been mere Passion, passion it is true of different kinds—but always passion'.[112] And yet this description of a medium that 'assails—but does not argue' does confer on poetry a role in testing claims to the truth—one that may be very close in character to 'essaying', given that the etymology of the word 'assail' overlaps in meaning with 'assay' and 'essay' (to test, 'put to the proof, try').[113] What follows is the essential concession that poetry 'may be wrong'. Mistrusting conclusiveness, Byron held a view more generally that a good man should be willing to be 'found in the wrong', and not allow himself to become one of 'those self-optimists whose 'whatever is—is right.''[114] This last quotation comes from Pope's *Essay on Man*, and, like the reference to 'pretensions to Optimism' in the prose piece, it alludes to philosophical optimism, a doctrine influential to various degrees on English writers including Pope and Rousseau, which Byron, in common with Voltaire and Johnson, was inclined to satirise as an unthinking counsel of complacency: hence his wry comment in the sixth canto, 'But no doubt every thing is for the best—'.[115] By sharp contrast, his own activity of assailing ('essaying / To show ye what

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[110] Letters to Scrope Berdmore Davies, 26 January 1819, *BLJ* XI, 171–2; Moore, 19 September 1818, *BLJ* VI, 67–68.
[111] 'Observations Upon Observations', 178–9; Nicholson, editorial note 98n.
[112] 'Some Observations', 110.
[113] See OED Online, *'Assail v.1'*. Cf. *'Essay, v.',* senses 1.a and 4.a, and *'Assay, v.'*, senses I.1.a and 16.
[114] Unpublished draft note to *Childe Harold* IV, editorial apparatus, 122, 64n. Also cf. *Don Juan* XI, ll. 34–36.
[115] *Don Juan* VI, l. 6. Pope's lines are, in 'spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite, / One truth is clear, "Whatever is, is RIGHT"'. See Pope, *An Essay on Man in Four Epistles* (1733–4), I, 293–4, *Pope, Works*, p. 249. M. G. Cooke has read the passage as 'an indictment of much of Augustan poetry, and in particular of the *Essay on Man*'. But it seems more likely to be a sympathetic gloss of the poem, loyally circumventing an aspect of the poem that Byron could hardly have

ye are in every way') reveals not a vision of a benevolently ordered universe, but a world in which 'all is by no means well'—as Voltaire's Candide puts it.[116]

If, as the prose piece seems to suggest, the activity of 'assailing' involves testing claims to the truth without necessarily aiming to produce conviction, then the activity might be said to be representative of some of Byron's practices more generally. Medwin provides us with a revealing memory of Byron in conversation: 'He hates argument, and never argues for victory'.[117] In *Don Juan*, Byron recorded his own scorn for conversationalists who attempt to 'seize the last word, which no doubt's the best.[118] The same resistance to all forms of 'decisive authority' lay behind one of the few reservations he expressed about Johnson: 'He is, perhaps, a little opinionated, as all men who are the *centre* of *circles*, wide or narrow—the Sir Oracles, in whose name two or three are gathered together—must be'.[119] Byron's view that thinking people should possess a proper humility about their judgments suggests another overlap between his manner in *Don Juan* and essayistic discourse, which traditionally encourages a degree of sceptical reservation in relation to the claims of intellectual argument. In *Don Juan*, modesty is a quality that serves his hero well. Juan is 'reserved' and perhaps 'hardly quite assured enough':

> But Modesty's at times its own reward,
> Like Virtue; and the absence of pretension
> Will go much further than there's need to mention.[120]

This quality of reserve is one that is also attributed by the narrator of *Don Juan*, in tongue-in-cheek fashion, to himself: 'but modesty's my forte, / …let us ramble on.'[121] As this suggests, there is also a stylistic element to this 'absence of pretension'. The intention to 'ramble on' links a spirit of intellectual modesty to the digressive

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found congenial. M. G. Cooke, *The Blind Man Traces the Circle: On the Patterns and Philosophy of Byron's Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 99. Also see Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Letter from J. J. Rousseau to M. de Voltaire', 18 August 1756, in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. by Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 232–246 (p. 233); A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 184–204.

[116] Voltaire, *Candide, or Optimism* (1759), ed. by Theo Cuffe (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 52. Byron admired the 'freedom' of Voltaire. *Candide* was a work with which he was familiar and had certainly read by 1813 if not earlier (see letters to Hobhouse, 11 November 1818, *BLJ* VI, 76-77; Lady Melbourne, 7 September 1813, *BLJ* III, 111).

[117] *MC*, 265–6.

[118] *Don Juan* XIII, st. 98.

[119] 'Letter to John Murray*',* 150; Journal entry, 1 December 1813, *BLJ* III, 228.

[120] Don Juan XIII, l. 116; Don Juan XV, ll. 110–12.

[121] Don Juan XV, ll. 169–70.

style of 'occasional rambling' that Byron associated with Montaigne and Sterne and brought to his own conversational style in verse.

Byron's aversion to intellectual pretension has other stylistic consequences in *Don Juan*. One of these is his preference for quoting other writers and thinkers rather than making any claim to be one of 'people of sagacity' himself. This is embodied in a narrator who has a habit of following his references to learned opinion—in the following case Locke, Bacon, and Socrates—with an undercutting mode of self-reference. 'I perch upon an humbler promontory,' he declares in Canto XV,

> And never straining hard to versify,
> I rattle on exactly as I'd talk
> With any body in a ride or walk.[122]

Among other things, writing 'exactly as I'd talk / With any body on a ride or walk' means not discoursing too long on serious philosophical topics. By adopting a conversational style, the poet guarantees his frankness, but also assures us that he does not present his own opinions as intellectual authority.

Another way in which Byron displaces the possibility of conclusiveness in *Don Juan* is through his adoption of the quasi-dramatic speaking voice of the narrator. Leading us to the boundary between the dramatic monologue and 'conversation in verse', as Jane Stabler suggests, in its most characteristic form this elusively ironic narratorial voice comes close to that which Byron described using in *Childe Harold* IV: 'little slightly, if at all, separated from the author speaking in his own person'.[123] As this suggests, Byron's ironic manner thrives where the distance between the dramatic speaker and the poet speaking *in propria persona* is slender. For much of the poem this voice is part fiction, part dramatic self-projection: a poet who at once is and is not Byron. One result of this is to introduce a comprehensive kind of irony into the poem. In the dramatic monologue, as Eric Griffiths writes, 'the consciousness of poet and fictional speaker diverge and coincide in creatively many ways, rather as diction and subject revolve around each other in the mock-heroic, and with similarly inquiring

[122] Don Juan XV, st. 19.
[123] Jane Stabler, 'Byron: Conversation and Discord', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 139 (2005), 111–36 (pp. 114–15); Dedication to *Childe Harold* IV, 122.

effects…'[124] There are of course elements of both in *Don Juan*; Byron delights in the ironies produced by what Griffiths calls the ''incompleteness' generally integral to writing when it conveys speech'.[125]

One of the virtues of this element of dramatic speech is that it allows Byron to test formulations that are not necessarily his own; when quoting 'the motto of Montaigne,' for example, in the stanza quoted above, which introduces a radically sceptical perspective (universal doubt being 'one of their most favourite positions') that is itself essayed rather than endorsed. It is never entirely clear how seriously such speculations are being entertained—or whether, indeed, as we may sometimes suspect, they are being lightly travestied—because Byron always stands in some sense outside the discourses he introduces into the poem. The effect is emancipating: because Byron's own position can never be conclusively determined, the poet, who is merely assaying, is at liberty to speculate. This allows him to introduce various intellectual figures and philosophical arguments into the poem—often with a reserve bordering on irony—without any need to adjudicate or reconcile their claims. A related effect is produced by the way the narrator habitually breaks off its contemplations, leaving them in suspension. For much of *Don Juan* we hear the voice of a narrator who, being interested in things as they are, believes that life is 'too brief' to wait too long until we 'leave off metaphysical / Discussion,' and 'agree that what is, is'.[126] His scepticism might be described as worldly in character, because it does not usually lead him too far from common sense: 'Nothing more true than *not* to trust your senses; / And yet what are your other evidences?'[127] Within *Don Juan,* speculations like these are typically introduced within a context of conversational and anecdotal familiarity, realised informally, and as a result of borrowed learning, and inextricably mixed up with varieties of ironic and personal reflection. None of this material is pursued too long or too consequentially—all of it, therefore, has an irresolvable character. This is another indication of what might be described as the essayistic character of these reflections. The activity of 'essaying', characteristically, recognises that inquiry cannot be brought to a conclusion because it is always generating further doubt. By leaving these lines of thought in perpetually unfinished and inconclusive form, Byron underlines the necessarily provisional quality of all inquiry, generating an effect that is in itself sceptical.

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[124] Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 75.
[125] *Ibid*., p. 190.
[126] *Don Juan* XI, ll. 34–36; Also Cf. Don Juan IX, l. 321.
[127] *Don Juan* XIV, ll. 9–16.

The most insistent source of these suspensions is Byron's responsibility to his narrative. For all its affinities with the essay, *Don Juan* is, of course, a narrative poem; it is significant that Byron wrote: 'Montaigne's Essays with a story for a hinge'. The fact that the discursive content of the poem must always eventually give way to the comic plotting is one feature that distinguishes Byron's mode of 'essaying' from the elements of versified essay in a work like Pope's *Essay on Man*, for example. Byron has a characteristic way of shifting from speculation into narrative: 'But let me to my story: I must own, / If I have any fault, it is digression;' 'No more; / But let us to the story as before…'[128] 'But to return' is a phrase repeated often by Montaigne in the *Essais*, where it is an indication of his radically digressive style.[129] Most characteristically, Byron uses the gesture to recall himself to his narrative, as in this Canto IX stanza:

> But I am apt to grow too metaphysical:
> 'The time is out of joint,'—and so am I;
> I quite forget this poem's merely quizzical,
> And deviate into matters rather dry.
> I ne'er decide what I shall say, and this I call
> Much too poetical. Men should know why
> They write, and for what end; but, note or text,
> I never know the word which will come next.
>
> So on I ramble, now and then narrating,
> Now pondering:—it is time we should narrate:[130]

Over the course of the poem Byron finds many ways of saying 'Return we to Don Juan', an acknowledgement that his speculations must be surrendered to the ongoing account of Juan's passions, intrigues and adventures: the activity of living, not thinking.[131] We can therefore be confident that whether Juan is in the arms of 'a forbidden woman', or 'on his path of fame', we will eventually be returned to wherever 'Our Hero (and, I trust, kind reader! Yours)' has been 'left upon his way'.[132] This digressive style of narration is a reminder of the second half of Byron's account of his poem in 1823: 'I mean it for a poetical T Shandy'. *Tristram Shandy* has

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[128] *Don Juan* III, ll. 857–8; *Don Juan* V, ll. 311–12.
[129] See e.g. Montaigne, *Essays*, II, 115, 165, 261, 438; III, 101.
[130] *Don Juan* IX, ll. 321–30.
[131] *Don Juan* II, l. 1329. See also, for e.g., II, 1249; IV, 55–6, V, 141; VI, 444–51; XIII, 89.
[132] *Don Juan* X, l. 33, 50–52; VIII, ll. 129–30; IX, ll. 177–8.

been described by Scott Black as a 'digressive work that is as much essay as novel', a recognition of kinship also implied by Byron when he brings the *Essais* into direct relation with Sterne's novel.[133] The narrative suspensions that characterise *Don Juan*—and Juan is, ultimately, 'Left in a tender moonlight situation,' as a result of the incompletion of the poem—show that Byron, like Sterne, saw how fruitfully essayistic discourse and narrative might collaborate.[134] And this, perhaps, is the most important point about these literary influences: both of the models named by Byron—Montaigne's essays and Sterne's novel—are themselves hospitable to hybridity. *Don Juan*'s easy uncertainty about its generic identity also belongs to the tradition of the essay: 'And in truth, what are these things I scribble, …?' asks Montaigne.[135]

A further source of uncertainty applies in *Don Juan*, which is that whatever truths Byron might come across in the course of writing will, ultimately, be offered by him as a poet—and this, as he suggests in Canto XII, may be for good or ill:

> Love
> 'Is Heaven, and Heaven is Love;'—so sings the bard;
> Which it were rather difficult to prove,
> (A thing with poetry in general hard.)[136]

In these sardonic lines, Byron is ambivalent about the freedom of poetry from the responsibilities of proof. The lines are aimed at the poets who fulfil that 'outrageous appetite for lies / Which Satan angles with, for souls, like flies.' And yet they apply, at another level, to all poetry, in which truth will be refracted through elements of form and sound. W. H. Auden described verse as unsuited 'to proving some truth or belief which is not universally accepted, because its formal nature cannot but convey a certain skepticism about its conclusions.'[137] In *Don Juan*, these formal considerations are compounded by the ambiguities of Byron's various dramatic self-projections: there is the character of the 'sad trimmer' in the third canto, for example, who is a version of Robert Southey, and therefore risible, but also of Byron himself: 'a man who had seen many changes' and picked up

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[133] Scott Black, 'Tristram Shandy, Essayist', in *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, pp. 132–49 (p. 132); cf. Parker, *SL*, p. 46.
[134] *Don Juan* XVII, l. 90.
[135] Montaigne, 'Of Friendship', *Essays*, 1, 321.
[136] *Don Juan* XII, ll. 97–100, quoting from Walter Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) III.xi.4–6. See Ricks, *Allusion*, p. 139.
[137] Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, p. 26.

'free thoughts in his travels, for variety'—and it is this figure who prompts the remark that poets 'are such liars, / And take all colours—like the hands of dyers.'[138] Poets are held to a lower standard of proof, Byron dryly warns us; but that licence, as he well knew, was also the making of his poem, which can move between actual fact and fiction as freely it does between its discursive and narrative content.

