Byron's Cunning Poetics

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Metis is not always easy to translate, but there is much to recommend the definition given by Detienne and Vernant: 'cunning intelligence', or 'intelligent ability'.[1] That allows for Homeric connotations of giving canny counsel — the term's mythological origins lie in the name of Zeus's first wife, whose crafty advice enables Zeus to triumph against Cronus — while also allowing for a later, Pindaric, sense of *metis* as more explicitly to the poet's skill or craft. Pope inclined to that second option in his translation of the *Iliad* (1715-1720), which, as it happens, Byron allegedly preferred to the original,[2] where *metis* is rendered as 'art'. Nestor's advice to Antilochus about how best to win a chariot race, part of the funereal games which commemorate Patroclus' death, exemplify Pope's preference:

> It is not Strength, but Art, obtains the Prize,
> And to be swift is less than to be wise:
> 'Tis more by Art, than Force of num'rous Strokes,
> The dext'rous Woodman shapes the stubborn Oaks;
> By Art, the Pilot thro' the boiling Deep
> And howling Tempest, stears the fearless Ship;
> And 'tis the Artist wins the glorious Course,
> Not those, who trust in Chariots and Horse. (XXIII.383-390)[3]

As in Homer's *Iliad*, Pope's lines construct a semantic chain, progressing from the *metis* of artisanal craftsmanship of carpentry, to the *metis* of a pilot's skilled physical manoeuvring of the ship (which is itself the product of the woodsman's skill), to the analogous *metis* of the art of charioteering, in which the chariot (another product of carpentry) is carried forth by the tempestuous natural power of the horses, steered to victory by the pilot whose hands control reins rather than cordage. The concept of *metis*, that is to say, allows for complex shiftings – resembling the shape-changing of Metis herself in her evasions of Zeus' amorous embraces.[4]

Deborah Hawhee has recently that *metis* should be understood not solely as a cognitive phenomenon but additionally as 'a tacit style of movement running through most kinds of action, including thought'.[5] Following Hawhee's definition, parallels might be drawn with the Byronic notion of *mobilité*, which is not simply *movement*, but rather an explanation of how memory

informs our current experience so that we are — sensorily speaking — in two places at once: 'an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions—at the same time without losing the past' [6]Malcolm Kelsall suggests an affinity between Byronic *mobilité* and Odyssean *polumetis* in relation to Byron's personality[7]); but he does not advance a possible correlation between the poetics of *mobilité* and a poetics informed by *metis*. True, Byron declares that *mobilité* is 'A thing of temperament and not of art' (*Don Juan*, XVI.st.97); but Byronic scholarship has often enough embraced the possibilities of reading *mobilité* as a poetical policy.[8] *Metis*, too, I want to argue, becomes a compositional tactic for Byron, especially in his greatest work, *Don Juan*.

Such an approach implies a new appreciation of the importance of Byron's classical learning for his epic craft. After Harrow and Cambridge, Byron's self-assessment of his classical knowledge was less than effusive: 'Of the Classics I know about as much as most Schoolboys after a Discipline of thirteen years' (*BLJ* I.147).[9] He refers to his proficiency in Greek with a typically Byronic alloy of conceited flippancy to his friend and biographer Thomas Moore:

> At school I was (as I have said) remarked for the extent and readiness of my *general* information; but in all other respects idle, capable of great sudden exertions (such as thirty or forty Greek hexameters, of course with such prosody as it pleased God), but of few continuous drudgeries. My qualities were much more oratorical and martial than poetical. [10]

His insistence on possessing no more than a *general* capability in language or poetry—of not exhibiting any such skill as would betray studious application, but of being gifted in those arts that suggested inspiration or genius rather than 'continuous drudgeries' -- emphasises the physical over the cerebral. The poet characterises his classical skills as performative, rhetorical, and militaristic, rather than scholarly -- even the composition of poetry in Greek is described as a spontaneous vigorous action: a 'great sudden exertion'. Throughout his letters and journals, Byron appears unwavering as to the irreconcilability of action and poetry, and adamant that he 'prefer[s] the talents of action' (*BLJ* III.405) – though he rather curiously reaches for a classical allusion in support of his derisive views of the literary: 'Who would write, who had anything better to do? "Action—action—action"—said Demosthenes: "Actions—actions," I say, and not writing,—least of all rhyme' (*BLJ*

II.345). Such anxious insistence upon his interest in antiquity as expressive of a masculine physicality was sustained throughout the poet's lifetime. Edward Trelawny describes touring Ithaca with the poet in 1823, the year before Byron's death:

> After landing, it was proposed to Byron to visit some of the localities that antiquaries have dubbed with the titles of Homer's school—Ulysses's stronghold, etc.: he turned peevishly away, saying to me, "Do I look like one of those emasculated fogies? Let's have a swim. I detest antiquarian twaddle. Do people think I have no lucid intervals, that I came to Greece to scribble more nonsense? I will show them I can do something better: I wish I had never written a line, to have it cast in my teeth at every turn."[11]

