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Narrative Means, Lyric Ends

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THE LABYRINTHINE PLOTS AND LYRIC STASIS OF *DON JUAN*

This narrative is not meant for narration.

—Lord Byron, *Don Juan* 14.7

Lord Byron's *Don Juan* serves as the starting point of this book for several reasons. Chronologically, it was the first poem in my study to be published, appearing in installments from 1819 through 1824. More importantly, it stands at one extreme of my dichotomy: on the surface, it seems to be overwhelmingly narrative in nature, with little overt lyricism.¹ Byron's poem is an especially useful example because it deliberately exposes many of the conventions of narrative; it lays bare the very structures under examination in this project. But even in *Don Juan*, the separation between narrative and lyric breaks down, and Byron's poem has some surprising and nuanced lyrical effects.



1. According to Stuart Curran, a lyric subgenre appears in the episode with Haidée, which plays with pastoral conventions. *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 192–95.

Most discussions of the genre of Byron's *Don Juan* have emphasized its relation to epic and satire. Rather than seeing *Don Juan*'s satiric elements as in competition with the poem's epic aspirations, Jerome McGann believes they are the basis of its epic claims. McGann asserts, "*Don Juan* is a serious poem, but its special character in the history of epic is that it is the first poem in the tradition to have defined its seriousness almost completely on the basis of comic and satiric forms."² Although the majority of critics place *Don Juan* in the narrative genre of epic, two have noted strong lyrical elements in the poem, and many have noted other narrative genres contained within the poem. According to Peter J. Manning's analysis, Byron's narrative impulse centers on Juan's adventures, and the narrator embodies the contemplative impulse of lyric.³ Brian Nellist goes further, and seems to attribute strong lyricality to the poem as a whole. He claims that reading *Don Juan* feels more like reading a sonnet sequence or *In Memoriam*, than like *The Prelude* or other long poems,⁴ implying that *Don Juan* is more lyrical than most long poems. *Don Juan* does have pronounced lyrical effects, which will be discussed in detail in the final section of this chapter. But Nellist's assertion is too strong: *The Prelude* contains more pervasive lyrical elements than does *Don Juan*, elements that will be examined in chapter 2.

The narrative elements of *Don Juan* are more obvious, and are very diverse. The label "epic" by no means exhausts the poem's generic possibilities. Some have called the poem novelistic; Michael Cooke, for instance, thinks "the poem falls somewhere between the picaresque and the *Bildungsroman*."⁵ McGann, however, locates the novelistic elements

2. Jerome McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), xiii. Every critic writing on *Don Juan* since owes a debt to McGann's work, and while I am no exception, my overall critical orientation differs from his. McGann claims, "*Don Juan* does not imagine itself, . . . it imagines the world. It is 'created' to clarify the world of men, rather than the world of poetic processes" (165). I, perhaps perversely from McGann's point of view, incorporate some of his findings but reapply them to the "world of poetic processes." That is, I am interested in what Byron's poem implies about the capabilities and limitations of literary modes, structures, and figures. For other discussions of *Don Juan*'s relation to epic and satire, see Harold Bloom, "Introduction," in *Lord Byron's Don Juan*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 13; Michael G. Cooke, *Acts of Inclusion: Studies Bearing on an Elementary Theory of Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 233; Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 222-23.

3. Peter J. Manning, "The Byronic Hero as Little Boy," in *Lord Byron's Don Juan*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 65.

4. Brian Nellist, "Lyric Presence in Byron from the *Tales* to *Don Juan*," in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, eds. Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), 43.

5. Cooke, 241.

and a sense of sustained narrative development in the final English cantos, rather than in the poem as a whole.⁶ In fact, the English cantos resemble a specific *kind* of novel; the setting in an old abbey and the appearance of the mysterious Black Friar invoke the Gothic tradition. The description of the siege at Ismail, though, reads like a historical novel in the tradition of Scott; Juan functions as an impressionable Waverly figure who is exposed to both sides of the battle (he consorts with the Turks but fights with the Russians) and who briefly interacts with historical figures (Suwarrow and, later, Catherine the Great).⁷ *Don Juan* also invokes a specific theatrical genre of “bedroom farce” in canto 1 when Julia lectures her husband while her lover hides in her bed.⁸ We find a subgenre of narrative poetry in canto 16, where, according to Stuart Curran, Byron puts forth and subverts romance conventions.⁹

What is the reader to make of this proliferation of genres? Curran has provided a perceptive description of its formal effects. He calls *Don Juan* “a tour de force of generic capaciousness,” which “realigns itself according to the conventions of one genre after another, analytically deconstructing each as to sufficiency or even adequacy, yet always, if obliquely, reinforcing them.”¹⁰ Indeed, *Don Juan* is almost a catalog of genres, in which each type is both embodied and parodied. The mere collection of so varied a range of genres, one after another, would be enough in itself to draw attention to generic conventions. But Byron augments this by having the narrator constantly note, analyze, and ridicule general poetic practices and the features of particular genres. They are exposed as arbitrary constructions, but they are employed within this poem nonetheless: they are both “deconstruct[ed]” and “reinfoc[ed].”¹¹ The cumulative effect of these highly visible and highly varied genres is a sense of playful multiplicity. But this is not the only notable feature of *Don Juan* which emphasizes multiplicity and exposes conven-

6. McGann, *Context*, 129.

7. These two characteristics are consistent with Georg Lukács’s description of Scott’s novels, which he sees as exemplars of the form. See *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 36, 39.

8. F. M. Doherty, “Byron and the Sense of the Dramatic,” in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, eds. Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), 226.

9. Curran, 191–92.

10. *Ibid.*, 198, 192.

11. This seems a specific instance of more general phenomena which prompt Jerome McGann to claim that “[Byron’s] work was invisible through deconstructive lenses exactly because it is a discourse of failure, plainly imperfect—a ‘spoiler’s art’ whose first aim is to spoil itself.” *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. James Soderholm (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14.

tions. Within each episode, each invoked genre, the course of the plot is multifarious, and it deconstructs some of the general assumptions and structures of narrative.

LABYRINTHINE PLOTS

Many theorists agree that what distinguishes a narrative from a mere series of events is the overall structure and meaning conferred by causation; events do not merely follow each other in time, they logically follow each other.¹² Of course, narratives do not require causation in the strong sense of scientific determinism, nor do they require the precise logic of mathematics or philosophy. Rather, they rely on conventionally held notions of what is probable, of everyday causes and effects, of what could reasonably result from a certain set of circumstances and actions.¹³ Causation is especially prominent in key plot moments, which Seymour Chatman has labeled “kernels”: “Kernels are narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events. They are nodes or hinges in the structure, branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths.”¹⁴ As is implied by Chatman’s language, a common metaphor for this model of narrative is a repeatedly forking path. Each fork represents an event with several possible outcomes, depicted by the branching paths. At each fork, only one path can be followed. As the narrative progresses, possible paths are foreclosed, and the remaining paths that could be followed are fewer and fewer. According to Chatman, “The working out of plot . . . is a process of declining or narrowing possibility. The choices become more and more limited, and the final choice seems not a choice at all, but an inevitability.”¹⁵ Early in a narrative, the reader can imagine many plausible plot developments and many possible dénouements, but late in the story the possible outcomes are fewer. The conclusion of a narrative ends the

12. For a more detailed discussion of critical debate on causation as a defining feature of narrative, see pages 7–8 of the Introduction.

13. In this respect, I think the causality of narrative is similar to Roland Barthes’s description of the notions of causality governing the proairetic code. I would add, however, elements from the cultural code to supplement the reader’s understanding of a plot’s causal development, and I think the enigmas of the hermeneutic code mark parts of the narrative’s causal chain that the reader does not yet understand, but will understand by the end of the narrative. See *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 18–21.

14. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 53.

15. *Ibid.*, 46.

reader's speculation about plot development, and provides one definitive plot path.

Typically, alternative plot paths are only vaguely implied, and are created when an active reader anticipates what might happen later in the narrative. *Don Juan*, however, explicitly describes plot paths that might have been taken but weren't. It contains numerous instances of what Gerald Prince calls the "disnarrated": "events that *do not* happen but, nonetheless, are referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text."¹⁶ Through this technique, Byron resists the process of declining possibilities, which characterizes most narratives. The poem contains instances of characters discussing missed opportunities and what might have been, as when Julia lists suitors to whom she could have succumbed but didn't.¹⁷ Not only does Julia contemplate the lost possibilities of the past; she also imagines future possibilities. While musing on the nature of her affection for Juan, she assumes she will be able to love him honorably, with no damage to her virtue, and she imagines that if her husband should happen to die, Juan will then be a suitable companion for her (1.81–85). Of course, this scenario does *not* happen, and the reader is left with a vivid description of a plot path the poem does not follow.

Even more numerous and conspicuous than characters' musings on what might have been are the narrator's comments on that topic. After Juan's unfortunate affair with the married Julia, the narrator says of his protagonist:

Had he but been placed at a public school,
 In the third form, or even in the fourth,
 His daily task had kept his fancy cool,
 At least, had he been nurtured in the north;
 (2.2)

Although the form of this statement is amusing, with its piling up of hypotheticals and its culminating qualification ("at least"), its content is not especially surprising. The narrator merely asserts that if, at a formative period in Juan's young life, his mother had reached a different decision on the important question of where to educate him, Juan's character might have been different. Despite the list of hypothetical conditions,

16. Gerald Prince, "The Disnarrated," *Style* 22.1 (Spring 1988): 2.

17. George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan*, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, vol. V, ed. Jerome McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 1.148–50. All subsequent citations are from this edition. Canto and stanza numbers will be provided parenthetically within the text.

the narrator provides scant details about this public school, compared to the elaborate description of Inez's idiosyncratic home schooling. He only vaguely describes the change it would later have produced in Juan, suggesting a general cooling in his character based on pseudo-ethnographic claims that national character is determined by climate (a frequent joke in the poem).