These ambivalences make *Don Juan* well adapted to assaying different kinds of truths. Moving between discourses, Byron is able to bring about ironic encounters between philosophy and experience, intellect and feeling, judgment and imagination: the truths of 'actual fact', for example, can be brought into relation with the imaginative understanding, or the poet's commitment to 'war …with all who war / With Thought' with the more immethodical findings of experience.[139] Parker makes this point compellingly about Johnson's *Rasselas*, a work that 'reads as a series of essays set within a narrative,' and therefore generates an ongoing 'sense of generic plurality or shift' as philosophy continually finds itself yielding to 'the switch into narrative, and the sense of ongoing process which the travelling in *Rasselas* always suggests'.[140] As in *Rasselas*, or *Candide*—another hybrid work with which *Don Juan* has elements in common—this means leaving behind ideals and theories in order to view the world in light of growing experience and an ever-widening perspective. This will inevitably involve going deeper into doubt: as Rasselas remarks: "the more we enquire, the less we can resolve.'[141]

III

Byron's commitment to the wider perspective is brought into particularly clear focus by the 'notions of emigration' that he entertained over the course of his years in Italy.[142] At Venice, Byron had appeared as the very definition of an artist profiting by living abroad: 'here I have pitched my staff—& here do I propose to reside for the remainder of my life,' he said there in 1818.[143] After leaving England, however, he did not stay settled anywhere for very long. By October 1819, a half-seriously pursued 'South American project' was making

[138] *Don Juan* III, ll. 633–59, 791–2.
[139] *Don Juan* IX (1823), ll. 186–7.
[140] Parker, *SL*, p. 258.
[141] Johnson, *The History of Rasselas*, *Works*, XVI, 99.
[142] Letter to Kinnaird, 23 September 1822, *BLJ* IX, 213.
[143] Letter to Samuel Rogers, 3 March 1818, *BLJ* VI, 17. T. S. Eliot remarked of Henry James, that 'Since Byron and Landor, no Englishman appears to have profited much from living abroad.' T. S. Eliot, *Little Review*, August 1918, quoted in Christopher Ricks, 'Donald Davie and the English', *LRB* 2.10 (22 May 1980).

him think of Venezuela, that there he might 'pitch my tent for good and all.'[144] The idea that he might go further abroad was still on his mind in 1822: 'South America— —The United States—or even van Dieman's land— '.[145] During this period he was being driven across Italy by political circumstances, but his way of always washing up somewhere new also reflected a deeper level of irresolution. Reflecting on his 'six years a Gipsy-ing' in 1820, he described himself as feeling 'very undecided & uncertain … having quite lost all local feeling for England without having acquired any local attachment for any other spot'.[146]

Other impulses lay behind his restless way of looking always for somewhere freer, cheaper, and further away. Another way of looking at these emigrations is that they were also a series of choices to be more free: 'I want a country—and a home—and if possible—a free one—'[147] In 1820, Byron described himself of thinking 'of Sth. America, or the Cape, or Turkey, or any where, so that I can but preserve my independence of means to live withal.'[148] Byron's library was auctioned off in 1816 when he left England. That necessity also marked the beginning of his long efforts to be unencumbered of his English landed interest. The whole drift of his affairs after leaving England was towards the realisation of his assets: of Rochdale, he said in 1820, '—I should like to convert it into Cash'.[149] This underlines his cosmopolitan angle of vision. By 1823, he was declaring, 'I am of no Country.'[150] In that determination to defend his 'independence of means' there lies an important truth about his art. In an earlier letter, brief thoughts of returning to England in 1819 ('I do not come to England for pleasure—but I know not where to go unless to America') were clouded by the thought that 'I must conform to my circumstances—and live accordingly,—that is meanly in London & difficultly—on that which affords splendour & ease in Italy'.[151] This wish to live in good style speaks, to some extent, of a desire to avoid the intrusion of the meanly real. And yet the question of means may be considered more than a matter of worldly resources, as the previous chapter has suggested. At an artistic level, too, he defended the strong link between his uncompromising independence and his freedom of technique. Byron reported that travelling beyond the reach of 'the short arms of literary England' had allowed his art to take a direction that was '*free and* unbiased'.

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[144] Letter to Hobhouse, 3 October 1819, *BLJ* VI, 225.
[145] Letter to Kinnaird, 24 September 1822, *BLJ* IX, 215.
[146] Letter to Kinnaird, 30 April 1820, *BLJ* VII, 86.
[147] Letter to Hobhouse, 3 October 1819, *BLJ* VI, 226–7.
[148] Letter to Augusta, 2 January 1820, *BLJ* VII, 15.
[149] Letter to Hobhouse, 6 April 1820. *BLJ* VII, 71. On Byron's relation to cash ('Cash is Virtue') see Ricks, *Allusion*, pp. 131–46; letter to Kinnaird, 23 Feb 1822, *BLJ* IX, 113.
[150] Letter to Count Alfred D'Orsay, 22 April 1823, *BLJ* X, 156.
[151] Letter to Kinnaird, 16 November 1819, *BLJ* VI, 241.

In *Don Juan*, his satisfaction at being 'out of the way' of what he saw as English literary parochialism had ongoing implications for his style. One was that his worldly narrative continued to travel further out, beyond the centre of English literary life; another was that by leaving the poem open to the influence of impure and discursive forms, he continued to push into a region beyond the usual boundaries of poetry.

Increasingly, the poem came to absorb the influence of the loose, unsystematic, autobiographical writing that Byron was doing elsewhere. This included the 'Detached Thoughts' of 1821–22. Sent to Murray as 'a common-place book', these were cousin to the destroyed *Memoirs*, which Medwin recalled Byron describing as 'very incoherent, written in a very loose and familiar style.'[152] They had their origins in a discontinued journal begun in May 1821: 'But what shall I write? another Journal?—I think not.—Anything that comes uppermost—and call it "my Dictionary".[153] Byron could see that *Don Juan*, similarly, might be allowed to unfold according to impulse and inclination. By 1823, and the cantos Byron was writing at Genoa, the idea of writing whatever 'comes uppermost' had been directly absorbed into the poem:

> But what's this to the purpose? you will say.
> Gent. Reader, nothing; a mere speculation,
> For which my sole excuse is—'tis my way,
> Sometimes with and sometimes without occasion
> I write what's uppermost, without delay …[154]

These lines describe a poet who is free to pursue whatever ends he pleases, by whatever manner suits him in the moment. The critical implications of this are interesting. This is a stanza to which McGann refers in *The Romantic Ideology*, where he writes that 'Byron's famous "spontaneity"…is a poetic style which covets verbal immediacy, and *Don Juan*'s digressive manner is its exemplary form. The mediations of language are destroyed by turning language into an environment for sensations and feelings.'[155] For McGann the stanza is representative of Byron's 'effort to break free of language altogether in order to achieve an unmediated set of responses', though at other times in *Don Juan*, as he acknowledges, there is 'an effort to plunge into the verbal medium itself, to make the flow of language the encompassing totality of immediate experience'. In either description,

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[152] Letter to Murray, 8 June 1822, *BLJ* IX, 168; *MC*, 30.
[153] Journal entry, 1 May 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 106.
[154] *Don Juan* XIV, ll. 49–53. Cf. *Don Juan* XV, ll. 157–9.
[155] McGann, *RI*, p. 126.

however, what is involved is an attempt to assimilate the poetic medium to experience itself. The limitation of his approach—and Peter Manning, too, links Byron to the pursuit of an 'ideal of unmediated expression'—is that the poet's ''medium' … is not 'sensation' but language,' as Peter McDonald points out of Keats.[156] So although these critical accounts convey Byron's respect for the sensuous world, they cannot fully capture his relish for the ironies produced by his medium, which is self-consciously verbal.

McGann's particular example, the stanza above, is very much complicated once it is recognised that when Byron declares, 'I write what's uppermost, without delay', he is in fact alluding to *Tristram Shandy*. The reference comes from Sterne's portrait of Yorick, who 'seldom shun'd occasions of saying what came uppermost, and without much ceremony; he had but too many temptations in life, of scattering his wit and his humour,—his gibes and his jests about him.'[157] Far from being a case in which the 'mediations of language are destroyed', then, as McGann suggests, these lines were meant to contain a recognisable, though unacknowledged, literary reference. The primary impulse of the lines is conversational, but the borrowing is typical of the easy flow of literary quotation, punning and wordplay that gives *Don Juan* away as a literary medium.

Byron's intention to write with an improvised spontaneity was meant seriously. As Jonathan Lamb notes in his study of 'Sterne's Use of Montaigne', Yorick's habit of 'saying what came uppermost' is an assurance of his integrity and 'naked temper'.[158] Byron means something similar when he promises to set down whatever 'comes uppermost' when composing his autobiographical writings in his 'loose and familiar style'. A commitment to writing on impulse will guarantee that the writer is concealing nothing. Byron also had such candour in mind when reusing the phrase in a letter to Murray, in June 1822, when considering whether to reply to the poor reviews of the dramas he wrote in 1821–22: 'if I do—it will be difficult for me not to make sport for the Philistines by pulling down a house or two—since when I once taken pen in hand—I *must* say what comes uppermost—or fling it away— —I have not the hypocrisy to pretend impartiality—'[159] The lines from *Tristram*

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[156] Manning, 'Don Juan and the Revisionary Self', p. 210; McDonald, *Sound Intentions,* p. 120.

[157] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. by Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), I. ch. xi, p. 24. The allusion is not noted in the current edition. O'Neill and Stabler have referred in general terms to Sterne's influence on Byron's style in *Don Juan*: see O'Neill, *Romanticism*, pp. 106–7; Stabler, *BPH*, p. 54.

[158] Jonathan Lamb, 'Sterne's Use of Montaigne', *Comparative Literature*, 32.1 (1980), 1–41 (p. 6).

[159] Letter to Murray, 6 June 1822, *BLJ* IX, 168.

Shandy tell us that Yorick makes enemies as a result of his irrepressible and indiscreet wit; Byron similarly courts the dangers of frankness. He turned to the same expression again in Canto XV:

> I don't know that there may be much ability
> Shown in this sort of desultory rhyme;
> But there's a conversational facility,
> Which may round off an hour upon a time.
> Of this I'm sure at least, there's no servility
> In mine irregularity of chime,
> Which rings what's uppermost of new or hoary,
> Just as I feel the 'Improvisatore.'[160]

Here the poet's claim to an unreserved honesty is underwritten by a conversational method that dictates that he set down whatever occurs to him in the moment when he takes 'pen in hand'. In these lines, literary design is relinquished in favour of a style that possesses the same expansive, liberated ease of his letters—being relaxed, conversational, and merely 'desultory'. And yet in that promise to record 'what's uppermost' the echo of Sterne lingers; the stanza defends the honesty of unpremeditated writing, which is without 'servility', but the allusion is a reminder that what we are reading is an outcome of literary style as well as 'conversational facility'.

This is underlined by the fact that Byron's commitment to 'saying what came uppermost' was probably further mediated by Pope: 'I may as well throw out what comes uppermost, as study to be dull', Pope wrote in one of his widely-published letters; in another he referred to the 'liberty of throwing out my self upon paper to you, and making what thoughts float uppermost in my head, the subject of a letter.'[161] The idea also appears in the work of another great letter-writer, Keats: 'it will be impossible for me to keep any order or method in what I write: that will come first which is uppermost in my mind…'[162] In Pope's case, the phrase refers to an ideal of cultivated spontaneity and controlled self-portraiture, exemplified by the letters that he took pride in having 'scribbled' or written 'negligently,' so that 'my style, like my soul, appears in its natural undress'.[163] Byron's commitment to writing without hypocrisy went far beyond Pope's carefully mediated ideal of sincerity. And yet it is interesting to find that writing what comes uppermost is an idea that has—perhaps paradoxically—

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[160] *Don Juan* XV, ll. 153–60.
[161] Letters from Pope to Henry Cromwell, 24 June 1710, *Correspondence*, I, 90; and 30 December 1710, I (1963), 111.
[162] Letter from Keats to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 October 1818, in *The Letters of John Keats*, I, 392.
[163] Letters from Pope to John Caryll, 19 November 1712, *Correspondence*, I, 156; Swift, 28 November 1729, III, 79.

literary origins. Byron's allusion to Yorick likewise yields a distinctly literary pleasure. Byron, like Yorick, is unable to turn down 'occasions of saying what came uppermost, and without much ceremony'. But when Byron records his own intention to 'write what's uppermost, without delay', he means to defend not just his right to speak with an unconstrained honesty, but also his licence to use whatever literary reference comes uppermost: to use the association that springs to mind on a given occasion, to allude without much delay or ceremony. In fact, this could describe much of Byron's practice in *Don Juan* and in his letters more generally.

This points to another implication of intending *Don Juan* 'for a poetical T Shandy—or Montaigne's Essays', which is that both of these models are open to loose literary borrowings. If rhyme is a formal feature of poetry that can easily become 'critically transparent or invisible', as McDonald suggests, then the same might be said of Byron's habitual use of unsignalled allusions.[164] Byron's habit of making rapid and improvised references from memory means that the extent of his literary reference can easily go overlooked. 'We have often been asked to applaud Byron's poems in *ottava rima* as though they somehow proceeded directly from contemporary speech,' observes Bernard Beatty; when what we find instead, he suggests, is a method modelled on Pope and Burns: 'a deliberate balancing of poetic usages, quotations and colloquial idiom. Each gives and takes life from the other.'[165] Often, the result leaves Byron poised between an improvisatory and a literary impulse. As Jonathan Bate perceptively observed, '*Don Juan* as a whole is an accumulative, disparate, unorganic work, so its quotations are not integrated.'[166] And yet Byron is also a specialist in quietly absorbing unacknowledged quotations into his dramatic speaking voice. Wilson Knight made a related point about his letters: 'You hear the speaking voice, but the speaking voice speaks in literature. That is dramatic speech.'[167]

Far from wanting 'to break free of language', Byron recognised that throwing off the associations that attach themselves to words—making the medium clear—would be an impossibility. This is evident, for example, in the observation he makes of Bowles, who, as he exasperatedly pointed out, 'is always quoting Pope—I grant that there is no poet—not Shakespeare himself—who can be so often quoted—with reference to Life——but his Editor is so like the Devil quoting Scripture—'[168] At some level, quotation is simply an inevitable result of using language. Byron's habits of reference were deeply instinctive; the borrowing

[164] McDonald, *Sound Intentions*, p. 58.
[165] Beatty, 'Lord Byron: Poetry and Precedent', pp. 123–4.
[166] Bate, *Shakespeare*, p. 240.
[167] Wilson Knight, *Poets of Action*, p. 272.
[168] 'Observations Upon Observations', 182.

from Sterne is an example of the delightful ironies that it could produce. Byron's evident satisfaction in casting himself in the role of Yorick while simultaneously playing a version of himself shows that, like Yorick, he was as subject to the temptation of 'scattering his wit' as he was determined to speak candidly.

The allusion to Sterne makes it possible to trace a familiar pattern in Byron's work. As his scepticism of the ordinary preoccupations of poetry led him to expand what the medium could do, he adopted an increasingly improvisatory style that was, in some ways, consciously unliterary, including in its repudiation of formal unity. Its business is said to be with 'the world, and the world's ways', rather than the world of art. And yet, when close attention is paid to his verse, that impression is not always borne out. It was in 1822, McGann argues, that *Don Juan* was transformed into 'a comprehensive survey and explanation of the principal phases of the epoch 1789–1824' under the influence of the arrival of Hunt at Pisa and 'the lively political conversations which Hunt's arrival helped to stimulate'.[169] But it was also at this point that new and revisited literary influences started to flow into the poem: even Byron's intention to 'rattle on exactly as I'd talk', as A. B. England points out, echoes a verse epistle by Matthew Prior: 'I must, Sir, prattle on, as afore, / And beg your Pardon yet this half Hour.'[170]

When Byron claims that 'I never know the word which will come next', which may, incidentally, contain a further echo of Prior, he demonstrates how closely his scepticism was at one with elements of his literary style.[171] Writing with 'no plan' means travelling in uncertainty, which suggests that *Don Juan,* in common with the open-ended forms chosen by Sterne and Montaigne, approximates a sceptical vision of what it means to live: to be carried along with little understanding of why one thing follows another, to be in doubt of the possibility of ever arriving at conviction. J. T. Parnell writing on Swift and *Tristram Shandy* notes that 'The writers of the sceptical tradition all employ non-linear and 'open' form as part of their assault on dogmatism.'[172] And yet, as Jonathan Lamb points out, the '*Essays* and *Tristram Shandy* are books that observe

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[169] McGann, *BI*, p. 255; McGann, editorial notes, *CPW* V, 293.