But despite Byron's protestations, his contemporaries' assumption that the poet's interest in Greece would be primarily cerebral was understandable given the Classical furnishings of his poetry. The juvenilia (1806-1809) include short translations from Aeschylus, Anacreon, Catullus, Euripides, Horace, and Virgil; his magnum opus, *Don Juan*, refers to an impressive range of Greek and Roman writers, but is full of allusions to Homer and Virgil—unsurprising, perhaps, given the poem's purported epic status.[12]

Jerome McGann claims that the question of *Don Juan*'s epic status is 'semantic and perhaps philosophical, but not scholarly';[13] but the question of how Byron's long poem might be generically classified, and specifically whether it is epic, has actually been a matter of ongoing debate.[14] Since McGann's assured classification of the poem as 'modern epic', twentieth-century criticism insisted on the poem being variously 'Primary Epic', 'comic epic', 'mock-epic', 'epic satire', anti-epic , or, indeed, a novel.[15] The two most recent answers to the question are Herbert Tucker's direct re-assessment of *Don Juan* being an 'epic for an age of bullshit' and Nicholas Halmi's rather more delicate analysis of *Don Juan* as an epic-length poem sustained by tension between tradition and modernity.[16] Byron himself upheld *Don Juan's* epic form in his conversations with Medwin:

> If you must have an epic, there's 'Don Juan' for you. I call that an epic: it is an epic as much in the spirit of our day as the Iliad was in Homer's. . . It shall have twenty-four books too, the legitimate number. Episodes it has, and will have, out of number; and my spirits, good or bad, must serve for the machinery. If that be not an epic, if it not be strict according to Aristotle, I don't know what an epic poem means.[17]

The depth of Byron's sincerity is, as ever, in shallow supply. Yet to assume that *Don Juan* can be unproblematically defined as epic, or even to suggest, as Hirsch does, that the question of *Don Juan's* genre is 'obvious' to solve by simply stating its idiosyncrasy overlooks the poet's evident strategies of epic reformation and resistance to those 'necessities' of form, defined (among others)

by René Le Bossu and Dryden.[18] Throughout the poem, Byron calls upon the reader to observe the presence of epic necessities that his poem purports to fulfill, before undermining the very conditions that were deemed fundamental for epic composition. The norms of such refutation do not exemplify Kermode's concept of an 'anti-genre'; nor does the poem adhere to Susan Stewart's ideas concerning 'distressed genres'.[19] In its commitment to reinvention, *Don Juan* conforms to the expectations of epic as a genre contingent on continual recreation and transformation.

If the contemporaneity of the origins of epic and heroism indicate an inextricability, as Gregory Nagy has suggested, then such inextricability dictates that any renegotiation of the form requires a reconsideration of heroism—the reinvention of heroism itself.[20] Byron's epic appears to ask a reformulation of the post-Homeric epic predicament: how does one write an epic in an age of heroic desiccation? Byron's economical opening declaration to the poem, 'I want a hero' (*DJ* I.1) at once invokes the impetus of Classical epic—to relay heroic exploit—and the long eighteenth-century crisis in supplying the kinds of men that might pass for heroes: 'I condemn none, / But can't find any in the present age / Fit for my poem' (*DJ*, I.37-39). Byron's toying 'want'—simultaneously a desire for and a lack thereof—is in part a comment on the contemporary semantics of 'hero'. By the late seventeenth-century a hero is not necessarily one who exhibits heroism, but merely the man whom the main action of an epic (or novel) revolves around (*OED*). Byron's Don Juan is caught between the competing notions of what it means to be a hero. These semantic uncertainties manifest themselves in heroic inaction: little that Byron's hero does can be considered 'heroic'. One exception is his rescue of the child Leila from 'Two villainous Cossacques' (VIII.729) at the Siege of Ismail:

> One's hip he slashed, and split the other's shoulder,
> And drove them with their brutal yells to seek
> If there might be chirurgeons who could solder
> The wounds they richly merited, and shriek
> Their baffled rage and pain; while waxing colder
> As he turned o'er each pale and gory cheek,
> Don Juan raised his little captive from
> The heap a moment more had made her tomb. (VIII.745-752)

The episode is one of only two instances of hand-to-hand combat in the sixteen and a half canto poem,[21] yet even at this moment the poet is more invested in depicting the bloody realities of war

than with (re)establishing military might as the cornerstone of the heroic. The survival of heroism in such a setting becomes as tenuous as that of the child-victim, submerged as she is beneath the heap of slain bodies—products of war that 'a moment more had made her tomb.'