Elsewhere, the narrator does make surprisingly specific assertions about how events might have turned out differently. During Juan and Alfonso's scuffle, the narrator says of Alfonso's sword:

For Juan very luckily ne'er saw it;
 His temper not being under great command,
 If at that moment he had chanced to claw it,
 Alfonso's days had not been in the land
 Much longer. . . .
 (1.185)

Here a brief moment of imperception, someone not catching sight of an object, has literally life-or-death consequences. Moreover, the narrator seems sure of the result of this alternative plot; the hypothetical situation is stated so confidently that it almost gains the force of fact. The might-have-been feels almost as real as what was. This example is not an isolated one; rather, definitive statements about alternative plots are a common trope in the poem. In canto 2 the passengers try to prevent their ship from sinking by using cloth to stop the leaks, but the narrator declares:

all such ingredients
 Would have been vain, and they must have gone down,
 Despite of all their efforts and expedients,
 But for the pumps. . . .
 (2.29)

Again, the reader receives definitive information that lives were (temporarily) saved because of one object, one circumstance. This pattern is soon repeated when Juan swims toward Haidée's island and we are told, "Nor yet had he arrived but for the oar" (2.107). The details upon which the plot turns become farcically trivial in the bedroom scene in canto 1. After apologizing to his wife for accusing her of infidelity, Alfonso stumbles upon:

A pair of shoes!—what then? not much, if they
 Are such as fit with lady's feet, but these
 (No one can tell how much I grieve to say)
 Were masculine. . . .
 (1.181)

Because a certain pair of shoes belongs to a man rather than a woman, Alfonso is proven a cuckold, Julia is confined to a convent, and Juan is sent abroad in a doomed ship.

This repeated presentation of what might have been in *Don Juan* exposes the underlying structure of much narrative literature. The narrator points out turning points in the story (or "kernels," as Chatman calls them), and tells us what would have happened if a different plot path had been followed. This makes visible the structure of the plot, by making explicit not only what were the key moments in the story, but also what the results would have been if something else had happened then. Byron clearly sketches the forking path of the plot for the reader, showing us the assumptions about causality and narrowing possibility on which most narratives depend. As Gerald Prince claims of the disnarrated generally, "it makes explicit the logic at work in narrative whereby . . . every narrative function opens an alternative, a set of possible directions, and every narrative progresses by following certain directions as opposed to others: the disnarrated [are] choices not made, roads not taken."¹⁸ In the case of *Don Juan*, it is as if Byron wants to avoid the narrowing of possibilities on which narrative depends, as if he wants to keep options open after they have been foreclosed, as if he does not want to leave any road untaken.¹⁹ The result is a multitude of plot options kept before the reader's eyes, a tangle of narrative possibilities. *Don Juan's* narrative paths could be described as a set of forking paths folded in on themselves, nested within each other—as a labyrinth.²⁰

18. Prince, "Disnarrated," 5.

19. This seems in keeping with Jerome Christensen's comment that in *Don Juan* "improvisation should not be considered as the postponement of the moment of decision that must come—such is the closural logic proper to the theater and to the novel—but as the continual renewing of decisions that defer the decided." *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 246.

20. I am using the terms "labyrinth" and "maze" interchangeably. That is, I am using "labyrinth" in a broader sense that includes forked paths, rather than the narrower definition of "labyrinth" as a single path folded on itself, with only one route to follow. For a suggestive meditation on the labyrinth, in the narrower single-path sense, as a metaphor for narrative structures, see J. Hillis Miller, "Ariadne's Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line," in *Interpretation of Narrative*, ed. Mario J. Valdés and Owen J. Miller (Toronto:

The analogy between Byron's narrative and a maze is consistent with Byron's five references to "labyrinths" in *Don Juan*. The first appears in the narrator's long disquisition on the nature of his epic:

There's only one slight difference between
Me and my epic brethren gone before,

. . .

They so embellish, that 'tis quite a bore
Their labyrinth of fables to thread through,
Whereas this story's actually true.

(1.202)

Here a labyrinth explicitly refers to the construction of a narrative. The narrator's attempt to distance his own work from the labyrinthine nature of other epics obviously must be read ironically. When one of the most notoriously digressive narrators in literature argues against embellishment, we clearly cannot take him at face value. Rather, his own digressions and elaborations align him closely with the epic authors he criticizes, and suggest that his own narrative is just as winding a maze as theirs.²¹ Of course, his attempt to distinguish his epic based on its truth is also ironic: he opens the first canto by choosing as his hero an "ancient" figure from "pantomime" rather than a contemporary leader covered in the "gazettes" (1.1).

Elsewhere in the poem, labyrinths refer to structuring devices and key thematic elements of *Don Juan*. For instance, the harem episode contains the quip:

'Tis time we should return to plain narration,
And thus my narrative proceeds:—Dudù,
With every kindness short of ostentation,
Shewed Juan, or Juanna, through and through
This labyrinth of females . . .

(6.57)

This maze contains beautiful women, a wealth of possible erotic objects for Juan's desire. It is precisely Juan's string of romances that comes

University of Toronto Press, 1978): 148–66.

21. Jane Stabler adopts the rhetoric of labyrinths and possible paths to describe the reader's process of following (or not following) the possible digressions offered by allusions in *Don Juan*. See *Byron, Poetics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11, 128, 133, 167.

closest to unifying the poem; almost every episode contains a new romantic liaison.²² The poem itself could easily be described as a maze of females, a tangle of Juan's various romantic relationships. Such a reading is strengthened by a second labyrinth reference during the harem episode:

Oh enviable Briareus! with thy hands
 And heads, if thou hadst all things multiplied
 In such proportion!—But my Muse withstands
 The giant thought of being a Titan's bride,
 Or travelling in Patagonian lands;
 So let us back to Lilliput, and guide
 Our hero through the labyrinth of love
 In which we left him several lines above.
 (6.28)

Again the poem associates labyrinths with romantic entanglements, and here the link to narrative structure is more explicit. The narrator says he will guide Juan through "the labyrinth of love," and in guiding the hero through the harem, the narrator also guides the hero through the story. The analogy of the maze thus functions on both a thematic and structural level. In the larger context of this stanza, the reference to Briareus, who had one hundred hands and fifty heads, immediately follows the narrator's wish that he could kiss all the women in the world at once. This places the labyrinth reference in the context of a desire for multiplicity, an unwillingness to choose one option over others. Such an association is quite appropriate to a metaphor for the narrative structure of *Don Juan*. Byron's repeated presentation of hypothetical plots, his assertions of what might have been but was not, shows an interest in keeping a multiplicity of possible plots juxtaposed and suspended. His labyrinthine narrative keeps all plot paths present and tightly compacted, wound round each other.

We are left with the final two references to labyrinths, both involving philosophy, another recurrent theme of the poem. The narrator laments, "But I'm relapsing into metaphysics, / That labyrinth" (12.72). Although

22. One possible exception is the shipwreck episode; if it is isolated from the rest of canto 2, the shipwreck incident has no romantic interest beyond Juan's lamentations for Julia, which are interrupted by a bout of seasickness. It does seem significant, however, that canto 2 also introduces Juan's greatest love, Haidée. A second possible exception is the Ismail episode. The siege does result, however, in Juan's (admittedly Platonic) relationship with the orphan Leila. And even here there may be a sexual charge, a suggestion that in a few years when she comes of age, Leila might be a temptation to Juan.

non? One possible interpretation is suggested by Jerome McGann; while his account is insightful, it gives us only half the picture. He notes the prevalence in canto 1 of characters imagining possible futures and laying plans for bringing them into existence: "Donna Inez and all the characters in the first episode have their own designs and purposes on the events, but nothing turns out as any of them had hoped or expected."²⁴ McGann extrapolates the characters' lack of success in anticipating the future into a general principle of the poem:

This pattern of unforeseen consequences operates throughout *Don Juan* . . . and it is based upon Byron's assessment of his own life as well as the general idea that too many factors impinge upon an event for anyone to be able to know at the time what it means, or where it will lead. And after the event, in the apparent security of retrospective understanding, the chains of causation and relationship which one perceives represent themselves not as the operation of necessary order but as a bizarre series of coincidental linkages. The result of a Byronic narrative in *Don Juan* is not even retrospectively a sense of probabilities but of achieved possibilities. Not everything has been assimilated, and the narrative line, as a result, seems factive rather than fictive. Events might have been otherwise, and with just as much reason, but they weren't.²⁵

This seems an accurate description of the characters' experience of the poem: the characters are at the mercy of "unforeseen consequences,"

implied alternative plots in stanzas 1.142, 1.144, 1.172, 2.35, and 2.105. These are in addition to the examples discussed above. The later cantos tend to describe multiple, mutually exclusive plot paths through different methods. Stanza 17.12, for instance, leaves unresolved "Whether his [Juan's] virtue triumphed—or, at length, / His vice" in the previous night's encounter with the Duchess of Fitz-Fulke. The narrator also leaves unresolved the nature and extent of Juan's friendship with Adeline because it "keeps the atrocious reader in *suspense*" (14.97). He teases us by saying, "It is not clear that Adeline and Juan / Will fall; but if they do, 'twill be their ruin" (14.99). Rather than describing during or after the fact what could have happened but definitely didn't, here the narrator describes two possible future outcomes without deciding between them. Here the effect on the reader is, as Byron claims, suspense about future events, a reader response much more associated with narrative than with lyric. Stanzas 6.119–20 are an intermediate case, since at the time of the stanzas it is unresolved which plot path will be taken, but the subsequent canto resolves the plot. For the importance of suspense in narrative, see, for example, Meir Sternberg's discussion of suspense, curiosity, and surprise in narrative in "Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity," *Poetics Today* 13.3 (Fall 1992): 463–540. See also Peter Brooks's discussion of "the anticipation of retrospection" in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 23.

