

‘Artlessness and Artifice’: Byron and the Historicity of Poetic Form

Gavin Oliver Sourgen

Balliol College

University of Oxford

DPhil in English Language and Literature

Hilary Term 2013

Abstract

'Artlessness and Artifice': Byron and the Historicity of Poetic Form

Gavin Oliver Sourgen DPhil in English

Balliol College Hilary 2012

This thesis examines the conscious amalgamation of conflicting forms in Byron's verse, and how these forms strain to create meaning in the processes of his poetry. Through a series of close readings and critical engagements with other Romantic poets, I endeavour to show how Byron's poetry is often a rich site of contention between revolutionary and conservative impulses; both in its style and subject matter, and more often than not, in the complicated relationship between them.

Beginning with Byron's problematic place in the English Romantic canon, I attempt to lay a foundation for my claims that for all his mistrust of closed systems and predetermined positions there remained an urging desire to reconcile definitive artistic contour with internal form-developing process in many of his most intense poetic engagements. In his efforts at reconciling an awareness of the ever-moving provisional nature of subjectivity with a deep-rooted demand for evaluative permanence, Byron habitually employs a hybrid poetic idiom which seeks to be both timeless and time specific.

In many of his most distinctive compositions, Byron holds a so-called 'High Romantic' lyrical mode, in which meaning is immersed in a persistent flowing rhythm, in tension with an eighteenth-century rhetorical style in which the careful placement of weighty words offsets its continuity to striking effect. By bookending my enquiry with Byron's penetrating discursive conflicts with the naïve lyrical impulses of Wordsworth's blank verse and what he perceived as the rhetorical appropriations of Keats's poetry, I wish to demonstrate that Byron's poetry enacts a curious meeting of nature and culture by a refusal to cleave them.

Table of Contents:

<i>List of Abbreviations:</i>	1
Introduction: <i>Byron's Plurality</i>	3-17
1. 'Beyond Imagination's Power, Beyond the Bard's defeated Art': Form and Process in Byron's Verse.	18-62
2. 'Blank Pretenders': Sense and Feeling in Byron's Objections to Blank Verse.	63-123
3. 'My pang shall find a voice': <i>Manfred's</i> Mixed Mode.	124-166
4. 'The Patched-up Idol of Enlightened Days': <i>Childe Harold</i> III and IV.	167-213
5. 'Postures and Posturing' in <i>Don Juan</i> .	214-295
Bibliography	i-xii

ABBREVIATIONS

- BLJ* Lord Byron. *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols. (London: John Murray, 1973-94.)
- CH* *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Andrew Rutherford (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970.)
- CMP* Lord Byron. *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.)
- CPW* Lord Byron. *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-94.)
- HCW* William Hazlitt. *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1930-4.)
- RR* *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, 3 vols. in 9 parts (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1972.)
- KL* John Keats. *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958.)
- LPBS* Percy Bysshe Shelley. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964.)
- SPP* Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York; London: Norton, 2002.)

‘It is surely one of the monstrous ironies of our time, the present critical Age of Irony and Ambiguity, the Period of the Poetic Paradox, that Byron, the master of these, should have been so neglected by the new critics.’¹ (Ernest J. Lovell, Jr.)

¹ Ernest J. Lovell, Jr., ‘Irony and Image in Don Juan’ in *English Romantic Poets*, ed. M.H. Abrams (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 239.

Introduction: *Byron's Plurality*

Despite enjoying a substantial critical resurgence over the past fifty years, Byron's position in the English Romantic canon remains conspicuously unsettled. It has become something of a commonplace to view him as a bona fide Janus of Romantic poetry: fitting but improperly into the poetic context of the period by reaching back toward the revived classicism of the eighteenth century even while facing away from it as a formidable figure of his time. Byron declared that he lived in 'gigantic and exaggerated'² times, but Hazlitt thought that the poet tried to detach himself from the spirit of that age through petulant and splenetic gestures of defiance: 'his contempt of his contemporaries makes him turn back to the lustrous past, or project himself forward to the dim future'.³ If Coleridge imagined himself as the philosophical 'arbitrator between the old school & the New School',⁴ Byron professed to be of 'no school' or 'no party' and sported with prepositions and *Paradise Lost* in canto fourteen of *Don Juan* – 'the world is all before me, or behind'⁵ (XIV, 65) – to evoke the belief that he was, in a strange and comic sense, both firmly rooted in his time and beyond it.

The result of this peculiar tension in Byron, between the time-specific and the timeless, is a fairly sharp division in scholarly attention over the shaping and directing power of his poetic and critical imagination. On the one hand we preserve a critical inclination which centres on the almost rampant materialism of Byron's temperament and his art. This can be traced back to the Keatsian conviction that his intelligence was given to performance and outward action rather than internal contemplation: 'there are

² *BLJ*, ix. 155.

³ William Hazlitt 'The Spirit of the Age', in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1930-4), xi. 72.

⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71), ii. 830.

⁵ All poetry is taken from *Lord Byron, The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-93) unless otherwise stated.

two distinct tempers of mind in which we judge things – the worldly, theatrical and pantomimical; and the unearthly, spiritual and ethereal – in the former Buonaparte, Lord Byron and this Charmian hold first place in our minds'.⁶ Recognition of this dispositional assumption has produced an extensive collection of studies dedicated to exposing Byron's poetry as the demystifying antidote to High Romanticism's visionary flights of fancy – either as a staged gesture of cultural ambivalence, or as a tactical positioning of poetry within literary markets.⁷ On the other hand, we identify a school of critics who, by drawing from Hazlitt's judgement that 'he is, in a striking degree, the creature of his own will...sealed on a lofty eminence...self-will, passion, the love of singularity...are the proper categories of his mind'⁸ remain committed to presenting Byron as the most sublime of Romantic poets. The first is public, rhetorical and performative; holding his compositions in either passive agreement with, or mocking imitation of, the generic conventions of the eighteenth century. The second is imperial, reflexive, and transcendental; demonstrating the final triumph of the sublime over the neoclassical in Byron's commanding voice.

As I have already implied, this is largely because Byron troubles our best attempts at classification; he 'disconcerts the categoriser'⁹ as Beatty puts it. This is well expressed in an observation on *Marino Faliero* in the *British Review* in which the reviewer not only troubles over the way in which the play confounds 'the modern distinction between the romantic and the classical,' but continues to show how this amalgamation

⁶ John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1958), i. 395-6.

⁷ It is not my intention to offer a tediously comprehensive literary review, but Jerome Christensen's, *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and Philip W. Martin's *Byron: A Poet Before His Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) present the foremost studies in this approach.

⁸ *HCW*, xi.72.

⁹ Bernard Beatty, *Byron's 'Don Juan'* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 2.

of opposites is often ‘strikingly exemplified’¹⁰ in Byron’s work. The reviewer was not alone in this belief. In his *London Magazine* appraisal of the same play, Hazlitt makes an important reference to *Manfred* in suggesting that Byron was indeed ‘romantic’: implementing the term not only as an adjective of literary ‘romance’, but also with the uncomplimentary overtone of being ‘non-classical’¹¹:

The characters and situations there are of a romantic and poetical cast, mere creatures of the imagination; and the sentiments such as the author might easily conjure up by fancying himself on enchanted ground ... Lord Byron can gaze with swimming eyes upon any of the great lights of Italy, and view them through the misty, widespread glory of lengthening centuries: that is, he can take a high and romantic interest in them, as they appear to us and to him; but he cannot take an historical event’. (RR, B. iv. 1591)

The implication here is that while Byron’s poetic vision is capable of the lofty and imaginative sweep, it lacks the measured and objective repose of an Augustan mind. Others, however, could see Byron as ‘classical’. John Wilson’s *Edinburgh Review* of *Childe Harold IV* begins by commenting upon ‘the fanciful and romantic feeling’ of contemporary travel narratives only to resolve that Byron’s poem is not of this kind: ‘Yet we think the genius of Byron is, more than any other modern poet, akin to that peculiar genius which seems to have been diffused among all powers and artists of ancient Greece...singleness, simplicity, and unity.’ (RR, B. ii. 894)

Variations on this contrast abound in contemporary criticism, codifying an enduring debate over the focal point of ‘Romanticism’ and whether or not Byron was complicit in, or subversive of, early-nineteenth century literary conventions. In commenting on Byron’s private account of ‘passion’ as a creative force, Clement

¹⁰ *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers, Part B: Byron and Regency Society Poets*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1972), i. 477. Hereafter abbreviated as RR.

¹¹ Hans Eichner, *‘Romantic’ and its Cognates: The European History of the Word* (Toronto University Press, 1972), 228.

Goode concludes, rather forcefully, that ‘whatever may have been his conscious sympathies, and they have been exaggerated as classical, in this notion he is, at every point in his career, romantic to an extreme,’¹² while Harold Bloom argues for the definitively ‘unromantic’ nature of his temperament: ‘Byron never left the world, nor could he ever abandon any of the existing conceptions of it. His is therefore the most social of Romantic imaginations and so the least Romantic.’¹³ Whether by going to the extreme of attributing Byron’s complex nature and composite poetics to a purely subjective or autobiographical whimsy or, more pointedly, by locating them in his absorption of historically conditioned clashes, his intricate negotiations of thought and style are imperfectly explained.

This imperfection, if we may call it that, has much to do with the problematic terms by which we judge the aesthetic values of an age which is marked by its longing for permanence and continuity as much as it is for its radical and revolutionary impulses.¹⁴ In a gesture which expresses the sheer violence of conceptual cleaving, Lovejoy proposes that ‘the words romanticism and classicism are used like hatchets to chop up materials of the most delicate and subtle weaving and intertexture.’¹⁵ Herbert Read captures the complicated ambivalence in these criteria, and Byron’s especially thorny station within them, to salient effect: ‘Romantic and classic – we exchange these counters with bewildering effect. If to steal away and mingle with the Universe is a romantic proceeding, then Byron is the romantic, and Wordsworth and Coleridge, who

¹² Clement Tyson Goode, *Byron as Critic* (New York: Lenox Hill, 1923), 86.

¹³ Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1971), 3.

¹⁴ Two recent revisionary accounts for this contradiction which are particularly illuminating on the matter are David Fairer’s *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle 1790-1798* (Oxford University Press, 2009), and Jon Mee’s *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: poetics and the policing of culture in the Romantic period* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Quoted by J.R. Watson in his ‘Introduction’ to *Pre-romanticism in English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century: the poetic art and significance of Thomson, Gray, Collins, Goldsmith, Cowper & Crabbe*, ed. J.R. Watson (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), xi.

were always careful to keep logical distinctions between man and nature, were classical. But if to write verse of this ease and suavity is to be classical, then Byron was classical, and the poets of *Kubla Khan* and *Michael* were romantic experimentalists, obsessed with some notion of a correspondency between form and feeling.¹⁶ To generalize about a large and multifaceted intellectual movement is almost unavoidably to lay down some convenient simplifications, and it may be more useful to consider differing trends within a larger creative formation than trying to pivot our suppositions on two variable and incompatible terms. But even if we do so, it does not make it any easier in judging Byron's poetry which is often a rich site of contention between revolutionary and traditional discourses; both in its style and subject matter, and more often than not, in the complex relationship between them.

In his attempts at reconciling an awareness of the ever-moving provisional nature of subjectivity with a long-standing demand for evaluative permanence, there exists an underlying tension between Byron's creative and discursive endeavours. His public commitment to Pope, and to the Horatian ideal of poetry as civilized discourse often stands in opposition to an insistence in many of his most celebrated works on poetry as self-expression. Some critics have tried to get out of this conundrum by tracing a linear development in Byron's thought from an early allegiance to the poetic authority of the past towards a subsequent relinquishing of those conservative ideals to make way for a more avant-garde or progressive poetics. Thus Frederick Shilstone argues:

His presence in *The Age of Bronze* merely helps to show how the vision of the *ottava rima* poems is more acceptable to a Byron for whom neoclassical satire,

¹⁶ Herbert Read, *The True Voice of Feeling* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), 310.

like so many other literary and social traditions, is no longer an authority to which he can pay much heed.¹⁷

While Shilstone is not wrong in pointing to an important modification in the tone of Byron's later poems through the discovery of the *ottava rima*, he fails to account for the strong presence of neoclassical attitudes and qualities throughout Byron's late work. In the very example Shilstone provides, *The Age of Bronze*, we see a poem written in rather taut rhyming couplets, an alternative title '*Cai'inen Secular e et Annus liatid Mirabilis*' taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as well as an epigraph from Virgil's Aeneid: '*Impar Congressus Achilli*'. If that is not enough, Byron links the work directly to one of his early satires in a letter to Leigh Hunt, declaring that the poem is written 'in my early English Bards style — but a little more stilted and somewhat too full of "epithets of war" and classical allusions'.¹⁸ Throughout Byron's career one perceives a deep-seated resistance to linear conversions, whether they be political, philosophical, or poetic, all the while disavowing the possibility of an uncomplicated exchange. To read Byron's poetic development as a straightforward passage from satire to sentiment is to forsake a vigorous dialectic between nature and convention in all of his work, not to mention his astonishing powers of assimilation.

Perhaps the most telling example of Byron's innate divisiveness is the radical shift in methodology adopted by his most alert and celebrated critic, Jerome J. McGann. In McGann's influential early study, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (1968), he offered an exemplum of New Critical and Deconstructive methods in exploring the 'phenomenon of Byronic self-expression'¹⁹ and exhibiting the way in which Byron's poetry centres on composition as an act of self-creation. Yet in his

¹⁷ Frederick W. Shilstone, *Byron and the Myth of Tradition* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 238.

¹⁸ *BLJ*, x, 81.

¹⁹ Jerome McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), vii.

subsequent enquiry, *Don Juan in Context* (1976), McGann moved quite severely from these methods by adopting a historically based critical procedure, reading the poem through a contextual and ideological lens to show how Byron adopted a ‘functional poetics’²⁰ to force calculated effects upon his readers. While this is, perhaps, a crude reduction of McGann’s almost unrivalled sensitivity to Byron’s complex poetics, and it may say more about the critic’s own shifting procedural inclinations as it does about the poet’s complex authorial manoeuvrings, we cannot ignore the severity of the split in these two successive studies, nor can we ignore the very one-sided, dichotomised approach in either of them.

This contradiction is, in part, precipitated by Byron’s reluctance to offer a theory for poetry. One might point to several lines of argument in the Pope-Bowles controversy as the premise for a poetics, as I do quite earnestly at times in this study, but they do not hold quite the same weight of philosophical assertion or artistic manifesto as one finds in the ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, Keats’s deep reflections on beauty and truth in his letters, or Shelley’s prefaces and *Defence of Poetry* because Byron often knowingly departed from them. It has been well documented in Romantic scholarship that Byron was not given to methodological procedures or precise expositions, as he often professed that ‘to form decisive resolutions is idle,’²¹ and if we hope to extract a coherent theory from his reflections on art and nature we will search in vain. Byron thought too concretely and wrote too briskly to frame a definite code of literary principles. Nevertheless, by piecing together the various judgments, feelings and deliberations located in the prolific output of his poetry, in his letters and journals, and in the public debate over Pope, whose poetry was

²⁰ Jerome McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 79.

²¹ *BLJ*, v. 230.

‘the pivot of a dispute in taste’²² according to Shelley, we begin to see something of an underlying consistency in his variousness which indicates that Byron was often very decided in his convictions on literary matters. This is especially evident in his repeated commitment to poetry as a distinct art in the face of a growing belief that it was merely another form of philosophy, and, as a consequence of this, in his faith that it provided a unique province for the relationship between truth and art that could not be found elsewhere.

Byron was neither oblivious to the hotly contested transformations in the essential definition of poetry during the early nineteenth century, nor was he a cunningly elusive or unwilling participant in the self-conscious literary culture of the period. That his engagements with these dilemmas often involve an essential irony or complexity of tone is unchallenged, but to speak of Byron’s ‘deliberate obscurantism’²³ or his sham posturing – the way he often ‘posed as a neoclassical traditionalist’²⁴ as many argue – is to do injustice to the way in which he was deeply, and consciously, involved in the changing poetics of the age. One of the many fine discoveries revealed by Jane Stabler’s *Byron, Poetics and History* is that his reading of contemporary English literature and politics did not end with his departure from England in 1816. His conflict with a ‘novel’ poetics (the ‘modern’ poetry of the day as he called it) was frequently negotiated through a network of friends and acquaintances: he was forever enquiring to John Murray as to what the publisher’s other ‘raggamuffins’ were up to. While Byron declared that his period was ‘not a high age of English Poetry’²⁵ as many others had believed it was, he was vitally aware of how high the stakes were for the place of poetry

²² Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1964. ii. 290. Hereafter abbreviated to *LPBS*.

²³ Jerome J. McGann, “‘Studiously Greek’?: *The Two Foscari*” in *The Plays of Lord Byron: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Gleckner and Bernard Beatty (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), 134.

²⁴ David Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 185.

²⁵ *BLJ*, ix. 35.

and poetic traditions in these discussions, and how deeply implicated he was in the major transformations of the age. Jonathan Bate goes so far as to argue that, ‘with the possible exception of Goethe himself, Byron was the strongest critic of Romanticism among the exponents of Romanticism.’²⁶ It is this very contradiction of being simultaneously complicit *in* and disapproving *of* that transformation which continues to fascinate and trouble readers of his verse.

In truth Byron often tried to situate the poetry of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries within the grand march of English literary history, as well as trying to predict what might become of the art in the hands of future generations. In one of the most contemporaneously mindful statements of the period, Byron captures the heightened sense of poetical-historical specificity in English Romantic poetry:

I called Crabbe and Sam the fathers of present Poesy; and said, that I thought—except them—all of “us youth” were on a wrong tack. But I never said that we did not sail well...Our fame will be hurt by admiration and imitation. When I say our, I mean all (Lakers included), except the postscript of the Augustans. The next generation (from the quantity and facility of imitation) will tumble and break their necks off our Pegasus, who runs away with us; but we keep the saddle, because we broke the rascal and can ride. (*BLJ*, VI. 10)

The implicit reference here is to a widespread perception in Romanticism’s major proponents that they were part of a grand revolution in poetic form, especially on the levels of structure and metre. Byron’s shrewd observation suggests a fundamental transformation in the mechanisms of poetry, one that marks a watershed in the history of English verse, and although it is less political in its tone than Hazlitt’s famous retrospective assertion that ‘rhyme was looked upon as a relic of the feudal system and

²⁶ Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 224.

regular metre was abolished with regular government',²⁷ it certainly anticipates such claims. Yet in a manner characteristic of Byron's doubling politics and doubling poetics, he pays homage to a certain sense of regulation in this poetic revolution by keeping to 'the saddle' of pre-existing structures. That he and his generation 'broke' from the traditional limits and measures of neoclassical poetry suggests a powerful and new-found freedom, but it does not imply an unbridled freedom: there is an implicit degree of control in their prosodic experiments. This type of formulation is indicative of Byron's characteristic plurality of vision, in which he attempts to handle problems implicit in his age (and the next), by tackling the fundamental assumptions of the previous age without surrendering the achievements of either.

In yet another discerning reflection to Goethe on the imminent categorization of poetic schools and systems, Byron strikes upon the very terms under which his poetry would later be judged:

I perceive that in Germany, as well as in Italy, there is a great struggle about what they call '*Classical and Romantic*' — terms which were not subjects of classification in England — at least when I left it four or five years ago. Some of the English Scribblers (it is true) abused Pope and Swift, but the reason was that <They> themselves did not know how to write <in> either prose or verse...but nobody thought them worth making a Sect of. Perhaps there may be something of the sort sprung up lately — but I have not heard much about it, — and it would be such bad taste that I shall be sorry to believe it. (*CPW*, iv. 546.)

The following year, after Bowles had published his strictures on Pope by discoursing on 'the Invariable Principles of Poetry,' Byron noticed once again that 'Schlegel and Madame de Staël were endeavouring 'to reduce poetry to *two* systems, classical and

²⁷ 'On the Living Poets' in *HCW*, v. 161-2.

romantic. The effect is only beginning.²⁸ I do not wish to give unnecessary attention to the conceptual history of these terms for that is beyond the principal considerations of this study. I only use them to demonstrate how discerning Byron was of the shifting criteria by which poetry was being produced and judged, and how such criteria have been inadequately applied to his own poetry. By showing Byron's awareness of these growing distinctions as they are reflected in his correspondence and, more importantly, in his poetry, I hope to expose the reductive deficiencies of reading Byron's poetry in the same either/or terms.

By giving close attention to the often intense relationship between manner and matter in Byron's verse, I aim to call attention to the extraordinary multiplicity of his imagination which creates, not simply by opposition or disjunction, but also by unification and interpenetration. The conflict between nature and convention are often poised together in hybrid verse-forms of continuity and discontinuity. In this way, Byron's poetry challenges the convenient and too readily accepted polarity of cold Classicism and passionate Romanticism: the 'shift across the century from an imitative to an affective aesthetic'²⁹ as Wasserman described it. Byron's unwillingness to reconcile these conflicting modes publically, together with his inability to finally and wholeheartedly choose between them in his work, often constitute simultaneously constructive and deconstructive acts. It is for this reason that neither deconstructive methodologies (which depend on differences and oppositions and consequently must annihilate organization and continuity), nor the logocentric impulses of New

²⁸ Lord Byron, *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 142n. Hereafter referred as *CMP*.

²⁹ Earl R. Wasserman, *The Subtler Language: Critical Readings of Neoclassic and Romantic Poems* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959), 23.

Historicism, (which necessitate that poetic forms are encoded ideologies) present adequate paradigms for grasping the range of his thought and work.

Of course, this could well be said of most Romantic poetry, which is often marked, and accordingly defined, by its restless attempts to synthesise the dialectics of mind and nature or subject and object in the very processes of its formations. But, as I have already suggested, Byron differs from his contemporaries by never subscribing to a particular philosophy for poetry, and, more significantly, by never dissolving the boundary between poetry and philosophy to the point where they are indistinguishable. The famous lines from *Childe Harold III* – ‘Tis to create, and in creating live /A being more intense, that we endow /With form our fancy, gaining as we give /The life we image, even as I do now’ (46-9) – are often produced to demonstrate that Byron’s immersion in the creative process is ‘Romantic’ to the extreme. However, critics who do so seldom acknowledge that they are part of a larger reflection on the futility of such all-consuming creative acts, nor do they consider the poet’s deliberate tempering of this activity in the stanza that follows: ‘Yet must I think less wildly; I have thought /Too long and darkly’ (55-6). Byron’s imagination is active and formidable, but in forsaking the relentless need for abstraction that we find in the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats, and by almost always making a distinction between experience and the representation of experience, Byron denies a systematic means of expressing a settlement between formalism and spontaneity; between ‘the generic bias of the neoclassical poet and the psychological bias of the sublime poet.’³⁰ The lines in *Childe Harold* continue, and in doing so affirm a sense of continuity in discontinuity, ‘Yet am I changed; though still enough the same /In strength to bear that Time cannot abate’ (61-2) which, in its recognition of an innate structural soundness, is more in keeping

³⁰ Richard Cronin, *Shelley’s Poetic Thoughts* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), 31.

with a neoclassical legacy than it is with a Romantic investment in unencumbered process. Byron was willing to admit that he ‘broke the saddle’ of Augustan poise, but for all his mistrust of closed systems and predetermined positions, there remained a desire for definitive artistic profile as well as internal form-developing process in all that he penned. It is the embodiment of this twin-desire in Byron’s poetry that forms the foundation of this study.

In his excellent account of the ways in which Romanticism was defined, adopted, and transformed in the twentieth century, John Bayley explains a fundamental distinction between the ‘Romantic absorption in the nature of the creative process’, and a classicism which ‘is always associated with form, with careful craftsmanship, and with an interest in techniques for their own sake’.³¹ It is to this end that Byron’s complex negotiations between the two terms or principles of art – between form as a noun and form as a verb – seem to be some of the most contentious and perhaps the most interesting. His works often exemplify the strenuous and unresolved watershed between an unselfconscious and a self-regarding art. Susan Wolfson rightly draws our attention to Byron’s propensity for negotiating aesthetic processes in and through his poetry. ‘No Romantic poet’ she argues, ‘is more conscious of style and form, in both social and literary registers, than Byron – and this sensibility involves an often scrupulous, often experimental, use of poetic forms as an instrument of critical investigation’.³² But if Wolfson’s claim is to be earnestly admitted, then not only is it important for us to consider the ways in which Byron’s works are themselves individually and socially signifying, but also to examine the formidable fusion of structure and spontaneity that they entail. By evaluating the unique register of Byron’s

³¹ John Bayley, *The Romantic Survival: A Study in Poetic Evolution* (London: Constable, 1957), 49.

³² Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1997), 134.

poetry both in relation to the literary context of the period and in his various responses to his contemporaries, I mean, in part, to agree with Stuart Curran that, ‘the values of process and progress that dominate their culture are as distinctive in constitution as they are in purpose’,³³ but I also wish to reconcile these processes with Byron’s mindful attempts at giving expression to his deepest feelings without destroying ‘the prior and purely beautiful fabric’³⁴ of his literary predecessors.

These dynamics are deftly accounted for by Jane Stabler in *Byron, Poetics and History*, which stands as the only concentrated engagement with Byron’s socially-poetic displacements to date. In her treatment of Byron’s textual complexity, Stabler presents a sensitive analysis of his notorious formal deviations through a framework of reader responses to the text, remaining alert ‘to the contingencies of reader participation and the historical matrices of literary composition.’³⁵ It is a study that has presented Byron in a new light, and opened up his works in hitherto unacknowledged ways, and one to which this thesis owes a great deal. My reading of the formal complexity of Byron’s verse merely offers an extension to Stabler’s foundation for the poet’s ‘historical self-consciousness’ by advancing a more direct engagement with Byron’s form-conscious imagination, and the technical processes of Byron’s poetry as they embody a telling transition in poetic form.

‘Byron’s poetry,’ posits Auden, ‘is the most striking example I know in literary history of the creative role which poetic form can play.’³⁶ This, I argue, is because his instinctive belief in the structuring power of verse as a necessary embodiment of the imagination’s restless impulses always outweighed his urge to boundless arrangements.

³³ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 204.

³⁴ *CMP*, 158.

³⁵ Jane Stabler, *Byron, Poetics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10.

³⁶ W.H. Auden, ‘Don Juan’ in *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber, 1963), 394.

In his poetry Byron attempts to ascribe a place for the imagination that is neither static nor formless, neither hopelessly conclusive nor amorphously unstructured. To appropriate a phrase from Herbert Read's observation on poets more generally: Byron's 'feeling for form is stronger than a formless feeling.'³⁷

³⁷ Herbert Read, 'The Cult of Sincerity' in *The Hudson Review*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Spring, 1968), 61.

1. *'Beyond Imagination's Power, Beyond the Bard's defeated Art': Form and Process in Byron's Verse.*

'His works afford ample scope indeed for the minute inquiries in which technical criticism loves to indulge, and are full of poetical riches and beauties, – but they also provoke another sort of criticism which is of far higher interest'.³⁸

(Edinburgh Monthly Review on Childe Harold's Pilgrimage IV).

³⁸ RR, B. ii.793.

*'Amidst the ties that have been dashed to pieces, there are links yet entire though the chain itself be broken.'*³⁹

As I suggested in my introduction, Byron's poetry often embodies a curious intersection of autonomous impulses and an underlying affirmation of traditional modes. In his review of Thomas Moore's *Life of Byron*, Thomas Babington Macaulay offers a lengthy deliberation on the revolution in poetic form and taste in the late-eighteenth century, before hinting at Byron's ill-fitting station within that development:

His lot was cast in the time of a great literary revolution. That poetical dynasty which had dethroned the successors of Shakspeare and Spenser was, in its turn, dethroned by a race who represented themselves as heirs of the ancient line, so long dispossessed by usurpers. The real nature of this revolution has not, we think, been comprehended by the great majority of those who concurred in it.

If this question were proposed — wherein especially does the poetry of our times differ from that of the last century? — ninety-nine persons out of a hundred would answer that the poetry of the last century was correct, but cold and mechanical, and that the poetry of our time, though wild and irregular, presented far more vivid images, and excited the passions far more strongly than that of Parnell, of Addison, or of Pope. In the same manner we constantly hear it said, that the poets of the age of Elizabeth had far more genius, but far less correctness, than those of the age of Anne. *It seems to be taken for granted, that there is some necessary incompatibility, some antithesis between correctness and creative power.* (CH, 302, *my emphasis*)

Macaulay begins his account of this sweeping transformation by couching it in the political terms of inheritance and dispossession: giving attention to a group of poets who usurped the very rhymesters who had themselves dethroned the poetic dynasty of the Elizabethan era. The magnitude of that claim is somewhat tempered by his subtle destabilisation of absolute change through the recognition of return and repossession,

³⁹ *CMP*, 99.

but Macaulay ultimately, though somewhat ironically, concludes that a disconnection between precision and imagination is now ‘taken for granted’. However, Macaulay struggles to maintain this unequivocal separation between elegance and originality – the ‘necessary incompatibility...between correctness and creative power’ – in relation to Byron’s verse, especially since Byron himself denied it. In his ‘Observations upon an Article in *Blackwood’s*’, a forerunner for the Pope/Bowles debate, Byron defended the ‘memory of him who harmonized our poetic language’ by attacking those who were ‘smitten’ by a new school that sought to ‘revive the language of Queen Elizabeth.’⁴⁰ With this knowledge, Macaulay ends up having to elaborate at length on the difference between arbitrary ‘rules’ and the ‘eternal and immutable principles of poetry’ because, in his estimation of the poet’s heightened powers, Byron’s verse seems to embody both forms of poetic force. From this perspective, Byron can be seen to inhabit a problematic middle ground as a ‘polite radical’ whose work, in various ways, is more evenly wedged between imaginative excess and mollifying decorum. The dilemma, as Byron saw it, was in striking a balance between nature and culture:

For Art – too rude, for Nature – too refined,
 Instruct how hard the medium ’tis to hit
 Twixt too much polish, and too coarse a Wit.

*(Hints from Horace,*⁴¹ 390-2)

Once again, Byron demonstrates an unusual desire to reconcile extremes. While he acknowledges that poetry as a form has liberated itself from the neoclassical rubric of elegant composition, he nonetheless remains deeply attached to the idea that it is generated from something more than a mere enthusiasm of feeling. He does not subscribe uncritically to the tenets of neoclassicism but nor does he wish to eliminate

⁴⁰ *CMP*, 112.

⁴¹ Hereafter referenced as *H/H*.

tradition's place as an important means of regulation against the intemperance of nature.

If we were to ignore the almost blinkered passion in Byron's rebuttal of Bowles's assault on Pope⁴² and consider the many valuable observations on the changing dynamics of poetry which he presents in them, we discover that Byron's two main charges against "modern" poetry are based on the creative extremes of enthusiasm and imitation: or, more specifically, on the inconsistent amalgamation of these philosophical extremes in their poetry. He demurs against the emergence of

two Sects of Naturals – the Lakers – who whine about Nature because they live in Cumberland – and their *under-sect* (which some one has maliciously called the "Cockney School") – who are enthusiastical for the country because they live in London. (*CMP*, 156)

Byron is playing off the newly-established inclination for literary sects and artificial classifications outlined earlier, but in doing so he draws attention to his own serious concerns for an emerging notion of poetry which, with varying emphases, aimed at a complete separation of nature and culture. He goes further:

I can understand the pretensions of the Aquatic gentlemen of Windermere to what Mr Braham terms "*entusymusy*" for lakes and mountains and daffodils – and buttercups – – but I should be glad to be apprized of the foundation of the London propensities of their imitative brethren to the same "high argument"? (*Ibid*, 156)

⁴² The usefulness of Byron's contribution to the Pope/Bowles controversy as a critical text has been debated by scholars. Macaulay argued that 'when he attacked them he brought his whole soul to the work' (*CH*, 311) whereas Claude Rawson contends that 'Byron's famous letters on Pope, with the exception of a handful of eloquent or amusing utterances...are not very interesting or distinguished documents, more preoccupied with a tedious and self-important wrangle with Bowles than any genuine understanding of Pope.' See Claude Rawson, *Satire and Sentiment 1660 – 1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 98-9.

Byron's special unease at the unprecedented severing of inventive and derivative practices – an unnecessary cleaving of the Augustan poet's dual attachment to inspiration and imitation – has become doubly dangerous in the manifestation of a second wave of 'imitative brethren' whose presence testifies to a broader dissemination of the radical poetics of the Lake school. An insulated coterie of poets proclaiming a grand revolution in the principles of poetic composition and reception is one thing, but a propagation of these codes to a younger generation of poets, and to the very centre of the reading public, is a major threat to the foundations of the whole poetic enterprise. However, by juxtaposing and inverting the ostensibly incompatible notions of organic enthusiasm and synthetic reproduction, Byron's snub strikes at the very heart of what he perceives as the Lake school's enigmatic artistic ideals. It not only undermines their claims to originality and their notion that a poem is a unique and untranslatable statement, but it also destabilises their deeply-entrenched belief that such poetry is beyond the vulgar palate of contemporary readership.

In a clever reversal of Wordsworth's desire to pioneer a new form of aesthetic discrimination, one in which 'every great and original writer, in proportion as he is great and original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished',⁴³ Byron subordinates and devalues any elevated sense that the Lake school may have of being above the reach of an unrefined sensibility by setting up the Cockney school as living (though diminishing) imitators of their verse. To dispel the possibility of absolute originality in the development of an exclusive and discriminatory poetics, Byron wittingly qualifies difference by recapitulating similarity. He elsewhere maintains that Wordsworth is 'essentially a bad writer...he may have a sect but he will never have a

⁴³ William Wordsworth, 'Letter to Lady Beaumont, May 1807' in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935-39), ii. 145.

public, and his “audience” will always be “few” without being “fit”, except for Belam’ before enforcing his claim that the latter’s proclaimed distinction between momentary popularity and lasting value is an all-to-simplistic notion because ‘Gray’s elegy pleased instantly and eternally’.⁴⁴ This is a convenient stance for Byron to adopt after the extraordinary public success of his poems between 1812 and 1815, not to mention his own his own ambivalence about the inherent quality of those poems, but it also reflects his concern for the changing perception of poetry’s constitutive properties beyond literary markets.

The ‘high argument’ to which Byron refers is a citation to lines 68-71 of the ‘Prospectus’ to *The Recluse* as appended to Wordsworth’s *The Excursion* (1814) in which he offers the near tautological proposition: ‘*How exquisitely the individual Mind...to the external World / Is fitted: – and how exquisitely, too /...The external World is fitted to the Mind*’.⁴⁵ Byron mocks the notion of a seamless correspondence between shape and matter because it reflects his apprehension for the Wordsworthian poetics of form as the illusion of natural spontaneity. For the most part, Byron saw this as a dangerous mode of assertiveness which assumed no inherited ideal beyond the creative act. Wordsworth, it must be remembered, upturned Dryden’s argument that the discipline of poetry is valuable for ‘putting bounds to a wilde over-flowing Fancy’⁴⁶ in his famous assertion that all good poetry is a ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling’, and as he would later qualify, spirit recoiled from ‘the bondage of definite form’.⁴⁷ For the like of Wordsworth and Coleridge poetry provided access to a metaphysical absolute in which

⁴⁴ *CMP*, 109.

⁴⁵ ‘Preface’ to *The Excursion* in *William Wordsworth, The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jay (Ithaca, N.Y; London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 40.

⁴⁶ John Dryden, ‘Essay on Dramatick Poesie’ in *The Works of John Dryden: Prose 1668 -1691*, ed. S.H. Monk and A.E. Wallace Mauer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 79.

⁴⁷ William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and J.W. Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), vol. iii. 34.

the conditions of aesthetic wholeness and transcendental truth might coexist, but, in Byron's mind, this view of poetry was quixotically free from any measurable formal properties. It was to this end that he differed so noticeably from them. Byron's concern that this unbridled approach to artistic creation was merely self-authenticating signals his deepest fears for the disinheritance of an important literary tradition.

The following lines in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* testify to Byron's distaste for an elevated 'Romantic' aesthetic which emphasises innovation at the expense of genuine creativity:

There be, who say in these enlightened days
That splendid lies are all the poet's praise;
That strained Invention, ever on the wing,
Alone impels the modern Bard to sing:
'Tis true, that all who rhyme, nay, all who write,
Shrink from that fatal word to Genius—Trite;
Yet Truth sometimes will lend her noblest fires,
And decorate the verse herself inspires:

(EBSR, 849-56)

Byron implements a series of semantic inversions to demonstrate the paradoxical and unrealised ambitions of a new form of poetry. The oxymoronic phrase 'splendid lies' suggests a dazzling effect without substance, while the equally illogical formulation 'strained Invention' serves as a double affront to modern poetry's failed attempts at producing a composition of unprocessed character and seamless flow. In some ways, this presents a reworking of the same terminology that was employed by De Quincey and others to undermine Pope's achievements: describing him as 'a pyrotechnic artist' who produced 'brilliant and evanescent effects out of elements that have hardly a moment's life within them.'⁴⁸ It must be acknowledged that Byron is not arguing

⁴⁸ De Quincey, 'Lord Carlisle on Pope' in *Alexander Pope: A Critical Anthology*, ed. F.W. Bateson and N.A. Joukovsky (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 230.

against the idea of poetic ingenuity or imaginative fertility. Rather, his hostility is aimed at a group of poets who thought, rather narrowly, that it is invention ‘Alone’ which impelled ‘the modern Bard to sing’. Byron’s mid-line alteration in ‘all who rhyme, nay, all who write’ touches upon a renewed debate on the essential difference between poetry and prose during this period to which I give sustained attention in the next chapter, but for the moment I would like to use it to show how seriously Byron felt about verse as a distinct entity. Byron was ready enough to bend, and at times break, formal boundaries, but the idea of poetry as a deliberate art was important to him: ‘A man’s poetry is a distinct faculty, or soul,’ he told Moore in a letter of 1821, ‘and has no more to do with the every-day individual than the Inspiration with the Pythoness when removed from her tripod.’⁴⁹ This definition does not forsake the ‘eternal and immutable principles of poetry’ but the opening up of poetry beyond the range of the versifier (removing it from its tripod so to speak) was a great concern to Byron, who felt that the distinctive and exceptional quality of the poet – his effortless ability to implement a range of poetic techniques and devices – was being lost.

Maintaining an Augustan taste for inventiveness within recognised structures, Byron concludes, with syntactical irony, that these attempts at a soaring originality outside the obligation to recognised forms often have the opposite effect of their intention: ‘shrink[ing]’ to the commonplace rather than rising to new heights. Byron’s cunning conflation of ‘Genius’ with ‘Trite’ almost certainly has in mind Wordsworth’s riddled thesis in the ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* in which the Lake poet’s emphasis on ordinary subjects and ordinary language seemed, to Byron, to be strangely at odds with his description of a poet as ‘a man of more than usual’ sensibility. In truth, Byron was always somewhat baffled by the mysterious manner in which Wordsworth proposed to

⁴⁹ *BLJ*, ix. 64.

make the familiar unfamiliar, or the unpoetic poetic, without due concern for poetry as a necessary artifice for that expression.⁵⁰ This is reflected in an early review of Wordsworth's 1807 *Poems* in which he commends the 'native elegance' of some compositions which are 'devoid of the tinsel embellishments and abstract hyperboles of several contemporary sonneteers' but is, on the whole, rather condemnatory of the collection because 'Mr. W. confines his muse to...trifling subjects'. This, according to Byron, is largely due to the misapplication of Wordsworth's poetic ability for the sake of maintaining his poetic philosophy. After sporting with a section entitled "Moods of my own Mind" by wishing that 'these "Moods" had been less frequent,' Byron appropriates Johnson's critique of Reynolds to make his point: 'it is by "abandoning" his mind to the most common-place ideas, at the same time clothing them in language not simple, but puerile' that Wordsworth disfigures his verse. I do not wish to elaborate too extensively on this point because it makes up the bulk of my enquiry in the next chapter, but I cite it here to show that Byron was not necessarily troubled by Wordsworth's investment in the freedom of the imagination, but rather, in his attaching that freedom to undeserving subjects, and undeserving mediums. Byron offers his only moment of outright praise to a poem which displays the proper application of Wordsworth's "Mood" to the creation of compelling verse: 'the force and expression...of a genuine poet, feeling as he writes'.⁵¹

However, the intensity of Byron's engagement with this 'novel' aesthetic generates its own kind of textual anxiety that exposes the values which lurk, by insinuation, within his own disarming simplicity. Byron's ambivalent response to Wordsworth and a Lake school poetics of prophetic autonomy reveals an

⁵⁰ As my final chapter suggests, it was Byron who solved this problem in *Don Juan* almost precisely because he was not intent on doing so.

⁵¹ *CMP*, 8-9.

uncomfortable endeavour, in many of his works, to distinguish genuine affect from private zeal without forsaking the imagination as a source of power and originality. In his scattered comments on Wordsworth and Coleridge, poetry, aesthetics and politics are often combined in such a way as to severely test Byron's concept of imagination at the same time that they draw attention to his complex position as a genteel writer and a radical Whig. Here would seem a source of significant tension: an interesting discrepancy between Byron's position as a liberal, and occasionally radical Whig, and his stance as a patrician poet; what David Erdman terms his 'puzzling inner tensions between radical aristocratic and aristocratic radical'.⁵² While this discrepancy has often been noted of Byron, it has not to my knowledge been related to the curious and powerful dynamics of his poetry. If Hazlitt's famous claim for Byron, 'who in his politics is a liberal, in his genius is haughty and aristocratic'⁵³ is to be properly addressed it should be done so in relation to his unique poetic register. Byron's compound style reveals, at many points, not only that he was appraising himself against the radical poetics of Wordsworth and Coleridge, but that he was aware of the strength of some of their positions, and shared some of their responses.

Yet throughout his letters he expresses a 'disregard for "entusymusy" 'personally' and 'poetically',⁵⁴ dismissively trivialising the fervent ideals of the Lake School as ramblings of mystical fanaticism. In an epistle to John Murray in 1817, arguably at the height of his own 'visionary' creativity, Byron contends that, 'Coleridge may console himself with the "fervour – the almost religious fervour" of his and Wordsworth's disciples as he calls it. If he means that as any proof of their merits I will

⁵² David V. Erdman, 'Lord Byron' in *Romantic Rebels: Essays on Shelley and his Circle*, ed. K.N. Cameron (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 163.

⁵³ *HCW*, xi. 74.

⁵⁴ *BLJ*, iv. 263. *My emphasis*.

find him as much “fervour” in behalf of Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcote as ever gather over his pages or round his fireside.⁵⁵ This sense of social refinement – of the individual’s proper integration in the world so that he is never so loosely detached from it as to become fanatical – is particularly important to Byron’s belief in the freedom that poetry affords for a simultaneously implicated and detached stance. While he thought Coleridge’s ‘Christabel’ a ‘fine wild poem’, Byron’s attachment to a neoclassical sensibility of fitting detachment held the ill-defined principles or poetics of the Lakers to be little more than the frenzied abandonment of reason. In a splenetic criticism of Wordsworth’s ‘soi-disant’ poetry to Leigh Hunt, Byron remarks that, ‘Jacob Behmen, Swedenbourg, and Joanna Southcote, are mere types of this arch-apostle of mystery and mysticism.’⁵⁶ As Jon Mee points out in his detailed study of romantic-period enthusiasm, ‘the religious sublime left the boundaries between poetry and prophecy too porous for most polite eighteenth-century readers,’⁵⁷ and it is reasonable to assume that Byron’s politeness was, in this regard, still very much intact.

When he comes to address this issue in the letters to Bowles, he resorts to a highly politicised, though fundamentally mischievous, illustration:

It is the fashion of the day to lay great stress upon what they call “Imagination” and “Invention”, the two commonest of qualities – an Irish peasant with a little whisky in his head will imagine and invent more than would furnish forth a modern poem. (*CMP*, 143-144)

In the same manner that Byron undermines Wordsworth’s ‘high argument’ by inverting the Lake poet’s grand aspirations to dwindling outcomes in *English Bards*, here he reduces the ambitions of these newly-prized terms to the product of low-class revelry.

⁵⁵ *BLJ*, v. 267.

⁵⁶ *BLJ*, iv. 324.

⁵⁷ Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: poetics and the policing of culture in the Romantic period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 31.

This is not to say that Byron deliberately elides the potential of an instinctive and unrehearsed creativity or that he is not, like Coleridge and others, fascinated by the nature of his own mental and creative processes. Byron's characteristic shrewdness includes recognition of the power of imagination as a source of creative achievement. But almost precisely because of its power, emphasis is placed on its necessary containment by judgement.

In many of his earnest private declarations Byron submits to the fundamental imbalance of the poetic imagination, but this is often couched in ironic terms and a wry, aristocratic tone:

Great imagination is seldom accompanied by equal powers of reason, and vice versa, so that we rarely possess superiority in any one point, except at the expense of another. It is surely then unjust to render poets responsible for their want of common sense, since it is only by the excess of imagination they can arrive at being poets, and this excess debars reason; indeed the very circumstance of a man's yielding to the vocation of a poet ought to serve as a voucher that he is no longer, of sound mind.⁵⁸

Byron is certainly playing into a convention that placed great emphasis on the inherent immoderation of emotion indispensable to creative genius,⁵⁹ but the dignified tenor of his assertion suggests a healthy retrospective intelligence that offsets this emotional excess. It is more in keeping with the reach of Dryden's 'Great wits are sure to madness near allied, / And thin partitions do their bounds divide'⁶⁰ than it is with an early-nineteenth century declaration of impassioned creativity. One only needs to contrast

⁵⁸ Marguerite Countess of Blessington, *Lady Blessington's Conversations with Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr., (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 114-5.

⁵⁹ For a thorough explication of the 'cult of genius' in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century see Frederick Burwick's *Poetic Madness and the Romantic Imagination*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) in which he shows a fundamental dialectic between creativity and mental instability in the period. A close study of Byron is conspicuously absent.

⁶⁰ John Dryden, *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. Paul Hammond (London; New York: Longman, 1995), *Absalom and Achitophel*, vol. i. part I. 163.

this with a parallel declaration by De Quincey to understand Byron's modification of the romantic trope:

Poetry has been properly enough termed inspiration: the connection is natural; and the resemblance may be traced in more points than one. A man of genius (whether addressing the imagination or the heart) pours forth his unpremeditated torrents of sublimity—of beauty—of pathos, he knows not—he cares not—how; he is rapt in a fit of enthusiasm or rather a temporary madness and is not sensible of the workings of his mind any more than the ancient seer—“wrapt into future times”—during the tide of prophetic frenzy—or a man in the wild delirium of a fever—is conscious of the words he utters... (*Diary*, I. 169)⁶¹

Byron's account contains none of the frenetic punctuation or hysterical language of De Quincey's justification. It is true that De Quincey's assertion is not as violently unregulated as it first appears (giving credence to a 'conscious' rapture rather than a pathological reflex) but there is an overly-enthusiastic validation of the turbulent nature of poetic creation that one seldom finds in Byron. The very balance of thought and management of syntax in Byron's description of an irrational imagination (notably pitched at a polite audience, and given to us second hand) denies such fervid intensity of feeling. It is an impression of regret rather than commendation, and its sentiments are confirmed in a widely analysed letter to Thomas Moore in which the poet asserts: 'I feel exactly as you do about our "art," but it comes over me in a kind of rage every now and then, like * * * * , and then, if I don't write to empty my mind, I go mad. As to that regular, uninterrupted love of writing, which you describe in your friend, I do not understand it. I feel it as a torture, which I must get rid of, but never as a pleasure. On the contrary, I think composition a great pain.'⁶² There are two significant perceptions in this passage worth highlighting. The first is the notion of composition as a torturous

⁶¹ *The Diary of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Horace A. Eaton, 2 vols. (London: Noel Douglas, 1927), ii. 169.

⁶² *BLJ*, viii. 55.

yet fundamentally allaying activity whereby mental or emotional pressure is released through a process of ‘emptying’ out. This idea is more familiar to us in Byron’s offhand definition of poetry as ‘the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake’⁶³ and is as striking in its directing function as it is in its explosive power. The second is an irritable response to the unfeasible notion of a relentlessly impassioned creativity which testifies to Byron’s desire for a healthy separation of the everyday life from the poetical life.

In another letter to Moore Byron teasingly ridicules the expectation of eccentricity in a young admirer:

I have had a friend of your Mr. Irving’s— a very pretty lad — a Mr. Coolidge, of Boston — only somewhat too full of poesy and ‘entusymusy.’ I was very civil to him during his few hours’ stay, and talked with him much of Irving, whose writings are my delight. But I suspect that he did not take quite so much to me, from his having expected to meet a misanthropical gentleman in wolf-skin breeches, and answering in fierce monosyllables, instead of a man of this world. I can never get people to understand that poetry is the expression of *excited passion* and that there is no such thing as a life of passion any more than a continuous earthquake, or an eternal fever. Besides, who would ever *shave* themselves in such a state? (*BLJ*, viii. 146)

Byron’s report on this peculiar episode contains many of the fundamental aspects of his unformed poetics: a scepticism for lopsided outlooks; an admission of the spontaneous authority of poetical composition without ascribing unequivocally to its incessant power; and a practical justification of his beliefs whose uncomplicated pragmatism is rooted in the style of Samuel Johnson and other eighteenth-century satirists. Its logic, which views poetry as a means of order and consolidation rather than a means to escape from the world, destabilizes any elusive consolidation of imaginative and worldly

⁶³ *BLJ*, iii. 179.

processes and in doing so undermines any straightforward application of a New Historicist enterprise in representing private consciousness as an evasion from public history.

In *Don Juan* he writes disdainfully, ‘I hate all mystery, and that air /Of clap-trap, which your recent poets prize,’ (II, 987-8) expressing his disregard for a growing emphasis on semantic vagueness. Elsewhere he contends that Shelley’s standing as a poet will be hindered by his idealism and the numinous quality of his poetry: ‘Shelley has more poetry in him than any man living; and if he were not so mystical, and would not write Utopias and set himself up as a Reformer, his right to rank as a poet, and very highly too, could not fail of being acknowledged.’⁶⁴ It was for this reason, as much as any other, that Byron took on the civic vindication of Pope. In Pope, Byron beheld a poet with as wide a range of sympathy for the natural world as the ‘Lakers’ – ‘No Poet ever admired Nature more or used her better’ he claimed⁶⁵ – but one with infinitely more sense and clarity of expression. In his now notorious defence of the ‘little Queen Anne’s man’ Byron praises *Eloisa to Abelard* for treating its subject ‘with so much delicacy, mingled, at the same time, with such true and intense passion’; that is to say, for the subtlety and strength of Pope’s easy, genteel manner. It is from this that he turns to Pope’s supposed ‘licentiousness’:

“Licentiousness!” – there is more real mischief and sapping licentiousness in a single French prose Novel, – in a Moravian hymn – or a German Comedy – than in all the actual poetry that ever was penned – or poured forth Since the rhapsodies of Orpheus. The Sentimental Anatomy of Rousseau and Mad. de S. – are 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

⁶⁴ *Medwin’s Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell Jr. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1966), 194.

⁶⁵ *CMP*, 155.

itself passion – and does not systematize. – It assails – but does not argue – it may be wrong – but it does not assume pretensions to Optimism. (*CMP*, 178)

In a very Shelleyan gesture, Byron argues for the generic elevation of poetry above the mediums of prose, drama and music for its capacity to create a new order or affect without resorting to the vulgar expressions of sentiment and the mechanical notions of pure logic. It is precisely because poetry does not deal directly with its truths or passions, in the way that a philosophical novel does, which guards it against such vulgarity and systematic thought. Once again we might argue that this is, by Coleridgean or Shelleyan standards, a very ‘Romantic’ gesture, but its stimulus is quite unlike those offered by his contemporaries because Byron advances not Milton or Shakespeare as the exemplum of a higher moral and artistic medium agent, but Pope. Where Wordsworth believed that Pope was ‘insensible’ to the distinction between a living creature and an intellectual existence,⁶⁶ Byron locates poetry’s special facility for integration and accommodation in Pope’s sensitive weaving of ‘delicacy’ with ‘true and intense passion’ rather than in the assimilating powers of the imagination.

Like Blake and Shelley, and many of the other post-Enlightenment poets for that matter, Byron believed in poetry’s power to transcend philosophical analysis – ‘poetry is in itself passion, and does not systematize. It assails, but does not argue’ – but he was classical enough to allow, with proper caution, the use of external devices to give that passion sense. For Byron then, the ‘mingled’ prototype offered by Pope operates in two categories: the literary example of his poems which are both decorous and impassioned, and the praiseworthy example of a man consistent in his method. Byron’s admiration for the manner in which Pope’s poetry engaged substantially with

⁶⁶ *Pope: Critical Anthology*, 173.

both ennobling and lurid forms of imagination made him particularly aware of the need to respond, first, to the accusations of Pope's alleged perfunctory poetics, and then, more alarmingly, to Bowles' allegations of licentiousness. On the one side of Pope's style is the aesthetic realm of the freeplay of creativity within firm poetic structures; on the other is the moral integrity of discursive reflection. Byron did not replicate Pope's model. In fact, not only did he claim that Pope was 'the poet whom [he] resemble[d] in nothing',⁶⁷ but he also suggested that he had 'shamefully deviated'⁶⁸ from the former's exemplary practice. But Byron felt a deep sense of loss in the public depreciation of Pope, and if we are to talk perceptively about the form of Byron's poetry, we should account not only for its artifice and artlessness, its sincerity and insincerity, or its subjectivity and objectivity, but how these notions interlace and remain in tension. While not a recapitulation of Augustan ideals it never aspires to the principles of transparent and symbolic representation which abide in the poetic treatises of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley. As the *Monitor* review of *Manfred* indicates, Byron's is a 'mind of the most painful sensibility, being added to a strong, vivid and almost unshackled imagination...Still, to use one of our poet's own expressions, he is held back from passing certain limits, – from leaping the precipice on whose brink he is always tottering, "by a single hair."⁶⁹

It is therefore not surprising that one of his most quoted 'Romantic' declarations – 'For what is poesy but to create / From overfeeling good or ill' – is uttered within the interlocking rhyme scheme of a *terza rima* structure, and is part of a broader account of those anonymous poets who have never penned their divine inspiration. This passage from *The Prophecy of Dante* is worth closer inspection for its

⁶⁷ *BLJ*, iii. 36.

⁶⁸ *CMP*, 106.

⁶⁹ *RR*, B. iv. 1646.

conflicting textual negotiations with the unavoidable containment of visionary creativity
within an artistic medium:

Many are poets who have never penn'd
 Their inspiration, and perchance the best:
 They felt, and loved, and died, but would not lend
 Their thoughts to meaner beings; they compress'd
 The god within them, and rejoin'd the stars
 Unlaurell'd upon earth, but far more blest
 Than those who are degraded by the jars
 Of passion, and their frailties link'd to fame,
 Conquerors of high renown, but full of scars.
 Many are poets but without the name,
 For what is poesy but to create
 From overfeeling good or ill; and aim
 At an external life beyond our fate,
 And be the new Prometheus of new men,
 Bestowing fire from heaven, and then, too late,
 Finding the pleasure given repaid with pain,
 And vultures to the heart of the bestower,
 Who, having lavish'd his high gift in vain,
 Lies chained to his lone rock by the sea-shore.
 So be it, we can bear. — But thus all they,
 Whose intellect is an o'ermastering power
 Which still recoils from its encumbering clay
 Or lightens it to spirit, whatsoe'er
 The form which their creations may essay,
 Are bards: the kindled marble's bust may wear
 More poesy upon its speaking brow
 Than aught less than the Homeric page may bear:
 One noble stroke with a whole life may glow,
 Or deify the canvas till it shine
 With beauty so surpassing all below,
 That they who kneel to idols so divine
 Break no commandment, for high heaven is there
 Transfused, transfigured: and the line
 Of poesy, which peoples but the air
 With thought and beings of our thought reflected,
 Can do no more: then let the artist share
 The palm, he shares the peril, and dejected
 Faints o'er the labour unapproved — Alas! (Canto IV, 1-38)

The vague blanketing effect of the opening phrase 'Many are poets' establishes a collective of ideal poets who exist only in the abstract. The almost anaphoristic use of connected yet anonymous plural pronouns 'Their, They, Their' only furthers the impression of an unattested and paradigmatic assemblage of poets who maintain their consummate essence purely because they do not commit their feelings to a tangible medium; because they 'never penned / Their inspiration'. A contrast is thus presented between high 'thoughts' and 'meaner beings'; between ideals which exist unsullied in the mind and words that take concrete shape on the page. This creates a fundamental tension between spirit and figure which is prevalent in many of Byron's most intense ruminations on poetic form. The subtle and temporary shift in tense, produced by Byron's rhyming of 'penned' with 'lend' in the first tercet, creates an implicit unease in the provisional obligation one makes by advancing the purity of thought and feeling into utterance. This calls to mind Wordsworth's elevation of an aural poetics over print culture, and his great fear for the adulteration (and death) of thought through commitment to the page, when he confessed that 'There is little need to advise me against publishing, it is a thing which I dread as much as death itself.'⁷⁰

But if Byron seems here to be sustaining the 'high' Romantic notion of an original spiritual ideal, it is everywhere destabilised by his relentless references to artistic technique and poetic texture. He gives credence to the instinctive and uninhibited creativity of unknown bards but the methodical spacing of 'felt, and loved, and died', combined with the binding shape of alternating rhyme scheme, demonstrates the versifier's innate desire for demarcation and directive. In a characteristically telling syntactic alteration, Byron sets the semantic convention of particular words against the

⁷⁰ Quoted in Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 91.

grammatical structures of the stanza. The contracting and intensifying term ‘compress’d’, used in this instance to mean suppressed or held back, is expanded through enjambment to imply its opposite. Byron’s technique of spatial or syntactical manipulation on the page gives particular weight to the fabric of poetry and in doing so emphasises the unfeasibility of a truly prophetic or transcendental mode beyond linguistic containment. That these supreme spiritual poets were ‘Unlaurell’d upon earth’ carries the dual implication of being unheralded and yet also lacking a substance around which their divine thoughts might be wreathed. It is therefore fitting that they ‘rejoin’d the stars’ in a cosmological pattern of connective activity which could not be obtained on earth. The imagery of adulterated containment is consistent throughout the opening tercets, never more shrewdly employed than in the spilling over of ‘jars / Of passion’ across two lines to subtly undermine the very idea of limitation-through-enclosure that it so tenaciously asserts.

It is at this point that we arrive at the famous definition of poetry as an ‘overfeeling of good or ill’: as an ‘overflow, utterance, or projection’⁷¹ to borrow from M.H. Abrams’s description of the romantic expressive aesthetic. Yet the whole drift of the passage thus far has been of an inner power unexpressed, and it is upon this assumption that it proceeds. To this extent, Byron now qualifies the claim with an important proviso which compels this private internal power to be externalised and made public, ‘and aim / At an external life beyond our fate, / And be the new Prometheus of new men’. In a gesture that reflects, but modifies, Shelley’s definition of the poet in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, as ‘the combined product of such internal powers as modify the nature of others, and such external influences that excite and

⁷¹ M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 11.

sustain these powers,⁷² Byron tacitly shifts his focus from a cautious inward ‘compression’ to a daring outward ‘lavish[ing]’. The transcendental thoughts of the poet now have a life on the page and, consequently, a life in the realm of civic accountability. The cost of producing an enduring artefact, rather than an ephemeral impression, is the potential for public reproach and it is on this theme that the poem pivots in a half-line volta: ‘So be it, we can bear.’ This powerful mid-line closure carries with it the twofold inference of the *poète maudit*’s abiding fortitude and, perhaps more importantly, the perilous activity of bodying forth thought by bearing it out on the page. It is a noticeable fissure in the text and marks a serious redefinition of the poetic enterprise, but it is one that draws on what has taken place in the lines leading up to it. If we neglect the fundamental antagonism of spirit and form that has structured the poem thus far – if we overlook the delicate tension between unstated ideals and disburdened utterances – then we fail to comprehend Byron’s distinctive register. His is not merely a poetics of unexpected rotations and unanticipated digressions, but one that also delights by understated and integrated inversions.

Having now arrived at a juncture, the turn from ‘Many are Poets who have never penn’d / Their inspiration’ to

But thus all they,
Whose intellect is an o’ermastering power
Which still recoils from its encumbering clay
Or lightens it to spirit, whatsoe’er
The form which their creations may essay,
Are bards;

⁷²*Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York; London: Norton, 2002), 208. Hereafter abbreviated as *SPP*.

marks a dramatic restructuring of the poet's initial terms of artistic classification. In a richly drawn-out clause which plays on several ambivalences of arrangement and connotation, Byron relocates his earlier emphasis on divine inspiration to the strangely entangled power of reason. That it is the 'o'ermastering power' of 'intellect' and not 'inspiration' is vital to his redefinition of that inspiration taking shape in poetic form. Not only does it suggest that the poet has altered the criteria of visionary inventiveness to accommodate a deeper sense of comprehension, but it also implies an underlying impression of command in that comprehension. But once again, the sense of the sentence is betrayed by its own unsettling methods, and while the speaker affirms the influence of judgment in transcendental thought, the thought drives on over line-ends, denying the equanimity of rhythm in the earlier tercets by mimicking the urge to break the bonds of logic. The unbridled force of the 'intellect', it would seem, is just as dangerous as a disembodied spirit. Like much of the diction in this passage, the term 'o'ermastering' implies that which it is (a command over one's obstreperous self) and that which it wishes itself not to be (one who is conquered by external forces). Correspondingly, the verbs 'recoil' and 'lighten' suggest such antithetical movements as beating back and retreating upon the self, at the same time that they denote a welcoming weightlessness and a vital luminosity upon dark matter. In a wry Byronic paradox, one of the forms or embodiments of inspiration on the page is its textual representation of an alleviation of spirit from matter: essence recoiled or lightened from its 'encumbering clay'.