[170] 'An Epistle to Fleetwood Shephard' (1689), ll. 111–12, *The Literary Works of Matthew Prior,* ed. by H. Bunker Wright and Monroe K. Spears, 2nd end, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), I, 89 (hereafter, Prior, *Works*); England, *Byron's Don Juan*, p. 96. Byron seems not to have owned a volume of Prior in England, but he would have encountered his poems in Anderson's *British Poets,* in which the 'Epistle to Fleetwood Shephard' is collected, in VII, 390; Byron either remembered the lines or re-encountered them in Hunt's library at Pisa. Also see Chapter 5 for a further discussion of Prior. Interestingly Francis Jeffrey thought that the closest precedent for the manner of *Beppo* was to be found in the 'lighter pieces of Prior': Francis Jeffrey, unsigned review of *Beppo,* p. 302). Cf. Stabler, *BPH,* p. 59.

[171] *Don Juan* IX, ll. 327–8; Cf. Prior, An Epistle to Fleetwood Shephard' (1689), ll. 31–2, *Works*, I, 86–7.

[172] J. T. Parnell, 'Swift, Sterne, and Sceptical Tradition', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 23 (1994), 221–242 (p. 236).

themselves and begin to use themselves as part of their subject matter,' in a process that becomes in some ways 'increasingly literary'.[173] Jane Stabler, referring to the way that digression is figured as a journey by Byron's predecessors including Sterne, points out that 'Byron's writing takes this literary trope a stage further by mingling it with the historical actuality of out across war-scarred Europe.'[174] McGann, too, of course, has demonstrated the value of drawing out these 'specific historical perspectives'.[175] And yet Byron also does much travelling in imagination*:* when he invites his readers to follow Juan to Russia, for example ('Suppose him then at Petersburgh…'), or for that matter, when he sends his hero to England.[176] Byron's worldly conviction that writing must not lose touch with reality was real, but he also valued a form of literary worldliness. This is suggested by the irony he directed towards Keats and the 'Cockney School' in the unpublished addendum to the 'Letter to John Murray':

> When they have really seen life—when they have felt it—when they have travelled beyond the far-distant boundaries of the wilds of Middlesex—when they have overpassed the Alps of High-gate—and traced to it's [*sic*] sources the Nile of the New River—then—& not till then—can it properly be permitted to them to despise Pope.[177]

Given that Pope never travelled very far, the worldliness that Byron has in mind must at least in part be a quality of mind. He was defending Pope as a truly European poet, but also responding to a side of his predecessor to which he had always sensitive: the Pope who remarked in a letter to Swift that 'Imagination has no limits, and that is a sphere in which you may move on to eternity; but where one is confined to Truth (or to speak more like a human creature, to the appearances of Truth) we soon find the shortness of our Tether.'[178] When Byron looks to Pope, imaginative and literary experience take their place alongside lived experience. It is this literary intelligence that makes Pope so worth quoting 'with reference to life'.

A similar quality may be found in the worldly manner of Montaigne, who warns that being 'a Man of some Reading,' he 'can promise no Certainty' about where his knowledge originates: 'Therefore let no Body

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[173] Lamb, 'Sterne's Use of Montaigne', p. 38.
[174] Jane Stabler, *BPH*, p. 54.
[175] McGann, *BI*, pp. 266–7.
[176] *Don Juan* X, l. 506.
[177] 'Letter to John Murray', 157.
[178] Letter from Pope to Swift, 19 December 1734, *Correspondence*, III, 446.

insist upon the Matter I write, but my Method in writing.'[179] Byron is similarly interested in the means of travel. Describing Juan's journey towards England, he invokes the high spirits of travelling 'merely for the sake of its own merits', and all for 'the pleasure in arriving / At the great end of travel—which is driving.' [180] Again, his 'independence of means' in art as in life are essential. And though he travels in doubt of the possibility of arriving at any certainties, he proceeds with a degree of confidence in his methods. In large part, it is Byron's considerable formal means which convince us that the poem could contain anything or go anywhere. Being committed to essaying the world, the poet discovers his subject matter to be endless:

> … let us ramble on.
> I meant to make this poem very short,
> But now I can't tell where it may not run.
> No doubt, if I had wish'd to pay my court
> To critics, or to hail the *setting* sun
> Of tyranny of all kinds, my concision
> Were more;—but I was born for opposition.[181]

This describes a poem which can reach into any part of life and can bring all kinds of subjects within itself, obeying a muse who 'treats all things, and ne'er retreats / From any thing,' as Byron writes in the following stanza.[182] When Montaigne uses the essay as a metaphor for the journey of life, he writes: 'I neither undertake it to return nor to finish it.'[183] Out of his bitter disillusionment Byron similarly discovers the method that sustains his poem, which can unfold without end: 'I can't tell where it may not run'.

In *Don Juan*, Byron also defended his freedom to travel wherever he wanted stylistically. Of the manner that had made Byron famous, Oliver Elton observed: 'He followed out this style to the utmost, he made the best of it; and in doing this he travelled away from it. At length he attained a poetic style that nearly approaches to his prose style.'[184] In his final years in Italy, these stylistic developments become one source of Byron's increasingly difficult relations with 'literary England'. These are the subject of the final chapter of this thesis.

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[179] Montaigne, 'Of Books', *Essays*, II, 129. See discussion of this passage in Lamb, 'Sterne's Use of Montaigne', p. 22.
[180] *Don Juan* X, st. 72.
[181] *Don Juan* XIV, ll. 170–6.
[182] *Don Juan* XVI, ll. 17–19.
[183] Montaigne, 'Of Vanity', *Essays*, III, 321, 327.
[184] Elton, *A Survey of English Literature*, II, 136.

Chapter 5 – Throwing it Away

I

In December 1823, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* reviewed Cantos VI–VIII of *Don Juan*, which had been published that July. The reviewer was probably John Gibson Lockhart.[1] Byron had earlier been gratified by Lockhart's 'John Bull's Letter' of 1821, which was full of backhanded insults that were really compliments. 'I had really no idea what a very clever fellow you were till I read Don Juan', Lockhart had written then.[2] 'I don't remember anything so complete as the recent fall of Lord Byron's literary name', he now remarked. By this time, the editors at *Blackwood's* had lost patience with *Don Juan*, now classed as sneering and 'anti-British' poetry, 'printed by the Cockneys'.[3] Up until this point, Byron had been on the right side of that term of abuse, calling Keats 'that idol of the Cockneys' and expressing reservations about Leigh Hunt's 'vulgarisms' of style.[4] In an unpublished addendum to the 'Letter to John Murray', he had criticised the unwelcome 'Jingle' of the 'Bucolical Cockneys' 'who pretend to rival' Pope.[5] Now, partly by way of his association with the Hunts, Byron was accused of the same: 'doubt, if you can, that Byron has staid away rather too long, and that, if he means to write more English, it is high time he were back in England*, to hear the language spoken*.' The reviewer next advised him to 'guard against' listening to the 'poor Cockney' under his roof:

> He has positively lost his ear, not only for the harmony of English verse, but for the very jingle of English rhymes. He makes *will* rhyme to *will* in stanza 33 of Canto VI. 'Patience" is the rhyme to "fresh ones" in another place. "*John Murray*" rhymes to "*necessary*" in a third; and "*had in her*" to "*Vladimir*" in a fourth. As for the flow of his verse, read the follow patches of dull prose: … [6]

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[1] See Ralph M. Wardle, 'Timothy Tickler's' Irish Blood', *The Review of English Studies*, 18.72 (1942), 486–490 (p. 486).
[2] John Gibson Lockhart, *Letter to the Right Hon. Lord Byron, by John Bull* (London: William Wright, 1821), p. 43. See letter to Murray, 29 June 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 145.
[3] 'The New Cantos of *Don Juan*' (Letters of 'Timothy Tickler Esq.', No. VII), *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine,* 14 (December 1823), 88–92 (pp. 88, 92). The 'Cockney School' had been so christened by Lockhart in an article entitled 'On the Cockney School of Poetry', in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 2.7 (Oct. 1817), 38–41.
[4] *MC*, 238; comments on M. S. of Leigh Hunt's *Story of Rimini*, 1815, *CMP*, 213–17; letter to Hunt, 22 October 1815, *BLJ* IV 320.
[5] Addendum to the 'Letter to John Murray', 148–9, 154.
[6] 'The New Cantos of *Don Juan*', p. 90. The examples given are from *Don Juan* VI, ll. 801-5; VII, 204–6; and VIII, 1119–20.

The magazine then printed a stanza each from Cantos VI, VII and VIII, setting them out without line-breaks to demonstrate the point.[7] One of these examples is a stanza in which we follow Juan into battle:

> "Perceiving then no more the commandant of his own corps, nor even the corps, which had quite disappeared—the Gods know how! (I can't account for everything which may look bad in history; but we at least may grant it was not marvellous that a mere lad, in search of glory, should look on before, nor care a pinch of snuff about his corps.)"[8]

This is Byron's *ottava rima* at its most conversational and least epigrammatic—and a graphic example of what Swinburne described as the 'debatable borderland' of his verse in *ottava rima*, situated somewhere between poetry and prose. Attention to Byron's original stanza demonstrates the importance of the expansive parenthesis, his use of half lines, and the latency of the rhyme scheme, which is fulfilled as if by accident:

> Perceiving then no more the commandant
> Of his own corps, nor even the corps, which had
> Quite disappeared—the Gods know how! (I can't
> Account for every thing which may look bad
> In history; but we at least may grant
> It was not marvellous that a mere lad,
> In search of glory, should look on before,
> Nor care a pinch of snuff about his corps:)— [9]

This stanza is a good example of how far Byron was willing to test the orthodoxy that he inherited from Dryden and Pope that verse 'is granted to be more remote than Prose from ordinary Conversation,' or, for that matter, that 'Blanck Verse is, indeed, the nearer Prose'.[10] In an early essay, 'The Borderline of Prose', T. S. Eliot argued that the only essential difference between poetry and prose must be that 'poetry is written in verse, and prose is

[7] The examples given, which were all published in 1823, are *Don Juan* VI, st. 5; VII st. 21, VIII, st. 31.
[8] *Don Juan* VIII, st. 31.
[9] *Ibid*.
[10] Dryden, *A Defence of An Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, pp. 7, 5.

written in prose; or, in other words, that there is prose rhythm and verse rhythm.'[11] Reflecting on that essay, Christopher Ricks has proposed that 'If we set aside metre, the remaining poetry/prose distinction is that in prose the lines run the full breadth of the page. In prose, the line-endings are without significance …'[12] With the visual distinction of the lineation removed, and finding the sound of the metre almost imperceptible, we discover that the stanza appears to be straddling 'prose rhythm and verse rhythm'.

Curiously enough, then, the *ottava rima,* at least in this form, might be considered to raise some of the same questions that have historically been asked about blank verse. Drawing attention to the difficulty of hearing 'where the lines end or begin', Johnson famously complained of the tendency of blank verse to become '*verse only to the eye*'.[13] A similar objection was recorded by Coleridge in his discussion of metrical composition in *Biographia Literaria*, where he expressed his reservations about 'a theory, that aims to *identify* the style of prose and verse'. 'The existence of *prosaisms*', he insisted, '*must* at length be conceded, when a number of successive lines can be rendered, even to the most delicate ear, unrecognizable as verse, or as having even been intended for verse, by simply transcribing them as prose…'[14] In fact, Byron shared in this traditional unease about the presence of '*prosaisms*' in verse. In the *ottava rima*, he may have always had 'half a mind to tumble down to prose', as he said in *Beppo*, but he also insisted on the distinction: 'Prose poets like blank–verse, I'm fond of rhyme,' his poet remarks in the first canto of *Don Juan*.[15] From *English Bards* onwards*,* this was a line of criticism that he had been aiming at Wordsworth, 'Who, both by precept and example, shows / That prose is verse, and verse is merely prose'.[16] Hazlitt would later say of Byron that 'he does not understand Mr. Wordsworth's poetry, and we cannot make him', but it might be more accurate to say that Byron—who had admired the *Lyrical Ballads*—was by this point determined to be unadmiring of his predecessor.[17] His primary objection was that Wordsworth's 'prosaic raving' was 'the sort of writing which has superseded and degraded Pope'; Pope, by contrast, was praised in the 'Letter to John Murray' for doing 'in *verse*—which the greatest of

[11] T. S. Eliot, 'The Borderline of Prose' (1917), *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, I, 537–543 (pp. 537–8). The essay was originally published in *The New Statesman* in May 1917, and Eliot was reviewing some prose poems by Richard Aldington, but also speaking more generally.
[12] Christopher Ricks, *Along Heroic Lines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 9–10.
[13] Johnson, 'Life of Milton' (1781), *Lives*, I, 242–95 (pp. 294).
[14] Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 265.
[15] *Don Juan* I, l. 1605.
[16] *English Bards*, ll. 241–2.
[17] Hazlitt, 'Pope, Lord Byron, and Mr. Bowles', p. 602; letter to Leigh Hunt, 30 October 1815, *BLJ* IV, 325.

men have wished to accomplish in prose'.[18] Byron's determination not to be one of the 'Prose poets, even as he took his verse to the border with prose, to some degree adopting what he condemned, suggests how essential it was to him that his most prosaic effects, including those that *Blackwood's* found so objectionable, should be achieved in a rhymed medium.

Writing 'dull prose', in other words, becomes a question of rhyme. In taking his *ottava rima* to the border with prose, Byron deployed a full range of metrical experiments. Another example provided by the *Blackwood's* review comes from Canto VI:

> "He died at fifty for a queen of forty; I wish their years had been fifteen and twenty, for then wealth, kingdoms, worlds, are but a sport; I remember when, though I had no great plenty of worlds to lose, yet still, to pay my court, I gave what I had—a heart;—as the world went I gave what was worth a world; for worlds could never restore me those pure feelings, gone forever."[19]

One of the specific features of this stanza is its teasing shifting of pronouns to the line-ending: 'I / Remember when,' 'I / Gave what I had—', 'I / Gave what was worth a world;' a ploy that Byron uses elsewhere in *Don Juan*.[20] The effect, that of identical rhyme, reduces the sounds to similitude, which in this case produces a form of punning, playing on the eye and ear, in which the I/I rhymes yield pure identity. The use of homonyms was one of the effects singled out for criticism by the *Blackwood's* review, which specifically objected to Byron making '*will* rhyme to *will*'. That example comes from a passage in which the narrator is resuming the story after observing the women in the seraglio:

> —but we will
> Continue. As I said, this goodly row
> Of ladies of all countries at the will
> Of one good man, …[21]

[18] Unpublished Preface to *Don Juan, CPW* V, 82; 'Letter to John Murray', 149.
[19] 'The New Cantos of *Don Juan*', p. 90. The stanza quoted is Canto VI, st. 5.
[20] Cf. *Don Juan* I, st. 213; *The Vision of Judgment*, st. 13.
[21] *Don Juan* VI, ll. 258–61.