24. McGann, *Context*, 101.

25. *Ibid.*

and a pattern of contingency and coincidence operates throughout the poem. The poem's characters are unaware of the "chains of causation" binding them as they act; causation can be understood only after the fact. In McGann's view, the narrator may have a retrospective understanding of the events, and confidently assert some of the details that were crucial for events turning out as they did (the presence of the pumps on the ship, for instance, or the masculine nature of the shoes). Yet the narrator's greater wisdom is not accompanied by greater choice: he has no control over how the events did play out.²⁶

McGann's reading has been very influential, inspiring subsequent critics to pursue political readings of Byron's depiction of contingency and causation.²⁷ Nonetheless, McGann's analysis of events that might have been otherwise depends upon a key assumption, which, as we shall see, does not hold true throughout the poem. McGann treats the narrator as a character interacting with the other characters, emphasizing the moments of greatest distance between the narrator and Byron. In that case, the narrator experiences many of the same limitations as the other characters, and is just as subject to the contingency of the world he describes. Whether or not we agree with this analysis depends upon whether the poem favors chance or choice, and whether it emphasizes the narrator-as-character or narrator-as-author. As I hope to show, *Don Juan* is playfully inconsistent and does both. In many instances, the poem emphasizes the narrator's freedom and portrays him as having authorial choice. Contrary to McGann's reading, the narrator could decide that events be otherwise. Of course, this freedom is not absolute:

26. Peter J. Manning also claims the narrator cannot control the events in the poem, but explains it through the stability of Juan's character, rather than the contingency and coincidence within the represented world: "For stanza after stanza [the narrator] abandons Juan to pursue his own interests, yet in regard to the story he often claims that he would rather have had matters otherwise but cannot deviate from the facts. This fixity corresponds with the fixity of Juan's character; it is only the telling that Byron can make protean." *Byron and His Fictions* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), 220.

27. Most notably, Jerome Christensen discusses illusory notions of consent influenced by commercial culture, political ideology, religious belief, and gender norms; and James Chandler examines the interrelation of intelligibility, causation, political causes, and historical cases in *Don Juan*. See Christensen, 214–57, and James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 350–88. Whereas Christensen adopts oppositional rhetoric to distance his own position from McGann's, Chandler explicitly acknowledges his debt to McGann and to Christensen. I agree with Chandler's assessment that Christensen's approach is more similar to McGann's than Christensen's rhetoric suggests. See Chandler, 357–58. Jane Stabler has also discussed contingency and risk in *Don Juan*, with an emphasis on the siege cantos, economics, Byron's publishing practices, and Shakespearean allusion. Stabler, 121–35.

there are historical, ideological, and legal constraints on Byron and on the narrator he uses as his mouthpiece. For instance, Gary Dyer has rightly warned us that “[t]o call the style of *Don Juan* versatility or virtuosity is too voluntaristic and too celebratory,” because the poem’s polyglossia often encodes material dangerous to its author.²⁸ There are also practical constraints imposed by the needs of the discourse. Despite the narrator’s suggestions of Juan’s precarious situation in the shipwreck, the pumps and the oar *must* save him; for if Juan died in canto 2, even *this* narrator’s powers of digression would be hard-pressed to continue the poem to epic lengths without its eponymous hero.²⁹ Nevertheless, I wish to explore the freedom that *is* available to the narrator and author. By doing so, I do not intend to dismiss or refute McGann’s reading, but rather to supplement it, because *Don Juan* alternately invites both of these readings.³⁰

McGann’s reading gains support from the narrator’s many comments on chance. During the siege of Ismail, the narrator says that “Juan, by some strange chance . . . By one of those odd turns of Fortune’s tides,” is separated from his comrades and left to fight alone (8.27). Even if the wheel of Fortune reference is taken as an invocation of a controlling higher power, its operation is random and indistinguishable from “strange chance.” According to the narrator, luck operates in the drawing room as well as on the battlefield. After describing the Amundevilles’ guests, who have avoided public disgrace and been given good standing in high society, the narrator comments, “I can’t exactly trace their rule of right, / Which hath a little leaning to a lottery” (13.82). And if the characters’ world seems ruled not by the gods but rather by chance, then so, by his own admission, does the narrator’s world. He says of dreams:

28. Gary Dyer, “Thieves, Boxers, Sodomites, Poets: Being Flash to Byron’s *Don Juan*,” *PMLA* 116.3 (May 2001): 574.

29. Peter Manning notes an instance when the narrator himself exposes the link between an untimely death for Juan and an untimely end for the poem: “The narrator misses no chance to underscore the artifice of his narrative, often by the most obvious devices: ‘Lambro presented, and one instant more / Had stopped this Canto, and Don Juan’s breath’ (IV, 42).” Manning, *Byron and His Fictions*, 228. While Manning observes that these lines expose the poem’s artifice, he does not relate them to the larger phenomenon of the poem repeatedly mentioning plot paths it does not pursue.

30. I thus agree with Michael O’Neill’s comment that “there is a fascinating tug between *Don Juan*’s impulse to draw experience into itself and its desire to suggest that it is being shaped by, rather than shaping, what *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* calls ‘Circumstance, that unspiritual god’ (IV, 125).” Michael O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 101.

I've known some odd ones which seemed really planned
 Prophetically, or that which one deems
 'A strange coincidence,' to use a phrase
 By which such things are settled now-a-days.
 (6.78)

Fate, the planning of the gods, has been replaced in the narrator's skeptical society by the mundane vagaries of chance. Finally, chance is also said to influence the way the narrator treats the characters. He lists people in Lord Henry's party and then admits, "I have named a few, not foremost in degree, / But ta'en at hazard as the rhyme may run" (13.83). The reign of randomness often seems to apply equally to the narrator and the characters. In this context, the narrator seems to be part of the same world as the characters, and is perceived to be yet another character internal to the story, rather than an author figure controlling the story. The poem can be read as creating a full, self-consistent world which mirrors and comments upon Byron's own. These discussions of chance in the text thus support the treatment of the narrator as character necessary for McGann's interpretation, and his emphasis on *Don Juan* as a critique of the world.

Despite the seeming randomness of the plot the poem takes (at the exclusion of other plots which are mentioned), and despite the narrator's frequent remarks about chance, other narratorial remarks imply that other forms of causation are at work within the poem. At times, the narrator attributes agency to the characters, and ascribes surprising events not to chance but rather to the characters' free will. In the English cantos, the narrator provides this suggestive analogy: "Good company's a chess-board—there are kings, / Queens, bishops, knights, rooks, pawns; the world's a game; / Save that the puppets pull at their own strings" (13.89). The world may have the appearance of a game governed by chance or by the inscrutable machinations of a higher power, but the participants in the game move themselves. One reason that will sometimes masquerades as chance is given in this characterization of Adeline:

The Lady Adeline Amundeville;
 The fair most fatal Juan ever met,
 Although she was not evil, nor meant ill;
 But Destiny and Passion spread the net,
 (Fate is a good excuse for our own will)

And caught them;—what do they *not* catch, methinks?
 But I'm not Oedipus, and life's a Sphinx.
 (13.12)

If “fate is a good excuse for our own will,” then perhaps chance is an equally good excuse, especially since the poem so often blurs chance and fate, seeing the former as a skeptical age’s name for the latter. While human will may technically be free, it functions as a net that entraps us because intentions can so easily be divorced from results. Adeline “was not evil, nor meant ill,” but she is potentially “fatal” to Juan. She is a prime example that in *Don Juan* “too many factors impinge upon an event for anyone to be able to know at the time what it means, or where it will lead.”³¹ So many factors impinge, so many other people’s wills clash with hers, that Adeline is unable to predict the results of even her own choices. Indeed, the poem suggests that the world is so complex that it is often difficult even to recognize free will at work; it is due to this complexity that life is a Sphinx whose riddle can never be answered.

The assertion that “Passion” helped “spread the net” for Adeline is important; *Don Juan* presents the passions as especially obscure and ungovernable manifestations of willfulness. Not only do characters unadvisedly act on their emotions in an unreflective way, but they also willfully deceive themselves about the nature of those emotions. (Julia’s ‘Platonic’ passion for Juan springs to mind.) Gulbeyaz provides an obvious example of acting according to passion, with unfortunate results. The narrator says of her:

Gulbeyaz rose from restlessness; and pale
 As Passion rises, with its bosom worn,
 . . .
 The nightingale that sings with the deep thorn,
 Which Fable places in her breast of Wail,
 Is lighter far of heart and voice than those
 Whose headlong passions form their proper woes.