Since the emblem and facility of the imagination is so frequently defined as having a mediatory influence, putatively reconciling the rift between categories and oppositions, it is easy to take the idea of a partitioned aesthetic for granted rather than

observing this breach itself as a rhetorical feature of Romanticism. When Byron considers the fragmented poetic lineage of his age – the continuity-in-discontinuity that it bears – by suggesting that ‘amidst the ties that have been dashed to pieces, there are links yet entire though the chain itself be broken’, he situates his own creative enterprise somewhere between the time-specific triumph of an iconoclastic revolution and the timeless permanence of the organic sensibility. It has relations to Shaftesbury’s conviction that when ‘New Forms arise...and the old dissolve, the Matter whence they were composed is not left useless, but wrought with equal Management and Art’.⁷³ As a result, Byron’s language writhes and twists in the ruptures between naturalness and artifice; between poetry as product and poetry as process, and in doing so it exposes the contradictions inherent in a purely ‘expressive’ enterprise. It offers a vindication of a divine vision but insists upon the materiality of that vision when it is transformed into art.

While the lifeless stone of a ‘marble bust’ may be roused into existence by a sublime revelation or ‘noble stroke’ of enthusiasm, the nature of that illumination is once again troubled by Byron’s employment of a difficult and conflicting syntax:

for high heaven is there
 Transfused, transfigured: and the line
 Of poesy, which peoples but the air
 With thought and beings of our thought reflected,
 Can do no more

Embedded in the celestial transmission of the imagination into words is an unavoidable metamorphosis of its essential character because it is ‘transfigured’ at the same time that it is ‘Transfused’. Byron’s critique of the power of the imagination here is

⁷³ ‘The Earl of Shaftesbury’ in *The Rise of Romanticism: Essential Texts*, ed. Brian Hepworth (Manchester: Carcanet, 1978), 84.

characterised by the difficult integration of its potential or promissory function through its manifestation in expression. It does not fully renounce the mediating power of the imagination, but it consigns it to a more circumscribed and limited realm in the aesthetic: in this instance, the historically conceived ‘line / Of poesy which peoples but the air / With thought and beings of our thought reflected’. In a remarkable reversal of intention through demonstration, Byron validates the unique freedom of divine thoughts from materiality almost precisely because those thoughts are incompletely realised in their embodiments. The inadequacy of their figurations provides the fluidity for their dissemination, for, as he later declares, ‘Ye shall be taught by Ruin to revive / The Grecian forms at least from their decay’ (44-5). It is this hard-won sense of spirit in form and form in spirit that underlies the great body of his poetic output.

Another way to identify what is most challenging in Byron’s poetry is to investigate not only the ambivalent use of poetic form in his verse but also the ways in which the problem of form enters his work as one of its essential subjects. Through this we might begin to explicate the competing poetics of Byron’s verse by recognising a discursive shift, a moment at which the poem’s conflicting constitutive modes – aesthetic reflection and lyrical immersion – break into each other. In a much-celebrated passage in the fourth canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* Byron grapples with the dilemmas of structural and imaginative discrimination through the poet-narrator’s own conflicted response to the *Venus de’ Medici*:

There, too, the Goddess loves in stone, and fills
The air around with beauty; we inhale
The ambrosial aspect, which, beheld, instils
Part of its immortality; the veil
Of heaven is half undrawn; within the pale
We stand, and in that form and face behold
What Mind can make, when Nature’s self would fail;

And to the fond idolaters of old
 Envy the innate flash which such a soul could mould:

We gaze and turn away, and know not where,
 Dazzled and drunk with beauty, till the heart
 Reels with its fullness; there – for ever there –
 Chain'd to the chariot of triumphal Art,
 We stand as captives, and would not depart.
 Away! – there need no words, nor terms precise,
 The paltry jargon of the marble mart,
 Where Pedantry gulls Folly – we have eyes:
 Blood – pulse – and breast confirm the Dardan Shepherd's
 prize. (IV, 433-450)

These stanzas contain two competing artistic impulses: the need to affirm the aesthetic assumptions of neoclassical taste by demonstrating a careful understanding of the formal configuration of the sculpture before him, and a more modern infringement upon the bloodless distancing produced by such regulating measures. The opening line, 'the Goddess loves in stone,' draws attention to an essential relationship linking shape and meaning which hinges upon the preposition *in* by suggesting both a sentiment that is circumscribed within the material limits of its medium and a manner or act of expression that is itself firm and unyielding. But if the marble form is rigid, it is not unfeeling, for it disseminates its radiance by creating an atmosphere that impresses upon its viewer something of an ethereal energy beyond the materiality of its form. The lines proceed by alternating between visual acts or entities ('aspect', 'form', 'face', 'behold') and disembodied transferals ('inhale', 'instils', 'immortality'): between articles perceived and qualities inspired. In this way, the sculpture becomes both a form to behold and a spirit to be felt, affirming an early appraisal in the *British Review* which celebrated the classical excellence of the poem:

The taste of the poem is classical, and sufficiently informed by learning without being disfigured by pedantry...His descriptions of the Venus and Apollo, those purest and most perfect remains of ancient sculpture, glow with the fervours of classical enthusiasm. (RR, B. i. 470)

These sentiments are the quintessence of the neoclassical sublime. They convey a desire for artistic rendering that is detailed but not mired by the didacticism of undue wisdom or atomistic reasoning, and for a quality of intense feeling that will not devolve into a too lofty imaginative flight. The passionate equanimity of the first stanza is steered by the steady, regular rhythm in the latter half of the third line ‘The ambrosial aspect, which, beheld, instils’ as it mimics the repose and serenity characteristic of classical art. The dual and binding sense of vision in which an ‘aspect’ is ‘beheld’ within a single line yet kept delicately apart by fixed intervals of punctational and rhythmical division intimates to a unity of creation and reception that is neither stiffly antithetical nor organically fused. The expression of such sentiments has, as one of its precedents, the eighteenth-century Pindaric ode such as Thomas Gray’s ‘The Progress of Poesy’ in which ‘the power of harmony to produce all the graces of motion in the body’ operates ‘With arms sublime, that float upon the air, / In gliding state she wins her easy way’ (38-9) or one of the more regulated lyrics such as Joseph Warton’s ‘The Enthusiast’: ‘With all her Attick fares, such raptures raise’ (I. 47).

However, as we progress we begin realise that the tone and temperament of this bond is far from settled. The fifth-line pivot in which ‘the veil / Of heaven is half undrawn’ performs a curious doubling act that conceals at the same time that it reveals. If the Venus offers an uncovering of celestial perfection it also presents a betrayal of its capacity to do so – discomposing as much as composing that perfection. The subsequent enjambment of ‘within the pale / We stand’, enacts a more confused

interchangeability of subject and object by demonstrating that a look which only ‘part’ promises to transcend beyond the range (or pale) of perception and experience also works to draw its beholder within the marble limits of its ‘pale’ (ashen) complexion: circumscribing as it liberates. The creator-observer’s organising function is held in an unsettling contradiction between perception and articulation. This is reflected in the increased fluidity of the syntax which begins to point to the poet’s acute sensibility rather than to the artwork’s intrinsic greatness.

This stanza is incontestably about the binary quality of sacred art, but more specifically, it is about a pervasive indeterminacy in the simultaneous operation of responding to and creating that art. The movement of the lines no longer represent revived classical deities; they are embodiments of new powers, psychological powers which attempt to synthesize the shadowy traditions of antiquity with the sensory vividness of immediate experience. In a letter to John Murray in April 1817, two months before he commenced with the composition of the final canto of *Childe Harold*, Byron admitted to a certain shift in his critical judgment which reflects a concession to the modern criteria of poetic fervour that he so eagerly renounced elsewhere:

I went to the two galleries – from which one returns drunk with beauty – the Venus is more for admiration than love – but there are sculpture and painting – which for the first time at all gave me an idea of what people meant by their *cant* & (what Braham calls) “entusimusy” (i.e. enthusiasm) about those two most artificial of the arts. (*BLJ*, v. 218)

This kind of reflection is typical of Byron, who admits to his participation in a contemporary critical idiom but couches the acknowledgment in a sardonic, trivializing tone. Nonetheless, it offers some idea about the nature of Byron’s personal response to the statue and the discursive shift that it entails. The remainder of the stanza oscillates

uneasily between 'Nature' and the 'Mind', that is, between things as they are created and things as they are cognized. This echoes Shelley's *Mont Blanc* where the 'rapid' but flowing river is also a 'source of human thought' creating 'a sound but half its own'.

The corresponding substantives of an expression cast, and a gaze beheld, are no longer separated by their grammatically contrapositional modifications because the viewer now stands 'in that form and face': there is no fundamental distinction between tenor and vehicle in a realm where art becomes, to adapt Abrams's formulation, both mirror and lamp.⁷⁴ These lines contain a form of critical indeterminacy endemic to 'Romanticism' because they embody a disconcerting struggle between the ontological and the epistemological. This sense of indecision, so uncharacteristic of Byron, is felt by a reviewer in the *Edinburgh Monthly*, who reflects on the uneasy power of his 'rapturous hymn to the Venus de Medicis,' before expressing the source of this unease in a rumination on the lines upon the Apollo Belvidere: 'the celestial animation of his countenance, - the grace of his form, and the unrivalled inspiration of the artist of his sculptured wonder, - are embodied in the nervous lines of the poet!⁷⁵ A deep-felt awareness that the beauty of classical forms is being viewed and articulated in a more powerful, but dangerous, light is strong here. 'It is in this distinction' claims Robert Langbaum, 'this new disequilibrium between them moment of insight, which is certain, and the problematical idea we abstract from it' that we recognise a uniquely 'modern

⁷⁴ Although Abrams's thesis depends on a final transformation of reflection to projection, he is alert to such moments: 'A number of romantic writers then, whether in verse or prose, habitually pictured the mind in perception, as well as the mind in composition, by sometimes identical analogies of projection into, or reciprocity with, elements from without.' *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 62.

⁷⁵ RR, B.ii.795.

form of literature, a form imitating not nature or an order of ideas about nature but the structure of experience itself.⁷⁶

In an almost passively self-conscious flinch, the poet confronts the paradox of the contemporary observer caught ‘in the pale’ by envisaging with envy, a bygone era of sublime spectators, ‘the fond idolaters of old’, whose primordial, instinctive creations predate the rigid parameters of neoclassical precept and therefore offer an unattainable exemplum of the aspiring imagination which achieves divine status by holding the transience of an ‘innate flash’ in a permanent form. In what would become a peculiarly Keatsian attribute in the Odes, the poet lapses into a state of mesmeric disorientation: ‘dazzled and drunk with beauty’ he finds himself momentarily transfixed by the power of the classically sublime – seemingly released from the bonds of time and place. In the same way that the speaker in ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ is held silent and immobile by the ‘Attic shape’ so he is almost frozen into tableau by the marble effigy, held ‘there – forever – there’ in a state of entrancement that is further enacted by the framing of hyphenated parentheses. The controlling power of the artefact, an external object in which verity abides but cannot be wholly determined, may be implicit of Keats’s ‘negative capability’ by which the poet surrenders the yearning for intelligence through a kind of self-effacing receptivity to the article before him. Yet if it is a mode of spatial or liminal abeyance, it may also be a form of subliminal suspension which echoes the rapturous intensity of Wordsworth’s spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling: the

⁷⁶ Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1953), 47. An intensified version of this process can be seen once again in *Mont Blanc* where Shelley enacts a continuous and interminable transaction between perceiver and perceived, where his mind:

Now renders and receives fast influencings,
 Holding an unremitting interchange
 With the clear universe of things around (*SPP*, 97.)

speaker seized and rendered ‘motionless and still’ by the arresting strangeness of Solitary Reaper’s song.

However, the ensuing lines exist to show the source of the poet’s captivation – it is neither the voyeuristic fascination of Wordsworth’s silent spectator, nor the eternal, deathless realm of Keats’s Grecian urn. Rather, it is the staggering, bewildering indecision of one who cannot find absolute authority in the stoic firmness of the classical object or the organizing powers of the imagination. In this way, Byron’s verse acts as a type of awkward mediating force between classic and romantic stances. It attempts to entertain both positions simultaneously, for, as these lines in *Hints from Horace* attest: ‘truth and fiction with such art compounds’ and ‘We know not where to fix their several bounds’ (211-2). The ambiguous statement of the constructed aesthetic object or fiction; its reflexivity; and the embroilments of its circularity, are figured in the speaker’s inside-outside relationship to the statue. He can neither get fully inside nor outside it.

The delicate balance between spellbound astonishment and rousing passion is difficult to maintain.⁷⁷ The heart ‘reels’ with a fullness which evokes the spiralling gyrations of one who has lost his balance, who gazes and turns and looks away but knows ‘not where’ to fix his vision. Where active and passive voice converge and interlace, there can be no steady balance between subject and object and the power to identify is offset by the capacity to remain distinct, to preserve separateness.

⁷⁷ In his essay on Keats’s ‘Elgin Marbles’ sonnet Grant F. Scott strikes at the heart of the dilemma: ‘How the awestruck viewer would convert so much perceived grandeur into his own aesthetic creations without being overwhelmed himself was a question no one ventured to answer; neither did they attempt to explain how the process of “transfusion” would take place. All they knew was that it was not direct imitation of the marbles that would create a national renaissance, but a mysterious assimilation of their forms.’ Grant F. Scott, ‘Beautiful Ruins: The Elgin Marbles Sonnet in Its Historical and Generic Contexts’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, vol. 39 (1990), 141.

Precariously balanced between empathy and free projection, Byron's speaker performs a difficult high-wire act of the mind. On the one hand his individuality must be modified and even changed by his encounter with a scared piece of art. On the other hand, that individuality can never, Byron insists, be wholly absorbed. The negating orientations between a transformative imagination with its dangers of unauthorized dethronement and a contemplative imagination with its fears of inert captivity remain in tension and suspension.

The exclaimed rhetorical pivot 'Away!' enacts a vital rupturing of this enchantment that is reminiscent of Shelley's Prometheus breaking the binary deadlock of a curse that has him bound to a 'ravine of icy rocks'. While this is primarily a declaration of the inherent impracticality in trying to contain and explain the emotive power of art within an established critical vocabulary – 'the paltry jargon of the marble mart' – I would also like to suggest that it demonstrates Byron's unshakable commitment to explore aesthetic and ontological questions outside the abstract and through the passages of time: passing beyond the self-contained episode and into the world of narrative. The dismissive retort, with its marked shift in tone, offers the first conscious act of judgement in these two stanzas which breaks the exegetic stalemate between formalism and spontaneity, the duplicitous arena where 'Pedantry gulls Folly'. First powerfully experienced and then powerfully dismissed, the paradox of opposing yet uniformly equivocal ideals working in and against one other can now be treated as a relatively harmless rhetorical trope in which originality is duped by imitation through the parody of inversion.

The poet emerges with renewed affirmation in the candour of the senses for it is 'eyes: / Blood – pulse – and breast' that 'confirm' value; a moderate effecting outwardly

as well as inwardly without fears of dispossession.⁷⁸ These sentiments echo, to refute, Winkelmann's reflections on the Apollo Belvedere: 'realm of incorporeal grace...blood palpitates not here: an empyrean mind, like a flood of light, pours through the whole and marks the outline'.⁷⁹ While Byron endorses, to a certain extent, the neoclassical paradigm of a spiritual essence captured in solid forms, his ultimate allegiance is to the visceral experience of beauty, to grandeur 'deeply felt'. As he would proclaim in a letter to Moore of 1817: 'poetical flesh and blood must have the last word – that's certain'.⁸⁰ After the intensity of the debate in the lines preceding this conviction, with their powerful mingling of spirit and matter, it seems something of a feeble concession: a formulaic mechanism that acts out of self-defence in order to allay the poet's fears of meaninglessness. One might argue that the poet's attempts to overcome the critical impasse are doubly weakened: first, in the application of an allegorical or rhetorical trope; and then, by his unconvincing faithfulness to a self-affirming value in the senses. But they are vital to understanding of Byron's poetic principles: they testify to his inherent distrust of a Romantic poetics of irresolution, his unwillingness to leave the reader in an unsettled state, and his need for meaning to be tangibly possessed by its creator and its observers.

These lines seem to me to be a striking example of Byron's treatment of the dual notion of form as process and form as product. The fluctuations of the syntax are such that in its shifting grammatical relationships we perceive both a desire for internal form-giving movement and a necessity for lasting artistic shape. The statue, though the most 'artificial of arts' in Byron's own words, is first the impeller of heightened states

⁷⁹ 'Beschreibung des Torso im Belvedere zu Rome' trans Henry Fuseli (1765), quoted in Grant F. Scott, 'Beautiful Ruins', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, vol. 39 (1990), 137.

⁸⁰ *BLJ*, v. 211.

into heightened processes, but it is then acted upon by those same processes and made subject to the modifying power of the imagination. The textual instability of this movement affirms Andrew Bennett's claim that 'Rather than a stable and coherent theory, the Romantic-expressive conception of authorship is impelled by the contradictions within its own idea of composition.'⁸¹ However, while Byron is fascinated by these mysterious disjunctions of cause and effect, he is ultimately unsettled by them, and seeks a stable criterion for evaluative discrimination. This is because he thought of poetry primarily as an art and not as an imaginative experience which may or may not find expression in words. His fluctuation between immersed and detached stances announces a poet who sees himself as a part of, and apart from, the stylistic drift of the age, but his final emphasis naturally falls on the finished product – on the substance out of which the poem is made. The full implication of this contradiction for the peculiar nature of Byron's verse is yet to be properly explored. In one of his early monographs on Shelley, Richard Cronin draws our attention to an aspect of *Don Juan* which can be applied to many, if not all, of his poems: "The most important technique that Shelley learned from *Don Juan* was the possibility of employing an uneven or mixed style, so that the reader is prevented from finding a point of reference in any one of the poem's styles and forced to consider the relation between styles as the poem's meaning.'⁸²

'A bounding pas de quatre'

If the central tension in much of Byron's poetry is his desire to sustain both an organic and a rhetorical mode, it is most evidently displayed in his poetry's composite arrangements of expressive and declamatory inclination, or more specifically, in the

⁸¹ Andrew Bennet, *The Author* (London: Routledge, 2005), 61.

⁸² Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), 58.

affective power generated between his rhythm and syntax. ‘The Age of Sensibility’ argued Northrop Frye, ‘represent[ed] an interesting period of the transition in the history of English meter as well as the history of the literary imagination’⁸³ Just what that transition entails, is best explored in Donald Davie’s now classic study on the transforming history of poetic syntax in which he accounts for a broad shift in the linguistic arrangements of Romantic poetry as a revolution from ‘sense’ as a matter of intelligent perception to ‘sense’ as a matter of intuitive feeling:

...once the idea of ‘organic form’ was broached, poetic syntax began to move into the orbit of music and away from strong sense. Wordsworth’s revision of *The Prelude* is similarly, among other things, a movement from syntax to pseudo syntax. And in fact the whole Romantic movement in poetry tended to minimize the responsibilities of poetry towards what the Augustan critics understood as “sense”. Symbolism, from this point of view, only pushes to a logical extreme the implications of Romantic poetic theory. It was the Romantics who first suggested by implication, that syntax could have only a phantasmal life in poetry.⁸⁴

Davie’s thesis demonstrates, through a sequence of prominent examples, how the relation between grammar and intention became less clear in the post-Augustan period where the long-established priority of thought over expression began to be reversed. This shift from meaning to mood is registered in Coleridge’s well-known comment on the breakdown of Pope’s *discordia concors*, by which he suggests that poets of the nineteenth century no longer proceeded on the belief that poetic syntax should transmit an emphasis of semantic balance, but rather that their syntactic organizations convey an undetectable connection between melodic contours and the feelings generated by their evanescent perceptions. Davie’s allusion to a ghostly or ‘phantasmal’ pseudo syntax has in mind Wordsworth’s ‘pure organic pleasure from the lines’ in *The Prelude* especially

⁸³ Northrop Frye, quoted in John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 189.

⁸⁴ Donald Davie, *Articulate Energy: an inquiry into the syntax of English poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), 61.

where those lines embody the ‘fleeting moods of shadowy exultation’, or what Fry would call the pleasure of the ‘diffusion of sense’⁸⁵ in poetry: a fluid, excursive metrical arrangement that attempts to escape closure.

Interestingly, while Davie presents Wordsworth and Coleridge as exemplars of this development, Byron is offered as a crux in the moment of transition. Writing about a crucial transformation in the application of the phrase ‘poetic strength’ to imply a command of reason in the eighteenth century but the faculty of ardour or emotional pressure in the nineteenth century, Davie quotes two opposing uses of this phrase to show how Byron’s verse was seen to embody both qualities. The first is a line in Jeffrey’s observations on the ‘very sweet verses’ of Samuel Rogers: ‘They do not, indeed, stir the spirit like the strong lines of Byron, nor make our hearts dance with us, like the inspiring strains of Scott’, while the second is a taken from a letter written by Maria Edgeworth: ‘I do not like Lord Byron’s *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, though, as my father says, the lines are very strong, and worthy of Pope and *The Dunciad*.’ From this Davie declares that Byron is the crucial case. ‘Byron is “strong”, so everyone in his own day agreed,’ posits Davie, ‘But he is strong in both ways, the Augustan way and the Romantic; so that when Jeffrey says that Byron is “strong” and when Richard Lovell Edgeworth says so, they do not mean the same thing.’⁸⁶ This is a powerful statement in the history of poetic form but one that has, to my knowledge, never been examined in any significant detail. It identifies, but does not explore, Byron’s unique position in the English Romantic canon as one who both participated in and resisted these shifting trends in poetic syntax.

⁸⁵ Northrop Frye, ‘Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility’ in *Northrop Frye’s Writings on the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Imre Salusinszky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 11.

⁸⁶ *Articulate Energy*, 63-64.

In a letter to Clough, Matthew Arnold spoke of ‘two offices of poetry’: one to add to ‘our store of thoughts and feelings,’ and another to ‘compose and elevate the mind by a sustained tone, numerous allusions, and a grand style,⁸⁷ but, as John Gibson Lockhart and others proclaimed, Byron’s poetry often seemed to exemplify both of these offices: ‘the sweep, the pith, the soaring pinion, the lavish luxury, of genius revelling in strength.’⁸⁸ In many ways, Davie’s observations were anticipated much earlier by Macaulay in his deliberations on Byron’s threshold position in the canon:

He belonged half to the old, and half to the new school of poetry...His fame was a common ground on which the zealots of both sides – Gifford, for example, and Shelley – might meet...His poetry fills and measures the whole of the vast interval through which our literature has moved since the time of Johnson. It touches the *Essay on Man* at the one extremity, and *The Excursion* on the other. (*CH*, 306.)

Macaulay’s appraisal is as sweeping in its language as its convictions, but the double service he pays to Byron’s poetic variety as well as its transitional qualities is important to our understanding of his distinctive style. Not only does he contend that Byron ‘belonged half to the old, and half to the new school of poetry’, but also that his poetry ‘fills and measures’ the extensive interlude between the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries: suggesting an exemplified mediation between two opposing poetical sects. At the opposite ends of Macaulay’s continuum are Wordsworth’s sinuous blank verse meditations in *The Excursion* and Pope’s taut heroic couplets in *An Essay on Man*, and although Byron never committed himself fully to either of these two modes, his style ‘touches’ on both extremes. In other words, his verse embodies a struggle between a lyrical style, in which meaning is immersed in a persistent flowing rhythm,

⁸⁷Matthew Arnold, *The Essential Matthew Arnold*, ed. Lionel Trilling (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), 30.

⁸⁸ RR, B. i. 211.

and a rhetorical or dramatic style, in which the careful placement of weighty words offsets the continuity of this tempo to striking effect.

But if Davie implies that both senses of poetic strength – the strength of sound and the strength of sense – were displayed in Byron’s verse, then others were divided about the final value of their amalgamation in his poetry. Coleridge remarked that to his ear ‘there was a sad want of harmony in Lord Byron’s verse,’ before alluding to Lucretius’s distinction between celestial and terrestrial entities to question the authenticity of Byron’s procedures ‘Is it not unnatural to be always connecting very great intellectual power with utter depravity? Does such a combination often really exist in *rerum natura*?’⁸⁹ The allegation here is that although there is a great emotional force in the movement of his verse, it is not properly aligned with the visceral materiality of its matter. This sense of a heightened rhythm as the ill-fitting transporter for his forceful expression is seized upon by Hazlitt, who famously suggested that ‘nature only serve[d] as a foil to set off his style.’⁹⁰ In line with this contention is Swinburne’s assault on Byron’s poetic abilities in which he labelled him ‘the apostle of culture’ who ‘had fancy, wit, fire natural and artificial, with very remarkable energy and versatility: but in all the composition of his highly composite nature there was neither a note of real music nor a gleam of real imagination.’⁹¹ The charge is that he lacked the indispensable gift of harmony necessary for producing consistently enchanting lyrical poetry; that he did not possess a heightened sensitivity to the subtleties of flowing internal cadence. ‘It is the fault indeed of all the productions of Lord Byron,’ claimed Thelwall, ‘that they are rather elaborations of the intellect than effusions of the heart.’⁹²

⁸⁹ CH, 265.

⁹⁰ CH, 269.

⁹¹ CH, 470.

⁹² RR, B.ii.540

When Matthew Arnold opened Byron's verse alongside that of Wordsworth's (the acclaimed lyrical virtuoso of the Romantic age), he found the former to be a 'rhetorician of force' whose poetry displayed a wonderful power in 'vividly conceiving a single incident', but in comparison with the latter, concluded that Byron's verse contained no 'deep internal law.'⁹³ It was from the stiffening consensus of this perception across the nineteenth century that T.S. Eliot notoriously remarked on Byron's 'imperceptiveness to the word' by suggesting that his ear was 'imperfect and capable only of crude effects.'⁹⁴ Yet Poe went on to show, in a decisive study of metrics, that Byron's lines were 'musical despite of all law' and contained a wonderful compromise between sound and vision: 'reconciling [the] oil and water of the eye and ear.'⁹⁵ Poe's metaphor for two constitutively uncooperative substances being 'reconciled' but never fused in Byron's verse, lends itself kindly to my contention that he revelled in the power of mixed modes that were not so disparate as to be utterly incongruous and, at the same time, that he wished to forge meaning out of the relationship between styles. In an unintentional corrective to Coleridge's disbelief that depravity could combine with harmony 'in *rerum natura*', Chesterton thought that an underlying agreement in Byron's metrics was the great mark of his sincerity:

One of the best tests in the world of what a poet really means is his metre. He may be a hypocrite in his metaphysics, but he cannot be a hypocrite in his prosody. And all the time that Byron's language is of horror and emptiness, his metre is a bounding *pas de quatre*. (CH, 484)

The image of a vigorous galloping synchronization afforded by Chesterton's description of a 'bounding *pas de quatre*', can be easily linked to Lockhart's impression of *Don Juan* as a 'soaring pinion' and Swinburne's assertion that the 'rough sonorous changes' in

⁹³ CH, 445.

⁹⁴ T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 201.

⁹⁵ CH, 346.

Byron's verse, though fundamentally a deficiency in his ear, were borne out of a desire to match Milton's sublimity 'which is chiefly of sound' with Spenser's 'material beauty.'⁹⁶ This sense of unity in powerful motion seems to me to be one of Byron's distinctive artistic signatures because it most aptly conveys the peculiar amalgamation of his Romantic and Classical inclinations. His desire for a feeling of restraint and firmness in art which is not inflexible is married to his contempt for motionless sterility.

In yet another apparently incompatible commingling of notions, Carlyle called him 'our English Sentimentalist and Power-man',⁹⁷ suggesting an affective lyrical quality beneath the potency of his daring temperament. Perhaps the most fitting description of this quality in Byron's verse is the picture of Azo in *Parisina*, who seems to maintain a 'mind all dead to scorn or praise, /A heart which shunned itself':

And yet
That would not yield — nor could forget,
Which when it least appeared to melt,
Intently thought — intensely felt:
The deepest ice which ever froze
Can only o'er the surface close —
The living stream lies quick below,
And flows — and cannot cease to flow. (*Parisina*, 548-556)

In opposition to Azo's ostensibly careless defeatism, is a rhythm of profound internal feeling which charges these lines with purpose and direction. It does not wish to harmonise with the moody bearing it describes, but it retains a latent power almost precisely because it runs deeply below the surface of its thought. Francis Jeffery identified the same steadfastness-in-dynamic motion in his review of *The Corsair* where he remarked, with surprise, at Byron's vigorous handling of an otherwise inactive form:

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 376.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 288.

‘the regular heroic couplet, with a spirit, freedom, and variety of tone, of which...we scarcely believed that measure susceptible.’⁹⁸

While he wrote some fine lyrics, including the *Hebrew Melodies*, Byron recognised his constitutive antipathy to, and lack of aptitude for, a purely melodious mode. In an early letter to Moore, he contemplated writing an atmospheric tale of passion before concluding that it ‘it would require a good deal of poesy, and tenderness is not my forte.’⁹⁹ He admired Moore’s lyrical efforts above all the other poetry of the day, remarking to the author of *The Minstrel Boy* that ‘If I could imitate your style I would have no great ambition of originality.’ But Byron accepted that his ‘qualities were much more oratorical and martial – than poetical,’ acknowledging the ‘fluency... turbulence...my voice ...copiousness of declamation...and action’¹⁰⁰ that had been remarked of him. But if these qualities represent an inherently word-bound or ‘antipoetic’ spirit, they also draw our attention to Byron’s brilliant facility in wrenching semantic and emotional effects out of words, and his inherent feeling for a turbulent fluency. I hope to demonstrate this quality throughout the course of my enquiry by drawing on the deeply involved, though at times curious opposed, relationship between the internal dynamics of his poetry and the structural configurations that he employs. In a 1909 letter to Elsie Moll, Wallace Stevens strikes upon an aspect of rhyme which Byron perhaps understood better than his contemporaries, that the ‘words to be rhymes should not only sound alike, but they should enrich and deepen, and enlarge each other, like two harmonious notes.’¹⁰¹ In this way, they can offer surprising deviations between their constitutive parts, without losing their general logic within the

⁹⁸ Quoted in Susan Wolfson, *Formal Charges*, 126.

⁹⁹ *BLJ*, iii. 101.

¹⁰⁰ *BLJ*, ix. 43.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Donald Wesling, *The Chances of Rhyme: Device and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 35.

stanza. Words are enjoyed, not only for their participation in the creation of a palpable and richly semantic medium, but for their capacity to embody feeling and contribute to an emotive rhythm. The cognitive drama which is created between or among rhymed words allows Byron to take advantage of both the natural and unnatural arbitrariness of language by demonstrating the mind's unavoidable contention rather than its assimilation with nature's blankness.

Peter J. Manning has compellingly demonstrated that Eliot's judgement on Byron's 'imperceptiveness to the word' is a fundamentally ill-conceived one because it is rooted in, and therefore limited to, a specific notion of the word as a vital and active poetic symbol.¹⁰² It was a notion that Byron did not much care for because its drive towards an essential and harmonious unity did not account for the poetic texture which is created by a deliberate strain between diction and rhythm. The ideal of the high Romantic lyric as it is laid out by John Stuart Mill has been too well documented to merit a sustained recapitulation, but I briefly evoke its claims to lay the foundation for my gradual demonstration across this thesis that Byron resisted all of them in one way or the other. Firstly, he rejected the idea that language could be absolutely symbolic (its impulse arriving in a form that is inseparable and therefore undetectable from the mode of the impression itself) because he thrived on the contradictions inherent in feeling taking material shape (thoughts 'transfigured as they are transfused'); secondly, he precluded the notion of poetry as 'feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude' because, as Bernard Beatty has shown, 'the latency for address'¹⁰³ is in all that Byron penned. Finally, and perhaps most significantly to my line of enquiry, Byron

¹⁰² 'Don Juan and Byron's Imperceptiveness to the English Word' in Peter J. Manning, *Reading Romantics: texts and contexts* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 116.

¹⁰³ Bernard Beatty, 'Addressing Time: The Poetry of Lord Byron', Byron Nottingham Foundation Lecture, (Nottingham: Hawthorn, 2009), 39.

explicitly disallowed the growing conviction that poetry could have meaning in its melodic contours alone. Where Coleridge defines the ‘specific symptoms of poetic power in a young writer’ to be ‘the delight in richness and sweetness of sound, even to a faulty excess,’¹⁰⁴ and Frederick Pottle argues that Shelley, ‘employs pronounced, intoxicating, hypnotic rhythms that seem to be trying to sweep the reader into hasty emotional commitments,’¹⁰⁵ Byron seldom abandons sense in his rhythmical deviations, preferring rather, to play sense off against rhythm.

In *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, Byron shows how Southey’s poetry had dwindled ‘Since startled metre fled before thy face / ...illustrious conqueror of common sense’ (*EBSR*, 217-20), before attacking ‘flimsy DARWIN’S pompous chime’:

Whose gilded cymbals, more adorned than clear,
The eye delighted but fatigued the ear;
In show the simple lyre could once surpass,
But now, worn down, appear in native brass;
While all this train of hovering sylphs around
Evaporate in similies and sound. (*EBSR*, 894-900)

The twin reproach in this passage justly encapsulates my argument because it condemns the over-elaborate pattering of sound – the kind of vulgar onomatopoeia of an ornamental musicality which Coleridge so despised – at the same time that it denounces the drifting diffusiveness of modern verse which ‘Evaporate[s] in similies and sound’. In this sense, Byron’s verse is more akin to the ‘Metaphysical metaphor’ describe by C. Day Lewis as one which ‘always gives the impression of a fingernail striking the glass

¹⁰⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia literaria, or, Biographical sketches of my literary life and opinions*, ed. James Engel and Walter Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), ii. 20.

¹⁰⁵ Frederick Pottle, ‘The case of Shelley’ in *English Romantic Poets*, 294.

and the finger at once laid on the glass's rim to stop the resonance', whereas in 'romantic metaphor' he argues, 'the tone goes ringing on.'¹⁰⁶

While Byron implicitly rejected the lyrical ideal of poetry as the unadulterated expression of feeling he also recognised the inadequacy of a solely intellectual apprehension of poetry. In his famous, though fundamentally spurious, rejection of Horace in *Childe Harold IV* he contemplates the danger of learning without the instinct for feeling:

Then farewell, Horace; whom I hated so,
Not for thy faults, but mine: it is a curse
To understand, not feel thy lyric flow,
To comprehend, but never love thy verse:
Although no deeper Moralist rehearse
Our little life, nor Bard prescribe his art,
Nor livelier Satirist the conscience pierce,
Awakening without wounding the touched heart. (*IV*, 685-93)

Yet even in this apparent departure, we detect an underlying appreciation for the manner in which Horace awakens the heart (and not the mind) to the inconsistencies of humanity. One detects traces of Wordsworth's schoolboy frustrations at the application of a false 'secondary power' in reason, but Byron's expression of loss differs from Wordsworth's in both its mechanics and motivation. For one thing, it is tainted by nostalgia for the classical, as well as articulating an indispensable correspondence between the internal life and the public domain which resonates with the poet even in his most 'Romantic' moments.

The artistic commitment to a combinatory power of sound and sense is fundamental to Byron's assessment of one of his most important poetic forbears: Pope.

¹⁰⁶ C.Day Lewis, *The Lyric Impulse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 17.

In a much quoted though seldom evaluated reflection to John Murray regarding the changing nature of poetry, Byron emphasizes the play between pitch and duration, between syntax and line, that is a defining feature of Pope's poetry:

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 - & from which none but Rogers and Crabbe are free – and that the present & next generations will finally be of this opinion. – I am the more confirmed in this – by having lately gone over some of our Classics – particularly *Pope* – whom I tried in this way – 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 not to have been so) and mortified – at the ineffable distance in point of sense – harmony – effect – and even *Imagination* *Passion* – & *Invention* – between the little Queen Anne's Man - & us of the lower Empire. (*BLJ*, v. 265)

The clarity and vigour of Pope's lines, the 'point of sense – harmony – effect' are a fundamental contrast to the organic tendency of the lyric in its move from complexity to fulsome simplicity. Murray showed this letter to Gifford who wrote: 'There is more good sense, and feeling and judgement in this passage, than in any other I have ever read, or Lord Byron wrote.'¹⁰⁷ For Byron, the seemingly monotonous versification of Pope – 'a versification too timidly balanced'¹⁰⁸ for Wordsworth – did not devolve into undifferentiated unity but was redeemed by his brilliant wit and compactness of expression. Byron admired *Christabel*, calling it a 'fine wild poem,'¹⁰⁹ but Coleridge himself had maintained that the poem 'depend[ed] for its beauty always, and often even for its metrical existence, on the *sense* and *passion*.'¹¹⁰ Byron's mingled admiration and animosity for an early nineteenth-century organicism is often embodied in his work

¹⁰⁷ *BLJ*, v. 265.

¹⁰⁸ Letter to Alexander Dyce (10 May 1830) in *Pope: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John Barnard, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 43.

¹⁰⁹ *BLJ*, v. 108.

¹¹⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, Griggs, iii. 112.

through engaging and dissenting dialogue with the lyrical impulses of the age, and it is this which forms the subject of my next chapter.

2. ‘Blank Pretenders’: Sense and Feeling in Byron’s Objections to Blank Verse.

The slow, sad stanza will correctly paint
 The lover’s anguish or the friend’s complaint,
 But which deserves the laurel, rhyme or blank,
 Which holds on Helicon the higher rank?
 Let squabbling critics by themselves dispute
 This point, as puzzling as a Chancery suit.

(*Hints from Horace*, 109-14)

‘Cowper – and all the rest of the Blank pretenders may do their best and their worst – – they will never wrench Pope from the hands of a single reader of *sense and feeling*.’¹¹¹

(Byron, *Letter to John Murray Esq^{re}*)

¹¹¹ *CMP*, 158. *My emphasis*.

Byron never concealed his adversarial stance toward the growing popularity of blank verse as a vehicle for imaginative expression. More precisely, he condemned the accompanying demotion and exclusion of Augustan poets that it entailed, scorning those who were ‘smitten’ by a new school that sought to ‘revive the language of Queen Elizabeth.’¹¹² Not only was Byron confronting a resurgence and re-appropriation of the supposed natural language of the Renaissance pastoral mode, but more specifically, he was criticizing a revival of Miltonic blank verse unredeemed by Milton’s distinctively strong cadence. He continues,

Blank verse – which – unless in the Drama, no one except Milton ever wrote who could rhyme – became the order of the day, or else such rhyme as looked still blanker than the verse without it. – I am aware that Johnson has said – after some hesitation – that he could not “prevail upon himself to wish that Milton had been a rhymmer.”– The Opinions of that truly Great Man, whom it is also the present fashion to decry will ever be received by me with that deference which Time will restore to him from all – but with all humility – I am not persuaded that the Paradise lost would not have been more nobly conveyed to Posterity, not perhaps in heroic couplets, although even *they* could sustain the Subject – if well balanced, but in the Stanza of Spenser, or of Tasso, or in the *terza rima* of Dante – which the Powers of Milton could easily have grafted on our language. (*CMP*, 112)

The passage, taken as a whole, underscores Byron’s commitment to a poetic tradition that trusts in the discernible structures of rhyme. The heroic couplet, the Spenserian stanza, and the *terza rima* of Dante are all evoked as worthy vehicles for Milton’s sublime epic. The damning judgment in Byron’s assertion that ‘Blank verse – which – unless in the Drama, no one except Milton ever wrote who could rhyme’ enforces two serious claims. Firstly, it implies that the origin and development of blank verse as a prominent form in the poetical canon is not the result or discovery of a medium that is admirable in and of itself, but that it is borne out of a deficiency in the talents required

¹¹² *CMP*, 112.

to rhyme, and secondly; that Milton's superlative execution of the form is the single exception to this rule. Added to this judgment is a typically Byronic pun on the loaded meaning of the word 'blank' in 'or else such rhyme as looked still blanker than the verse without it' to suggest a pattern of pairing that is bare, plain, and empty – a verse that is deprived of the energy and vitality that is so distinctive of Pope's couplets.

Apart from the more obvious criticisms against an expressive deficiency in these remarks, there lurks an uncomfortable awareness that Milton's metrical achievement in *Paradise Lost* had ordained blank verse as a legitimate medium for imaginative and poetic transmission. Byron's almost ludicrous insistence that *Paradise Lost* could have been 'more nobly conveyed to posterity' in less flexible forms testifies to a deeper concern for the unbinding influence that Milton's epic had initiated among a range of contemporary poets who had undertaken to imitate his essentially inimitable style. Importantly, while Byron does not go so far as to suggest that the circumscribing affinity of the heroic couplet would be a credible alternative (although Dryden had wanted to turn *Paradise Lost* into a rhymed opera),¹¹³ he does not readily discard its ability to 'sustain' the grand and contrasting 'Subject' of Milton's epic, 'if well balanced'. It is precisely because the structural freedom of blank verse had been 'nobly conveyed to posterity' by Milton's sublime poem that it became a central concern to Byron's salvaging of the poetic tradition of Pope. Although he never held Milton or Shakespeare as models for artistic aspiration in the way that Wordsworth and Keats did, Byron always thought that the great Renaissance poets were of the highest order and even said as much to Leigh Hunt: 'our Milton & Spenser & Shakespeare...are very

¹¹³ In fact, in *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, Lucy Newlyn records at least twelve verse imitations of the poem in the eighteenth century. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 24.

Tuscan and surely...far superior to the French School.¹¹⁴ In a letter of the same year to James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, Byron admits not only to Milton's greatness, but also to his own inability to replicate him: 'You are mistaken, my good fellow, in thinking that I (or, indeed, that any living verse-writer—for we shall sink poets) can write as well as Milton. Milton's *Paradise Lost* [sic] is, as a whole, a heavy concern; but the two first books of it are the very finest poetry that has ever been produced in this world.'¹¹⁵ Such explicit and heartfelt praise seems out of sorts with Byron's open disavowal of the qualities of extended unrhymed pentameter, but there were special reasons for this.

To admire Milton privately was one thing, but to concede as much publicly, and unequivocally, as Wordsworth had done, was to consent to blank verse as an authentic vehicle for imaginative expression beyond Milton's singular and authoritative grasp. Byron could never grant as much in the civic domain, for to do so would fundamentally weaken the cultivated claims of advancement made by Pope and 'The French School'. As a result, his remarks on blank verse are almost always characterized by a wry doubleness of admiration and condemnation. When he makes a gentle arching curve away from ostensible appreciation in his comments to Caroline Lamb on a poem by the future Lady Byron, 'Though I have an abhorrence of Blank Verse, I like the lines on *Dermodry* so much that I wish they were in rhyme,'¹¹⁶ we are yet again presented with a witty, yet telling contradiction. If he likes the lines on *Dermodry* 'so much' why does he wish for them to be in rhyme? This is not simply a matter of personal taste. Byron wishes that the lines were couched in rhyme because that would place them firmly within the historical or generic evolution of poetic form away from unbridled passion

¹¹⁴ *BLJ*, iv. 50.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, iv. 84.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, i. 175.

and towards noble arrangement. ‘I look upon a proper appreciation of Pope’, he argued, ‘as a touchstone for taste, and the present question as not only whether Pope is or is not in the first rank of our literature, but whether that literature shall or shall not relapse into the Barbarism from which it has scarcely emerged for above a century and a half.’¹¹⁷ In opposition to a narrowly selective reading of literary history, one that explicitly casts a shadow over the legacies of Pope and Johnson,¹¹⁸ Byron offers his own compromised tradition which accounts for Milton’s imperial triumph as an anomaly in the history and progression of poetic form. His fears for the consequences of a chasm created by Wordsworth’s canonical leap back into the seventeenth century – ‘Mr. Wordsworth his “postscripts to Lyrical Ballads”...[argues] that the *two* great instances of the sublime are taken from *himself and Milton*’¹¹⁹ – fuelled a knowing disparity between his public reasoning and his personal taste. Byron’s vindication of an Augustan or classical tradition, as he saw it, demanded an equivalent attack on the emergence of an anti-classical style founded upon a succession of late-eighteenth century responses to Milton’s blank verse.

If Byron’s pronouncements on the matter in his ‘Observations’ on Pope seem sweeping or exaggeratedly austere, it is because they are necessarily so. Byron felt that he had to counter the supposed revolutionary assertions of Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge with his own partisan rebuttal, even if his individual poetic practices were sometimes at odds with his conservative claims for the progression of poetry. It is not necessarily the merits of Byron’s rebuttal that matter but the motivation behind it, which in his mind was no less than the future disposition of the English poetic canon.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, vii. 200.

¹¹⁸ As Matthew Arnold would later maintain, ‘we did well to return in the present century to poetry of the Elizabethan age for illumination, and to put aside, in a great measure, the poetry and poets intervening between Milton and Wordsworth’. *Matthew Arnold: a collection of critical essays*, ed. David J. DeLaura (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 114.

¹¹⁹ *CMP*, 103.

David Duff captures the tone of such conceited oppositions by placing them within a broad definition of romanticism: ‘its privileging of specific literary forms and aesthetics depends upon an ostentatious rejection of others, and that in these rejections, we can trace the process by which romantic ideology is constructed.’¹²⁰ Byron’s (at times) extravagant objection to the extended blank verse revival of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries establishes his own unique ‘romantic ideology’ because it so fittingly combines his esteem for the sublime power of Milton’s strong syntax with his fear of a poetic disinheritance.

When Edward Young characterised blank verse as ‘verse unfallen, uncurst; verse reclaimed, re-enthroned in the true language of the Gods’¹²¹ he produced a powerful allusion to, and alteration of, Milton’s preface to *Paradise Lost* by suggesting that blank verse predated the artificial ornamentation of neoclassical grammar and had, therefore, not yet descended from the purity of being it expressed. This simultaneously nostalgic and revolutionary yearning for a purely poetic, extra-historical language far removed from the contingencies of versification, formed part of a late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth polemic that elevated blank verse above rhyme on the basis of an essential superiority in its relation to nature and auditory truth. It was for this reason that James Thomson opened up blank verse from narrative to lyrical and meditative purposes, and Coleridge venerated the seamless rhythm and uncomplicated movement of Wordsworth’s blank verse. The long, conversational poem of Cowper’s *The Task* and Akenside’s *Pleasures of the Imagination* ‘achieves its final impressiveness’¹²² in the ponderous arrangements of *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*.

¹²⁰ David Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27.

¹²¹ Samuel Johnson, ‘Young’ in *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; with critical observations on their works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), vol.4. 207.

¹²² John Bayley, *The Romantic Survival*, 16.

In these poems, the unhurried movement of the blank verse and their emotive language urge the reader toward an experience of contemplation equivalent to that conveyed by the poem's speaker. The effect of the form therefore depends upon its repeated extensions, and its tendency is towards diffusion rather than concentration. In Wordsworth's hands, blank verse became an uncluttered medium in which to pursue his twin desire for a natural style and an eternal epic vision, because it offered an almost inexhaustible network of relations without sharp edges. As William Keach suggests, 'by 1817-1818, blank verse had come to be associated with Wordsworth,'¹²³ and to the extent that his manner deviated from Milton's expressive force, Byron would argue, it eroded the crucial divisions between matter and spirit, or body and soul, that are central to his poetic ideals: 'those poor idiots of the Lakes...are diluting our literature as much as they can'.¹²⁴ Unchecked and unsegmented by patterns of rhyme, it can accommodate prodigious flows of utterance, but its frameless freedom can also engender a poetry that is insubstantial and dilatory.

While his deepest aspersions against a diffusive blank verse style were registered in *Don Juan* and the revised version of *Hints from Horace* it is quite clear that Byron had grown impatient with this leisurely contemplative mode at an early stage in his career. In *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* he offered an implicit critique of the aesthetic grounds on which such evanescent poetics are based:

Next comes the dull disciple of thy school,
That mild apostate from poetic rule,
The simple WORDSWORTH, framer of a lay
As soft as evening in his favourite May;
(*EBSR*, 235-9)

¹²³ William Keach, *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics* (Princeton NJ.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 49.

¹²⁴ *BLJ*, vii. 201.

Critical reflections such as these form part of Byron's broader polemic against a naïve romantic lyricism that centred on rural ideals and near speakerless still-life impressions. His attempt to capture this sense of semantic dispersion is displayed, rather wryly, in a sequence of linguistic ambivalences. The use of terms such as 'dull' and 'simple' to denote Wordsworth's guilelessness also work to critique an undesigning manner that is lacking in sheen; one that is indistinctly felt or heard. Correspondingly, the jibe implicit in describing the Lake poet as a 'framer of a lay' plays on the double sense of 'lay' as both a mellifluous lyric and an open expanse of rural terrain. The diction and imagery contribute to a feeling of binding insubstantiality. That Wordsworth is a 'mild apostate' suggests that although he has deviated from 'poetic rule', he has not deviated boldly enough to excite his readers, while the implementation of enjambment and of a gentle or undemanding simile in 'framer of a lay / As soft as evening' effects Byron's criticism of an insipidly agreeable poetics. Byron's complaint extends beyond his common demurrals against an uninhibited lyricism to strike at the banal allowances of Wordsworth's informal mood. The connection between 'simple WORDSWORTH' and his ironically-conceived role as the frameless 'framer of a lay' is an important one for Byron because it undermines the Lake poet's attempts at slackening the language to incorporate the speaking voice at the same time that it admonishes his gentle and continuous blank verse extensions: his 'mild' deviations from 'poetic rule'.

Poetic composition, at least as it works in much of Byron's poetry and in his reflections on poetry, is a form of discernible linguistic architecture rather than an atmospheric impression or a leisurely pervasion of imagery. This is not to say that he demanded an organisational stiffness, but rather that he celebrated the dynamic breaching that a perceptible structured allowed. While he strongly objected to the

constraints imposed by poetic ‘strictures’ of the ‘*suppressive* or stranguary kind,’¹²⁵ and was forever advocating the merits of enlarging motion, he objected to the increasingly popular notion that poetry was simply a ‘region to wander in.’¹²⁶ In yet another moment of mingled praise and contempt, Byron expresses his admiration for the Lakers’ naturalising impulses: ‘all of them [had] a very natural antipathy to Pope, and I respect them for it – as the only original feeling or principle –they contrived to preserve.’¹²⁷ But it was the extent to which they pushed the boundaries of an organic poetics beyond the limits of sense that troubled him. As I have been arguing throughout, Byron aspired to the combined effects of a compact or substantial style that compels concise clauses, *and* an unceasing form with the power of rhythmic impetus which necessitates protracted phrasing beyond its bounds. It revels in expanding and contracting motions against expansive and constrictive ones and is never content with the manner of roaming without action that we find Wordsworth’s *Excursion*:

Here may I roam at large;—my business is,
Roaming at large, to observe, and not to feel;
And, therefore, not to act—convinced that all
Which bears the name of action, howso’er
Beginning, ends in servitude—still painful,
And mostly profitless.

(*The Excursion*, Book the Third, 898-904)

For Byron, poetry is not simply a matter of choosing between the fixed and living dimensions of poetic metre – between static engagements and passive, hovering detachments – but it is invested in creating a productive tension between a system based on natural stress and one based on ideal patterns. His poetry, therefore, does not take kindly to a privileging of one at the exclusion of the other.

¹²⁵ *BLJ*, iii. 60.

¹²⁶ *KL*, i.170.

¹²⁷ *CMP*, 106.

Before I continue, it may be worth registering two valuable caveats governing the principal arguments of this chapter. The first concerns some of the assumptions I make about the monological and syntactical insipidity of Wordsworth's blank verse. It cannot be more urgently emphasised that these assumptions are not necessarily my own, but are based on Byron's specific and deliberately overstated 'abhorrence' for Wordsworth's extended blank verse objectives. Related to this, are the material circumstances which suspended the publication of *The Prelude* until after Wordsworth's death. Byron's strong judgments are based almost exclusively on the stated ambitions in the 'Prospectus' to *The Recluse* as it was printed with *The Excursion* in 1814, and may well have been altered had he encountered the syntactic force of those most celebrated moments of crisis in *The Prelude*.¹²⁸ The lacklustre blank verse efforts which followed 'Tintern Abbey' came as an unwelcome surprise to Byron, who wrote to Leigh Hunt in 1815 to indicate his feelings that Wordsworth's 'performances since "Lyrical Ballads" – are miserably inadequate to the ability which lurks within him.'¹²⁹ This sense of misapplied ability, coupled with political disloyalty, would always mar his view of Wordsworth's place amongst poets and they are often most cuttingly expressed in his hostility to the programme for poetry set out in the 'Prospectus'. The second qualification concerns Byron's own non-drama blank verse endeavours which are markedly absent in this discussion. While his experiments with the form are admittedly few and far between, pieces such as *Darkness* and *The Dream* must be acknowledged in any examination of Byron and blank verse. Although I do address his implementation of this mode in my ensuing chapter on *Manfred*, and am really more concerned with his aspersions against the whole ethos of a naturalised blank-verse epic, it must be pointed

¹²⁸ The 1816 auction catalogue lists a 2-vol. *Lyrical Ballads* (i.e. 1800, 1802, or 1805), the 1807 volumes, *The Excursion*, and *White Doe of Rylston*. *CMP*, 231-44.

¹²⁹ *BLJ*, iv. 324.

out that Byron's use of blank verse to convey a stifling lack of contrast in poems like *Darkness* only serves to further my contention that Byron thought it a lifeless form.

*'Immeasurable measures move along'*¹³⁰

In writing *The Excursion*, Wordsworth exchanged the demands of structure for a copious language and a seamless metre: the blank verse flows and overflows in an effort 'to transcend the fixities of time.'¹³¹ Wordsworth's metrical deviation from Milton – refracted through the blank verse of a number of eighteenth-century poets – is to eradicate, as far as possible, the number of disjointed pauses and heavy stresses and maintain a fluidity of syntax. This is carefully noted by Claude Rawson in his account of the evolution of blank verse in the eighteenth century:

In William Cowper's *The Task*, or in Charlotte Smith's *The Emigrants*, two of the most important predecessors of Wordsworth's verse style, there is a much greater degree of end-stopping than we find in Wordsworth. In Wordsworth's blank verse, by contrast, sense continually spills over line breaks. The line end rarely coincides with a syntactic break. At the same time he pushes the refusal of unnecessary markedness of diction still further even than Cowper.¹³²

Wordsworth's blank-verse poems derive their characteristic charm from the feeling of interminable drift which they create, but since the number of formal principles is principally discarded in favour of a prolonged period of contemplation, its closural effects increasingly depend upon the thematic features of the poem which are themselves an extension in time. His unobtrusive prosody aids in the effect of

¹³⁰ *ESBR*, 149.

¹³¹ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (Cambridge Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 43.

¹³² 'Wordsworth' in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry*, ed. Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 295.

naturalness but, as Brennan O'Donnell demonstrates in his examination of Wordsworth's metrics, it often dilutes rhythmic energy by 'placing prepositions in stress positions.'¹³³ To more robust spirits like Byron and Hazlitt, such poetry did not much appeal. Hazlitt's review of *The Excursion* (1814) attacked its lack of frame by arguing that it exhibits 'all the internal power, without the external form of poetry'.¹³⁴ His problem with this kind of lyrical field, where feeling comes in aid of feeling, is that it creates a poetry which had no steady organizing principle around which the text's ruminations might wreath itself. In conspicuous contrast to this one might recall Swinburne's claim for Byron that 'his poetry deals with the outward nature and depends upon the forms of things.'¹³⁵

Byron frequently condemns Wordsworth for his capacious manner and unintelligible language:

And Wordsworth, in a rather long "Excursion"
 (I think the quarto holds five hundred pages),
 Has given a sample from the vasty version
 Of his new system to perplex the sages;
 'Tis poetry--at least by his assertion,
 And may appear so when the dog-star rages--
 And he who understands it would be able
 To add a story to the Tower of Babel.

('Dedication' to *Don Juan*, 25 -32)

If the dominant tone of the passages lies in the humour with which Byron engages his critique of the 'design and scope' laid out by Wordsworth in his *Prospectus*, this does not make the critique any less serious or devastating in its intent. There are fundamental

¹³³ Brennan O'Donnell, *The Passion of Meter: A Study of Wordsworth's Metrical Art* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1995), 124.

¹³⁴ RR, A. i. 453. This notion of an internal order was put forward by Edward Young in this *Conjectures on Original Composition*: 'Whereas the classical poets chiefly endeavour to pint the outward figure, linements, and motions; the sacred poet makes all the beauties to flow from inward principle in the creature he describes and thereby gives great spirit and vivacity to his description.' *Conjectures on Original Composition*, ed. Edith J. Morley, (Manchester: Manchester University Press & London: Longmans, 1918), 44.

¹³⁵ CH, 468.

aesthetic issues behind this burlesque parody of a ‘new system to perplex the sages’ and they are once again fixed upon the dual notions of irrepressible protraction and incomprehensibility. That Wordsworth’s ‘five hundred’ page quarto is merely ‘a sample’ from his ‘vasty version’ indicates a compulsive need on the part of the poet to repudiate completion: the poem consists of a series of random sequential encounters that are not taken to their conclusion, only ever serving as a reflection on things past or a preface for things to come. This urge to boundlessness is both a mental and a poetic attribute, and one that had acquired a distinctly negative valence for Byron by the time he encountered *The Excursion*. Yet even a casual reader of Romantic poetry would be quick to point to the flaw in my argument, for what is *Don Juan* other than a series of random sequential encounters that are not taken to conclusion? Byron himself only introduced the formal inauguration of his narrative at the beginning of canto XII, and conjectured to Murray that the poem might spread to 150 cantos. How then could the Byron of *Don Juan* object to the immeasurable length of Wordsworth’s poetic trajectory?

The answer lies in the constitution of form, rather than in any generic or narrative comparison. Byron may make the sense of one *ottava rima* stanza spill over into the next as he often does in *Don Juan* but the operational forces inherent in the rhyme scheme and its stanzaic dimensions mean that the origins of the thought are seldom lost and ‘its touches of beauty’, to use Keats’s standard, never leave the ‘reader breathless, instead of content.’¹³⁶ While it had become something of a commonplace to mock Wordsworth after 1814 for the cumbersome protraction of his blank verse, Byron’s parodies bear more strongly on his deepest beliefs in the art of verse. Byron’s complaints against *The Excursion*’s watery blank verse are often built upon its incalculable evenness and the dilution of its powers because of its length. The repeated

¹³⁶ *KL*, i, 239.

charge is that it depends on an ever-reaching expansiveness and does not take kindly to brevity and selectivity. In a letter to Murray in 1814, Byron confirms this charge by summoning Wordsworth to make an important distinction between valuable and deficient editorial practices:

...you should however have a good number to start with – I mean good in *quality* – in these days there be little fear of not coming up to the mark in quantity – There must be many “fine things” in Wordsworth – but I should think that it be difficult to make 6 quartos (the amount of the whole) all fine – particularly the Pedlar’s portion of the poem. (*BLJ*, iv. 167)

His criticism that the ‘fine things’ are lost in the all-consuming quantity is not without justification. The first sentence of *The Excursion* is seventeen lines long and a rather rambling formulation. In fact, there are many long, loose, discursive sentences in the poem, (occasionally expanding over 30 lines) which bear none of the force of contradistinction necessary to sustain the interval across which the thought is stretched. This is reflected in a *British Review* essay which remarks upon the sense of prolongation in the poem, by maintaining that it is not,

long in respect to quantity, (for I have heard a longer sermon of fifteen minutes than one of fifty,) but long in respect to the quantity of idea spread over the surface of words. Every thing is long in it, the similes, the stories, the speeches, the words, the sentences (which indeed are of a breathless length), – and yet, awful to relate, it is only a third part “of a long and laborious work!” (*RR*, A. i. 229.)

Byron’s satire is alert to the unchecked self-‘assertion’ of Wordsworth’s ‘vasty version’, and its diffusive lack of logic:

Tis poetry...
 And may appear so when the dog-start rages –
 And he who understands it would be able

To add a story to the Tower of Babel.

The excessive elaboration indicates a special weight of interest on Byron's part for the relationship between a progression beyond fixed limits and an impenetrable perplexity of thought. His reference to Sirius as the 'dog-star' that 'rages' indicates an excessive outpouring equivalent to the heliacal rising that flooded the Nile, while his allusion to the 'Tower of Babel' evokes a confusions of tongues comparable to Wordsworth's creation of a world of thinned and untrusted words. The audible pun on 'story', to signify both a new tale and another rung or level of elevation beyond the grounds of common sense, typifies the verbal and spatial excess of Wordsworth's rambler.¹³⁷

If Macaulay was later to claim that Wordsworth's style 'was often too mysterious for general comprehension,'¹³⁸ Byron showed that this was the consequence of his longing for a natural abundance of immeasurable length. Its lack, however much it may revel in Miltonic ideas and associations, is of the classical instinct for clarity, simplicity, and selection. It wants the internal firmness requisite for conveying life to the arrangement. When Johnson praised *Paradise Lost* for its strength of style and its sense of final achievement by maintaining that 'None ever wished it longer than it is'¹³⁹ he was also quick to chasten the eighteenth-century blank-verse poets for a pervading

¹³⁷ In a subsequent stanza in *Don Juan* Byron strikes upon the same matter:

Young Juan wander'd by the glassy brooks,
Thinking unutterable things; he threw
Himself at length within the leafy nooks
Where the wild branch of the cork forest grew;
There poets find materials for their books,
And every now and then we read them through,
So that their plan and prosody are eligible,
Unless, like Wordsworth, they prove unintelligible. (I, 713-20.)