Such an image of buried heroism is one the poet has figured in the previous cantos, lamenting those

> …men who fought in gallant actions
> As gallantly as ever heroes fought,
> But buried in the heap of such transactions
> Their names are rarely found, nor often sought. (VII.265-268)

The fault of modern warfare is not that there are insufficient heroes but rather so many that their heroic actions are lost amidst the sheer volume of the dead. Heroes cannot be extricated from lists of names that elide the military distinction they seek to confer, and warfare itself has become a bloody tangle of severed limbs: 'a brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art' (IX.27). The charge levelled at the reader in the seventh stanza, 'Of all our modern battles, I will bet / You can't name nine names from each Gazette' (*DJ* VII.265-272), recalls the start point of the poem—the poet's futile search for a suitable hero: 'When every year and month sends forth new one, / Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant, / The age discovers he is not the true one' (I.3-4). Heroism's promise of eternal fame is rendered false by the proliferation of two notable nineteenth-century phenomena: mass printing and mass slaughter. The discordance of heroic endeavour and printed record is struck most forcefully by the awkward rhyming of 'true one' and 'Juan', which provides the ongoing joke of the poem: that the hero's name doesn't quite fit the acoustic strictures of *ottava rima*. Just as Juan's name is uncomfortably squeezed into a form that appears to resist his participation, his actions never quite live up to the expectations readers have of a hero. Having rescued Leila, Juan is forced to decided whether to ensure her safety or his glory, his re-entry to the battle risking the former but offering possibilities of the latter. The resolution is a distinctly unheroic one. Faced with choosing between 'fame and feelings, pride and pity;—' (VIII.804), the obvious solution is the bribery of two soldiers—death if she should come to harm, and fifty roubles if preserved. Pierced by 'the thirst / Of Glory' (VIII.413-414), valour has been ousted by contractual obligation.

Juan's arrival at the Siege precipitates the crisis of the Romantic epic poet, Byron appealing directly to Homer in a reformulation of the post-Homeric epic predicament: how does one write an epic in an age of heroic desiccation?

> Oh, thou eternal Homer! I have now
> To paint a siege, wherein more men were slain,
> With deadlier engines and a speedier blow,
> Than in thy Greek gazette of that campaign;
> And yet, like all men else, I must allow,
> To vie with thee would be about as vain
> As for a brook to cope with Ocean's flood;
> But still we Moderns equal you in blood; (VII.633-640)

Byron here offers his most overt conflation of the contemporary record of heroism—the printed gazette—with the Greek equivalent—Homeric epic. In so doing, Byron returns us to the cloyed pages of the gazettes with which his search for a hero commences (I.3) and within which any hope of heroism appears to be terminally engulfed. As with the opening stanza, Byron is alert to the shifting semantics of epic terminology; in this instance it is 'engine', which, until the predominance of the mechanised instruments of industry in the late eighteenth century, could equally be used to refer to ingenuity or machinery (*OED*). Milton, for instance, uses the term in both senses in *Paradise Lost* (compare the now obsolete sense at I.750, 'Nor did he scape By all his Engins', to current usage at VI.518, 'Whereof to found thir Engins and thir Balls'). Byron, however, only has the later sense at his disposal; as with the term itself, the modern equipment of warfare precludes Byron from more ancient practices—these deadlier engines can only hope to equal their Homeric equivalents in bloodshed. Yet, as Paul Cantor has asserted, 'war lost its poetic glamour when it ceased to be a matter of the mano-a-mano contests of individual heroes celebrated in Homer, and became an occasion for mass slaughter'. [22] If heroism in the nineteenth century—an age of mechanical warfare—no longer requires the physical prowess of ancient martial combat, then heroic action need not be isolated to bodily endeavour. Romantic poets found potential in the instability of that traditional heroic mode. In particular, the resultant opportunity for heroic reinvention produces a new interest in the relationship between the poet and the hero. *Don Juan* succeeds in artfully redrawing the wearisome boundary between poet and hero, 'which every one

seemed determined not to perceive' (*CPW* II.122) in his previous major work, *Childe Harold*, propounding instead the poet as the new locus of a new kind of heroism. In a logical extension of the shift from brawn to brain, poet becomes hero, and hero merely protagonist.

Cantor establishes the nineteenth-century relocation of the heroic as a necessary movement away from conventional epic: 'Finding themselves unable to write traditional epics, the Romantics laboured to transform the genre into something more personal, and in the process they discovered that they could be their own best heroes'.[23] Paul de Man similarly writes of the peculiarly Romantic reorientation of narrative around thought, with the self as 'the primary centre of cognition'[24]. De Man observes such reorientation in Rousseau specifically: 'Unlike the epic narrators who wrote about events in which they did not take part, Rousseau speaks out of his own self-knowledge'.[25] We might firstly extend de Man's assessment to Byron's pseudo-autobiographical *Childe Harold*—a text in which Rousseau is remarkably present (in particular, *CHP* III.st.76-84 and 104). *Childe Harold* not only takes the self as the primary centre of cognition, but also as the static point around which the narrative rotates, and to which the poem inexorably returns. In the opening two cantos it is plausible to read the eponymous hero as a physical manifestation of such self-knowledge, yet by the final two cantos the articulation of self is more evidently the task of the poet, Byron having relinquished any purported distinction between poet and hero 'which every one seemed determined not to perceive'.[26] Written out of self-knowledge ('Could any man have written it—who has not lived in the world?' (*BLJ* VI.232)), the self-knowing narrator is equally central to the narration of *Don Juan* (although there is no longer a place for Rousseau in the mix).