And that’s the moral of this composition,
 If people would but see its real drift;—
 (6.87–88)

31. McGann, *Context*, 101.

The story of Philomela's rape, mutilation, and transformation into a forever-wailing nightingale is, perhaps, the ultimate tale of suffering. But Byron presents Philomela's sorrow as less extreme than Gulbeyaz's, because he thinks the victims of another's violent will are better off than those who willfully, actively pursue their own passions to miserable ends.³² Viewed in this context, Juan's passivity is a positive quality, a possible solution for avoiding the torments of misplaced will. A second possible solution is a better understanding of the likely consequences prior to acting on passion. In *Don Juan*, with its unpredictable complexity, this solution is not available, at least, not for the characters in the poem. The many comments on their inability to anticipate outcomes, or to understand causes, form a sharp contrast with the narrator's confident assertions of why the plot happened as it did, and how the plot would have changed if certain details had been different. The narrator's coy remark "I'm not Oedipus" is disingenuous; taken as an authorial figure, the narrator can answer the riddles of his own poem.³³ The many comments on the inscrutability of characters' wills have the paradoxical effect of highlighting the great power of the narrator's and author's wills over their story. Passivity might be the only answer available for Juan, but the narrator can demonstrate remarkable activity and control in the creation of Juan's story, as when he teases the reader with

What further hath befallen or may befall
The hero of this grand poetic riddle,
I by and by may tell you, if at all.
But now I choose to break off in the middle.
(8.139)

The decision of whether to view the narrator as another character (facing similar limitations on his knowledge and control), or to view

32. According to Edith Hamilton, in the original Greek myth Philomela was turned into a swallow. Her sister Procne took revenge on her husband, the rapist, and Procne was transformed into a nightingale. Subsequent Roman tradition switched the final fates of the sisters, and in English poetry, the nightingale is identified with Philomela. Byron seems to be following the English tradition, since the meaning of the passage clearly suggests the nightingale is a passive victim, not the active avenger that Procne was. See Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (New York: Mentor Books, 1940), 270–71.

33. James Chandler discusses the tendency in *Don Juan* for Byron to disclaim knowledge of causes, and reads it as a parody of Wordsworth's "The Thorn," which contains lines like "I cannot tell; I wish I could." Chandler, 360–62. He also notes contrasting examples of "the jokes of a narrator who is in fact quite cavalier about the problem of identifying causes behind what he observes," examples which show "Byron[']s . . . unqualified confidence in his talent for lucid explanation." Chandler, 363.

the narrator as an author figure (who controls the course of events in the poem), affects the reader's assessment of the poem's many alternate plot paths. McGann's interpretation of the effect of the poem's might-have-beens on the reader depends on viewing the narrator as a character who experiences the same limitations as other characters. There are, of course, moments in which the narrator claims to have known the participants in the story, as when he angrily complains that the young Juan doused him with water (1.24), when he asserts that he actually saw the devil take Juan (1.203), or when he claims to have eaten dinner at the Amundevilles' home (16.81). Byron also sometimes portrays the narrator as a character distinct from himself; for instance, the narrator claims to be unmarried and childless (1.22) and says he does not speak English well (2.165). In addition, Byron's abandoned preface to the first cantos makes an elaborate pretense of supposing the narrator to be a specific person (who is not Byron) in specific circumstances. If the narrator is viewed as on the same level as the other inhabitants of the poem's world, then the tenuous causal relations he describes are understood as evidence of how the world portrayed in the poem functions, and by analogy, how Byron's world functions. We would agree with McGann that all of the possible (but untaken) plot paths described have the primary function of reminding us of the haphazardness of the world. *Don Juan* would then resemble a mimetic text that "resort[s] to the disnarrated mainly on the level of story . . . in order to emphasize that the world presented is modeled in terms of reality rather than convention."³⁴ And if we stay immersed in the level of story, the many might-have-beens may create brief suspense about the plot, or heighten our interest in what actually happens in the narrative.

There are, however, numerous moments when the narrator explicitly comments on his activity of writing a fictitious poem, as when he discusses selecting as his hero the Juan of "ancient" stories and current "pantomime[s]" (1.1), and when he requests that the reader "recollect the work is only fiction" (11.88).³⁵ At times, the narrator also strongly resembles the biographical Byron; for instance, he alludes to having written *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1.212) and *Cain* (11.56) and says he swam the Hellespont (2.105). To ignore the narrator's authority

34. Prince, "Disnarrated," 6.

35. According to Peter J. Manning, "By unveiling the artificiality of his own procedures Byron displays the fictiveness of language generally and the delicate and complex consensus through which it is preserved," a consensus which depends upon literary and historical precedents and contexts. I focus on artificiality's relationship to lyric timelessness, rather than to the history of language. See "*Don Juan* and Byron's Imperceptiveness to the English Word," *Studies in Romanticism* 18.2 (Summer 1979): 229.

over his fiction, or his alignment with Byron, runs contrary to much of the poem. But Byron's multiple plot lines have an additional effect on the reader, one that shifts our focus away from knowledge of the world. By presenting the reader with what might have been in addition to what was, the poem allows for two contradictory responses, and invites both of them.

If we treat the narrator as having authorial control, or if we instead focus on the implied author, then all of the poem's might-have-beens are seen as alternative plots that the poem could have followed but did not.³⁶ The responsibility for events turning out as they did is placed not on the quirky and unpredictable ways of the world, but rather on authorial choice. The focus shifts from the chance happenings within the story, to the artistic decisions made by the narrator and author at the level of discourse. In a discussion of self-referentiality in poetry, Jonathan Culler has remarked, "A work's self-descriptions do not produce closure or self-possession but an impossible and therefore open-ended process of self-framing."³⁷ In *Don Juan* we find the reverse scenario of impossible and open-ended proliferation creating a sense of self-referentiality. Read this way, the poem resembles an "explicitly metafictional text [which] resorts to the disnarrated mainly on the level of discourse in order to insist on its own artificiality."³⁸ This attention to authorial choice and control may provide the reader with a more satisfying framework for viewing the poem than if we focus exclusively on the characters' viewpoints. Events within the poem are so coincidental that the world inhabited by the characters seems to lack comprehensible laws of cause and effect, and if incidents cannot be explained within the world of the story, then the reader may look for explanations within the world of discourse. The narrator can provide answers: the characters may be unable to comprehend cause and effect, but the narrator is often definitive on that topic, to a degree that can only be attributed to an authorial figure. The more contingency the characters experience, the greater the author's and narrator's control seems to be. We acknowledge that "events might have been otherwise, and with just as much reason, but they weren't," but instead of attributing this to the "bizarre series of coincidental linkages" within the characters' world, we can attribute it to the narrator's

36. For the distinctions among narrator, implied author, and historical (or real) author, see Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 70–76.

37. Jonathan Culler, "Changes in the Study of the Lyric," in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, eds. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 52.

38. Prince, "Disnarrated," 6.

or to Byron's choices in creating this fictional world.³⁹ The seeming arbitrariness of the author's choice further emphasizes his willfulness, and his agency. All of the narrator's statements about what characters might have done (but didn't) remind the reader of other poems he might have written, and of the arbitrariness of this fictive creation.⁴⁰

Crucially, this focus on the constructedness of the poem creates an awareness of time as a suspended moment of composition, which, in turn, creates the impression of lyric timelessness. That is, by laying bare its narrative conventions, *Don Juan* creates lyrical effects. A reader who focuses on authorial choice and the level of discourse will turn his or her attention away from the temporal development of the plot path that is taken, and instead directs attention to the key moment that could have led to several possible developments, and on the selection process through which the author chose one plot over many others.⁴¹ In terms

39. McGann, *Context*, 101. McGann is, of course, aware of the frequent alignment between author and narrator in *Don Juan*, even referring to "Byron the narrator." *Context*, 117. He also suggests that Byron uses episodes as experiments in social interactions, but he seems to limit Byron's agency to choosing the initial conditions for each experiment, as though the subsequent results were out of his control. *Context*, 116–31. Perhaps this (limited) authorial agency is what provokes Jerome Christensen's critique that *Don Juan in Context* presents Byron as "a humanistic poet who is the master strategist of his poem, who thematizes contingency and pays lip service to the 'god circumstance,' but who, ironically, occupies a standing place of transcendental freedom outside the 'array' from which he, designing agent, can artfully dispose accident, contingency, and circumstance to the greater glory of Byron, 'properly so-called.' In my reading the unfolding of *Juan* is fully circumstantial, subject to no master plan." Christensen, 215. In effect, Christensen makes McGann's position sound much closer to mine (since I emphasize the freedom available to the author and narrator as designing agents). But I believe that, in doing so, Christensen distorts McGann's analysis. It is difficult to accept, for instance, Christensen's implication that McGann sees *Don Juan* as subject to Byron's master plan, when McGann explicitly argues that Byron has no such plan for the poem: "Byron, the god of his poem, is a local deity, and he has neither a prevenient sense of his poem's order nor a retrospective comprehension of that order." *Context*, 116. More recently, McGann has said of *Don Juan*, "the writing will not—indeed, cannot—achieve anything but provisory and limited control over its own materials." *Byron and Romanticism*, 130.

40. Despite this difference with McGann, I am not alone in the assertion that a work's focus on plot paths that it does not take produces an acute awareness of its fictional status. Peter Brooks has noticed similar phenomena in Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir*. Both the protagonist, Julien Sorrel, and the narrator think about hypothetical plots and comment on what would have happened if only a certain circumstance were different. As Brooks describes it, "Constantly referring to . . . the missed chances and might-have-beens, the narrator repeatedly adumbrates other novels, texts of the might-have-been-written. This obtrusive narrator . . . claims to demonstrate why things necessarily happened the way they did, yet inevitably he suggests the arbitrariness and contingency of every narrative turn of events, how easily it might have been otherwise." See Brooks, 75.