¹³⁸ *CH*, 306.

¹³⁹ *Lives*, i. 290.

effusiveness which fashioned ‘not exactness, but copiousness’,¹⁴⁰ and contained none of the dignity and eloquence approaching the grand style. For Johnson, such blank verse had ‘neither the easiness of prose, nor the melody of numbers and therefore tire[d] by long continuance.’¹⁴¹ Not only did it threaten to fatigue the reader, but so long as it gave no indication of its intended conclusion it remained vulnerable to capricious confusion. As John Dennis so stubbornly asserts: ‘Poetry is either an Art, or Whimsy and Fanaticism. If it is an Art, it follows that it must propose an end to itself, and afterwards lay down proper means for the attaining that End’¹⁴² Byron may have accounted for a false ranking of genres in his letters defending Pope by showing, for example, how difficult it is to place Dante within a specific category, but he did not easily discard the expectations demanded by a particular category: ‘as I have before said the poet who *executes* best – is the highest – whatever his department – and will ever be so rated’.¹⁴³

The idea that lofty thoughts or content should be matched by a correspondingly fine style was repeatedly advocated by Byron in his criticism of contemporary attempts at the long epic poem by poets who lacked the expertise necessary for sustaining those attempts. This very notion is stated candidly in the much dwelt upon opening theme of *Don Juan* but it is more precisely articulated in the following lines from *Hints from Horace*:

Dear authors! suit your topics to your strength,
And ponder well your subject and its length,
Nor lift your load before you’re quite aware
What weights your shoulders will or will not bear.

¹⁴⁰ *Lives*, iv. 164. 208. Barbara Hernstein-Smith uses an amusing simile to explain the effect of blank verse: ‘Blank verse may be best compared, perhaps, to an inexhaustible spool of tape: it will measure any bit of material, but cannot, in itself, determine the shape or length of that material. It has no self-generated cut of point, and it will stop measuring only when the material itself has ended.’ Barbara Hernstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A study of how poems end* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 79-80.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 209.

¹⁴² John Dennis, ‘The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry’ in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939-43), i. 335.

¹⁴³ *CMP*, 142-3.

But lucid Order, and Wit's siren sense,
 Await the Poet skilful in his choice;
 With native Eloquence he soars along.
 Grace in his thoughts, and Music in his song! (H/H, 59-66)

The passage unquestionably centres upon an Augustan propriety for the appropriate relationship between style and subject matter: the principle that a poet's language must conform to the dignity of the subject it treats. As John Baillie had remarked in his *Essay on the Sublime* (1747), it is the task of criticism 'to define the Limits of each Kind of Writing, and to prescribe their Proper Distinctions'.¹⁴⁴ Pope's *Essay on Criticism* rings loudly here: 'Be sure yourself and your own reach to know, / How far your genius, taste, and learning go; / launch not beyond your depth, but be discreet,' (48-50) but the tenor of Byron's caveat is subtly different. Pope's counsel has been altered, if not in its form then certainly in its terms, to tackle the ever expanding poetics of blank verse lyricism. The imperative 'ponder well your subject and its length' strikes the reader as a calculated assault on those who held poetry purely as a process rather than a product – as a pondering *through* and not *before* composition. It promotes an evaluative pause before creation as a corrective gesture to the spontaneous outpouring of emotion that had become 'the order of the day.' It likewise endorses the value in estimating a proper structure that will support the weight of its content, however, there is a special equilibrium in Byron's promise of 'lucid Order' and 'siren sense' for the poet 'skilful in his choice' that urges toward an alluring harmony rather than a simple persuasion by reason. The phrase 'native Eloquence' evokes a national vernacular at the same time that it compounds the innate and the learned; it hints towards a natural constitution that is neither forced nor laboured. In similar fashion, 'soars along' is Byron's Miltonic

¹⁴⁴ *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Andre Ashfield and Peter De Bolla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 86.

allusion to Satan's ascension in book two of *Paradise Lost* that tells of an epic ranging upward that is deliberate and forceful but never diffusive.

Byron's thrusting allusive style within a visible rhyme scheme gives deference to Augustan composure at the same time that it lends energy to the Miltonic promise of breaking out of that composure. A close connection is thus suggested between the propelling and postponing functions of a well-chosen arrangement. In his preface to *The Prophecy of Dante*, Byron shows the damage can be done when the arrangement is dismantled: 'I have had the fortune to see the fourth canto of Childe Harold translated into Italian versi sciolti – that is, a poem written in the Spenserian stanza into blank verse, without regard to the natural divisions of the stanza, or of the sense.'¹⁴⁵ Its architecture provides a necessary reinforcement even as it lays the foundation for a dramatic exchange between the subject and its setting. These exchanges are a vital element in Byron's poetry, much like the potential for weighty human action created by the soft backdrop in these lines: 'Our Hero was, in Canto the Sixteenth, / Left in a tender Moonlight situation / Such as enables Man to show his strength' (XVII, 89-91). Byron's repeated promotion of the excellences in shouldering a fitting structure through which to explore or roam should not be misunderstood as the mechanical elevation of a taut correspondence between form and subject. There is, for one thing, an internal élan in vigorous spirits like Napoleon that implicitly refuses close-fitting forms, a 'fire / And motion of the soul which will not dwell / In its own narrow being, but aspire / Beyond the fitting medium of desire' (*Childe Harold* III, 379-12). Even in his firmest verse, the imagination is always active enough to widen the restricted sphere in which nature has confined it, and in this we witness a readily acknowledged danger of being imprisoned by conforming to unyielding structures.

¹⁴⁵ *CPW*, iv, 214.

However, there is an equal danger in pressing too far beyond these limits as Byron's proliferation of images in which scaffolding collapses under unsustainable pressure suggests. In disparity with Byron's conviction that Napoleon's commanding spirit is active and enlarging is the image, in his *Ode to Napoleon*, of the French emperor trapped like Milo beneath the oak he rended, "Thou, in the sternness of thy strength, / An equal deed has done at length" (50-1). The rhyming of 'strength' with 'at length' to indicate a loss of that strength through a disintegrating effusion is characteristically Byronic. But a more compelling picture of the loss of potency that accompanies a dissolution of structure is the image of mankind groping futilely at the atmosphere when the platform beneath gives way in the *Venice Ode*: 'still we lean / On things that rot beneath our weight, and wear / Our strength away in wrestling with air' (60-2). The corrosive verb 'wear...away' carries with it the abrasion of rubbing too vigorously upon a delicate construction, while the fruitless exertion implicit in 'wrestling with air' implies a perilously pointless over-extension – of not being 'quite aware / What weight your shoulders will or will not bear.' This images draws upon Gibbon's memorable assertion that the Roman Empire collapsed 'under the weight of its own decadence' at the same time that it reflects the sentiments of a contemporary review which admired the ubiquitous freedom of Keats's poetry but regretted how 'the verse frequently runs riot, and loses itself in air.'¹⁴⁶ It repudiates the need to convert a series of perceptions into a continuous and immeasurable poetic enterprise. Strong sense, as Byron perceived it, is compact and concise. It necessitates a nearness of expressions and it vanishes when utterances are too frequently drawn out. With his own vigorous comprehensiveness and movement he reiterates the praise that Denham bestowed upon Richard Fanshew: 'Nor

¹⁴⁶ RR, C. i. 560.

are the nerves of his compacted strength / Stretched and dissolved into unsinewed length'¹⁴⁷ without forbidding the capacity for effective extensions.

These passages are useful as an entry into a discussion on the importance of rhyme, and the prevalent rhyme pairing 'strength / length' in so many of Byron's poems as it is used to signal a vital tension between pause and extension. Having already addressed Byron's strength of rhythm and strength of diction in the previous chapter, it might be valuable to consider how these qualities are combined in rhyme for they bind together so much that mattered to him. Two complementary concepts come together here to conceive and foster Byron's deepest triumphs of poetic form: his conviction that a poem should embody a force of expression, and his feeling for extended but noticeable dimensions of duration. Unlike some of his neoclassical predecessors, Byron employs rhyme beyond its role as a purely referential quality. In Byron's verse rhyme functions as a compelling emblem of literariness, with the twin purpose of furnishing an affinity of sound which is itself delightful, and of conveying poetic structure by scoring off boundaries and other divisions, and furthermore acting as an ancillary to the overall cadence. Each rhyme word has the associated poise of its resounding station in the line and the potency of its trajectory in the sentence, and in the poem at large.

Much like the Doge's definition of a commonwealth in *Marino Faliero* – 'Proportioned like the columns to the temple / Giving and taking strength reciprocal' (III, ii. 171-2) – Byron's rhymes provide the regulating modulations of a dual impulse. Take this magnificent description of a first kiss in *Don Juan*:

¹⁴⁷ *To Sir Richard Fanshawe on his translation of Paster Fido* (1648). Coleridge may have observed that the eminent characteristic of Wordsworth's style was his 'sinewy strength and originality of single lines and paragraphs' (*BL*, ii.121), but critical consensus suggested otherwise.

A long, long kiss, a kiss of youth and love,
 And beauty, all concentrating like rays
 Into one focus, kindled from Above;
 Such kisses as belong to early days,
 Where heart, and soul, and sense, in concert move,
 And the blood's lava, and the Pulse a blaze,
 Each kiss a heart-quake — for a kiss's strength,
 I think, it must be reckoned by its length.

By length I mean duration; theirs endured
 Heaven know how long — no doubt they never reckon'd;
 And if they had, they could not have secured
 The Sum of their Sensations to a Second;
 They had not spoken; but they felt allured,
 As if their souls and lips each other beckon'd,
 Which, being join'd, like swarming bees they clung—
 Their hearts the flowers from whence the honey sprung.
(DJ, II. 1481-96)

The supple eloquence of the passage epitomizes Byron's ability to find a form and language that rises to the demands of creating an image which is concurrently lucid and suggestive. It produces a powerful sense of prolongation without being weakly disseminated across the page, and without resorting to the systematic regularity that so bothered Romantic poets such as Coleridge who sought to 'measure time' rather than 'count syllables'. Byron manages to achieve condensation as he describes, in a majestically sustained image, the perpetuation of a timeless moment. The combined intensity and duration of the kiss is effected by two opposing yet complementary devices: the overflow of 'all concentrating like rays / Into one focus' beyond the boundary of the line gives the impression of amplification; while the mid-line pause on 'focus' allows the figure of refracted light to settle or concentrate upon a single word that itself demands focus. It stresses the very opposite of the diffusive poetics that Byron so despised: the movement of the verse is of a narrowing and insistent descent, converging its abundant energy into a single word and a single penetrating image. However, the depiction does not conclude there, as the next movement takes us away

from an intense focal point upward and out again to the unknown celestial agent that sparked the bending of beams to a common purpose. It is almost a straight-forward reversal of the established concentration but it has added to the complexity of the moment. This transition sets the tone for the rest of the stanza as it enlarges and contracts to simulate the two throbbing pulses in contact. By plotting its passage across space and time – heaven and earth, the present moment and the primitive or ‘early days’ of old – the stanza shapes the simultaneous unfolding and enfolding of an all-pervading episode in the lives of the characters that is reminiscent in its sentiment, though not in its form, of Wordsworth’s ‘spots of time’.

The palpable, or even visceral, tension of the moment is marked by the convergence of poetic time, natural time, and eternal time, as well as the speaker’s problematic attempts to distinguish one from the other. While the love or desire that led to their kiss is ‘kindled from above’, its duration is therefore immeasurable on earth and continues, quite literally for ‘heaven knows how long’. In a corresponding manner, Byron’s rhyming of ‘love’ with ‘above’ plays on a religious convention found in the like of Donne and Herbert that has earthly love sanctioned or ordained from heaven. But it does so only to describe the secretive and fundamentally unendorsed communion of Juan and Haidee. Equally, the rhyming of ‘rays’ with ‘days’ evokes a natural connection between the sun’s warming focus and its responsibility to the cyclical measure of time – holding the lovers’ kiss in an eternal image – even as it works to create a disconnection between the present moment and the instinctive action of primeval times. The only imperfect rhyme in this stanza is that of ‘move’ with ‘above’, but this is important to the meaning of the verse as it suggests an effortless or natural relation between ‘heart, soul, and sense’ as the lovers exchange passion in perfect agreement. It is so very

distinctive of Byron to employ a wilfully artificial mechanism to create the effect of natural harmony.

The tension in Byron's syntax is continuously towards a synthesis or redefinition that will not permit words to recline into easy semantic postures. For instance, the term 'reckon'd' which can denote a quality that is accounted for or determined by judgment but also highly regarded, is repeated in the second stanza to demonstrate its consummately effective ineffectiveness. In a motion of self-conscious detachment from the moment he describes, Byron draws attention to his own subjective scale of estimation: 'for a kiss's strength, / I think, it must be reckon'd by its length.' The mannered rhetorical play of the line is furthered by the unnecessary inclusion of 'it' which breaks the rhythm of reading and gestures towards a proverbial wisdom that is otherwise no more than an individual opinion. However, the value of the scale is such that the duration of the kiss cannot be 'reckon'd' while the lovers are locked in the grip of intimacy. The intensity of their moment is beyond the scope and relevance of metrical measurement, even if the regularity of the iambic beats and the smoothness of the sibilance in 'secured / the sum of their sensations to a second' has the reader inadvertently keeping time. Its strength has distorted the lovers' feeling for length.

The emphatic rhyming of the speaker's commentary upon time, 'reckoned, second, beckoned' rings loudly in the reader's ear and threatens to subvert the softer rhymes 'endured, secured, allured' which link the lovers in tender and timeless affection. But it never manages to overwhelm them because the intensity of their embrace is too strong and the final triumph of the lovers over the speaker is registered in the powerfully sexual simile that concludes the account. The greatest oddity in this passage is the ostensibly needless qualification on the part of the speaker at the start of

stanza 187: ‘By length I mean duration’ which Peter Cochran describes as ‘a misunderstanding few would make.’¹⁴⁸ While this is almost certainly true, the distinction between physical distance and temporal continuation is a vital one for Byron because it indicates an essential pressure between play and precision that is at the heart of his larger poetic endeavour. It may not possess the quiet ‘secret consummate felicity between diction and movement’¹⁴⁹ which Arnold believed that Wordsworth possessed and Byron lacked, but it demonstrates a masterful tension between the two.

‘Where is that living language which could claim / Poetic more, as Philosophic fame?’

Despite Byron’s expressed aversion to poetry which lacked an external frame, he was not prone to excessive prescription, and was keen to admit a relaxation of generic rules provided that the ensuing creation exhibited an identifiable quality of poetic craftsmanship. In a rare instance of praise for his contemporaries (albeit veiled in irony), Byron admires the daringness of their endeavours:

Whate’er their follies, and their faults beside,
 Our enterprising bards pass nought untried,
 Nor do they merit slight applause who choose
 An English subject for an English muse,
 And leave to minds which never dare invent,
 French flippancy, and German sentiment.
 Where is that living language which could claim
 Poetic more, as Philosophic fame,
 If all our Bards, more patient of delay,
 Would stop like Pope — to polish by the way?
(HJH, 447-56)

¹⁴⁸ Peter Cochran, footnote:

http://www.internationalbyronsociety.org/images/stories/pdf_files/don_juan2a.pdf

¹⁴⁹ CH, 445.

The compliment is short-lived, and elaborately backhanded, but it acknowledges an ambitious loosening of generic regulations at the same time that it points to the closural failures that arise from explorative excess. The phrase ‘Our enterprising bards pass nought untried’, with its regard for bold undertakings (rather than ‘mild apostasy’) and its subsequent rebuke of a group of poets who are both indiscriminating and untested, has just that combination of admiration and admonishment that emerge so strongly in Byron’s engagements with his contemporaries. In a similarly ambivalent tone, the succeeding line, ‘Nor do they merit slight applause’ can be read as a compliment – that these modern poets warrant great, rather than minor applause – and an insult – that for all their enterprising endeavours they still receive little public recognition. Yet the overall tone of the passage is one of regret at the misapplication of a sincere poetic venture and the misplacement of talent. Byron recognises the value of a renewed English pastoral that rejects continental impertinence and mawkishness, but he laments its tendency to pure philosophy beyond the range of poetry: ‘there will be found as comfortable metaphysics and ten times more poetry in the “Essay on Man” than in the “Excursion.”’¹⁵⁰ It is on these grounds that Byron does not find a place in Isobel Armstrong’s reading of Romantic poetry as the ‘language of living form.’¹⁵¹ The earnest tenor of the question, ‘Where is that living language which could claim /Poetic more, as Philosophic fame?’ expresses a deep-felt desire to pursue the freedom of a natural form without surrendering the craft of a distinctive, and long-established medium. If we place this two-fold appeal alongside Blake’s categorical distinction between ‘Living Form’ and ‘Systematic ‘Art’: ‘Grecian is Mathematic Form: Gothic is Living Form, Mathematic Form is Eternal in the Reasoning Memory: Living Form is Eternal

¹⁵⁰ *CMP*, 110.

¹⁵¹ See Isobel Armstrong, *Language as Living Form in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982).

Existence,¹⁵² we can see just how deeply Byron sways between the Romantic desire for organic unity and the neo-classical attraction to stately composition. The necessary conversion of philosophy into poetry is made possible by pause and modification. This dual sense of composure and refinement is sanctioned by the double pause in ‘more patient of delay’ which suggests the need for a higher degree of consideration at the same that it urges towards the inclusion of a traceable technique.

Still more striking confirmation of Byron’s alertness to Wordsworth’s damaging extensions of thought and line are his repeated cautions at the dangers of generic overstretching. Having addressed Byron’s concerns over the unfit relation of the mode or scale to its particular medium, we must attend to the manner in which he expanded this notion to tackle the occurrence of an unmanageable, and ultimately deflating, enlargement of the naturalised language of the pastoral mode to epic proportions:

... let them not to vulgar WORDSWORTH stoop,
 The meanest object of the lowly group,
 Whose verse of all but childish prattle void,
 Seems blessed harmony to LAMB and LLOYD:
 Let them — but hold, my Muse, nor dare to teach
 A strain, far, far beyond thy humble reach;
 The native genius with their being given
 Will point the path, and peal their notes to heaven.
(EBSR, 903-10)

The passage calls us to judge, by incompatible development, the ungainly fusion of a generic commitment and an imaginative realisation. The verb ‘strain’ and the notion of overstretching beyond ones capabilities forms an inseparable part of Byron’s critical lexicon, especially in relation to the epic desires of those ‘enterprising Bards’ of the Lake School. In the Dedication to *Don Juan* he famously hauls Southey over the coals

¹⁵² Blake, ‘On Virgil’ in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman and Harold Bloom (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1982), 270.

for extending beyond his reach: ‘because you soar too high, Bob / And fall for lack of moisture quite a dry Bob’, but this was merely an elaboration upon many of his deepest criticisms in *English Bards* and *Hints from Horace*.¹⁵³ As I have been arguing throughout this chapter, at the heart of such slander is a feeling that while these poets aspired to the standard set by Milton, their allegiance to the conversational mode without due consideration for its facility as a social medium, coupled with their fixation on rustic subjects – ‘The transitory Being that beheld / This Vision, when and where and how he lived’ (‘Prospectus’, ii. 847-51) – made them incapable of attaining Milton’s greatness. Byron here suggests, that unlike his avowed epic forerunner, Wordsworth is not the master of his epic medium, and is trying to do more (or less) than his vehicle would allow.

The difficulty that beset Byron was the simultaneously expansive and domesticating tactics of the purely lyrical blank verse epic. In syntax, scope, and intricacy, it attempts to replicate the dignified and stately style of *Paradise Lost*; however, its plain diction, opaque philosophical abstractions, and humble concrete details all work to weaken the grandeur of the verse.¹⁵⁴ The attempted synchronisation of the exalted and eternal powers of the imagination, (‘the Bard in holiest mood’) with the quotidian – ‘a simple produce of the common day’ which speaks of ‘nothing more than

¹⁵³ Take these lines in *Hints from Horace* which address the theme of failed epic aspirations as a result of their unmanageable and exalted lyricism:

Beware – for God’s sake don’t begin like B[owl]es!
 “Awake a louder and a loftier strain”,
 And pray, what follows from his boiling brain?
 He sinks to Southey’s level in a trice,
 Whose epic mountains never fail in mice!
 Not so of yore awoke your mighty sire,
 The temper’d warblings of his master lyre; (HfH, 192-8)

¹⁵⁴ These lines should be read alongside Byron’s insistence in *Hints from Horace* that Milton is the inimitable exemplum of blank-verse epic:

The immortal wars which gods and angels wage,
 Are they not shown in Milton’s sacred page?
 His strain will teach what numbers best belong
 To themes celestial told in epic song (HfH, 105-8)

what we are' – was for him, an improper fusion of Milton's magisterial combination of amplitude and leisure; his signature wonder and ease. Coleridge labelled the mid-to-late-eighteenth century blank verse of Cowper 'divine chit-chat' and admired the semi-conversational mode that grew out of such appropriations of Milton, but for likes of Byron and others with an equally strong inclination for the combinatory power of sound and sense,¹⁵⁵ this was little more than lofty aspiration couched in 'childish prattle'; a 'strain, far, far beyond [their] humble reach'.

'Nothing Formless or Laboured'

The primary cause of overstretching is once again founded upon the lack of sensible termination that blank verse encourages. The Lake poets are entreated to pause by a halt in the line at the same time that they are asked to embrace the achievements of Pope (and Horace) in the palm of their hands: 'Let them—but hold my Muse'. Where Schiller had called on poets to extend the epic genre forward 'so as to display that pastoral innocence' under the conditions 'of expansive thought',¹⁵⁶ Byron warned against the dwindling consequences in overstraining the bucolic:

A labour'd, long exordium sometimes tends
 (Like patriot speeches) but to paltry ends;
 And nonsense in a lofty note goes down,
 As pertness passes with a legal gown:
 Thus many a bard describes in pompous strain
 The clear brook babbling through the goodly plain
(H/H, 21-6)

¹⁵⁵ An appraisal of Wordsworth's 'Preface' in *The Monthly Review* picked up on this incongruity between form and subject by objecting to his 'pompous classification of trifles.' (RR.A. ii. 734)

¹⁵⁶ 'On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry' (1795) in *German Aesthetics and Literary Criticism*, ed. Hugh Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 187.

The focus of the satiric irony is the focus of dissenting styles and unwanted effects. The iambic pentameter of the first line is regular, but it can only be maintained if we dwell unnaturally upon either ‘laboured’ or ‘exordium’ which, combined with the almost cumbersome alliteration in ‘laboured, long exordium’, produces the dragging effect it wishes to critique. By implication, this supposed shift from a heightened expectation to a feeble conclusion is not registered as a jolting transition, but rather as an inevitable transmission that takes place through its own drawn-out process. The grammatically superfluous inclusion of ‘but’ in the second line has a purpose beyond its metrical fleshing out of that line: it serves its twin function as a conjunction between two contrasting clauses (between the desire and the actual effect) and; as an adverb to emphasise that very contrast by an unavoidable conversion on the part of the speaker – a laboured exordium tends *only* to paltry ends. To add to this, Byron’s ridicule of figurative or stylistic incompatibility is expressed in two highly conceited similes of conceit: the jingoistic bombast of ‘patriot speeches’ and the superficial impudence of legal speech which dresses its content with pert language even as it dresses its barristers in ostentatious robes.

These deliberately contrived figurations for the ungainly style of poems like *The Excursion* may seem like a peculiar distaste, but Byron was not alone in expressing doubts about the soundness of representing lowly subjects through ‘pompous strains’. When T.S. Eliot argued that the rejection of rhyme was not ‘a leap at facility’ but that it imposed ‘a much severer strain upon the language’,¹⁵⁷ he was extracting his judgments from an eighteenth-century tradition that troubled over the unnatural stress which blank verse, unhinged by Milton’s strong syntax, might place upon poetic diction. For Dr Johnson, blank verse tempted poets to greater extravagance in the use of syntactic

¹⁵⁷ T. S. Eliot, ‘Reflections on Vers Libre’ in *To Criticize the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 131.

distortion than rhymed verse, reasoning that ‘if blank verse be not tumid and gorgeous, it is crippled prose.’¹⁵⁸ In other words, if it is not written in the sublime or grand manner of Milton, it may be susceptible to an excessive and defective singularity. Pope said something similar in a letter of 1739 to Joseph Spence: ‘I have nothing to say for rhyme, but that I doubt whether a poem can support itself without it in our language, unless it be stiffened with such strange words as are like to destroy our language itself.’¹⁵⁹ And in a remark upon Akenside which anticipates the critical language applied to *The Excursion* in the early reviews, Johnson hits upon the wearisome immoderation of such undertakings:

The exemption which blank verse affords from the necessity of closing the sense with the couplet betrays luxuriant and active minds into such self-indulgence, that they pile image upon image, ornament upon ornament, and are not easily persuaded to close the sense at all. Blank verse will therefore, I fear, be too often found in description exuberant, in argument loquacious, and in narration tiresome. (*Lives*, iv. 174)

The continuity of these terms, as they are employed to heed warning against a hazardous self-indulgence and the tedious exertion that it entails, is evident in Saintsbury’s blunt criticism of Wordsworth’s lengthy masterpiece: ‘passage after passage in the *Prelude* is either intentional burlesque or sheer prose.’¹⁶⁰ I will expand on Byron’s role in the ‘poetry/prose debate’ at a later stage in this chapter, but for the moment I would like to return to his use of rhyme in the previous passage as a means of

¹⁵⁸ Samuel Johnson, *Lives*, iii. 388.

¹⁵⁹ Joseph Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men*, ed. James M. Osborn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), I, 173. Hazlitt argues much the same thing in his essay ‘On the Prose-Style of Poets’: ‘Poets either get into this incoherent, undetermined, shuffling style, made up of ‘unpleasing flats and sharps’, of unaccountable starts and pauses, of doubtful odds and ends, flirted about like straws in a gust of wind; or, to avoid it and steady themselves, mount into a sustained and measured prose...’ in *The Plain Speaker: The Key Essays*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell), 2.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Robert Burns Shaw, *Blank verse: A Guide to its History and Use* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 26.

exploiting the ambivalence of words in conjunction to validate the importance of applying a fitting form to a fitting subject.

The whole tenor of Byron's critical pronouncements upon what he perceived to be an overwrought naturalism can be observed, once more, in the masterful ambivalence of his rhymes. The three couplet pairings, 'tends/ends', 'down/gown', 'strain/plain', actively, and ironically, convey the dwindling of epic ambitions to insignificant conclusions. The diction is unsophisticated, but their binding influence is not. By placing the terms of extravagance ('nonsense', 'pertness', 'pompous', 'babbling') at various stress points in the line, yet all the while maintaining an uncomplicated regularity in the simple and effortless rhymes that give the passage its sense, Byron is presenting a double affirmation of the relationship between structure and meaning. Yet again, it is in the semantic vexations of Byron's aurally harmonious rhymes that he most deeply interrogates the formal dilemmas of a lyrical blank-verse epic; of 'nonsense in a lofty note'. Byron admits the inadequacy of regulation to generate the highest poetic effects, and accordingly makes leeway for originality, but method and sensibility are never kept separate from the creative enterprise. Joseph Warton famously debunked Pope's genius on the basis that it lacked the exalted feeling of original composition: 'The Sublime and the Pathetic are the two chief nerves of all genuine poesy. What is there transcendently Sublime or Pathetic in POPE? In his works there is indeed, "*nihil inane, nihil arcessitum; — puro tamen fonti quam magno flumini prior;*" as the excellent Quintilian remarks of Lysias.'¹⁶¹ It is not too outlandish to suggest that Byron has in mind Warton's condemnation of Pope's poetry as 'nothing formless or laboured but

¹⁶¹ Joseph Warton, 'Dedications to Young' in *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (London: Printed for M. Cooper, 1756), xi.

more of a clear brook than a mighty river'¹⁶² when he ridicules Wordsworth's 'laboured, long exordium' and the unmanageable effect of describing 'clear brooks babbling' in a 'pompous strain'.

If Byron was critical of a Lake School poetics that insisted upon the 'immeasurable' protraction of thought and feeling, he was equally concerned with its predilection for an indivisible rhythmic flow. Jane Stabler argues that 'one of Wordsworth's characteristic modes of transition in "Tintern Abbey" is the placing of his own lyrical outbursts against the more gradual transitions of "the life of things"'¹⁶³ but in a letter to Leigh Hunt partially quoted earlier, Byron voiced his discontent at the way in which Wordsworth had since dissipated his creative ability by writing sluggish, inactive verse:

...his performances since "Lyrical Ballads" – are miserably inadequate to the ability which lurks within him: - there is undoubtedly much natural talent spilt over "the Excursion" but it is rain upon rocks where it stands and stagnates.
(*BLJ*, iv. 324)

This image of a stifled imagination represented by gathered water idly festering in an enclosed space is a fundamental and enduring one for Byron. He does not deny Wordsworth's ability as a poet, but shows that his talents languish as a consequence of monological inertia. They are marked by an unhealthy absence of activity and are without the necessary appreciation for dislocation required to produce compelling poetry.

Wordsworth's principal desire to fuse vision and thought, to form a perfect union in the 'blended might' of mind and nature, or as Hazlitt calls it, 'the perfect

¹⁶² My translation.

¹⁶³ Jane Stabler, 'Transition in Byron and Wordsworth', *Essays in Criticism* (2000) 50(4), 317.

coincidence of the image and the words with the feelings we have,¹⁶⁴ works its way into the fibre of his blank verse lyricism. His distinct poetic style is marked by a sonorous impressionism: its rhythmic regularities and deep sonic structures give his works a feel of unsculptured wholeness and indivisibility: ‘an eye made quiet by the power/ Of harmony’. It is a markedness that is decidedly unmarked, and as Christopher Ricks so gorgeously describes, ‘line gives way to line with an utmost intangibility of division.’¹⁶⁵ Wordsworth, and often to a greater extent Shelley, believed that if space and time could be held together by a coterminous fusion of forms, then the age-old dispute between art and nature could be unequivocally settled in an entirely new medium. Byron implicitly discarded this notion, not least because it naively and idealistically ignored the material practicalities of what that medium would look like.

In his response to Bowles’s charge that conspicuous refinement is unpoetical, Byron defended the place of art in poetry through a visual construction of vessels breaking the sea’s ‘vast but fatiguing monotony’ without which it would ‘sink into mere descriptive poetry – which in itself was never esteemed a high order of that art.’¹⁶⁶ In moments such as these, it would be easy to reduce Byron’s defence of Pope in the controversy to a straightforward justification of technical virtuosity over a natural style, but we would be doing so at the expense of considering his commitment to the powerful combinatory power of artifice with nature. It is not simply the vessels themselves that are poetical, but rather it is their ability to break the vast and fatiguing monotony of the sea which makes them so. Like many of his remarks in the letters to Bowles, Byron champions the function of art to delineate and offset an otherwise

¹⁶⁴ ‘On Poetry in General’, *Ibid*, 46.

¹⁶⁵ Christopher Ricks, ‘A Pure Organic Pleasure of the Lines’ in *William Wordsworth’s ‘The Prelude’: A Casebook*, ed. Stephen Gill, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 47.

¹⁶⁶ *CMP*, 131.

chaotic uniformity. As a retort to the authentication of a natural poetic depiction untainted by any noticeable signs of human construction – ‘I am told that the “Nature” of Attica would be *more* poetical without the ‘Art’ of the Acropolis? – Byron presents an image of unformed bewilderment: ‘without them *spots* of earth would be unnoticed and unknown – buried like Babylon and Nineveh in indistinct confusion.’¹⁶⁷

It was Byron’s lifelong allegiance to the principle of a discernible expressive conjunction that shaped his revulsion for the uncongealed lyricism of blank verse compositions from the latter half of the eighteenth century onwards. Of particular distaste to Byron was a haphazard elimination of the line and the stanza without a suitable substitution for the compartmentalisation of thought. Milton’s blank verse was distinguished by its comparative deliberateness of rhythm, but it was also characterised by a high variation of stresses; its alternating active iambs and slow spondees working together to create a multiplicity of effects upon the reader. The force of Milton’s art is created by its compelling forward propulsion which is, nevertheless, defied by countless pretences for attention. One should not forget that Milton’s dual purpose, as it is laid out in the preface to *Paradise Lost*, was to abolish rhyme in order to extend the line and have ‘the sense variously drawn out from one verse to another’, but it also insisted on maintaining a degree of rhetorical control, for ‘true musical delight’ consists only in ‘apt numbers’ and ‘fit number of syllables.’¹⁶⁸ As Marvell exclaimed in his dedicatory ‘On Paradise Lost’, in double admiration for the form and content, ‘Thy Verse created like thy Theme Sublime, / In Number, Weight, and Measure, needs not Rhime.’¹⁶⁹ It was Milton’s technical virtuosity which led to Keats’s abandoning of *Hyperion*: ‘Miltonic

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 133-4.

¹⁶⁸ John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957), 210.

¹⁶⁹ Andrew Marvell, ‘On Mr. Milton’s Paradise Lost’ in *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith (London: Pearson Longman, 2003), 183.

verse cannot be written but in the verse of art. I wish to devote myself to another sensation',¹⁷⁰ and the inability of so many others to imitate his syntactic dynamism which had the likes of Isaac Watts (1709) protesting against 'the unmanly softness of the numbers, and the perpetual chime of even cadences.'¹⁷¹

Without the corresponding deference to rhetorical variety, Wordsworth's syntax in *The Excursion* is less dazzling than Milton's, since his often lengthy suspended sentences and extended blank verse enjambment frequently work to conceal rather than accentuate their successive points. In their attempts to transcend the boundary between the mind and external reality, Wordsworth and Shelley aimed at a timeless verse of naturalised equivalents; a verse without demonstrable punctuation. In *Home at Grasmere*, Wordsworth advanced his wish for a 'dreamlike blending' of 'the whole / Harmonious landscape: all along the shore / The boundary lost – the line invisible / That parts the image from reality' (574-7), while Shelley paid homage to the boundless 'sea profound / of ever-spreading sound.' The synaesthetic disintegration of image into sound and sound into image is fundamental to an organic poetics that seeks to attain 'the blended holiness of earth and sky' (*Home at Grasmere*, 144) because it offers the potential for a means of fusion that does not have to account for its artistic procedures. The absence of sharp-edged language and noticeable punctuation produces emotional effects upon the reader and in doing so, frees the poet from having to supply a logical meaning for this effect. The syntactic duration of that impression and the deep resonance it achieves upon the subconscious depends upon the type of endless and seamless indivisibility of Wordsworth's leech-gather in *Resolution and Independence*: 'his voice to me was like a

¹⁷⁰ *KL*, ii. 212.

¹⁷¹ Isaac Watts, 'Preface' to *Horæ lyricæ. Poems, chiefly of the lyric kind* (London: Printed and sold by Rogers and Fowler, 1709), xx.

stream /Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide.¹⁷² While at least two of the above examples are composed in rhyme, their uniform continuity of rhythm conveys a sense of openness and, at times, opaqueness. But for an Augustan sensibility it also teeters on the edge of an empty and incomprehensible impressionism.

For Byron, the poetic line, and its role in showing the connection between ideas is an important measure of measure. It moves the poem varyingly because it involves both recurrence and duration and must therefore be regarded as a constituent element of verse that has a discernible relationship among its other elements. An inconspicuous synthesis of the like proposed by Shelley and the Lakers imperils the very role of poetry in exploiting the gaps between words and things. Take these lines upon the ‘now omitted line’ in *Hints from Horace*:

Let Judgement teach him wisely to combine
With future parts the now omitted line.
This shall the author choose, and that reject,
Precise in style, and cautious to select;
Nor slight applause will candid pens afford
To him who furnishes a *wanting* word

(HfH, 67-72)

As we will come to see in some of the early reviews of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage III & IV*, Byron seldom advocated a purity of manner or upheld the pleasures of a stiffly regular style, but his close attention to the pliable potential of poetic contours and their role in establishing a fundamental relationship between internal parts is unmistakable. The drawing of ‘future parts’ back to the poetic line gives credence to lineation as the indication of a set of expectations and conventions which establish how its verbal sequence is to be read. But there is more here than the best words in the best

¹⁷²William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940-49.), ii. 239.

arrangement. These comments hold implications not only for the heightening of sustained emotion, but for the precision of demarcated thought. For instance, the enjambment of ‘combine / With future parts’ is not in itself valuable. Its power depends on its visible relation to the other formal elements in the stanza and, more specifically, to the binding nature of the adjacent line-ending rhyme. In this way, the poetic line serves as a catalyst and calibrator of the stanza’s tone, without which the tenor of its energy would be reduced. The Author’s choice of ‘this and that’ participates in the action of selection and separation that Byron so earnestly entreats throughout *Hints from Horace*. It does not preclude amplitude, but the structural firmness of the stanza allows the poet to expand or gather the line and to vary the rhythms accordingly.

Such technical exactness (‘Precise *in style*’) permits an ambivalently demanding diction: ‘Nor slight applause will candid pens afford / To him who furnishes a wanting word’. It is a fatal distinction for Byron’s poetry to read this as a statement of deficiency rather than a demanding urge upon the reader. There are plenty of wanting words in Byron’s verse,¹⁷³ but very few of them are naïvely deficient in meaning. Words are seldom employed for their mellifluous sounding, but hold their worth in marked affiliation with the rhythm and structure of the stanza. Candid pens ‘afford’ the opportunity for demanding words and demanding considerations. There is a striking resemblance between Byron’s fear of an unintelligible indivisibility of thought and

¹⁷³ Take these lines from stanza 22 of *Beppo*:

She was not old, nor young, nor at the years
 Which certain people call a “certain Age” —
 Which yet the most uncertain age appears.
 Because I never heard, nor could engage
 A person yet by prayers, or bribes, or tears,
 To name, define by speech, or write on page.
 The period meant precisely by that word,
 Which surely is exceedingly absurd. (*Beppo*, 169-177)

feeling, and the anxiety voiced by Hugh Blair nearly fifty years earlier on the emergence of a disconnected lyrical mode:

I do not require that an Ode should be as regular in the structure of its parts, as a Didactic, or an Epic Poem. But still, in every Composition, there ought to be a subject, there ought to be parts which make up a whole; there should be a connection of those parts with one another. The transitions from thought to thought may be light and delicate, such as are prompted by a lively fancy, but still they should be such as preserve the connection of ideas, and show the author to be one who thinks, and not one who raves.¹⁷⁴

Here Blair, like Byron in many of his most heightened lyrical moments, makes room for 'light and delicate' transitions of thought but insists that there still be coherent connections between them. Comparisons such as these demonstrate an essential continuity between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that has often been neglected by critics of Romanticism. Housman may have praised Blake for the evocative symbolism of his verse: 'That mysterious grandeur would be less grand if it was less mysterious, if the embryo which all that it contains should endue form and outline, and suggestion condense itself into thought',¹⁷⁵ but the poet of *Albion* frequently defended the merit of enclosing contours. He does so here, in the clearest possible statement of this rule: 'The great and golden rule of art, as well as life, is this: That the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art.'¹⁷⁶ There is undoubtedly a transformation in the poetic transitions of mind and matter during this period, one that blurs formal boundaries and dwells in 'mystery and uncertainty', but this was accompanied by a permeating fear, as Frederick Garber puts

¹⁷⁴ Hugh Blair, 'On Lyric Poetry' in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (London: printed for A. Strahan, T. Cadell, and W. Creech, 1787), iii. 148.

¹⁷⁵ A.E. Housman, *The Name and Nature of Poetry* (Bromsgrove: Housman Society, 2006), 38.

¹⁷⁶ Quoted in Garber, Frederick, *Self, Text and Romantic Irony: The Example of Byron* (Princeton, N.J.: University Press, 1992), 127.

it, 'that when being is deprived of outline it cannot be anything more than being in potential.'¹⁷⁷

As a poet concerned, above all, with the complex relation of words with things and the thorny relationship between words and their possible meanings, Byron was instinctively unwilling to allow for such a tenuous aesthetic to go unheeded. It does not fit comfortably into the heterogeneous poetics of Byron's verse and if Wordsworth endeavoured toward an eternal and undeviating aesthetic, Byron prided himself on his variousness. It was, after all, Bowles's allegiance to uniformity in the title of his attack on Pope that so enraged him: 'but I do hate that word "*invariable*." What is there of *human*, be it poetry, philosophy, wit, wisdom, science, power, glory, mind, matter, life, or death, which is "*invariable*?"...Of all arrogant baptisms of a book, this title to a pamphlet appears the most complacently conceited.'¹⁷⁸ Embedded in the complaint against a title that is not only 'conceited' but 'complacently conceited' is a double attack upon its too easily conception for the complexities of life and art.

We gain a sense of the particular nature of Byron's insistence upon literary markedness in these lines upon the ladies of the English aristocracy:

With other Countesses of Blank — but rank,
 At once the 'lie' and the '*élite*' of crowds;
 Who pass like water filtered in a tank,
 All purged and pious from their native clouds;
 Or paper turned to money by the Bank:
 No matter how or why, the passport shrouds
 The '*passé*' and the passed, for good society
 Is no less famed for tolerance than piety:

That is, up to a certain point, which point
 Forms the most difficult in punctuation.
 Appearances appear to form the joint

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 124.

¹⁷⁸ *CMP*, 129.

On which it hinges in a higher station.
 And so that no explosion cry 'aroint
 Thee, Witch!' or each Medea has her Jason;
 Or (to the point with Horace and with Pulci)
 'Omne tulit punctum, quæ miscuit utile dulci.' (DJ, XIII. 633-48)

The richly constructed significance of connotation and punctuation could not be more urgently and ironically stressed in these lines. While their collective title suggests an empty uniformity, there is nothing of the simple or permanent relationship between words, images and sounds that we find in high Romantic lyricism. For example, if we were to examine Byron's rhyming of 'clouds' with 'crowds' alongside Wordsworth's famous example in which the drifting subject that 'floats on high o'er vales and hills' meets a multitude of daffodils which are as 'continuous as the stars that shine...stretched in never-ending line,'¹⁷⁹ we could not help but notice the conspicuous rhetorical complexity of the former set against the gorgeous mellifluousness of the latter. Byron's image is not of constitutive and dimensional sameness (of mood and vision merged), but of a tension between sameness and difference that rests upon a vital linguistic variance. Like many of Byron's verse satires, the stanza simulates a difficulty of linguistic interpretation even as it performs it. The impurity of the Countesses of Blank rests upon their coinciding contradictions – 'At once the 'lie' and the 'elite' of crowds' – and is negotiated through a nexus of mixed rhetorical devices and semantic constructions.

This kind of elaborate verbal positioning holds the twin reputations of the women together, but it also holds them in doubt, and epitomizes the complexity with which Byron handles decisions about poetic form and framing when he is driven by the need to produce unambiguous definitions. The variety of tenses employed to connected

¹⁷⁹ Wordsworth, William. *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ii. 216.

terms – ‘purged/pious /*passé* /passed’ – works across shifting metaphors of nature and culture (from purifying clouds to the printing of money) and confounds any attempt on behalf of the reader to establish an uncomplicated or coalescing affinity between idea and image. But this is not a neoclassical arrangement of difference in sameness because it self-reflexively considers the very problem of finding a suitable reconciliatory arrangement even as it fails to produce it. Good society may be both pious and tolerant, but it is difficult to fix a limit between them, and the pressure to do so ‘forms the most difficult [point] in punctuation.’ The full force of these rhetorical questions pivots upon a grammatical hinging of ‘point’ (meaning) on ‘joint’ (juncture): at once the connection and the weak point between them. The final unravelling of the ostensibly unsullied reputations of the Countesses of Blank is navigated along an unsettled assortment of classical and literary allusions with mixed modes and dual purposes. In Byron word and thought can be indivisible, but never purely so.

‘Through still continu'd fusion’

A criticism that proceeds on the assumption that good poetry embodies conflicts and works through resistances or surprises, as Byron’s assuredly does, will have trouble accounting for the structural and thematic excellence of a poem like *The Excursion*. In Byron’s mind, where metrical and expressive structures are seamlessly commensurate the poet forgoes one of the chief means at his disposal for creating complexity and tension; he denies, as Samuel Johnson remarked, ‘those happy combinations of words

which distinguish poetry from prose'.¹⁸⁰ Simplicity, naturalness, and the absence of elaborate contrivance are at the heart of Wordsworth's blank verse but they also relinquish, at times, a vital word-play and tension. It might be that Wordsworth himself saw conflict itself as a poetic deficiency: an inability in the poet to be exquisitely fitted to the natural world: 'the medium through which, in poetry, the heart is to be affected, is language: a thing subject to endless fluctuations and arbitrary associations. The genius of the poet melts these down for his purpose but they retain their shape and quality in him who is not capable of exerting, within his own mind, a corresponding energy.'¹⁸¹ As John Bayley suggests, in many of their procedures the blank verse of *The Excursion* and *The Prelude* present an exceedingly undramatic poetry. Wordsworth's most ambitious poems are 'engrossed in exploration' argues John Bayley, 'poetry surrender[ring] the province of human drama and conflict almost wholly to [a] new form.'¹⁸² Mary Jacobus heralds this univocalism as Wordsworth's triumph in reconciling his own voice with that of nature: 'drowned neither by the voice of the sublime – Milton's voice – nor by the clamour of all the other voices by which the poet risks being possessed, the voice of nature permits a loss of individuality which is at once safe and unifying,'¹⁸³ while Paul Fry comments upon the abiding uniformity of *The Excursion*: 'all the characters sound alike, speaking the same timeless, stately blank verse with no relief to be had even from changes in tone.'¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ *Lives*, ii. 124.

¹⁸¹ From the 'Preface' in William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*, ed. Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2008), 174.

¹⁸² *The Romantic Survival*, 29.

¹⁸³ Mary Jacobus, 'The Lyric voice of *The Prelude*' in *William Wordsworth's The Prelude: a casebook*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 126.

¹⁸⁴ Paul H. Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 145.

Byron thought this the major fault of Wordsworth's efforts after *Lyrical Ballads*: that its smooth, unruffled uniformity and want of sharpness was a defect which was founded upon his isolation from the range of public dialogue. The flatness of these efforts, which are like 'rain upon rocks where they stand and stagnate,' is closely related to Wordsworth's isolation from society. Having acquainted his ear with only the sound of his own voice or, at least, only that of a small group of like-minded friends and family, there was but little clash, dramatic fluctuation, or unexpected contrariety of opinion in his poetry to promote the multivocality of good verse:

...but he [Hogg], and half of these Scotch and Lake troubadours, are spoilt by living in little circles and petty societies...Lord, Lord, if these home-keeping minstrels had crossed your Atlantic or my Mediterranean, and tasted a little open boating in a white squall...how it would enliven and introduce them to a few of the sensations! – to say nothing of an illicit amour or two upon shore, in the way of essay upon the Passions, beginning with simple adultery, and compounding it as they went along. (*BLJ*, iv. 152)

This excerpt contains many of Byron's deepest poetical inclinations and disinclinations: his distaste for the artless lyricism and trifling circumscriptions of exclusive literary coteries; his predisposition towards enlivened motion and worldly edification; and his artistic tendency to compound ostensibly simple scenarios rather than working to simplify complex procedures in a single philosophical vision. He presents a picture of the 'Lake troubadours' isolated and immobilised by their setting, not vitalised and animated by strong imaginative processes. This notion has been well captured by Byron scholars, many of whom quote his infamous putdown in the Dedication to *Don Juan*:

You, Gentlemen! by dint of long seclusion
 From better company have kept your own
 At Keswick, and, through still continued fusion
 Of one another's minds, at last have grown
 To deem as a most logical conclusion,

That Poesy has wreaths for you alone;
 There is a narrowness in such a notion,
 Which makes me wish you'd change your lakes for ocean.
 (*DJ*, 'Dedication', 33-40)

The urging desire for a broadened perspective in the last lines has been quoted almost to death by critics, but it is the wonderfully loaded phrase 'still continu'd fusion' that most perfectly apprehends the theoretical deficiencies of a Lake School poetics which insisted upon producing the 'spousal verse / of [a] great consummation' (*HaG*, i. 810-11). The homonymic 'still' is used to denote both its motionless adjectival sense and its unchanging adverbial import, while the feeling of a passive yet interminable reciprocity is upheld by the enervated activity of a 'still continu'd fusion'. It captures the sustained suspension of contrary impulses and the stale marriage of accommodating minds. While the expression is singularly Byronic, the sentiment is not. In a note accompanying Hunt's parody of Wordsworthian diction in *The Feast of the Poets*, the poet draws attention to an apparent division in the origin and nature of authorial power by intimating towards two separate modes of creative activity:

He thinks us over-active and would make us over-contemplative...we are, he thinks, too much crowded together, and too subject, in consequence, to high fevered tastes and worldly infections. Granted; - he on the other hand, lives too much apart, and is subject, we think, to low-fevered tastes and solitary morbidities.¹⁸⁵

These lines may just as well have been written by Byron who expressed frequent objection to the manner in which Wordsworth plunged himself into the inward life and cut himself off from the modern spirit.

In the 'Dedication' to *Don Juan*, Byron playfully inverts the Lake School's epic aspirations by insinuating that they gained inspiration from 'Pedestrian Muses' –

¹⁸⁵ Leigh Hunt, *The Feast of the Poets: with other pieces in verse* (London: Printed for Gale and Fenner, 1815), 107-8.

motivation that is both uninspired and, for all their walking among the fells of Cumbria, limited in manoeuvrability. The implication is that in writing poems such as *The Excursion*, Wordsworth exchanged the demands of epic variety, with its striking balance between private and public voices, for a simple and undemanding homogeneity. A similar idea is conveyed in *Hints from Horace*:

With little rhyme, less reason, if you please,
The name of Poet may be got with ease,
So that not tuns of Helleboric juice
Shall ever turn your head to any use.
Write but like Wordsworth,— live beside a lake,
And keep your bushy locks a year from Blake,
Then print your book, once more return to Town,
And boys shall hunt your Bardship up and down. (469-76)

Part of the unease that Wordsworth's ostensibly conceited ease created for Byron was the lack of apparent craftsmanship in its procedures – 'with little rhyme, less reason, if you please' – and the peculiar collaboration of passivity and sporadic activity that it entailed. It has neither the graceful effortlessness of a genteel poet whose ease seems hardly conscious of its own existence: the smoothness of composition which glides into verse almost without notice, nor the workmanlike quality of a self-made poet of integrity. His casual and simulated disdain, as Byron saw it, had deep-seated implications for the social structures of the English poetic canon. As he later complained in Popean terms, "The "mob of gentlemen who write with ease" has indeed of late years (like other mobs) become so importunate, as to threaten an alarming rivalry to the regular body of writers who are not fortunate enough to be either easy or genteel'.¹⁸⁶ But Byron's engagements with style were seldom born from, or preoccupied

¹⁸⁶ *CMP*, 10.

with, matters of class,¹⁸⁷ and his scornful uses of the term ‘ease’ usually involved a sharp displeasure towards the basic lack of artistry: ‘fashion’s ease without its art’ (‘Farewell to Malta’, 42). C.S. Lewis may have wondered if the ‘plain style’ was ‘the result of art or accident,’¹⁸⁸ but Byron was never in doubt: ‘Nature, - will make no great Artist of any kind – and least of all a poet – the most artificial perhaps of all Artists in his very essence.’¹⁸⁹

In Byron’s poetry the concept of ‘high seriousness’ is not based upon inflated philosophical assertion, but identifies itself in practice with an Horatian ideal of dignity and form. This seriousness, and the air of dignified expression that overhangs his verse, may seem to be in remarkable contrast with the abundant imaginative leaps for which he is so well-known, but it nonetheless hovers over all that he writes. Byron’s aversion to unwavering stability, dangerously autonomous minds or systems, and a barren lyricism, engendered a poetry that is vitally dialectical. But his robustness was often accompanied by a delicate diplomacy, the poet ‘managing his pen’ as Walter Scott remarked, ‘with the careless and negligent ease of a man of quality.’¹⁹⁰ His verse often seems that it is not gathering itself consciously together, but there is a careful managing of thought and image which gives the general feeling of a sensitive weightiness. Consider these lines from *The Island* as they portray the vessel’s unforced power, ‘In swifter ripples stream aside the seas, / Which her bold bow flings off with dashing ease’ (I, 227-228). The fastidious attention to detail, the swifter ripples causing a smooth outward parting of the water, is hardly noticed at first glance because the strength and energy of the vessel, with its ‘bold bow’ flinging and ‘dashing’ the flow of the waves as

¹⁸⁷ I take this up with more sustained focus in my final chapter on *Don Juan*.

¹⁸⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: a Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 207.

¹⁸⁹ *CMP*, 137.

¹⁹⁰ *CH*, 214.

it pursues its determined course, has our immediate attention. The image is detailed but not forced, nonchalant but not lazy or fatigued.

The negligent easiness of a prose-like blank verse clearly troubled Byron and is evident in many of his public and private reflections on the subject: ‘The Seasons of Thomson would have been better in rhyme, although still inferior to his *Castle of Indolence*; and Mr. Southey’s Joan of Arc no worse, although it might have taken up six months instead of weeks in the composition.’¹⁹¹ The imputation against a slipshod hastiness may seem ironic in light of Byron’s famously rapid composition, but there is a basic tenor of ease without intensity which separates them. This division has a class foundation, but its concerns over an essentially flat or unspecific blank-verse style has its roots in the eighteenth century attachment to an active poetic diversity. Swift complained that there was very little narrative variance in the *Seasons*, ‘I am not over fond of them, because they are all description and nothing is doing whereas Milton engages me with actions’,¹⁹² while Johnson grumbled against the unstructured sameness of Thompson’s blank-verse, ‘the great defect of the Seasons is want of method...Of many appearances subsisting all at once, no rule can be given why one should be mentioned before another; yet the memory wants the help of order, and the curiosity is not excited by suspense or expectation.’¹⁹³ The point here, is that unless it exhibits the ‘force of style’ which Hazlitt so admired in Milton, or the ‘Magnitude of Contrast’¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ *CMP*, 112.

¹⁹² Denis Donoghue, *Jonathan Swift: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 98.

¹⁹³ *Lives*, iv. 177.

¹⁹⁴ Several of Keats’s notes on *Paradise Lost* praise Milton’s dexterity in braiding together contrasting elements as a means of breaking the rhythmic arrangement of the verse. Most directly, Keats’s second note declares, ‘There is a greatness which the *Paradise Lost* possesses over every other Poem—the Magnitude of Contrast and that is softened by the contrast being ungrotesque to a degree—Heaven moves on like music throughout—Hell is also peopled with angels it also move[s] on like music not grating and harsh but like a grand accompaniment in the Base to Heaven.’ Elsewhere, in note six, he celebrates the mixture of ‘light and shade—the sort of black brightness.’ See Beth Lau, *Keats’s Paradise Lost* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 23-27.

which Keats held to be the defining feature of *Paradise Lost*, blank verse may offer little more than a prolonged line of naked feeling without argument.

Blank verse may thus liberate the poet from the burden of rhyming, but it levies its own more demanding form of restraint at the level of organization. It is a form that necessarily conveys multiple submissions to an over-arching authority and must therefore accommodate the prosaic without sliding too plainly or for too long into mere prose. As Shelley suggests in his preface to *The Revolt of Islam*, it is a form ‘which affords no shelter for mediocrity.’ It must be supple and flexible enough to act, as it were, like a springboard from which the poet can launch into those climatic moments of emotional crisis or heightened vision as Wordsworth does so masterfully in *The Prelude*. But if it cannot achieve this leap, as Byron shrewdly attests in a letter to Thomas Moore, it could prove dull and lifeless: ‘In Blank verse, Milton Thomson and our Dramatists are the beacons that shine along the deep but warn us from the rough & barren rock on which they are kindled.’¹⁹⁵ This comment parallels his remark that *The Excursion* is ‘rain spilt upon rocks where it stands and stagnates’ and demonstrates his feeling that the interminable motion of the unrhymed pentameter – in its path of ceaseless binding and inexorable continuation – may actually achieve an opposite effect to that which it intends.

While defenders of blank verse since Milton have professed a freedom from structural confinement, the kind of systematic repetition by which it is generated often leads to mere ‘prosaic simplicity’. In a review of Browning’s poetry by George Eliot, Wordsworth is criticised in strikingly similar terms: ‘He is, on the whole, a far more musical poet than Browning, yet we remember no line in Browning so prosaic as many

¹⁹⁵ *BLJ*, iv. 13.

of Wordsworth's, which in some of his finest poems have the effect of bricks built into a rock.¹⁹⁶ The determination to present an ageless and unchanging vision that can be comprehended completely in a single form always runs the risk of producing a solid and motionless system of enclosures. Like Coleridge's astonishing description of the waterfall, 'that infinity of Pearls & Glass Bulbs – the continual *change* of the *Matter*, the perpetual *sameness* of the *Form*',¹⁹⁷ the synchronised motion and stillness offered by blank verse continuity blurs its points of origin and termination. 'The verse is quiet in sound' says Philip Hobsbaum, in tacit reference to Coleridge's 'sounds of undistinguishable motion', and 'while it moves, it seems scarcely to be moving.'¹⁹⁸ Yet in trying to supplant the supposed lifeless conventions of neoclassical opposition with an all-encompassing and accommodating permanence, it hovers on a sterile evenness. As Blake, and later Byron, would contend, 'energy is the only life' – if one is going to act from impulse and not rule, then that impulse needs to sustain a vitality through variety.

Wherever he can, Byron uses the rhetorical expedients at his disposal to circumvent a narrow, one-sided, presentation of reality and to create an internal pressure that will powerfully represent his thematic dilemma. One of his most effective ways of securing tension in individual lines and passages is to make syntax, diction and meaning fight against form. A notable instance where this provides the motivation for the verse is in the sensory and psychological deprivation suffered by the prisoner of Chillon after the death of his brother, 'The last – the sole – the dearest link / Between [him] and the eternal brink':

¹⁹⁶ She continues 'To read [his] poems is often a substitute for thought: fine sounding conventional phrases and the sing-song of verse demand no co-operation in the reader; they glide over his mind with a speaker's exordium on 'feelings too deep for expression'. *Robert Browning: the critical heritage*, ed. Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley (London: Routledge, 1995), 23.

¹⁹⁷ Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, iii. 853.

¹⁹⁸ Philip Hobsbaum, *Meter, Rhythm and Verse Form* (London: Routledge, 1996), 16.

What befell me then and there
 I know not well – I never knew –
 First came the loss of light, and air,
 And then of darkness too:
 I had no thought, no feeling – none –
 Among the stones I stood – a stone,
 And was, scarce conscious what I wist,
 As shrubless crags within the mist;
 For all was blank, and bleak, and grey;
 It was not night – it was not day,
 It was not even the dungeon-light,
 So hateful to my heavy sight,
 But vacancy absorbing space,
 And fixedness – without a place;
 There were no stars – no earth – not time –
 No check – no change – no good – no crime –
 But silence, and a stirless breath
 Which neither was of life nor death;
 A Sea of stagnant idleness
 Blind, boundless, mute, and motionless!

(*Prisoner of Chillon*, 231-250)

The organising concept of this passage is centred on the contrasting shape of the rhyme scheme as it is employed to depict an unnerving lack of contrast. This paradox of binding and unbinding fights against the logical process of the depiction, as does the finely balanced interchange upon which the prisoner's analysis of the uncontainable and illogical proceeds. Much like the speakers in *The Lament of Tasso* and *The Prophecy of Dante* who find a peculiar type of freedom within their prison walls, the prisoner presents a complicated rather than a complementary psychological engagement with his historical moment. His unity with the environment – 'Among the stones I stood – a stone' – is the result of an unwanted sensory dispossession. It is a shortfall which is doubly enhanced by the enervating shift from alternating rhyme to couplet pairing, and furthered by the triple negative in 'I had no thought, no feeling – none'. Yet there is nothing flat about the verse which toils to create a powerful feeling of oblivion in the reader. Byron takes advantage of the power that lies in negation and emphasises the

importance of connections by describing the terrifying loss of connection. The speaker articulates, in carefully balanced though highly punctuated couplet octosyllables, the sense of obscure nothingness brought about by an all-encompassing conformity to his setting, ‘vacancy absorbing space, / And fixedness – without a place’. However, there are two prominent inversions in this phrase: the imperiously active ‘vacancy’ with its engrossing assimilation of ‘space’; and the patently unsteady equilibrium of ‘fixedness – without a place’. This liminal space, which defiantly resists description and meaning by presenting no external resistance to change, dismantles the oppositions between the speaker and his environment in the act of creating them. It is immeasurable and indivisible, ‘Blind, boundless, mute, and motionless’, and unchangeable, ‘A sea of stagnant idleness’, yet it plays on the disconnected union between the prisoner and his mental/spatial oblivion. In doing so it represents a deeper split in that conception than a blank verse monologue ever could.