Though Byron accused Keats of being the proponent of a new "Art of sinking in Poetry", he was himself fully willing to exploit effects of bathos in rhyme.[22] For both poets this would provide ammunition to the reviewers. Identical rhyme is also a feature of Byron's late satire in heroic couplets, *The Age of Bronze*. When this was published early in 1823, it was called a piece of 'doggerel' by another *Blackwood's* reviewer, John Wilson, who pretended to think that it had been 'begotten by a Cockney'.[23] The poem features a *bravura* twelve-line passage of identical rhyme on the word 'rent', a device brilliantly adapted to Byron's satire on the market for war, suggesting that everything may be boiled down to the demand for 'Rent, Rent, Rent!'[24] It was, of course, this 'anti-British' element that had antagonised the Tory reviewers; the opprobrium they cast on a poet who had 'lost his ear … for the very jingle of English rhymes' represented the union of a political and a stylistic criticism.

Among poets who have challenged the notion that 'there ever remains a substantial difference between the two spheres and between their respective native inhabitants, between the country of poetry and the country of prose', Robert Browning must be one of Byron's most important successors.[25] Those are the words of Alfred Austin, who charged Browning with writing a form of versified prose by 'gratuitously' measuring out his 'prose thoughts' 'into certain lengths'.[26] Austin was far from the only critic to accuse Browning of writing 'line upon line … that is flatly prose', or of employing 'rhymes that are so to the eye merely, like an occasional unintentional jingling of like sounds in careless prose'—a criticism which may bring to mind the stanza from *Don Juan* quoted above.[27] Though the influence of Byron on Browning has been traced by Jane Stabler among others, it remains an underestimated literary relationship—though it was one characterised by mixed feelings, as she shows.[28] John Maynard has suggested that 'Byron's influence on Browning was probably as great as that

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[22] 'Some Observations', 116. The Cockney appellation had a good deal to do with rhyme, as Peter McDonald has shown. See *Sound Intentions,* pp. 25, 117–18.
[23] John Wilson, review of *The Age of Bronze* (1823), *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 13 (April 1823), 457–60 (p. 457).
[24] *Ibid.*, l. 633 (and see from 620).
[25] Alfred Austin, *The Poetry of the Period* (London: R. Bentley, 1870), p. 50.
[26] *Ibid*., p. 61.
[27] Unsigned review of Browning's *Dramatis Personae* (1864) by James Hutchinson Stirling, 'The Poetical Works of Robert Browning', *North British Review* 49 (December 1868), 353–408, *Browning: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 280–83 (p. 281); George Brimley and 'T.C.C.', *Fraser's Magazine,* 53 (January 1856), 105–16, *Browning: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 165–73 (p. 171). Also see Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist' (1890), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde,* ed. by Russell Jackson, Ian Small and others, 10 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002–2019), IV (Josephine M. Guy, 2007), 123–206 (p. 130).
[28] Jane Stabler, 'Byron and Browning: Something and Nothing', in *Byron Among the English Poets*, pp. 251–68. See esp. Letter from Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 24 May 1845, in *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, *1845–46*, ed. by Robert Wiedeman Barrett Browning, 2 vols (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1899), I, 77.

of any modern poet except Shelley.'[29] Maynard was thinking of Browning's 'same sympathetic reaching out for more and more experience and the same problem of giving unity to his impulses, of concentrating instead of dispersing them.'[30] This well sums up that element of outward mobility that was differently a feature of their styles, and likewise a feature of their receptions. In Browning, Barbara Everett described a style that typically "goes everywhere", reflecting his vital interest in worldly life, and conveying, because 'characteristically lacking most recognizable forms of inward aesthetic necessity,' that the 'artlessness that is sometimes antagonism to art' that made up that element in him of the 'philistine.'[31]

One mode of artistic virtuosity in which they shared was rhyme: 'am I not a rhymester?', Browning asked his wife in a letter of 1846; Peter McDonald has suggested that 'in the specific matter of rhyme, Robert Browning is more in Byron's debt than in that of figures like Wordsworth or even Shelley.'[32] Both poets had a taste for venturesome rhymes. Henry Reeve, distinguishing between Tennyson and Browning as stylists, remarked on Tennyson's 'intense concentration of thought', which he contrasted with the effects of Browning's 'rare ingenuity of rhyme'. Browning, like Byron, was willing to go out of his way for a rhyme: 'The rhyme being found in some improbable place, carries off the poet to a new order of ideas, and leads, instead of following, the course of thought.'[33] This technique had been thoroughly exploited by Byron. One of its effects may be to convey a kind of cosmopolitanism in rhyme. Some of the un-English rhymes of which Blackwood's complained in 1823 are of this character: examples like the rhyme of '"*had in her*" to "*Vladimir*"'. Francis Jeffrey's one reservation about *Beppo* was its 'out-of-the-way rhymes'.[34]

One link between the two poets takes the form of Lockhart, the probable reviewer from *Blackwood's.* When Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning arrived at Pisa in 1846, twenty-five years after Byron, they were, as Jane Stabler points out, equally resolved to avoid the travelling English.[35] It was some years later, in 1854,

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[29] John Maynard, *Browning's Youth* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1977; repr. 2014), p. 175. Also cf. Stefan Hawlin, 'Browning's 'A Toccata of Galuppi's' How Venice Once Was Dear' *The Review of English Studies,* New Series, 41.164 (1990), 496–509 (p. 497); Ronald Bottrall, 'Byron and the Colloquial Tradition in English Poetry', p. 223.
[30] Maynard, *Browning's Youth*, pp. 175-6.
[31] Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 173-4.
[32] Letter from Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 6 April 1846, II, 39; quoted in Donald S. Hair, *Robert Browning's Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 111; McDonald, *Sound Intentions*, p. 23.
[33] Henry Reeve, unsigned article, 'Tennyson and Browning', *Edinburgh Review,* 172 (October 1890), 301–16, in *Robert Browning: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Boyd Litzinger and Donald Arthur Smalley (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1996), p. 564.
[34] Jeffrey, unsigned review of *Beppo*, p. 303.
[35] See Jane Stabler, *The Artistry of Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 21–40.

that Browning, writing to his friend John Forster from Rome, reported on his acquaintance with 'Lockhart—of whom I saw a good deal lately: what think you of his choosing to like me very much—being so unlike, as he said, 'a damned literary man!''[36] This comment is cited approvingly by Everett: 'One couldn't put the point better when discussing Browning's literary personality. As a poet, Browning is good, because he's not the least bit like one of your damned literary men.'[37] If the phrase brings to mind Byron's own claim, quoted in the introduction to this thesis, not to 'draw well with Literary men', that may be because Lockhart, who was a contemporary of Byron, had him in mind. Byron made the remark in one of the 'Detached Thoughts', first published in Moore's *Life* in 1830. After making the quip he continued: 'There are several exceptions to be sure—but they have either been men of the world—such as Scott—& Moore &c. or visionaries out of it—such as Shelley &c. but your literary every day man… I do not remember a man amongst them—whom I ever wished to see twice…'[38] Given that Browning, who at some point had read 'this book of Moore's', went on in his letter to Forster to relay an anecdote of Byron and Hobhouse on their travels, it seems likely that Byron had been a subject of their discussions at Rome. [39] Lockhart himself had described coming away with an 'enlarged estimation' of Byron after first reading his letters in the *Life*—these, of course, contain Byron's richest record of the equivocal pleasures of not being entirely a 'literary man'.[40]

II

In bringing his poetry to the borderland with prose, Byron was drawing himself further away from the 'interior of poetry' at the same time he was putting himself at odds with much of literary England. The revolt against

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[36] Letter from Robert Browning to John Forster, 2 April 1854, in *New Letters of Robert Browning*, ed. by William C. De Vane and Kenneth L. Knickerbocker (New Haven: University of Yale Press, 1950), p. 74.

[37] Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 169.

[38] 'Detached Thoughts', no. 53, *BLJ* IX, 30. These were first published in 1830 in *MLJ*, II, 551.

[39] Letter from Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 22 August 1846, II, 453. Browning told Forster that Lockhart had since departed Rome:

> He's gone in woeful case, to England, with some friends, one of whom was seriously taking counsel as to what he should do if Lockhart died in the passage: 'Would there be any indelicacy in asking him, do you think?' I suggested that a similar question to Hobhouse, about the relative advantages of being pickled and sent home, or consigned to the snug lying of the Abbey, had not been duly appreciated. Talking of 'damned literary men', Chapman's account has come in…

Letter from Robert Browning to John Forster, 2 April 1854, in *New Letters of Robert Browning*, p. 74.
The source may be the letter from Byron to Murray, of 7 June 1819, quoting Richard Brinsley Sheridan ('I trust they won't think of 'pickling and bringing me home to Clod or Blunderbuss Hall'). *The Rivals,* V.iii.19, *The Dramatic Works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), I, p. 140.

[40] John Gibson Lockhart, review of 'The Life of Lord Byron', p. 169. See Letter to Murray, 29 June 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 145;

him extended well beyond *Blackwood's.* As the final cantos of *Don Juan* began to appear, as Steffan and Pratt observe, 'the critics were ready to read rites over Byron's literary reputation.'[41] Byron was fully conscious of the 'odium' in which he was held in England. 'I am at this moment the most unpopular man in England', he assured John Hunt in 1823. 'Every publication of mine has latterly failed; I am not discouraged by this, because writing and composition are habits of my mind … I continue to compose for the same reason that I ride, or read, or bathe, or travel—it is a habit.'[42] Byron did not consider himself the first writer to have been cast out in this way. Trelawny recalled him making the following remarks, probably thinking of Bowles:

> Whilst our literature is domineered over by a knot of virulent bigots and rancorous partisans, we shall have no great or original works. When did parsons patronize genius? If one of their black band dares to think for himself he is drummed out, or cast aside, like Sterne and Swift. …If this age has produced anything good or great, which I doubt, it has been under every possible discouragement.[43]

Given that there is every indication that he felt similarly 'drummed out', it seems particularly significant that Byron should have taken Swift with him on the voyage to Cephalonia. Edward Trelawny recalled that 'Byron unusually silent and serious, was generally during the day reading Scott's *Life of Swift*, Col. Hippesley's *Expedition to South America*, Grimm's *Correspondence*, or Rochefoucauld. This was his usual style of reading on shore.'[44] It was Swift who seems to have provided the tone of the voyage. Byron's companions were particularly struck by his preoccupation with Scott's account of Swift's supposed mental decline. Trelawny recorded that

> … on our voyage we had been reading with great attention the life and letters of Swift edited by Scott and we almost daily or rather nightly talked it over, and he more than once expressed his horror of existing in that state—and expressed some fears that it would be his fate.[45]

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[41] T. G. Steffan and Willis Winslow Pratt, 'Notes on the Varorium Edition', *Byron's Don Juan*, ed. by T. G. Steffan and Willis Winslow Pratt, 4 vols (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1957), IV, 307.
[42] Letters to John Hunt, 10 and 17 March 1823, *BLJ* X, 120, 122.
[43] *HVSV*, p. 396.
[44] *HVSV*, p. 385. Gustave Mathias Hippisley's *Narrative of the Expedition to the Rivers Orinoco and Apuré*, which had been published by Murray in 1819, was described by Brown as 'a heavy tome on the War of Independence in South America' (*HVSV*, 388).
[45] *HVSV*, p. 433.

This, in fact, was a longstanding habit. After the March 1816 separation, Byron had begun describing 'fits of giddiness, & deafness, which make me think like Swift—that I shall be like him … and "die at top" first. My hair is growing grey…'[46] After this, he often claimed that he thought he might die 'mad', like Swift.[47] He elaborated on this in an 1821 journal entry:

> What I feel most growing upon me are laziness, and a disrelish more powerful than indifference. If I rouse, it is into fury. I presume that I shall end (if not earlier by accident, or some such termination) like Swift … I confess I do not contemplate this with so much horror as he apparently did for some years before it happened. But Swift had hardly *begun life* at the very period (thirty-three) when I feel quite an *old sort* of feel.[48]

A few days later he recorded his belief that the soul and the body 'draw together like post-horses.'[49] His wording is reminiscent of *Tristram Shandy*: 'the soul and body are joint-sharers in every thing they get', being 'exactly like a jerkin, and a jerkin's lining…'[50] His characteristic way of claiming to be past his best is also reminiscent of one of the passages he would have read in Scott's *Life*:

> The following anecdote may be depended upon. Mrs Whiteway observed the Dean, in the latter years of his life, looking over the Tale, when suddenly closing book, he muttered, in an unconscious soliloquy, "Good God! what a genius I had when I wrote that book!"—an exclamation which resembles that of Marlborough, in a similar declension of faculties, when, gazing on his own portrait, he uttered the pathetic reflection, "That was once a man."[51]

This recalls Byron's own recurring suspicion that 'I wrote better then than now': '—& how I wrote there!', he had exclaimed in 1821, looking back to what he had written in Switzerland and Greece where he had been 'out of the way' of English reviews.[52]

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[46] Letter to Augusta, 28 October 1816, *BLJ* V, 120.
[47] See letter to Hobhouse, 23 August 1819, *BLJ* VI, 214; journal entries, 6 January and 2 February 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 16, 42; cf. 'Observations Upon Observations', 168.
[48] Journal entry, 2 February 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 42.
[49] Journal entry, 27 February 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 51. Though cf. 'Detached thoughts', no. 96, *BLJ* IX, 46.
[50] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, *Gentleman*, ed. by Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009),
[51] Walter Scott, 'Memoirs of Swift', *The Works of Jonathan Swift, with Notes and a Life of the Author*, 19 vols (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co., 1814), I, 90–1.
[52] Letter to Murray, 23 September 1820, *BLJ* VII, 179; Letter to Murray, 24 September 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 220.