41. Anne K. Mellor also notes *Don Juan's* movement between narrative past and lyric present: "Time never stands still, but arbitrarily shifts about. Beginning in the present tense with Southey's fall and the narrator's pressing need of a hero, the poem then leaps into the

borrowed from Structuralism, the reader is led to concentrate on the paradigmatic rather than the syntagmatic axis. He or she focuses on a realm of multiple possibilities for a given narrative opening, considered out of time, rather than the progression in time from one selected possibility to another. This momentarily derails the temporal progression of narrative and creates a lyric timelessness; it also emphasizes the act of selection, and hence the lyric time of discourse in which the narrator and author make this selection.

While the poem invites attention to both the world of the story and the narrator's creation of discourse, the narrator strengthens the latter reading by insinuating himself in some descriptions of alternate plots. When he reveals the shoes in Julia's bedroom are masculine he claims, "I grieve to say" the news (1.181). And after declaring the pumps temporarily saved Juan's ship, the narrator comments, "I'm glad to make them known / To all the brother tars who may have need hence" (2.29). The poem's lyricism is not restricted to its labyrinthine plot, though. Lyrical effects are also created by the ironic tension between characters' dialogue and subsequent events, and by Byron's distinctive use of similes. In addition, the narrator himself often draws our attention to the act of composition, and hence to the lyric presentness of *Don Juan*, through explicit descriptions of himself, addresses to the reader, and comments on his writing process.

IRONICALLY FULFILLED DECLARATIONS

Don Juan's peculiar comments on chance and volition have more repercussions than I have discussed thus far. They also have a strange influence on the importance (or rather, unimportance) of motivation in the poem, and on the ironic fulfillment of some of the characters' declarations. For *Don Juan's* characters, intentions and motives are no guarantee of results; too many other factors impinge for the intended result to match the actual result. The reverse is also true: a given result cannot be definitive evidence of the motive behind it.⁴² Given this disjunction

past tense to create its fictive plot, the life and loves of Don Juan." The poem "[r]epeatedly pass[es] from fictive past to authorial present and back again." *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 42. The labyrinthine plots I describe, however, do not merely leap from Juan's past to an explicit description of the narrator's present. Rather, they create a sense of lyric presence through the very description of Juan's past possibilities.

42. Peter Manning notes that Juan refuses Gulbeyaz out of pride rather than virtue and suggests "Byron's satire is a reminder that actions give no clue to motives." Manning,

between actions and motives, the poem places much greater importance on the former. The narrator emphatically declares, "I hate a motive" (14.58), and then goes on to say:

'Tis sad to hack into the roots of things;
 They are so much intertwined with the earth:
 So that the branch a goodly verdure flings,
 I reckon not if an acorn gave it birth.
 To trace all actions to their secret springs
 Would make indeed some melancholy mirth;
 But this is not at present my concern,
 And I refer you to wise Oxenstiern.
 (14.59)

"Wise Oxenstiern" reportedly told his son that kingdoms are governed by folly, that great things arise from petty causes. This is why tracing the "secret springs" of actions would produce "melancholy mirth." Root causes are "intertwisted" and hence difficult to disentangle, and even if they are successfully uncovered and separated, they often yield disappointing information. Such a search for motivation "is not at present [the narrator's] concern," which implies that at another time, it might be. The narrator is capable of scrutinizing motives in a way the characters are not, but Byron presents this as unproductive work, and usually chooses to leave the characters' motivations ambiguous or completely unaddressed. If the characters in *Don Juan* are often described as two-dimensional, then it seems their flatness results from the author's deliberate choice to avoid interiority. Another consequence of the general uncertainty of characters' motivations is a correspondent uncertainty about whether or not characters are successful in acting out their intentions. This, combined with Juan's almost complete passivity, creates an overarching sense that no one in the poem can effectively realize his or her intentions.

There is one very odd subset of these phenomena. There are several instances in *Don Juan* of a character's words uncannily foreshadowing subsequent events. Although his or her words appear to be prescient,

"Byronic Hero," 58. Tom Mole goes further, and claims that *Don Juan* as a whole shows that "because the deep subject is not legible to onlookers, other people's motivations cannot be reliably assayed." More generally, Mole argues that although Byron's celebrity depended on a modern notion of subjectivity that assumed interiority (including motivation) was legible, in *Don Juan* Byron turned against the basis of his own popular success to expose this thinking as cant. See *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007): 143.

the ensuing reality runs contrary to the speaker's intent. Here, too, intention can not be successfully enacted. In some of these cases, the words are used rhetorically but are manifested literally. One of the most prominent examples occurs when Lambro returns and confronts Juan: "Young man, your sword;" so Lambro once more said: / Juan replied, 'Not while this arm is free'" (4.40). Juan does not give up his sword. He fights instead, but is injured and defeated by Lambro's men, surviving only to become a slave. Juan thus purposefully fulfills the intended meaning of his oath by not surrendering, but he also suffers the contrary state invoked by his oath: he is no longer a free man when they deprive him of his sword. His words become reality too literally, beyond the bounds of his actual intention. His own rhetoric seems to have turned against him.

The same scene contains a second example of this phenomenon. When Lambro has a pistol aimed at Juan, Haidée steps between them and says, "On me . . . let death / Descend—the fault is mine . . ." (4.42). Although Lambro does not shoot Haidée, she suffers a paroxysm at the sight of Juan's injuries. After a few weeks of wasting away, she dies of grief at being separated from Juan. Presumably, Haidée asks for death to descend on her rather than Juan for rhetorical effect, to convince her father to spare them both. Her words, however, are literally enacted in the text, for Juan lives but she does not. Of course, in both these cases, the poem offers naturalistic explanations of these results. Lambro is responsible for selling Juan into slavery, and since we are told he has a history of treating unexpected guests this way, we should not be surprised. Haidée's fate is rather melodramatic, but her demise can be attributed to psychological and physiological factors: she has no will to live and hence refuses to eat. And yet Juan's and Haidée's words seem like premonitions. The paucity of direct quotation in the poem draws even more attention to their speech; when dialogue is given, it stands out. Thus, the reader's focus may shift away from actual relations of cause and effect and move toward the ironic tension between Juan's and Haidée's words and a reality that runs contrary to each speaker's intent.

The reverse situation, a rhetorical statement that is followed by the opposite of its literal meaning yet the fulfillment of the speaker's intent, might occur in Julia and Juan's first sexual encounter. The narrator says of Julia, "A little still she strove, and much repented, / And whispering 'I will ne'er consent'—consented" (1.117). If we take Julia to be conscious of consenting at the time she speaks, then her words become an empty rhetorical gesture, a necessary but disingenuous attempt to retain

a semblance of virtue. In this case, the literal opposite of her words is quickly fulfilled, which is exactly what Julia wants. An equally plausible interpretation, however, is that Julia is still deceiving herself about her relationship with Juan, and literally (if briefly) means what she says when she declares she won't consent.

Given this interpretation of Julia, then her statement fits with other cases in which words are used literally by their speaker but are followed by events contrary to their meaning. A somewhat less ambiguous example is Juan's protest to Gulbeyaz: "The prison'd eagle will not pair, nor I / Serve a sultana's sensual phantasy" (5.126). Juan resists her charms, but he soon after serves an empress's sensual fantasies when he becomes Catherine the Great's favorite. As does Michael G. Cooke, "We [too] can appreciate the irony of Juan's defying Gulbeyaz with his profession that love is for the free, and then literally fighting his way into the moral and physical subjection and exhaustion of the Empress Catherine's boudoir."⁴³ Juan's assertion of his will is momentarily successful, but seriously undermined a few cantos later. The most striking case of a declaration (and its speaker's intention) being undermined by subsequent events, is uttered by Juan later in the poem. As he approaches London, he muses aloud on England's merits:

'Here laws are all inviolate; none lay
Traps for the traveller; every highway's clear:
Here—he was interrupted by a knife,
With, 'Damn your eyes! your money or your life!'
(11.10)

Immediately after declaring England free of highwaymen, Juan is attacked by one.

Given that these utterances form a recurring pattern in the poem, the question remains, what is their overall effect on the reader? If we were to adopt McGann's approach to the poem, then they would serve as a commentary upon the world, as reminders of the unpredictability of human affairs, of unforeseen events and failed intentions. But I believe these ironically realized statements are also strong reminders of Byron's control over his poem. The heavy irony and incredible coincidences of these strange declarations call attention to themselves, and they can be read as evidence of the author's intervention and the author's sense of humor. I agree with Brian Nellist that "Byron's authority as poet is

43. Cooke, 235.

constantly manifest to us in the process of reading his work,"⁴⁴ and in these cases his authority is especially prominent. Since these phenomena are linguistic, they point even more heavily toward the author, a particularly able word-user. The seeming force of the characters' words to materialize themselves intensifies our awareness of the poet's ability to construct a fictional world with words. Again, our attention is drawn to the lyric time of discourse.

PROLIFERATING SIMILES

Don Juan also manifests a surprising multiplicity, and draws explicit attention to the author's whim in its construction, on the small scale of figurative language. Similes in particular provide concentrated examples of some of the poem's most important and unusual characteristics. Multiplicity is especially prominent in the following passage:

The evaporation of a joyous day
 Is like the last glass of champagne, without
 The foam which made its virgin bumper gay;
 Or like a system coupled with a doubt;
 Or like a soda bottle when its spray
 Has sparkled and let half its spirit out;
 Or like a billow left by storms behind,
 Without the animation of the wind;

Or like an opiate which brings troubled rest,
 Or none, or like—like nothing that I know
 Except itself;—such is the human breast;
 A thing, of which similitudes can show
 No real likeness . . .