‘Poetic souls delight in prose insane’

If the artless spirit of the Romantic blank-verse apologists required a medium that was flawlessly agreeable in its parts, it risked a colourless docility which threatened to throw the whole distinction between poetry and prose into confusion. This delicacy between a spontaneous poetics and an unclassified expression without formal indicators was brought to the fore long before Byron’s censure of *The Excursion*. John Dennis may have solicited a poetry ‘that is everywhere extremely pathetic’ on the one hand, and one which ‘is writ in very good numbers’ on the other, but if the latter ‘wants Passion’ he

warned, ‘it can be but measur’d Prose.’¹⁹⁹ As the traditional obligations to composite structure and artifice were relinquished, it became difficult to fix the constitutional limits between verse and prose. Coleridge’s note to *Fears in Solitude* expressed this same difficulty: ‘NB. The above is perhaps not Poetry – but rather a sort of middle thing between Poetry and Oratory – *Sermioni Propriara* – some parts are, I am conscious, too tame even for animated prose.’²⁰⁰ Yet the difficulty in making this separation, which beset the like of Coleridge and Shelley, was never felt by Byron who repudiated the notion of a purely sincere and uncategorisable aesthetic. When he dismissed the spotlessly acquiescent poetics of contemporary blank verse, not only was Byron adding his own insights to the debate begun by Wordsworth’s claims in his ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads*, he was also protecting the unique status of the poet created by Dryden and Pope: In a jocundly shrewd defence of the poetic craft, Byron criticises Wordsworth:

Who warns his friend “to shake off toil and trouble,
And quite his books, for fear of growing double”;
Who, both by precept and example, shows
That prose is verse, and verse is merely prose,
Convincing all, by demonstration plain,
Poetic souls delight in prose insane;

(EBSR, 239-44)

Once more, the efficacy of the plain style, both as a principle and a practice, is overstated so as to bring its ultimate value into question. Much like the dual charge in ‘simple Wordsworth’ the ‘mild apostate from poetic rule’, Byron’s sardonic recognition that Wordsworth has convinced all ‘by demonstration plain’ jests upon the naivety and misleading straightforwardness of those well-known claims in the ‘Preface’. As though to offset the glaring contradiction of a principle that claims to transcend the edicts of

¹⁹⁹ Quoted in Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre*, 72.

²⁰⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Selected Poems*, ed. Richard Holmes (London: Penguin, 2000), 308.

established generic distinction, and to score a point for the art of poetry, Byron adds the jab that the deficiencies of Wordsworth's verse negatively verify his claims. In an appending note he jokes: 'Mr. W. in his preface labours hard to prove, that prose and verse are much the same, and certainly his precepts and practice are strictly conformable.' The naturalising schema put forward in the 'Preface' as a justification for blurring the lines between poetry and prose is ironically methodized into regularity here through the 'strictly conformable' relation of principle and practice. Again, the notion of a spontaneous artistic production is ridiculed for its faulty and unwanted consequences because it is 'Poetic souls [who] delight in prose insane'. The Horatian ideal of poetic 'delight' is overturned to imply an undiscerning and easily satisfied audience, while the production of 'prose insane' suggests a medium of uncontrolled passion rather than stylistic freedom. This contradiction between theory and execution is frequently pulled apart by Byron, who declares in canto I of *Don Juan* that: 'if ever I should condescend to prose, / I'll write poetical commandments' (1625-6). He never allows for perfect equivalents in the positive sense.

Wordsworth and Coleridge refused to make any qualitative distinction between poetry and prose on the grounds that poetry was an essence or spirit of expression rather than a formal entity. In this way, both poetry and prose are directed by a harmony of intention that disqualifies any promotion of verse as a superior medium of communication. Shelley advanced this same idea in his *Defence* by arguing that 'the distinction between poetry and prose is a vulgar effort' and supported his claim by positing that 'Plato was essentially a poet' due to 'the truth & splendour of his imagery and the melody of his language.'²⁰¹ The lyrical and universal criteria by which a poem is labelled as such is explicitly de-historicised in these accounts. The verity of essential

²⁰¹ *SPP*, 514.

forms is upheld to conceal the transitions in literary milieu in a kind of timeless effort to uphold the definition of a poem as a living Platonic condition: as if ‘a poem were a poem always, by virtue of some quintessential character which different ages may merely call by different names.’²⁰² For Byron, this appeal to an immutable continuity, to ‘the beautiful and permanent forms of history’, presented an underlying incongruity because it threatened to cut one off from a formidable literary tradition. Once again, it is this fear of a poetic disinheritance that drives his observations upon the defectiveness of a Lake-school aesthetics which discards historical materiality in favour of spiritual transcendence. It is at the heart of his contemptuous remarks on Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* as the ‘very worst prose that ever was written to prove that Pope was no poet and that William Wordsworth is’²⁰³ and underlies his punning response to James Hogg’s proposal for a new periodical, ‘So much for the Poetic Mirror, which may easily be, God knows, entitled to hang higher than the prose one.’²⁰⁴

In her excellent account of this debate, Lucy Newlyn describes the early-nineteenth century as ‘a period of intense generic experimentation in which the hierarchical positioning of poetry over prose became unsettled, and writers seized on the precarious interplay between genres to make political claims.’²⁰⁵ For the moment I would like to set aside the political implications of Byron’s consternation at a poetic disinheritance and concentrate on the literary schism that provoked his anxiety. His determination to discredit the merits of blank verse beyond *Paradise Lost* is certainly influenced by a courtly elevation of the heroic couplet and its relation to civilised discourse, but it is predicated principally upon the deep threat that a structureless

²⁰² John Hollander, ‘Romantic Verse Form and the Metrical Contract’ in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York; London: Norton, 1970), 260.

²⁰³ *CMP*, 103.

²⁰⁴ *BLJ*, iv. 84.

²⁰⁵ *The Anxiety of Reception*, 186.

unrhymed pentameter presented to the status of poetry at large. In a letter to Murray in 1819 Byron criticised the poem by Parson Hodgson in the irregular ‘new-fangled’ Spenserian stanza but praised the poet for defending Pope ‘against the bastard Pelicans of the poetical winter day – who add insult to their Parricide – by sucking the blood of the parent of English *real* poetry – poetry without a fault – and then spurning the bosom which fed them.’²⁰⁶ The sense of a lifeless spirit is evident again in Byron’s conviction that the active and continuous form-shaping activities of his contemporaries did not match up to their universal and totalising impulses.

The dethronement of Pope through ‘Parricide’ not only endangers the generic hierarchy within poetry, but it imperils the steady classical position of poetry as the highest order of expression. As John Hollander so comprehensively explains:

The crisis here occurs with Milton; and yet it is during the eighteenth century that...poetry...begins to have to confront the growth of prose as an authentic vehicle of imaginative expression. For Milton, blank verse had the virtues of a canonical poetic cadence, but by the middle of the eighteenth century, it was important that it be more like prose in some ways than rhymed verse could ever be.²⁰⁷

Poetry never inhabits anything remotely resembling this position in Byron: not only is it is not coterminous with prose, but it employs many of the figurative aspects which, in the age of plain style, had come to be considered as anti-poetical. In his ‘Farewell Petition to J.C.H’ composed in Constantinople in 1810, Byron impishly vows to uphold a classical tradition that converts the mundane and unstructured subjects of prose into a higher order: ‘All hail to Matthews...Tell him, that not in vain I shall essay / To read and trace our “old Horatian way” / And be (with prose supply my dearth of rhymes) /

²⁰⁶ *BLJ*, vi. 134.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 258.

Which better men have been in better times' (33, 37-40). One cannot but be struck by the kinship of this account and its cultivated nostalgia for the classical sublime. The impending loss of that kinship impelled many of Byron's deepest critical avowals, for he who would sooner go down with a noble arrangement than cut himself off from a time-honoured tradition:

'What say I?' – not a syllable further in prose;
 I'm your man 'of all measures', dear Tom, – so here goes!
 Here goes, for a swim on the stream of old Time,
 On those buoyant supporters, the bladders of rhyme.
 If our weight breaks them down, and we sink in the flood,
 We are smothered, at least, in respectable mud,
 Where the divers of Bathos lie drowned in a heap,
 And Southey's last Pæan has pillowed his sleep; –
 (Fragment of an Epistle to Thomas Moore)²⁰⁸

The most obvious attribute differentiating poetry from prose, beyond the metrical regularity of rhythm, is the physical demarcation of rhyme and the structural support that it provides in navigating the imaginative passage of the poet's thoughts. As I hope to have demonstrated already, Byron expressed serious concerns over the capacity of unrhymed poetry to sustain itself without these conventional demarcations, and his concerns would continue late into the nineteenth century and beyond, with Swinburne suggesting that 'a rhymeless lyric is a maimed thing.'²⁰⁹ Byron's argument in favour of rhyme is not necessarily Drydenian and rationalistic. He does not counter the extended 'Bathos' of a high-Romantic lyricism by arguing that the inevitable garb of all truly poetic experience is verse. For one thing, his unremitting alexandrines hint at, and allow for, a potential collapse of that arrangement. Here, as elsewhere, Byron's approach is guided by a sense of the traceable link between his late-Augustan coterie and a poetic

²⁰⁸ *CPW*, iii. 274.

²⁰⁹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Swinburne as Critic*, ed. Clyde Kenneth Hyder (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 80.

community of old. It depends upon a sense of literary history and formal continuity, and therefore echoes with the past: ‘Yet something may remain perchance to chime / With reason, and, what’s stranger still, with rhyme.’ (*Age of Bronze*, 546-7)

Byron’s poetry frequently turns upon the matter of rhyme and its implications for a genuine freedom within confinement. He prized the intricacies of a thoughtful poetic craftsmanship, ‘Prose poets like blank-verse, I’m fond of rhyme, / Good workmen never quarrel with their tools’ (*Don Juan*, I, 201-2) but was also willing to concede the discursive abandonment that his verse might entail without it:

But I am but a nameless sort of person
 (A broken Dandy lately on my travels)
 And take for Rhyme, to hook my rambling verse on,
 The first that Walker’s Lexicon unravels,
 And when I can’t find that, I put a worse on,
 Not caring as I ought for Critics’ cavils;
 I’ve half a mind to tumble down to prose,
 But Verse is more in fashion – so here goes (*Beppo*, 409-416)

The cavalier intemperance of the stanza, and its blatant exposure of a haphazard compositional method, stands in candid opposition to the lyrical ideal of instinctive creation. But if it does so, it also destabilises Byron’s multiple vindications of a judicious easiness and a dexterous artistry in *English Bards* and *Hints from Horace*. The knowingly dreadful rhyme of ‘verse on’ with ‘worse on’ is a connection so weak that it nearly ‘tumble[s] down to prose’ by Byron’s own definition of the unpoetical (‘blank verse and still blanker prose’), while the rebuff of ‘critic’s cavils’ is subsequently weakened by the commitment to write in verse because it ‘is more in fashion’. Even allowing for the deliberate obscurity of his mischievous tone here and elsewhere (‘But if a writer should be quite consistent, / How could he possibly show things existent?’ (*Don Juan*, 695-6), there are still radical discontinuities between the two central tenets of this

concurrent practice. Indeed, in a rhetorical extension of Shelley's claims for the universal poetic spirit, it may be the purpose of Byron's poetry to illustrate how ubiquitous are the aims of figurative language in poetic discourse and how readily they challenge any simple distinction between different kinds of verbal propriety.

But if Byron's reasoning works to complicate the system of priorities set up to distinguish poetry and prose, it does not merely collapse them. Instead his own work absorbs them into a new dialectical unity which relishes in the dramatic incongruity of its claims. In doing so, it once again dismisses all justifications for a pure or naïve style and upholds the fundamental vitality of poetry which must not only communicate, but must communicate with an urgency higher than prose. As he writes in dedication to George Canning, 'And never, even in that dull house, couldst tame / To unleavened prose thine own poetic flame; / Our last, our best, our only orator.' (*Age of Bronze*, 550-52) From one perspective, Byron's stance in the poetry/prose debate may appear to be fundamentally Burkean in its conservative impulses. 'They are not contented with their own grotesque edifice,' he argues in relation to Wordsworth and the Lake 'fraternity', 'unless they destroy the prior and beautiful fabric which preceded and which shames them and theirs forever and ever.'²¹⁰ However, any conviction that we might retain in that stance is once again troubled by the acknowledged conflict between his own creative and critical procedures: 'I have been amongst the builders of this Babel attended by a confusion of tongues – but never among the envious destroyers of the classical temple of our Predecessor.'²¹¹ The contradiction between Byron's predilections for poetic rambling and arbitrary choices, and his rejection of an incautious lyrical ease, is essential in explaining the dynamics of his poetry and the problems that it poses for

²¹⁰ *CMP*, 148.

²¹¹ *CMP*, 149.

critics because it testifies to his veneration of the structures of tradition (rather than viewing tradition as a timeless totality) without allowing himself to be bound by them.

With this I return full circle to Byron's fear that Milton's matchless strength of style had prompted a perilous attraction to blank verse autonomy which seriously jeopardised the future of the English poetic canon. A fitting example of how this might be true can be seen in Wordsworth's explanation for his belief that there is 'no essential difference between poetry and prose' in which he evokes the poet of *Paradise Lost* only to escape him: 'The truth of this assertion might be demonstrated by innumerable passages from almost all the poetical writings, even of Milton himself. I have not space for much quotation; but, to illustrate the subject in a general manner, I will here adduce a short composition of Gray...' ²¹² This slippery move away from Milton is uncharacteristic of Wordsworth who usually prided himself on his critical directness, but it is a necessary evasion for anyone calling up the complex structural forces of *Paradise Lost* to prove that poetry can be easily transliterated into prose. Although Milton may have liberated himself from the burden of rhyme, his grand theme implicitly repudiates an uncomplicated fusion of styles or liquid contour of utterance which transcend the distinctions between prose and verse. ²¹³ While it is possible to conceive of a flawless and unbroken spontaneity in the pre-lapsarian world of Adam and Eve:

Lowly they bowed adoring, and began
Their orisons, each morning duly paid

²¹² 'Preface' in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Michael Gamer, 176.

²¹³ Fiona Stafford has recently suggested that by 1802 Wordsworth had come to regard the Miltonic sonnet highly because, as he suggests in a letter, it offered 'an energetic and varied flow of sound crowding into narrow room more of the combined effect of rhyme and blank verse than can be done by any other kind of verse I know of.' Wordsworth, *Letters: Early Years*, I, 379, quoted in Fiona J. Stafford, *Reading Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 105. But without the parameters of that rhyme, it was prone to diffusiveness.

In various styles, for neither various style
 Nor holy rapture wanted they to praise
 Their Maker, in fit strains pronounced or sung
 Unmediated; such prompt eloquence
 Flowed from their lips, in prose or numerous verse

(*Paradise Lost*, v. 144-50)

once there has been a Fall, there will always be a gap between our ideals and the embodiment of those ideals; a rhetorical difference which undermines our instinctive rhythmical perfection. Wordsworth's stated attempt in the *Prospectus* to bridge that gap; to 'sing' of 'the individual mind that keeps its own / Inviolate retirement, and consists / With being limitless, the one great life' (8-10) was, for Byron, a philosophical desire that could not be met in poetry. Byron may have picked a soft target in *The Excursion*, and his criticisms of Wordsworth's blank verse are somewhat injudicious, but his impassioned response to the very idea of a purely lyrical blank verse epic tells us a great deal about what he valued most in the meaning and constitution of poetry.

Byron's epic paradigm in *Don Juan*, as George Ridenour so persuasively points out, is above all else, an epic of fallenness, and the creative opportunity that such fallenness presents. It is his sense of the power in adulterated variety, and not the longing after uncontaminated fusion, which expresses itself in his praise of Burns: 'What an antithetical mind! – tenderness, roughness – delicacy, coarseness – sentiment, sensuality – soaring and grovelling, dirty and deity – all mixed up in that one compound of inspired clay!'²¹⁴ If he felt that Wordsworth's talents were languishing in stagnation – the constant flow of his blank verse paradoxically fixing its subject in a timeless vision of immobility – then, as the *Edinburgh Monthly Review* suggests of Byron in relation to his efforts in *Don Juan*, 'He is gifted above all of his contemporaries with that divine energy which wakens all its touches into fervid animation...the warm and searching current of

²¹⁴ *BLJ*, iii. 239.

inspiration which pervades and exalts the inert materials of his art, and tends the charmed aspect of life to its slumbering elements.²¹⁵

²¹⁵ RR, B. ii. 792

3. ‘My pang shall find a voice’: *Manfred’s* Mixed Mode.

You and I, wandering over the world wide,
Chance to set foot upon a desert coast.
Just as we cry, “No human voice before
Broke the inveterate silence of these rocks!”
– Their querulous echo startles us; we turn:
What ravaged structure still looks o’er the sea?
Some characters remain, too!

Browning, *Paracelsus*. (Part iv. 439-445)²¹⁶

²¹⁶ Robert Browning, *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol.1, ed. Morse Peckham (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1969), 211.

Byron could not envisage the exercise of poetic genius exempt from conflict; exempt from the internal and external obstacles through which we become aware of the mind's difference from nature. Harold Bloom may have praised *Lyrical Ballads* for inaugurating 'modern poetry, the poetry of the growing inner self,'²¹⁷ but Byron implicitly rejects the historical expansion of the poetic imagination as an irreversible turn to subjective monologue because of its overwhelming threat to submerge all limits and distinctions in an undifferentiated play of lyricism. As I have endeavoured to demonstrate in my previous chapter, inherent in this refutation is an almost categorical scepticism for the expressive merits of blank verse, and in particular, a novel form of blank verse devoid of Milton's tapestry of dramatic words and thoughts.

Byron was reluctant to employ the form at all, and especially outside of the dramas. His most significant attempts at a romantic mode written in blank verse are the bleak, desolate lines of *Darkness* and the verse drama *Manfred*, with its curious blend of Shakespearean dialogue and Miltonic monologue which operates to amalgamate the dramatic and undramatic and hold them in tension. In the former, Byron implements a long single tablet of blank verse as a fitting mode for the representation of a fallen and discomposed world of blackness. Without the necessary contrast of day and night, the realm of earth (and poetry) is catastrophically obscure and chaotically undirected: its stars are 'rayless and pathless', its winds 'wither'd in the stagnant air.' But *Darkness* is a more straightforward portrayal of blank-verse barrenness, and it is in *Manfred* that he most directly explores the inertia of a purely ruminative mode by integrating it within a penetrating and concentrated declamatory discourse. In a letter to Kinnaird, Byron insisted that it was not to be regarded as a piece for the theatre, contending that 'it has

²¹⁷*The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1973), ii. 125.

no pretence to being called a drama – except that it is in dialogue & acts.²¹⁸ This is certainly true, but in having to defend its claims as a species of poetic composition, Byron gives prominence to *Manfred's* abiding dramatic structure and the rhetorical play within it. By writing a hybrid verse drama, a mode which McGann qualifies as ‘an index of Romanticism itself,’²¹⁹ Byron permits himself the possibility of operating in and between the solo voice of the lyric and the choral or social voice of drama.

The two primary approaches to the atmosphere of brooding consciousness in *Manfred* are either to see it, as Alan Rawes, Peter Cochran and George Ridenour do,²²⁰ as a production of Byron’s ‘Wordsworth phase’ of 1816-1817 in which he was immersing himself in transcendental philosophy amongst the Alps and experimenting in Romantic aesthetics while Shelley inundated him with lines from *The Excursion*,²²¹ or to view it, like Jerome McGann, Andrew Rutherford and Martyn Corbett, as a patent critique of Wordsworthian poetics.²²² There is strong merit in, and textual substantiation for, both contentions. His Alpine journal of that period shows an attempt to engross himself in the supernatural processes of nature (although admittedly not in the same manner as Wordsworth) while an early John Wilson review in *Blackwood's* pits the poem against the blank verse creations of his Laker counterpart: ‘He came into competition with Wordsworth upon his own grounds, and with his own

²¹⁸ *BLJ*, v. 195.

²¹⁹ Jerome J. McGann, *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 39.

²²⁰ In *Byron's Poetic Experimentation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), Rawes views *Manfred* as a transitional text and the last of Byron’s ‘Lakist Interlude,’ 102. Peter Cochran’s introduction to the poem on (http://www.internationalbyronsociety.org/images/stories/pdf_files/manfred_manuscript.pdf) suggests something similar, while George Ridenour places the lyrical-drama firmly within his ‘Wordsworthian Year’, see George Ridenour, ‘Byron in 1816: Four Poems from Diodati’ in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hiles and Harold Bloom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 453-65.

²²¹ Byron later told Thomas Medwin that Shelley ‘used to dose me with Wordsworth physic even to nausea’ *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell Jr. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1966), 194.

²²² See McGann’s Byron Foundation Lecture, ‘Byron and Wordsworth’ delivered in Nottingham on 27 May 1998. Rutherford describes it as Byron decisively ‘rejecting the Wordsworthian and Shelleyan notions of Childe Harold, Canto III’ (*A Critical Study*, 81), while Corbett described the piece as ‘a tragic reversal of Wordsworth’, see Corbett, Martyn, *Byron and Tragedy* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1988), 28.

weapons; and in the first encounter he vanquished and overthrew him.²²³ McGann rightly argues that Manfred's preoccupation with forgetting is an affront to the romantic poetics of remembrance, but his methodology is too strongly grounded in a psychology of opposition. It may be more useful to examine the work as a critique through exploration rather than a piece in compliance with or opposed to Wordsworthian aesthetics. In *Manfred*, Byron composes an argument about the condition of the creative imagination isolated from society and coalesced with nature as it is established in *The Excursion*, but the argument is mounted largely in stylistic terms, and in an intentionally dialectical relation to the dualistic poetics of Wordsworth's extended blank verse poem. As such, the drama both enacts a formal impasse of monological introspection, and fundamentally alters it to encompass a medium of dialogue and debate rather than an uncomplicated site of mutual reinforcement.

In the same *Blackwoods* review of 1817, John Wilson strikes at the heart of Byron's poetic achievement in *Manfred* by teasing out its fundamental stylistic difference from Wordsworth's blank verse meditations in *The Excursion*:

His description of the stormy night among the Alps – of the blending – the mingling – the fusion of his own soul, with the raging elements around him, – is alone worth all the dull metaphysics of the *Excursion*, and shows that he might enlarge the limits of human consciousness regarding the operations of matter upon mind, as widely as he has enlarged them regarding the operations of the mind upon itself. (RR, B. i. 118)

For Wilson, the energy and dynamism of Byron's descriptions of the raging elements acting upon Manfred as he struggles to summon a corresponding power from within, are an 'enlarging' or expanding of Wordsworth's colourless dualism where the human

²²³ RR, B. i. 118.

mind is as exquisitely fitted to the external world as the external world is fitted to the human mind. That *Manfred* would, in its earliest reception, elicit comparisons with Wordsworth's great metaphysical project suggests a thematic similarity, but it is on the level of style and execution that it so persuasively differs. Where Wordsworth aims to merge and blend 'Man and Nature' through a coalescing syntax of flawless reciprocation, Manfred's negative rupturing of harmony and identity is evident throughout. He attempts an interchange of sorts, but it is a deeply compromised one: the many dualities of body and spirit, individual and society, time and place within the verse drama are the source of a constructive tension rather than symmetry.

Peter Graham describes the poem's dynamic movement as 'a parade of negations stubbornly asserting Manfred's personal freedom' and dwells on the force of the protagonist's 'introspective and philosophical monologues, which teem with negations from the syntactic to the ontological.'²²⁴ As a result of this active and paradoxical interchange, the dangers of deciding for one poetic order rather than another, and congruently, for one account of the world rather than another, are the subject of the drama. If *Manfred* offers a stylistic riposte to the blank verse monologue more generally, it might also present a rather specific (though unreferenced) response to the poet-narrator's ruminative yearnings for the infinite in Shelley's *Alastor*. Although Byron never refers directly to Shelley's poem, it was published in the same year that he began *Manfred* and it is very likely that he would have received an early copy from Claire Clairmont who mentions its merits in a letter to him in 1816.²²⁵ The parallels in setting (the 'lone and silent hours' of the night); protagonist (the 'inspired and desperate

²²⁴ Peter Graham, 'Byron, Manfred, Negativity and Freedom' in *Liberty and Poetic Licence: New Essays on Byron*, ed. Bernard Beatty, Tony Howe and Charles E. Robinson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 51.

²²⁵ Claire Clairmont, *The Clairmont Correspondence*, ed. Marion Kingston Stocking (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), i. 29-31.

alchemist’); and plot (the individual ‘staking his very life on some dark hope’) are too obvious to be ignored, while Shelley’s epigraph allusion to *The Excursion* makes it an obvious candidate for comparison. Michael O’Neill calls upon this epigraph to argue that that Shelley’s creative intent is ‘simultaneously an act of homage and a form of critique.’²²⁶ I do not wish to explore the complicated relationship between those two poems because that is beyond the scope of this chapter, but Shelley’s poem presents yet another example of the lyrically insubstantial mode against which *Manfred* is composed.

This formal seizure and appropriation of romantic-style blank verse was noted in the *European Magazine* review of August 1817:

The style is truly Byronian, full of force and rapidity, with now and then exquisite touches of fancy and feeling; short pointed axioms and abrupt terminations are as usual frequent, and these not unfrequently make the “blank verse halt for it.” (RR, B. ii. 962)

As in many of the early reviews, Byron’s distinctive strength of style is emphasised in contrast to the flat equanimity of contemporary blank verse. Its mixed manner and cunning use of poetic line are highlighted to underscore both its sinuous flow and the poet’s masterful control of pause and cessation. In a cursory reflection on the poem in his essay on *Don Juan*, Ernest J. Lovell strikes upon the matter: ‘The blank verse is unusually firm, sure, and certain of itself and sets off to advantage the intervening lyrics.’²²⁷ Byron may have adopted a new mode that was recognised for its limitless pliability but as he himself said in a letter of 1817, *Manfred* was written ‘too much in my old style...[for]I am a devil of a mannerist.’²²⁸ The twin implications of a habitual

²²⁶ Michael O’Neill, ‘“A Kind of an Excuse”: Shelley and Wordsworth Revisited’ in *Literature and Authenticity, 1780-1900: Essays in Honour of Vincent Newey*, ed. Ashley Chanter, Michael Davies, and Philip Shaw (Farnham: Ashgate, 2001), 37.

²²⁷ Ernest J. Lovell, Jr., ‘Irony and Image in Don Juan’ in *English Romantic Poets*, 229.

²²⁸ *BLJ*, v. 185.

manner and of a general style built around the complex perspectival system opposed to ideal naturalism would not have been lost on a reader familiar with Byron's tone.

This characteristic and conscious amalgamation of styles has not been entirely ignored by modern critics, who are quick to identify *Manfred's* impurity of form. M.K. Joseph in particular, grappled with the unwieldy interaction of theme and style before concluding that the lyrical drama is little more than a 'confused mixture of genres.'²²⁹ David Eggenschwiler tries to circumvent this difficulty by arguing for a peculiar dramatic unity in which the essence of the play's fatal or tragic rhythm (its pervading sense of inevitability) is carried along by an intrusive, but ultimately unifying, comic tempo which sets the arbitrariness of the universe against the protagonist's mood of wretched necessity.²³⁰ Like many critics he centres his study on how the notion of a 'verse drama' denies simple generic classification, but in giving rigorous attention to the diverse modes or historical categories of the work, he fails to look closely at Byron's special handling of blank verse within this mixed mode. In addition to this, his eagerness to show how the comic offsets the tragic fails to consider how Byron subtly inverts these ostensibly opposed classes of thought or genre more generally. For one thing, he ignores Byron's remarks on the relationship between poetic form and dramatic genre in *Hints from Horace*:

Blank verse is now with one consent allied
To Tragedy, and rarely quits her side;
Though mad Almanzor rhymed in Dryden's days,
No sing-song Hero rants in modern plays;
Whilst modest Comedy her verse foregoes
To jest and *pun* in very middling prose; (HfH, 117-22)

²²⁹ M.K. Joseph, *Byron the Poet* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964), 107.

²³⁰ David Eggenschwiler, 'The Tragic and Comic Rhythms of *Manfred*', *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 13, no.1 (Winter, 1974), 63-77.

In this extract Byron evokes Dryden's closed-couplet Epilogue to *The Conquest of Granada* (1670) in which he proposed a new type of drama which commended heroic figures and actions in meter and rhyme. In elevating the play's form to a cultivated mode, Dryden believed that he could validate the progress of English drama by emphasising the manner as well as the dignity of the action. Dryden was especially derisive of the insubstantiality of Ben Jonson's blank verse because it provided mere 'grains for weight' as indicators of balance. In its place he stressed the obligation to strength and decisiveness in Restoration drama: 'when critics weigh / Each line, and every word, throughout the play' (Epilogue, Part ii. 13-14). That Byron would choose to recall Dryden's claims in light of a contemporary inclination toward tragic Renaissance blank verse is telling. His cutting insinuation at a thoughtless agreement in the phrase 'one consent allied' is formally undermined by its spatially insistent rhyming partner 'side' which operates to accentuate the need for opposition. In a similar vein, the blank verse of contemporary comedy is evoked to suggest a flattening out of contradictions. Its jests and puns no longer rely on the ambivalence created by contradistinction and are reduced, therefore, to a very 'middling prose'. It is with this in mind that I turn to the text of *Manfred* to investigate Byron's application of blank verse monologue within a dramatic manuscript as a means of implementing and interrogating the purity of stylistic ideals in both generic and formal terms.

The drama begins in morbid soliloquy, with Manfred lamenting his lack of repose and his inability to live a life of pure essence outside the limits of the body:

My slumbers — if I slumber — are not sleep,
 But a continuance of enduring thought,
 Which then I can resist not; in my heart
 There is a vigil, and these eyes but close
 To look within; and yet I live, and bear

The aspect and the form of living men.

(I. i. 3-8)

This opening statement captures many of Byron's objections to the cheerless solipsism of blank-verse monologue: the desire for spiritual disembodiment, the troubled introspection of an inward vision, and the perpetuation of 'enduring thought' without rest²³¹. If the key conventions of the blank-verse conversational poem are spontaneity and prolonged mental action, they here express a constitutionally-conceived psychological dilemma. The crux of Manfred's predicament is encapsulated in the phrase 'I can resist not' which implies both a power beyond his control and an inner fragility that cannot forgo temptation. It also suggests a fundamental inability to hold back. Manfred is attempting to ratify the Wordsworthian or Shelleyan doctrine of a rolling eternal perspective, to dwell perpetually 'in subtler essence' (I. i. 32) but all he achieves is a perpetual disunity, 'a wandering Hell...in eternal space' (I. i. 46). Indeed, the inaugural soliloquy may usefully be seen as an effort to explore the inadequacy of sustaining this medium of thought. His response is to waive the duality of natural motion and cessation by turning inward and meeting his own image in a creative internalisation which yearns to be generative but is, once again, only enduring. The successive enjambments work to enhance this feeling of continued introspective

²³¹ Take these opening lines from *The Dream* which work to complicate the double nature of existence with its intrusive visions and intrusive realities:

Our life is two-fold; Sleep hath its own world,
 A boundary between the things misnamed
 Death and existence: Sleep hath its own world,
 And a wide realm of wild reality,
 And dreams in their development have breath,
 And tears, and tortures, and the touch of joy;
 They leave a weight upon our waking thoughts,
 They take a weight from off our waking toils,
 They do divide our being

(*The Dream*, 1-10)

thought and in doing so give credence to a new poetics arranged on inner rhythm rather than definitive outlines.

The sentiment is not dissimilar to the curious middle-state between thought and sleep induced by the night-wandering poet of Shelley's *Alastor* in which 'Sleep, / Like a dark flood suspended in its course, / Rolled back it's impulse on his vacant brain.' (189-91) As Yeats would come to argue in 'The Symbolism of Poetry', the purpose of rhythm is to

...prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols.²³²

The notion of a mesmeric rhythm coupled with symbolic representation may hold the reader in a state of momentary hypnotic delight, but the difficulty for Manfred, and ultimately for Byron, is the unsustainability of such a long recurring mode without the necessary variety produced by genuine external engagement. While he wishes it to be so, the world which Manfred inhabits is not entirely an imaginative act or a world of his own making. His is not a mind liberated from the pressure of the will, it is simply trying to redirect the will inward: 'The thought which is within me and around me.' It is therefore continuous without being full, which is to say that its fullness may be sought as an abiding possibility of the future but is never possessed in the now. For much of the opening passage Byron's enjambments accentuate what at first seems Manfred's

²³² He goes on to suggest that the proper rhythms for symbolic poetry are not 'energetic rhythms' but, instead, 'those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty.' *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats Volume IV: Early Essays*, ed. Richard J. Finneran and George Bornstein (New York: Scribner, 2007), 119-20.

openness of movement but is soon exposed as his vulnerability to elemental powers. In a typically Byronic technique, the alluring monotony of Manfred's self-indulgent rhythms are destabilised by a series of words relating to external shapes. While there is no palpable configuration in the contour of the stanza outside of the driving pentameter, the uncomfortable presence of terms such as 'bear', 'aspect', and 'form' give special attention to the unfeasibility of self-contained forms and seamless arrangements.

Lacking an adequate means by which to empathise with outward forces and objects, Manfred is immobilised by his own deadening arrangements:

But this avail'd not: – Good, or evil, life,
Powers, passion, all I see in other beings
Have been to me as rain unto the sands,
Since that all nameless hour, I have no dread,
And feel the curse to have no natural fear,
Nor fluttering throb that beats with hopes or wishes,
Or lurking love of something on the earth.

(I. i. 19-27)

His weak appreciation of having to bear an external form and his faint attempts at outward connection are structurally detached, and, in effect, 'rain upon rocks where they stand and stagnate.'²³³ In this way the unqualified unity of the speaker is presented as a fundamental disunity: to be without trepidation should not be a curse, but somehow it is. To have no 'natural fear' is to have no natural counterpart or foil, and, much like a racquet player without an opponent, this deprives one of a vital dynamism of movement. Accordingly, the line 'Nor fluttering throb that beats with hopes or wishes' enacts a pulsation without reciprocation. The tri-syllabic 'fluttering' is flattened out by an extra-long succession of monosyllables and has the effect of a self-generated

²³³ *BLJ*, iv. 324.

excitement without exchange. The speaker is certainly aware of his being part of a wider public but it is his relation to that public which remains vague and ambiguous. Caught in an unhealthy dualism without proper correspondence, he seeks endless renewal from within and in doing so flattens out the natural delineations of night and day. For the timeless and featureless pattern prescribed by such thinking, as for Manfred's declaration of a sublime solitude, Byron presents an endless connection in emphatically unconnected terms.²³⁴

His supernatural position is, if anything, less tenable than his physical one. The very act of ponderous recapitulation shows that the ubiquitous presence Manfred wishes to uphold relies upon, and therefore continually collapses into, is an unsustainable linguistic web of self-representations; the lyrical drive of his monologue only delivers the stimulus for its own defeat. Significantly all we get is a state, an immobile grouping, not an action or dynamic transference of energy. This is most notably reflected in Manfred's musings with the Chamois Hunter in which he describes the dereliction caused by a life of ceaseless activity:

Thinks't thou existence doth depend on time?
 It doth; but actions are our epochs: mine
 Have made my days and nights imperishable,
 Endless, and all alike, as sands on the shore,
 Innumerable atoms, and one desert,
 Barren and cold, on which the wild waves break,
 But nothing rests save carcasses and wrecks,
 Rocks, and the salt-surf weeds of bitterness. (II. i. 51-8)

As everything around him exhibits the sign of his absence, Manfred's sense of time is altogether homogenous, fastened 'without hope of change' in the perpetuity of

²³⁴ It is these very disconnected attempts at connection that leads Peter Graham to speak of the 'subjunctive mood' which presents itself as 'intensely intransitive.' *Liberty and Poetic Licence*, 53.

possession. A thematics of dislocation manifests itself not only in the imagery of unremitting despair but also in the sluggishness of the metaphorical transitions which have the effect of scarcely being transitions at all. Synonym follows synonym ('imperishable', 'endless', 'all alike') in a descriptive sameness that emphasises the incapacity to separate and differentiate. The monotonous configuration of the language expresses an infinite recreation and relapse of absence through an indistinguishable and interchangeable extensiveness. Its limitless cyclical activity – the imperishable days and nights of thought – gives no scope for 'rest' apart from the acknowledged presence of lifeless objects. It is, by all accounts, a formal perversion of the neo-classical endeavour to survey nature without atomising its constitutive parts. Manfred covets an all-pervasion and eternal vision only to be met with an experience of endless decay.

To be thus,
 Grey-haired with anguish, like these blasted pines,
 Wrecks of a single winter, barkless, branchless,
 A blighted trunk upon a cursed root
 Which but supplies a feeling of Decay;
 And to be thus, eternally but thus, (I. i. 65-70)

Once again, the imagery in these lines is noticeably similar to the eternal plight of Shelley's poet-figure in the blank verse of *Alastor* whose internal landscape is stark and inhospitable: 'tall spires of windlestrae /Threw their thin shadows down the rugged slope, /And nought but gnarled roots of ancient pines /Branchless and blasted, clenched with grasping roots /The unwilling soil' (ii. 528-32). The repetition of the ultimately un-enriching adverb 'thus' in Manfred's account, coupled with the un-modifying conjunction 'but' expresses an unwelcome yet unchanging state of being. It is yet another example of perpetuation without modification.

Manfred's uniform impasse is disturbed by the variegated voices of the Spirits which Byron uses to demonstrate the supposed diversity of nature. They present an assemblage of vocabularies and expressions uttered through a multiplicity of poetic styles which contrast deeply with Manfred's pensive and melancholic blank-verse soliloquy. By altering the tone, language, and rhythm of the seven addresses, and by arranging them to contrast with each other as well as with Manfred, Byron wishes to show a composite world that allows for ambivalence; a world that is faint yet powerful, graceful yet harsh, subservient yet rebellious. However in a typically Byronic manner, this contrast is not as simple or edifying as it purports to be. The combined range of the seven Spirits may appear to offer a worthwhile alternative to Manfred's invariability, but the severity of their fastening procedures only work to offer an alternative, yet equally deficient form of sameness.

The trochaic tetrameter couplets of the first Spirit employ the courtly mode of a Renaissance drama to represent the ambivalence of political power:

Mortal! to thy bidding bow'd,
 From my mansion in the cloud,
 Which the breath of twilight builds,
 And the summer's sun-set gilds
 With the azure and vermilion
 Which is mixed for my pavilion. (I. i. 50-55)

The double nature of service and command which is to be the collective message of the Spirits is established in this opening refrain. But while it testifies to Manfred's dualistic dilemma by suggesting a celestial authority at the same time that it responds to his supernatural summons, it modifies the terms of that duality through its highly regulated metre and its bifurcating structure to suit its own vainglorious ambitions. What primarily distinguishes the first Spirit's account of discrete yet corresponding processes

from Manfred's metaphysical impasse is a standard of contrasting and harmonising vitality. Where Manfred frets and swaggers between competing modes or ideologies, the first Spirit speaks with an imposing authority. It describes the painterly effects of summer's twilight sunset in picturesque terms: the starkness of the azure sky and the undiluted vermillion of the sun are blended (through the enjambment) for its detached magisterial pleasure. The lines are stately and balanced, and work to demonstrate the proper relation between parts and wholes in an effort to reveal a connective power that does not dissolve its connections in dissipating metrical arrangements. But the grandeur of the image is also a myopically conceited one because it patently fails to endorse the servitude of its summons.

Correspondingly, the second spirit employs a sequence of ballad-like quatrains to impress upon Manfred and the reader, the combined grandeur of thrust and restraint:

The Glacier's cold and restless mass
 Moves onward day by day,
 But I am he who bids it pass,
 Or with its ice delay. (I. i. 68-71)

As we move forward through this particular quatrain, the natural lineations of Mont Blanc's interminable motions are powerfully and unexpectedly halted by the prohibiting command of a supreme force. In much the same manner as the first Spirit's authoritative depiction of the sky this seems, at face value, to be nothing more than the unequivocal exhibition of divine power over artless momentum. The unnatural rhyming of 'pass' with 'mass' reiterates an artificial progression that is not symptomatic of a 'natural supernaturalism' but reaffirming of the biblical delineations of God's power

over the natural world.²³⁵ However the equal distribution of alternating stresses (8/6/8/6) and the peculiar complementary preposition in ‘*with* its ice delay’ combine to suggest a more agreeable conjunction than is nakedly expressed. It allows for natural as well as unnatural limits by suggesting that there is something within the glacier’s ‘restless’ matter which allows it to be restrained. In like manner, and perhaps more significantly, the ‘thunder ball’ of the avalanche ‘must pause *for* [his] command’ and not at it. The implication of this ambivalence between intention and meaning will not be registered by the drama’s protagonist until much later in the play, but this choral passage is important to the constitutive structure of the work as a whole. It is stylistically precise and thematically pointed and far from the fatalistic natural order of Manfred’s philosophical ponderings. The work of the poem (and the work of Manfred) is to overcome the immobility which arises from the uneven and uncertain experience of wanting a continuous relationship with nature. It does so by redefining its form and by insisting on a chain of necessary pauses and terminations to suggest that the fashioning of enclosing contours within the rhythmic drive can be mutually creative.

²³⁵ For a fitting account of God’s demarcating power one need only consider the Book of *Job*, Chapter 38, in which the Lord rebukes Job for his self-indulgent solipsism by pointing to His supremacy over nature:

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?
 Answer me that if you have your wits.
 Who determined its measure, if you know,
 And who stretched out the builder's line?
 Wherein are its pillars sunk
 And who laid the cornerstone
 When the morning stars sang together
 And all the angels shouted for joy?
 Who shut the sea behind double doors
 When it burst from the womb,
 When I wrapped it in mist
 And swaddled it with *thick clouds*,
 When I broke out its limit
 And set the bar to its gate, saying,
 "This far you may come and no further;
 Here your proud waves shall halt"?

Of equal importance is Milton’s implementation of these lines in *Paradise Lost* in which God commands the elements while driving his chariot into the midst of Chaos: ‘Silence, ye troubled waves, and thou Deep peace’. (Book 7, 216)

However, the realisation of this constructive affinity is yet to be registered in either the spirits or in Manfred, who are, at this point, joined in hostile disagreement.

A proliferation of images concerning immobility and inertia dominate the Spirits' various accounts of order. The Third Spirit contemplates the gentle stillness of his ocean floor domain, his 'calm hall of Coral' in the 'blue depth of waters / Where the Wave hath no strife' while the Fifth Spirit's response to Manfred's summons abandons a ship in breathless cessation of the wind: 'The fleet I met sailed well, and yet / 'Twill sink ere Night be past' (I. i. 106-7). The Spirits' repeated insistence on the importance of artificial boundaries culminates in the extended iambic tetrameter couplets of the final apparition:

The star which rules thy destiny
 Was ruled, ere earth begun, by me:
 It was a World as fresh and fair
 As e'er revolved round sun in air:
 Its course was free and regular:
 Space bosom'd not a lovelier star.
 The hour arrived — and it became
 A wandering mass of shapeless flame,
 A pathless comet, and a curse,
 The menace of the universe;
 Still rolling on with innate force,
 Without a sphere, without a course,
 A bright deformity on high.
 The monster of the upper Sky!
 And thou! beneath its influence born —
 Thou worm! whom I obey and scorn —
 Forced by a power (which is not thine,
 And lent thee but to make thee mine)
 For this brief moment to descend
 Where these weak spirits round thee bend.
 And parley with a thing like thee —
 What would'st thou Child of Clay! with me? (I. i. 108-131)

On the surface it would seem that the final address is a straightforward narrative relating the move from order to chaos. The Seventh Spirit cannot tolerate the openness of eternal movement, the 'innate force...without a course' even if it represents the essential drive of the imagination. It detests the irregular and unpredictable freedom of this force and in doing so, dramatically disposes Manfred's unfettered blank verse in powerful organising antitheses. Without many of the delayed verbs one finds in Manfred's opening monologue, this speech offers a tightening up of syntax into concise forms with clearer meanings, and creates the capacity for enunciating true counterpositions. The mode, a block of dismissive tetrameter couplets, was most famously employed by Samuel Butler in his satirical polemic *Hubridas* (1663-78) which presented an excellent reversal of system and substance. It is in such a vein that the spectre proceeds. Describing, with regret, the move from harmony to disorder the Seventh Spirit employs firm contours and semantic delineations as an inversion of the content of the passage. The starkly contrasting oppositions 'thine / mine', 'thee / me', 'obey and scorn' all work to parody the unchecked headway of the comet's pathless course. This parody, it would seem, is the most blatant form of the inverted order that the drama discloses: the Spirit's lofty satiric theme is the displacement of a true order by a grotesque mock order.

The barefaced opposition, or methods of reversal employed in the Spirit's invalidating rhetoric is also the foundation of unintentional self-ridicule. The Seventh Spirit's address is inimically conceited: he exults in his own uninhibited opposition to Manfred and defines himself in resistance to the bedlam that he represents. But Byron works to deny the value of such an opposition even as the Spirit asserts it. If chaos and order are interchangeable paradigms, then they fix their subject and object in a static

relationship. The only change that is permitted, is a simple reversal and the Spirit is as much implicated in this move as Manfred. The change of tense in ‘The star *which* rules thy destiny / *Was ruled*, ere Earth begun, by me’ insinuates not only a matching of origins, but also a covetous desire for Manfred’s source of power. The line is tinged with disgruntled loss and nostalgic yearning. As the Spirit reflects upon the irrevocable yet arbitrary shift in authority, when the star slipped from his grasp – ‘The Hour arrived – and it became / A wandering mass of shapeless flame’ – he offhandedly admits that his governance may have been weak or even careless. This is less an affirmation of the controlling function of rigid orders and more a concession of the latent power of unrest in a course that is ‘free and regular’. Here apparent disorder begins to reveal its foundations in order. The grand narrative of historical revolutions gives way to the immediacy of the minute in which the Spirit is ‘forced...For this brief moment to descend’ to Manfred’s summons, but the self-contradicting nature of his complaint remains the same. The Seventh Spirit is determined to deny the power of the unfixed course, but his language and syntax repeatedly betray him. That he is forcefully roused by a power ‘which is not thine, / And lent thee but to make thee mine’ belittles his own conceited efforts to assert control over that which has control over him. Manfred’s influence has a weight and structure of its own, and one that is more substantial than the weightless words of the apparitions, for, as the final spectral orator admits ‘these Spirits round thee bend’.

The supposed variousness of the Spirits’ invocations are offered as correctives to Manfred’s formless orbit but the underlying contradiction in their rigid forms and unconvincing urgings only serve as binding dichotomies. The assorted structures of the debate are so intensely and illogically weighed – impeding all movement and embryonic

energy – that they emerge as perversions of the very legitimate form they so urgently endorse. If Manfred is locked within an endless and unchecked reciprocity with the natural world (the mind creating at the same time that it is being created), the Spirits are bound by their inability to admit to the liberating potential of unregimented motion. Feeling exists in their discourse, but it stands in passive relation to words and structures. Manfred's dilemma is thus compounded by an inadequate alternative.

This dilemma is further complicated by the palpable illogicality between form and desire in both Manfred and the Spirits. They are eternal, ethereal beings that insist on the importance of severe delineations while he, the 'Child of Clay', repeatedly insists on his desire to live purely in spirit. He loathes to be 'degraded back to clay' and later restates his contempt for the circumscribing limits of the flesh in conversation with the Witch of Atlas: 'though I wore the form / I had no sympathy with breathing flesh. / Nor mid'st the Creatures of Clay that girded me' (II. ii. 55-8). Since he knows no mode other than that of competition and antithesis, Manfred does not grasp the idea of 'breathing flesh' as a complex reciprocity but rather as an oxymoron. He cannot appreciate the flesh as a necessary apparatus for respiration and sees it only as a girding obstruction to metaphysical unity with the elements. In stylistic terms this is an assertion of the Wordsworthian or Shelleyian manner: holding things together by invisible connections which resist containment out of fear that containment would decisively and irrevocably close things off. Consequently, Manfred feels taunted by the Spirits' essential and unending form because it is a form that he burns for but cannot attain. The firmness of their rhetoric does not trouble him, but when they testify to their perfect or timeless sense of order,

We are immortal, and do not forget;
We are eternal; and to us the past

Is as the future, present.

(I. i. 149-51)

Manfred is dismayed and responds with a simple but consummate expression of defeat: 'Ye mock me'. Their formless and ageless continuity touches on the raw nerve of his deficient configuration and his inescapable mortality. It is the great paradox of the first Act that the disembodied spirits employ so terse a manner, while Manfred, a creature of terracotta mould, maintains a series of loose-fitting arrangements. 'This man / Is of no common order' remarks the First Destiny,

his knowledge and his powers and will,
As far as is compatible with clay,
Which clogs the ethereal essence, have been such
As clay hath seldom borne; his aspirations
Have been beyond the dwellers of the earth.

(II. iv. 55-9)

In desperation to overcome this dilemma, Manfred asks the Spirits for that which they cannot grant: 'self-oblivion'. His request is doubly hopeless because, over and above the Spirits' stated incapacity for structural deconstruction, his redemption entails a private purging 'of that which is within' (138). It cannot, therefore, be induced by external mediators. What they possess – 'Kingdom, and sway, and strength, and length of days' – they offer, but these are worldly attributes and beyond the inclinations of the drama's protagonist. Manfred rejects their offer but bids them to remain and in doing so registers, finally and wholeheartedly, the fundamental bind between lyrical spirit and concrete vision which has been established by their interaction:

yet stay – one moment, ere we part –
I would behold ye face to face. I hear
Your voices, sweet and melancholy sounds,
As music on the waters; and I see
The steady aspect of a clear large star;

But nothing more. Approach me as ye are,
Or one, or all, in your accustom'd forms. (I. i. 174-80)

This passage is paradigmatic of the flat dualism which Manfred encounters in opposition to the Spirits. The disjointedness between lyrical fluidity – ‘the sweet and melancholy sounds’ of their voices – and visual fixity – ‘The steady aspect of a clear large star’ – offers little opportunity for creative interplay. They are retained in divorced estrangement, and ‘nothing more’. Manfred endeavours to overcome the Coleridgean dichotomy of ‘form as proceeding, shape as superinduced’, by demanding that the Spirits take the shape of their essential or ‘accustom’d forms.’ Their cryptic response is typical of Byron’s scepticism for the manifestation of ideal forms outside of their abstract existences:

We have no forms, beyond the elements
Of which we are the mind and principle:
But chuse a form – in that we will appear. (I. i. 181-3)

In a gesture that stands between formal reflection and psychological projection, they appear in a configuration that is most fitting to him: as the spectre of Astarte. Manfred’s reaction is to fall ‘senseless’: that is, to yield to yet another mode of mental and physical deprivation. The competing notions of form as an embodied essence and a material process are far from settled. As I have been arguing throughout, many of Byron’s poems are characterised by some kind of split consciousness, an agonised awareness of two perspectives that don’t quite match. Manfred’s early desire for a limitless and inexhaustible order is disputed by the coldly-encompassing measures of the Spirits, but in this Manfred is simply presented with a trite dualism; an unhelpful schism between reckless autonomy and inflexible structure. It is, as he would later

describe, 'But an exchange of ignorance for that / Which is another kind of ignorance'
(II. iv. 62-3).

He emerges from these early encounters with little conscious appetite for the merits of those time-honoured arrangements employed by the Spirits. This is further enforced by the rigid and unimaginative recitations of the choral incantation which deals with precisely the same contraries that has been the theme of the spirits:

Though thy slumber may be deep,
Yet thy spirit shall not sleep,
There are shades which will not vanish,
There are thoughts thou canst not banish;
By a power to thee unknown,
Thou canst never be alone:
Thou art wrapt as with a shroud,
Thou art gathered in a cloud;
And forever shalt thou dwell
In the spirit of this spell. (I. i. 202-11)

Manfred's stated dilemma at the beginning of the play is a sleeplessness created by his isolation from society and his continuance of 'enduring thought'. All the Spirits and chorus can do is to reverse the causes of this dilemma by reiterating that he cannot escape the world even if he wishes to do so: he is 'wrapt as with a shroud' and 'gathered in a cloud'. This opposition is too stiff. Manfred is consumed by the enigma that nature is not exquisitely fitted to his mind, while the external voices repeat the notion that it is his mind which is not exquisitely fitted to nature. Manfred is thus further immobilised because he is not sure what form or what language to fix himself to: idealist or non-idealist; mind-moulded or matter-moulded; actively shaped by the self or passively formed by the external world. The curse of inevitable suffering seems to come both from Manfred's self and from a power outside his self, yet he cannot recognise this in

anything other than unbendingly competitive terms. The final lines of the choral chant seize upon this ultimate ambivalence: ‘Lo! The spell now works around thee, / And the clankless chain hath bound thee.’ Through the insipid binding of ‘thee’ with ‘thee’ to denote external constraint, and the heavy sounding adjective ‘clankless’ to mean noiseless, Byron wittingly inverts cause and effect and complicates the abrasive irresolution of these two modes of apprehension.

However, this inversion, or perversion, of the will against its own articulation requires Manfred to consider a complex notion of the relationship between intention and language – or, more significantly, to hold in suspension two rivalling versions of that relationship. Such transposals begin to take tacit effect on Manfred’s speech, even if they are not openly registered by him. In an apparent counterpoise to his hitherto unwavering desire for the perpetual prolongation of thought, Manfred inadvertently submits to a restraining power:

I stand, and on the torrents’ brink beneath
Behold the tall pines dwindled as to shrubs
In dizziness of distance, when a leap,
A stir, a motion, even a breath, would bring
My breast upon its rocky bosom’s bed
To rest forever — wherefore do I pause?
I feel the impulse — yet I do not plunge;
I see the peril — yet do not recede;
And my brain reels — and yet my foot is firm:
There is a power upon me which withholds
And makes it my fatality to live; (I. ii. 14-24)

At their onset, these lines express an intense distillation of the restless solipsistic impulse in whose energies Manfred has previously savoured. The over-spilling assonance of ‘brink beneath / Behold’, coupled with the blurring alliterative edges of

the phrase 'In dizziness of distance', take Manfred and the reader to the very edge of a precipice and almost beyond. With beautiful delicacy, the incremental diminishing of required force in 'a leap, / a stir, a motion, even a breath' take us to the threshold of tumbling with the play's protagonist. The consequence of such a tumble is, as he suggests, the decisive termination of ultimate ends. This notion is enforced by the enjambed internal resonances of 'a breath, would bring / My breast upon its rocky bosom's bed / To rest forever'. A formal connection can be made with the poet in *Alastor* who meets his death in a rock-strewn recess, where 'One step, / One human step alone, has ever broken / The stillness of its solitude' (588-90). But where Shelley's poet revels in the fatally divine outcome of his solipsism, Byron's poet-seer is struck by indecision. At this stage Manfred is still caught within the rude dichotomy of interminable motion and definitive cessation, but there follows the first fundamental alteration of this logical impasse in the questioning half line 'wherefore do I pause?' His restraint is scarcely perceptible and mysteriously inexplicable but he nonetheless restrains; and the style of the passage is modified accordingly. Manfred's three-line repetition of the conjunction 'yet,...yet,...and yet' intrudes upon the expressive flow of his intended 'self-oblivion' and introduces a new sense of responsive or struggling growth through delicate restriction.

As his old compulsive urges are repeatedly arrested by a newly acquired control, Manfred's language takes on a compound character that will eventually find its full voice or Byronic command in the latter speeches of the play. This acknowledgement of the combined powers of natural and unnatural pause lays the foundation for the Miltonic blank verse that is to come, but for now, the recurring disparity between impulse and action ('I feel...yet' / 'I see yet') witnesses to a doubleness of thought and

deed that has previously been absent. For the first time in the poem, the mind and body are held tangibly together and deliberately apart in a single line: ‘my brain reels – and yet my foot is firm’. Here Byron employs pauses to accentuate the halting perplexity of Manfred’s condition. The frequency of the pauses and the fitful way in which they move between states and from one state to another in each line suggests something that the remainder of the play bears out in regard to Manfred’s paradoxical nature. The movement is one of inexorable on-going dilemma, of simultaneous connection and disconnection. The concluding oxymoronic phrase, ‘There is a power upon me which withholds / And makes it my fatality to live’ invites Manfred to accept the ambivalent terms of his existence.

This discovery unshackles the foundation of Manfred’s bind and introduces a more fitting predicament to the play, one that concedes the unavoidable incompatibility of spirit and matter. To commit suicide would produce the self-generated end which Manfred so desires but it might also degrade him finally, and lastingly, back to clay. This recognition of Man’s combined shabbiness and exalted aspirations give rise to the most celebrated lines in the work:

How beautiful is all this visible world!
 How glorious in its action and itself;
 But we, who name ourselves its sovereigns, we,
 Half dust, half deity, alike unfit
 To sink or soar, with our mixed essence make
 A conflict of its elements, and breathe
 The breath of degradation and pride
 Contending with low wants and lofty will,
 Till our mortality predominates, (I. ii. 37-45)

Manfred is beginning to relinquish the enervated dualism of the first scene and reflect on his existence with a more vital continuity. Although he has not quite struck upon the

Miltonic vision of reinforcing contrasts that prevails in Act III, a glimpse of that vision is offered in this chastened idiom of restriction which retrieves some of the power of the Spirits' speech. If Manfred's principal imaginative method in the first scene is to conceive of himself as an elevated spiritual essence, it is here adjusted to incorporate his being within the general collective of Mankind. The character of the blank verse has changed and we are now required to attend to the meaning Manfred attaches to possessive first-person plural pronouns such as 'we' and 'our'. The passage represents in miniature the transformation of Manfred from an autonomous to a referential figure.

By imagining and placing himself within a larger general order, Manfred grudgingly points the way to his own eventual recovery. The famous description of man as 'Half dust, half deity' is, strictly speaking a regular pentameter line, but its visual succinctness seems almost to compress the thought, until it is carried over into the next line so that 'Half dust, half deity, alike unfit / To sink or soar,' urges us to complete the steady and dignified cadence. But this sense of philosophical repose is complicated by the ever-so-slightly alteration in tempo that follows: 'with our mixed essence make / A conflict of its elements'. Strictly speaking, the lines obey the same iambic beat, but they now include a number of polysyllabic words which operate to unsettle the perfect monosyllables that preceded them. The regularity of this now iconic reflection is further confounded by the rhythmically disruptive force of 'degradation' in 'breathe / the breath of degradation and pride' which forces an unnatural pronunciation in order to maintain the hitherto flawless measure. It is a very subtle working of diction against tempo but an internal struggle of the line against its own components nonetheless, and a measure of Manfred's gradual acceptance of an integrated multiplicity within uniform structures. He is no longer obligated to decide between spirit and matter but has begun

to contend with the curious amalgamation of 'low wants and lofty will.'²³⁶ The mechanics of the stanza are neither wholly natural (or hidden), nor are they explicitly conceited. They testify to Manfred's increasing ability to capture fluctuations of thought and feeling and render them in depth.

Yet Manfred responds to this discovery by turning his attention to the distant sound of the Shepherd's pipe and affirming the lyrical ideal once more:

The natural music of the mountain reed —
 For here the patriarchal days are not
 A pastoral fable — pipes in the liberal air,
 Mixed with the sweet bells of the sauntering herd:
 My Soul would drink those echoes. – Oh, that I were
 The viewless Spirit of a lovely sound,
 A living voice, a breathing harmony,
 A bodiless enjoyment, born and dying
 With the blest tone which made me! (I. ii. 48-56)

At this stage in the poetic development of Manfred, he perceives what Byron appreciates about the individual's relation to tradition, but he still loathes it. He accepts the twin circumstance of dust and immortal desire and uses this recognition as a final opportunity to register his longing for an ethereal existence. Again he concentrates on the plain, lyrical expressiveness of a renewed pastoral essence. From the hypnotic rhythms of the Shepherd's flute arises an aural reflection of the kind employed by Wordsworth and Shelley. The delay of the main verb 'pipes' in the opening clause almost wreaks havoc on its sense but it allows for the leisurely aside – 'For here the patriarchal days are not / A pastoral fable' – that so tellingly applies its unhurried meaning to its form. If the politically charged term 'liberal' has any significance here, it

²³⁶ While this is a very Augustan phrase and referential to Pope's 'low ambition, and the pride of kings' in the *Essay on Man*, it also reflects a drifting away from Hamlet's dilemma of narrow ambition and lofty dreams: 'Oh God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space.' (II. ii. 253)

is hardly noticed by its speaker who luxuriates in the open vowels of this unspoilt atmosphere where 'the liberal air' mixes 'with the sweet bells of the sauntering herd'. It is for him, a seamless fusion of nature and culture in which the latter, with its mere moderate references in the chiming of bells and unrestricted air, gives way to the former. In a reaffirmation of the spiritual order he so covetously desires, and couched in an unintelligible language of the kind Byron so despised, Manfred revels in his longing: 'My Soul would drink those echoes.' The easeful flow of lyrical feeling, with its tender transfer of energies, and located in an arrangement that has little energy to speak of, has returned for one final evanescent sounding: 'The viewless Spirit of a lovely sound, / A living voice, a breathing harmony, / A bodiless enjoyment'. However, it is not without markers of his newly acquired idealistic defeat. The wishful indulgence 'Oh, that I were' carries with it an expression of its own sentimental hopelessness. In like manner, the concluding aspiration to be organically complete in and of himself, like a piece of music 'born and dying / With the blest tone which made me!' only serves to remind the reader of the volatile star under which he was born. He has either forgotten the accursed tone by which he was conceived, or is simply revelling in its 'pathless' freedom. At this point, it is a lyric which cannot find a way of transcending the obstructions it creates for itself.

In a relapse of the indeterminacy of Act 1, Manfred is caught between the loss of the past and the deferral of the future. While his field of vision is beginning to grow to accommodate a greater range of voices and modulations, it is far from complete. His two idealistic reflections on the limitless majesty of the airborne eagle and the bodiless delight of the Shepherd's music add to his uncertainty through their endless, yet enticing, deferment of meaning and closure. He is still mesmerised by the uninhibited

condition of the lyrical ideal. This indeterminacy culminates, almost ironically, in a failure of mental and physical stability. The boundless perspective or ‘dizziness of distance’ becomes a material reality as Manfred sways literally and metaphorically on a precipice: ‘I am all feebleness, the Mountains whirl / Spinning around me’. In Wordsworthian terms, he is nothing less than a ‘Border dwelling betwixt life and death.’²³⁷ But Manfred is prevented from plummeting by the Chamois Hunter because he is a figure who understands the value of limits and decisive thought. Where Manfred’s supernatural activities have made his ‘days and nights imperishable’, the Chamois Hunter is a ‘Peasant of the Alps’ who possesses ‘days of health and nights of sleep’ (II. i. 67).