But to uphold de Man's and Cantor's assertions that the self-knowing narrator is a product of the nineteenth century is to downplay the probable influence of earlier models. The conflation of the poet and hero is not a specifically Byronic, nor even a more general nineteenth century innovation. Both of Homer's epics offer notable moments when the central hero turns poet: Achilles' song in Book 9 of the *Iliad*, and Odysseus' narrative, spanning Books 9-12 of the *Odyssey*. In each of these instances, there is an evident interest exhibited by the epic composer in

the relationship between the competing heroic qualities of *bie*, or bodily strength, and *metis*, or cerebral craftiness. Both Erwin Cook and Donna Wilson have commented upon the sophisticated interplay of *metis* and *bie*, or mind and body in Odysseus and Achilles respectively.[27] What appears evident is that these moments of conflation of poet and hero show the clearest instances of such sophisticated interplay of traditionally oppositional qualities. In the *Iliad*, the hero turns bard but briefly, and Achilles' song is only indirectly relayed to the audience, remaining in the third person:

> And they came to the huts and the ships of the Myrmidons, and him they found delighting his mind with a clear-toned lyre, fair and elaborate, and on it was a bridge of silver; this he had taken from the spoil when he destroyed the city of Eëtion. With it he was delighting his heart, and he sang of the glorious deeds of warriors; and Patroclus alone sat opposite him in silence, waiting until Aeacus' grandson should cease from singing.
> (*Il.*IX.185-191)[28]

The traditional distinction between lyric performer and lyric subject is complicated not only by the singer being himself a hero of the 'glorious deeds' he sings, but also that the instrument on which he plays has been won in the battle he delights in relaying: 'this he had taken from the spoil when he laid waste the city of Eëtion'. As such, the materials of song—subject and object—are the products of the hero's own *bie*. Odysseus' narrative offers an alternative portrayal of hero turned poet, most famously in Book 9 when he becomes hero of his own song and relays in the first person his wanderings. The cross-dressing of hero as poet in the ninth book prefigures the simile used in Odysseus' recovery of his bow in the twenty-first book:

> So spoke the suitors, but resourceful Odysseus, as soon as he had lifted the great bow and scanned it on every side—just as when a man well-skilled in the lyre and in song easily stretches the string about a new peg, making fast at either end the twisted sheep-gut—so without effort did Odysseus string the great bow. And taking it in his right hand, he tried the string, which sang sweetly beneath his touch, like a swallow in tone. (*Od*.XXI.404-411)[29]

The hero's *bie* is articulated by comparing his effortless stringing of the great bow to the ease with which a bard—a figure characterised by skill rather than strength—strings a lyre. As with the example of Achilles, the physical exploits of war and the crafted nature of epic performance drawn together via the close association of the instruments of war and poetry: the bow and the lyre. Odysseus' epithet of *polumetis* (many wiled or resourceful) is especially significant at this point. It is Odysseus' cunning that has led to the recovery of his bow—the weapon necessary for the massacre of the suitors and his eventual victory; as such, Odysseus' *metis* is a requisite facilitator of his *bie*. The simile chosen conflates the craftsmanly preparation of the materials of war with those

of poetry—it is the physical skill of the lyricist that provides the visual comparison. The complexity of this simile is further compounded by the comparison of the sound of the twanging bowstring with the twittering of a swallow, rather than, for instance, the lyrically gifted nightingale; for Homer, the hero's narrative skill can never equal the song craft of the poet.

As with Homer's *Odyssey*, Byron's *Don Juan* offers specific instances of equating epic action (heroism) with lyric action (song). The most famous association of the man of letters with the man of action occurs in the eleventh canto:

> In twice five years the "greatest living poet,"
> Like to the champion in the fisty ring,
> Is call'd on to support his claim, or show it,
> Although 'tis an imaginary thing,
> Even I—albeit I'm sure I did not know it,
> Nor sought of foolscap subjects to be king—
> Was reckon'd, a considerable time,
> The grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme. (*DJ* XI.433-440)

In these lines Byron makes two unexpected associations: (i) between poetry and prizefighting; and (ii) between the poet and the politically charged anti-hero Napoleon. From pugilist to strategist, the complex interplay between the physical and the cerebral can be witnessed within the shiftings of a single stanza. The analogy between poetics and pugilism may be contrasted to Homer's and Pindar's compositions on boxing matches, where the intense physicality of the sport is never equated with the cerebral action of poetry. In *Iliad* XXIII, the boxing match between Epeius and Euryalus ends in gore and confusion, albeit with the victorious Epeius helping his battered opponent out of the ring: there may be honour in such competition, but they are contests of *bie* where *metis* has no role. Even Pindar, who in the same collection of Odes that equate the rudest manual practices with skilled artistry—'and the roads bore works of art like living' (*O.*7.50-55)—maintains a clear distinction in his Odes on boxing between the function of his poetry and the physical contest being commemorated (as is evident in *O.*7, *O.*10, *O.*11, *Nem.*5, and *Isth.* 4-8). Perhaps the closest we come to poetic pugilism in classical poetry is in the *Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi*, where the facing of two opponents invites comparison, but resists analogy. Significantly, in the *Certamen*, it is Hesiod's final recitation of his own agriculturally-themed work that secures his victory, the King

decreeing that 'it was right that he who called upon men to follow peace and husbandry should have the prize rather than one who dwelt on war and slaughter'.[30] Byron's lines appear to reverse this classical precedent of opposing *bie* and *metis*—where boxing may be considered the extreme physical manifestation physical force and antithetical to the cunning intelligence of poets.