(16.9–10)

Here Byron provides five possible vehicles for one tenor in the extended simile. Their status as a list of alternatives is made more conspicuous by the anaphora of "or" beginning a line five times. Byron couples two rhetorical devices which, individually, call attention to their own construction: anaphora is a structuring device which exposes its operation through its prominent placing, and simile announces itself, and keeps

44. Nellist, 39.

its literal element structurally distinct from its metaphorical element, through its use of “like” or “as.” I discuss the significance of this clear separation between vehicle and tenor in chapter 3, but in the case of *Don Juan* a simile’s obtrusiveness is its more relevant feature. Here, the combination of simile and anaphora makes the author’s craft and playfulness even more obvious.

Although Byron’s extreme use of simile calls pointed attention to how the device functions, it also undermines the very function that gives the device its name—its creation of similitude. With each alternative he piles on, Byron implies that the vehicles he has already provided are insufficient, that they are unable to convey fully the desired characteristic of the tenor.⁴⁵ In the end, he must admit that the tenor is “like nothing that I know / Except itself.” The form this admission takes plays wonderfully against its content. The phrase begins in a line that contains “or” twice, repeats “like” immediately after itself, and has the two negatives “none” and “nothing” alliterate with “know.” In short, this line asserts radical uniqueness but is full of repetition. The arrival of “except itself” in the following line, and its freedom from repetition, recuperates the individuality that was just undermined. After five failed comparisons and one assertion of similarity through identity, the stanza abandons simile and instead invokes “the human breast.” It only now becomes clear that the “evaporation of a joyous day” was itself a metaphor for the melancholy born from fleeting joy (though one may have noted earlier that the word “evaporation” is used metaphorically in the similes’ tenor, and that its literal meaning may have influenced the choice of liquids in several of the vehicles). “The human breast” stands in metonymic relation to the melancholy (and to the other emotions) it contains, and is then placed in apposition with the category of things “of which similitudes can show / No real likeness”—but the narrator does not say how large a category that may be.

One end result of Byron’s flurry of vehicles and the failure of simile is a conviction of the uniqueness of their tenor, its dissimilarity from everything else. A sense of uniqueness does not only adhere to the tenor, however; the terms in the list of vehicles are taken from such wide-ranging sources that the trait they share may become less important than

45. Erik Gray suggests that lists of similes are “essentially self-destructive,” yet in some contexts a list of similes “represent[s] a movement away from perfect likeness—each new vehicle weakens similitude,” while in other cases “[t]he same device . . . represents the opposite movement, a faithful aspiration toward perfection, though always eventually futile.” Erik Gray, “Faithful Likenesses: Lists of Similes in Milton, Shelley, and Rossetti,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 48.4 (Winter 2006): 292, 304.

their diversity. J. Drummond Bone says of the lists scattered throughout *Beppo*, "The reader does not experience randomness, but does experience the sense of a multiplicity of things surprisingly allowed to be only themselves."⁴⁶ This, I think, holds equally true of the lists of similes in *Don Juan*: they give us a profound sense of individuality within multiplicity.

If some of Byron's similes show the breakdown of comparison, others use this very insufficiency to undertake a different kind of comparative task. The transition from one form to the other is illustrated by his attempts to describe Gulbeyaz's anger:

Suppose, but you already have supposed,
 The spouse of Potiphar, the Lady Booby,
 Phedra, and all which story has disclosed
 Of good examples . . .

. . .

But when you have supposed the few we know,
 You can't suppose Gulbeyaz' angry brow.

A tigress robb'd of young, a lioness,
 Or any interesting beast of prey,
 Are similes at hand for the distress
 Of ladies who cannot have their own way;
 But though my turn will not be served with less,
 These don't express one half what I should say.
 (5.131–32)

Here we are given two separate lists of vehicles all for one tenor, and both are followed by explicit admissions of their failure. Supposing various scorned women from fiction will be insufficient for supposing Gulbeyaz's angry expression, and beasts of prey also fall short in conjuring her ferocity. But the narrator's confession, "Though my turn will not be served with less, / These don't express one half what I should say," points the way toward the success of his lists. The comparisons do not state an exact equivalence between tenor and vehicle, but they are comparative in the sense of the grammatical comparative degree. That is, the objects in the list are similar in kind but different in degree: the tenor is even *more* of the trait shared by the vehicles. His vehicles "will

46. J. Drummond Bone, "Beppo: The Liberation of Fiction," in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, eds. Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), 108.

not be served with less" because they need to indicate more, as much as they can. The tenor becomes the superlative of these comparatives, becomes unique in the extreme degree to which it manifests the common trait. The reported insufficiency of the simile to convey Gulbeyaz's anger serves the purpose of intensifying the anger we must attribute to her. The copiousness of the list displays the writer's inventiveness, and the reader exercises her imagination in following the progression of vehicles and then making the inductive extension to the greater intensity of Gulbeyaz. The seeming inability of language to create an exact equivalence is turned into an asset as it involves the reader in an imaginative leap that heightens the comparison beyond what any one equivalence could do.⁴⁷

The poem's self-denigrating comments about its own devices belie a surprisingly nuanced effectiveness, which often is underappreciated by critics. In fact, the general rapidity of *Don Juan's* verse and its flippant assertions of being unplanned unfortunately encourage readers to leave the poem's stylistic details underexamined.⁴⁸ Perhaps most emblematic of this neglect is T. S. Eliot's complaint "that [Byron] added nothing to the language, that he discovered nothing in the sounds, and developed nothing in the meaning, of individual words. I cannot think of any other poet of his distinction who might so easily have been an accomplished foreigner writing English."⁴⁹ The rewards of examining *Don Juan's* style should be made manifest by another passage in which Byron ridicules his own similes. In the course of enumerating the beauties of the sleeping harem girls, the description lingers on one girl in particular:

A fourth as marble, statue-like and still,
Lay in a breathless, hushed, and stony sleep;

47. This technique is fairly common in *Don Juan*. Some of the other comparative lists in the poem are descriptions of: the beauty of the women of Cadiz (2.5–6), the rapture of watching one's beloved sleeping (2.196), and the sweetness of first love (1.122–27). Byron seems especially drawn to the technique when he wants to evoke an intense emotional state.

48. An important exception to the underappreciation of Byron's form is Susan Wolfson's insightful analysis of form in *The Corsair*, in chapter 5 of *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

49. T. S. Eliot, "Byron," in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 201. Peter Manning challenges Eliot's claim by suggesting, "One could sketch a poetics based not on the word but on words: . . . on the relationship between words in themselves unremarkable. In contrast to Eliot's bias toward the symbolic, hence the static, one might urge the disjunctive and the dynamic." He finds such a dynamic poetics in *Don Juan's* use of allusion. Manning, "*Don Juan*," 208. For a more recent analysis of allusion in *Don Juan*, see chapters 4 and 5 of Jane Stabler's *Byron, Poetics and History*.

White, cold and pure, as looks a frozen rill,
 Or the snow minaret on an Alpine steep,
 Or Lot's wife done in salt,—or what you will;—
 My similes are gathered in a heap,
 So pick and chuse—perhaps you'll be content
 With a carved lady on a monument.
 (6.68)

McGann takes seriously Byron's claim that his "similes are gathered in a heap." He picks up on the phrase when, after quoting stanzas 16.9–10 (discussed above), he asserts, "This is an instance of Byron's use of series, one of the poem's staple devices. Byron gathers his similes in a heap, and the bizarre congruence of different items produces surprising tonal opportunities."⁵⁰ I agree that series are a staple device, and that they produce surprising results from "the bizarre congruence of different items," but I do not think that they are as loosely piled up as he claims. McGann's assertion of careless randomness in the series is more explicit when he argues that *Don Juan* is "a tenacious poem, anxious to include almost anything, whether it 'may suit or may not suit [the] story' (XV, 19). The poem uses the series device repeatedly to gather armloads of material into itself, most of which is useless to the advancement of the plot or to the coherence of anything but the loosest generalizations about the poem's ideas."⁵¹ It is true that the elements in Byron's lists of similes do not advance the plot, and they are often only tangentially related to the poem's chief themes. But to say that the series "gather armloads of material" is misleading, because it implies a haphazard juxtaposition of elements. In reality, Byron's extended similes are often finely structured, even the simile above in which he disingenuously declares that his "similes are gathered in a heap."

After providing several alternatives for the simile's vehicle, the narrator entreats, "Perhaps you'll be content / With a carved lady on a monument." By offering as the final vehicle a statue, the stanza circles back on itself, recalling the adjectives originally used to describe the sleeping girl—"marble," "statue-like," "stony." This repetition also calls to our attention qualities of the other vehicles which might have otherwise been overlooked. By describing the snow cap on a mountain as a "minaret," Byron invokes an architectural feature which aligns with the building mentioned later—the "monument." The "statue" on the monu-

50. McGann, *Context*, 95

51. *Ibid.*, 133.

ment is prefigured by Lot's wife, who is transformed into the equivalent of a statue, an equivalence which is emphasized by the phrasing "Lot's wife done in salt," the language of a sculptor who "does" a certain figure in a certain medium. The "frozen rill" may not connect to monuments or statuary, but it is akin to the snow of the second vehicle, and all three vehicles describe natural substances which are usually mobile but are here immobilized. (Flowing liquid water is frozen in two of them, and in the third salt, which by association with water might be imagined as dissolved in the ocean, is turned into a solid block.) In case the careful structure of this simile is suspected to be a fluke, consider this example:

I hate a motive like a lingering bottle,
 Which with the landlord makes too long a stand,
 Leaving all claretless the unmoistened throttle,
 Especially with politics on hand;
 I hate it, as I hate a drove of cattle,
 Who whirl the dust as Simooms whirl the sand;
 I hate it, as I hate an argument,
 A Laureate's ode, or servile Peer's 'Content.'
 (14.58)

The stanza forms a geometrical progression in which the amount of space given to each vehicle diminishes by half—4 lines, then 2, then 1, then half a line. The second vehicle, the "drove of cattle," contains an embedded simile: they "whirl the dust as Simooms whirl the sand." All the vehicles share the characteristic of dryness, either the literal aridity of the empty bottle and the driven dust, or the figurative dryness of dead language. Byron's similes use the impossibility of equivalence to perform more effective comparatives, and in the process create subtle repetitions, producing several kinds of multiplicity within a single figure.