The dialogue that ensues between Manfred and the Chamois Hunter is of paramount importance to Byron’s general exposition on the necessity for poetic abeyance and poetic sense. The Chamois Hunter reproves Manfred’s vague philosophical ruminations by addressing him as a ‘Man of Strange Words...that makes thee people vacancy.’ This description is doubly significant to Manfred’s transformation. Firstly, it depreciates the opaquely mystical diction employed by the poet-prophet who seeks both lyrical simplicity and metaphysical complexity. Secondly, by using the peculiarly charged verb ‘people’ to mean occupy or fill, in the almost oxymoronic ‘people vacancy’, the Chamois Hunter strikes upon a fundamental contradiction in Manfred’s ineffectual doings. He implies a repeated postponement of action by inadequate substitution.

Intriguingly, the phrase appears again, though in altered form, when Manfred reflects on his past pursuits to the Witch of Atlas:

²³⁷ Unpublished fragment to *The Prelude*. MS. W.72-3 quoted in Douglas Kneale, *Romantic Aversions: Aftermaths of Classicism in Wordsworth and Coleridge* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999), 131.

And with such penance
 As in itself has power upon the air,
 And spirits that do compass air and earth,
 Space, and the peopled infinite, I made
 Mine eyes familiar with Eternity, (II. ii. 86-90)

Manfred is attempting to describe the redemption he gained from his forbidden arts after being shunned by society. Yet the calculated ambivalence of Byron's phrasing portrays an unwieldy entanglement of ownership and dispossession which anticipates the First Destiny's confused claim in scene four: 'He is mine, / And thine, it may be; be it so, or not' (II. iv. 69-70). The prospective, and suggestively Shelleyian, motion in 'penance / As in itself has power upon the air' is, ironically, a meaning that is only fully accessible to the spirits that he conjures. Deepening the irony are the demarcating movements of the spectres which work to 'compass air and earth, / Space, and the peopled infinite'. In a tone echoing Wordsworth's promotion of the high-minded poet's ability to 'see into the life of things', Manfred falsely claims to have made his 'eyes familiar with Eternity'. This extension or elevation of vision, he believes, situates his physical transcendence within a broader matrix of supernatural ruptures in the temporal and linguistic structures of humanity.

In a phrase that prides itself on the least degree of formal determination, Manfred proudly exposes the foundation of his boundless linguistic style: 'I thus prolonged my words'. In other words, Manfred perceives the enlurement of his being beyond the limitations of a mortal perspective as a capacious extension of poetic time – the formal expression for his rejection of a restricting formalism. However, 'people vacancy' is a phrase that further performs the disjunction of Manfred's plunging against society: its meaning is recapitulative of the linguistic sterility that has been emblematic

of his impotent dualism throughout. The source of this verbal impotence, as it is revealed in his encounter with the Witch of Atlas, is the existential indeterminacy generated by his fatal neglect of Astarte. ‘And for thus’, exclaims the Witch, Manfred is bound to remain ‘A being of the race thou dost despise, / The order which thine own would rise above, / Mingling with us and ours’ (II. ii. 122-4). Manfred responds to the origins of his predicament by conceding the fruitless verbosity of his efforts thereafter: ‘Daughter of Air! I tell thee, since that hour / But words are breath’. The simultaneous obligation to speak himself perpetually into being and the ineffectual wastefulness of the endeavour is perfectly captured in this response.

Much like Shelley’s Prometheus, whose insistence on a temporality beyond measure endorses ‘no change, no pause, no hope’ (I. 24), Manfred’s troubled statement of linguistic immensity has him locked in a cycle of infinite sameness:

I plunged deep,
 But like an ebbing wave it dash’d me back
 Into the gulph of my unfathomed thought:
 I plunged amidst mankind — Forgetfulness
 I sought in all, save where ‘tis to be found,
 And that I have to learn — my sciences,
 My long pursued and superhuman art,
 Is mortal here — I dwell in my despair,
 And live – and live forever. (II. ii. 142-50)

His actions, as they are indicated by the repetition of ‘I plunged...I plunged’ and furthered by the pressing verbs in ‘I sought’ and ‘I dwell’, remain desperate without being constructive. ‘I plunged amidst’ represent a confrontation without interaction and an altercation without exchange. The proliferation of ‘I’s in the passage fails to achieve the correspondence it claims and offers only a mutual exchange of emptiness. While Manfred’s longing for forgetfulness renders a bleak version of Wordsworth’s liberating

powers of remembrance it seems that nothing is resolved except the qualities of inevitable yearning and the incessant drive towards a suspension of closure. But it is a candid reflection upon his existence, at once a recognition of his mortality and his failed attempts to transcend it.

It is this same lack of proper pause and measure which so discomforts the Chamois Hunter. When Manfred wishes to take flight he entreats, 'No, No, yet pause – thou must not yet go forth; / Thy mind and body are alike unfit / To trust each other' (II. i. 3). The reiteration of the positive deterrent 'No, No' together with the blatant avowal of a discontinuity between mind and body disquiets any seduction into a poetics of vastness and untold duration. Manfred's dilemma is once again depicted as a continuation of endless disjointedness, or to put it another way, as a constant process of suspension without pause. As the Chamois Hunter points out, Manfred's repressed desire for an artless correspondence with the spiritual world, has led to a succession of incomplete thoughts and utterances: 'whatso'er thine ill, / It must be borne, and these wild starts are useless.' Manfred fears that in the enclosure of meaning lies death, but his relentless refusal to accept the value of judicious pause only produces unsatisfying starts, not ideas embodied in language. The Chamois Hunter further implores the need for thoughtful delay, and this time with a more direct conviction, 'Patience'. In a gesture that discredits its own enabling power, Manfred sounds out his own verbal transformation: 'Patience, and Patience...I am not of thine order.' While it posits an intractable defiance on the part of the speaker, it nevertheless indicates Manfred's newfound difficulty in sustaining the uninhibited fluidity required for his limitless vision. The unwitting application of repose in 'Patience, and Patience' marks the subtle transformation in Manfred's oral patterning. In like manner, his supposed fortitude in

opposing the Chamois Hunter's advice by strong assertion, 'I must number space and eternity' is inadvertently weakened in the revelation of its own unfeasibility and in its application of a finite system upon an infinite realm. Manfred's speech is shot through with the increasingly tenuous conviction that he cannot achieve the inexhaustible unity he so anxiously desires. Nothing is uttered here without an implicit difference between connotation and denotation. Fittingly, the Chamois Hunter's last words represent a witty inversion of Manfred's eternal aspirations and his fear of mortality: 'Heaven give thee rest.'

The crucial moment in Manfred's transformation takes place during his meeting with the apparition of Astarte, the sister whose absence initiated his yearning for an eternal correspondence with the universe. The episode occurs immediately after the Spirits strain, once more, to force Manfred into submission by demanding that he 'Kneel' or it 'T'wil be taught thee' (II. iv. 36). To this Manfred responds in ironic assurance of his obedience, 'Tis taught already.' The mordant tone of his reply suggests that it is merely an equivocation of their demands and one which gives greater credence to his conviction that the imposition of unbending structures is unnecessarily debilitating. But there is no longer any sign of his obdurate defiance and this allows him to confront his circumstances directly and sincerely for the first time:

For hitherto all hateful things conspire
 To bind me in existence – in a life
 Which makes me shrink from immortality –
 A future like the past. I cannot rest.
 I know not what I ask, nor what I seek:
 I feel but what thou art – and what I am;
 And I would hear yet once before I perish
 The voice which was my music.

(II. iv. 128-35)

These lines describe Manfred's reluctant acceptance of his fate with a poignant sadness that has hitherto been absent from the previous articulations of his predicament. They express the heartfelt difference that is the basis of his confusion – 'I know not what I ask, nor what I seek: / I feel but what thou art – and what I am' – and the integrity of his drive – 'I cannot rest' – which reposes on the full-stop almost without him realising it. The perpetuation of his dilemma is revealed to us by the Phantom of Astarte who candidly bears the conditions of her lyrical existence (her 'vainly echoed name'): 'I live but in the sound – it is thy voice'. These details bring to the surface Manfred's persistent impulse to sound her name for the provisional comfort that it brings. But they also emphasise the acknowledged futility of the whole enterprise, and just as it seems that Manfred will once again resort to trembling indecisiveness – '*A Spirit*: He is convulsed – this is to be a mortal / And seek the things above Mortality' – he exercises a self-control that surprises in its agreement of form and spirit – '*Another Spirit*: Yet see – he mastereth himself – and makes / His nature tributary to his will' (II. iv. 160). It is with this newly-discovered composure that he prepares for his death in Act III, remarking to Herman that, 'There is a calm upon me / Inexplicable stillness! Which till now / Did not belong to what I knew of life' (III. i. 6-8).

In his lively but self-possessed response to the Abbot's prophetic claims, Manfred dismisses a rhapsodic belief in the uninhibited possibilities of the imagination at the same time that he discards sacramental redemption. Through this he begins to liberate himself from the limitless world of eternal reflection and interminable echo without having to resort to the closed world of superficial binaries and inflexible logic.

Old Man! there is no power in holy men,
Nor charm in prayer – nor purifying form

Nor penitence — nor outward look — nor fast —
 Nor agony — nor, greater than all these,
 The inward tortures of that deep despair
 Which is remorse, without the fear of hell,
 But all in all sufficient to itself
 Would make a hell of heaven – can exorcise
 From out the unbounded spirit the quick sense
 Of its own sins, wrongs, sufferance, and revenge
 Upon itself; there is no future pang
 Can deal that justice on the self-condemn'd
 He deals on his own soul. (III. i. 66-78)

This passage has generally been read in ethical terms as a distinct rejection of the Abbot's insistence that religious rites are a necessary intermediate between man and heaven in favour of a troubled self-sufficiency.²³⁸ This is certainly the surface argument but, read closely, the segment suggests both a rebuff of institutionalised salvation as well as the deficiency of a mode that purports to be 'all in all sufficient to itself'. The forceful intent of the opening lines, with their insistent repetition of the weighty conjunctive 'Nor', is matched by a succession of longer, more cumbersome lines of imprecise conviction. Logos gives way to a richer, though indeterminate, verbal texture in which meaning is not simply contained by the individual clauses but is created amongst them. The sporadic use of dashes and deferment of meaning, coupled with the contrastingly assured tone of the speaker represents a passage that does not simply put things together but moves from one to another, knitting webs of force and difference between them. Both the half-articulate and the persuasively inarticulate are united into a formal urgency that does duty to them both.

Manfred's conviction that there is no power in the flagellatory mechanisms of religious penitence ('nor fast – / Nor agony') is counterbalanced by his equal conviction

²³⁸ See Rutherford, *Critical Study*, 87-9.

that there is even less power in the self-flagellatory motions of inward guilt. They are merely unproductive substitutions of the same procedure. However, in a move characteristic of Milton, the syntax troubles this simple reversal. The long four-line delay of the verb in ‘nor, greater than all these...can exorcise /From’ almost forgets its negative qualification and makes possible the self-exorcism of inner guilt by a lively imagination. Similarly, the line ‘But all in all sufficient to itself / Would make a hell of heaven’ is not itself all in all sufficient because it calls attention to Satan’s famous stoic declaration in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*: ‘one who brings / A mind not to be changed by place or time. / The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.’ (*PL*, I. 252-5). Byron is evoking a powerful literary tradition as a means of subtly rebuking his protagonist for Manfred’s is no longer a mind unchanged by place or time, and embedded in this stoic assertion is a feeling of self-ridicule. While he refuses the quick fix of a last-minute salvation offered by the Abbot, he also acknowledges the ‘quick sense’²³⁹ or lack of good judgment in the ‘unbounded spirit’. This pattern of release and containment, so prevalent in Milton’s great epic, presents a necessary tension between freedom and restriction which is now repeatedly suggested in the final act but seldom unbalanced in the way that it has been throughout.

Tradition, the simultaneously endowed and disputed past as Byron represents it, is here neither formless nor voiceless, but bears a material face, and while Manfred rejects the comfortable totality of the Abbot’s moral resolutions, he no longer trusts in time’s unbroken potential. The culminating vision of the sun’s imperial presence permits a greater temporal sophistication than has been offered before. Its rhythmic

²³⁹ There are precious few examples of the phrase ‘quick sense’ in English Literature. The most relevant instance comes from Sidney’s *Arcadia* where he describes the soon-to-be duped Duke as ‘This Basilius, having the quick sense of a lover’ (*O.E.D.*). This implies both a heightened sensory awareness and, a lack of discernment.

and structural delineations allow for the mutual activity of convention and natural renewal:

Glorious Orb! the idol
 Of early nature, and the vigorous race
 Of undiseased mankind, the giant sons
 Of the embrace of angels with a sex
 More beautiful than they, which did draw down
 The erring spirits who can ne'er return. –
 Most glorious orb! that wert a worship, ere
 The mystery of thy making was reveal'd!
 Thou earliest minister of the Almighty,
 Which gladden'd on their mountain tops the hearts
 Of the Chaldean shepherds, till they poured
 Themselves in orisons! Thou material God!
 And representative of the Unknown —
 Who chose thee for his Shadow! Thou chief star
 Centre of many stars, which mak'st our earth
 Endurable, and temperest the hues
 And hearts of all who walk beneath thy rays!
 Sire of the seasons! Monarch of the climes,
 And those who dwell in them! For, near or far,
 Our inborn spirits have a tint of thee,
 Even as our outward Aspects. (III. ii. 3-23)

As I have argued throughout, the separation of the individual from tradition in *Manfred*, and much of Byron's verse, is most effectively comprehended as an unnecessary severing of the rational from the visionary faculty. What is most apparent in the lofty language and steady, deliberative tone of this passage is the attempted resolution of these two modes of apprehension: a compensation for the former diffusiveness of his blank verse monologues without resorting to the imperviousness of the choral chants. This passage is best understood, not so much as a uniform description of the sun's regal power, but as an expression of a new mode of perception which functions by a corresponding distinction and connectivity. There are no unnatural leaps in thought or imagery, no 'wild and useless starts' but rather, a balancing of spirit and matter: 'Thou

material God! / And representative of the unknown'. Stylistically this represents a merging of the lyrical with the rhetorical. The power of the speech rests mainly in the complexity of combined thought and feeling, and in the presiding pattern of rhythmical continuity with figurative force. The sustained similes as well as the extended syntax add impetus to Manfred's ode to the sun, creating an unusually assured effect.

Byron employs natural, social and rhetorical referents to furnish his passage with Miltonic vigour. This is appropriate because the imaginative thrust of the vision is a reworking of Satan's reflections on earth (that "Terrestrial Heaven") in book nine of *Paradise Lost*. Where Milton's Satan emphasises the synchronising centrifugal force and centripetal influence of the earth: 'As God in Heaven / Is centre, yet extends to all, so thou / Centring receiv'st from all those orbs' (ix. 108-10), Manfred underscores the simultaneously generative and chastening power of the sun: 'Thou chief star / Centre of many stars, which mak'st our earth / Endurable, and temperest the hues / And hearts of all who walk beneath thy rays!' The harmony wrought by a motion that reigns in or aligns even as it extends outwards is the principal force behind much of Byron's and Milton's art. They exploit the gaps between circumstance and desire, or reality and perception, by drawing attention to them as gaps, rather than trying to fill or hide them. In Milton's account, Satan moves from an appreciation of earth's perfection to a pained recognition of his own fundamental disharmony with the elements: 'But I in none of these / Find place or refuge; and the more I see / Pleasures about me, so much more I feel / Torment within me' (ix. 118-21), while Byron depicts the opposite where Manfred moves from difference to a delicate and indirect agreement with his counterpart: 'For, near or far, / Our inborn spirits have a tint of thee, / Even as our outward Aspects.' Insofar as it describes a spontaneous and melodious correspondence

with the natural world ‘the Chaldean shepherds...poured / Themselves in orisons!’ the impetus behind Manfred’s speech is Romantic, but the formal dynamics of the blank verse are a modification of Milton’s dialectic mannerisms which demand rhetorical and dramatic workmanship. Manfred displays intellectual as well as emotional sympathy with his subject: he laments the demystification of the sun in stately terms: ‘that wert a worship, ere / The mystery of thy making was reveal’d’, and delicately diminishes the regal power of the ‘Glorious orb’ by transposing its radiance onto the ‘inborn spirits’ of a human form. Where Manfred had previously ‘turned inward’ or ‘plunged against’, he now likens to and holds apart: ‘near or far’. By recognizing the creative potential of natural and intellectual traditions, he now recognises that poems, like traditions, are generated or extended by an origination or reorigination of difference.

Manfred began by regarding the universe in an aberrantly continuous way – in a sleepless state without due conception of night or day. He ends by discarding his own ill-conceived dualism (the fatal continuity or static totality of a shapeless fusion with the spiritual world) by upholding the authority of the sun as ‘Sire of the seasons! Monarch of the climes’. Earlier in the play, the Spirits had termed Manfred ‘the Magician who would so pervade / The world invisible’, but he ends in worldly defiance of their attempts to apprehend him in pure spirit:

Nor will I hence, while I have earthly breath
 To breathe my scorn upon ye – earthly strength
 To wrestle, though with spirits; what ye take
 Shall be ta’en limb by limb. (III. iv. 101-4)

The balanced half-rhyme in ‘earthly breath’ and ‘earthly strength’ is a crucial amalgamation of spirit and matter that calls attention to Manfred’s status as a mortal.

Manfred has grudgingly learnt to accept his earthly form with its feelings for transcendence (half dust half deity), and to this the Spirits' fittingly respond: 'Reluctant Mortal'. Manfred now speaks of his 'past power' in altered terms as a 'length of watching – strength of mind.' This is a slight but decisive revision of the 'continuance of enduring thought' in Act 1 as well as the collective Spirits' offer of 'Kingdom, and sway, and strength, and length of days'. The poised and self-conscious relation between 'length' and 'strength' gives credence to a new-found understanding of the relation between measurement and vigour.

In explicating Manfred's dissimilarity from his father, his servant Manuel emphasises a clear split in configuration and conduct, 'I speak not / Of features or of form, but mind and habits' (III. ii. 17-18). Manfred's primary development in the play is to understand firstly, that this split exists; that there are no perfect arrangements between shape and spirit, and secondly; that it is not so rigid that there cannot be a creative interplay between them. The key to this development is an appreciation, in both thought and linguistic structure, for the importance of natural pause and termination. This is most noticeably seized upon in Manfred's final words 'Old Man! 'Tis not so difficult to die.' If one doubts the magnitude of this assertion then one needn't look further than Byron's strong reaction to Murray's omission of the line: 'You have destroyed the whole effect & moral of the poem by omitting the last line of Manfred's speaking'.²⁴⁰ That Byron speaks of the 'effect' as well as the moral supports my argument that the lyrical drama is, amongst other things, a critique of Wordsworth's diffusive and interminable blank verse as much as it is a criticism of dogmatic thought. It is often complained of Byron that he contravened the regulations of specific verse forms out of an inadequate grasp of the medium. As the *Blackwood's* review insists,

²⁴⁰ *BLJ*, v. 257.

‘there are in the very finest passages, so many violations of the plainest rules of blank verse, that we suspect Lord Byron has a very imperfect knowledge of that finest of all music.’ (RR, B. i. 124) Yet embedded in this very complaint is a moment of unwitting praise for it is in the ‘very finest passages’ that Byron’s violations are most noticeable, and this may serve as a further indication that Byron aimed at these rhetorical checks on the conventional blank verse effects of melodic naturalness.²⁴¹

If Douglas Bush argues that in *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley supplants a dramatic structure with a musical one, and Richard Cronin uses this to extend the notion by showing how Shelley is able to free himself from the dramatic traditions of Milton and Aeschylus,²⁴² then Byron tends towards the opposite in *Manfred*. The wider social, historical, and generic reverberations of Byron’s theme are echoed in his choice of a loosely meditative dramatic form, but they also demonstrate an evolution of that form through its progressive movements. While Byron evidently created *Manfred* for a mental and not a physical theatre, he makes use of dialogue as a way of undoing the interminable inward turns of Manfred’s thought and entwining them into a more objective texture of dramatic intrusions and suppressions. The nature of Byron’s undertaking precludes continual reflection but it does not preclude continual ingenuity, force, and originality. Despite his best attempts at an effortless connection with the natural world, Manfred is impelled to confront metaphysics in a mixed mode; to accept that the embodiment of ideas requires a certain artificiality and will not spring naturally from its own accord. There is an opposition in the matter to the method applied to it – the physical and conceptual are seldom co-ordinate – and therefore require an

²⁴¹ In this, Irving Babbitt’s observations on Goethe hold true for Byron, ‘he saw that the romantic disease was the imaginative and emotional straining toward the unlimited (*Hang zum Unbegrenzen*), and in opposition to this unrestraint he was never tired of preaching the need of working within boundaries.’ *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1919), 361.

²⁴² Richard Cronin, *Shelley’s Poetic Thoughts* (London: MacMillan, 1981), 154.

alternative mode of engagement and reconciliation. In Byronic criticism, this manoeuvre is more often than not presented as a calculated perversion of a simplistic ideal. But in addition to this satiric tendency, the diminution of a subject voice that is doubly entailed by Byron's decision to inscribe objective tones and structures within a lyrical drama constitutes the argument of the work as a whole. Byron's intricate subversion and reconstitution of his protagonist's power of imaginative autonomy and spontaneous expression is a reworking of the natural ideal. But since this power is also, in generic terms, the power of lyrical blank-verse utterance, it is possible to consider *Manfred* alike as a response to the psychological and poetic challenges posed by lyrical authority.

‘The Patched-up Idol of Enlightened Days’:

Childe Harold III and IV.

The ruling passion, such as marble shows
When exquisitely chiselled, still lay there,
But fixed as marble’s unchanged aspect throws
O’er the fair Venus, but forever fair,
O’er the Laocoon’s all eternal throes,
And ever-dying Gladiator’s air.
Their energy like life forms all their fame,
Yet looks not life, for they are still the same.

(Don Juan, IV, 481-8.)

Fantastically tangled: 'The critics' dilemma

From their earliest reception, the final two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* have provoked a perplexing variety of responses. While it would be an impoverishing generality to claim critical consensus for the cantos of 1812, the ambivalence of Byron's 'exile' from England in 1816 – part emancipation, part estrangement – coupled with the collapsing of the supposed third-person distancing device in all but nominal references to Harold as protagonist in cantos III & IV, posed a new set of difficulties for its readers.²⁴³ Through a more spirited exploitation of the Spenserian stanza's unusual flexibility (with its doubling techniques and metrical inequalities) and a heightened subjectivity of the narrative voice, Byron tries to assimilate self and history in an entangled structure of linearity and discontinuity. This troubled its first reviewers and continues to trouble critics who have found the substance of the poem every bit as challenging as its style. Hazlitt described canto IV in chimeric terms – its phantasmagorical shiftings were 'as disturbed, as confused, as disjointed' as a 'troubled dream' – expressing specific consternation at the loose structure of the poem whose 'lassitude or feverish tossing and tumbling'²⁴⁴ reflected a design without settled perimeters. The *Scots Magazine* review of the same canto articulated a thorough disquiet at the often punctuated dissonance or 'harshness' of narrative which resulted from the unevenness of its overlapping arrangement: 'a too frequent straggling of one stanza into one or more which follow it'²⁴⁵ which had the effect of ceaseless disruption. If Susan Wolfson highlights a stylistic indeterminacy in the couplets of *The Corsair* by showing

²⁴³ While I am aware that the cantos were published separately, and are usually read as such (particularly in their apparent articulation of a move from 'Nature' to 'Culture'), I am really more interested in the unusual dynamics of Byron's return to the Spenserian stanza in 1816-1817, and will therefore treat the cantos, more or less, as one production.

²⁴⁴ RR, B. i. 2336.

²⁴⁵ RR, B. i. 2179.

how reviewers ‘were divided as to whether Byron’s style, in relation to his poem’s narrative extended or violated Augustan practice’,²⁴⁶ this division between correctness and transgression is especially compounded in the ever-moving Spenserian stanzas of *Childe Harold* III and IV.

The fundamental difficulty that beset so many early readers was the palpable complexity of a poetic register which seemed to turn, almost without warning, from the smoothness of assertive historical reflection, to wild and irregular bursts of personal revelation, and then back again to more moderate convictions in the alexandrine. The *British Review* of canto III saw the conservative critic William Roberts labouring to resolve the speaker’s capacity to ‘strut sometimes in the garb of the philosopher – sometimes in the foppery of sentimental woe’, drawing attention not only to Byron’s customary unsettling of social agreement by idiosyncratic intrusion but also affirming its opposite in the almost teleological ‘turn from abuse and disorder to means of rational delight and virtuous improvement.’²⁴⁷ By blurring the traditional polarities of thought and feeling, Roberts argues that Byron strains to ‘interweave sentiment and description into one continuous and complex idea’ and confounds the laws of causality and apposition in doing so. This fluctuating form of plurality seems to grant no comfortable parity between division and integration; between particularity and universality; between the individual and society. Byron appears to move backwards and forwards between personal rumination and general reflection, both in order to establish, and complicate, the relationship between them.

²⁴⁶ Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 137.

²⁴⁷ RR, B. i. 2181.

In his accompanying *Notes in Illustration of Canto IV of Childe Harold*, John Cam Hobhouse was careful to defend Byron's mode of expression against the many charges of irregularity by insisting on the constructive possibilities of an idiom which opens up Greek and Roman antiquity in the same way that a plough furrows by breaking the evenness of the ground:

The style which one person thinks cloggy and cumbrous, and unsuitable, may be to the taste of others, and such may experience some salutary excitement in ploughing through the periods of the Classical Tour. (*CPW*, ii. 262)

But the recurring presence of elegant phrases and universal assertions forces him to insert a curious disclaimer after this comment: 'It must be said, however, that polish and weight are apt to beget an expectation of value'. One scarcely needs to evoke the conservative inclinations of Hobhouse to illustrate the underhanded, though perhaps unwitting, betrayal of his lordship's social violations, but his point about the generative irregularity of the final cantos is useful. It has, of course, become something of a commonplace to relate such textual deviance to the poet's digressive habits, but there is a manifestly indecisive movement, or series of movements, inscribed within the temperament and style of these final cantos which seems to be of unique character in the Byron corpus. Behind the flagrantly aggravated tone of so many early reviews lies a much deeper anxiety about the way in which the poem problematizes its author's own convictions and the aesthetic on which they are founded – an inconsistency that extends beyond the issue of altering tastes and personal allegiance and reaches to the very core of subjectivity and historical process.

The cantos, taken as a whole, express the special meeting point of a difficult stanzaic configuration and an especially turbulent period in the life of their author.

Although Byron had enjoyed great success with the form four years earlier, and one might argue that his return to the Spenserian stanza at the very moment of his expatriation from England is itself a nostalgic homecoming, his intensified manipulation of a formal arrangement widely acknowledged for its troublesome integration of the universal and the particular – which often appear to be either too arbitrarily or too stiffly related, marks a special convening of dispositions. While Byron inferred a lasting monument of private value when he confessed that the stanza of Spenser was ‘the measure most after [his] own heart’,²⁴⁸ he also acknowledged a powerful sense of personal division at his return to the form:

it is a fine indistinct piece of poetical desolation, and my favourite. I was half mad during the time of its composition, between metaphysics, mountains, lakes, love unextinguishable, thoughts unutterable, and the nightmare of my own delinquencies. (*BLJ*, v. 165)

The ambivalent nature of Byron’s ‘self exile’ from Britain in 1816 has been well covered over the past half century of Romantic scholarship and it would be unprofitable for me to belabour the point.²⁴⁹ My concern is in connecting this biographical moment of intense equivocation in the poet’s own life with his return to a verse form that permits contrast and transition at the same time that it endorses continuity and permanency. I will give greater consideration to Byron’s particular syntactic manipulations in the cantos as the chapter progresses, but for the moment I would like to claim more generally that they are marked by a remarkable jostling between personal voice *and* chosen medium which combine to promote successive conditions of epistemological affirmation and ontological renunciation: while at times the poet-narrator’s mind ‘stirs too strongly’ to uphold ‘sects and systems’ (III, 381), in other moments he cannot free

²⁴⁸ *BLJ*, iv. 13.

²⁴⁹ See for instance, M. Raizis, ‘Byron’s Promethean Rebellion in 1816: Fictionality and Self-Projection in His Poetry of That Year.’ *Byron Journal* 19 (1991), 41-52.

himself from the weight of their authority, for ‘Still around him clung invisibly a chain / Which galled forever, fettering though unseen, / And heavy though it clanked not’ (III, 77-9).

The very substance of the final two cantos is none other than the poet’s search to find a form that will accommodate his own sense of ambivalence at the same time that the inbuilt ambivalence of his chosen form, with its great range of syntactic flexibility within an ungainly rhyme scheme, induces his mind to roam even as it journeys ever forward. This tension between action and style which gives the poem much of its disturbing power and beauty is evident throughout. In the early stages of Canto III, the poet avows his faith in the constraints of the stanza (i.e. tradition or public form) by having ‘mix’d / again in fancied safety with his kind, / And deem’d his spirit now so firmly fix’d’ (III, 10) and yet remains is at a loss: ‘searching through the crowd to find fit speculation’ where ‘non unite in one attaching maze’ (III, 60). At the start of Canto IV the search continues: ‘still teems / My mind with many a form which aptly seems / Such as I sought for’ (IV, 58-60) and yet he remains ‘Glowing but circumfused’ (IV, 52), ‘foam[ing] in fetters’ (IV, 116). The subject is not so much ‘pitted against form’²⁵⁰ in disjunctive conflict as it is ‘fantastically tangled’ (IV, 117) within that form. The final cantos of *Childe Harold* are more radically equivocal than any of his other poems because they figure the most concentrated example of what might loosely be described as ‘Romantic indeterminacy’; that enmeshed discursive negotiation between appropriation and projection, and yet they never completely surrender the deep desire for evaluative permanence.

²⁵⁰ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, 206.

At an earlier point in the chapter I implied that there has been an almost incalculable array of reactions to *Childe Harold* III & IV. There are in truth two distinct and antithetical discursive traditions to approaching the poem which grow out of an interpretative incapacity to attend to the binding heterogeneity of the text without in some way forsaking its plurality. The first is what we might term 'passive' or 'contextual' in that it perceives authorial constructions as negotiations of external aesthetic categories. Thus John Wain concludes of the 'Dying Gladiator' episode in canto IV, that 'this mechanical (and not very accurate) moral drawing from history is an eighteenth-century taste',²⁵¹ while Philip W. Martin attends to the way in which Byron 'loses artistic independence'²⁵² by appropriating 'tourist rhetoric' and contemporary philosophic trends so that he might appeal to an ever-changing audience. The second, more prominent line, is what we might call a 'transformative' or 'transcendental' approach which centres on the poet's self-conscious imaginative activity as an autonomous creative power which generates form and meaning from within and is therefore capable of transcending the imposing limits of the external world. Thus McGann examines the means by which the poet-narrator's 'soul...must constantly reconsider its own conception of itself and recreate itself under the influence of fresh experience',²⁵³ and Michael O'Neill considers the 'recoil of the mind upon itself' in a form of 'self-consuming thinking' and 'self-transcending creativity'.²⁵⁴ The first views Byron as prosaically submissive, the second as insatiably effectual.

²⁵¹ John Wain, 'The Search for Identity' in *A House for the Truth: Critical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 163.

²⁵² Philip W. Martin, *Byron: A Poet Before His Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 2.

²⁵³ Jerome J. McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 38.

²⁵⁴ Michael O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 115.

While the fallaciousness of the contextual tradition has been thoroughly exposed, the seemingly unmanageable mediation of experience through the patchy framework of a conspicuously disjointed verse form has produced a chestful of readings explicating the manner in which Byron crumbles traditional forms of knowledge into the fragmentary shards of an interminable and immeasurable subjectivity. The forerunner for such interpretations is Robert Gleckner's *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* which positions the poems textual unravellings within the poet's broader determination to 'shape the indeterminate vision of his epic by dramatizing the collapse of antique systems of truth into the fractural shards of modern experience'.²⁵⁵ In a similar tenor, M.G. Cooke's engagement with the poem reveals it to be little more than a 'discontinuous scheme of self-assertion and self-cancellation'.²⁵⁶ While there is certainly a great deal of textual and biographical evidence to scaffold Byron's vestigial grasp of a world in ruins, it would be an impoverished assumption to conclude that the later cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* are solely preoccupied with epistemological disintegration.

Interpretations centred on the speaker's 'piecemeal' apprehension and composition inevitably point to the much examined 'broken mirror' moment to show how Byron creates perspectives that dissolve continually in the processes of the poetry:

Even as a broken mirror, which the glass
In every fragment multiplies; and makes
A thousand images of one that was,
The same, and still the more, the more it breaks; (III, 289-92)

²⁵⁵ Robert F. Gleckner, *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), 157.

²⁵⁶ M.G. Cooke, *The Blind Man Traces the Circle: On the Patterns and Philosophy of Byron's Poetry* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 55.

From a modern standpoint it is tempting to read these lines in deconstructive terms as irrepressibly discontinuous: depreciating further and further as the mirror becomes ever more fractured. But the verbal texture conveys a deeper sense of agreement. The abiding, measured rhythm in the extended alexandrine, ‘the same, and still the more, the more it breaks’, is assonant rather than dissonant and achieves a feeling of growth out of corrosion. The cooperative and enlarging diction - ‘same’, ‘still’, ‘more’, proffers an assuaging permanence in and through its divisions. The line expresses unity and fragmentation in a single phrase, it is a formal gesture that combats its own reductive tendencies, and is therefore hardly the despairing vision of Eliot’s ‘heap of broken images’ but more in keeping with an Augustan sensibility that saw decay and corruption as natural and unproblematic. If composing poetry is ‘to create, and in creating live / A being more intense’ (III, 46-7) then it must also be acknowledged that the mind ‘fevers into false creation’ (IV, 1091). Such formulations are, as I suggested in my introduction, familiar to the reader of Romantic poetry but their immediate rejoinders are less so. In the first instance the poet retorts in self-admonishment: ‘yet I must think less wildly’ (III, 55), while in the second he turns to the classical figures of art in questioning despair: ‘Where are the forms the sculpture’s soul hath seized?’ (IV, 1092).

The process described here in a personal voice of introspection might be glossed by a more expansive deliberation on the image of the fallen empire of Venice. The impression of totality crushed and ground to powder in the ‘Statues of glass – all shiver’d – the long file / Of her dead Doges are declin’d to dust’ (IV, 127-8) presents a vision of quivering fragility given way to complete and irreversible collapse. However, though the perspicuity of glass has turned to a dusty opaqueness, it is still a ‘vast and sumptuous pile’ (129) whose colossal opulent wreck ‘Bespeaks the pageant of their

splendid trust' (130). I am not suggesting that Byron's poem is without radical disconnections, but if we are to focus solely on the manner in which it forsakes the misleading collective confidence of classical and enlightened minds, we may fail to see the possibilities for social and formal accord that are embedded in the texture of the poem. The gestures of inauguration Byron makes in breaking the deadlock of a stultifying tradition may unfold in violent ruptures but they never quite free themselves from contingency. Each emergence represents a deeper involvement with that from which it emerged. Here, as in so many of the stanzas which have preceded and followed it, the poem hems and haws between a classicism insistent upon distinct forms, discernible structures and conscious craftsmanship, and more reflexive immersions in the intangible nature of the creative process.

Gleckner's enquiry represents a pessimistic version of the overly-autonomous approach to the poem because it emphasises the destructive potential of the imagination. However, the triumph of poetic emancipation against the poet's sense of historical inevitability in the final two cantos of *Childe Harold* is the focus of illustrious critical awareness in, among other places, Jerome J. McGann's *Fiery Dust*, Vincent Newey's *Centring the Self* and Michael O'Neill's *Romanticism and the Self Conscious Poem*. Their attention to the undigested paradoxes of the text and the highly self-conscious voice of the narrating poet fill a gap in Romantic studies left by the unwillingness of the so-called 'Yale School' to contend with Byron's simultaneous participation in, and critique of, a consuming absorption in the nature of the creative process. However, their approaches, though vastly impressive, present a reconsideration of *Childe Harold* which often tries too hard to thrust the poem more securely into the 'Visionary Company' of Bloom's Romantic canon without consideration for its in-built resistance

to that canon. Its place in that company, as I have tried to demonstrate, is far from settled.

McGann's early study of *Childe Harold* argues that the poem is a process of discovery in which the narrating poet gradually comes into a full understanding of his status as pilgrim by acceding to a prophetic office that enlightens not through 'oracle' but as 'exemplum',²⁵⁷ that is, not from beyond but from within. McGann's reading deviates only slightly from Gleckner's 'anti-pilgrimage' hypothesis in its conclusion which champions a Hegelian dialectic of thought in which the recurring negations of totality seem to merge themselves in a higher truth that comprehends them. The poet-narrator's final realization of his 'Faculty Divine' (IV, 1036) in 'the mind's ability to triumph permanently over defeat and death' is none other than a final declaration of 'the sacred worth of the individual soul above everything else on earth'.²⁵⁸ Like Gleckner, McGann considers the shattered wreck of Europe as it is contained within the poet's psyche, 'a ruin amid ruins' (IV, 1172), and therefore argues that it is graspable or conquerable in a way that the broad sweep of historical fatedness is not. There are two obvious drawbacks implicit in this analysis: firstly in the way that it condenses and accordingly subdues the external forces of Nature and History to the autonomy of a single mind, and secondly, in the all too lopsided evocations of the redemptive power of the heroic sublime – 'the union of Nature and Supernature' – that stems from an over-determination to resolve the radically equivocal operations of the poem at large.

In a variation of this critical practice, Michael O'Neill and Vincent Newey embrace the complicated doubleness of poetic voice as an interconnectedness of self

²⁵⁷ *Fiery Dust*, 40.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 136.

and fiction; a ‘dramatization of consciousness’²⁵⁹ in which identity is created (and destroyed) in and through composition. Through attentive close-reading to the linguistic nuances of an ever-changing authorial voice they represent the superlative investigations of subjectivity in *Childe Harold* thus far. Yet this can only be achieved by insulating the author-in-text dynamic into a self-governing whole whose interchange is performed without reference beyond itself. Newey’s apprehension of the poem is predicated upon the cognitive dynamics of conceiving and perceiving: upon the ‘interchangeable and indivisible activities of “making” and “reading”’.²⁶⁰ He focuses his analysis on the dilemmas of what he concludes to be an essentially volatile authorial power in which the ever-changing alignments of declaration and abjuration express mental processes and a creation of the self that is always provisional and at the point of dissolution. While historical realities are not utterly neglected in Newey’s account, he holds Byron’s pattern of construction and undoing as representing the disequilibrium of human experience only as it exists in the mental world the poet:

Though *Childe Harold* is vividly referential, impressive in its realizations of history, civilization, or nature, the ‘world’ man inhabits, its pressing actuality is not that of any material realm beyond the text but the actuality of the mental process embodied in it, the blend of idealism and vigorous scepticism that is endlessly reconstructive and an endless dissolution.²⁶¹

While Newey is not amiss in calling attention to the work as a strenuous engagement with the internal problems of poetic enterprise, there is a danger in collapsing these engagements into mere subjectivity by reading the poem as an unmitigated rumination upon the process of bringing imaginative thought to bear upon the things of the world, painting all things in the hues which the mind itself devises. In such an approach, the

²⁵⁹ O’Neill, 94.

²⁶⁰ Vincent Newey, *Centring the Self: Subjectivity, Society and Reading from Thomas Gray to Thomas Hardy*, (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 209.

²⁶¹ *Ibid*, 209.

larger forces of nature and human history are contracted to a span and have no reality outside the mind of the poet whose imagination is too aggressively active to permit passive consideration for events beyond the mental topography of the mind. In this sense, the conflicts inherent in the form are dangerously pathological without being phenomenological: the poet acting upon and rebelling against a law that is his to own and disown.

The discursive thread connecting all of these studies is a very modern one which eschews the crude realism of a barefaced historicism by focusing instead on the self and text as autonomous constructions or, to put it more accurately, the writer's sense of the crisis of subjectivity undergone in composition. Where Gleckner traces the poem's multiple elaborations toward enigma, McGann presents the image of a hard-fought triumph against the destructive cycles of history, while Newey and O'Neill give meaning to the unresolved acts of creation and destruction. Yet with varying emphases these critics approach the drama of contradictions through the same expressive paradigm of poetry as utterance and projection. Authority, then, is not contingent upon history or the inherited forms of poetic composition, but exists in a kind of ceaseless self-creating and self-undoing where coercion and consent reinforce, yet undermine, one another and in doing so 'wrest back for poetry a power associated with prophecy.'²⁶² In essence this sets up an unwanted dichotomy between historiographical approaches to the poem, and its self-justifying 'Romantic Ideology.' Appealing as such a dichotomy may be when confronting the knotty tissue of intertextuality that constitute *Childe Harold* III & IV, it too readily assumes an opposition that combats history against

²⁶² Michael O'Neill, "'A Very Life in Our Despair': Freedom and Fatality in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Cantos 3 and 4" in *Liberty and Poetic Licence: New Essays on Byron*, ed. Bernard Beatty, Tony Howe, and Charles E. Robinson (Liverpool University Press, 2008), 45.

prophecy. In doing so it runs the risk of ignoring the great range of the poem whose formal mobility negotiates the divisions of chance and determination. Evidence for the discursive pluralism of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* lies, not just in the poem's adaptability to both of these arguments but it is also present in the fact that Byron gives counter-signals in the text itself, as though to draw attention to the interchangeability of ontological values when measured with an epistemological yardstick, and of ideological values when measured against the self whose 'bark drives on and on, and anchored ne'er shall be' (III, 70). The double theme of nature and convention gives to almost every stanza a deep ambiguity which is not the critic's business to remove.

Any claims we make about the nature of Byronic divarication are especially rickety when confronting the peculiar idiomatic flux of *Childe Harold* III & IV. The difficulty, or even impenetrability, which many readers feel in these cantos is inherent in their subject as well as their manner; it is not necessarily, or incontestably, the product of the poet's troubled consciousness. Geoffrey Ward records Byron's shift to *Don Juan* and the *ottava rima* verse-form 'having not so much resolved as given up trying to solve his dilemmas from the self-centred yet centreless viewpoint of *Childe Harold* III.'²⁶³ This is owing to the explicit difficulties of the Spenserian stanza which maintains a degree of flexibility, but does not possess the whimsical subjective spring of the *ottava rima* famously celebrated by Virginia Woolf as 'an elastic shape which will hold whatever you choose to put into it.'²⁶⁴ The inbuilt structural complexity of a mode that infuses heroic with continued rhyme means that spirit and form are often carelessly and obscurely modulated.

²⁶³ Geoffrey Ward, 'Byron's Artistry in Deep and Layered Space' in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, ed. Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool University Press, 1988), 211.

²⁶⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Ann Olivier Bell, vol. 1 (London: Hogarth, 1977), 181.

In his account of Byron's struggle with the Spenserian unit ABABBCBCC, Paul West labels it a stanza of 'unfortunate strata,' which he puts down to the implicit contradiction between its sharp internal couplet and the wearisome final alexandrine. 'Evoking the couplet's tidy dispatch,' he argues, it 'at the same time slumps into monotony towards the end.' In a categorical flourish, West dismisses the possibility of Byron ever having an aptitude for the form because of his restless temperament: 'Perfect for Spenser's timeless vista, it gets Byron into phrases and torpors he does not require.'²⁶⁵ The problem with this sort of approach, beyond its leaning too easily on an inevitable mismatch between Byron's Spenserian and *ottava rima* efforts, is that takes for granted the synoptic timelessness of Spenser's 'World Picture' and Byron's aversion to such panoramic visions, without acknowledging the distinctive scope for microcosmic and microscopic engagements offered by the internal dynamics of stanzas. In them we detect a complicated syntactical cross-current of progression and regression which often pivots at a midpoint in the fifth line, operating as an axis about which the stanza doubles back upon itself. The reciprocal rhyme in line five lays the basis for a second quatrain which complicates, enlarges and re-examines the narrative context of the first four lines and thus creates a structural pattern exploiting both repetition and difference. Narrative syntax moves forwardly linearly (though, at times, unevenly), but within formal parameters that draw in part upon what has gone before. The specific tension is one of enjambment (as a concept and a literary device) against design; exhibiting continuities and revivals as well as shifting focuses of attention. To put it simply, the timeless and the time specific are always merging and competing.

²⁶⁵ Paul West, *Byron and the Spoiler's Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), 53.

There are I think, special reasons for the difficulty in estimating the proper relation between form and intention in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and especially in the intensified tone of the latter cantos, which have their roots in the generic history of Spenser's stanza. It has always been maintained – and most reasonably I think – that Spenser's adoption and transmutation of the eight-line *ottava rima* of Ariosto and Tasso into a nine-line English stanza carried with it an uneasy mixture of contrasting linguistic traditions; a meeting of descriptive and reflective styles. There is, therefore, a pervasive sense that the stanzas are not naturally figured but patched together, not a balanced and dissoluble composition but a series of peculiarly concordant and discordant lines. Byron felt this, and expressed as much in the preface to Canto IV in which he reflects upon the difficulty in trying to fit his 'Italian' subject to a culturally and linguistically ambivalent form:

In the course of the following Canto it was my intention, either in the text or in the notes, to have touched upon the present state of Italian literature, and perhaps of manners. But the text, within the limits I proposed, I soon found hardly sufficient for the labyrinth of external objects and consequent reflections...The state of literary party runs as high or even higher than even on the question of Romantic or Classical as they call it, so that for a stranger to steer impartially between them is next to impossible. (*CPW*, ii. 122-3)

The hybrid origins of its structure are not entirely suited to well-designed English tastes but they do not wholly fit an Italian sensibility either. The serious didactic intentions of Spenser's allegory for instance, seem at times overwhelmed by the dazzling hedonism of his poetic style. This prosodic clash and its expression of two different world views invited great debate throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and are frequently implicated in an ongoing conflict between the merits of imaginative and intellectual art. Where Dryden issued a word of warning against the Gothic opulence of this Italian influence: 'Ariosto's style is luxurious without majesty or decency.

Tasso...beneath the dignity of heroic verse',²⁶⁶ others, such as Prior, honoured the composite aesthetic of the stanza whatever the excesses and affectations of its lavish manner.²⁶⁷

Although it hasn't the overall nimbleness of the *ottava rima*, the Spenserian stanza is a rich brocade of unified and irregular meter, a conjunction of many moods. It contains a remarkable meeting of classical sensibility and romantic temper: the heroic meter of the individual quatrains can be balanced, urbane and logical with a certain authoritative restraint and severity; yet its interlocking rhyme, like those of the Italian sonnet and Chaucer's rhyme royal, is accommodating of jarring connections and unmethodical observations. Similarly, the concluding six-foot alexandrine can be poised in stately reconciliation – 'All things decay in time, and to their end do draw' (*The Faerie Queene* III. vi. 40) or unconvinced of its own closing deduction – 'The whiles the passing brightnes of her fraile senses dazed' (III. xi. 49). The concentration of natural and unnatural divisions in an established shape gives sanction to the slow moving adagio with its long vowels and plosive consonants as well as the lively allegro with its short vowels and liquid consonants. Neither is slighted nor entirely abandoned.

²⁶⁶ John Dryden 'A Discourse on Satire' in *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. Walter Scott, William Miller and James Ballantine 18 vols., (London: printed for William Miller), xiii. 15.

²⁶⁷ The peculiar generic development of the stanza as it exists in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* has been comprehensively examined in longer studies concerning Spenser's influence on Romantic poetry, most exceptionally in Stuart Curran's scrupulous analysis of the development of the romance genre during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and Gregory Kucich's extensive investigation into the 'duality of Romantic Spenserianism'. While Kucich's study is centred on the 'Spenserianism' of Keats and Shelley he gives due attention to the 'doubleness of experience' in *Childe Harold*, emphasising Byron's 'multiple elaborations towards enigma instead of revelation'. In his general thesis pertaining to the 'profound generic questioning' of the period Curran highlights Byron's poem to demonstrate the poet's 'power in exploiting the realism within romance' that Spenser's medium proffered. These enquiries are historically thorough and theoretically convincing and I do not wish therefore to repeat their claims in my handling of the poem. My intention rather is to extend their claims for the stylistic evolution of a particular genre through a more concentrated deliberation on the texture of Byron's poem – to examine the fabric as well as the frame. See Gregory Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and romantic Spenserianism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 38, and Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, 88-9.

The dazzling manner and sober matter of Spenser's stanza are, therefore, not easily resolved by a simple contrast because they revel in variety, albeit an almost unmanageable one. This was felt by Byron in his twin experiments with the mode (1812, 1816-18), both of which bear prominent convictions for its special properties. Although he pre-emptively dismantles any accusations of slavish adherence to the antiquated language of the 'old structure of versification' in his preface to *Childe Harold* I & II, Byron is quick to include a preceding affirmation of the plenitude of its configuration by quoting Beattie's letter to Dr Blackwood (1766):

Not long ago I began a poem in the style and Stanza of Spenser, in which I propose to give full scope to my inclination, and be either droll or pathetic, descriptive or sentimental, tender or satirical, as the humour strikes me; for, if I mistake not, the manner which I have adopted admits equally all these kinds of composition. (*CPW*, ii. 4-5)

To this Byron adds the 'authority' of the 'highest order of Italian poets' (Ariosto), insisting that if his own variations on the model are unsuccessful, 'their failure must be in the execution, rather than in the design'. Byron clearly values the in-built juxtaposition of harmonies and disharmonies in each stanzaic unit, even if they place greater demands on the poet. The greatest of these demands is in the pacing: the difficult technical problem of maintaining and regulating the speed of continuity. As Beattie describes it: 'It admits of more variety of pause than either the couplet or the alternative rhyme; and it concludes with a pomp and majesty of sound...its irregularity of inflection and number of monosyllables, abounds in diversified terminations.'²⁶⁸ As a consequence, the stanzas abound in modifying contrasts but often lack the dramatic intensity of a self-contained and internally consistent narrative.

²⁶⁸ James Beattie to Thomas Blacklock (Aberdeen, 22 September, 1766) in William Forbes, *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie* (London: Routledge, 1996), 62.

But if this supposed incongruence between speed and variety constitutes an aesthetic defect for the like of Dryden, it fits Byron's purposes (or lack of clear purpose) in *Childe Harold* III & IV magnificently. In a letter to Thomas Moore regarding the swift easy style of *The Corsair*, Byron contemplates the leisurely dignity of the Spenserian stanza:

In the present composition I have attempted not the most difficult but perhaps the best adapted measure to our language – the good old & now neglected heroic couplet – the Stanza of Spenser is perhaps too slow and dignified for narrative – though I confess it is the measure most after my own heart. (*BLJ*, iv. 13)

While so much critical attention has been given to Byron's achievements in *Don Juan* and the speed afforded by the *ottava rima* for the expression of his quick intelligence, it is striking that Byron should have maintained a deep investment in the unhurried dignity of the Spenserian stanza. In a letter to Murray in 1817, he objected to poem entitled *Modern Greece*, written and published anonymously by Felicia Hemans: 'not being able to manage the Spenser Stanza has invented a thing of it's own – consisting of two elegiac stanzas a heroic line and an Alexandrine twisted on a string',²⁶⁹ which showed both his attentiveness to the difficulties of the medium and its lasting value for him. This, I believe, is owing to Byron's inherent attraction to poetry which allows for forceful disjunctions at the same time that it maintains a pervasive sense of dignity. And it was this mode, which organizes itself by interlocking themes and cyclical patterns rather than by clear narrative progression, which became especially applicable to the psychological and geographical thresholds of his 1816-17 years.

²⁶⁹ *BLJ*, v. 262.

Once again, Byron plays movement against pause. Nowhere is this formal ambiguity more evident than in what is effectively the opening stanza of Canto III:²⁷⁰

Once more upon the waters! yet once more!
 And the waves bound beneath me as a steed
 That knows his rider. Welcome, to their roar!
 Swift be their guidance, wheresoe'er it lead!
 Though the strain'd mast should quiver as a reed,
 And the rent canvas fluttering strew the gale,
 Still must I on; for I am as a weed,
 Flung from the rock, on Ocean's foam, to sail
 Where're the surge may sweep, or tempest's breath prevail. (III, 10-18)

The first line announces Byron's formal return to the Spenserian stanza but it also signals an intended adjustment of that register. The adjectival conjunction 'yet' in 'Once more...yet once more' evokes a return through repetition but it is one of changing value and changing emphasis. The insinuating shift, as we discover in the proceeding stanza, is a more personal absorption of Harold's 'Tale' by the speaker:

Again I seize the theme then but begun,
 And bear it with me, as the rushing wind
 Bears the cloud onwards: (III, 19-21)

Not only do these lines make a point of declaring that the substance of Cantos I & II has been forcefully taken hold of and carried along by the poet, but they also sound the manner by which this is done: in the dual motion of a cloud that alters its shape even as it is hastened forward by the rushing wind. While Harold the protagonist is allowed to recede into the textual history of the poem the simultaneously associative and episodic dynamic of the narrative remains.

²⁷⁰ The actual opening stanza is little more than a dedication or 'hymn' to Ada.

Though confirmed by this self-conscious expression of transition, it is the opening stanza that establishes the foundation of poetic movement by navigating between interrelated measures of control and dispossession. There is again a reinforced sense of command through reciprocity in the image of waves that 'bound beneath' as 'a stead / That knows his rider'. It implies an established and effortless mastery of manner, an indivisible fastening of subject and object, and a feeling of endorsed purpose in the oceanic rhythm as a directing agent. There is no mistaking that it is the verse which leads its practitioner in the thrusting forward motion of its design but there is an implied degree of artistic empowerment in the imperious sway of a poet that has reared the verse-form to capture the demands of his temperament. The lines avail themselves to a certain integrated give-and-take of structure and spirit but in a manner so ambivalent that the driving impetus remains unclear. There is an undeniable deliberateness in the speaker's welcoming of the roar as both an active invitation for the reader to yield to the full, deep, prolonged sound of the verse, and yet it also presents a sounding of his own sense of wilful submission to the uncontainable power of the form. The speedy prompting or 'swift guidance' of the meter is held together by a series of penetrating declamations too swift and determined for thought or doubt. To roar then is not merely to bellow in sound but, according to the *O.E.D.*, to 'act or occur fast and decisively'; to be convicted by the course set by the metrical pattern of the stanza 'whatsoever it lead!'

But, the verse is not as swift as the poet's desires for rapid movement, and Byron threatens to fracture this internal cadence near mid-point of the next line by straining to restrict the word 'strain'd' into a single syllable phrase so as to maintain the

relentless regularity of the meter. Until this point one felt a quality of agreed stability in being swept along by so propelling a rhythm, but the hazards of continuous overexertion begin to show. While the tempo takes the 'lead', the vessel that it transports (the weak counter-rhyming 'reed') wrenches in an image of structural instability. The above example is one of the few stanzas in cantos III & IV in which the fourth and fifth lines are not enjambed yet the same shift-in-continuity between them ('quivering while bounding') bears the strain of the poet's handling of a pattern that part admits and part denies. The modification from a seemingly permanent regularity to an unsteady acknowledgment of internal frailty is not only evident in the oscillating motion of 'quivering' and 'fluttering' but is signalled by the introduction of authorial agency. By raising a fabric of potentially unregulated words and phrases, by straining the tattered canvas of the verse so to speak, the advancement of the line is made subject to the impulses of its author: 'And the rent canvas fluttering strew the gale'. Through erratic variations of individual accent the charted progression of the iambic pentameter can be scattered irregularly and untidily. In this way the forward impetus can be held back or accelerated by the movement of thought, the grammatical structures, the uses of stress-shifts and run over lines, the weight of the rhymes and the combinations of consonants. The very weightless whims of the poet mean that while he is flung like a weed to the mercy of the ever-moving meter, it is this same buoyancy of spirit that makes it impossible for him to keep to its course in a straightforward way. The concluding alexandrine 'Where're the surge may sweep, or tempest's breath prevail' is hardly a rudderless concession on the part of the poet. It is a metrical balancing of form and agency provided by the luxury of an extra foot, but it is a dangerously simple resolution in light of the manifold entanglements that come before it. Like so many

successful unions mood and meter are conspicuously co-dependant and yet so thoroughly and uncomfortably amalgamated that an enduring tension exists.

What I am trying to establish here is a revised approach to the conflicting modes of perception in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* as they are organized by the structure of the Spenserian stanza and Byron's distinctive manipulations of syntax within that structure: drawing on Coleridge's distinction between 'form as proceeding and shape as superinduced'.²⁷¹ There is a penetrating correspondence between the outline of the verse-form and the individual progressions of thought or modes of contrast which operate inside its mould. Individual offset lines are dense with perceptual content, yet very frequent enjambment and parallelism of syntax makes the utterance thrust itself ahead of its own steady declarations. And with this forward thrust, different forms of delay (dashes, parentheses, a slightly rising rhythm at line-end) prevent the poem from bounding on uncontrollably: feelings of transition are held in tension with the desire to linger amid present resolutions. The writing ripples with suggestions that never fall into the inertly emblematic nor decline into the merely descriptive.

In a stanza bookended by the individual's obligation to mingle 'with the herd...penn'd...in their fold' and the impulsive craving to be a 'wanderer of Eternity', Byron displays this internal manoeuvring of autonomy and dependency with utmost intensity:

To fly from, need not be to hate, mankind;
 All are not fit with them to stir and toil,
 Nor is it discontent to keep the mind

²⁷¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection*, ed. Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 131.

Deep in its fountain, lest it overboil
 In the hot throng, where we become the spoil
 Of our infection, till too late and long
 We may deplore and struggle with the coil,
 In wretched interchange of wrong for wrong
 'Midst a contentious world, striving where none are strong. (III, 653-61)

What is immediately striking about this stanza is the number of strong, active verbs which are used, almost paradoxically, to describe the loss of mental agency one experiences in a collective organization. It begins by indirection, offering the vigorous verb 'to fly from' not as a high pitch of action but rather as an inaction; as the poet's desire to retreat from the cauldron of public confrontation. This is a very intransitive handling of an otherwise transitive verb. But if it is in any sense a private conviction, it is nonetheless delivered from a very public posture: to fly *from*, we are told in a rhetorical truism, is not necessarily to make judgement *against*, because in doing so it would embody the very opposition that disembodiment avoids. The tone of the succeeding line is somewhat less detached – 'all are not fit with *them*' very nearly reaches the tenor of a personal admission of fragility – but it still retains the broad quality of a civic statement in the style of an Augustan satirist: a comment of projection from the inside out presented, as it were, from the outside in. To 'stir' is to mix with others but it is also to rouse discord in the same way that toiling implies both a verbal disputation and the entanglement that such disputation necessitates.

However, the speaker is also aware that although such end-stopped lines remove him from public involvement, their moralizing status represents the failure of a poetic transition and an individual transcendence. The running enjambment of the ensuing lines serves to undermine the *discordia concors* of eighteenth-century poetics by showing not a balanced tension between opposing principles but an uncontrolled spirit

of disagreement; not roughness subjected to symmetry but an internally confined symmetry subjected to roughness. The meaning of the passage now hinges upon the phrase ‘to keep the mind / Deep in its fountain’ where it remains unclear whether ‘its’ indicates a possessive pronoun for the individual mind or a genitive adjective for mankind as an embodying reservoir of thought. The pattern of containment and release in the first two lines gives way to a thrusting of sense from caesura to caesura: from *fountain*, *throng*, and *infection* in a sinewy but flexible style of convoluted antithesis. It becomes something of a paradox of metrical organisation in which a fountain is both a well of stagnant turmoil and an emancipatory spring for the unsocial, and therefore, self-contained mind, and where overboiling can mean both overcooking and boiling over in a state of ebullience.

This masterly impression is a matter of diction and grammar played against the structure of the stanza. A mode of line-defined thought is put up against the strain for an autonomous order outside its inherited shape, or as Seamus Perry more eloquently says of the *Ancient Mariner*, a pressure is created between the ‘cribbed nightmare of centripetal monomania and a redemptive resort to the free existence of things.’²⁷² The passage, standing as it does between the extremes of kinship and solitude, endeavours to present a justification for the poet’s unequivocal move from culture to nature, but the employment of denotatively burdensome language and a juggling of word order avoids any straightforward transference of energy from the collective to the particular. Though displacement and repression do operate here, there is no decisive move from history to imagination; from earthly others to a transcendent self. There is instead a voice which gains profundity and power by troubling its own origins.

²⁷² Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 268.