Byron's conflation of poetry and pugilism enacts on a local level the complex interplay of an antithetical rendering of *metis* and *bie*. This complexity is exaggerated by the crowd-pleasing performative element of Byron's verse. John Whale has established an evident patriotism to pugilistic practice in the Georgian period: 'pugilism justified itself by reference to the national character'; success in the ring was not a straightforward celebration of national strength, however, but offered a rather more complex mode of heroic recovery, being 'framed in terms of a classical heroism which served the purposes of a nascent Britishness'.[31] Without denying Byron's probable consciousness of contemporary estimations of boxing as a national sport, a neoclassical conceit might also be discernable in his reinforcement of the resemblance of poetic competency and physical combatancy: the Swiftean battling of rival poets from *Battle of the Books* (1704), or Pope's interrelation of poet and hero in the 'Preface' to his translation of the *Iliad*:

> When we behold their Battels, methinks the two Poets resemble the Heroes they celebrate: *Homer*, boundless and irresistible as *Achilles*, bears all before him, and shines more and more as the Tumult increases; *Virgil* calmly daring like *Aeneas*, appears undisturb'd in the midst of the Action, disposes all about him, and conquers with Tranquility[32]

Contrary to Pope's characterisation of the poet-heroes Homer and Virgil, the hero figure with whom Byron identifies himself stands outside his own poem—and, indeed, firmly outside British military decorum: 'The grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme'. Certainly, biographical commentators have explained such affiliation through Byron's own status as a Society pariah: he had been living on the continent in self-imposed exile since 1816.[33] But more pertinent considering the immediate context of prizefighting, is that Byron choses a man known for his military ingenuity, rather than physical strength or stature. Napoleon's strategic skill is recorded as a mode of military craftiness. Napoleon's early biographer, Louis Antoine Fauvelet de Bourrienne, characterizes him as such in his *Life*, speaking of 'that crafty disposition for which he was so remarkable'.[34] Similarly, J. G.

Lockhart's *History of Napoleon Bonaparte* remarks upon 'His crafty management'.[35] Around a decade later, in his *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*, William Hodgson refers to the Emperor as 'the wily Napoleon' and 'the crafty Napoleon' in a single page.[36] In aligning himself with the French Emperor, Byron clearly figures himself as a man of cunning intelligence -- a man of *metis.*

Byron's cunning poetics are indebted both to Homeric *metis* (craftiness) and also to Pindaric *metis* (craftedness). The former is evident in Byron's use of digression and return; the latter at a local, linguistic level through word choice, rhyme, and vocabulary. As with *metis* itself, *Don Juan* resists exact calculation or rigorous logic. The complexity that underlies Byron's grasp of epic form and substance is in no way specious; the poet skirts the epic parameters he establishes for himself in the opening cantos: rather than offering three episodes (I.1597) told over twelve books (I.1594), or even 'two dozen / Cantos' (XII.437-438), he instead suggests he might continue up to a hundred (XII.400). Byron's elusion of numerical measurement is hinted at alongside the early epic quantities outlined in the first canto, in his announcement that 'All these things will be specified in time' (I.1601), enabling endless deferrals of any indication of the poem's anticipated size. Rather than this seeming lack of structural blueprint betraying a deficiency of forethought, it instead draws attention to the manner in which the poem is crafted, providing the poet with innumerable opportunities to showcase the poem's status as a product of his ingenious artisanal process. Byron may have been dismissive of meticulous design, but this does not exempt him from poetic craftsmanship. He exasperates to Murray: 'You ask me for the plan of Donny Johnny—I *have* no plan—I *had* no plan—but I had or have materials' (*BLJ* VI.207).

The digressions Byron performs within *Don Juan* are purposeful deviations from the purported central design of the epic plot—Juan's odyssey—but are of crucial importance for Byron's particular epic schema, enabling him complete freedom in the transitions between episodes in relation to both character and event. Byron's declaration in the opening canto that 'The regularity of my design / Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning' (I.51-52) is not as specious as it may

appear. Byron's apology for digression in the twelfth canto discloses the deliberate and controlled nature of his digressive art:

> Oh, pardon me digression—or at least
> Peruse! 'Tis always with a moral end
> That I dissert, like Grace before a feast:
> For like an aged aunt, or tiresome friend,
> A rigid guardian or a zealous priest,
> My Muse by exhortation means to mend
> All people, at all times and in most places;
> Which puts my Pegasus to these grave paces. (XII.305-312)