By giving several possibilities for one tenor, Byron also suspends the poem's syntagmatic progress and highlights the author's act of selection. Here the paradigmatic possibilities consist of figurative language, rather than the alternate storylines that form Byron's labyrinthine plots. The tenor of a simile can be an important element in the larger narrative, an element that could be quickly amplified by a standard simile with one short vehicle. And some of Byron's vehicles have narrative content: they may contain temporal progression (as in "the last glass of champagne, without / The foam which made its virgin bumper gay"), or they may allude to other narratives (as do the references to Lady

Booby and Lot's wife). But in *Don Juan*, this narrative content is paired with a lyrical effect. The list of vehicles temporarily draws our attention away from the tenor, and the larger narrative to which it is tied. Instead, the explicitly poetic constructions of the figurative elements divert our attention. That is, the figurative nature of the multiple vehicles further amplifies the constructedness of the poem, and hence the lyric moment of its construction.

AUTHORIAL ENNUI, LYRIC STASIS, AND HOPELESS CYCLES

The poem's self-reflexivity and attention to the level of discourse, achieved through several techniques repeatedly used in the poem, should by now be clear. One might object, however, that not all instances of self-reflexivity are necessarily lyric in nature. While I agree that self-reflexivity does not automatically equate to lyricism, in the case of *Don Juan* additional features give the prominent level of discourse the timelessness specific to lyric. The most noticeable method through which Byron makes the moment of composition feel static, suspended in time, and hence lyrical, is his characterization of the narrator as ennui-laden. The narrator's claims about why he writes reveal his ennui, and the poem's sense of stasis at the level of discourse:

And yet I can't help scribbling once a week,
 Tiring old readers, nor discovering new.
 In youth I wrote, because my mind was full,
 And now because I feel it growing dull.

But 'why then publish?'—There are no rewards
 Of fame or profit, when the world grows weary.
 I ask in turn,—why do you play at cards?
 Why drink? Why read?—To make some hour less dreary.
 It occupies me to turn back regards
 On what I've seen or ponder'd, sad or cheery;
 And what I write I cast upon the stream,
 To swim or sink—I have had at least my dream.
 (14.10–11)

The narrator repeatedly characterizes the world as weary of him, yet the stronger impression created by the passage is that the narrator himself

is weary, and initially tries to displace his ennui onto others. When he was young, his “mind was full.” Now, he can “feel it growing dull.” The repeated consonants of “feel” and “full” link the two words, and give “feel” positive connotations of robust feeling. These connotations are reinforced by the mention of growth, which for a fleeting second suggests the narrator’s once-full mind has now become even more capacious. The suggestion collapses with the revelation that his mind has only grown “dull,” that tiredness affects him as well as his public, that he is as unlikely to discover new matter for his mind as he is to discover new readers. The hopeful diction of growth is again quickly negated when the “world grows weary.” The repetition of *r* and *w* sounds in all three words in the phrase, as well as in “rewards” in the previous line, draws attention to the phrase and slows it down: the lingering sounds of *r* and *w* make the line drag along, imitating the weariness it describes. The quick, clipped monosyllables of the following line (“I ask in turn,—why do you play at cards?”) make a sharp contrast, and enact the energy and spirit people hope to attain from the pastimes he lists. The narrator passes the time by writing; he composes this poem “to make some hour less dreary.”

These stanzas on “why publish?” immediately follow a stanza declaring the narrator’s passionate nature, his former fame, and his current unpopularity, remarks that closely align the narrator with the historical Byron. Since the stanzas occur in a context that minimizes the distance between narrator and author, their content can be justifiably applied to the implied author (the persona that Byron projects through this work) as well as to the narrator. Comments suggesting the implied author’s weariness are especially frequent in the later cantos, such as, “ennui is a growth of English root” (13.101), and in Britain “there’s little left but to be bored or bore” (14.18). If the implied author is writing to combat ennui, then it is perfectly logical for him to make the poem as full and varied as possible.⁵² By exploring plot paths his hero could have taken but didn’t, the author gives the narrative a wider assortment of decisions, events, and results than it could have sustained by limiting its attention to one path. A multiplicity of plots also takes up more space on the page, and correspondingly takes more time to write, than a single plot would. The poem’s many long lists of similes, with multiple vehicles for one tenor, also fill the page and occupy more of the author’s time than more concise figures of speech would. If the implied author’s object

52. Peter Manning also discusses stanza 14.11 in the context of writing as a method to stave off ennui and melancholy, and suggests the poem engages in headlong motion in order to defy time and fixity. See Manning, *Byron and His Fictions*, 234–35, 202–3.

is to pass the time, then these stylistic strategies make good sense: *Don Juan's* multiplicity is consistent with the Byronic persona it creates.

Although the author seems to use prolixity to combat his own weariness, he is also aware that it might cause weariness in others:

... You lose much by concision,
Whereas insisting in or out of season
Convinces all men, even a politician;
Or—what is just the same—it wearies out.
So the end's gain'd, what signifies the route?
(15.51)

Although the connection between them is inverted here, avoiding concision is again thematically linked to boredom, reinforcing their connection and reiterating the narrator/author's tendency to project his own boredom onto others. The passage's final line, with its attention to ends and its indifference to means, also resonates with broader themes. Just as this passage focuses on results rather than the factors leading up to them, elsewhere the poem ignores the motives which lead to actions, and emphasizes chance which interferes with predictable causality. The assertion that "the route" is not significant resonates with the poem's attitude toward plot paths, and toward paths in general. If the route is not important, then by metaphorical extension, the particular path the plot follows is not crucial, either. Since no one plot path should be privileged, the presentation of other possible paths has a leveling effect, enacting the idea that the route that is taken does not signify any more than the routes that aren't.

The stanza still seems concerned with end results, and with the final destination, despite its indifference to the road taken to arrive there. But when juxtaposed with the following stanza, the end no longer corresponds to the destination:

Now there is nothing gives a man such spirits,
Leavening his blood as Cayenne doth a curry,
As going at full speed—no matter where its
Direction be, so 'tis but in a hurry
And merely for the sake of its own merits:
For the less cause there is for all this flurry,
The greater is the pleasure in arriving
At the great *end* of travel—which is driving.
(10.72)

The “great *end* of travel,” its sole goal for the narrator, is motion itself, a flurry of activity with no particular destination or direction in mind. The motion of the poem could be expressed in a similar way. *Don Juan* is not teleological; the hero’s destination at the end of each episode does not carry any special weight or importance. Rather, the mere fact that he is thrown into another adventure, that he and the story remain moving, is of primary importance. Juan’s travels keep him, the reader, the narrator, and the implied author occupied. The direction taken by the narrative, the particular path it follows, matters much less than its mere continuance, because evidence within the poem suggests its main goal is to help its teller pass the time. The headlong activity of and within the poem form a strong contrast to the implied weariness of its author, but are of a piece; the narrative must gallop along if it is to hold the attention of an ennui-ridden man who has seen everything.⁵³

Travel and writing are not the narrator’s only palliatives, however. Intoxication is frequently mentioned as a comfort, and the hangovers that follow are mentioned almost as frequently. The longest meditation on alcohol in *Don Juan* contains some illuminating and carefully crafted lines:

Man, being reasonable, must get drunk;
 The best of life is but intoxication:
 Glory, the grape, love, gold, in these are sunk
 The hopes of all men, and of every nation;
 Without their sap, how branchless were the trunk
 Of life’s strange tree, so fruitful on occasion:
 But to return,—Get very drunk; and when
 You wake with head-ache, you shall see what then.

Ring for your valet—bid him quickly bring
 Some hock and soda-water, then you’ll know
 A pleasure worthy Xerxes the great king;
 For not the blest sherbet, sublimed with snow,
 Nor the first sparkle of the desert-spring,
 Nor Burgundy in all its sunset glow,
 After long travel, ennui, love, or slaughter,

53. This seems in keeping with Dino Felluga’s argument that “according to the science journals of the time period,” in poets generally and in Byron in particular “overwrought intensity serves but to mask imminent, deathly exhaustion.” Dino Franco Felluga, *The Perversity of Poetry: Romantic Ideology and the Popular Male Poet of Genius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 122.

Vie with that draught of hock and soda-water.
(2.179–80)

Travel is not the only available method to leaven the blood; alcohol can produce similar results. “The grape” is included in a list with “glory . . . love, gold” because they all are able to produce “intoxication,” to bring pleasure and heightened sensibility to those who pursue them. In this respect, drunkenness is allied with goal-oriented activities. Alcohol is described as a life-giving “sap” that nourishes and produces positive results—the branches of life’s growth. The passage suggests that intoxication produces not wasteful oblivion but rather motivation and hope directed toward the future. But wine’s inclusion in a list with glory, love, and gold cannot completely elide its differences with the other members of the series. Wine is not “fruitful” in the same way as the other terms in the list. Alcohol produces only immediate intoxication, and a hangover which must be relieved with “hock and soda-water.”