The passage I have just addressed is end-stopped but there are many which spill over grammatically into the succeeding stanza: the criticism of a ‘too frequent straggling of one stanza into one or more which follow it’ cited earlier. In this way the poem, like a variety of its individual stanzas, is allowed to expand complexly as motivating impressions coil and return throughout its development. Following what is perhaps the most formidable stanza in canto III in which Byron wrestles with the incompatibility of form and spirit in Napoleon’s uncontainable ‘fever at the core’ is a passage of almost inexplicable rigidity:

This makes the madmen who have made men mad
 By their contagion; Conquerors and Kings,
 Founders of sects and systems, to whom add
 Sophists, – Bards, – Statesmen, – all unquiet things
 Which stir too strongly the soul’s secret springs,
 And are themselves the fools to those they fool;
 Envied, yet how unenviable! what stings
 Are theirs! One breast laid open were a school
 Which would unteach mankind the lust to shine or rule. (III, 379-87)

The unexacting style that it deliberately evokes is fittingly conveyed by the flaccid and clumsy alliteration of the first line. But the simplicity of thought and diction is deceptive: its fastening power is, by design, cumulative. By couching an image of thoughtless connectivity in carelessly articulated monosyllables, Byron condenses the formation of ideologies and their adherents to an unwieldy declaration. It wittingly impoverishes that which it seeks to describe, by reducing passionate, wayward conviction to the schematic prescriptions of a recipe ‘to whom’ one ‘adds’ and ‘stirs’ components. The infectious influence of a philosophical ‘contagion’ is further enforced by the hyphenated bond of ‘Sophists – Bards – Statesmen’ which has the effect of concentrating the specious reasoning of the individual into an general administration

which tightens as it broadens. The unruly fervour or stirring of ‘unquiet things’ is chastened down through circumscription into principle and decree until the style of these lines more particularly suggests a sententious reckoning in the drumming manner of Dryden. The persuasive urges of their ‘stings’ serve to command and coordinate in an approach indicative of a scattered herd coerced towards the framing restrictions of an enclosure. However, in an inversion of this reductive impulse, the stitching together of collective doctrine gives way to a penetrating dissection of the individual where ‘one breast laid open’ becomes a ‘school’ that exposes its own fallacious system of logic. This would seem less problematic had the previous stanza not upheld the enigma of genius (which is at one and the same time a possession unique to a single individual and a discursive potential valued for its influence on and absorption into other discourses) in one famous ‘antithetically mixt’ Napoleon: whose ‘Soul hath brooked the turning tide / With that untaught innate philosophy’. The stanza, as it were, turns inside out and the logical sequence is undercut by an unexpected reversal of subject. Its structure is a recognition and a resistance, a paradigm-bursting through paradigm development.

Spenser’s interiorizing of allegory, it will be remembered, is founded upon the paradox of trying to express primitive, pre-linguistic urges within the courtly discourse of civic humanism. As many have noted, *The Faerie Queene* articulates a conflict between sense and spirit, time and eternity, attainment and desire – the result is a certain intellectual tempering, a pointed metaphysical wittiness which offsets its lavish sensuousness and creates that strange blend of the abstract and the concrete for which it is renown. Dimensions of meaning and reference shift swiftly and subtly: landscapes thicken, recede, or become interiorized, diverse narratives contract to focus on the poet himself and enlarge to include mankind. Arising as it does from this composite

arrangement, Byron's poem might seem to represent a deliberate attempt to give rekindled force to an organizational complexity where 'More mighty spots may rise, more glaring shine, / But none unite in one attaching maze / The brilliant, fair and soft' (III, 578-80). Just as Spenser's innovative displacement of narrative order in *The Faerie Queene* signals a transition from the apparent timeless hierarchy of 'the Elizabethan world-picture' toward a more unsettling dialectical exchange between romance and pastoral characteristic of baroque art, Byron's appropriations of public rhetoric and poetic form in *Childe Harold* represent an idiom caught in the interstices of an aesthetic interregnum.

When Byron produced one of his most memorable judgment on the stylistic excellencies of Pope: 'he is a Greek Temple, with a Gothic Cathedral on the one hand, and a Turkish Mosque and all sorts of fantastic pagodas and conventicles about him',²⁷³ not only was he conveying the origins of his own 'poetical cross-purposes,' as Hazlitt put it, but he was evoking Hughes's familiar affirmation of the dual aesthetics in Spenser's *Faerie Queen*:

To compare it therefore with the Models of Antiquity, would be like drawing a parallel between the *Roman* and the *Gothic Architecture*. In the first there is doubtless a more natural Grandeur and Simplicity...tho the former is more majestic in the whole, the latter may be very surprising and agreeable in its Parts.²⁷⁴

In parallel with Hurd's conviction that Spenser 'trimmed between the Gothic and the Classic',²⁷⁵ Hughes classifies the poem at the interface of two distinct but converging traditions. In like manner, Michael Vicaro demonstrates how 'Byron's narrative pivots

²⁷³BLJ, viii. 109.

²⁷⁴ John Hughes, 'An Essay on Allegorical Poetry' (1715) quoted in Willard H. Durham, *Critical Essays of the Eighteenth Century 1700-1725* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1915), 106.

²⁷⁵ Richard Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry* (London: Printed for A. Millar, W. Thurlbourn, and J. Woodyer, 1762), 115.

between realism and romance ideals in a central dialectic of imagination and historical fact'.²⁷⁶ These observations capture the ebb and sway of associative and oppositional structures afforded by the sprawling yet internally oppositional configuration of the stanza. But where Spenser could invest his scenery with a system of significant relationships because that system was in the public domain and easily available, Byron's poem is written in an acute period of crisis and redefinition for public and private language and logic. The *Faerie Queene* presumes an intellectual homogeneity, certain shared assumptions such as 'the Great Chain of Being' which allow for rich modulations of variety so long as they are held within a firm cosmic arrangement. The final cantos of *Childe Harold* are more radically evasive than this because they enact a far more subjective dialect between personal time and historic time.

'The Survey and the Sating Gaze'

After this rather protracted, though I hope necessary, foregrounding of the interpretative difficulties attendant on Byron's employment and adaptation of the Spenserian verse-form, I now set out to explore the manner by which *Childe Harold* II & IV confront the broader dilemmas of historical process in ways that endeavour to dissolve the distance of neoclassical analysis but remain all too aware of the dangers in a sympathetic engagement with the past. The stanzas waver, therefore, between the 'survey' and the 'sating gaze' (IV, 1424), all the while showing how the poem is capacious and adaptable enough to encompass moderate progression as well as striking change. Drawing on the distinction between penetrative and detached viewpoints addressed in the opening chapter, I would like to give more focused attention to the

²⁷⁶ Quoted in Gregory Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism*, 114.

unresolved arbitration between panoramic comprehension and occluded vision in these later cantos of *Childe Harold*. As a means of arriving at the doubling aesthetics of History in these cantos, it may be more useful to give concentrated consideration to the poem as it displays Byron's own awkward grappling with the history of aesthetics.

In a recent critical analysis of the poem, Stephen Cheeke addresses the palpable contradiction between Byron's theoretical notions of history and his private experience of it. Cheeke tackles the poet's critical awareness of the 'pastness of the past' in light of his 'direct and first-hand' engagements with the significant scenes of history. Accompanying a careful assessment of Byron's treatment of the ruins of Rome in canto IV, Cheeke justly contends that 'Enlightenment historiography does not work; sceptical demystification does not fit comfortable with the ecstatic communion he so often recorded.'²⁷⁷ But his alertness to this niggling inconsistency is not sustained for the duration of the study and Cheeke's analysis persistently centres on Byron's spiritual apprehension of history, on his meditations upon the timeless ethereal essence of historical locations. It therefore suffers from the employment of an abundance of unqualified mystical terms — 'meditative', 'communion', 'sanctuary', 'mysterious faith' — to emphasise the poet's transcendence of materiality, finally concluding that 'at the heart of Byron's historiographical method [is] an intense and inter-subjective relation with the past.'²⁷⁸ These sentiments recall McGann's examination of a number of early nineteenth-century responses to the ruins of Rome in *The Beauty of Inflections* in which he craftily utilizes the demystifying methods of New Historicism to expose the development of the ancient city's peculiar mythological power for the individual. Concentrating his claims on the revitalizing facility of art, McGann evokes *Childe Harold*

²⁷⁷ Stephen Cheeke, *Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), xi.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

IV as an example of the capacity for psychological reconstruction in the mind of the artist. 'In Byron's poem' he argues, 'Rome is a private and interiorized locale...like everything else in Byron's poem, Rome is an expression and extension of himself.'²⁷⁹

While Cheeke emphasises Byron's subjective intimacy with the sacrosanct as a 'form of anti-antiquarianism, or counter-connoisseurship rooted in present reality,'²⁸⁰ McGann stresses the poet's logocentric need to inscribe the *genius loci* with his own deconstructive mental processes. The problem with both these claims is that they take for granted an all-too-easy rebuke of classical antiquarianism in order to bolster their contentions for the poet's vigorous renderings of an intensely-felt personal experience. In this way Byron remains consciously ensconced within the sublime potential of German transcendental philosophy, making an occasional foray into the discourse of civic humanism, but always returning to that act of imagining and inscribing in words the mind's power to transcend historic time. This seems to me a strained effort to press *Childe Harold* into a Romantic or Wordsworthian sense of the sublime to which it does not quite fit. Wordsworth, like Kant and to some extent Burke before him, felt that the sublime resided in the subject – in the state or condition of the mind and not in the object itself – even if the spirit of the object evokes a sublime experience. In his 1812 fragment on 'The Sublime and the Beautiful', Wordsworth emphasised the compelling difference between 'seeing' as a sensory experience and 'perceiving'²⁸¹ as an act of the will: landscape gives form to self-expression rather than serving as a subject for contemplation.

²⁷⁹ Jerome J. McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 324.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁸¹ *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and J.W. Smyser, vol.2, 357.

Yet to approach *Childe Harold* III & IV in terms of its rejection of the classical is to place particular emphasis on historical rupture – on an infusion of mental impressions upon an external scene – to the detriment of Byron’s enduring classical temper. His multiple engagements with the ruins of Rome are certainly self-reflexive and self-referential, but they evade self-absorption by that central instinct for objective significance which lies in and behind his work. The deep, private intensity of feeling in these stanzas is evident to reader, but its power and importance follow from its being something more than the mental construction of an individual experience. External structures work to modify spirit even as the spirit modifies historical forms. The opposite assertion to those of McGann and Cheeke could no less persuasively be made, and has been made; most notably by Jerome Christenson in his exposition on the preservation and promotion of a genteel sensibility in Byron’s poetry. Focusing on the imperial tactics of expansionism in *Childe Harold* IV, he sees the move from ‘Nature’ to ‘Culture’ in the final two cantos as a strategic endeavour on behalf of Byron and his publisher to market the poet’s refined sense of the grand sweep of history. ‘Setting off from the inaugural image of Venice’ he argues, ‘the fourth canto iterates the Spenserian stations of Lord Byron’s dilatory comprehension of the panorama if not the principles of history’.²⁸² Christensen’s thesis is weakened by his reduction of poetry to a saleable commodity and the limited attention to the texture of text inevitably following such an approach, but it is significant precisely in its capacity to emphasise Byron’s awareness of the powerful thrust of material and intellectual culture. Byron’s ontological search through the rubble of Rome in the later cantos conveys an abiding apprehension toward the linear modes of social and political development, but the spirit and range of his enquiry often exemplifies the sweeping judiciousness of a classical intelligence.

²⁸² Jerome Christensen, *Lord Byron’s Strength*, 190.

For Bernard Blackstone, Byron's faith in the sanction of this tradition is the essential attribute of all his poetry:

For Byron, the wisdom must be there from the beginning: he is a classical poet, living in bright air, the air of columns, theatres, temples brilliant in the sun. Wisdom is there if we can but seize it, a heritage from the past, something to be recovered, not remade...We come to terms with Byron only when we have come to terms with the past.²⁸³

In the wake of contemporary criticism's technical vocabulary Blackstone's blanketed declaration seems itself rather antiquated, something to be recovered, but he strikes upon an important tenor in the mind of the poet which I have tried to emphasise throughout this thesis: that of historical retrieval and repossession. One only needs to think of Byron's ambitious youthful apology in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* and his vindication of Pope in the letters to Bowles to validate this allegiance to a neoclassical ethic of recovery. A neglected hallmark of Byron's manner in *Childe Harold III & IV* is a certain elevated and composed sensibility, a gentlemanly ability to think in general terms. As Hazlitt says of the poet in *The Spirit of the Age*, in a description that combines the sublime with picturesque, 'he takes the highest points in the history of the world, and comments on them from a more commanding eminence'.²⁸⁴ Writing to Murray from Venice in 1817, Byron expressed a deep frustration at the manner in which a surplus of tourists ruined the picturesque views of Switzerland: 'the most distant glimpse or aspect of them poisoned the whole scene - & I do not choose to have the Pantheon & St Peter's & the Capitol spoiled for me too'.²⁸⁵ Byron is clearly evoking here an aesthetic not only of poetry, but also of landscape painting, and his exclusive rights to an untainted vista of the significant scenes of European heritage. For all the

²⁸³ Bernard Blackstone, *Byron: A Survey* (London: Longman, 1975), 91.

²⁸⁴ *HCW*, xii. 74.

²⁸⁵ *BLJ*, v. 191.

sublime force of his poetry, he makes it clear that he does not wish to have the static unity of a circumscribed prospect disintegrated at the hands of a lone intruder.

There are few moments in which the strain between a grand view and a personal view is more pronounced than in the famous stanzas upon entering St Peter's Basilica in the fourth canto. The grammatical juggling of time and knowledge in these lines operates deftly, but powerfully, to evoke a penetrating interplay of mind and matter. It does not so much posit a favouring of subject time over historic time, or *vice versa*, as it demonstrates a dynamic interchange between them. What we find here is the potential embodiment of a Byronic poetics, an emblemized definition as it were, of the generative function of poetry even as that poetry responds to and grows out of a cultural image of iconic permanence:

Enter: its grandeur overwhelms thee not;
 And why? It is not lessened; but thy mind,
 Expanded by the genius of the spot
 Has grown colossal, and can only find
 A fit abode wherein appear enshrined
 Thy hopes of immortality; and thou
 Shalt one day, if found worthy, so defined,
 See thy God face to face as thou dost now
 His Holy of Holies, not be blasted by his brow.

Thou movest – but increasing with the advance,
 Like climbing some great Alp, which still doth rise,
 Deceived by its gigantic elegance;
 Vastness which grows – but grows to harmonize –
 All musical in its immensities;
 Rich marbles – richer painting – shrines where flame
 The lamps of gold – and haughty dome which vies
 In air with Earth's chief structures, though their frame
 Sits on the firm-set ground – and this the clouds must claim

Thou seest not all – but piecemeal thou must break,
 To separate Contemplation, the great whole;

And as the Ocean many bays will make
 That ask the eye – so here condense thy Soul
 To more immediate objects, and controul
 Thy thoughts until thy Mind hath got but heart
 Its eloquent proportions, and unroll
 In mighty graduations, part by part,
 The Glory which at once upon thee did not dart,

Not by its fault – but thine: our outward sense
 Is but of gradual grasp – and as it is
 That what we have of feeling most intense
 Outstrips our faint expression; even so this
 Outshining and o’erwhelming edifice
 Fools our fond gaze, and Greatest of the great
 Defies at first our Nature’s littleness,
 Till growing with its growth, we thus dilate
 Our Spirits to the size of that they contemplate

Then pause and be enlightened; there is more
 In such a survey than the sating gaze
 Of wonder please, or awe which would adore
 The worship of the place, or the mere praise
 Of art and its great masters, who could raise
 What former time, nor skill, nor thought could plan;
 The fountain of sublimity displays
 Its depth, and thence may draw the mind of man
 Its golden sands, and learn what great conceptions can. (IV, 1387-1431)

To begin with, the invitation to ‘Enter’ the ‘vast and wondrous dome’ is a congenial one for ‘its grandeur overwhelms thee not’. In Kant’s notorious, though fundamental mendacious, account of his own entry into St Peter’s, the sheer excess of signifiers and ungraspable vastness of its structure made it, for him, an unmanageable sight: a sight which defeated perception by causing him a sense of ‘bewilderment, a sort of perplexity...[in which] the imagination recoils upon itself’.²⁸⁶ For Kant, the giddy angles and perspectives afforded by the many curved forms and concave surfaces presented a

²⁸⁶ Immanuel Kant *Critique of Judgement*, translated [from the German] with analytical indexes by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 26.

constant threat of disorder: a space that was unfathomable and therefore unmappable. Yet Byron's moderate and unthreatening tone beseeches no such conceptual astonishment. The hypothetical viewer is assured that there is no fear in being overpowered by the magnitude of the chamber. Instead, the coalescing spirit of the sublime, present in the object no less than the observer, performs a delicate act of reciprocity. The duality of the mind's enlargement, which has grown out of an innate sense of the grandeur of place, but also out of a spatial obligation to meet the demands of its magnificent dimensions, is coupled with the enlargement of 'the genius of the spot': itself 'grown colossal' by enjambment.

The tone of these lines is Wordsworthian in its sublime vocabulary, even if its overall structure, and impetus, is not. The process of expansion described here in continuous enjambment from lines two to six gives the feeling of an uninterrupted, if motionless, transmission of mutual growth. Byron is able to suspend the image so that it can be grasped, at least in theory, as a sensory whole without fear of paralysis. The loose-fitting syntax and flowing tempo work to uncover a medium by which the sublime authority of Spirit and spirit can be flawlessly fitted together. To enshrine is to place in an appropriate receptacle, to preserve in a form that ensures habitual veneration, and in such a tenor of contained reciprocity Byron is able to align aptitude and amplitude in seamless concatenation; the mind is enshrined in the sacred dome at the same time that the dome is enshrined in the mind of the perceiver. The desire here is for a swelling outwards of spirit without risk of being overwhelmed or 'blasted', and this is attained by the application of a rising rhythm within the circumscribing rhyme sequence of *mind / find / enshrined / defined*. The biblical incantation in the final lines is an attempt at reconciling the logocentricism of the Old Testament – the divine

pronouncement ‘thou / Shalt’ – with the New Testament transcendentalism of a poet-prophet – ‘the Bard / In holiest mood’ – to borrow a phrase from Wordsworth. What Byron achieves in this passage is an extraordinary correspondence; the potentially stifling power of intrinsic majesty is shielded from oppressiveness by private identification with the sacred vault; while the danger of an excessive spill-over of inspiration and projection is protected against by the defining limits of a ‘fit abode’.

However, in the same shifting manner as those lines on the *Venus de Medici*, the convenience of a static agreement is broken by the movement of one Spenserian stanza spilling over into the next at the very point in which motion is rekindled: ‘Thou movest’. What had seemed like an effortless reconciliation was really just a portrait or cross-section of a complex temporal process: a kind of deceptive air of permanency to what is actually in transition. Again there is a salience of reciprocity given by the double sense of the nominative pronoun in ‘Thou movest’ to suggest both an individually addressed reader and a more general inevitability of motion of time in the inclusive manner of ‘one moves’. The importance of this duality is that it emphasises the inescapable condition of temporality: the consequence of time, as well as image, to the experience of sublimity. The move seems involuntary, as if drifting along with the stanza and yet in this, as in so many of the stanzas before it, the nature of that movement is far from settled.

The opening quatrain of this stanza appears to naturalize the inter-dependence of subject and object by creating an image of Alpine ascent which, at first sight, offers an impression of organic development that increases ‘with the advance’:

Thou movest – but increasing with the advance,
Like climbing some great Alp, which still doth rise,
Deceived by its gigantic elegance;

Vastness which grows – but grows to harmonize
 All musical in its immensities;
 Rich marbles – richer painting – shrines where flame
 The lamps of gold – and haughty dome which vies
 In air with Earth's chief structures, though their frame
 Sits on the firm-set ground – and this the clouds must claim

Our expectations for a comprehensive and settled view are therefore thwarted by ceaseless displacement. The whole cannot be grasped at once, and the ever-rising rhythm of the first two lines threatens a frameless motion without hint of termination. The mountain-like contours of the basilica stretch out inestimably in a series of upward stream-like motions which cannot be epistemologically contained or controlled by the viewing subject. They hint at spatial distinctions which break down and dissolve by the flux of a ceaselessly-changing environment, one that never stops its transformations long enough to become a safely knowable, chartable and understandable place. However, Byron's subsequent wrenching of language into a complex ensemble of undulating views turns from nature to artifice, and more readily displays the energies of a baroque aesthetic contained in a modern sensibility. His impressions turn upon the interplay of curved forms and dynamic movements.

Our perceptions are deceived by the dome's 'gigantic elegance', that is, by the urgent dichotomy of an oxymoron which binds together the sublime and the beautiful in a clause of paradoxical harmony. It isn't the formless terror of the Kantian sublime, (a mass of inchoate material), but a: 'Vastness which grows – but grows to harmonize'. The stanza pivots on the phrase 'All musical in its immensities' which gestures toward an inexhaustible completeness but 'musical' is also used in a rather old-fashioned sense as an adjective for the agreement of form and content; the harmony of expression and emotion. The agreement is not an Augustan one because it does not imply an

antithetical balance or definitive framework, it exists *in* its immensities: in the *immensus* of a harmony that cannot be measured. But there is a dignity and composure in the line which flows from its self-possession and lends a certain coherence to the dazzling heterogeneity of the dome. The sentiment (though not the manner) reflects a Popean articulation of structural unity between a rich array of elements:

Not *Chaos*-like together crush'd and bruis'd,
 But as the World, harmoniously confus'd;
 Where Order in Variety we see,
 And where, tho' all things differ, all agree (*Windsor Forest*, 13-16)²⁸⁷

In Pope's lines the imaginative integration comes from the unifying principles found in the forest itself and is echoed in the formal arrangement of the poetic syntax – a patterned regulation in diversity where all things are at odds and all agree. While the poet recognizes a dynamic conflict amongst disparate components, his steady detachment from that conflict – afforded by the line-defined suspension of involvement – presents a static resolution in being able to 'see' (and therefore able to see to it) that all things finally 'agree'.

Without the bifurcating unity of the heroic couplet, Byron is denied the luxury of this technical distance and the loose-jointed configuration of Spenser's final quatrain imposes an element of subconscious or uncontrolled association. This induces him to seize upon words, and artefacts, and weld them into conglomerates which by their combinations enact the unresolved parallelism of a baroque complexity grounded in a modern desire for subjective participation. Despite the metrical balance of 'All musical in its immensities', it fails to produce the harmony it longs for because the mid-stanza

²⁸⁷ Alexander Pope, *Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert John Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 37.

couplet (harmonize/immensities) is highly artificial, and the lines soon immerse themselves in a series of intensifying rhythmic contrasts:

Rich marbles – richer painting – shrines where flame
 The lamps of gold – and haughty dome which vies
 In air with Earth’s chief structures, though their frame
 Sits on the firm-set ground – and this the clouds must claim.

The structural ambivalence between diverse but interdependent mediums, is again evident in the difficult amalgamation of internal qualities and external entities. The physical arrangement of the lines, with their excessive employment of dashes, forces strenuous grammatical demands upon the reader. The shifting syntax and eliding appositional dashes fail to clarify the status of relationships, allowing for a double reading. One puts emphasis on the terminal points of spirit and entity, the other on the status of transition itself. It presents a complex network of relationships and exchanges where the most assorted qualities are yoked together absolutely at the same time that they are held parenthetically apart. While the external formation of the edifice is rooted to the earth (it ‘Sits on the firm-set ground’) the contra-positional curvature of its sublime hemispherical dome is suspended in the atmosphere (vying ‘In air with Earth’s chief structures’) in a paradoxical relation of abstract and concrete mediums. If couplet division is imperative to the unerring command of the Augustan poet, then, as Karl Kroeber contends, ‘interpenetration is essential for the Romantic, who individuates not by alienation and opposition, not by segregating one thing from another, but by depicting *how* they conjoin and interfuse.’²⁸⁸ Byron’s lines speak neither of the exclusive possession of the object’s meaning nor of his own prophetic inscription upon the

²⁸⁸ Karl Kroeber, ‘Experience as History: Shelley’s Venice, Turner’s Carthage’, *ELH*, vol. 41, no. 3 (Autumn, 1974), 331.

scene. It is an awkward attempt at maintaining the boundaries that separate one aesthetic property from another even as they appear indissolubly fused.

This leads Byron to one of his most emblematic deliberations on the problematic nature of individual comprehension and aesthetic achievement in the poem:

Thou seest not all – but piecemeal thou must break,
To separate Contemplation, the great whole;
And as the Ocean many bays will make
That ask the eye – so here condense thy Soul
To more immediate objects, and controul
Thy thoughts until thy Mind hath got by heart
Its eloquent proportions, and unroll
In mighty graduations, part by part,
The Glory which at once upon thee did not dart,

Not by its fault – but thine: our outward sense
Is but of gradual grasp – and as it is
That what we have of feeling most intense
Outstrips our faint expression; even so this
Outshining and o’erwhelming edifice
Fools our fond gaze, and Greatest of the great
Defies at first our Nature’s littleness,
Till growing with its growth, we thus dilate
Our Spirits to the size of that they contemplate.

The mistake that commentators who are bent on exposing Byron’s deconstructive methodologies often make is to accentuate the cleaving processes of these formal discrepancies by emphasising them as recurring denials of totality rather than inevitable conditions of totality. Yet again, McGann’s reading of these lines as the “piecemeal” apprehension of a life which we never comprehend precisely because it involves us in constant passage and possibility²⁸⁹ is only partially true because it too readily accepts

²⁸⁹ *Fiery Dust*, 43.

the speaker's purported freedom from inherited procedures of aesthetic integration. Keeping to a Kantian paradigm that centres on the power of signification in the very lack of fit between objects and the individuals who perceive them, McGann reads these lines as a conformation of Byron's final move from technical discrimination to imaginative sympathy. In this sense, the parts of the dome are not available for precise analysis because they are not discrete entities of a whole, but psychological agents whose energies are engaged in the creation of a new mind-forged entity.

But any argument for the dramatizing of structural collapse can only be valid if there is significant textual substantiation of that collapse, rather than simply assuming that Byron's first instinct is to unravel (rather than engage with) established modes of artistic comprehension. In this way, McGann's insistence on the poet's validation of a vitally active imagination in canto IV bears the inequitable omission of any thoughtful observations on the constraints of the stanza or the visual configuration of the dome itself. For one thing, McGann's powerful stake in maintaining the self-referential impetus of the poet's sublime pilgrimage blinds his analysis from a crucial allusion to Pope's lines in *Essay on Criticism*:

In wit, as nature, what affects our hearts
Is not th' exactness of peculiar parts;
Tis not a lip, or eye, we beauty call,
But the joint force and full result of all.
Thus when we view some well-proportion'd dome,
(The world's just wonder, and ev'n thine, O Rome!)
No single parts unequally surprise,
All comes united to th' admiring eyes;
No monstrous height, or breadth, or length appear;
The Whole at once is bold and regular. (243-252)²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ Alexander Pope, *Poetical Works*, 71.

Before we weigh these lines against Byron's reworking of them in the stanzas above, it is worth making the distinction here between the structural spontaneity of Pope's all-encompassing vision ('The Whole *at once* is bold and regular') and a Wordsworthian spontaneity which is the heightened illusion of prelapsarian wholeness. By establishing the broad distinction between these two forms of configuration, we might then see how Byron's lines perform a probing transition between them.

The premise behind Pope's art of 'controlled variety' stems from his confidence in discrete entities submitting quite passively to the directives of an 'admiring' vision. The stylistic features of an Augustan disposition imply no careless serenity or insipid poise, but their conquests are visual and verbal rather than imaginative: they trust in the capacity for art to evoke wonder, without disconcerting, because it embodies: 'the joint force and full result of all'. The constitutive balance in Pope's couplets implies a certain mastery of authorial power within a firm cosmic arrangement. It provides the man of enlightened mind with a medium through which the infinite diversities and accidents of nature (themselves prone to harmony) may be resolved into an artistic whole. This mode of composition compellingly subordinates article to unification or element to structure, and reflects the poet's 'great delight in artifice...by indirect and unsuspected methods'.²⁹¹ It treats the energies of division and distinction as mere facilitating assumptions which are never so active as to threaten the configuration in which they are enclosed.

Standing in contrast to, or as a deliberate aversion of, these Popean pretences, is Wordsworth's own fiction of spontaneous ordering smartly explained by Paul Valéry as

²⁹¹ *Lives*, iv. 47.

‘a vital form’s autonomy from its symmetrical counterparts.’²⁹² As a fragment of 1797 suggests, Wordsworth does not conceive of nature as an entity to be compressed into art, but rather as a fluid process which is subject to the individual’s ‘power’ to

Combine
 The things perceived with such an absolute
 Essential energy that we may say
 That these most godlike faculties of ours
 At one and the same moment are the mind
 And the mind’s minister.²⁹³

The poet’s conviction in a unifying power which is temporal and active, rather than structural and reactive, is indicated in the ‘absolute / Essential energy’ of his godlike faculties and the seamless exchange permitted by the blank verse. From this perspective structure and meaning are subjected to a kind of fluid activity in which their forms and values dissolve into an endless stream of activity. ‘The Imagination shapes and creates;’ declares Wordsworth in his preface to *Poems* (1815), ‘and how? By innumerable processes; and in none does it more delight than in that of consolidating numbers into unity, and dissolving and separating unity into number.’²⁹⁴ The number of active verbs in this reflection testifies to Wordsworth’s delight in the vitality of the imagination and the unifying processes of poetic engagement above Pope’s fully-formed artifice.

To return then, to Byron’s reworking of Pope’s lines on the ‘well-proportion’d dome’ in the fourth canto of *Childe Harold*, it is evident that they do not fit comfortably in either paradigm of poetic unity. To an even greater extent than the ‘broken mirror’ stanza, this passage articulates the inevitable fragmentation of individual perception, the

²⁹² Cited by Karl Kroeber in *Romantic Landscape Vision: Constable and Wordsworth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), 4.

²⁹³ William Wordsworth, *Early Poems and Fragments, 1785-1797*, ed. Carol Landon and Jared Curtis (Ithaca; NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 402.

²⁹⁴ William Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, iii. 82.

‘piecemeal’ comprehension of the world, in an oddly pervasive and controlled manner. By trying to achieve, on the one hand, a kind of critical perspective or temporal distance, and, on the other hand, a specific conjuncture of image and time – seeing parts as parts but with an impression of the whole fully formed – Byron endeavours to hold a vast system of correspondences in harmony. But unlike Pope or Wordsworth, he abandons any possibility of a spontaneous amalgamation. He immerses himself in the forms of discrete entities, condensing his ‘Soul / To more immediate objects’, but this is part of a larger process of knowing them ‘by heart’, so that their ‘eloquent proportions’ can be unrolled in ‘mighty gradations, part by part,’ until their ‘Glory’ is finally attained: the glory ‘which at once upon thee did not dart’. It is different from Pope’s conviction in a magisterial vision because it presents an immersion of the ‘Soul’ in the particular, but it is likewise distinct from Wordsworth’s boundless fusion because the ‘Soul’ retains a certain investment in the mind’s ability to ‘controul’ its engagements. What Byron offers in the succeeding stanza is a vision of coalescing reciprocity which is both organic and synthetic:

Not by its fault – but thine: Our outward sense
 Is but of gradual grasp – and as it is
 That what we have of feeling most intense
 Outstrips our faint expression; even so this
 Outshining and o’erwhelming edifice
 Fools our fond gaze, and greatest of the great
 Defies at first our Nature’s littleness,
 Till growing with its growth, we thus dilate
 Our Spirits to the size of that they contemplate.

In a manner parallel with the stanza that preceded it, these lines throb with the pulse of centrifugal and centripetal impulses. They give credence to an inward form which is endlessly modulating without resorting to shapeless flux, at the same time that they embrace tangible contours which are not circumscriptive. The first quatrain involves a

rather cumbersome interchange between subject and object as the speaker writhes amid descriptive and philosophical thoughts. In four lines he negotiates his way through the constitutive differences of the dome's infinite structure and our finite grasp of the world, the conflict between our 'outward sense' and our internal awareness of the sublime, and the futility of our 'faint expression' to communicate those feelings 'most intense'. The transitions are thorny and uneven, but they demonstrate a knowledge that is hard-won *through* immersion and *over* time, and by the mid-stanza couplet – 'even so this / o'erwhelming edifice' – we get the impression that the poet has gained a sense of familiarity with his exalted subject. It is this slow-gathered and severely-acquired understanding then, which allows for the growing fusion of the final couplet: the spirit enlarges through enjambment into the final alexandrine to achieve an ultimate unity.

The stanzas abound in the language of transcendence, but to wrench these terms out of their neoclassical context in the manner of Cheeke or McGann, is to obfuscate the complexity and subtlety of Byron's distinctive idiom in the final cantos of *Childe Harold* which is also characterized by its struggles with containment and by a measured accumulation of meaning. The dynamics of integration and detachment are as much structural and thematic problems as they are psychological ones, and while the poem ends, as the third stanza had begun, with an affirmation of the ever-moving thrusts of the waves, 'Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean – roll!' (1603), there are moments when we are told to,

pause and be enlightened; there is more
 In such a survey than the satiating gaze
 Of wonder please, or awe which would adore
 The worship of the place, or the mere praise
 Of art and its great masters, who could raise
 What former time, nor skill, nor thought could plan;
 The fountain of sublimity displays

Its depth, and thence may draw the mind of man
Its golden sands, and learn what great conceptions can.

I am not proposing that we read these famous lines as an expression of definitive unity in the style of Pope, but a certain coherence abides which is, however compromised, aggregative and associative; a mixed mode that confronts disjunctive experiences while tracing lines of connection across them. The stanzas embody an interrelatedness of several modes of knowledge and experience that stem in part from Byron's peculiar reflexes of thought at a moment of genuine transition in his life, and, in part, from a set of historical and generic conventions that had been under constant threat from the latter half of the eighteenth century. While never formally theorized, the sublime evinced in *Childe Harold* III & IV is a heterogeneous compromise between Romantic and Classical impulses; separate from Longinus in eschewing frameworks and stratified values, and distinct from a Kantian sublime in that it is unmistakably contingent upon range and amplification and therefore, however interminable in effect, bound to the finiteness of materiality. The stanzas, and their author, are like his description of Waterloo: 'The patched-up idol of enlightened days' (III, 168).

5. Postures and Posturing in *Don Juan*.

‘Most poetry is the utterance of a man in some state of passion, love, joy, grief, rage, etc., and no doubt this is as it should be. But no man is perpetually in a passion and those states in which he is amused and amusing, detached and irreverent, if less important, are no less human.’²⁹⁵

(Auden, ‘Don Juan’)

‘Byron has an infinitely greater range of tone and feeling [than Auden]; not merely a greater range of dislike, but a greater range of sympathy.’²⁹⁶

(Roland Bottrall, ‘Byron and the Colloquial Tradition in English Poetry.’)

²⁹⁵ W.H. Auden, ‘Don Juan’ in *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1948), 401.

²⁹⁶ Ronald Bottrall, ‘Byron and the Colloquial Tradition in English Poetry’ in *English Romantic Poets*, ed. M.H. Abrams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 225.

'My indifference was a kind of Passion'

In many of the early appraisals of *Don Juan*, Byron is accused of performing a haughtily uncaring and decadent remoteness. In *The Spirit of the Age* Hazlitt depicts the poet more generally as a one shamelessly luxuriating in his indolence and deliberately unsettling his audience by doing so: 'he lounges with extravagance, and yawns as to alarm the reader,'²⁹⁷ while the *Blackwood's* review of cantos I & II emphasises the unnerving contrast between authorial disinvestment and the poem's playful tone: 'The highest of all possible exhibitions of self-abandonment has been set forth in mirth and gladness.'²⁹⁸ Thelwall's review in *The Champion*, like many others at that time, relates Byron's supposed mocking apathy to a fundamental moral disregard by claiming that 'Every sentiment and feeling is sported with that should be sacred to the heart of man.' This friction between the seriousness of the subject and the poet's postured unconcern is evident throughout Thelwall's first reflections on *Don Juan* but it degenerates into an irresolvable clash when he considers the second canto and finds, 'the same unfeeling contempt – we should rather say *indifference*, of all that the social heart should hold in reverence.'²⁹⁹

To the extent that Thelwall's observations reveal a genuine discomfort in the critic they suggest not true indifference in the poet, for that would be unthreatening and easily dismissed, but a dangerous individualism which forcefully asserts itself through detachment. As George Ridenour so compellingly remarks of *Don Juan*: 'in spite of its insistent casualness it makes its point with such single-minded perseverance.'³⁰⁰ The peculiar and intimate insight that the poem offers – an insight which could only be

²⁹⁷ CH, 270.

²⁹⁸ RR, B. i. 144.

²⁹⁹ RR, B. i. 538 -540.

³⁰⁰ Ridenour, *The Style of Don Juan*, ix.

obtained by a poet's deep investment in his subject – and its pervasive nonchalance present an imperilling conundrum for the critic. As a testament to this, we need only consider the number of strong verbs that Hazlitt employs to remark upon Byron's poetical disinterest when he insists that his is 'a mind preying upon itself, and disgusted with or indifferent to all other things...there is nothing less poetical than this sort of unaccommodating selfishness.'³⁰¹ The terms and criteria which Hazlitt uses to describe Byron's egotistical remove from humanity are profoundly Romantic. They reflect the critic's antipathy not only to Byron's misappropriation of a newly validated poetics of sympathy with the natural world, but also to his spurning of the image of social cohesion provided by his literary predecessors. His mind is thus doubly unpoetic.

Others have read Byron's apparent indifference through the paradigm of an eighteenth-century allegiance to the impersonal and mischievous finery of art. Thus Herbert Read concludes that it is little more than 'a consciously adopted sophistication; a positive belief in making life an amusement and verse writing a playful artifice'³⁰², while John Bayley distinguishes the poet from his contemporaries by his 'unattached frivolity, not unattached mystery.'³⁰³ In this way the speaker's unsettling detachment in *Don Juan* is reduced to a mere literary device; a ubiquitous poetic persona whose air of abandon only serves to extend his artistic autobiography and affirm his position as a dispassionate expositor of awkward truths. What appears as a violent and supercilious aloofness to Hazlitt and Thelwall is little more than a virtuoso performance for Read and Bayley. Byron was possessed of a mind equally agile and vigorous, and it is easy to see how these contrasting attitudes to his singularly active passivity would emerge, but

³⁰¹ *HCW*, v. 153.

³⁰² Herbert Read, *The True Voice of Feeling* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), 309.

³⁰³ John Bayley, *The Romantic Survival*, 22.

neither of them do justice to the fact that he resented thoughtless engagement as much as he distrusted affectation and insincerity.

These troubling and inadequate accounts of Byron's indifference in *Don Juan* are strongly offset by a series of critical reflections validating the poem's earnestness and authenticity. In his *Letter to the Right Hon. Lord Byron. By John Bull*, John Gibson Lockhart focusses his evaluation of the poem directly upon its author by advancing that 'it is the only sincere thing you have ever written; and it will live many years after all your humbug Harolds have ceased to be...' ³⁰⁴ In a letter written to John Murray, John Wilson Croker claims that there is 'a prodigious power of versification in it, and a great deal of good pleasantry...I confess it seems to me a more *innocent* production than Childe Harold,' ³⁰⁵ while Swinburne latches onto this same peculiar combination of 'power' and 'pleasantry' when he suggests that it demonstrates 'the excellence of sincerity and strength.' ³⁰⁶ In all of these accounts of the poem's sincerity, its appraisers indicate how *Don Juan* is spared from a naïve sentimentality by the force of its expression. Again, such integrity of manner and method is persuasively accounted for by Carlyle when he submits that 'Perhaps *Don Juan*, especially the latter parts of it, is the only thing approaching to a *sincere* work, he ever wrote; the only work where he showed himself, in any measure, as he was; and seemed so intent on his subject as, for moments, to forget himself. Yet Byron hated this vice...heartily detested it: nay he had declared formal war against it in words.' ³⁰⁷ The common point of reference in all of these remarks is Byron's intense concentration on his subject and way in which this concentration worked to displace his otherwise overpowering personality. But this is

³⁰⁴ *CH*, 183.

³⁰⁵ John Wilson Croker, 'The Croker Papers' in *Byron: 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage' and 'Don Juan': A Casebook*, ed. John Jump (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1973), 37. *My emphasis*.

³⁰⁶ Swinburne, 'Edinburgh Review of Burns, 1828' in *Burns: the Critical Heritage*, ed. Donald A. Low (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 214.

³⁰⁷ *CH*, 290-291.

once again a too simple separation of temperament and art, and it is in Carlyle's account of the poem's unique form of sincerity that we become most aware of the peculiar dynamic of self-expression through detachment; of a work where the poet 'showed himself...as he was' in those moments when he seemed 'to forget himself'. At the same time, it strikes upon another fascinating contradiction which forms the primary subject of this chapter: that while *Don Juan* demonstrated Byron's most sincere efforts in poetry, he not only considered sincerity to be a vice, but he 'declared formal war against it in words.'

A fitting point of entry into the curiously engaging detachment of *Don Juan* is, once again, Byron's own explanation for his paradoxical artistic participation in and critical distance from the poetic 'taste of the Day' as it is presented in 'Some Observations Upon an Article in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*' (1820). After reflecting on the wider geopolitical navigations of a formative immersion in the 'agitating world at home' and the due distance afforded by living in 'far countries abroad', Byron concludes with a richly equivocal qualification: 'my *indifference* was a kind of Passion – the result of experience and not the philosophy of Nature.'³⁰⁸ Dissimilar as they appear in relation to a general poetic deportment, the ideas of apathy and conviction are brought together almost as if they were transposable synonyms. The implicit contradiction in this gesture is seized upon by Andrew Nicholson in his annotation to the remark which he describes as 'a seeming paradox...an illogical statement.'³⁰⁹ On the face of it Nicholson is right, and to subject Byron's singular and contextually-specific deployment of a phrase to rigorous analysis may seem a questionable procedure. Nevertheless, this notion of a 'passionate indifference' is both the logical point of

³⁰⁸ *CMP*, 110.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 390.

departure and the crux in any study of Byron's unusually pluralistic stance in *Don Juan* for it bears directly on the origin, nature, and style of the work.

Before I elaborate on the notion of a passionate indifference that is the consequence of experience rather than philosophy, it is worth considering the importance of these terms as inaugurating and conceptualising impulses for *Don Juan*. In April 1821, Byron responded to Shelley's creative promptings by expressing his growing passivity to the motions of life: 'You want me to undertake a great Poem – I have not the inclination nor the power. As I grow older, the indifference – *not* to life, for we love it by instinct – but to the stimuli of life, increases.'³¹⁰ By laying claim to an enervating lack of interest in the rousing activities of distinct experiences – the 'Life of Sensations'³¹¹ that Keats so earnestly desired – without forsaking the general and instinctive appreciation for existence, Byron presents his own version of the crucial Romantic distinction between thought and sensation. Yet in a characteristically Byronic reversal of these terms, he links his 'growing' disinterest to stimulating activities while attributing his instinctive reflex to the general feeling for things. This is further insinuated by the ambivalence of the syntax which asserts the poet's growing indifference in profoundly generative terms. But it also reveals the curiously rising inertia at the core of *Don Juan* and the problem that Byron faced in harnessing this strangely unconcerned energy for creative purposes.

Byron's reaction to Shelley's urgings represents a noticeable development or maturing of his poetic temperament. It stands in stark contrast to the 'restless doctrine' he championed in his correspondence with Annabella Milbanke in 1813:

³¹⁰ *BLJ*, viii. 104.

³¹¹ *KL*, i. 185.

The great object of life is Sensation – to feel that we exist – even though in pain – it is this ‘craving void’ which drives us to Gaming – to Battle – to Travel – to intemperate but keenly felt pursuits of every description whose principle attraction is the agitation inseparable from their accomplishment. – – I am but an awkward dissembler... (*BLJ*, iii. 109)

Although Byron does not relate such strong impressions to the creation of poetry as Keats did in his epistolary reflections, these almost perverse sentiments capture a striking aspect of his early thought and verse. In this excited or even violent arousal of feeling Byron dramatizes the vital ambivalence of individual experience when lived by impulse rather than strategy. He does not altogether disclaim the possibility of ‘accomplishment’ but centres his so called ‘restless doctrine’ on compulsive processes rather than achieved outcomes. The primary appeal is agitation; the constant stirring or oscillating motion which renders permanence either undesirable, or at best a dull substitute for an inactive consciousness. His claims for a relentless intemperance are something of a hyperbolic exhibition and are not easily squared with the number of chastening qualifications which I explored in the opening chapter, but they nevertheless demonstrate a far more direct confrontation with the ‘Life of Sensations’ than we see in the letters written during the composition of *Don Juan*.

The flippantly disarming caveat, ‘I am but an awkward dissembler’ is typical of Byron’s correspondence and can be easily overlooked, but it is also, perhaps, the most truthful utterance in this fragment and characteristic of the type of off-handed confession that made its way into the fabric of *Don Juan*. In fact, the technical application of this sort of informal epistolary formality to the *ottava rima* of *Don Juan* is in many ways what gave the poem its unique tone. I am by no means the first to point this out for much has been made of the power of Byron’s colloquial or conversational manner in *Don Juan*. It is smartly presented by Roland Bottrall in his essay ‘Byron and

the Colloquial Tradition in English Poetry' which stresses the rhythms and word order of the poet's 'aristocratic colloquial speech' by drawing attention to the 'huddled speed of...question and answer, parenthesis, court gossip, innuendo, thrust and repartee'³¹² in several stanzas. But Bottrall and others were not willing to align the evolution of Byron's style to the complex strategies of self-representation and social commentary that it entailed: the deeply invested sense of disengagement which permeates throughout its cantos. 'In youth I wrote, because my mind was full,' suggests the speaker in the fourteenth canto, 'And now because I feel it growing dull.' (XIV, 79-80)

This move had, to a certain degree, been articulated in the first canto:

No more – no more – Oh! never more, my heart,
 Canst thou be my sole world, my universe!
 Once all in all, but now a thing apart,
 Thou canst not be my blessing or my curse:
 The illusion's gone for ever, and thou art
 Insensible, I trust, but none the worse,
 And in thy stead I've got a deal of judgment,
 Though heaven knows how it ever found a lodgement
(I, 1712-20)

This is hardly the first occasion in which Byron employs the term 'art' to imply both an artifice and a state of being, but it is a particularly telling employment of that term for the poem at large because it performs, with wonderful irony, a supposed shift from passionate engagement to detached judgment that the speaker would have us believe even as the dynamics of the stanza work against this shift. The delicate department of 'Once all in all, but now a thing apart' is beautifully held apart by its balance across the caesura in an artful gesture of the speaker's ability to subtly reverse his youthful attachment for unbridled emotion by making it into a piece of art: a literary 'illusion'.

³¹² Ronald Bottrall, 'Byron and the Colloquial Tradition in English Poetry' in *English Romantic Poets*, 222.

But the unnatural severing of passion from art – ‘The illusion’s gone for ever, and thou art /Insensible,’ – renders it either foolish or passively unintelligible and in need of the sense for its vitality. In yet another mocking turn upon itself, the final couplet seems to enact the stanza’s ostensible shift from passion to judgement even as it seeks to contain that judgement in a fitting ‘lodgement’. But the ambivalent syntax in this couplet, and in much of the stanza for that matter, toys with the unproblematic substitution of emotion for intelligence and we are left pondering exactly what the ‘it’ is that found a lodgement in verse: the heart or the mind? Byron’s manipulation of an easy ironic qualification within its lyric context is, in many ways, the application of a detached conversational manner by which ‘indirections, finde directions forth’ to use Hamlet’s famous phrase. And in doing so, it gives the sense of having attained an increased comprehensiveness and complexity even while it seems to maintain its air of disinterest.

However, the development of an intricately connected correspondence through the acknowledged listlessness of the poet has implications beyond its individual stanzas, and is embedded in the poem’s own larger unwilling conception. This is interestingly conveyed in Shelley’s response of July 1821:

I still feel impressed with the persuasion that you *ought* – and if there is prophecy in hope, that you *will* write a great and connected poem, which shall bear the same relation to this age as the ‘Iliad’, the ‘Divina Commedia’, and ‘Paradise Lost’ did to theirs; not that you will imitate the structure, or borrow from the subjects, of any of these, or in any degree assume them as your models. You know the enthusiasm of my admiration for what you have already done; but these are ‘disjecti membra poetæ’ to what you may do, and will never, like that, place your memory on a level with those great poets. Such is an ambition (excuse the baseness of the word) alone worthy of you. You say that you feel indifferent to the stimuli of life. But this is a good rather than an evil augury. Long after the *man* is dead, the immortal spirit may survive, and speak like one belonging to a higher world. But I shall talk bombast, when I mean only to tell a plain truth in plain words. (*LPBS*, ii. 309)

While his efforts with *Don Juan* were well under way at this stage, it is a mark of Byron's unconcerned yet evocatively dormant power that Shelley should beseech him so strongly to write a great and connected poem for the age. Where Wordsworth had laid out his plan to write the era's vast and connected poem with painstaking care in the 'Preface' to *Poems* (1815) and the 'Prospectus' to *The Excursion*, it is precisely Byron's lack of forthright investment in the endeavour that paved the way for his doing so. If the textual history of *The Prelude* suggests that Wordsworth's epic was somewhat disabled by its programme, then Byron's poem was similarly enabled by its lack of a 'plan'. But this is part of a larger dynamic that extends beyond literary intentions. The ethical and aesthetic impetus behind Shelley's promptings – that the poem be of the magnitude but not the manner of Homer, Dante and Milton, and that it unite the otherwise scattered compositions of a dismembered *oeuvre* – are implicitly connected with Byron's articulated indifference to the stimuli of life while still maintaining an instinctive appreciation for the whole of it. They indicate a productive disinvestment in the distinct motions or processes of experience without disowning an inherent familiarity with the thing itself: the conversion of involvement into knowledge and feeling rather than philosophy. The final sentences of Shelley's urging endorsement contain so much of what was to be central in *Don Juan's* marriage of subject and manner: the uncategorizable nature of a poem offering 'plain truth in plain words' through the mouth of a poet speaking 'like one belonging to a higher world.'³¹³ As one might expect, for Shelley this entailed the death of the man to make way for the

³¹³ Francis Jeffrey's unsigned review of *Beppo* (then anonymous) is much to the point here: 'The great charm is in the simplicity and naturalness of the language, – the free but guarded use of all polite idioms, and even all the phrases of temporary currency that have the stamp of good company upon them...The unknown writer...has furnished us with an example, unique we rather think in our language...of good verse, entirely composed of common words.' *CH*, 123.

elevation of the spirit. But for Byron it involved the death of a restless spirit to make way for the acquired command of a man of experience.

When Byron claimed that his indifference was ‘a kind of Passion – the result of experience and not the philosophy of Nature’ he challenged what he perceived to be an unserviceable and limiting dichotomy between unfamiliar experience and subjective comprehension in the poetry of the day. The ‘philosophy of Nature’ he describes is drawing from, amongst other things, Wordsworth’s declaration in the ‘Preface’, that ‘Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge’. Yet Byron’s assertion plainly rubbishes the timeless practice of re-enacting the incomprehensible power of discrete experiences in pensive detachment (the ‘poetry of experience’ which Langbaum held to be the defining aspect of the period) because, in Byron’s mind, it combines the wrong forms of engagement and extrication. By forsaking the prospect of an unemotional participation in the events which would become the subject of their poetry (seeking only to recreate the individual stimuli that they offer), poets such as Wordsworth and Keats could do little more than ponder abstractly upon their materials or merely convert their materials into abstractions, which ‘sweep o’er the ethereal plain’ (*DJ*, III. 881). They may very well attain Schiller’s aesthetic state in which ‘we are kept at one and the same time in utter repose and supreme agitation’³¹⁴ but they do so at the cost of conveying any real knowledge to the reader. Locked in the irreconcilable procedures of over-zealous engagement and over-zealous reflection they surrender the possibility of achieving an inventive familiarity with their subject matter. Experience, at least in the way that it functions as a critical term for Byron’s compositional practices in *Don Juan*, is both the particular instance of occurrence in the course of time, and the knowledge

³¹⁴ Schiller, ‘Aesthetic Education’, quoted in Katarina Deligiorgi, *Kant and the Culture of Enlightenment*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 150.

gained from that involvement. It does not promote understanding over attachment or elevate encounter above awareness, nor does it equate knowledge with deductive reasoning. Rather, it accepts an uncalculated yet inherent familiarity with the strangeness of things that is gathered *through* individual experiences and gained unknowingly *over* time. The result is an unconscious mastery of experience which does not require its difficult re-enactment in poetry.

It is precisely this quality which John Gibson Lockhart homed in on in his vindication of *Don Juan*: ‘Mr Wordsworth may write fifty years about his ‘dalesmen’; if he paints them truly it is very well; if untruly, it is no matter: but you know what neither Wordsworth nor any Cumberland stamp-master ever can know...I promise you, that *knowledge* is a much more precious thing, whatever you at present may think or say, than any *notion*...’³¹⁵ Lockhart registers what had become a common jibe at Wordsworth’s inconsequential subjects, but the implications of his assertion for the nature of Byron’s verse and its divergence from the larger Romantic investment in the ontologies of process are far greater than this. Lockhart is less concerned with the Lake poet’s rustic materials than he is with Wordsworth’s attempts to promote his lowly matter from arbitrary association to universal relevance through philosophy. In seeking to bridge the gap between the general and the particular through abstraction rather than depiction, Lockhart implies that Wordsworth has only managed to widen that gap. Byron, on the other hand, exhibits a vital conversance with his subject, a certain awareness or state of knowing that cannot be gained by abstraction because it has to be possessed by its speaker and is therefore, in Lockhart’s terms, ‘a much more precious thing.’

³¹⁵RR, B. i. 207.

This conveyance of this knowledge in Byron's verse has too often been crudely mistaken for an unimaginative realism. When Keats wrote to his brother on the difference between his own poetry and that of Lord Byron's, claiming that 'he describes what he sees – I describe what I imagine – Mine is the hardest task',³¹⁶ he participated in the formation of a critical convention which centres on the unyielding realism of Byron's verse. While Keats exposed what he saw to be a weakness in Byron's creative faculties, Ruskin praised this immediacy and accuracy in Byron's poetry by affirming the poet's authority as a social commentator: 'Here at last', he claimed, 'I...found a man who spoke of what he had seen and known and spoke without exaggeration, without mystery, without enmity, and without mercy.'³¹⁷ Such evaluative pronouncements, both approving and dismissive, established a precedent for judging Byron's poetry in materialist or descriptive terms which does not do justice to its imaginative inventiveness. Byron's poetry is unquestionably obligated to the authenticity of worldly experience but he seldom presents a direct and artless relation to his subject matter. As W.W. Robson justly observes, 'the truthfulness of *Don Juan* is not so much this literalism, and still less the intenser, higher-order truth to life which preoccupied Keats and Shelley; it is the man-of-the-world realism'³¹⁸ transformed into art. However, what Robson fails to observe, and what I hope to show in this chapter, is the manner by which Byron achieves an 'intenser, higher-order truth to life' realism in *Don Juan* which, in Shelley's terms, 'lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar

³¹⁶KL, ii. 413.

³¹⁷ John Ruskin, *Præterita: The Autobiography of John Ruskin*, ed. Sir Kenneth Clark (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 125, 141.

³¹⁸ Jump, 134.

objects be as if they were not familiar³¹⁹ almost precisely because it is not ‘preoccupied’ with doing so.

Byron’s curiously disinvested investment in the materials of *Don Juan* is often confused with a type of cynical incredulity because it implies a repeated criticism of experience through experience. But his errors in authorial participation, when he trespasses the boundaries between creation and critical annotation, are not sins against cold decorum or vigorous sympathy; they are manoeuvrings of tone and the consequence of a poet who never takes his subject too seriously or too lightly: his ‘Muse’ both ‘withstands / The giant thought of being a Titan’s bride, / Or travelling in Patagonian lands’ (VI, 219-21). If anything, it is Byron’s almost fastidious concern for the manner of his creative engagement which leads to these moments of conspicuous remoteness. In a well-known journal entry of 1813, he provides a useful insight into the merits of poetry as a medium for detached engagement: ‘I began a comedy, and burnt it because the scene ran into *reality*; – a novel, for the same reason. In rhyme, I can keep more away from facts; but the thought always runs through, through...yes, yes, through.’³²⁰ The combination of prepositions, verbs, and adverbs in this concession is remarkably telling. Deprived of the structuring convention of rhyme and the freedom for imaginative play that such a structure provides, Byron cannot maintain the necessary poise between revelation and inventiveness in his comedy which runs *into* reality. The preposition *into* signifies both its transgressive action and the result of that action: it is not a two-way movement which can be harnessed or exploited to produce the self-contained doubleness of certainty and doubt that we find in verse. The comparative correspondence inherent in rhyme means that he can ‘always’ keep *more*

³¹⁹ *SPP*, 213.

³²⁰ *BLJ*, iii. 209.

(but not entirely) *away* from the facts because the thought runs *through* its artifice without settling *into* or achieving a reality.

The implication is that there is an important liberty or flexibility in imposed orders which guards its creator in the fertile dispersion and diversion of his powers. The structures of rhythm and rhyme mean that the poet can reflect on and participate in reality without abandoning himself to the enchantment of his subject. In Hazlitt's terms, it saves him from the 'effeminacy, [and] immersion in sensual ideas, or craving after continual excitement, that spoils the poet for prose'.³²¹ For one thing, it spares him from ending on such unresolved paradoxes of existential indeterminacy as 'Do I wake or sleep?' in which little progress has been made from instinct to consciousness.³²² As Mark Storey so delightfully concludes of *Don Juan*, it makes us aware of the need to be 'open about the limits of our knowledge...but open, too, to the need for precision'.³²³ The posture of poetry is compellingly indirect; its subjects may be taken from reality but it proceeds by means of suggestion, implication, and reflection, and it is therefore never an act of pure self-abandonment or self-creation.

As I have been at some pains to emphasise throughout this thesis, Byron reviled the widening belief that poetry could be, and was little more than, an unmediated expression of the self. Byron's truism of 1813, 'I envy no one the certainty of his self-approved wisdom',³²⁴ was only strengthened by his growing resolve to uphold the reputation of Pope a decade later. Time and again he recorded his objections to the

³²¹ Hazlitt, 'On the Prose Style of Poets' in *HCW*, xii. 7.

³²² Christopher Ricks's praise of Empson's urgency to commitment at the same time that we embrace paradox is fitting here: 'The refusal to act or decide, however rich its contemplation of complexity, is an act of indecision; prolonged, it can have no end but paralysis and neurosis.' *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 185.

³²³ Mark Storey, *The Eye of Appetite*, 161.

³²⁴ *BLJ*, iii. 225.

self-styled and self-justified claims of Wordsworth's '*soi-disant* poetry'³²⁵ which based its self-aggrandizement on an improper standard for measuring the fitness of things: its creator's more than usual sensibility rather than its demonstration of that sensibility through a mastery of its medium. Shelley's two-part definition of a poet as one who is able 'to apprehend the true and beautiful...which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression'³²⁶ is here evoked to indicate how strongly Byron felt that Wordsworth had neglected the latter. It was to this end that he spurned the poetry of John Keats and labelled him a 'tadpole of the Lakes'. Where Keats had exalted Wordsworth's 'extended vision' above Milton's 'circumscribed grandeur',³²⁷ Byron branded Keats's verse 'the *outstretched* poesy of this miserable Self-polluter of the human Mind'³²⁸ and in doing so registered his disdain for a poetry that directly confronts and intensifies the dilemma of self through an increasing urgency to express its own agitation. The connotations of an ungratified sexual enlargement and a glaring lack of restraint point to the sheer indulgence of Keats's poetical self-abandonments and self-revelations which do not seem to care for readerly reciprocation. In this sense they are truly indifferent and carry with them the Burkean implications of a despotic excess.³²⁹ Where Byron acknowledges the danger in unduly broadening details beyond the interest of the general reader, 'But I must crowd all into one grand mess / Or mass; for should I stretch into detail, / My Muse would run much more into excess, / Than when some squeamish people deem her frail' (XV, 505-08) the *outstretched* poesy of Keats is marked by a careless self-satisfaction in its

³²⁵ *BLJ*, vi. 47.

³²⁶ *SPP*, 209.

³²⁷ *KL*, i. 280-281

³²⁸ *BLJ*, vii. 217.

³²⁹ For Burke 'indifference' implied a distinct lack of balance. Or as Hulme says of Romanticism at large: 'the concepts that are right and proper in their own sphere are spread over, and so mess up, falsify and blur the clear lines of human experience.' T.E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), 118.

details. In Byron's judgement, a Lake-school poetics promoting the wilful abandonment of the self for its complete absorption in Nature had been accepted as poetic license by Keats and converted into an unnatural display of unfulfilling self-fulfilment.

I will examine Byron's concerns about the improper relationship between style and matter in Keats's poetry shortly, but for the moment I want to address his sense that Keats, much like his Laker counterparts, had misappropriated the social dynamics of engagement and detachment and in doing so, had distorted the artistic balance between activity and passivity beyond its applicability to poetry. In a letter to Murray in 1821 Byron strikes at the core of their agitated repose:

The pity of these men is – that they have never lived either in *high life* nor in *solitude* – there is no medium for the knowledge of the *busy* or the *still* world. – If admitted into high life for a season – it is merely as *spectators* – they form no part of the Mechanism thereof. – Now Moore and I – the one by circumstances & the other by birth – happened to be free of the corporation – & to have entered into its pulses and passions, “*quorum partes fuimus*”. – Both of us have learnt by this much which nothing else could have taught us.³³⁰

Nothing is more characteristic of Byron's later pronouncements on the unconscious yet deeply felt sociability implicit in the texture of *Don Juan*, and the distinct lack of such texture in the poetry of the day, than this. Putting the pressures of class distinction aside, Byron expresses what he perceives to be a fundamental lack of integration in and understanding of the internal motions of society in the like of Keats, Southey, Wordsworth and others. They lack a 'medium' for the expression of such knowledge because while they have appropriated its processes they have done so as spectators rather than participants and do not form part of its machinery. 'What Byron means by life' argues Auden, '– which is why he could never appreciate Wordsworth or Keats – is

³³⁰ *BLJ*, viii. 207.

the motion of life, the passage of events and thought.³³¹ The final clause in Auden's remark aptly grasps the synchronisation of movement and contemplation (not movement regained in quiet or stillness discarded in favour of movement) which forms the basis of Byron's method in *Don Juan*. It is the method of one who has gained some sense of understanding before he recreates, or recreates *because* he understands; not one over-invested in the act of recreation because it is the only means to his understanding. It is a method that integrates rather than denies its method, because it takes seriously the principle of living art as it is articulated in *Antony and Cleopatra*: 'Our court shall be a little academe, / Still and contemplative in living Art.' Marjorie Levenson has powerfully demonstrated how Keats's too-eager attempts at aesthetic participation are often elaborate compensations for actual involvement. His poetry grows out of an explicit distaste for the detached, analytical rendering of feeling found in Pope's verse and bases its procedures on a complete psychological identification with its subject. For Byron this presented an unnatural engagement with life's 'pulses and passions' and an improper association with one's materials: it confuses the empathy of *shared* feelings with an unhinged and essentially unknowing sympathy. More than this, it fails to acknowledge that in life, as in art, one can be a participant as well as a spectator. Or, more pointedly, that one is necessarily both a participant and a spectator.