Byron here counters the more effortless and impulsive gentle canter of the main body of the poem against the solemn ménage of digression. Such contrast comically inverts the standard reading of textual deviation as a liberation from the controlling demands of the central narrative; instead, Byron suggests that such lateral movements are not only central to his display, but that the control exerted demands an even higher level of poetic proficiency than moments ostensibly more crucial to the plot. Like Odysseus, the further Byron wanders from his eventual destination (i.e. the conclusion of the narrative) the more his *metis* is tested to facilitate his return, or *nostos*. Yet whereas for Odysseus such *nostos* is the desired outcome of the narrative, for Byron the use of narrative return functions within the narrative to facilitate further departures:

> But let me to my story: I must own,
> If I have any fault, it is digression;
> Leaving my people to proceed alone,
> While I soliloquize beyond expression;
> But these are my addresses from the throne,
> Which put off business to the ensuing session (III.857-862)

Byron is here characteristically Byronic: in owning to his digressive tendencies, the poet again embarks upon a digression before continuing with his story. Byronic digressions act as recurrent unravellings eternally to defer the final *denouement* of the narrative. Like Penelope, Byron carefully unravels all he has woven of his epic tapestry, thereby postponing the anticipated conclusion of his story. Though he turns away from the execution of the main purpose of his narrative, in lingering over the external reality and inner situations of both his protagonist and the narrative voice he brings new and necessary perspectives to the epic he has spun.

The laborious production of poetry is antithetical to Byron's concept of a poetic process; he writes to his publisher Murray:

> So you and Mr. Foscolo &c. want me to undertake what you call a "great work" an Epic poem I suppose or some such pyramid.—I'll try no such thing—I hate tasks—and then "seven or eight years!" God send us all well this day three months—let alone years—if one's years can't be better employed than in sweating poesy—a man had better be a ditcher.[37]

In the composition of *Don Juan*, Byron gives us little sense of the strenuous endeavour of composition that other Romantics—particularly Wordsworth—associated with the laborious task of epic composition. In *Don Juan* Byron practices the 'art of easy writing' (*Beppo* l.401) that he had protested against possessing in his first attempt at the *ottava rima* in an extended narrative. His verse is informed by a characteristic false modesty, hyper-conscious of the poetic ability demonstrated in his mastering of the *ottava rima*:

> I don't know that there may be much ability
> Shown in this sort of desultory rhyme;
> But there's a conversational facility,
> Which may round off an hour upon a time.
> Of this I'm sure at least, there's no servility
> In mine irregularity of chime,
> Which rings what's uppermost of new or hoary,
> Just as I feel the 'Improvisatore.' (XV.153-160)

Byron's vocabular exhibitionism is central to his affected art of easy writing; in his selection of particular rhyme words, Byron demonstrates a poetic freedom that prose poets had turned to blank verse to achieve. The choice of an Italian noun to complete the feminine rhyme of the final couplet serves as a reminder that the poet is composing in an idiom foreign to the form. Yet, as the stanza insists, 'there's no servility' of the English language within the rhymes themselves; as if to showcase the strength of the poet's native tongue, the heavier Anglo-Saxon 'hoary' dominates the pronunciation of the delicate Latinate ending to the Italian 'Improvisatore.' In the very process of likening himself to the 'Improvisatore', Byron proves the aptness of the label: his cunning verse-craft is as mobile in its rhymes as the wandering poet is in person.

Central to conveying the effect of spontaneous composition is the *ottava rima*, and it is Byron's choice of verse vehicle that has attracted the most consistent critical attention. As Virginia Woolf wrote whilst reading *Don Juan* for the first time, 'The method is a discovery by itself. It's what one has looked for in vain—an 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 say whatever came into his head'.[38] The pretense of the poet's absolute linguistic liberty is, however, exactly that: a façade; Byron's poetry reveals a very deliberate choice of words—a selection that is not arbitrary, but subtle and complex. Such selective sampling of language returns us to the poet's use of 'desultory', from the Latin '*desultorius*' meaning 'of or belonging to a vaulter, superficial, desultory', from which we have the noun 'desultor', 'A circus horse-leaper', whose mounts are known as 'desultories' (*OED*). Implicit in Byron's mock-critique of 'this sort of desultory rhyme' is Byron's athletic skill as desultor as he vaults with ease from one rhyme to the next. Such purported acoustic opportunism can be likened to a further facet of *metis* identified by Detienne and Vernant: '*Mêtis* is swift, as prompt as the opportunity that it must seize on the wing, not allowing it to pass'.[39]

Byron's use of *ottava rima* was inspired by the poet's reading of Frere's *Whistlecraft* (1818), and, more obliquely perhaps, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532).[40] A connection between poetics and skilled workmanship, or craft, is suggested by the title of Frere's epic, which hints at the composition of *ottava rima* as song-craft. In his own crafting of *ottava rima*, Byron is conscious that his choice of formal vehicle for *Don Juan* indicates a departure from the blank verse that dominated contemporary epics: 'Prose poets like blank-verse, I'm fond of rhyme, / Good workmen never quarrel with their tools' (I.1605-1606). Such self-characterization as a poetic workman reiterates the connection between craftsmanship and epic composition, while highlighting the centrality of his approach within Byron's own reinvention of the epic mode; and in so doing, he appears to heed his own advice in 'Hints from Horace':