When it came to putting together Byron's own *Life*, Moore would underline the connection between Swift and Byron and their shared condition of 'being weary of the world'.[53] Swift's critics have often noted the effects on his style of his 'exile from the ministerial ambience where he once shone'.[54] No longer connected to the Tory ministry after 1714, he would look back at an undeserving world: 'I came here for no other purpose but to forget and to be forgotten. I detest all news, or knowledge of how the world passes.'[55] Writing from Dublin in the 1730s, he described himself as feeling 'a true old Man Scribbling trifles'.[56] It was Swift's way of thinking of himself as already buried in obscurity that seems to have spoken most to Byron. But although he associated Swift with a 'disrelish more powerful than indifference', there was clearly a deep creative influence at work too. Whereas Trelawny focused on Byron's much played-up fears of sharing Swift's fate, James Hamilton Brown, who also accompanied Byron on the voyage, drew different conclusions. He recalled that in addition to Montaigne,

> Byron chiefly read the writings of Dean Swift, taking occasional notes, with the view possibly of gleaning from that humorous writer something towards a future canto of *Don Juan* … He was also dipping into Voltaire, Grimm, 'Hippisley', and the maxims of de la Rochefoucauld: all, I should say, as connected with the composition of Don Juan, in which he was then deeply engaged.[57]

Geoffrey Hill has remarked on how much of the 'familiar verse' that Swift wrote in Ireland 'became a half-defensive exaggeration of …a play on the vicissitudes of being 'in' or 'out''[58] This is a reminder of the tremendous creative energy that Swift derived from his unwilling way of being out of the way. We find an echo of these vicissitudes in Byron's description of Don Juan in London: 'And thus acquaintance grew, at noble routs, / And diplomatic dinners, … / For Juan stood well both with Ins and Outs …'[59] What Byron described in himself was quite the opposite. Looking back at his life in England from the vantage point of 1820, Byron recalled that 'I had no party in fashion …none in literature—and in politics I had voted with the whigs—with

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[53] *MLJ*, I, 184–5.
[54] See espec. Edward Saïd, 'Swift's Tory Anarchy', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 3 (1969), 48–66 (p. 60); Derek Mahon, 'On Swift's Poems', in *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift,* p. 795.
[55] Letter from Swift to Knightley Chetwode, 19 July 1725, *Correspondence*, III, 76.
[56] Letter from Swift to Pope, 1 November 1734*, Correspondence*, IV, 262.
[57] *HVSV*, 387.
[58] Geoffrey Hill, 'Jonathan Swift: The Poetry of Reaction', in *Geoffrey Hill: Collected Critical Writings,* ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 71–87 (p. 73).
[59] *Don Juan* XIII, 185–7.

precisely that importance which a whig vote possesses in these Tory days'.[60] Far from standing 'well both with Ins and Outs', he feels himself to have been 'born for opposition', readily acknowledging that 'being of no party, / I shall offend all parties'.[61] Like Swift, he was aware that a whole mode of art might be discovered in being 'drummed out or cast aside'.

Near the opening of Canto XIV, one of the country house cantos, Byron offers us his reflections on the condition of being out of fashion:

> The world is all before me, or behind;
> For I have seen a portion of that same,
> And quite enough for me to keep in mind;—
> Of passions too, I have proved enough to blame,
> To the great pleasure of our friends, mankind,
> Who like to mix some slight alloy with fame:
> For I was rather famous in my time,
> Until I fairly knock'd it up with rhyme.[62]
>
> I have brought this world about my ears, and eke
> The other; that's to say, the Clergy—who
> Upon my head have bid their thunders break
> In pious libels by no means a few.
> And yet I can't help scribbling once a week,
> Tiring old readers, nor discovering new.
> In youth I wrote, because my mind was full,
> And now because I feel it growing dull.

This meditation on the condition of having once been famous and effective takes some of its life from an unacknowledged borrowing from *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*, Swift's splendidly self-mocking obituary for himself. 'For I was rather famous in my time, / Until I fairly knock'd it up with rhyme', writes Byron, with a witty self-comprehension; in the lines from Swift, the poet imagines that soon after his death an indifferent world has already dispatched his works to the pastry-cooks. The bookseller Bernard Lintot is asked for some works of Swift. 'I keep no antiquated Stuff,' he advises:

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[60] 'Some Observations', 96–97.
[61] *Don Juan* IX, ll. 201–2.
[62] *Don Juan* XIV, st. 9.

"The Dean was famous in his Time;
"And had a Kind of Knack at Rhyme:
"His way of Writing now is past;
"The Town hath got a better Taste …[63]

In the *Verses*, Swift variously describes himself as out of date, out of fashion, and past his best. Playing on the pathos of decline, he imagines that he hears what his friends think of him in life: 'methinks, I hear 'em speak…'[64] '"For Poetry, he's past his Prime,' his friends complain. 'How does he fancy we can sit, / To hear his out-of-fashion'd Wit?'[65] In common with the best of his appropriations, Byron adapts Swift's lines—which are already dramatically self-conscious—to that dramatic voice that is 'little slightly, if at all, separated from the author speaking in his own person'. Since at least 1822, Byron had been claiming that he was fully aware he was 'going down hill in the world of scribbling'.[66] Byron's lines are at once an imitation of Swift, and an ironic, self-mocking imitation of himself, a portrait of his own character and reputation.

It is essential to the success of these lines that they are only bordering on the dramatic. Thinking of his actual dramas in 1821, Byron remarked that 'many people think my talent "*essentially undramatic*" –and I am not at all clear that they are not right.—'[67] 'He has willed rather to project himself into the minds of others, and to express *their* thoughts, than to give language to his own; avoiding the error of Byron, most undramatic because the least sympathetic of writers,' noted one reviewer of Browning in 1890.[68] It is in the *ottava rima,* where all such dramatic borrowings can tend towards self-revelation, that Byron produces some of his best effects. Writing on the dramatic monologue, Everett referred to 'the theme to which that form's dubieties were so well suited: the ambiguous nature of art and the artist.'[69] These dubieties are already present in Swift's poem, which is at once a rueful reflection on having been once 'trusted long in great Affairs,' and a defence of his importance and uncompromising independence: 'I had some repute for Prose / And till they drove me out of

[63] *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift,* ll. 263–66, *Swift*, *Works*, p. 505.
[64] *Ibid*., l. 79, p. 498.
[65] *Ibid*., l. 99, 91–2, p. 499.
[66] Letter to Kinnaird, 27 May 1822, *BLJ* IX, 166.
[67] Letter to Murray 4 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 57.
[68] Unsigned review of Browning's *Complete Works, The London Quarterly Review*, LXXIII (January 1890), 205–25, in *Robert Browning: The Critical Heritage*, p. 554.
[69] Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 165.

Date, / Could maul a Minister of State …'[70] As well as being a piece of witty self-depreciation, then, it is also a work of 'self-celebration', as Claude Rawson points out, by a man who, despite all the signs to the contrary, 'took himself seriously as a poet'.[71] It may after all be a considerable sign of integrity to find one's 'Kind of Wit' to be 'out of Date' in a corrupted age.[72] This is well conveyed by the popular idea that Swift went mad, as Hazlitt memorably put it, from maintaining a 'constitutional preference of the true to the agreeable.'[73] Within Byron's casual, self-implicating lines, two visions of the poet are likewise left unreconciled: the incorruptible moral artist, and the figure who is ageing and 'scribbling' only because he finds himself 'growing dull'.

Byron's reflection on having fallen out of fashion in his own lifetime, 'Tiring old readers, nor discovering new', was endorsed by an ungenerous assessment by Trelawny of his demeanour at Pisa:

> The character he most commonly appeared in was of the free and easy sort, such has had been in vogue when he was in London, and George IV was Regent; and his talk was seasoned with anecdotes of the great actors on and off the stage, boxers, gamblers, duellists, drunkards, etc., etc., appropriately garnished with the slang and scandal of that day. Such things had all been in fashion… Byron, not knowing the tribe was extinct, still prided himself on having belonged to it…[74]

Critics sometimes refer to Byron's 'nostalgia for England' in this period, which seems to give him little credit, as if he regretted not being the great attraction at London parties and suppers.[75] There may be a parallel, here, with Johnson's criticism of Swift, who was censured for complaining of his 'ejection from gay scenes, important employment, and splendid friendships'.[76] Johnson concluded from Swift's letters that 'He seems to have wasted life in discontent, by the rage of neglected pride, and the languishment of unsatisfied desire.'[77] For both Swift and Pope, however, going out of fashion appears as something closer to the form of life. Theirs were not just

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[70] *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*, ll. 329, 60–62, p. 498.
[71] Claude Rawson, 'Jonathan Swift', *The Cambridge Companion to English Poets*, 213–34 (p. 213). Cf. *Swift's Angers*, p. 222.
[72] *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*, l. 242, p. 504.
[73] Hazlitt, Lecture VI, *Lectures on the English Poets*, V (1930), 104–22 (p. 111).
[74] Trelawny, *The Last Days of Shelley and Byron*, pp. 29–30. In his review of Moore's *Life,* John Gibson Lockhart was keen to report the verdict of Dr. Millingen that Byron's brain 'resembled complete that of a man much advanced in life', and his heart that of 'persons who have died of old age'. See John Gibson Lockhart, review of 'The Life of Lord Byron', p. 220.
[75] Marchand, Introduction to *BLJ* I, 21.
[76] Johnson, 'Life of Swift', *Lives*, III, 189–214 (p. 213).
[77] *Ibid*., p. 212–13.

shallow reflections on lost celebrity, but apprehensions of the whole human situation: going out of date as our existential condition.

What Swift described as his unwilling acquaintance with the condition of no longer having 'Credit in the world' was one that Byron, like Swift himself, was ready to play up.[78] Both poets see how closely failure and success are likely to be intertwined for a poet. In the *Verses*, this is suggested by the epitaph that Swift provides for himself via a drinker at the Rose Tavern:

> "As for his Works in Verse and Prose,
> "I own my self no Judge of those:
> "Nor, can I tell what Criticks thought 'em;
> "But, this I know, all People bought 'em.[79]

The same notes, half-self-mocking, half-self-vindicating, can be found in Byron: 'Well, if I don't succeed, I *have* succeeded,' Byron writes in the twelfth canto, 'I've paid, in truth, / Of late, the penalty of such success, / But have not learned to wish it any less.'[80] Byron returned to the idea that he had 'knock'd it up' in Canto XV, in a stanza that looks all the way back to that wounding early review of *English Bards:*

> I think I should have made a decent spouse,
> If I had never proved the soft condition;
> I think I should have made monastic vows,
> But for my own peculiar superstition:
> 'Gainst rhyme I never should have knock'd my brows,
> Nor broken my own head, nor that of Priscian,
> Nor worn the motley mantle of a poet,
> If some one had not told me to forego it.[81]

To illustrate the condition of being 'knocked up' (this was also how Byron described himself after the Venetian carnival in 1817) the *OED* chooses a suggestive example: 'Every literary man, however great his

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[78] *Letter from* Swift to Thomas Tickell, 19 July 1725, *Correspondence*, III, 77.
[79] *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*, ll. 309–12, p. 506.
[80] *Don Juan* XII, ll. 129–36. Also see ll. 433–6.
[81] *Don Juan* XV, ll. 185–192. On the reference to Priscian, cf. *Hudibras,* II.ii.225, p. 133; *The Dunciad,* III.161–2, *Pope, Works*, p. 534.

success, knocks up at last.'[82] Perhaps no literary effect is so acquainted with the terms of success and failure as rhyme. In his *Defence* of the *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, Dryden's speaker remarks that 'none are very violent against it, but those who either have not attempted it, or who have succeeded ill in their attempt.'[83] Rhyme, at least in the tradition that Byron inherits from Dryden and Pope, may be either performed to good or ill success. As Dryden writes, the good poet 'will commit no faults either in rhyme or out of it', and the bad 'shall write scurvily out of Rhyme, and worse in it.'[84] Rhyme, then, may be imagined as a successful enterprise, a means of redeeming success against various forms of unluck. We have a strong sense of this in Swift's *Verses,* as Geoffrey Hill points out, where 'the rhyming wit itself works like a 'trump' or triumph to snatch brilliant personal success from a position of elected disadvantage.'[85] Byron was also alive to this idea, which eventually pits the rhymer against death himself, 'Sole creditor whose process doth involve in't / The luck of finding every body solvent.'[86]

The close involvement of rhyme with questions of success and unsuccess suggests how readily it might stand in for larger questions of literary achievement. It was in 1822 that Byron had praised Swift's 'wonderful' rhymes. Brown, observing Byron on the voyage to Cephalonia, formed the impression that he was reading the *Life of Swift* 'with the view possibly of gleaning from that humorous writer something towards a future canto of *Don Juan*'. It is therefore interesting to note that Scott had praised Swift for being a 'master of his art' in rhyme, his words falling 'as easily … if he had been writing in prose', with 'no mark of the difficulty with which these graces are obtained.' [87] But what Scott described as Swift's 'facility in putting rhimes together on any trifling occasion' also raises questions: is mastery of this kind a sign of brilliancy, the question of a merely technical expertise, or something closer to the mechanical talents of a mere scribbler?

These ambivalences play out beautifully around the lines that Byron adopts from Swift on having 'a Kind of Knack at Rhyme'. The *OED* defines a having a 'knack' for something as 'The 'trick' of dexterous performance; an acquired faculty of doing something cleverly, adroitly, and successfully'.[88] Pope uses the term in one of his Horatian imitations, the *Second Epistle of the Second Book of Horace*, which recommends that the good poet should proceed severely with himself, and 'show no mercy to an empty line', but also take care to

[82] *OED*, *Online*, 'knock, *v.'* sense 8, citing Albert Smith, *The Pottleton Legacy* (1849), 255.
[83] Dryden, *A Defence of the Essay of Dramatique Poesie*, p. 22.
[84] *Ibid*., pp. 79.
[85] Hill, 'Jonathan Swift: The Poetry of Reaction', p. 76.
[86] *Don Juan* XV, ll. 49–56.
[87] Scott, 'Memoirs of Swift', I, 469, 490.
[88] *OED*, *Online*, 'knack, *n.2.'* sense 2a.

appear effortless: ‘Then polish all, with so much life and ease, / You think ’tis Nature, and a knack to please …’[89] In Pope’s hands, the term suggests an elegant facility for success in writing. That the Tory wits had reduced poetry to a mere knack for a successful performance was a criticism levelled at them in their own time. The charge was brought against them perhaps most notably by Mary Wortley Montagu: ‘The Art of Poetry is now grown so thoroughly Mechanical, that … it is sure Bread to a Boy that has a good Memory, and a Knack at *Crambo*.—’.[90] This was a key aspect of her criticism of Pope, who she accused of confusing real poetry for ‘tinsel Rhime, and triffleing Sense’, and thinking ‘Crambo’ ‘sublime’.[91] But it became particularly pointed in her attack on Swift: ‘Perhaps you have no better Luck in / The Knack of Rhyming than of ——’[92] In these descriptions, it appears as a much more contentious gift.