The correlation between Byron and Keats has frequently been made, but often in a study of the latter's poetic method, and usually in relation to his anti-assertive and anti-dogmatic stance.³³² Thus John Bayley asserts that 'Keats and Byron are in fact

³³¹ *The Dyer's Hand*, 405.

³³² More often than not, this correlation is made in a concentrated study of Keats rather than Byron. See: John Bayley, *The Uses of Division: Unity and Disharmony in Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1976); Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974) and Marjorie Levison, *Keats's Life of Allegory: the Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988). To my knowledge, Anne Barton is the only one to have made this connection as a supplement to our understanding of Byron's views on poetry in her Nottingham Byron Foundation Lecture (1968) but in her assertion of their similarities (in the feeling that

more closely related to one another than to any other romantic poet. Both transform poetry by their personality, though one exploits the process and the other seeks to evade it...Byron was ready enough to extend a tribute to the safe, depersonalised Keats of *Hyperion*.³³³ Similarly, Leslie Marchand contends that when Keats complained that his friend Dilke was a man ‘who cannot feel he has a personality unless he has made up his mind about everything’, he was ‘nearer to Byron...than either realized’. Marchand settles his comparison by suggesting that the “Negative Capability” which Keats so admired in Shakespeare he might also have seen in Byron had he been able to look under the latter’s flippant manner.³³⁴ These are both valid points which artfully expose a hidden correspondence between two openly antithetical poets of the early nineteenth century. But they also reveal a central and ultimately irreconcilable difference between them which forms the principal subject of this chapter. Exploiting the process of a personality-transforming poetry and seeking to evade it are two very different practices, and although Byron exhibited an almost unrivalled willingness to dwell in contradiction without any prickly reaching after fact, he seldom agonized over this in his poetry, and especially not in *Don Juan*. When Lady Blessington called him ‘a perfect chameleon’³³⁵ she expressed his versatility in a term that is as seamless as it is unfixed. Likewise, it is unlikely that Keats would have found Shakespeare’s ‘Negative Capability’ had he looked under Byron’s flippant manner because it abides *in* and is articulated *through* that manner as one of its distinguishing features. Like one of Castiglione’s courtiers whose artful command necessitates a tolerance of dissonance in crucial areas of involvement,

action is more valuable than poetry, and that poetry can be a means of catharsis), Barton does not account for their palpable differences on these matters.

³³³ Bayley, *The Uses of Division*, 115.

³³⁴ Leslie Marchand, *Byron’s Poetry: A Critical Introduction* (London: John Murray, 1965), 7.

³³⁵ Lovell, ed., *Lady Blessington’s Conversations of Lord Byron*, 72.

the Byron of *Don Juan* can deal with his characters' agitation because of his own empathetic composure.

Byron's indifference in *Don Juan* is unquestionably Romantic because it is, at heart, an expression of empathy. It is separate from the authorially-removed judgment fundamental to eighteenth-century satire and involves little of the absence of feeling or want of zeal that constitutes a Modernist poetics of alienation and estrangement. A strong measure of inwardness prevails in his poem which transforms it into something other than an objective narrative. But this intimacy does not belong exclusively to the particularised self and the idiom is as little a mode of self-confession as it is a form of exegesis. The Eliot of 'Gerontion' may ask: 'I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it / Since what is kept must be adulterated?', and J. Hillis Miller may speak of Hardy's narrators adopting 'a position of detached watchfulness'³³⁶ but Byron's epic poem deals with the formal complexities of involvement rather than the ultimate failure of participation. The personality of the poet is refined – it is precisely this quality which Byron so adamantly wished to exemplify above Keats and others – but it has not 'refined itself out of existence' in the manner that Joyce attributed to the condition of the modern artist. In contemplating Yeats's search for a poetic voice, Harold Bloom provides us with a useful insight into the special triumph of Byron's long poem:

No poet, I suppose, has ever assumed as many deliberate masks as Yeats did, or been so adept at self-dramatization. At such necromancy of the self perhaps Byron was Yeats's peer, but Byron was all that Yeats merely hoped to be...that single one in his own age whose search after his own self might prove to be authentic. The mask-seeking quests of Yeats were searches for a voice or voices, rather than a self or selves.³³⁷

³³⁶J.Hillis Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), 23.

³³⁷ Bloom, 'Yeats and the Romantics' in *Modern Poetry: Essays in Criticism*, ed. John Hollander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 502.

Byron's 'search after his own self' proved to be authentic because it relinquished the awkward self-consciousness of trying to be so. It was the consequence of experience and not the philosophy of nature.

'Surely they're sincerest who are acted on by what is nearest.'

One of the more pressing concerns for poets of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century was this: how does a newly accepted conviction in the sincerity of art – a conviction that denies art or purports not to be art – become art? In truth it is a very difficult question to answer and one that persistently riddled the like of Shelley and Coleridge in their prose apologies for poetry. In *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity*, David Perkins elevates this issue to the very pinnacle of Romantic concern. 'In the transformation of poetry throughout the eighteenth century,' he contends, 'nothing is more remarkable than the emergence of sincerity as a major poetic value.'³³⁸ An enquiry befitting its New Critical allegiance to the poet's moral authenticity and expressive purity, Perkins's investigation draws on Rousseau's *Confessions* to explore the Romantic impulse for self-revelation and its capacity as a generative force. But this inevitably raises a tricky question about the relationship between authorial unaffectedness and aesthetic value. In attempting to answer this, Perkins employs Wordsworth's ideal of spontaneous utterance, the 'simple effusion of the moment', to demonstrate how poets of the period sought to close the gap between experience and rumination: 'If a writer can catch experience as it is before he reflects upon it, and his feelings in the same instant of time, he is touching on the purest source of whatever knowledge and

³³⁸ David Perkins, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), 1.

understanding he can hope to have.³³⁹ In such a reading of poetic sincerity the degree of artifice in any production is measured by the distance between occurrence and re-creation. It naturally follows that the ‘purest source’ of knowledge springs from the poet’s ability to eliminate this distance.

Unsurprisingly, this definition was revealed to be gravely limited in its impractical idealism, and criticism has since been compelled to screen the term by precise definition before endeavouring to use it as an instrument for literary analysis. Thus when Lionel Trilling comes to address the concept in *Sincerity and Authenticity* he does so with guarded care: ‘the word itself has lost most of its former high dignity. When we hear it, we are conscious of the anachronism which touches with its quaintness. If we speak of it, we are likely to do so with either discomfort or irony.’³⁴⁰ Trilling’s sceptical qualification draws attention to the polarised responses of self-consciousness and cynicism which a term like sincerity is likely to evoke in the twentieth century and beyond. But in doing so it also reminds us of the two main responses to the apparent indifference of *Don Juan* outlined in this chapter’s introduction and the way in which the peculiarly open indirectness of Byron’s poetic sincerity destabilises any simple separation of spontaneous and reflexive activity. Ernest Lovell describes the strangely implicated irony of *Don Juan* as being ‘Rooted in his essentially modern sensibility,’ which he argues, ‘made sustained lyrical writing and absolute purity of tone as difficult for him as they now are for many of his poetic descendants.’³⁴¹ Just as Macaulay had put forward the notion that Byron’s hybrid verse bridged the gap and affected the transition between Augustan and Romantic sensibilities, so Lovell contends that he paved the way for a composite Modernist

³³⁹ *Ibid*, 22-23.

³⁴⁰ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 6.

³⁴¹ Ernest J. Lovell, ‘Irony and Image in *Don Juan*’ in *English Romantic Poets*, ed. M.H. Abrams, 240.

poetics. However one wishes to place Byron's peculiarly amalgamated verse, he never equated sincerity with innocence of feeling or sanctity of expression, insisting rather, that it abides in the artfulness of representation.

When Keats rejected art in search of 'the true voice of feeling', and praised Wordsworth for 'martyr[ing] himself to the human heart, the main region of his song'³⁴² he contributed to a general intensification of the relation between truth and language – or to phrase it differently, between literal meaning referentially grounded and figurative meaning fashioning its own world. In a letter to Fanny Brawne he conveyed his desire for a love 'true as truth's simplicity and simpler than the infancy of truth';³⁴³ a love uncorrupted by the adult's need for language and logic. Tim Milnes takes this one step further by suggesting that 'The Romantics energize[d] the field of meaning with poetic value, almost to the extent of collapsing the distinction between reference and figure.'³⁴⁴ It is an issue which I have examined in relation to Wordsworth's blank verse and it this same desire that lies at the heart of Shelley's repeated distinction between primitive proper meaning and figurative secondary meaning in the *Defence* where he wagered his pressing claims for an ideal or natural primacy of expression that could enact its perfect correlation between word and feeling. As De Quincey put it, 'There is, first the literature of *knowledge*; and, secondly, the literature of *power*. The function of the first is to *teach*; the function of the second is to *move*.'³⁴⁵ But Byron held this to be a fundamentally fallacious cleaving of intelligence from emotive force. As Byron saw it, if a poet is without the knowledge required to move the reader by fitting representation, and the acceptance that it is merely a

³⁴² *KL*, ii. 229.

³⁴³ *KL*, ii. 294.

³⁴⁴ Tim Milnes, *Knowledge and Indifference in English Romantic Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11.

³⁴⁵ Thomas De Quincey, 'The Poetry of Pope' in *Romantic Critical Essays*, ed. David Bromwich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 173.

representation, then his poetry is likely to please no one – like the motions of Onan it is most likely to move only himself. ‘I don’t care one lump of Sugar for my *poetry*’ he told Murray, ‘but for my *costume* – and my *correctness*...I will combat lustily.’³⁴⁶

By not wanting to be a captive to expressive difference, the openly heartfelt poet risks tautology; the reduction of the thing to itself. His rhetorical devices are in danger of being diminished in function to emptiness and sameness. ‘The excellence of every Art’ wrote Keats, ‘is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth.’³⁴⁷ Here Keats provides us with the innate quality of excellent Art (its ‘intensity’ for reconciliation), but the means by which that quality takes shape remains ambiguously abstract. In much the same way, Perkins can insist on the simplicity of Wordsworth’s poetic sincerity when his definition retains the notion of simultaneous conception and manifestation as an ‘essence’, but he gets himself in a tangle when he attempts to convey the embodiment of that essence in verse: ‘Poetic style, then can result from the struggle to be sincere united with the desire to seem it.’³⁴⁸ The tainted implications of an inward (followed by an outward) ‘struggle’ and the unwanted doubleness of trying ‘to seem’ sincere rather than simply being it add unwelcome difficulties to the notion of poetry as a simple effusion of the moment. Mill had encountered a similar difficulty more than a century earlier when he proposed that Wordsworth ‘may be said to be the poet of unpoetical natures.’ ‘But,’ as Mill is forced to admit, ‘unpoetical natures are precisely those which require poetic cultivation.’³⁴⁹

The most characteristic foundation of sincerity in *Don Juan* is the communicated willingness to state full truths in all their contradictory aspects, but to do so figuratively

³⁴⁶ *BLJ*, iii. 165.

³⁴⁷ *KL*, i. 192

³⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 12.

³⁴⁹ John Stuart Mill, ‘Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties’ in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger, (University of Toronto Press, 1981), 381.

and without being ‘unpoetically’ invested in those truths. In the ‘Pope Controversy’, Byron made it clear that the very substance of poetry is ‘truth’:

If the Essence of poetry must be a *Lie* – – throw it to the dogs – or banish it from your republic – as Plato would have done – he who can reconcile Poetry with truth and wisdom – is the only true “*Poet*” in its real sense – “*the Maker*” “*the Creator*” – why must this mean the “liar” – the “feigner” the “tale teller”? (CMP, 149)

But his concept of the poet as a ‘*Maker*’ or ‘*Creator*’ extends beyond mere essence to a sincere investment in the style of a poem, to the point where its style is its essence. In opening stanzas of the last completed canto, Byron draws a comparison between the talents of the ‘antique Persians’ and the appropriation of those talents by ‘modern youth’, suggesting that although they can match their predecessors in feats of action: ‘At speaking truth perhaps they are less clever’. ‘Of all the Muses that I recollect,’ the speaker dryly maintains, ‘Whate’er may be her follies or her flaws /In some things mine’s beyond all contradiction /The most sincere that ever dealt in fiction’ (XVI, 13-16). In other words, it is the most sincere because it accepts the contradiction that it trades in fiction without pretending otherwise. One feels in the poem a sincerity which stems from the poet’s unwillingness to simply or reduce the relationship between the literal and the metaphorical. Because such sincerity derives from the technique of the poem, rather than its author’s stated consciousness, it is often mistaken for falsity when it is not. This is because Byron understood that when we become mindful of a sensation and endeavour to create an equivalent form that has more than private value, we are participating in an activity that, far from being spotlessly sincere, is willing to moderate the form to fit the feeling, and the feeling to fit the form. In an observation which tends to the maturation of Byron’s personal style, Bottrall unconsciously describes the importance of that style at a pivotal moment in the history of poetic form:

‘When there was no longer a disproportion between sentiment and object, when he could see things as they are, and could feel as a sane man feels, Byron began to cast about for a technique which should express adequately his new objectivity’.³⁵⁰ This merely reiterates the fact that poetry is not plain truth – ‘the first and last of knowledge’ – but the artistic rendering of truth. And yet, as Herbert Read contends, ‘this does not make it [any less] insincere for the artist’s feeling for form is stronger than a formless feeling.’³⁵¹ It was in this sense, that Byron declared ‘formal war’ against sincerity ‘in words’.

Goethe perceived more of this quality – this ‘feeling for form’ – in Byron than he did in any poet since Shakespeare, describing him as the ‘greatest genius of the century’ with an ‘incommensurable’ talent for powerful expression. Indeed, it is upon this very principle of poetic rendering that Goethe underlined Byron’s genius: ‘Our German aesthetical people are always talking about poetical and unpoetical objects; and in one respect they are not quite wrong, yet at the bottom no real object is unpoetical if the poet knows how to use it properly.’³⁵² Banishing the debate between symbolic and metaphorical properties to the realm of philosophy, Goethe touches upon a concept that Byron understood better, and accepted more willingly, than his contemporaries: that language must act to indicate quality and character, and that its actions are never unalloyed manifestations of feeling. While Coleridge complained that it ‘is among the miseries of the present age that it recognizes no medium between *Literal* and *Metaphorical*’,³⁵³ Byron never grappled with the conceptual difference between signs that are allegorical and those which are vitally symbolic because he recognized that poetry is

³⁵⁰ M.H. Abrams, *English Romantic Poets*, 213-4.

³⁵¹ Herbert Read, ‘The Cult of Sincerity’, 151.

³⁵² J.P. Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe* (London, New York: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1930), 189.

³⁵³ Quoted in Kathleen M. Wheeler, *The Creative Mind in Coleridge’s Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1981), 53.

at heart a pretence. In a statement which would be almost ridiculous were we not familiar with the great Romantic debate over these terms, W.W. Robson concludes rather proudly of *Don Juan* that Byron ‘uses poetry for the expression of anti-poetic sentiments.’³⁵⁴ It is a slight adjustment on Mill’s claims for Wordsworth, but a telling one. In knowing how to use his materials ‘properly’ – in converting the anti-poetic into poetry – Byron distinguishes himself from his fellow poets by never being in any doubt that he has transformed his materials into poetry rather than abstraction. It was the self-conscious dramatization of that doubt in the poetry of the day, and especially Keats’s *Endymion* and ‘Sleep and Poetry’, that Byron took issue with in his critical aspersions.

Byron was by and large untroubled by Keats’s deep investment in the aesthetic experience as a higher reality, in fact he shared in that investment. What he objected to, over and above what he saw to be Keats’s unqualified experience in life, was the state of perpetual indeterminacy that such an intensified aesthetic experience produces when its creator bluntly discards the precision needed to make its reality felt in the reader. When Swinburne vindicated Byron’s grasp for the ‘outward form of things’ in his second and more flattering appraisal of the poet, he did so by criticising Coleridge and Keats for using nature ‘mainly as a stimulant or a sedative.’³⁵⁵ So consumed were they by the act of reproducing feeling in the processes of their poetry, suggests Swinburne, that they soon forgot the purpose of bringing that feeling to bear upon the reader. For Byron, the effect of this reckless indulgence in art is precisely its disfigurement; the negation of real feelings caused by its overeagerness to feel:

For over warmth, if false, is worse than truth;
If true, ’tis no great lease of its own fire;

³⁵⁴ W.W. Robson, ‘*Don Juan* as a Triumph of Personality’ in *Byron: ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’ and ‘Don Juan’: A Casebook*, ed. John Jump (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1973), 138.

³⁵⁵ *CH*, 376.

For no one, save in very early youth,
 Would like (I think) to trust all to desire,
 Which is but a precarious bond, in sooth,
 And apt to be transferred to the first buyer
 At a sad discount: (VI, 121-7)

The thoughts and emotions themselves may or may not be false, but without a proper esteem for poetry as a worthy artifice for intent, they result in false embodiments. This is brilliantly articulated by Byron in his employment of the term 'lease' to indicate the external 'release' of an internal passion at the same time that it implies an artistic contract for its conveyance to the reader. The contractual metaphor is maintained all the way through the speaker's description of an ineffectual rendering of feeling to suggest that such rendering (or lack thereof) is, in fact, the breaking of a time-honoured contract. It is little more than a 'precarious bond.../...transferred to the first buyer / At a sad discount'. Byron confirms the precariousness of the bond by its direct and infantile relation to 'sooth', an archaic term for truth that negates the prospect of primitive naturalism in the sophistication of poetic figuration. In Byron's terms the sincerity of poetry has nothing to do with the truth or falsity of its convictions but the sincerity of purpose attested by the artful incarnation of those convictions.

The overzealous engagement with 'truth' or philosophy that he saw in the poetry of the day had disrupted the balance between passion and art to the point of breaking all contracts with the reader. This goes back to Byron's belief that, despite their reiterated attachment to the Lakes and the City, the 'two Sects of Naturals' did not form part of the 'Mechanism' of society and nature. They therefore had no medium for the knowledge of the busy or still life. At such a disjunction from society, their poetic struggles with truth take the form of a rampant materialism, stretching or '*overstretching*' expression not by ingenuity but by saying more than words or figures habitually allow.

As Byron saw it, these perverted modes of social disengagement lead to distorted methods of linguistic engagement. He thus describes Southey's poetry as "the rancour of the renegado" – the bad language of the prostitute who stands at the corner of the Street – and showers her Slang upon all.³⁵⁶ Byron presents us with the crude but fitting image of the poet-prostitute assailing unwanted and unreciprocated solicitations to passers-by in a frenzied volley of insults. The prevailing temper is one of bitter exclusion which is both caused and exacerbated by an inappropriate mode of participation. Byron makes his point with the spitting sibilance of the sentence which gives the physical effect of spraying outwards without objective or control.

The image of expressive impropriety that Byron conjures for Southey's gaudy method is remarkably similar to the criticism he levelled against Keats in his now famous remarks on the young poet's inventions as a 'sort of mental masturbation'. Byron's growing sense that Keats's poetry exhibited a coarse appropriation of the Lake-school persuasion in the fervour of the creative process without due concern for its mediums, is well captured in these remarks. 'He is always f-gg-g his *Imagination*,' complained Byron, 'I don't mean he is *indecent*, but viciously soliciting his ideas into a state, which is neither poetry nor anything else but a Bedlam vision produced by raw pork and opium.'³⁵⁷ The implication is that Keats's poetry, by his own stated criteria, has all the intensity required of great art without an apparent purpose for that intensity. As readers we ready ourselves for Byron's completion of the sense in, 'viciously soliciting his ideas into a state...[of]...' but the ensuing account of that condition is deliberately delayed by a digression into what it is not. This is precisely Byron's point: because the intensity is not a shared experience, a mere Bedlam vision, we can never

³⁵⁶ *CMP*, 104.

³⁵⁷ *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, ed. G. M. Matthews (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 129.

know what that state is. By withholding the gist of the sentence, Byron creates the same feeling of frustration he felt one experienced in reading Keats's poetry.

Over and above the young poet's assault on Pope, it is this indefinite suspension of sense and the dissatisfaction that it effects upon its reader which is at the centre of Byron's attacks on Keats. It is the 'Onanism of Poetry', he declares, the pleasure extracted by the Italian fiddler 'suspended daily by a Street Walker in Drury Lane.' Once again, the connection between a self-manufactured excitement of vicarious engagement (which for Byron is really no engagement at all) and its manifestation in an ultimately unfulfilling gesture of unreciprocated desire is tantamount to the creative indulgence of the poet rapt in his own displaced idiom of intensity. These lines have often been quoted to illustrate a pervasive class anxiety in the early responses to Keats's stylistic intrusions upon an exclusive aesthetic realm, but this is often at the expense of what they tell us about Byron's own attitude to form and style. The two most well-known critical accounts of Byron's remarks appear in books by Marjorie Levinson and Christopher Ricks on the slipperiness of Keats's uniquely transgressive style. In the latter Ricks posits how one 'may think that these outbursts tell us more about Byron's imagination than about Keats's, but I think that Byron's violence of embarrassed disgust is a false reaction to something truly in Keats.'³⁵⁸ While Ricks strikes upon a point useful to his own purposes he too easily dismisses Byron's powerful outburst as a 'false reaction' and neglects how easily his argument could be turned on its head: how Byron's response might be a true reaction to something falsely rendered. John Bayley argues, just as Ricks had done two years earlier, that one of Keats's most distinctive poetic emblems is the 'indispensable personal idiom'; the implementation of a word or metaphor that is right for its description but right only for him. From this he terms

³⁵⁸ Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 86.

Keats an ‘innocent rhetorician,’³⁵⁹ attesting to the earnest authenticity of his productions in the same way that Perkins upheld Wordsworth’s poetic sincerity. What Bayley fails to account for, and what Byron insists on time and again through the self-pleasing metaphors in his ‘outbursts’ on Keats, is that such personal sincerity loses its fundamentally private value when it enters the public realm of poetry. For Byron, poetry needs to bear more than a vaguely symbolic relation to things. ‘What we are typically in search of,’ to appropriate J.G.A. Pocock, are ‘modes of discourse stable enough to be available for the use of more than one discussant.’³⁶⁰

In accordance with Byron’s view that all modes of fervent engagement are without art, and by implication, without intimacy, Auden says of *Don Juan* that, ‘To enjoy it fully, the reader must be in a mood of distaste for everything which is in any degree a bore, that is, for all forms of passionate attachment’.³⁶¹ The ostensible contradiction in Auden’s remark recalls Byron’s own denotative inversion of ‘indifference’ and ‘passion’ to suggest that poetry is not a mode of uninhibited engagement with the world but an artful one. It is this alone that prevents it from being dull, because a passionate attachment is only interesting to its captive and not to its observers. In fact, it is the very rude dichotomy between creator and observer which it enforces at the expense of a mutual participation in the creative act that Byron so vehemently rebuked. Without making an irretrievably digressive detour into the sixteenth century, it may be worth noting that the ideal of inventive ease put forward by Castiglione in *Book of the Courtier* describes, almost exactly, the engaging absence of passionate attachment that Auden detected in *Don Juan*:

³⁵⁹ *The Uses of Division*, 118.

³⁶⁰ J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 7.

³⁶¹ *The Dyer’s Hand*, 394.

And that is to eschew as much as a man may, and as a sharp and dangerous rock, affectation or curiosity and (to speak a new word) to use in every thyng a certain Reckelessness [*sprezzatura*], to cover art withall, and seeme whatsoever he doth and sayeth to do it wythout pain, and (as it were) not myndyng it. And of thys do I beleve grace is muche deryved, for in rare matters and wel brought to passe every man knoweth the hardnes of them, so that a redines therin maketh great wonder.³⁶²

While I do not wish to give too much attention to matters of class, because my real concern has to do with integrity of method or style, it must be remembered that the *Book of a Courtier* was not a guide for the nobility but a primer for processes of social integration. A courtier is not an elite member of the gentry whose style (or ‘feeling for form’) is inborn, and therefore needs to perfect his manner to the point where it becomes impossible to distinguish between impulse and technique if he is to become a participant in the public realm, or a ‘mechanism thereof’ to use Byron’s phrase. And, as Castiglione suggests, the principal manner of participation is not excessive ‘curiosity’ or superficial dissimulation but a ‘redines therin’ that ‘maketh great wonder.’ His ideal of ease does not depend on the absence of difficulties but on the capacity to accept difficulty and to turn it into the wonder of art: not to shower all with art but to ‘cover art withall’.

Byron seldom overlooked the fact that human subjectivity is itself textual, and while it may be contemplated in private it is achieved socially. It is the combined effects of merit and order, tutelage and birth, instinct and design as they are embodied in a given medium. When the ‘Lakers and their undersect’ tried to substitute the ideal of a courtly or social ease for a natural or organic one, they neglected this basic foundation. Thomas Hardy would later claim as a postscript to Romanticism that ‘the whole secret of a living style and the difference between it and a dead style, lies in not having too

³⁶² Baldassarre Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* translated by Sir Thomas Hoby, ed. W.H.D. Rouse (London: Dent, 1948), 89.

much style.³⁶³ Byron might certainly have agreed with Hardy, but to this he would have added that the principal danger of committing a natural or ‘living style’ to an unavoidably social medium is that unless it is well executed, it teeters on the edge of an irresponsible and incomprehensible ease. It forgets the poet’s poise and is always in danger of being taken away with, and by, its own rhetoric. By laying too great a stress on the inadequacy of its figurative function, rather than trying to master that function, its grossness is earnestly and unequivocally displayed; the social ideal is so thoroughly subverted that the poet is forced to rush in and fill that gap with his shaky personal voice. The problem with such practice – in surrendering one’s ‘whole spirit’ to ‘the influxes / Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements’ to quote from Coleridge’s ‘Nightingale’ ode – as Byron saw it and as I have tried to articulate thus far, is that it is either too successful in its endeavour to be without style (becoming truly artless in the most damning sense of the word), or it inadvertently produces the deliberate materialism which it seeks to evade, and it does so with a great deal less control.

In an extended reflection on this matter, which is worth quoting in full, Byron uncovers the difference to marked effect:

The grand distinction of the Under forms of the New School of poets – is their *Vulgarity*. – By this I do not mean that they are *Coarse* – but “shabby-genteel” – as it is termed. – A man may be *coarse* & yet not *vulgar* – and the reverse. – – Burns is often coarse – but never *vulgar*. – – Chatterton is never vulgar; – nor Wordsworth – nor the higher of the Lake school, though they treat of low life in all it’s branches. – It is in their *finery* that the New-under School are most vulgar; – and they may be known by this at once – as what we called at Harrow – “a Sunday blood” might be easily distinguished from a Gentleman – although his cloathes might be the better-cut – and his boots the best-blackened of the two – probably because he made the one – or cleaned the other with his own hands...Far be it from me to presume that there ever was or can be such a thing

³⁶³ Notebook-entry of 1875 quoted in Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 148.

as an *Aristocracy of Poets*...but there *is* a Nobility of thought and of Style – open to all Stations – and derived partly from talent – & partly from education – which is to be found in Shakespeare – and Pope – and Burns – no less than in Dante and Alfieri – but which is no-where to be perceived in the Mockbirds and bards of Mr. Hunt little chorus. – If I were asked to define what this Gentlemanliness is – I should say that it is only to be defined by *examples*, – – of those who have it – & those who have it not. – In *Life* – – I should say that most *military* men have it – & a few *Naval*; – – that several men of rank have it – and few lawyers; ... It is the *Salt* of Society – and the Seasoning of composition. – *Vulgarity* is far worse than downright *Blackguardism* – for the latter comprehends wit – humour – and strong sense at times – – while the former is a sad abortive attempt at all things – “signifying nothing”. – It does not depend on low themes – or even low language – for – Fielding revels in both – – but is he ever *vulgar*? – No – you see the man of education the gentleman, and the Scholar sporting with his subject – – it’s Master, not its Slave. (*CMP*, 159-160)

There is so much more to this passage than the familiar class anxieties which are usually brought to bear on it. Underneath the references to a Harrow ‘Sunday blood’ and the ‘mock birds and bards of Mr. Hunt’s little chorus’ a point of considerable importance is being made about the quality and process of aesthetic achievement. By picking at the overexposed seams or showy decorations of ‘the under forms of the new school’ Byron exposes a fundamental discrepancy between its essence and the materialisation (or ‘finery’) of that essence in poetry. But he does so to demonstrate a ‘nobility of thought and style’ that is ‘open to all stations’ and draws on Shakespeare and Burns to prove this. In a gesture that most suitably depicts his belief in the true indivisibility of form and content, Byron can only demonstrate this nobility of thought and style by example because it is a quality which is more easily felt or shown than defined. He does this because he believed that both forms of the ‘new school’ had either overlooked or wrongly disregarded Aristotle’s principle that all art is essentially metaphor. Where Wordsworth and the Lakers had, through their candid philosophical ruminations, forgotten that the creation of all fine art is in its showing rather than in its telling, their

Cockney appropriators did not have the control over their medium to be confident that their showings were proper tellings.

In Byron's mind, neither sect elicits the proper combination of analogy and assertion required of the true poetic spirit, but the former is saved from vulgarity by its complete disinvestment in the artful relation of things for fear that they might be artificial alignments. However, by taking the Lake-school idealisms to heart but not fully to heart, that is to say by dismissing the passive inheritance of poetic and social conventions without committing to a purely organic mode, coupled with their lack of an innate 'nobility of thought and style', the 'mock birds and bards of Mr. Hunt's little chorus' cannot achieve the proper interpenetration of form and reality that poetry requires, offering instead a profane intermingling of poetic activity with philosophical concern. In this sense their vulgarity really is a 'sad abortive attempt at all things' because it drifts into embarrassing impasses over questions of existence and the place of art. In Byron's terms it is truly vulgar because it exhibits a complete disunity of thought, feeling and expression: it is not the performance of a masterful poet 'sporting with his subject' but, to implement Eliot's excellent phrase, the demonstrable 'dissociation of sensibility'. Byron would not have known it at the time, but perhaps the best example of the distinction he was trying to articulate is reflected in a letter from Keats to his brother and sister-in-law. Where Byron implies that the author of *Joseph Andrews* is kept from vulgarity by his quicksilver appreciation for the irony of life, Keats had asked his relatives, 'With what sensation do you read Fielding?'³⁶⁴

It would be a mistake to assume that Byron did not risk vulgarity because he never veered far enough from a passive adherence to formal conventions to do so. 'Art

³⁶⁴ *KL*, ii. 18.

is *not* inferior to Nature for poetical purposes' insisted Byron in his defence of Pope: 'What makes a regiment of soldiers a more noble view – than the same mass of Mob? – Their arms – their dresses – their banners – and the *art* – and artificial symmetry of their position and movements.'³⁶⁵ His distinction between Art and Nature, between a well-formed battalion and a formless mob is, by eighteenth-century standards, quite straightforward and would sit comfortably in any one of Sir Joshua Reynolds's Academy lectures on form. But a closer look at the strange compound (and distinction) in 'the *art* – and artificial symmetry of their position and movements' obfuscates Byron's initial distinction by suggesting an expressive conjunction beyond the uniformity and ornamentation of the regiment. It posits a vital expression of nature through style; a posturing of essential value in and through its artificial postures at the same time that it lays claim to something beyond them. Byron employed this same metaphor earlier in the debate to imply that his poet-contemporaries could not break from the bind of associating well-formed artefacts with lifeless arrangements to see the other exceptional qualities of such art. 'I will say nothing of the harmony of Pope and Dryden – in comparison – for there is not a living poet (except Rogers, Gifford, and Crabbe) who can write a heroic couplet' argues Byron, but 'The fact is that the exquisite beauty of their versification has withdrawn the proper attention from their other excellencies, as the vulgar eye will rest more upon the Splendour of the uniform than the quality of the troops.'³⁶⁶ The implication is that weak-eyed detractors either mistakenly detach form from quality, or they can't read form well enough to see the quality therein. In contrast to some of his Romantic counterparts, Byron never treated the formal problem of innate feeling taking shape in verse as an unavoidable but inessential corollary to that feeling. He always held the problems of subject, material,

³⁶⁵ *CMP*, 138-9.

³⁶⁶ *CMP*, 111.

and form as one problem. More than this, he almost always felt the problem should not be exhibited self-consciously as a problem.³⁶⁷

I turn, almost inevitably, to the shining instance of this delicacy; to the much quoted and much analysed stanza on Adeline's mobility in the sixteenth canto:

So well she acted, all and every part
 By turns — with that vivacious versatility,
 Which many people take for want of heart.
 They err — 'tis merely what is called mobility,
 A thing of temperament and not of art,
 Though seeming so, from its supposed facility;
 And false — though true; for surely they're sincerest,
 Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest. (XVI, 817-4)

In these lines Byron articulates a far more complex notion of sincerity than Perkins's face-value explanation allows. For one thing, it puts forward the idea of an unconscious artifice as the best expression of sincerity and, much like Yeats's teasing request to separate the dancer from the dance, it invites the reader to participate in the impossible task of dividing the intent from the action, especially when that action is so well executed. The artfulness of the verse suggests a provocative play, both in Adeline and on the part of the speaker who describes her movements, which lures us into judging genuineness through social exchange rather in isolation. But because her manner is so well cultivated and its implementation so effortless, it is much less of a contrivance than it first declares itself to be. It is a real experience as well as an aesthetic one: its sincerity is the sincerity of technique yet more than mere 'technique' for it involves the moral attitudes that shape its manner. The monosyllabic masculine triplet 'part/heart/art'

³⁶⁷ I say almost because many of the 1816/17 experiments in form contradict this. Having said that, I hope that my treatment of *Childe Harold* III & IV and *Manfred* in previous chapters have demonstrated that Byron's working out of this problem in his poetry is always tempered by an underlying faithfulness to authorial control.

gives expression to an implicit and constant state of being, while its elegant polysyllabic counterpart ‘Versatility/mobility/facility’ captures Adeline’s aptitude in demonstrating her innate ease. Having thus arrived at the final couplet in ‘surely they’re sincerest / Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest?’ we are well set to appreciate its irony by questioning both the naive impressionability that it implies and the false passivity of her simply being ‘acted upon’.

Adeline affects a considerably subtler but no less enthusiastic engagement with the moment than the speaker of *Endymion* does but her participation in that moment is sometimes misread as a cultivated indifference or ‘want of heart’ when it is really the avoidance of affectation through a mastery of her medium – it is dependent upon an urgent and essentially thoughtful engagement. Byron qualifies his (and Adeline’s) seamless integration of temperament and art with an appending note which is so well known that it has given rise to the critical term ‘Byronic mobility’: ‘In French, “mobilité”...It may be defined as an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions – at the same time without losing the past.’ In many ways this is an extraordinary evocation for it lays claim to the type of heightened sensitivity in Keats’s life of sensations – the ‘excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions’ – without conceding the value of past experience attained by that sensitivity. It is the simultaneity between that which is immediately felt and that which is intellectually apprehended which does not privilege one over the other. It is because of this truly ‘more than usual sensibility’ and its appreciation for the way in which things take shape that Byron’s verse in *Don Juan* is stirred as much by the timeless as it is by the contingent pressures of his time.

Byron's vindication of poetry as art is more than a passive duplication of the Augustan classification of style as an appropriate garment; a well-chosen rhetoric or ornamental elaboration fitted to its theme. In response to Murray's concerns over the unevenness of *Don Juan*, Byron explicitly rejected any attempt to tighten its structure unnaturally, protesting that, 'you might as well make Hamlet (or Diggory) "act mad" in a straight waistcoat...their gestures and my thoughts would only be pitiably absurd – and ludicrously constrained.'³⁶⁸ Hamlet's – and consequently Juan's – dilemma is created and exacerbated by their freedom to wander (or wonder) in thought, and it is a triumph of form that Byron found a poetic medium which allowed for such perambulations. But *Don Juan* is hardly a docile adaptation of the *ottava rima* stanza for poetic purposes. No severely determined purpose pre-exists it: the poem itself is an act of discovery, its full meaning generated in and through its creation. In this sense it may be said to be a poem of organic constitution, not in the Coleridgean manner of a seamless fusion of discrete particles, but one which gathers meaning through its transitions and connections. Byron later claimed that it was written 'with as little poetry as could be helped'³⁶⁹ by which he meant that it was fashioned naturally and that its technical apparatus was so deeply integrated into the poem's texture that it exists unobtrusively. But he was equally convinced of its final value as a poetic artefact, writing to Kinnaird in 1819 with egging conviction: '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*?'³⁷⁰ His inexpugible sense of having created something of ultimate artistic worth gives credence to his belief that excellent poetry is both cumulative and

³⁶⁸ *BLJ*, vi. 207-8.

³⁶⁹ *BLJ*, vi. 208.

³⁷⁰ *BLJ*, vi. 232.

provisional; it exploits the transitory nature of existence for effect but it does not leave its reader in a state of unrewarding suspension.

It was partly for this reason that he disliked *Endymion*, but appended to this discontent was a deeper belief that the poem was stylistically unattached and little more than unscrupulous carpetbaggery. If the axes of his 'Dedication' to *Don Juan* and his untiring public defence of Pope were Byron's abhorrence for apostasy and his unwavering loyalty to those he venerated, it is because in principle he valued commitment above any other virtue. Not commitment to a philosophical position, commitment to a poetic sect, or commitment to a woman, but to forms and beliefs so deeply ingrained that they are largely unstated. In poetry, this implied a commitment to one's materials even if those materials permitted acts of digression. As Patricia Meyer Spacks so excellently remarks, 'Sincerity, as experienced in literature, always implies commitment. Although a man might in fact be quite sincere in holding contradiction and shifting attitudes, poetry which seems opportunistic, which grasps at whatever might make a poem, is unlikely to convey sincerity.'³⁷¹ It is precisely this sort of poetic opportunism that he detected in Keats, referring to it in correspondence with Shelley: 'You know my opinion of *that second-hand* school of poetry. You also know my high opinion of your own poetry, – because it is of *no* school...'³⁷² The implications of alignment or misalignment here are strong and call to mind Byron's famous lines in the ninth canto of *Don Juan*:

The consequence is, being of no party,
I shall offend all parties: — never mind!
My words, at least, are more sincere and hearty
Than if I sought to sail before the wind.
He who has nought to gain can have small art: he

³⁷¹ Patricia Meyer Spacks, 'In Search of Sincerity' in *College English*, 29, no.8 (May, 1968), 599.

³⁷² *BLJ*, viii. 11.

Who neither wishes to be bound nor bind,
 May still expatiate freely, as will I,
 Nor give my voice to Slavery's Jackall cry. (IX, 201-8)

Like many other episodes in *Don Juan*, this stanza toys with the very thoughtless urgency of the ideas that it seems to prompt with hasty assurance. It sets us up to believe that because its speaker is open to contraries he is an entirely free agent at liberty to roam as his inclination sees fit. But the sheer whimsy of this notion is bound in rhyme to the shape of the stanza and is part of a larger hallowed task laid out only two stanzas earlier in which the speaker avowals to 'war in words...with all who war / With Thought.' The stanza is ostensibly about the uninhibited freedom obtained by complete and utter detachment from external objects, but what it really posits is a supreme internal commitment that is hard-won and unflinching. To rhyme 'sincere and hearty' with 'small art: he' as Byron does with ironic effect in the middle of this stanza is to jest with the unadulterated innocence of one who floats freely – 'who neither wishes to be bound nor bind' – but who does so without being invested in that freedom because he 'has nought to gain'. There is a terribly clever pun in 'My words, at least, are more sincere and hearty / Than if I sought to sail before the wind' which sports with the nautical definition of 'aloof' as a ship which sets itself apart by its ability to sail into (and therefore close to) the wind. It is the path of most resistance (enacted by the only imperfect or unnatural rhyme in the stanza) and therefore, in Byron's terms, the most sincere one.

The strain of this conviction runs deep in Byron's work and is often conceived in terms similar to those by which he registered his disparagement of Keats's and Southey's verse. In *The Prophecy of Dante* he speaks of the 'harlotry of genius, which, like

beauty, / Too oft forgets its own self-reverence, / And looks on prostitution as a duty.’ (III, i. 77-9) This is not a straight-forward attack on political apostasy but a graver betrayal of the self. It is the sort of self-treacherous act of one of ‘these parricides of their own Principles’³⁷³ as Byron would later call them. Byron offers an image which corresponds to his metaphor for Southey’s poetry, as that of the prostitute disengaged by her undiscerning eagerness to engage, to critique yet another manifestation of this principle in poets who tarnish the sincerity of the artistic contract through a misalliance with external or political objects. Expression that is either too eager to please itself or too eager to please others does not amount to anything more than gaudy posturing because it has neglected its deep, inborn ‘duty’ to ‘beauty’. We cannot separate the ethical and aesthetic imperatives in these pronouncements because the language employed in them affirms an integrity *in* method: a commitment in the core which prevents any passive alliance to external codes.

We come to a deeper sense of this quality in Byron when we compare his reflections above with Keats’s desire for *Endymion* to provide the reader with ‘a little Region to wander in where they may pick and choose, and in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new in a second Reading.’³⁷⁴ At face-value it seems the most sincere of poetic endeavours, and to Keats it was, but to the likes of Byron it represented a dangerous caprice with as little poetic sincerity as possible. The bower-like fertility of Keats’s ‘little Region’ is abundant and open-ended to the point of being amorphous. This, he believes, yields an enriching profusion of imagery and an endless deferment of meaning which gives its readers the privileged freedom to ‘pick and choose’ as they please. It was to this end that Arthur Hallam

³⁷³ *CMP*, 103.

³⁷⁴ *KL*, i. 170.

praised Tennyson, Keats, and Shelley for their capacity, as poets of sensation, to discover the ‘colours...sounds, and movements’ of nature, the moniker of ‘innumerable shades of fine emotion’ which are too delicate and elusive for representational language to express. ‘Other poets seek for images to illustrate their conceptions’ argues Hallam, but ‘these men had no need to seek; they lived in a world of images; for the most important and extensive portion of their life consisted in those emotions which are immediately conversant with the sensation.’³⁷⁵ But this ‘world of images’ that Hallam evokes is little more than a wistful ideal and as Auden so wonderfully emphasised in praise of *Don Juan*, ‘no man is perpetually in a passion’ and those moments when he is not are no less human, and by extension, no less poetic. As Byron put it in a letter to Moore, ‘I can never get people to understand that poetry is the expression of *excited passion*, and that there is no such thing as a life of passion any more than a continuous earthquake, or an eternal fever.’³⁷⁶ Byron does not deny the connection between poetry and passion, but Keats’s fixation on the rich abundance of process – on an ‘etherial existence’³⁷⁷ in which consciousness is continually recreated – was for Byron a very unnatural conception of the aesthetic experience. In his eagerness to keep the aesthetic space as open-ended as possible, he forgets that poetry is a medium of sustained imagery because it abandons the very poetic situation it has created.

In what seems to me an eccentric requisition of Shelley’s language, Keats calls for a gathering of ‘Minds to fellowship divine / A fellowship with essence, till we shine / Full alchymized and free of space.’³⁷⁸ Their coincidence in the poet’s mind makes the vision and its arbitrary connections peculiarly his, but the abstraction that it occasions

³⁷⁵Arthur Henry Hallam, ‘On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson’ in *The Writings of Arthur Henry Hallam*, ed. T.H. Vail Motter (New York: Modern Language Association, 1943), 188.

³⁷⁶ *BLJ*, viii. 146.

³⁷⁷ *KL*, i. 301.

³⁷⁸John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Miriam Allott (Harlow: Longman, 1970), 154.

blurs the boundary between sense and sensation to near irrelevance for the reader. It may present a direct questioning of what Mark Sandy calls ‘Enlightenment’s obsession with fixed [and] totalising...explanations of the universe’³⁷⁹ but as John Dennis advanced, ‘When the Imagination is so inflam’d, as to render the soul utterly incapable of reflecting, there is no difference between Images and the Things themselves.’³⁸⁰ Byron felt this way about Rubens, whose paintings he described to Hobhouse as ‘not nature...not art...[but] an assemblage of florid night-mares.’³⁸¹ He expressed a similar idea in the opening lines of *Hints from Horace* where he contended that the integrity of classical proportion had been so thoroughly abandoned by certain artists that they fashioned creations ‘sillier than a sick man’s dreams, / ...a crowd of figures incomplete, / Poetic night-mares, without head or feet.’ (12-14) The too-eager and exceedingly-personal sequence of associations, activated by the poet’s voluptuous vision and authenticated by his emotion, have produced a phantasmagoria of overwrought imagery.³⁸²

In praise of Keats’s transcendental power, Stuart Sperry argues that in much of his poetry, the ‘whole process of associative interweaving and etherialization is too subtle and attenuating to permit any genuine connection with reality to exist.’³⁸³ Under Byron’s conditions for poetic authenticity this sort of personal obligation to the surge and flow of sensual impressionism represents the absolute low point of artistic opportunism. Jeffrey struck upon this method in his early review of *Endymion* when he accused Keats of playing *bouts rimes*:

³⁷⁹ Mark Sandy, *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 134.

³⁸⁰ *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. E. N. Hooker (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), i. 363.

³⁸¹ *BLJ*, v. 73.

³⁸² It may be worthwhile to compare this with the teeming haze of imagery that Coleridge struggled with when writing without a ‘body of thought’: ‘my Poetry is crowded and sweats beneath a heavy burthen of Ideas and Imagery.’ (*Collected Letters*, i. 337.)

³⁸³ Stuart Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 100.

It seems as if the author had ventured every thing that occurred to him in the shape of a glittering image or striking expression – taken the first word that presented itself to make up a rhyme, and then made that word the germ of a new cluster of images – a hint for a new excursion of the fancy – and so wandered on, equally forgetful when he came, and heedless whither he was going, till he had covered his pages with an interminable arabesque of connected and incongruous figures, that multiplied as they extended, and were only harmonized by the brightness of their tints, and the graces of their forms.³⁸⁴

As one fitting example of what Jeffrey is talking about, we might consider following the hasty union of ‘dreams/streams, subtle/shuttle, space/trace’³⁸⁵ in the first book. What movement there is appears to be the child-like effect of a one eagerly pursuing and discarding whatever momentarily grasps its fancy: it may be an innocent undertaking but it is only innocent as a subjective experience, not as a piece of art. It is a movement of accidental discovery and carefree relinquishment in which things are brought together but not connected. Byron shared in Keats’s belief that the act of poetry involved a simultaneous rendering and receiving of meaning through an ‘intensified’ aesthetic experience, but the distance between the two poets is most noticeable when we examine the means by which that intensity is achieved.³⁸⁶ For Byron it is usually occasioned by a concentration of association through metaphor and an acute awareness for the structures of alliance, however loose those structures may be. It is for this reason that he may well have appreciated the former’s odes. But the sort of empty associations that we find in parts of *Endymion* which do not invite thought or visualisation were, to use the phrase of Browning’s disgruntled cloister, his ‘heart’s

³⁸⁴ Quoted in William Keach, *Arbitrary Power*, 52.

³⁸⁵ (I. 748-53)

³⁸⁶ In a letter to Marianne Hunt, Shelley strikes upon the essence of this difference by drawing out Keats’s almost Byronic vigour without the latter’s innate control. Shelley praises Keats’s first *Hyperion* but grumbles that, ‘His other things are imperfect enough, & what is worse written in the bad sort of style which is becoming fashionable among those who fancy that they are imitating Hunt & Wordsworth. – But of all these things nothing is worse than a volume by Barry Cornwall entitled the Sicilian story...Is not the vulgarity of these wretched imitations of Lord Byron carried to a pitch of the sublime?’ (*LPBS*, ii. 239.)

abhorrence'. Their sentiments may or may not be true but they are elaborate and overwrought, an 'interminable arabesque' and, therefore, untruthfully formed.

The obvious rebuttal to my claims that Byron valued purposeful organisation over random association is to point to the notorious 'sudden transitions' and general loose structure of *Don Juan* which McGann, among others, describes as 'radically, aggressively episodic and meandering'.³⁸⁷ The pliability of its form is nowhere better expressed than by Virginia Woolf in a diary entry of 1918: 'It is the most readable poem of its length ever written, I suppose; a quality which it owes in part to the springy random haphazard galloping nature of its method. This method is a discovery in itself. It's what one has looked for in vain – a[n] elastic shape which will hold whatever you choose to put into it. Thus he could write out his mood as it came to him; he could whatever came into his head.'³⁸⁸ At first glance, its 'springy random haphazard galloping nature' and the image of the poet writing 'out his mood as it came to him' presents *Don Juan* in terms no different from *Endymion's* distinct lack of method, its author venturing 'every thing that occurred to him in the shape of a glittering image or striking expression', but it is, and distinctly so. When Woolf repeats the word 'method' and describes it as 'a discovery in itself', she draws our attention to a powerful facility for design behind its structural freedom or elasticity. Perhaps the most revealing phrase in her description is the qualifying clause 'thus' in 'Thus he could write out his mood' which points to a form of accommodating autonomy that has been hard won because it is in-built. The *ottava rima*, or more importantly Byron's implementation of the *ottava rima*, is thus doubly accommodating because it offers a proper lodging for the poet's mood even as it assists in the modification of that mood without exposition and

³⁸⁷ Jerome J. McGann, '*Don Juan*' in *Context*, 101.

³⁸⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Ann Olivier Bell. vol. i. (London: Hogarth, 1977), 180-181.

without vagueness. Ernest Lovell explains this well when he argues that *Don Juan* embodies a ‘completely uninhibited style, flexible beyond anything before it, it is able at once to give the impression of dramatic conversation, using rhythms close to the movement of modern speech, and also to allow the nearly complete lyric, humorous, or meditative expression of the whole man behind it.’³⁸⁹

Hazlitt’s separation of ‘familiar style’ from a ‘vulgar’ one is much to the point here:

It is not easy to write a familiar style. Many people mistake a familiar for a vulgar style, and suppose that to write without affectation is to write at random. On the contrary there is nothing that requires more precision, and, if I may so say, purity of expression, than the style I am speaking of. It utterly rejects not only all unmeaning pomp, but all low, cant phrases, and loose, unconnected, *slipsbod* allusions.³⁹⁰

The familiar style, as it is defined here, is in many ways an ideal style because it evades both the artificiality of unnatural expression and the unrefined coarseness of vulgar utterance. While the familiar style is not to be mistaken with a loose style – for ‘nothing...requires more precision’ – the vulgar style reveals itself by ‘loose, unconnected, *slipsbod* allusions.’ To put it another way, poetry of the latter kind values negative capability above reason to the point where the actual verbalisation of its ideal is displaced by its own figurative demonstration on the page. It results in the breakdown of what Hume, in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, termed ‘the real relation of ideas’ and threatens to engender an ultimately tasteless and incomprehensible order. It is despoiled, not elevated, by literary means and achieves neither beauty nor truth. In its quest for a fully-engaged subjective style far removed from the dispassionate and

³⁸⁹ Lovell, 244.

³⁹⁰ William Hazlitt, ‘On Familiar Style’ in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu, vol. vi. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), 217.

inactive clarity of neoclassical art it becomes, to use Marjorie Levinson's excellent description, 'a detached literary style and a self-reflexive one at that.'³⁹¹ If, according to Arnold, Wordsworth has no style, then as Levinson observes, 'to overhear Keats's poetry is to hear nothing *but* intonation, to feel nothing but style and its meaningfulness.' His poetry, she argues, presents 'a parodic return upon his own derivativeness' which ultimately undermines the premise of natural authority it so gamely wishes to endorse. 'It is moving, and impressive,' says Bayley, 'but it is also in a damaging sense aesthetic.'³⁹² The rich abundance of the language does not match the infertility of the subject and Keats is forced to overreach, metrically and linguistically, to express what essentially cannot be expressed without analogy. Byron responded to such ill-formed figurations as Cleopatra responds to her disfigurement in Shakespeare's famous play, it is but 'greatness / I' the posture of a whore' (v. ii. 219-20).

In other words, if so much is invested in the process of poetry without due concern for the nature of art as a necessary artifice or 'lodgement' for that process, then the poet will always be in doubt as to whether he has effected a natural integration of his materials or a rhetorical appropriation of them. If at times he resorts to an exaggeratedly rapid procurement of figures that are so numerous and rich that they seem to crowd out meaning, then elsewhere he registers an awkward hesitancy in reflecting on his handiwork. Again I turn to John Bayley who comments on one such moment in Keats's verse where 'the pause between feeling and making can be felt, and in the hush our sense of craftsmanship at work is embarrassingly strong.'³⁹³ Bayley captures a moment of indecision in the act of composition which is not, and should not be, so exclusive to Keats that it merits observation. But he deems it worth remarking

³⁹¹ Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 13.

³⁹² *The Uses of Division*, 122.

upon, and his reason for doing so is not simply to point to its obvious deviation from the poet's own principle that poetry should come 'as naturally as the Leaves to a tree' or not at all, rather, Bayley offers his observation as a means of demonstrating Keats's doubts about the process of verse making itself – about the embodiment of feeling in language. Yet again, it is tempting to emphasise the moving honesty in such moments of qualitative pause, but it is unlikely that Byron would have regarded Keats's demonstrable hiatus as anything other than an uneasy and unwanted instance of self-exposure. This is because Keats does not so much pause as to ponder the best possible expression of his sentiment, but rather that he may wonder if it can be expressed at all.

While the precise nature of a poet's compositional methods can never be fully explicated, we seldom witness this sort of troubled hesitation in Byron's verse, at least not without ironic consideration for the dual capacity of language to expand and limit its meaning in its conjunctive progressions. It is generally agreed that Byron wrote with relative swiftness and self-possession, and especially so when he implemented the nimble decasyllables of the *ottava rima*. In the *Variorum Don Juan* T.J. Steffan argues that 'Byron could not have produced the great bulk that he did if he had not written with phenomenal speed and ease and for the most part without thoughtful revision.'³⁹⁴ This is precisely the noble ideal of unforced fluency that Byron himself championed in several letters to Murray regarding his inability to revise, the tacit endorsement of a Romantic poetics of spontaneity. Yet some critics have gone to great effort in exposing this fluency as an affectation of gentlemanly indifference. Zachary Leader identifies a class element in 'Byron's carelessness – or relative carelessness – about finished work,' arguing that 'his flaunting casualness...signal[s] upper-class hauteur – disdain for effort,

³⁹⁴ *Byron's 'Don Juan': A Variorum Edition*, ed. T.J. Steffan and W.W. Pratt, 4 vols. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1957), i. 103.

graft, anything that smacks of the artisan or the labourer.³⁹⁵ While there is an element of truth in this – his expressed indignation to Moore at Leigh Hunt’s reference to poetry as a profession, ‘I thought that Poetry was an *art*, or an *attribute*, and not a *profession*’³⁹⁶ is often quoted to confirm it – Byron’s sense of effortless composition is more closely related to his belief in the artist’s consummate ability to command his material (to be ‘its master – not its slave’) than it is the aristocrat’s fear to be found sweating over his work.

In discussing the unique suppleness of the *ottava rima* stanza, Prothero explicates Byron’s peerless control of a potentially slippery medium: ‘He handles it with consummate mastery and with an amazing facility of rhyming. In stanza after stanza of clear idiomatic English, as colloquial as metrical style will allow, the rhymes fall into their place without unnatural involutions of the sentence.’³⁹⁷ What Prothero so beautifully indicates here, is that the tones and possibilities of its language, however ‘plain’ and conversational, are painlessly bound up with the pervasive complexity of its final achievement. In a related treatment of Byron’s casual manner, Lovell nullifies the charge of an elevating ease by arguing that the ‘careless ease of *Don Juan*, often remarked, is the necessary counterweight or safety valve to the audacity of the ironic juxtapositions and is the mark of the balanced point of view...the poetic voice under easy control.’³⁹⁸ Lovell contemplates a corresponding daringness and appeasement in its manner which exposes the essentially false dichotomy in Keats’s notorious tag that Byron ‘cuts a figure but is not figurative’. While the like of Coleridge and Keats devoted so much of their creative energy to a deep consideration of the relationship between

³⁹⁵ Zachary Leader, ‘Byron, Revision, and the Stable Self’ in *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 84.

³⁹⁶ *BLJ*, vi. 47.

³⁹⁷ In *Jump*, 108.

³⁹⁸ Lovell, in M.H. Abrams, *English Romantic Poetics*, 241.

form and subjectivity, it was Byron who understood that cutting a figure is being figurative. With this in mind, Peter Manning correlates Byron's editorial revisions with the literary construction of the self: the 'endless self-revision of the Byronic self',³⁹⁹ which he suggests, 'takes the form of vital accretion rather than craftsmanly polish.'⁴⁰⁰ While he possibly makes too much of the force of personality as a poetical construct, Manning's analysis draws attention to the entrenched connection between method and manner in Byron's life and verse that I am trying to articulate here. It was for this reason that he despised those who evoked a too easy manner by linking it to a nonrepresentational quality of spirit as much as he did the 'ballad mongering' speculators of verse.

For Byron, verse of this kind stages a needless and excessive cleaving of impulse from strategy because it is unsettled in its own manner. It is ultimately disingenuous because it turns poetry into a false modesty rather than accepting it as a modest sophistication; an 'excellent falsehood' to keep up the Shakespeare analogy. He articulated this very thing to Moore in a comment on Hunt's *Rimini* where he complained about 'his trash of vulgar phrases tortured into compound barabrisms to be *old* English...he is an honest Charlatan, who has persuaded himself into a belief of his own impostures, and talks Punch in pure simplicity of heart.'⁴⁰¹ Where Wordsworth had actively renounced a genteel standard of artistic sincerity which presents itself socially as unrehearsed and unaffected in favour of a 'truly' organic one, Byron is here implying that Hunt has misappropriated both precedents. Byron implied elsewhere that

³⁹⁹ Peter J. Manning, 'Don Juan and the Revisionary Self' in *Romantic Revisions*, ed. Robert Brinkley and Keith Hanley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 223.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁴⁰¹ *BLJ*, vi. 46-47.

he ‘deemed it good poetry at bottom, disfigured only by a strange style,⁴⁰² but it is in light of his comments on blemished finery of the ‘under school’, it is difficult to separate the ‘Punch’ from the simplicity. In being too aware of the incongruity between a particular feeling and its untruthful embodiment on the page, Hunt assumes a vulgar self-consciousness which is not the higher truth-to-beauty order he wishes to express. It may be jaunty and playful, little more than a sportive confession without art, but its literary markedness presents a conspicuous misuse of art.

Richard Cronin hits upon the matter in his treatment of Hunt’s Cockneyisms in *The Politics of Romantic Poetry*. In making his argument that these Cockneyisms are better defined socially than they are linguistically, or rather in the relationship between their style and subject matter, Cronin considers Hunt’s peculiar habit of writing with a diction (and the ‘freedom’) of a poet from another age. ‘But’ Cronin suggests, ‘Hunt writes only “as if” he were unaware of these matters. His is always a knowing innocence, an “affectation of a bright-eyed ease.”⁴⁰³ From this it would seem that Hunt, like Byron, was attempting to strike a middle ground between sceptical disbelief and indiscriminate belief in the style of his poetry. But, as Byron saw it, the disjunction between intention and figuration in *Rimini* is perhaps less stable or playful than Cronin assumes because Hunt has gone so far in affecting ‘a bright-eyed ease’ that he has ‘persuaded himself into a belief of his own impostures, and talks Punch in pure simplicity of heart.’ Hunt’s behaviour in poetry, as Byron saw it in the reflection above, is like that of a schoolboy who keeps on insisting, excessively and hyperbolically, that he has kissed a girl in order to maintain the pretence that he has. He does this to the

⁴⁰² *BLJ*, vi. 46.

⁴⁰³ Cronin, ‘Leigh Hunt, Keats and the Politics of Cockney Poetry’ in *The Politics of Romantic Poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 185.

point where he actually believes that he has, but he is betrayed socially by his own self-conscious and overblown rhetoric.

The poetic power of *Don Juan* hinges upon its poet's acute awareness of the inescapable disjunction between intent and the figuration of that intent, but it expresses this disjunction by an artful synthesis of its elements: it exposes the inharmonious motions of the world without unwieldy bombast and without forcing its language to shoulder an insufferable weight of meaning. It is because of this that Mark Storey remarks upon 'Byron's ability to keep the verse poised'⁴⁰⁴ throughout, and the *Literary Examiner* review of cantos I and II considers how the 'ease and felicity of Byron's transitions from "grave to gay, from lively to severe," are without example; only as it was observed of the "Allegro" of Milton.'⁴⁰⁵ Cronin's examination of the inextricable relationship between social codes and stylistic ones is convincing⁴⁰⁶, but his brush with Byron finally settles on the fact that 'Byron is protected from Lockhart's indignation not by the soundness of his morals but by the soundness of his style, by an ease that remains gentlemanly without ever descending into jauntiness.'⁴⁰⁷ One cannot deny that this has something to do with his rank and learning but Byron went to great lengths to argue that a soundness of style or 'ease' was the consequence of something far deeper than rank or learning. Its essence is perhaps best appreciated when we accept the same alleged contradiction in Byron that we observe in one of his most scathing critics of the twentieth century. It was, after all, the same T.S. Eliot who insisted that in creation an

⁴⁰⁴ *The Eye of Appetite*, 168.