> Unless your care's exact, your judgment nice,
> The flight from folly leads but into vice;
> None are complete, all wanting in some part,
> Like certain tailors, limited in art (ll.49-52)

For Byron, the linguistic raw materials from which he assembles his poem are vital rather than inert; indeed, Byron's self-characterization of his compositional process illustrates further how this feature of his *metis*-like poem aligns him with more traditional epic forerunners. As Ford has noted, 'The singer is classed in Homer among the itinerant specialized workers (*dēmiourgoi*) along with

healers, seers, and carpenters'.[41] Nagy suggests that the concept of poetry being wrought out of skilled, or crafted language is a concept that emerges alongside a specifically Homeric epic process, the celebration of which he observes in Pindar's *Pythian* 3.112-114: 'We know of Nestor and Lykian Sarpedon, still the talk of men, from such echoing verses as wise craftsmen constructed'.[42] Regardless of whether Pindar has Homer in mind at this point (as Nagy contends), it is evident that the connection between poetics and craftsmanship emerges as a universal analogy for the poetic process; as Ford indicates: 'By the late fifth century, the subtle formal beauties of poetry are associated with writing and with working over a text in a craftsmanly way'.[43] The servant's description of literary composition in Aristophanes' *Women at the Thesmophoria* exemplifies:

> —to lay the keel of his inchoate drama.
> He's warping fresh stakes of verses;
> some he planes down, others he couples,
> minting aphorisms, swapping meanings,
> channeling wax and rounding the mold
> and funneling metal—
>
> (*Women at the Thesmophoria* ll.52-57)[44]

The lewd interruption of the final line—'And sucking cocks', l.57—is appositely expressive of the concept of poetic craftsmanship emerging not via epic, but comedy. As Ford observes, epic poets avoided 'novel' language, whereas composers of comic or light verse kept their ears open to 'contemporary jargon'; as such it is comedy that reflects the critical consensus of the literati, by representing 'poetry as a *tekhnē* like any craft'.[45] The absence of allusion to poetic 'craft' in epic was, Ford suggests, additionally owing to the negative connotations of the verb: in epic, 'crafting' speech is associated with cunning deception.[46] Byron, however, shows no such compunction in the association of poetics and deceit, reveling in the elision of the crafted and the crafty when he declares in the eleventh Canto, 'I think I know a trick or two' (*DJ* XI.497).

In his alertness to the cunning crafting of poetry, Byron reveals his simultaneous debt to the legacy of the epic and comedic traditions. The comic epics of the long eighteenth-century are equally alert to contemporary jargon as their archaic predecessors. Byron's alertness to the cosmopolitan nature of English idioms, especially contemporary fashionable trends, is partly evidenced by his use of recent inventions as rhyme words:

Our shipwreck'd seamen thought it a good omen—
It is as well to think so, now and then;
'Twas an old custom of the Greek and Roman,
And may become of great advantage when
Folks are discouraged; and most surely no men
Had greater need to nerve themselves again
Than these, and so this rainbow look'd like hope—
Quite a celestial kaleidoscope. (II.737-744)

Invented in 1816 and patented by its inventor Sir David Brewster in 1817, the kaleidoscope was an object of some familiarity to Byron. Murray wrote to Byron in September 1818, three months prior to the composition of the second canto of *Don Juan*: 'I sent you a very well constructed Kaleidoscope – a<n> newly invented Toy wch if not yet seen in Venice will I trust amuse some of your female friends'.[47] The novelty of the word itself, it would appear, initially left less of a mark than the object to which it referred: 'Spooney arrived here today—but has left in Chancery Lane *all* my *books*—everything in short except a damned—(Something)-SCOPE. I have broke the glass & cut a finger in ramming it together—'.[48] The farcical comedy of Byron's biographical encounter with the kaleidoscope is transmuted to a comedy of unexpected congruence in *Don Juan*, the ancient significance of an omen of the Classical world being described in newly formed language. Byron's poetic articulation of old custom in new language is itself reflective of the etymology of 'kaleidoscope': a new label for a novel invention, comprised of ancient component parts, from the Greek *kalos* (beautiful), *eidos* (form), and *-scope*, used commonly to denote scientific instruments and appended to Greek or Latin stems (*OED* q.v.). Not only does *metis* facilitate the poet's reconciliation of strength and cunning, but, on a generic level, it enables synthesis of epic—genre of heroic action—and comedy—genre of crafted wordplay.