The idea that Pope and Swift possessed a merely technical adeptness in rhyme was a central element in their receptions in Byron’s time. A common view of Pope as more versifier rather than a poet is encapsulated in Wordsworth’s account of his metrical cleverness, in which his predecessor appears as ‘a Man balancing a Sword upon his finger, which must be kept from falling at all hazards.’[93] Pope’s way with rhyme could easily be made to appear as a trifling or mechanical skill. ‘You may find wit and humour in verse, and yet no poetry’, Johnson reportedly said of *Hudibras*, concluding that ‘it is not to be reckoned a poem’.[94] Elsewhere, Johnson appreciated its ‘unexhaustible wit’, but cautioned against imitators, describing its technique as an ‘artifice’ which reveals itself by ‘frequent repetition’, so that the reader ‘turns away from a second exhibition of those tricks, of which the only use is to shew that they can be played.’[95] This describes a form of mere ingenuity, allied to the improvised impermanence of a game. A Hudibrastic style should, therefore, only be adopted by a poet ‘who, in confidence of the novelty and justness of his conceptions, can afford to throw metaphors and

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[89] Pope, *Imitations of Horace, Book II, Epistle II*, ll. 176–7, *Works*, pp. 377-8.
[90] Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Nonsense of Common-Sense*, IX (Tuesday, March 14, 1738), in *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Essays and Poems*, ed. by Robert Halsband and Isobel Grundy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 146–9 (pp. 147–8).
[91] Montagu, ‘Her Palace placed beneath a muddy road’ (1803), l. 117, 6–7, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Essays and Poems*, pp. 457–51 (p. 251).
[92] Montagu, ‘The Reasons that Induced Dr. S. to write a Poem call’d the Lady’s Dressing room’, variant lines, 82–83n, repr. in *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Essays and Poems*, pp. 273–6 (p. 276). For the relevance of these lines to Pope, see Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, ‘Alexander Pope: ‘renown’d in Rhyme’’, in *Literary Milieux*: *Essays in Text and Context Presented to Howard Erskine-Hill*, p. 253–4.
[93] Wordsworth, ‘Essay on Epitaphs II’ (1876), *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), II, 63–79 (p. 79).
[94] *Boswell’s Life of Johnson,* ed. by George Birkbeck Hill, rev. by L. F. Powell, 6 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934–1950), III, 38.
[95] Johnson, ‘Life of Butler’, *Lives*, II, 1–10, pp. 7, 11.

epithets away.'[96] The element of game was also part of Wortley Montagu's complaint against Pope and Swift, who she denounced for putting on a sport for the crowd, like boxers, and stirring up quarrels 'on both *Sides*'.[97] In other contexts, having a knack of this kind may appear as nothing less than a misuse of the intellect. This is the character of the deeply equivocal talent described by Rochester's 'gibeing, gingling knack call'd Witt,' from the *Satyre against Reason and Mankind*.[98] Marianne Thormählen describes Rochester's use of the word 'wit' as 'a term whose meaning oscillates between human intelligence and facile verbal cleverness, traversing sense, judgment and fancy'. In this line, as she points out, it appears as an 'unkind and paltry pastime which debases the glorious mental faculties of man'.[99] 'Gibeing' (jeering) because it employs ridicule and 'gingling' (jingling) because it is written in rhyme,' as Harold Love notes, Rochester's 'knack' appears as a dubious, and perhaps pernicious, cleverness with words, even a sign of the corrupted reason.[100] Swift's brilliancy in making up *extempore* proverbs and rhyming adages, which are examples of false or unsound wisdom, might be considered a related skill.[101]

All of this bears on Byron's own facility in rhyme, and on what has sometimes been viewed as his dubious gift for extemporised writing. Medwin admiringly recalled these skills: 'He seems to be able to resume the thread of his subject at all times, … Such talent is that of an improvisatore.' In his conversation, as in his letters, he noted, 'His ideas flow without effort, without his having occasion to think.'[102] Byron's aptitude for improvisation has not, however, always been appreciated. Robson thought that in the later cantos of *Don Juan*, when Byron comes forward 'frankly as an improviser', he becomes 'the victim of a technique, or lack of technique, which permits him not only to tolerate second-rateness but elaborate it with gusto.'[103] It was also on the basis of borrowings like the one he makes from Swift that Byron was sometimes accused of possessing a merely mechanical ability in verse: 'Alas! poor Lord Byron! His originality has been often questioned, and he has of late been compelled to admit, that the scissors, or a mental operation almost as mechanical as scissors-work, have stood him in good stead', remarked the *Blackwood's* reviewer in 1823.[104] In this description, the

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[96] *Ibid*., p. 10.
[97] Montagu, *The Nonsense of Common-Sense*, p. 148.
[98] Rochester, *A Satyre against Reason and Mankind* (c. 1674), l. 49, *The Works of John Wilmot*, p. 58.
[99] Marianne Thormählen, *Rochester: The Poems in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 209.
[100] Harold Love, editorial notes, *The Works of John Wilmot*, p. 58, 49n.
[101] See Walter Scott, 'Memoirs of Swift', *The Works of Jonathan Swift, with Notes and a Life of the Author*, I, 469.
[102] *MC*, 265.
[103] W. W. Robson, *Critical Essays*, p. 178.
[104] 'The New Cantos of *Don Juan'*, p. 90.

writing of poetry becomes a matter merely of possessing a good memory for other people's words: having 'a good Memory, and a Knack at *Crambo*'.

In his commitment to write 'Just as I feel the "Improvisatore"' Byron was responding in part to the temper of his times. Angela Esterhammer has made a study of the fashion for French and Italian *improvvisatori,* including Tomasso Scriggi, who would extemporise poetry for an audience in the 1820s. Scriggi, as she points out, cultivated a connection with Byron 'through portraits, dress, and pose'.[105] Byron seems to have been more ambivalent. Medwin recalled a conversation between him, Byron and Shelley at Pisa:

> 'The greatest genius in that way that perhaps Italy ever produced,' said Shelley, 'is Sgricci.'
> 'There is a great deal of knack in these gentry,' replied Lord Byron; 'their poetry is more mechanical than you suppose. More verses are written yearly in Italy, than millions of money are circulated. It is usual for every Italian gentleman to make sonnets to his mistress's eyebrow before he is married,—or the lady must be very uninspiring indeed.
> 'But Sgricci! To extemporize a whole tragedy seems a miraculous gift.
> 'I heard him improvise a five-act play at Lucca,' said Shelley …
> 'I have never read his play since I was at school,' replied Lord Byron. 'I don't know how Sgricci's tragedies may appear in print, but his printed poetry is tame stuff.
> 'The inspiration of the *improviser* is quite a separate talent:—a consciousness of his own powers, his own elocution—the wondering and applauding audience,—all conspire to give him confidence; but the deity forsakes him when he coldly sits down to think. Sgricci is not only a fine poet, but a fine actor.'[106]

That Byron saw a firm difference between poetry and this gift for improvised performance is also suggested by one of the 'Detached Thoughts' in which he recalled his time in Parliament: 'Pitt I never heard—Fox but once—and then he struck me as a debater—which to me seems as different from an Orator as an Improvisatore or a versifier from a poet.'[107] What Byron resists is the element of 'mechanical' skill involved in having 'a great deal of knack' in the context of the performer's momentary appeal to an audience.

The spectacle of 'skill surmounting difficulty' is Hazlitt's subject in his 1821 essay on 'The Indian Jugglers', which raises some of the same questions.[108] In this piece, Hazlitt admires the ingenuity and

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[105] Angela Esterhammer, *Print and Performance in the 1820s: Improvisation, Speculation, Identity (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 13.
[106] *MC*, 137–8. Medwin was with Byron at Pisa until he continued on his tour of Italy in April 1822.
[107] 'Detached Thoughts', no. 5, *BLJ* IX, 14.
[108] Hazlitt, 'The Indian Jugglers' (1821), *Works*, VIII (1931), 77–89 (p. 82).

'mechanical excellence' of the jugglers, who perform 'with all the ease, the grace, the carelessness imaginable,' but he is also led to ask 'where fine art begins, and where mechanical skill ends'. To Hazlitt, the jugglers seem poised somewhere between great skill and mere skill: 'Is it then a trifling power we see at work, or is it not something next to miraculous?' The difficulty is in deciding between real artistry and mere 'cleverness':

> Cleverness is a certain *knack* or aptitude at doing certain things, which depend more on a particular adroitness and off-hand readiness than on force or perseverance, such as making puns, making epigrams, making extempore verses, mimicking the company, mimicking the style, &c. Cleverness is either liveliness and smartness, or something answering to *sleight of hand*, like letting a glass falls sideways off a table, or else a trick, like knowing the secret spring to a watch.[109]

In this description, having a 'knack' suggests a 'mere mechanical deception' or accomplished dexterity.[110] And yet, as Jon Cook points out, Hazlitt reserves judgment on whether these qualities are indeed 'trifling' or 'miraculous', or whether good writing might be 'poised somewhere between the two.'[111] Some of Hazlitt's language in this essay suggests parallels with his criticism of Byron for wanting only to display 'his superiority of execution.' As he complained in *The Spirit of the Age*: 'His only object seems to be to stimulate himself and his readers for the moment—to keep both alive, to drive away *ennui*… He composes (as he himself has said) whether he is in the bath, in his study, or on horseback—he writes as habitually as others talk or think—'[112] To an interesting degree, this account of Byron recalls his description of the racket-ball player in 'The Indian Jugglers': 'he never flung away the game through carelessness and conceit, he never gave it up through laziness or want of heart … He did not throw away the game to show off an attitude, or try an experiment.'[113] Hazlitt would not be the last to detect in Byron's cultivation of an offhand, throwaway style a form of merely 'verbal cleverness'. By the late 1880s, when Swinburne was ready to suggest that 'Byron is no more a poet than any one of the tribe of dunces decimated by Pope', he felt that his defects obliged him and his peers to reconsider

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[109] *Ibid*., p. 78–9, 82–3.
[110] *Ibid*., p. 78.
[111] Jon Cook, Introduction to *William Hazlitt, Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. xxx.
[112] Hazlitt, 'Lord Byron', p. 72.
[113] Hazlitt, 'The Indian Jugglers', pp. 87–88.

> … the question, whether the generation of our fathers may not have been right after all in deciding … that this idol of our grandfathers or grandmothers could maintain no higher title to fame than one which is the appanage of every successful pressman or improvisatore – the title of a very clever man.[114]

III

Another poet who has been subject to a suspicion that their poetry might, in some unsettling way, be reducible to a 'Knack at *Crambo'*, was Browning. In the 1870s, a decade in which Browning was feeling acutely aware of the lack of success of his long poems, he 'seem to have thought a good deal, and adversely, of Byron', as Samuel Chew points out.[115] By this time, Browning's 'first feeling for Byron' had been overtaken by misgivings which were only intensified when Alfred Austin praised Byron—as one of the 'really great poets'—at Browning's expense.[116] Browning had come to think that Byron's way of 'pretending to despise' mankind was 'altogether dishonest', and that he had misused his great hour of success—his 'prime in poet's power', as he put it in *La Saisiaz*—to spread doubt and misanthropy.[117] He also seems to have had Byron in mind when he composed, in late 1877, *The Two Poets of Croisic*—a poem written in the *ottava rima.* His poem, as Clyde de L. Ryals remarks, 'would become Browning's "Vision of Judgment" and he would use the stanzaic form of Byron's poem to have his say about its author.'[118] Browning's stanza in *The Two Poets of Croisic* has been described as a '*Beppo*-like *ottava rima*', but in fact its effects are quite different from Byron's.[119] One exception is when the publisher of a poetry journal speaks in a startlingly authentic Byronic idiom in the tradition of the witty 'Epistle from Mr. Murray to Mr. Polidori': 'Sir, will you have the truth? This piece of yours / Is simply

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[114] Swinburne, 'Wordsworth and Byron'**,** pp. 77–8.
[115] Samuel C. Chew, *Byron in England, his Fame and After-fame* (London: John Murray, 1924), p. 286; See Clyde de L. Ryals, *Browning's Later Poetry, 1871–1889* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975, repr. 2019), p. 158.
[116] Letter from Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 22 August 1846, in *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, II, 453. Alfred Austin, *The Poetry of the Period*, p. 13. The attack was first published in the *Temple Bar Magazine* in 1869.
[117] Letter from Robert Browning to Anne Egerton Smith, 16 [August] 1873, in *Letters of Robert Browning: Collected by Thomas J. Wise*, ed. by Thurman L. Hood (London: John Murray, 1933), p. 159; Browning, *La Saisiaz* (1878), l. 593, *Poems*, II, p. 526.
[118] Clyde de L. Ryals, *Browning's Later Poetry, 1871–1889* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975, repr. 2019), pp. 163.
[119] *Ibid*.

execrable past belief. / I shrank from saying so; but, since nought cures / Conceit but truth…'[120] This irresistibly recalls Byron: 'Dear Doctor—I have read your play / Which is a good one in its way…'[121]

For all his hostilities, then, there is also a line of stylistic affinity at work. 'Of Pacchiarotto, And How He Worked in Distemper', his satirical answer to his critics and the title poem of his 1876 collection, also suggests a natural affinity with *English Bards*.[122] The ingenuity of its assault in rhyme is a reminder of Browning's deep familiarity with the tradition of double and triple rhymes that he found in Butler, Swift and Byron.[123] One acquaintance recalled that 'doggerel always had a curious fascination for him, and he preferred to quote the very worst poetry'.[124] The difference between good poetry and the 'very worst poetry' is one of his preoccupations in *The Two Poets of Croisic*. The two poets of the title—Breton versifiers from previous centuries—are introduced in sardonic terms: not 'soldiers, sailors, statesmen, priests, / Lawyers, physicians', indeed, 'None of them all, but—poets, if you please! / …endowed with knack of rhyme …'[125] Again the term implies a dubious gift: one of the poets, René, a court versifier, is the author of 'much / Rhyming thought poetry and praised as such.'[126] It is not genuine and lasting poetry—but he enjoys his 'mighty moment of success' nonetheless. Much of *The Two Poets of Croisic* is concerned with the conceit and foolishness of such poets, who compete with their 'clink' and 'crambo' for the preferment of critics who are unable to tell the difference.[127]

The Two Poets of Croisic is a poem about literary success, failure, and what it means to be a 'man of rhyme', and it confers a curious afterlife on that 'knack of rhyme' that already takes such an ambivalent form in Swift and Byron.[128] The shared preoccupation is revealing because it is hard to think of three poets who might more readily be said to have an 'off-hand readiness' in rhyme than Swift, Byron and Browning. It tends to suggest that a gift for rhyming virtuosity might be naturally accompanied by an element of doubt, as if the poets

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[120] *The Two Poets of Croisic* (1878), ll. 689–92. Cf. 'Epistle from Mr. Murray to Mr. Polidori' (1817), letter to Murray, 21 August 1817, *BLJ* V, 258–61; *CPW* IV, 126.
[121] 'Epistle from Mr. Murray to Dr. Polidori' (1817), ll.1–2, *CPW* IV, 126.
[122] The reviewer at *The Examiner* was reminded of the dispute between Byron and Southey: see unsigned review, *The Examiner,* 12 August 1876), 904–5, in *Robert Browning: The Critical Heritage*, p. 450; see also 'Introduction' p. 18.
[123] John Dryden, *Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* (1692), *Works*, IV (1974), 2–90 (p. 81). On his reading of these poets, see Maynard, *Browning's Youth*, p. 329, 330; Hair, *Robert Browning's Language*, p. 112. Also see W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, p. 164.
[124] Recollection of Anne Thackeray, in Anne Ritchie, *Records of Tennyson, Ruskin, Browning* (New York: Harper, 1893), pp. 168–9, quoted in Hair, *Robert Browning's Language*, p. 113.
[125] *The Two Poets of Croisic*, ll. 167–170.
[126] *Ibid*., ll. 177–80, 230–2.
[127] *Ibid*., ll. 620, 669.
[128] *Ibid*., l. 698.