⁴⁰⁵ RR, B. iii. 1375.

⁴⁰⁶ In demonstrating how the indeterminacy of Keats's poetry reveals a general political indeterminacy in the period, Cronin shows how easily the common argument that social codes expose stylistic inconsistencies can be reversed.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 187.

artist goes through an ‘extinction of personality,’ that spoke of the ‘duty, the consecrated task, of sincerity.’⁴⁰⁸

Perhaps inevitably, some critics have accounted for Byron’s gentlemanly evasion of the jaunty by casting him into the mould of a stylistic conservative whose classical impulse or steadiness of vision prevented him from reaching into the unknown for risk of impropriety. Thus Christopher Ricks observes how the ‘limpidity and lucidity of Byron’s style act as a *cordon sanitaire* against contagious embarrassment.’⁴⁰⁹ There is some merit in these arguments as Byron himself often evoked the bonding and safeguarding affinity of a classical education in his letters to Shelley and Hobhouse. ‘Why our classical education alone —’ he suggests in a letter to the latter concerning his involvement with political radicals, ‘should teach us to trample on...the unblushing baseness of these...miscreants’.⁴¹⁰ Yet Byron’s sure-footed sense of decorum rarely extended into poetical correctness and he frequently used his classical education as an excuse to breach the etiquette of polite verse:

This liberty is a poetic licence,
Which some irregularity may make
In the design, and as I have a high sense
Of Aristotle and the Rules, ’tis fit
To beg his pardon when I err a bit. (I, 956-60)

What I am suggesting when I speak of the duty or ‘consecrated task of sincerity’ is something altogether different from external propriety. The same Byron who makes his classical education felt in letters to his friends reflected privately on the poetic freedom from decorum: ‘read Burns t-day. What would he have been, if a patrician? He should

⁴⁰⁸ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber), 173.

⁴⁰⁹ Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment*, 83.

⁴¹⁰ *BLJ*, vii. 81.

have had more polish – less force – just as much verse, but no immortality...⁴¹¹ More important than his insistence on social codes and implied contracts with the reader was Byron's conviction that the poet must possess his own style or risk being possessed by it. His main point of disagreement with the 'Cockney' poetry of Keats and Hunt was that it lacked a necessary measure of self-control; that it did not trust in itself as art. Joyce's reflections on the difference between a classical and a romantic style provide a useful terminology for this distinction:

A classical style, he said, is the syllogism of art, the only legitimate process from one world to another. Classicism is not the manner of any fixed age or of any fixed country: it is a constant state of the artistic mind. It is a temper of security and satisfaction and patience. The romantic temper, so often and so grievously misinterpreted and not more by others than by its own, is an insecure, unsatisfied, impatient temper which sees no fit abode here for its ideals and chooses therefore to behold them under insensible figures. As a result of this choice it comes to disregard certain limitations. Its figures are blown to wild adventures, lacking the gravity of solid bodies, and the mind that has conceived them ends by disowning them. The classical temper on the other hand, ever mindful of limitations, chooses rather to bend upon these present things and so to work upon them and fashion them that the quick intelligence may go beyond them to their meaning which is still unuttered.⁴¹²

It is important to recognise that Joyce's Stephen is speaking about a fundamental distinction in the embodiment of ideals and not merely articulating the conflict of a general temperament. The image that he conjures for the romantic imagination is not that of a restless motion in the soul which aspires for something beyond its 'fitting medium of desire', but an eighteenth-century organic that mistrusts all forms of embodiment and so struggles for coherence. It sees 'no fit abode...for its ideals' and so

⁴¹¹ *BLJ*, iii. 207.

⁴¹² James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, quoted in Jacques Aubert, *The Aesthetics of James Joyce* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 78.

opts to 'behold them under insensible figures' which are then, in an apt symbol of their own fickleness, 'blown to wild adventures'.

In this sense, Byron's style, for all its perceived irregularity and waywardness, is closer to the classical variety. For one thing, it values the 'constant state of the artistic mind' as an appropriate means of organising the unevenness of reality. By this I don't mean that Byron endorsed the merits of a constant temper (his fascination in Napoleon's volatility alone is testament to this), but that he trusted in the power of an artistic temper devoted to its subject. Secondly, and perhaps more decisively, Byron's style is classical in the sense that it relies on the power of a 'quick intelligence' to recognise and go beyond limitation in the single breath of an insinuating line. It is a style that persists with the earnestness of a method which directs by indirection long after that method had been dismissed as creatively fraudulent. A 'true voluptuary' he argued in relation to the antithetical mind of Burns, 'will never abandon his mind to the grossness of reality. It is by exalting the earthly, the material, the *physique* of our pleasures, by veiling these ideas, by forgetting them altogether, or, at least, never naming them hardly to one's self, that we alone can prevent them from disgusting.'⁴¹³ Sensual gratification does not mean for Byron the complete and utter desertion of thought to the power of the senses, but a heightened appreciation for the hidden forms of sensuality. By placing emphasis on the corporeal or incarnate figuring of 'our pleasures' and the way in which these pleasures take shape obliquely (and therefore tactfully) in our thoughts and memories, he motions towards a larger poetic endeavour that recognises how such pleasures may be properly conceived and executed on the page.

⁴¹³ *BLJ*, iii. 239.

Byron's highest expectation for poetry – that it embody a 'nobility of thought and style' – has nothing to do with proper or improper materials, only proper and improper methods, especially if those methods are so ingrained that they are not noticed as such. As Claude Rawson attests, a 'command of low styles, and a taste for them, have often been paraded as badges of patrician freedom' but excessive utterance is saved from vulgarity when it 'is more preoccupied with itself than with its ostensible subject': which is to say, when its excess does not become the 'grossness of reality' in verse because it has never been named 'hardly to one's self.' In this way, Rawson's remarks on the Earl of Rochester are perhaps an even more fitting description of Byron: '[because his] ease spilled over into excess... It thus differed from the Popeian version which suggested containment and measure, but its way of being excessive included a sense of command.'⁴¹⁴

What he perceived as an underlying inability in the poets of the day to maintain this sense of command provoked Byron a great deal because he sensed that losing command of one's medium meant losing command of one's subject. McGann puts it well:

Byron's critique of Romanticism thus argued that a style of art (Romanticism) was being transformed into an article of (bad) faith. Coleridge's famous definition of "poetic faith" as the "willing suspension of disbelief" is much to the point here...Coleridge imagines highly self-conscious readers of poetry...who deliberately "suspend" their awareness that the poetic scene is a play of language. Problems will arise, however, if the "suspension of disbelief" should lose its hold on the artifice involved – if a reader or poet should slip into a delusion and take the poem for "truth".⁴¹⁵

⁴¹⁴ Claude Rawson, *Satire and Sentiment 1660 -1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 13.

⁴¹⁵ Jerome J. McGann, 'Byron and the Anonymous Lyric', in *Byron and Romanticism*, 96.

Byronic assumptions about the work of poetry and the authenticity of style do not take kindly to ‘articles of bad faith’ because Byron understood that poetry is at heart a conceit. This does not mean that it has to be a conceited or opportunistic conceit but a truthful invention is not an uninhibited overexposure to ‘truth’, it is a creative analogy; a revealing of likeness in things dissimilar. By extension, a bad conceit, whether shaped by the visionary flights of fancy or an immersion into the grossness of reality, is merely fantastical. Poetry intensifies experience by narrowing its focus but it never deals directly with the truth and even the most lyrical effusion, if it is going to make its mark, needs to direct by indirection. ‘The very shadow of true Truth’ announces the speaker in canto XI, ‘would shut / Up annals, revelations, poesy, / And prophecy (XI, 37). Perhaps more than any of his poetic statements, this acknowledged difference between ‘true Truth’ and poetic truth, more decisively separates Byron from his contemporaries.

In a fine demonstration of this principle in canto XV, Byron describes Juan as being ‘the more seductive, / Because he ne’er seem’d anxious to seduce’ before going on to chastise those whose ‘abuse’ of their ‘attractions marr’d the fair perspective’ in a deliberation that might stand as a fitting antidote to the unqualified candour of Keats’s delicate enigma that beauty is truth and truth is beauty:

They are wrong — that’s not the way to set about it;
 As, if they told the truth, could well be shown.
 But right or wrong, Don Juan was without it;
 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.
 The Devil hath not in all his quiver’s choice
 An arrow for the heart like a sweet voice.

By Nature soft, his whole address held off
 Suspicion: though not timid, his regard
 Was such as rather seem to keep aloof,

To shield himself, than put you on your guard:
 Perhaps 'twas 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. (XV, 97-112)

As Byron insists here, it is the sincere work of art (or an artful temperament), and not the imagination, that reconciles opposite and discordant qualities because it does not sever the aesthetic performance from its philosophical impetus by splitting the ideal from its figurative function. The facility for a deeply engaging detachment, for 'insinuating without insinuation' as Byron phrases it in the succeeding stanza, is not so much a courtly ideal as it is a poetic one. There is, of course, a deep irony running through these stanzas which forces the reader to question the confidence of its assumptions: the all too artificial reiteration of Juan's sincerity in 'his manner was his own alone'; the crafty alignment-by-contrast of Juan and the Devil; the conspicuous mention of something that is not worth mentioning...etc., but that is specifically its point. If Cronin suggests that 'Cockneyisms are best defined...by the perplexities, the awkward embarrassment, that they provoke in the reader,'⁴¹⁶ then Byron's protagonist, 'rather seemed to keep aloof...than put you on your guard.' It goes without saying that *Don Juan* disconcerted its readers – this has been the subject of endless debate and analysis since it was first published – but they were not perplexed by the awkward embarrassment of a suspiciously stylized simplicity (of Punch in pure of heart), they were dismayed by the poet's seeming lack of concern or consternation over his own very evocative material. This is because Byron's satiric intention in *Don Juan* (if we may call it that) is not to see the human form held up to a mirror and stripped of its pretension, but rather to see pretension itself as a necessary agent of humanity. A

⁴¹⁶ *The Politics of Romantic Poetry*, 185.

substantial part of Byron's subject was the high society that he knew through participation – 'those ranks of society whose high external accomplishments cover and cloke internal and secret vices' – but his rendering of that society in verse was, in principle and intention, as natural as any Romantic lyric because he sought to 'paint the natural effects of such characters...'⁴¹⁷ The convictions that the stanzas imply by lyrical indulgence are sprung from the same depth of perception inferred by their logical paradoxes, and – more significantly – from the unwavering commitment to a full startlingly expressiveness of the difficult.

This leads to a fundamental problem in defining the poem according to genre; a problem long-established by scholars and comprehensively treated by Nicholas Halmi in his examination of the manner in which Byron flouts 'the same epic conventions to which he professed his adherence.'⁴¹⁸ This is why it might be fruitful to look more closely at the specific formal complexities of Byron's strangely involved detachment in *Don Juan*. Lockhart's famous defence of the poem responds to an accusation in the *British Review* that it 'offers no proper subject for criticism,'⁴¹⁹ by proposing that this is because it is 'the most original in point of *conception*...and in point of *tone*'.⁴²⁰ In other words, we cannot separate the general thought (model/genre) from the tenor (tone) of its formal development on the page, just as we cannot separate Adeline's intention from her well executed action. A *Blackwood's* review strikes upon the essence of the problem for the critic when it concedes *Don Juan's* inability to submit to simple exegesis: 'Had

⁴¹⁷ M.K Joseph describes this method well: "The "distancing" effect created by the major strategy of the narration, and also by the prevailing tactics of multiple simile, *objet trouvé*, verbal *collage*, linguistic impurity, and so on, enables the narrator to preserve a moral normality while at the same time expressing his mocking and ironic despair of a world that he sees as morally abnormal." M.K. Joseph, *Byron: The Poet* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964), 209.

⁴¹⁸ See Nicholas Halmi, 'The Very Model of a Modern Epic Poem' in *European Romantic Review*, vol.21, no.5 (October 2010), 589-600.

⁴¹⁹ RR, B. i. 485.

⁴²⁰ RR, B. i. 210.

the wickedness been less inextricably mingled with the beauty and grace, and the strength of a most inimitable and incomprehensible muse, our task would have been easy.⁴²¹ To put it in formal rather than moral terms, the amalgamation of its lyrical and rhetorical input – its familiar and unfamiliar impulses – is bound to such an ‘inextricable’ degree that it permits neither easy explanation nor deconstruction.

This takes us back to Shelley’s positive validation of Byron’s growing indifference as the necessary catalyst for a man of his poetic power to ‘speak like one belonging to a higher world’. In fact, a return to Shelley is apt because it was he who advocated the originality of *Don Juan* with greatest vigour by calling it ‘a poem totally of its own species’ and remarking on ‘the grace of the composition no less than the free & grand vigour of [its] conception’.⁴²² The general feeling that Byron attained the easy-yet-precise ‘familiar style’ put forward by Hazlitt – but also that he had created something uncategorizably sublime – is married in Shelley’s ringing celebration of the poem: ‘With what flashes of divine beauty have you not illuminated the familiarity of your subject’.⁴²³ Lucy Newlyn addresses the ‘defamiliarizing effect of sublimity’ in *Paradise Lost* by demonstrating how the ‘sublimity and loftiness of Milton’s conceptions were seen as removing him from human concerns...“Apart, and on a sacred hill retir’d / Beyond all mortal inspiration fir’d”, he became a model of the abstracted imagination which works at a distance from its kind.’⁴²⁴ The same could not be said for Byron who achieved a probing and dynamic detachment through effortless engagement which has yet to be (possibly because it cannot it be) fully grasped by readers of *Don Juan*.

⁴²¹ RR, B. i. 143.

⁴²² LPBS, ii. 357.

⁴²³ LPBS, ii. 198

⁴²⁴ Lucy Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, 56-7.

It was on this point that early readers could not decide if the poem was too worldly or unworldly, but it is on this same point that it may be the only long poem in the great age Romantic of poetry to meet Coleridge's benchmark for the 'Power of the Imagination' to produce 'the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound.'⁴²⁵ Perhaps the highest compliment for the sense of novelty which the poem evokes in things familiar is that it was of such an unusual order that it incited a moment of doubt in the man most acquainted with its form. But in keeping with his conviction that the sincerity of poetry is best measured by the poet's commitment to his style and subject, Byron responds with fervid self-assurance: 'I have read over the poem carefully, and I tell you, *it is poetry*. Your little envious knot of parson-poets may say what they please: time will show that I am not in this instance mistaken.'⁴²⁶

If the unique style of *Don Juan* is so demonstrably *of* and yet *not of* its time that it transcends generic classification, then while we may accept Trilling's claim that we are now forced speak of sincerity with either discomfort or irony – and that Byron's poem participated in the creation of that discomfort – we must also accept that neither of the two major classifications of literary irony can fully account for Byron's poetic sincerity. As Hazlitt's and Thelwall's comments attest, the personality of the poet is too deeply implicated in the texture of the poem for it to be an example of eighteenth-century irony; the guarded playfulness of the 'Age of Prose and Reason', but as Jerome McGann has gone to great effort to demonstrate, neither does it conform to the general chaotic unrest and fluidity of a 'Romantic irony' which embraces life (and its re-

⁴²⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia literaria*, ed. James Engel and Walter Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), ii. 20.

⁴²⁶ *BLJ*, viii. 192.

enactment in art) as a state of perpetual indeterminacy. It is precisely for this reason that we should not sunder the poem's disposition from its technique. This has been done to damaging effect by a number of critics' intent on bending *Don Juan* to fit the latter conception of irony. Thus Alvin B. Kernan speaks of the poem as a 'sprawling, wandering tale'⁴²⁷ while Erik Gray, in the only dedicated attention to Byron's indifference that I am aware of, combines the worst aspects of New Historicism with the worse aspects of Deconstructive methodologies to argue that the 'model for both Juan's and Byron's indifference...is tourism, and specifically two of tourism's major attributes: perpetual motion and expatriation.'⁴²⁸ The tourist's paradigmatic movement of momentary pause for superficial contemplation followed by hasty commencement may seem a fitting simile for the poem's rapid episodic motions, but it does not do justice to the intensity of its engagements, and the great range of sympathy that it displays in those engagements. Byron may claim to 'rattle on exactly as I'd talk / With any body in a ride or walk (XV, 151-2) and that his 'desultory rhyme' is only good for its 'conversational quality, /Which may round off an hour upon a time' (XV, 154-6) but this has more to do with his easy manner, his 'never straining hard to versify,' than his penchant for superficial transactions. As McGann so astutely observes, 'if the basic style of *Don Juan* is chatty and conversational...the "tone"...has always been recognized to be extremely various.'⁴²⁹

In a similar misreading of tone, or rather negation of tone for the sake of theoretical justification, Anne K. Mellor performs the most violent cleaving of form and temperament in her reading of *Don Juan* through the philosophical lens of romantic

⁴²⁷ Alvin B. Kernan, 'Don Juan: The Perspective of Satire' in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970), 344.

⁴²⁸ Erik Gray, *The Poetry of Indifference: from the Romantics to the 'Rubaiyat'* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 49.

⁴²⁹ McGann, *Don Juan in Context*, 79.

irony. Mellor focuses on its unfamiliar effects by reflecting on the sudden and often unexpected shifts in direction. Through this she emphasises the irregularity of the poetic narrative which, in her estimate, is so unpredictable as to be intrinsically volatile: ‘The world of *Don Juan* is founded on abundant chaos, everything moves, changes its shape, becomes something different. Time never stands still but arbitrarily shifts about.’⁴³⁰ While Mellor compellingly demonstrates the way in which Byron debilitates any attempt at logical assessment by inscribing the poem with a ‘pervasive restlessness’ which repeatedly destabilizes the rigidity of teleological analysis, her argument often pushes too far in the opposite direction by insisting upon its instability. The ‘open-ended, self-expanding awareness’ on which Mellor centres her enquiry is everywhere evident in *Don Juan*, but to identify a resistance to determining forces is not necessarily to conclude that all is boundless without limit or end. Much of the poetic power of *Don Juan* resides in its seemingly inexhaustible suggestiveness – in an indispensable process of becoming – but the verse is by no means locked in a circuitous and self-defeating orbit without any assignable quality of being. It certainly abounds with ‘antithetical impulses’ but, as G.M Ridenour so cogently demonstrates, the poem is ‘much more than the rehearsal of a series of paradoxes; it is a developing dramatic action in which, of course, the paradoxes participate’.⁴³¹

The recurring configurations of advance and retreat within the *ottava rima* stanza are part of a larger movement in which the reciprocal interplay of opposing inclinations serve to coax passions out of formlessness and to shape them into experience. The verse certainly embodies a vital conflict of presence and absence, but as Anne Barton shrewdly observes, ‘lacking Spenserian finality, [it] could extend itself naturally into the

⁴³⁰ Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980), 42.

⁴³¹ Ridenour, *The Style of Don Juan*, xi.

next stanza,⁴³² allowing for stanzaic affinity and progression. The play between tempo and diction within its individual units can be employed to create an atmosphere of lyrical affection even as the final couplet remains cerebrally awake to the physical realities of that tenderness. In the same way, the movement between stanzas can serve to break its intimate connections of thought and feeling or persist with them beyond due regard for closure. ‘And just as one may feel that a tension between push and resistance is one of the most exciting qualities of Byron’s handling of rhythm,’ suggests Ridenour in relation to *Don Juan*, ‘much of the peculiar effect of the poem as a whole is a function of the interaction of forces pushing us onward and forces compelling us to linger.’⁴³³ The movement of the poem is itself an incarnation of its distinguishing aesthetic character: the union of moral purpose with imaginative vigour and a deep investment in the problem of knowledge even if it attempts to secrete that investment by indirection. If Byron’s rhetoric of ‘passionate attachment’ involves a stance of ironic detachment and indifference to that passion, then it is never more revealed than in the passionate detachments of Juan and his first two mistresses whose desperate attempts to conceal their attraction only work to expose their desire in greater ways. The demonstration of this principle through close reading forms the final portion of this chapter.

‘Shown more in the eyelids than the eyes’

The title of this chapter, ‘Postures and Posturing in *Don Juan*’ has, I hope, been suggested thus far in all of my attempted explications of Byron’s complex authorial

⁴³² Anne Barton, *Byron: Don Juan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 16.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 142.

positioning through method. However, the full implication of such positioning cannot be explicated in argument because, not only does it work through insinuations rather than revelations, but it ‘insinuates without insinuation,’ or to use another phrase from the text, its revelations are ‘half withheld and then half granted’. It is only in reading the poem and experiencing the poet’s heightened sensitivity to the shaping of feeling through form – to an unconscious posturing through its postures – that we become involved in the subtleties of its artless technique.

The first interactions between Juan and Julia are a fine example of irony in action and the poet employing the perfect words or figurations to capture their wordless gestures. They are marked by a series of carefully constructed poetic inversions between the inward workings of the individual and their outward figurations of desire:

Whate’er the cause might be, they had become
 Changed; for the dame grew distant, the youth shy,
 Their looks cast down, their greetings almost dumb,
 And much embarrassment in either eye; (I, 553-6)

Caught in the rapture of inexperienced passion, their inner restlessness is revealed in the manifestation of a coveting that alters outward appearances, for ‘they had become / Changed’. However, ‘become changed’ is itself an awkward and ambiguous tautology, suggesting a development that has already come to be or evolved into being without accounting for the actual process of that transformation. It is not a repetition that necessarily enforces the move from one state to another, but rather serves to undermine the stability of such linear progression. The hard line ending ‘become’ insinuates a permanent, inexorable condition, yet the carrying over of ‘become’ into

‘changed’ at the start of the next line unsettles any expectation of stagnation by impressing an awareness upon the reader of a shift in disposition. The terms are interdependent but they also stand apart, for if one *is* changed, then one can *be* changed, and contained in the very tenor of a past development is the latent, ever-lurking possibility of vacillation. While the diction almost demands the acceptance of a closed or altered state, the syntax disavows our faith in such uncomplicated conversions. Accordingly, the proceeding lines and stanzas have Juan and Donna Julia perpetually figured and reconfigured. The narrative advances because Byron’s characters are seldom passive or static and never self-sufficient nor irrevocably transformed.

Vain and desperate attempts to conceal their attraction have the two young lovers locked in double bondage: by endeavouring to maintain distance – in forcefully extending the space between them – they unavoidably increase their desire for each other. This strained prohibition of direct contact is both signalled and yet also undermined by two ostensibly weak motions in ‘looks cast down’ and ‘greetings almost dumb’ because there is a power in these nearly helpless acts of evasion; a potency in their very fragility. The motion of casting down, of directing one’s eyes away from the object of fascination, is also to draw interest to one’s own being with a gaze bent inward upon the self. In the same way, by addressing each other in a manner that is almost voiceless but not wholly so, Juan and Julia generate an uncertainty which only serves to heighten their feelings of self-consciousness. These mutual utterances have the impression of not being uttered at all and are so restrained as to be almost unintelligible, but in trying to withdraw rather than assert – in ‘greetings *almost* dumb’ – they are more powerfully expressed than any outright declaration which is too palpable and determined to evoke desire. Here Byron shows that to cast away from someone is

also to cast oneself into something, and such self-reflexive acts motion to a language that fashions as it attempts to constrain. This entangled interplay is captured in the phrase ‘much embarrassment in either eye’; a self-consciously cumbersome alliteration that conflates the singular and plural and presses home a troubled connection which creates as it perceives. To change is also to exchange, and exchanges for Byron are seldom direct substitutes.

In the subsequent stanza Byron renders the first physical contact between Juan and Julia in an intensely tangible intangibility:

Yet Julia’s very coldness still was kind,
 And tremulously gentle her small hand
 Withdrew itself from his, but left behind
 A little pressure, thrilling, and so bland
 And slight, so very slight, that to the mind
 ‘Twas but a doubt; but ne’er magician’s wand
 Wrought change with all Armida’s fairy art
 Like what this light touch left on Juan’s heart. (I, 561-8)

Although it does not close with a full-stop, the first line seems to be a general statement about Julia’s nature rather than a judgment derived from her beau. By including the crucial qualifying adjective ‘very’ and the affirming past tense verb ‘was’, Byron appears to assert the antithetical nature of Julia’s attempted aloofness rather than articulate it as a mere perceived misreading on the part of Juan. But if it is an assertion of a general condition, it is proceeds by delicate enactment, for the highly particularized and transient nature of the succeeding lines (with their continuous unsettling enjambment), point rather unnervingly to the temporality of the experience. This slyly implicates the reader in the narrative by suggesting a meaning that lies both within and beyond the immediacy of the verse.

The quivering, vibratory motion of Julia's rescinding hand is embodied in the irregular, but flowing, rhythm of the first five and a half lines of the stanza. Once again, through the enjambment of 'left behind' and 'A little pressure', the poet implies a connection through disconnection, and the staggered layering of these lines into a series of punctuated halts and advances that expand and contract before our eyes mimics an important oscillation between enactment and reception. The removal of the hand is in no way a single activity and the shortened interval of the phrases thereafter indicate an intensification in the dying resonances of contact. The touch is so diminutive that it scarcely constitutes anything at all and cannot be comprehended in thought because 'to the mind 'twas but a doubt'. Yet the teasing obliqueness of the act produces a feeling of uncertainty in Juan, a lack of understanding or conviction that paradoxically provokes and compels a sense of change within. Julia withdraws her hand so not to have her attraction to Juan exist as a visible entity. But in trying not to take shape, it is materialized more powerfully than it might have been in a candid action because it creates a troubled yearning in him that is deeply visceral without being incarnate.

The outward signs of Donna Julia's ungovernable inner passion penetrate the ensuing exchanges between the two:

And if she met him, though she smiled no more,
 She look'd a sadness sweeter than her smile,
 As if her heart had deeper thoughts in store
 She must not own, but cherish'd more the while,
 For that compression in its burning core;
 Even innocence itself has many a wile,
 And will not dare to trust itself with truth,
 And love is taught hypocrisy from youth.

But passion most dissembles yet betrays
 Even by its darkness; as the blackest sky
 Foretells the heaviest tempest, it displays
 Its workings through the vainly guarded eye,
 And in whatever aspect it arrays

Itself, 'tis still the same hypocrisy;
 Coldness or anger, even disdain or hate
 Are masks it often wears, and still too late.

Then there were sighs, the deeper for suppression,
 And stolen glances, sweeter for the theft,
 And burning blushes, though for no transgression,
 Tremblings when met, and restlessness when left.
 All these are little preludes to possession,
 Of which young Passion cannot be bereft,
 And merely tend to show how greatly Love is
 Embarrass'd at first starting with a novice. (I, 569-592)

These stanzas pivot on an underlying paradox: that of disclosure through attempted disguise, of a passion 'that most dissembles yet betrays'. Donna Julia's failed endeavours to suppress an inward gravitation toward Juan are signalled by the irrepressible visible configurations of her desire. A nexus of self-conscious gestures exhibit themselves through unwanted mediums or 'aspects' of exposure and in doing so, blur the real and the figurative. The 'hypocrisy' or *hypokrisis* (role-play) of passion, like that of poetry is, in Byron's terms, really no hypocrisy at all because the embodiment of contradiction is something that cannot be avoided: 'being' is *always* at the point of being interpreted, and even 'innocence has many a wile'. The unwelcoming finality of the stanza-ending phrase, 'and still too late' is a temporal disruption which seems to concurrently anticipate and enact the futility of Julia's self-denial by gesturing towards the inevitability of her infidelity. In this instance, to 'betray' is both to reveal and deceive in the same act. Passion 'itself' is personified because it seems to take on a life of its own, a life independent of and more powerful than its host. However, the distinction between subject and object is troubled because passion reveals its inner movements *through* the 'vainly guarded eye' or 'I'. Julia mistakenly believes that she can

dissolve outward appearance from inward reality but her constructions are inbred and only serve to enforce her self-dupery.

Feigned passivity becomes itself a dynamic act because it keeps prompting effects greater than its impulses. In this sense, restriction may even enlarge experience because 'sighs' are thrust 'deeper' through suppression, and the triumph of short-lived, surreptitious 'glances' are made 'sweeter' by their forbiddance. The sequence of adjectival and adverbial suffixing 'er' generate an impression of expanding as they progress and have the sense of passing some or other threshold. In this way desire emerges *through* rather than *in spite of* Julia's synthetic attempts to confine her lust within. The very sequence of rhymes in stanza 72 – 'more', 'store', 'core' – achieve the compression of feeling moving inward to a nucleus and intensifying as it is pushed deeper and deeper within. The line, 'As if her heart had deeper thoughts in store' witnesses to a cognitive collapse moving thought downward to the breast and beyond the perimeters of reason or control. The stanza is a gathering of its own difficulties and while *Don Juan* abounds in unstable representations of buried emotion, there is no such thing as a truly false embodiment in Byron's verse, for even deception is self-referential. It is constitutive *in*, as well as being reflective *of*, its posturing because, as Byron so ably demonstrates and Terry Eagleton so cogently postulates, 'language inscribes its otherness within its interiority.'⁴³⁴ Even consciously artificial signs bear meaning within and beyond their appearance and in doing so become real signs embodying an essentially unstable, but familiar, assimilation of form and content. From this point of view, the famous lines in *Childe Harold* III, 'Tis to create, and in creating live / A being more intense, that we endow / With form our fancy, gaining as we give / The life we image' are far less radical than they are often made to mean. They testify to Byron's

⁴³⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 7.

constant attention to the forming of images rather than any desire to receive images fully-formed, but they are not so directly invested in their own creative processes as they appear because, as so much of Byron's verse demonstrates, to live within the shifting world of desire and circumstance is to live poetically; it is to figure forth in 'indirect and unsuspecting methods.' The repeated successions of engagement and withdrawal which mark Julia's interactions with Juan carry out the beating urges that ebb and flow within them: 'Tremblings when met and restlessness when left'. The internal accents 'Trem/met' 'less/left', produce a modulated interplay of assonance and dissonance, rhythmically coming together and moving apart in an irregular but persistent motion that warrants constant pursuit in its fleeing.

And while they both continue to employ strategies of resistance, they cannot conquer the passions within:

Poor Julia's heart was in an awkward state;
 She felt it going, and resolved to make
 The noblest efforts for herself and mate,
 For honour's, pride's, religion's, virtue's sake; (I, 593-6)

Faced with the impossibility of concealing her desire, Donna Julia confronts her own agitated predicament: the unwanted array of her inner disarray. This discernible loss of composure, the awareness of losing control of a feeling which she had no command in the first place, is countered by a renewed determination to 'compose' herself: to gain mastery over the self by 'making effort'. But in Byronic terms her efforts are misguided because she looks to deflect her desire onto a set of orthodox, but essentially worthless codes. By placing these traditionally authoritative terms in a rapid throw-away line, Byron gives little chance to their possibility of productive containment: they remain ill-defined, abstract, and hollow. In the early signs of a pattern which is repeated

throughout *Don Juan*, Julia's resolve to renounce her sexual appetite is bound to collapse because it has no natural outlet for effective figuration: it is too fixed, too determined, and therefore, in Byronic terms, too inelastic to take proper shape. Julia resolves to 'Love then, but love within its proper limits' (461), to have her passion 'well fenced / In mail of proof' (649-50), but it soon bursts through in uncontainable forms,

And Julia's voice was lost, except in sighs,
 Until too late for useful conversation;
 The tears were gushing from her gentle eyes,
 I wish indeed they had not had occasion,
 But who, alas! can love and then be wise?
 Not that remorse did not oppose temptation,
 A little still she strove, and much repented,
 And whispering 'I will ne'er consent' – consented. (I, 929-36)

A series of double negatives ('had not had', 'not that...did not') are employed to imply yet another direction by misdirection. The opportunity for constructive discourse has passed, and pent-up yearning surges forth in an overflow that realises its very acceptance in its whispered defiance.

To say that their affair is inevitable is not to say that Don Juan and Donna Julia are at the mercy of external forces beyond their command because their desire is born(e) from within. This is never more potently indicated than in the very moments before consummation:

There is a dangerous silence in that hour,
 A stillness, which leaves room for the full soul
 To open all itself, without the power
 Of calling wholly back its self-control; (I, 905-8)

At the first situation in which all social restraints are lifted, restless motion gives way to a stillness that allows for the teeming promise of their desire to emerge outside the precincts of a hitherto harnessing secrecy and it cannot help but body forth the fullness

of its inner passions. Byron's syntax in this stanza is really quite exquisite: the 'full soul' hasn't the 'power /Of calling back its self-control', because however much we may acknowledge that the two conflicting compulsions have been brought together by rhyme, the power resides in that very 'self-control' which has moved on. However much we might argue that the violent rupture of their separation is catalysed by an external force in Don Alfonso, it seems to have been set in motion by the very lovers themselves who continue in surreptitious retreat from the world but not each other and, in doing so, fail to recall the forbidden tension that drove them together in the first place. Julia disregards the vitality of a desire that is 'cherished' within the 'compression' of its 'burning core': an object that 'she must not own' if she wants it to endure.

The Haidee stanzas demonstrate the most dynamic example in *Don Juan* of the interplay between distance and desire. After the supposed indecency of the shipwreck passages we proceed to the highest levels of intimacy that the poem will reach in the relationship between Juan and Haidee. The heightened sense of the nature-in-art and art-in-nature dynamic that I am trying to represent was noted by Murray in a letter to Byron, in which he insists that 'nothing in all poetry is finer than your description of the two females in canto II – it is nature speaking in the most exquisite poetry'.⁴³⁵ Importantly, the rhythmic manner of Juan's arrival prefigures the mode of this relationship by inaugurating an important cyclical pattern of loss and recovery. The 'changeable' or erratic motion of the waves has Juan tossed back and forth between land and sea, between order and disorder, as he struggles toward that which is in sight but agonizingly out of reach. In this fluid, provisional world – between the seaward

⁴³⁵ John Murray, *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 273.

limit of the land and the landward limit of the sea – Byron portrays Juan as both acting towards and being acted upon:

Nor yet had he arrived but for the oar,
 Which, providentially for him, was wash'd
 Just as his feeble arms could strike no more,
 And the hard wave o'erwhelm'd him as 'twas dashed
 Within his grasp; he clung to it, and sore
 The waters beat while he thereto was lash'd;
 At last, with swimmingly, wading, scrambling, he
 Roll'd on the beach, half senseless, from the sea. (II, 849-856)

The stanza turns restlessly, alternating line by line between accident and purposeful action. It composes the very struggle between agency and the shifting world of circumstance that is the central concern of the poem at large. The fortune of being powerlessly 'lash'd' to the oar by a 'hard wave' is off-set by the almost primitive survivalism of 'swimming, wading, scrambling' in a troubled fusion of external force and internal will. Juan emerges, 'half senseless, from the sea', which suggests a kind of birthing from the womb, only to be drawn back toward death, 'There, breathless, with his digging nails he clung / Fast to the sand, lest the returning wave / ...Should suck him back to her insatiable grave' (857-9). Byron's repeated insistence upon a creative force that figures, but also has the destructive and absorbing energy to engulf, conditions the dual treatment of a passion and a verse form that both reaches out to and closes in upon the self.

When Haidee discovers Juan, he is suspended between states: between life and death; sleep and consciousness:

How long in his damp trance young Juan lay
 He knew not, for earth was gone for him,
 And Time had nothing more of night nor day
 For his congealing blood, and senses dim;

And how this heavy faintness pass'd away
 He knew not, till each painful pulse and limb
 And tingling vein seem'd throbbing back to life,
 For Death, though vanquish'd, still retired with strife.
 (II, 881-88)

The first five and a half lines of the stanza serve to emphasise the liminality of Juan's condition. The curious phrase 'damp trance' couples the physical with the mental and shows him still caught between sea and land: neither dry nor fully soaked, he lies in a half-conscious state of abstraction. The effect of the falling rhyme sequence 'lay', 'day', 'away', implies that he is dissolving or decomposing while the alternating rhymes 'him', 'dim', 'limb' suggest a slow gathering or materializing of form. This is captured in the seemingly oxymoronic, 'heavy faintness'. But if it is a contradiction it is a powerfully accurate one, for it encapsulates the combined experience of weight and lightness in a barely perceptible, yet overpowering exhaustion. Juan's existence seems to hang in the balance at the very centre of the stanza as his fate appears to hinge upon the phrase 'congealing blood', which forecasts the transition from a shapeless semi-solid substance into a more concrete, tangible form. Thereafter, the rising repetition of 'and' in 'each painful pulse and limb / And tingling vein' creates an inner rhythm which pulsates to outward formation. Crucially, as we will shortly see, it is an encounter that brings Haidee back to life, and the reluctant departure of defeated 'Death' pre-empts her demise in the unbearable anxiety of separation.

The suspended nature of Juan's existence is mirrored by the lingering presence of Haidee who is felt hovering above:

'Twas bending close o'er his, and the small mouth
 Seem'd almost prying into his for breath;
 And chafing him, the soft warm hand of youth

Recall'd his answering spirits back from death;
 And, bathing his chill temples, tried to soothe
 Each pulse to animation, till beneath
 Its gentle touch and trembling care, a sigh
 To these kind efforts made a low reply.

(II, 897-904)

The subtle elaborations of their interaction in this stanza are generated and maintained by a coexisting distinction which manages to hold the two subjects together in sameness and difference. Juan's gradual return to life is inverted by Haidee's extreme curiosity for the unknown which has her delving almost intrusively into his lips for air. A second, and perhaps more significant duality resides in the two-fold meaning of 'chafing' which expresses Haidee's capacity to rouse Juan back to consciousness by restoring warmth and sensation in him at the same time that it anticipates their imminent wearing away from too much contact. This establishes something akin to an imperceptible dialogue in the reciprocal or hypnotic reflexes back and forth between the two. It is, once again, the expression of a probing union not yet fully embodied nor concretely expressed. As in the Julia episode, careful attention is given to their posture:

then o'er him still as death
 Bent, with hush'd lips, that drank his scarce-drawn breath.

(II, 1143-44)

It would be difficult to conceive of an equivalent line in poetry that achieves such penetrating levels of intimacy and communion without actual contact. It is a masterpiece of suggestiveness because the intensity of the moment rests in the consummate secrecy of an act which gains its stolen sensual pleasure by hovering on the brink of something unattained. Haidee inclines in reaper like posture over Juan, herself momentarily dead in the silent suppression of respiration, taking in that which

hardly exists. Arrested motion and looming disposition reside together in temporal and spatial displacement, creating a haunting presence through absence. The image is both alluring and foreboding, structurally reflecting the strange satisfaction of an intangible involvement which yearns without seizing:

It was such pleasure to behold him, such
 Enlargement of existence to partake
 Nature with him, to thrill beneath his touch,
 To watch him slumbering, and to see him wake:
 To live with him forever were too much;
 But then the thought of parting made her quake:
 He was her own, her ocean-treasure, cast
 Like a rich wreck – her first love, and her last.

(II, 1377-1385)

The ecstasy of beholding from a close remove echoes Julia's 'stolen glances', and the curious preposition in 'thrill beneath his touch' captures the very essence of Byron's attention to the way in which meaning is generated by spatial arrangement. In the same way we expect Haidee to partake *in* and not 'with' Juan, our instinct is to perceive her thrilling *at* Juan's touch rather than 'beneath' it. Christopher Ricks has paid tribute to the importance of prepositions for Wordsworth as an 'essential medium' for delineating unity and 'permanence,'⁴³⁶ but in *Don Juan*, Byron repeatedly uses prepositions to indicate the immutability of transience and difference. In this instance the effect of these manipulations of diction is to impute the reader into the same spatial recognition of elements held together without being immediately connected.

To recognize the paradox of a magnetism that draws one near but never against, is also to admit to an impenetrable division within the self that must choose between a demystifying preservation of the object through concrete union, or risk the ultimate

⁴³⁶ Christopher Ricks, 'William Wordsworth 2: "A Sinking Inward into Ourselves from Thought to Thought"' in *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 118.

loss of desire by immeasurable distance. It is the paradox at the heart of Byron's poetry, and it is one that is already somewhat resolved by the nature of the *ottavo rima* which is famously engaging but which denies perpetual oscillation by its springy forward movement. Haidee's desire to linger in contrast to the form – in everlasting possession of 'her own, her ocean-treasure' – is essentially a commitment to internal collapse. The stanza-ending declaration of a love that is 'first...and...last', signals Haidee's eternal attachment to Juan but it is a totality which also confirms its own finiteness because, as their intimacy reaches its peak in the point of contact, it also summons its inevitable death in consummation. While Juan and Haidee are also eventually disjoined by an external force in Lambro, the nature and consequences of their separation suggest an impending internal collapse which had been fashioned by the very nature of their union:

Their intense souls, into each other pour'd,
 If souls could die, had perish'd in that passion, –
 But by degrees their sense were restored,
 Again to be o'ercome, again to dash on;
 And beating 'gainst *his* bosom, Haidee's heart
 Felt as if never more to beat apart. (II, 1523-1528.)

The repetition of 'again' shows the two young lovers literally absorbed in a self-defeating cycle, vacillating backward and forward between self and other or life and death. It performs the dilemma of a desire that urges toward possession but recoils at the thought of closing the gap that preserves such urges. However, this indecision moves towards resolution in the final couplet as the opposition of 'beating 'gainst' seems to favour amalgamation in 'never more to beat apart' in a concluding expression which draws together independent parts. In this we witness Haidee becoming

dependent on Juan as a life-giving source and forfeiting her identity in a dangerous fusion: an ‘exquisite fitting’ of the kind that Byron objected to.

The greater part of Canto III is an attack on the uniformity of homely idealisms: the ‘pretty pair...living in their insular abode’ (III, 648). By dissolving the tension between them, Juan and Haidee have become mere two-dimensional silhouettes and no longer hold the intense figurative power they had before. The deep craving appetite of desire has been, ‘Sharpened from its high celestial flavour / Down to a very homely household savour’ (III, 39-40). In Byron’s world of creation through opposition, it is ‘domestic doings’ and not hate which forms ‘true love’s antithesis’ because it invites the dissolution of that opposition rather than the persistence of difference. Byron’s insistence on this productive disparity extends to Milton and Dante, the sublime poets who ‘sung of heaven and hell’ (III, 75); who were ‘hapless in their nuptials, for some bar / Of fault or temper ruined the connexion’ (III, 76-7). By removing the critical distance between herself and Juan, Haidee renounces the urgency that drew them together in the first place and in doing so signals the termination of her own spirit: for ‘tis “so nominated in the bond” / That both are tied till one shall have expired’ (III, 53-4). Through an over-zealous engagement with each other, they detach themselves from the world at large:

Mix’d in each other’s arms, and heart in heart,
 Why did they not then die? – they had lived too long
 Should an hour come to bid them breathe apart;
 Years could but bring them cruel things or wrong,
 The world was not for them, nor the world’s art
 For beings passionate as Sappho’s song;
 Love was born *with* them, *in* them, so intense,
 It was their very spirit – not a sense. (IV, 209-216)

They have entered the world of abstraction by believing in a conception of life and art which has no material form, but in Byronic terms this neither the world of life nor art. In a macro-enactment of its ebbing and flowing existence Juan retreats, as he arrived, back out to sea, but in this instance he is devoid of any strength to exert his will: ‘Wounded and chained, so that he cannot move, / And all because a lady fell in love’ (IV, 407-8). It is fitting that Lambro should send this into action because Haidee’s ‘piratical papa’ understands the conditions of ‘nautical existence’:

He was a man who had seen many changes
 And had always changed as true as any needle;
 His polar star being one which rather ranges,
 And not the fix’d. (III, 633-36)

In an early review, Croker describes how the very ‘loose’ structure of the *ottavo rima* allows for persisting variances: ‘Lord Byron’s fertility of thought and facility of expression; and the Protean style of *Don Juan* instead of checking (as the fetters of rhythm generally do) his natural activity, not only gives him wider limits to range in, but even generates a more roving disposition.’⁴³⁷ This is certainly true, but as I have tried to show throughout this thesis, that ‘roving disposition’ is often predicated upon an underlying sense of composure which does not bind. Haidee binds herself to Juan in order to nullify the possibility of loss, but in substituting an unfamiliar pleasure for a tranquil and complacent union, she prohibits all forms of creative possibility and in doing so permits her own cruel reversal of intention. The distance between objects becomes limitless and unfathomable, and Haidee confronts the prospect of utter vacancy:

till the change that cast

⁴³⁷CH, 192.

Her sweet face into shadow, dull and slow,
 Glazed o'er her eyes – the beautiful, the black –
 Oh to possess such lustre – and then lack! (IV, 549-552)

If the initial desire between Haidee and Juan was grounded in a delicate and suggestive intimacy, it here withers in sensory deficiency without ‘a groan or sigh or glance’ because its subjects cannot conceive of a connection that is neither immeasurably fixed nor immeasurably fluid. It was for this reason that Byron fundamentally rejected blank verse, and labelled sonnets ‘the most puling, petrifying, stupidly platonic compositions’:⁴³⁸ because neither of them presented him with enough scope for his bounding *pas de quatre* of sense and feeling.

⁴³⁸ *BLJ*, iii. 240.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Blair, Hugh. 'On Lyric Poetry' in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, vol. 3 (London: printed for A. Strahan, T. Cadell, and W. Creech, 1787.)
- Blessington, Marguerite Countess of. *Lady Blessington's Conversations with Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969.)
- Byron, George Gordon. *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchland, 13 vols. (London: John Murray, 1973-94.)
- Byron, George Gordon. *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980-94.)
- Byron, George Gordon. *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991.)
- Byron, George Gordon. *'Don Juan': A Variorum Edition*, ed. T.J. Steffan and W.W. Pratt, 4 vols. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1957.)
- Castiglione, Baldassarre. *The Book of the Courtier*, translated by Sir Thomas Hoby (ed.) (London: Dent, 1948.)
- Claire Clairmont, *The Clairmont Correspondence*, ed. Marion Kingston Stocking (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.)
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Selected Poems*, ed. Richard Holmes (London: Penguin, 2000.)
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engel and Walter Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983.)
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection*, ed. Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.)
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71.)
- De Quincey, Thomas. *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*, ed. David Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970; repr. 1985.)
- De Quincey, Thomas. *The Diary of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Horace A. Eaton, 2 vols. (London: Noel Douglas, 1927.)
- De Quincey, Thomas. 'The Poetry of Pope' in *Romantic Critical Essays*, ed. David Bromwich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 172-183.)

- Dryden, John. *The Works of John Dryden: Prose 1668 -1691*, ed. S.H. Monk and A.E. Wallace Mauer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.)
- Dennis, John. *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939-43.)
- Eliot, T.S. 'Reflections on Vers Libre', *New Statesman*, March 3, 1917, reprinted in *To Criticize the Critic* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965.)
- Hazlitt, William. *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London, Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930-34.)
- Hazlitt, William. *The Plain Speaker: The Key Essays*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.)
- Hazlitt, William. *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu, vol. VI (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998.)
- Johnson, Samuel. *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; With Critical Observations on their Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006.)
- Keats, John. *The Complete Poems*, ed. Miriam Allott (Harlow: Longman, 1970.)
- Keats, John. *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958.)
- Low, Donald A. *Burns: the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974.)
- Marvell, Andrew. *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith (London: Pearson Longman, 2003.)
- Medwin, Thomas. *Conversations of Lord Byron: Noted During a Residence with His Lordship at Pisa, in the Years 1821 and 1822* (London: Henry Colburn, 1824.)
- Milton, John. *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1957.)
- Murray, John. *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007.)
- Reiman, Donald H., (ed.) *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, 3 vols. in 9 parts, (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1972.)
- Rutherford, Andrew., (ed.) *Byron: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970.)
- Schiller, Friedrich. 'On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry' in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winkelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, Goethe*, ed. Hugh Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.)

- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York; London: Norton, 2002.)
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964.)
- Spence, Joseph. *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men*, ed. James M. Osborn, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.)
- Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton (London: Longman, 1977.)
- Swinburne, Algernon Charles. *Swinburne as Critic*, ed. Clyde Kenneth Hyder (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972.)
- Pope, Alexander. *Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert John Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966.)
- Warton, Joseph. *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (London: Printed for M. Cooper, 1756.)
- Watts, Isaac. 'Preface' to *Horæ lyricæ: Poems, Chiefly of the Lyric Kind* (London: Printed and sold by Rogers and Fowler, 1709.)
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Ann Olivier Bell, vol. 1 (London: Hogarth, 1977.)
- Wordsworth, William. *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James Butler, Michael C. Jaye, and David Garcia (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007.)
- Wordsworth, William. *Early Poems and Fragments, 1785-1797*, ed. Carol Landon and Jared Curtis (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999.)
- Wordsworth, William. *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940-49.)
- Wordsworth, William. *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and J.W. Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.)
- Wordsworth, William and Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*, ed. Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2008.)
- Wordsworth, William. *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935-39.)
- Young, Edward. *Conjectures on Original Composition*, ed. Edith J. Morley (Manchester: Manchester University Press; London: Longmans, 1918.)

Secondary Reading

- Abrams, M.H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953.)
- Abrams, M.H. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1971.)
- Armstrong, Isobel. *Language as Living Form in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982.)
- Ashfield, Andre and Peter De Bolla., (eds.) *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.)
- Arnold, Matthew. *The Essential Matthew Arnold*, ed. Lionel Trilling, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969.)
- Auden, W.H. *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963.)
- Babbitt, Irving. *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919.)
- Barnard, John. *Pope: The Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1973.)
- Barton, Anne. *Byron and the Mythology of Fact*, Nottingham Byron Foundation Lecture (Nottingham: Hawthorne, 1968.)
- Barton, Anne. *Byron: Don Juan*, Landmarks of World Literature Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.)
- Bate, Jonathan. *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.)
- Bate, Jonathan. *The Romantics on Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 1992.)
- Bate, Walter Jackson. *From Classic to Romantic: Premises of Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961.)
- Bateson, F.W. and N.A. Joukovsky, N.A., (eds.) *Alexander Pope: A Critical Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.)
- Bayley, John. *The Romantic Survival: A study in Poetic Evolution* (London: Constable, 1957.)
- Bayley, John. *The Uses of Division: Unity and Disharmony in Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1976.)
- Beatty, Bernard. 'Addressing Time': *The Poetry of Lord Byron*, Byron Nottingham Foundation Lecture (Nottingham: Hawthorn, 2009.)
- Beatty, Bernard. *Byron's 'Don Juan'* (London: Croom Helm, 1985.)
- Beatty, Bernard. *Byron and the Limits of Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988.)

- Beatty, Bernard. 'Continuities and Discontinuities of Language and Voice' in *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, ed. Andrew Rutherford (London: Macmillan in association with the British Council, 1990.)
- Blackstone, Bernard. *Byron: A Survey* (London: Longman, 1975.)
- Blake, William. 'On Virgil' in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman and Harold Bloom (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1982.)
- Bloom, Harold. *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1961.)
- Bloom, Harold., (ed.) *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism* (New York and London: Norton, 1970.)
- Bloom, Harold. 'Yeats and the Romantics' in *Modern Poetry: Essays in Criticism*, ed. John Hollander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968.)
- Bone, Drummond., (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Byron* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.)
- Butler, Marilyn. 'Byron and the Empire in the East' in *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, ed. Andrew Rutherford (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990, 63-81.)
- Butler, Marilyn. *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.)
- Cameron K.N., (ed.) *Romantic Rebels: essays on Shelley and his circle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973.)
- Cheeke, Stephen. *Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003.)
- Christensen, Jerome. *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.)
- Cooke, M.G. *The Blind Man Traces the Circle: On the Patterns and Philosophy of Byron's Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.)
- Corbett, Martyn. *Byron and Tragedy* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988.)
- Cox, Jeffrey N. *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.)
- Cronin, Richard. *The Politics of Romantic Poetry: in Search for the Pure Commonwealth* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000.)
- Cronin, Richard. *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981.)
- Curran, Stuart. *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.)

- Davie, Donald. *Articulate Energy: An Inquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1995.)
- Davie, Donald. *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.)
- DeLaura David J., (ed.) *Matthew Arnold: a Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hal, 1973.)
- Donoghue, Denis. *Jonathan Swift: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.)
- Duff, David. *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.)
- Durham, Willard H., (ed.) *Critical Essays of the Eighteenth Century 1700-1725* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1915.)
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996.
- Eggenschwiler, David. 'The Tragic and Comic Rhythms of *Manfred*', *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 13, No.1 (Winter, 1974), 63-77.
- Elfenbein, Andrew. *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.)
- Eliot, T.S. *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957.)
- Erdman, David V. 'Lord Byron' in *Romantic Rebels: Essays on Shelley and his Circle*, ed. K.N. Cameron (Harvard University Press, 1973, 158-179.)
- Fairer, David. *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle 1790-1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.)
- Franklin, Caroline. *Byron: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press, 2000.)
- Fry, Paul H. *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2008.)
- Frye, Northrop. 'Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility', in *Northrop Frye's Writings on the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Imre Salusinszky (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2005.)
- Fussell, Paul. *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism: Ethics and Imagery from Swift to Burke*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965.)
- Garber, Frederick. *Self, Text and Romantic Irony: The Example of Byron* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.)
- Gaull, Marilyn. *English Romanticism: The Human Context* (New York: Norton, 1988.)

- Gleckner, Robert F. *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967.)
- Goode, Clement Tyson Jr. *George Gordon Lord Byron: a Comprehensive Annotated Research Bibliography of Secondary Materials in English 1973 to 1994* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1996.)
- Graham, Peter. 'Byron, Manfred, Negativity and Freedom' in *Liberty and Poetic Licence: New Essays on Byron*, ed. Bernard Beatty, Tony Howe and Charles E. Robinson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008.)
- Gray, Erik. *The Poetry of Indifference: from the Romantics to the 'Rubaiyat'* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005.)
- Hartman, Geoffrey. *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964.)
- Hallam, Arthur Henry. 'On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson' in *The Writings of Arthur Henry Hallam*, ed. T.H. Vail Motter (New York: Modern Language Association, 1943, 182-98.)
- Halmi, Nicholas. 'The Very Model of a Modern Epic Poem' in *European Romantic Review*, vol.21, no.5 (October 2010, 589-600.)
- Haslett, Moyra. *Byron's Don Juan and the Don Juan Legend* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.)
- Hernstein-Smith, Barbara. *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.).
- Hobsbaum, Philip. *Meter, Rhythm and Verse Form* (London: Routledge, 1996.)
- Hollander, John. *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.)
- Housman, A.E. *The Name and Nature of Poetry* (Bromsgrove: Housman Society, 2006.)
- Hulme, T.E. *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge, 2000.)
- Jacobus Mary. *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's 'Lyrical Ballads'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.)
- Jacobus, Mary. 'Dithyrambic Fervour: the Lyric Voice of *The Prelude*' in *William Wordsworth's The Prelude: A Casebook*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.), 123-146.
- Joseph, M.K. *Byron: The Poet* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964.)
- Jump, John., (ed.) *Byron: 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage' and 'Don Juan': A Casebook* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1973.)

- Keach, William. *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.)
- Kelsall, Malcolm. *Byron's Politics* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987.)
- Kermode, Frank. *History and Value* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.)
- Kneale, Douglas. *Romantic Aversions: Aftermaths of Classicism in Wordsworth and Coleridge* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999.)
- Knight, G. Wilson. *Byron and Shakespeare* (London: Routledge; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966.)
- Kroeber, Karl. 'Experience as History: Shelley's Venice, Turner's Carthage' *ELH*, vol. 41, No. 3 (Autumn, 1974, 327-48.)
- Kucich, Gregory. *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.)
- Hartman, Geoffrey H. *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987.)
- Langbaum, Robert. *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1953.)
- Lansdown, Richard. *Byron's Historical Dramas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.)
- Lau, Beth. *Keats's Paradise Lost* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998.)
- Leader, Zachary. 'Byron, Revision, and the Stable Self' in *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.)
- Levinson, Marjorie. *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.)
- Lewis, C.S. *The Allegory of Love: Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936.)
- Litzinger, Boyd and Donald Smalley., (eds.) *Robert Browning: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1995.)
- Lovell, Ernest J. Jr., (ed.) *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966.)
- Lovell, Ernest J. Jr., (ed.) *His Very Self and Voice, Collected Conversations of Lord Byron* (New York: Macmillan, 1954.)
- Lovell, Ernest J. Jr., 'Irony and Image in Don Juan' in *English Romantic Poets*, ed. M.H. Abrams (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1960.)
- McGann, Jerome, J. *Don Juan in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976),

- McGann, Jerome, J. *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968.)
- McGann, Jerome, J. *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.)
- McGann, Jerome, J. 'Byron and Wordsworth' in *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. James Soderholm (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.)
- McGann, Jerome, J. *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.)
- Manning, Peter J., 'Don Juan and the Revisionary Self' in *Romantic Revisions*, ed. Robert Brinkley and Keith Hanley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 210-226.)
- Manning, Peter J. *Byron and His Fictions* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978.)
- Manning, Peter J. 'Don Juan and Byron's Imperceptiveness to the English Word' in *Reading Romantics: Texts and Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.)
- Marchand, Leslie A. *Byron's Poetry, A Critical Introduction* (London: John Murray, 1965.)
- Marshall, William H. *The Structure of Byron's Major Poems* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962.)
- Martin, Philip W. *Byron: A Poet Before His Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.)
- Mee, Jon. *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.)
- Mellor, Anne K. *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980.)
- Mill, John Stuart. *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981.)
- Miller, J. Hillis. *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970.)
- Milnes, Tim. *Knowledge and Indifference in English Romantic Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.)
- Moore, Thomas. *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron with Notices of his Life*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1830; repr. 1932.)
- Newey, Vincent. 'Authoring the Self: Childe Harold III and IV' in *Centering the Self: Subjectivity, Society and Reading from Thomas Gray to Thomas Hardy* (Aldershot: Scholar, 1995, 178-210.)

- Newlyn, Lucy. *Reading, Writing and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.)
- Newlyn, Lucy. *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.)
- O'Donnell, Brennan. *'The Passion of Meter': A Study of Wordsworth's Metrical Art* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1995.)
- O'Neill, Michael. *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.)
- O'Neill, Michael. "A Very Life in Our Despair": Freedom and Fatality in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Cantos 3 and 4' in *Liberty and Poetic Licence: New Essays on Byron*, ed. Bernard Beatty, Tony Howe, and Charles E. Robinson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008.)
- Perkins, David. *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964.)
- Perry, Seamus. *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.)
- Pocock, J.G.A. *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.)
- Raizis, M. 'Byron's Promethean Rebellion in 1816: Fictionality and Self-Projection in His Poetry of That Year', (*Byron Journal* 19, 1991.)
- Rawes, Alan. *Byron's Poetic Experimentation: Childe Harold, the Tales, and the Quest for Comedy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.)
- Rawson, Claude. *Satire and Sentiment 1660-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.)
- Rawson, Claude. 'Wordsworth' in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.)
- Read, Herbert. 'The Cult of Sincerity' in *The Hudson Review*, vol. 21, no. 1, (Spring, 1968, 147-168.)
- Read, Herbert. *The True Voice of Feeling* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953.)
- Ricks, Christopher. 'William Wordsworth 2: "A Sinking Inward into Ourselves from Thought to Thought"' in *The Force of Poetry*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984, pp117-134.
- Ricks, Christopher, 'A Pure Organic Pleasure of the Lines' in *William Wordsworth's 'The Prelude': A Casebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 43-72.)
- Ridenour, George. 'Byron in 1816: Four Poems from Diodati"' in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hiles and Harold Bloom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965, 453-65.)

- Ridenour, George M. *The Style of Don Juan* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1960.)
- Rutherford, Andrew., (ed.) *Byron: Augustan and Romantic* (London: MacMillan, 1990.)
- Sandy, Mark. *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.)
- Scott, Grant F. 'Beautiful Ruins: The Elgin Marbles Sonnet in Its Historical and Generic Contexts' in *Keats-Shelley Journal*, vol. 39 (1990, 123 -150.)
- Shilstone, Frederick W. *Byron and the Myth of Tradition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988.)
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. 'In Search of Sincerity' in *College English* vol. 29, no.8 (May, 1968, 574-601.)
- Sperry, Stuart. *Keats the Poet* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994.)
- Stabler, Jane. *Burke to Byron, Barbauld to Baillie, 1790-1830* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.)
- Stabler, Jane. *Byron, Poetics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.)
- Stabler, Jane. 'Transition in Byron and Wordsworth' in *Essays in Criticism* vol. 50, no.4 (2000, 306-28.)
- Stafford, Fiona J. *Reading Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.)
- Storey, Mark. *Byron and the Eye of Appetite* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986.)
- Trilling, Lionel., (ed.) *The Essential Matthew Arnold* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969.)
- Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.)
- Wain, John. 'The Search for Identity' in *A House for the Truth: Critical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1972, 155-72.)
- Ward, Geoffrey. 'Byron's Artistry in Deep and Layered Space' in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, ed. Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988.)
- Wasserman, Earl R. *The Subtler Language: Critical Readings of Neoclassic and Romantic Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959.)
- Wesling, Donald. *The Chances of Rhyme: Device and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.)
- West, Paul. *Byron and the Spoiler's Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960.)
- Wheeler, Kathleen M. *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1981.)

Wolfson, Susan J. *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.)

Woodring, Carl. *Politics in English Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970.)