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NOTES

[1] M. Detienne, and J-P Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago, 1991), p.11.
[2] 'Translations almost always disappoint me; I must, however, except Pope's "Homer," which has more of the spirit of Homer than all the other translations put together': Countess of Blessington, *Conversations of Lord Byron* (Princeton, 1969), p.141.
[3] Alexander Pope, *The Iliad of Homer*, ed. Maynard Mack (2 Vols., London, 1967).
[4] See (Pseudo-)Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca*, I.iii: 'who turned into many shapes in order to avoid his embraces'.
[5] Deborah Hawhee, *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece* (Austin, TX, 2004), p.47.
[6] Byron's poems are quoted from *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (7 vols.; Oxford, 1970-83), V.820n. Reference hereafter to *CPW*. *Don Juan* is abbreviated to '*DJ*'.
[7] Malcolm Kelsall, 'Byronic Homer', *The Byron Journal* 35 (2007): pp. 1-10, at p.6.
[8] See Frederick Shilstone, 'Byron, Kirkegaard, and the Irony of Rotation', *Colby Quarterly* 25 (1989): pp. 237-244, at p. 237.
[9] Byron's letters are quoted from *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (3 vols.; 1973-94). Reference hereafter to *BLJ*.
[10] Thomas Moore, *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron: with Notices of his Life* (London, 1830), pp.40-41.
[11] *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. E.J. Lovell (New York, 1954), p.411.
[12] McGann's edition supplies references to the numerous allusions.
[13] Jerome J. McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (1976), p. xii.
[14] See Nicholas Halmi, 'The Very Model of a Modern Epic Poem', *European Romantic Review* 21 (2010): pp.589–600, at p.589.
[15] McGann (1976) at p.xii-xiii; Donald H. Reiman, 'Don Juan in Epic Context', *Studies in Romanticism* 16 (1977): pp.587–94, at p.587; Andrew Rutherford, *Byron: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh & London, 1961), p.141; Ritchie Robertson, *Mock-epic Poetry from Pope to Heine* (Oxford, 2009), p.321; Frederick L. Beaty, *Byron the Satirist* (De Kalb, IL, 1985), p.138; John Lauber, 'Don Juan as Anti-Epic', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 8 (1968): pp.607-19; M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin, TX, 1981), p.5, and Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (London, 1971), p.59.
[16] Herbert Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse, 1790-1910* (Oxford, 2008), p.231, and Halmi, p.598.
[17] *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. E.J. Lovell (Princeton, 1966) p.165.
[18] E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, 1967), p.106.
[19] Frank Kermode, 'The Argument of Marvell's 'Garden'', *Essays in Criticism* 2 (1952): pp.225-241, at p. 229; Susan Stewart, 'Notes on Distressed Genres', *The Journal of American Folklore* 104 (1991): pp.5-31, at p.6.
[20] Greg Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Rev. Ed. 1999. Baltimore, MD, 1979), p.116.
[21] The other is Juan's shooting of the highwayman Tom in canto XI, stanza 13.
[22] Paul Cantor, 'The Politics of the Epic : Wordsworth, Byron, and the Romantic Redefinition of Heroism', *The Review of Politics* 69 (2007): pp.375-401, at p.388.
[23] Cantor, p.377.
[24] Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), p. 102.
[25] de Man, p.102.
[26] *CPW* II.122.
[27] Erwin Cook, '"Active" and "Passive" Heroics in the "Odyssey"', *The Classical World* 93 (1999): pp. 149-167, at p.153; Donna Wilson, *Ransom, revenge, and heroic identity in the Iliad* (Cambridge, 2002), p.140.
[28] Homer, *Iliad, Volume I: Books 1-12*, translated by A. T. Murray, revised by William F. Wyatt (Cambridge, MA, 1924), p.409.
[29] Homer, *Odyssey, Volume II: Books 13-24,* translated by A. T. Murray, revised by George E. Dimock (Cambridge, MA, 1919), p.341.
[30] *Hesiod; The Homeric Hymns. And Homerica*, trans. H.G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge, MA: 1914), p. 587.
[31] John Whale, 'Daniel Mendoza's Contests of Identity: Masculinity, Ethnicity and Nation in Georgian Prize-fighting', *Romanticism* 14 (2008): pp. 159-171, at p.259.
[32] Pope, vol. 1, p.12.
[33] Most recently, John Clubbe, 'Byron, Napoleon, and Imaginative Freedom', *Liberty and Poetic Licence:*

New Essays on Byron. (Liverpool, 2008), pp.181-192.
[34] Louis Antoine Fauvelet de Bourrienne, *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* (Vol. 2., London, 1831), p.119.
[35] J.G. Lockhart, *The History of Napoleon Bonaparte* (Vol. 2., London, 1829), p.22.
[36] William Hodgson, *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* (London, 1841), p.368.
[37] *BLJ* VI.105.
[38] Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf* (London (1965), p.3.
[39] Detienne and Vernant, p.15.
[40] Byron refers to both in a letter to Murray (*BLJ* V.266).
[41] Andrew Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton, 2007), p.113.
[42] Nagy, *Pindar's Homer* (Baltimore, MD, 1990), p.300.
[43] Ford, p.156.
[44] Aristophanes, *Birds. Lysistrata. Women at the Thesmophoria*, ed. and translated by Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA, 2000), p.463.
[45] Ford, p.137-138.
[46] Ford, p.113-114. See also Nagy, (1990), p. 56-7.
[47] *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Liverpool, 2007), p.261.
[48] *BLJ* VI.77