themselves could not be sure whether what they possessed was a gift of virtuosity or a more 'trifling' power. In Browning's case, it may be relevant that he was a poet who was so often accused of writing prose in metre. Indeed he was sometimes accused of writing in a metre that was 'mechanical merely', for his effects were so close to prose, or employing metre for only 'mnemonic or for catchpenny purposes.'[129] The word 'knack' may have its own history in this context. One meaning traced by the *OED* is an 'ingeniously contrived literary composition', in the sense of a mere trifle, in an old tradition of rhymed love knacks.[130] A quotation is given from Denham: 'All those pretty Knacks you do compose, Alas, what are they but Poems in prose...?'[131]

Browning's references to crambo were meant to remind readers of Juvenal's seventh satire, as Donald Hair points out, with its line on 'crambe repetita'—the repetitious meetings of sound in bad poetry.[132] The seventh satire, playful and aggressively comic, is spoken by an ageing poet who feels that the prime of active life has slipped him by, and who is now reflecting on the years that he has wasted on writing. William Gifford's 1806 translation adopts Pope's 'idle trade' to outline the predicament:

> Meanwhile those vigorous years, so fit to bear
> The toils of agriculture, commerce, war,
> Spent in this idle trade, declines apace,
> And age, unthought of, stares you in the face …[133]

This satire is one source of the Augustan trope of bad poetry as only so much wasted paper and ink. 'And though these lines should only line portmanteaus, / Trade will be all the better for these Cantos', Byron remarks, a few stanzas on from claiming that 'I can't help scribbling once a week'.[134] The satire is something of a *locus classicus* for any number of reflections on writing. Prior wrote a verse imitation of the seventh satire called a

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[129] Austin, *The Poetry of the Period*, p. 61.
[130] See e.g. *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* I.i.23–34, ed. by Peter Holland, *The Oxford Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 135.
[131] *OED*, *Online*, 'knack, *n.2.'* sense 3c, citing John Denham, *Rump: or an Exact Collection of the Choycest Poems and Songs* (1662).
[132] Hair, *Robert Browning's Language*, p. 140; Juvenal, *Satire* VII, ll. 152–5, *Juvenal and Persius*, *Loeb Classical Library*, ed. by Susanna Morton Braund (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 311.
[133] William Gifford, translation of Juvenal's *Satire* VII, ll. 49–54, *The Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis, Translated into English Verse* (London: W. Bulmer and Co, 1806), p. 230. Cf. Pope's *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, ll. 129–30, *Works*, p. 331.
[134] *Don Juan* XIV (1823), ll. 111–12.

Satyr on the Poets in which he contemplates the indignity of seeing one's 'deathless Song / The dusty Lumber of a Smithfield stall'.[135] Burns reflects, in a similarly rueful spirit, on a life spent on 'the *crambo-jingle*'.[136]

This mood is revisited in the country house cantos, which are an evocation of 'An English autumn', matched by the oncoming of middle age in a poetic speaker who assures us that he no longer feels much in 'much excess'.[137] In these cantos, Byron represents himself as sobered by being in the middle way of life. 'I now mean to be serious;—it is time,' Byron writes at the beginning of these cantos,

> Because indifference begins to lull
> Our passions, and we walk in Wisdom's ways;
> Also because the figure and the face
> Hint, that 'tis time to give the younger place.[138]

This new note of the 'serious' is a play on the Augustan notion that middle age is the time to renounce poetry in favour of an aspiration to a new moral seriousness and the consolations of the philosophic mind.[139] And so Pope farewells the frivolity of verse: 'Well, on the whole, plain Prose must be my fate: / Wisdom (curse on it) will come soon or late.'[140] 'I am sinking fast into prose,' he told Swift in a late letter.[141] In fact Byron's pose of indifference, like the position of the 'moderate–minded bard' he takes up in the early cantos, is assumed only so that he might reject its equanimities.[142] He has nothing but scorn for the traditional consolations of age: 'Religion, and Reform,' 'Peace, War, the taxes,' 'the 'Nation'', the 'landed and the monied speculation'; and, of course, 'claret and madeira / To irrigate the dryness of decline'.[143] For Byron there could be no triumph of wisdom. He had a characteristic way of throwing off success and settled feelings. 'The life of an Epicurean', Byron noted in a letter of 1820, '—& the philosophy of one are merely prevented by "that rash humour which my Mother gave me" that makes one restless & nervous—& can overthrow all tranquility with a Sirocco.'[144]

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[135] Prior, *Satyr on the Poets, in Imitation of the Seventh Satyr of Juvenal* (1687), ll. 64–5, *Works*, I, 29.
[136] Burns, 'Epistle to J. L*****k, An Old Scotch Bard' (1785), l. 45, *Poems*, I, 86. Also cf. 'The Vision' (1786), ll. 20–21, 25–30, *Poems*, I, 103.
[137] *Don Juan* XIII, st. 75–77; l. 57.
[138] *Don Juan* XIII, ll. 29–32.
[139] Horace, *Epistles* I.i.10, p. 251.
[140] Pope, *Imitations of Horace, Book II, Epistle II*, ll. 198–99, *Works*, p. 378. Also see Pope, *Imitations of Horace, Book I, Epistle I, To Lord Bolingbroke* (1738), ll. 17–20, *Works*, p. 351.
[141] Letter from Pope to Swift, 17–19 May 1739, *Correspondence*, IV, 178.
[142] *Don Juan* I, ll. 941.
[143] *Don Juan* XIII, st. 6, ll. 37–8.
[144] Letter to Hobhouse, 8 June 1820, *BLJ* VII, 116.

For Byron, such uncertainties were the essence of the human situation: not knowing 'what to believe—or what to disbelieve', as he said at Venice, is like 'walking in the dark over a rabbit warren'; and 'even the most righteous', he noted on another occasion, cannot be 'sure of salvation', 'since a single slip of faith may throw him on his back, like a skaiter, while gliding smoothly to his paradise.'[145] And yet even the most radically unsettling uncertainty was to be preferred to the peace of a culpable tranquillity.

Any 'sinking' into prose that Byron would do would take a very different form than in Pope. Byron reportedly said at Missolonghi that 'Poetry should only occupy the idle. In more serious affairs it would be ridiculous.'[146] 'I have no poetical humbug about me; I am too old for that', he was also reported to have remarked in Greece.[147] With his role in Greece—'perhaps as a reporter of the actual state of things there … I might be of use … if not most useful—at any rate *least* obnoxious'—he was able to form to his old ambition to 'state things as they really are'.[148] In March 1824, he wrote to the Greek Committee to assure them of his commitment to 'stating to the Committee things as they *really* are—I am an enemy to Cant of all kinds … "I could mouthe" as well as any of them if I liked it—but I reserved (when I was in the habit of writing) such things for verse—in business—plain prose is best—and simplest—'[149]

In the Detached Thoughts he had remarked, 'I have at least had the name and fame of a Poet—during the poetical period of life (from twenty to thirty) whether it will last is another matter…'[150] By Canto XV of *Don Juan* he was writing, 'But still I am, or was, a pretty poet.'[151] These late ambivalences point, again, in some ways, towards Browning's uneasy treatment of 'knack of rhyme' in *The Two Poets of Croisic*, where he had been troubled by that borderland between poetry and 'Rhyming thought poetry and praised as such'. Everett has written of our sense that it is from 'the accepted limitations of his craft that the deeper notes of Browning's poems come.'[152] William Allingham recalled an occasion in 1876 when Browning was sixty-four:

> Browning looked at a photograph of himself on my chimney-piece and said, 'There I am—and I don't recollect when or where it was done, or anything about it. I find gaps in my memory. … People

[145] Letter to Hobhouse, 14 April 1817, *BLJ* V, 216; Journal entry, 25 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 35.
[146] Marchand, *Byron: A Biography*, III, p. 1125.
[147] *HVSV*, 426.
[148] Letters to Hobhouse, 6 October 1823, *BLJ* XI, 40; 7 April 1823 *BLJ* X, 142; Journal entry, 28 September 1823, *BLJ* XI, 32.
[149] Letter to John Bowring, 30 March 1824, *BLJ* XI, 147.
[150] 'Detached Thoughts', no. 82, *BLJ* IX, 41.
[151] *Don Juan* XV, l. 480.
[152] Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 179.

> compliment me on my prodigious memory, because I have a knack of remembering rhymes—'hog' and 'dog,' and so forth; but it's breaking down.'[153]

In this account of a poet feeling himself estranged from a former facility, there is a note of amused bitterness. With that reference to having a 'knack of remembering rhymes', Browning manages to convey the idea that perhaps all he ever possessed was something akin to what he described in *The Two Poets of Croisic* as a 'rhyming-trick'.[154] The phrase brings to mind his description in that poem of René, one of his versifiers: thus he 'rhymed, …Elaborating rhyme for "love"—not "dove". 'There's our first famous poet.'[155] That description is aimed at bad poetry—embodying the irritation of a true poet at the 'crambo' selling in his own age—but there is also a note of self-disillusionment.[156] There is a reminder, too, of *Don Juan*—'I needs must rhyme with dove, / That good old steam-boat which keeps verses moving'—and a sense that a question is being half-seriously entertained as to whether all poetry is not merely a form of finding a 'rhyme for "love"—not "dove"'.[157]

Something of that undecided self-contempt can be detected in some of Byron's late letters. Of his daughter Ada he remarked lightly in 1823, 'I hope that the Gods have made her any thing save *poetical*—it is enough to have one such fool in a family.'[158] But a tone of wondering bitterness and conclusiveness enters another letter, written two months before he died: 'Her preference of *prose* (strange as it may now seem) *was* and indeed *is* mine—(for I hate reading verse—and always did) and I never invented anything but *"boats—ships"* and generally something relative to the Ocean—'[159] Christopher Ricks has suggested that Eliot's sense of the 'middle' part of 'life largely wasted' has pertinence to Byron: 'No honest poet can ever feel quite sure of the permanent value of what he has written. He may have wasted his time and messed up his life for nothing… There may be honest poets who do feel sure. I don't'.[160] It is possible that the poet has been implicated in

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[153] Diary entry, 6 April 1876, in *William Allingham: A Diary,* ed. by Helen Paterson Allingham and Dollie Radford (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 249.
[154] *The Two Poets of Croisic*, l. 525.
[155] *Ibid.*, ll. 238–40, 529.
[156] *Ibid.*, ll. 595–6, 668–9.
[157] *Don Juan* IX, ll. 587–8; see Chapter 3.
[158] Letter to Augusta Leigh, 12 October 1823, *BLJ* XI, 47.
[159] Letter to Augusta Leigh, 23 February 1824, *BLJ* XI, 121.
[160] T. S. Eliot, *East Coker* V (1940), *T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909–1962*, p. 190; Christopher Ricks, 'Byron and T. S. Eliot', Byron Among the Poets, a symposium at All Souls College, Oxford, 13–14 January 2018; Barbara Everett, 'In Search of Prufrock', *Critical Quarterly*, 16.2 (1974), 101–121 (p. 102), quoting T. S. Eliot, 'The Art of Poetry', no. 1, interview by Donald Hall, *The Paris Review* 21 (Spring-Summer 1959).

something inconsequential, a mere putting together of sounds—like love and dove—with their suggestion of *crambo*.

And yet, as always, there is always the sense in Byron of an incorrigible, unreformed creativity. Wondering 'what the devil had I to do with scribbling' in 1814, he added, 'It is too late to inquire, and all regret is useless, But, an' it were to do again,—I should write again, I suppose.'[161] Byron was never without new plans for writing. Over his years in Italy, it is possible to trace a growing interest in prose writing. 'If I write—I think of trying prose—' he said in early 1817, in a hiatus from poetry.[162] Writing to Count Giuseppe Alborghetti in 1819, he complimented him on his 'very good English prose—a better thing when well done than poetry at any time.'[163] In one of the 'Detached Thoughts, he harked back to his first parliamentary speech: 'nobody ever thought about my *prose* afterwards, nor indeed did I—it became to me a secondary and neglected object, though I sometimes wonder to myself *if* I should have succeeded?—'[164] Lady Blessington complained of him becoming 'sententious' in conversation: 'I attribute this to his having lived so much alone, as also to the desire he now professes of applying himself to prose writing. He affects a sort of Johnsonian tone, likes very much to be listened to, and seems to observe the effect he produces on his hearer.'[165]

When Byron's letters were published in Moore's *Life*, Lockhart—for all his reservations—guessed that 'had his life been prolonged, he would have taken his place in the very first rank of our prose literature also.'[166] Hazlitt's irritation at Byron's reply to Bowles ('Why does he write prose at all?') suggests that this would not have been universally welcomed.[167] Murray had applied some flattery after *Beppo*: 'Does your Lordship never think of Prose – though like Lord Harvey I suspect yr [*sic*] Lordships thoughts fall so naturally in Rhyme that you are obliged to think twice to put them into prose'.[168] Hazlitt turned the same observation into a criticism: 'Lord Byron's prose is bad', he wrote in his essay 'On the Prose Style of Poets', for 'he tries to knock some one down with the butt-end of every line, which defeats his object'.[169] Desultory attempts at novels and prose stories

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[161] Journal entry, 17 March 1814, *BLJ* III, 251–2.
[162] Letter to Murray, 2 January 1817, *BLJ* V, 154.
[163] Letter to Count Giuseppe Alborghetti, 1 July 1819, *BLJ* VI, 172.
[164] 'Detached thoughts', no. 10, 15 Oct 1821, *BLJ* IX, 16.
[165] *BC*, 19.
[166] John Gibson Lockhart, review of 'The Life of Lord Byron', p. 169. Also see *The Athenaeum*, 166 (1 January 1831), 80.
[167] William Hazlitt, 'Pope, Lord Byron, and Mr. Bowles', p. 598.
[168] Letter from Murray to Byron, 16 June 1818, *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*, p. 251.
[169] Hazlitt, 'On the Prose Style of Poets', *The Plain Speaker* (1826), *Works*, XII, 17.

in 1807, 1813, 1816 and 1823 suggest one direction that his writing might have taken.[170] Aside from the influence of Sterne, there was his admiration for and familiarity with Walter Scott's novels: in his journal as late as 1821, he reflected that 'His novels are a new literature in themselves'[171] In one of his earliest letters he asked: 'Don't you think that I have a very Good Knack for *novel writing*?'[172]

A similar kind of unsettled creativity is in evidence when we read a fuller account of what Swift wrote to Pope in 1734 from Dublin:

> God be thanked I have done with everything & of every kind that requires writing, except now & then a Letter, or, like a true old Man Scribbling trifles … Yet what is singular, I never am without some great works in View, enough to take up forty years of the most vigorous healthy man…[173]

This restless, undiminished imagination knows that it has inexhaustible material to work with: 'The world is wider to a Poet than to any other Man,' as Swift writes (if only because its vice is endless).[174] Claude Rawson points out the 'paradox' that so many of 'Swift's greatest writings' belong to the period in which he considered himself exiled from worldly affairs.[175] Swinburne, before he changed his mind on Byron, expressed his admiration for the later cantos of *Don Juan* and disputed the idea 'that the poem falls off and runs low towards the end.'[176] The truth is that much of Byron's best writing belongs to the period when much public opinion had turned against him.

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[170] See Letter to Elizabeth Pigot, 26 October 1807, *BLJ* I, 135; 'a Chapter of a Novel' (1813), *CMP,* 46–48; 'The Tale of Calil' (1816), *CMP,* 51–58; 'Augustus Darvell: A Fragment of a Ghost Story' (1816), *CMP,* 58–63; 'An Italian Carnival' (1823), *CMP,* 190–93.

[171] Journal entry, 12 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 23. Byron frequently quoted from Scott's novels in his letters, including in late letters: see e.g. letter to Charles Barry, 24 December 1823, *BLJ* XI, 82.

[172] Letter to Augusta, 9 April 1804, *BLJ* I, 48.

[173] Letter from Swift to Pope, 1 November 1734*, Correspondence*, IV, p. 262.

[174] Letter from Swift to John Gay, 20 November 1729, *Correspondence*, III, 360.

[175] Rawson, *Swift's Angers*, p. 15.

[176] Swinburne, *Essays and Studies*, p. 256.

Conclusion

Saturday, 27th (I believe—or rather am in *doubt,* which is the ne plus ultra of mortal faith.)

Byron, journal entry, 27 November 1813[1]

Appreciating the significance of Byron's doubts requires us to view him with an element of double vision: to see that writing was at once the activity on which he spent his deepest energies, and an endeavour from which he withheld his full trust. Byron's distrust of art was real; and yet he also had an integrally literary sensibility; it is therefore by drawing out literary contexts that have often been overlooked in his work—writers including Butler, Swift, Prior, Montaigne and Sterne—that our sense for his resourcefully doubting creativity may be most fully realised.

Byron's doubts have also spoken to later poets who have been particularly attuned to the demands and complications of writing poetry. One aspect of that afterlife is illustrated by a work that was not published in Byron's lifetime: *Hints from Horace*, the loose imitation of Horace's *Ars Poetica* that Byron wrote in Popeian style at Athens in 1811, revised in 1820, but never published. Possessing something of the boisterous Scriblerian ambience of *English Bards*, this early satire contains some typically lively abuse of the 'rage for rhyme'.[2] But part way through the poem, following his Latin original, Byron turns to a passage in the *Ars Poetica* which describes a commercialised Rome, a culture in which there no longer seems to be any place for art.[3] To update the satire, Byron uses John Locke's hostility to the 'poetic vein' in place of Horace's description of the forces that were indifferent or hostile to art in his own time. 'Locke will tell you that the Father's right, / Who hides all verses from his children's sight', Byron observes,

> For Poets ⟨says this Sage, and many more⟩
> Make sad Mechanics with their Lyric lore,
> And Delphi now, however rich of old,

[1] Journal entry, 27 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 223.
[2] *Hints from Horace*, l. 684.
[3] Horace, *Ars Poetica*, ll. 323–346, p. 447.

Discovers little silver, and less gold …[4]

These lines ironically comprehend the case against poets, supposed to be ineffectual kinds of people. This is an old theme, to which poets have not stopped returning. '(Give ear, my friend, for thou hast been a scribe)', Byron writes at the beginning of his passage, and it is entirely possible that his words did catch a later poet's ear, to find their way, perhaps only half-remembered, into those significant Victorian lines of doubt about the uses of poetry in the fifth section of Tennyson's *In Memoriam:*

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
A use in measured language lies;
The sad mechanic exercise
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.[5]

The quality of doubt is, of course, different—as different, perhaps, as the two poems. There is a long way to travel between Tennyson's conscientiousness and the most unhesitating putting into words of Byron's early satire, which is entirely without reticence: 'Prepare for rhyme—I'll publish, right or wrong…'[6] To hear the echo here requires an accommodation of the passage of 'mechanic' from noun to adjective, and the other chances and choices that determine composition: Byron's use of 'sad' rather than 'poor', for example, and Tennyson's choice of 'sad' and not 'set' (as Peter McDonald reports the lines stood in one early manuscript).[7]

And yet there surely is a line to be drawn between Tennyson's 'sad mechanic exercise' and Byron's 'sad Mechanics with their Lyric lore'. There are other probable echoes of Byron in *In Memoriam*, as Christopher Ricks has traced in his edition of Tennyson.[8] Indeed Tennyson seems to have associated Byron with Horace; he

[4] *Hints from Horace*, ll. 39, 93; 521–26. Byron's lines are accompanied by a note, added as he was finishing his first draft in Athens, quoting from a passage from John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), an Italian copy – as 'I have not the original by me'. In this Locke is drawn into an almost comic hostility to poetry, recommending that the parents of boys with poetic instincts 'should labour to have it stifled and suppressed as much as may be' ('I know not what reason a father can have to wish his son a poet'). Byron, prose note to *CPW* I, 308; John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (London: Hemingway and Crook, 1800), pp. 199–200; John William Adamson, Introduction to *The Educational Writings of John Locke*, ed. by John William Adamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922; repr. 2011), pp. 17–18.
[5] *Hints from Horace*, l. 40. Tennyson, *In Memoriam* V, p. 9.
[6] *English Bards*, l. 5.
[7] In a note to his discussion Peter McDonald indicates that 'One manuscript (Lincoln) has 'set' for 'sad'' (*PT* 2, p. 322). See *Sound Intentions*, p. 170, 7n.
[8] Ricks, editorial notes, *The Poems of Tennyson*, II, 318, 330, 339, 406.

would later recall, quoting Byron, 'It was not till many years after boyhood that I could like Horace. Byron expressed what I felt, 'Then farewell Horace whom I hated so.''[9] Plans to publish *Hints from Horace* fell through in 1811 when Byron decided to suppress the fifth edition of *English Bards* with which it had been meant to be issued.[10] As a result, the lines did not appear in print until the first complete text of the poem was published in Murray's edition of the *Works*, in January 1831, an event that was advertised in *The Athenaeum* for that day, while Tennyson was still at Cambridge.[11] Hallam Tennyson later noted that the 'enthusiasm for the great literature of the past' of his father's 'high-spirited, poetical set' at Trinity College had no longer extended much to Byron: 'The modern poets in the ascendant among them were Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats; but Byron's 'comet blaze' was evidently on the wane.'[12] Nonetheless 'We can be sure that Tennyson read the Athenaeum assiduously,' notes one critic who has traced his early reading, 'for the Cantabrigians who wrote in it were almost all his Apostolic friends from Trinity'; and we may speculate that he would have read a work by Byron, newly published in full, either before or after leaving Trinity that Spring.[13] Among other things the satire is memorable for Byron's lightly bitter, ambivalently self-implicating portrait of the university man of his own class, 'Fool'd, pillaged, dunn'd, he wastes his terms away, … Sits in the senate, gets a son and heir, / Sends him to Harrow, for himself was there…'[14]

McDonald has given close examination to the 'sad mechanic exercise' 'as a way of describing verse-writing' that has become 'merely verse'. Citing Hazlitt's complaint that poetry in the Augustan age had fallen into 'the hands of a set of mechanic scribblers', he relates the word 'mechanic' to 'ideas of eighteenth-century regularity' and 'the notion of poetry in the shadow of Pope'.[15] Byron's 'Mechanic' probably glances at Locke's recommendation that young men should take up the 'useful' and 'manual arts' to prevent their dissipation (this, presumably, was one source of Byron's derision: 'Let Poesy go forth, pervade the whole, / Alike the rustic, and mechanic soul…', he invited sarcastically, in *English Bards*).[16] And yet these spirited and relatively untroubled

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[9] See Hallam Lord Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir* (1897), i.16, quoted in *The Poems of Tennyson*, I, 170. Tennyson was quoting from *Childe Harold* IV, ll. 685–7.
[10] McGann, editorial notes, *CPW* I, 227, 150n.
[11] See *The Athenaeum*, 166 (1 January 1831), p. 80.
[12] Hallam Lord Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson*, I, p. 36.
[13] Ian H. C. Kennedy, 'Alfred Tennyson's "Bildungsgang": Notes on His Early Reading', *Philological Quarterly*, 57.1 (1978), 82–103 (p. 91).
[14] *Hints from Horace*, ll. 237–8, 245–6.
[15] McDonald, *Sound Intentions*, p. 170, quoting Hazlitt, 'On Envy (A Dialogue)', *The Plain Speaker* (1826), *Works*, XII, 97–107 (p. 105).
[16] Locke, *Some Thoughts*, p. 233. *English Bards*, ll. 789–90.

ironies were also accompanied, as this study has shown, by more serious unresolved doubts, and by an element of self-distrust that although so differently expressed, was perhaps not so far from what Eric Griffiths has described as Tennyson's own deep conscious of 'the manner in which skill may convert itself into a hollow knack'.[17] The questions raised by the final chapter of this study—about the point at which poetry appears as a mere gift for putting words together, as mere skill—are ones that are brought into particularly clear focus by Byron's particular modes of virtuosity, as Tennyson's own view of Byron suggests: 'endlessly clever,' but not an artist 'in the higher sense'.[18] Despite his reservations, Tennyson retained an admiration for the *ottava rima* poems well into later life.[19] In 1884, William Allingham, decidedly not an admirer of Byron, recorded that 'T. thinks Byron's morals ought not to be considered in judging his poetry. … T. thinks he was perhaps the cleverest man of his time.'[20]

In some ways this raises larger questions of literary history. The composition of *In Memoriam* roughly spanned the period between the height of posthumous interest in Byron—marked by the release of Moore's *Life* and then the completion of Murray's full edition of the *Works* in 1833—and what was probably the lowest point in his mid-nineteenth-century reputation, in 1850.[21] By the time that Swinburne published his Preface to his *Selection from the Works of Lord Byron* in 1866, he could take it for granted that the present generation of poets were not reading much Byron, for they had been 'baptized into another church than his with the rite of another creed.'[22] As Richard Cronin has noted, this decline was partly as a result of the publication in 1842 of *Poems, in two volumes*, which 'first attuned the British public to Tennyson's art.'[23] By the 1830s, readers would have become more fully aware of the specifically literary character of Byron's doubts. The January 1831 issue of *The Athenaeum* also carried a second notice of Moore's *Life* (1830), which had made many of Byron's letters and

[17] Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, p. 145.
[18] Hallam Lord Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson*, II, p. 287; see Chapter 1.
[19] William Allingham recorded Tennyson expressing his appreciation for *Don Juan* in 1866, and again in 1880, when he remarked that Byron's '*Vision of Judgment* is the most wonderful thing in the world'. See diary entries for 18 May 1866 and 23 September 1880, in *William Allingham: A Diary,* ed. by Helen Paterson Allingham and Dollie Radford (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 132, 300. According to Herbert F. Tucker, in later life he recorded that 'My Schwärmerei for Byron entirely ceased when I was about 18 & I don't think I have ever opened him since': see *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 440.
[20] Allingham, diary entry, 6 November 1884, p. 337.
[21] See Samuel C. Chew, *Byron in England, his Fame and After-fame* (London: John Murray, 1924), p. 263; Steffan and Pratt, 'Notes on the Varorium Edition', IV, 312–14; McDonald, *Sound Intentions*, p. 25.
[22] Swinburne, Preface to *A Selection from the Works of Lord Byron*, v.
[23] Cronin, 'A. C. Swinburne and Byron's Bad Ear', p. 300.

journals available to readers for the first time.[24] These contained many of Byron's habitual disparagements of poetry: 'no one should be a rhymer who could be any thing better'; 'I do think the preference of *writers* to *agents*—the mighty stir made about scribbling and scribes, by themselves and others—a sign of effeminacy, degeneracy, and weakness. Who would write, who had any thing better to do?'[25] What most struck the editors of *The Athenaeum* in their short review of the *Life* was that 'His Lordship was a self-accuser in every way'.[26] Writing in the *Quarterly Review,* Lockhart was equally struck by this 'prevailing vein of self-reproach'.[27] In that record of his writing life, as these responses suggest, there is an element of an honest scrutiny, of questions faithfully asked. It is not incidental that many of Byron's most vigorous expressions of doubt have an interrogative character: from 'Who would not be a Bard?' as he asked in an early letter, to 'what are they worth? what have they done?' or '*who* was ever altered by a poem?' Or, quoting Pope, 'But 'why then publish?''[28] His way of putting the question suggests that we should not hold in unscrutinised trust whatever matters most to us.

Ian Jack has described the 1830s as 'a bad time for poets' and Eric Griffiths has suggested that Tennyson and Browning began their careers in an age characterised by a 'mistrust of poets and poeticality'.[29] This wider loss of faith in poetry has sometimes been ascribed, in a curious way, to Byron himself. 'John Murray refused any manuscripts of poetry after Byron's death in 1824', writes Lee Erikson, and 'by 1830 almost all publishers refused to publish poetry.'[30] And yet this was far from the effect he actually had on the poets who came after him. Ricks has drawn attention to Tennyson's early confession to be '*imitating Whistlecraft and Byron'* in an early piece, 'I dare not write an Ode' (1827).[31] The poem is about wanting to write, however hazardous. A modern poet, this young Tennyson feels, must have the right mettle, some good 'nerve and fibre' about him, if he is to rise, in *English Bards* style, above 'those undoers / Of doggerel Bards, the pitiless Reviewers.'[32] Byron's was a continuously revised creativity that was never allowed to rest on success. Paying his work close stylistic

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[24] *The Athenaeum*, p. 80.
[25] Journal entries, 23 and 24 November 1813, *BLJ* III, 217, 220, which were among those published in *MLJ*, I, 452, 448.
[26] Second Notice of Moore's *Life of Lord Byron* (1830), *The Athenaeum*, 1–3 (p. 3).
[27] *Ibid*. Lockhart, review of 'The Life of Lord Byron', p. 170.
[28] Letter to Elizabeth Pigot, 2 August 1807, *BLJ* I, 130; journal entry, 31 January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, 41; letter to Murray, 3 November 1821, *BLJ* IX, 53; *Don Juan* XIV, ll. 81–4.
[29] Ian Jack, *Browning's Major Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 5; Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, p. 154; cf. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry, 1830–1870* (London: Athlone Press, 1972), p. 4.
[30] Lee Erickson, *The Economy of Literary Form: English Literature and the Industrialization of Publishing, 1800–1850* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 26.
[31] 'I dare not write an Ode for fear Pimplaea' (1827), ll. 33–36, *The Poems of Tennyson*, I, p. 171; Ricks, *Allusion*, p. 185.
[32] 'I dare not write an Ode for fear Pimplaea' (1827), ll.11–12.

attention shows that far from diminishing his art, his doubts led to its expansion. From his rhymes to his attitude to revision, from his use of poetic language to the questions he asks about the boundaries between art and what lies beyond it, his doubts worked as a creative resource. Out of his compelling suspicion of the inadequacy of art came a widening of its boundaries. The result is a creatively resourceful, self-questioning creativity, which shows us how art might release us from 'fixed opinions' and 'self-approved wisdom'. 'We need Byron's salutary scepticism', as Ricks notes.[33] This study also finds much to esteem in the quality of his doubt.

[33] Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment*, p. 75.

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