This hangover cure is compared to a list of three alternatives, and this second list also associates drunkenness with the thrill of travel and activity, rather than with static oblivion. The “sherbet, sublimed with snow,” invokes snow-topped mountains, the sublime landscape par excellence. The orthographic similarity of “desert” to “dessert” recalls the sherbet of the previous line, and continues the association of edibles and landscapes. The double meaning of “spring” as both season and source of water conveys a double meaning to the line as a whole: the attraction can either be the beauty of a usually barren landscape filled with sparkling but transient flowers (springtime in the desert), or the relief of pure water in the midst of aridity. “Burgundy” is both a region and its wine, and the “sunset glow” can refer to a time of day in the former or to the color of the latter. Thus, dual meanings of natural scenery and refreshment are overlaid in all three examples in this list. The more or less exotic locations they evoke—sublime mountains, desert plains, the rolling hills of the French countryside—imply travel. Yet the imperative “Ring for your valet” suggests the reader should stay at home to enact this hypothetical situation. The strong implication that the narrator has repeatedly indulged in this scenario of drinking followed by his hangover cure, locates the narrator firmly and regularly in his own home. The varied locales evoked by the passage divert attention from the unchanging repetition and suspension actually portrayed in these lines.

These three comparisons also share a series of references to light and to time. The desert spring “sparkle[s]” and Burgundy “glow[s]”

with light. The sherbet is “sublimed with snow,” which might mean it is awe-inspiring, but which also has a relevant meaning in chemistry. A substance sublimates if it transforms directly from solid to gas, as when ice produces water vapor. The “blest sherbet” would then be surrounded with a hazy halo of water vapor, on which light would play as it would on a miniature cloud. Time also lends unity to this passage. Snow suggests winter, which is reinforced by the appearance of “spring” in the following line (even though its primary meaning in this context is a source of water rather than a season). A more overt temporal reference follows in “sunset.” But even here the reference is somewhat oblique, as “sunset” is used not as a noun but rather as an adjective, referring to the colors associated with the time of day. These complex interrelations are also unified sonically, by the heavy alliteration of *s*, both at the beginning of words and internally: sublimed, snow, sparkle, spring, sunset, blest, first, its. (Surely these stanzas refute T. S. Eliot’s critique “that [Byron] added nothing to the language, that he discovered nothing in the sounds, and developed nothing in the meaning, of individual words.”⁵⁴)

The references to cyclical time are apt, since the passage itself describes another cycle in which the narrator seems to be caught: the pleasure of intoxication, the pain of a hangover, and the pleasure of a hangover cure (hock and soda water). In this representation, the series is positive; it begins and ends with pleasurable experiences, separated by the inconvenience of a headache—a minor pain. Elsewhere in the poem, the cycle of drunkenness is not so benign.⁵⁵ We are told, “The drainer of oblivion, even the sot, / Hath got blue devils for his morning mirrors” (15.4). Hangovers can be much more terrifying and destructive than a mere headache. And there is a fourth stage in the process, which is only obliquely mentioned in the passage above: boredom. A hangover cure might bring the momentary pleasure of relief from pain, but it also returns the narrator to his initial state—ennui. Intoxication is a means to

54. Eliot, 201.

55. Anne Mellor links stanza 2.179 to the passion of Juan and Haidée, and has a very optimistic reading of it: “In such moments of intoxication, they experience a kind of self-transcendence—an expansion of human possibility, a widening of the sense and the spirit that is the closest they can come to divinity.” Mellor, 46. While Mellor accurately suggests that intoxication is here used as a metaphor for all intense experience, especially love, she ignores the prominent and repeated negative associations with hangovers. This oversight likely results from her emphasis on Romantic irony’s potential for liberation and affirmation. Michael O’Neill objects more generally to this optimistic interpretation of the poem: “It is tempting to gloss the workings of *Don Juan* by reference to theories of Romantic Irony. But the poetry’s sense of being at the mercy of the mobility it practices makes Byron’s role-playing and changes of mood difficult to categorize.” O’Neill, 105.

escape temporarily from boredom, for the process always returns to this initial condition. The list of conditions from which sherbet or burgundy might bring relief—"long travel, ennui, love, or slaughter"—is telling. The latter pair are the primary themes of Juan's adventures, his "fierce loves and faithless wars" (7.8). "Long travel" and "ennui" are thematically appropriate to the narrator, and might be the keys to his characterization and to his writing process. The intense excitement he attributes to the former and the utter boredom of the latter form a vicious cycle, in which the stimulants used to escape ennui work only temporarily, and eventually result in more complete weariness. The narrator's inability to find rest without restlessness suggests he might be a comic form of the usually tragic Byronic hero.⁵⁶ McGann sees Byronic heroes as falling into two fates: inertia so complete that the hero is broken and utterly oblivious, or more frequently, uncontrolled intensity of feeling and craving for action.⁵⁷ The narrator of *Don Juan* combines both traits and mellows them through comedy.

These traits equally characterize the implied author of the work. On the back of his manuscript to canto 1, Byron wrote:

I would to Heaven that I were so much Clay—
 As I am blood—bone—marrow, passion—feeling—
 Because at least the past were past away—
 And for the future—(but I write this reeling,
 Having got drunk exceedingly to day
 So that I seem to stand upon the ceiling)
 I say—the future is a serious matter—
 And so—for Godsake—Hock and Soda water.

Because of the curious location of this stanza on the verso of the manuscript, it is tempting to read it as a commentary on all that it contains within, on the poem as a whole. It is also tempting to attribute it to an authorial voice, if not to the historical Byron, then to the version of himself he evokes and embodies as the author of this work. Thus, the stanza strongly connects the implied author to the poem's discussions of

56. Susan J. Wolfson has an intriguing suggestion for where we might find the serious Byronic hero in *Don Juan*: "From Donna Julia forward, the Byronic hero that starred in the Regency gains a female form. It may be that in boyish Juan and the wry narrator of *Don Juan* the Byronic hero flickers into parody. But its romance burns in the heroines." *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 180.

57. Jerome McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), chapters 3.3 and 3.4.

intoxication and hangovers. In this instance, the process is represented not as cyclical but rather as halted. The reference to getting drunk “to day” focuses attention on this present instant, rather than on a possible habitual pattern. The past is something to be left behind, and the future can only induce the minimal attention of the hock and soda water that would make facing it a little easier. The author seems trapped in this extended moment, and his only priority is passing the time. Writing is explicitly mentioned here, again suggesting that the poem’s composition is an elaborate method of whiling away the hours. The diversion of writing is an insufficient cure, however. The author claims he is full of too much “passion [and] feeling,” that he would rather be insensible “Clay.” This suggests that his hypersensitivity and overstimulation is a general condition, and that intoxication is a method of temporarily gaining oblivion, contrary to associations elsewhere in the poem between drunkenness and activity.⁵⁸ His craving for oblivion is overtly linked to a death drive; he wishes his “blood—bone—marrow” replaced by “Clay,” anticipating the decomposition of his body after death. If time is merely something to be endured, then only death offers true respite from the tedium.

And yet, the poem repeatedly reminds us that some consequences haunt us even after death, that it does not offer a respite from everything. The most obvious instances are the four explicit mentions of “post-obits”—debts that come due after another’s death. The phrase is used literally for debts that must be paid by an old woman’s inheritors in stanza 1.125. It twice refers to posthumous fame, in the Preface to Cantos 1 and 2, and in stanza 17.9. Finally, the narrator asserts the Fates leave little behind but “the post-obits of theology” (1.103). It is possible to read the phrase as theology’s promises of an afterlife, promises that could be collected only after death. The more traditional interpretation, however, is that God lends man his life, and when he dies God collects the debt. The latter interpretation is supported by other references to the event of death itself as paying off a debt. Adeline is described as:

A page where Time should hesitate to print age,
 And for which Nature might forgo her debt—
 Sole creditor whose process doth involve in’t
 The luck of finding every body solvent.
 Oh, Death! thou dunnest of all duns! thou daily

58. As Michael O’Neill aptly describes this stanza, it displays “the desperate exuberance—or should that be exuberant despair?—typical of Byronic self-awareness in *Don Juan*.” O’Neill, xxviii.

Knockest at doors, at first with modest tap,
 Like a meek tradesman when approaching palely
 Some splendid debtor he would take by sap:
 (15.7–8)

Nature has leant youth, beauty, and life, and nature is always successful in collecting because everyone must die. In this passage and in others, death is the ultimate price to be paid, the final and inevitable consequence of a life of action. But elsewhere in the poem, there are suggestions of debts to be paid even *after* one's own death. The narrator says of age and conscience:

But at sixteen the conscience rarely gnaws
 So much as when we call our old debts in
 At sixty years, and draw the accompts of evil,
 And find a deuced balance with the devil.
 (1.167)

Although exactly who is in debt to whom is obscure, a relation of debt with the devil is clear, suggesting an afterlife in which evil can be paid back with evil. Suffering might continue even after life has ended, and sinners may have to pay dearly for their sins. This fear is more overt in the declaration that the heart "Prompts deeds eternity can not annul, / But pays off moments in an endless shower / Of hell-fire" (2.192). Despite the comedy of *Don Juan*, the situation and attitude of the implied author is tragic and desperate. For him, life is a series of moments, perhaps one excruciatingly extended moment, to be endured. He undertakes activities to pass the time (travel, drinking, writing), and they are necessary palliatives and can produce some good. But they are only briefly effective, and may have negative consequences which are much more lasting. The only relief to enduring the present is brought by death, and even that might be followed by further suffering. What Brian Nellist says of *The Giaour* holds equally true for *Don Juan*: "The consequences must be abided for the sake of the action. We are in a continuous present where redemption is impossible."⁵⁹ This focus on time as something to be endured, coupled with the attention given to the narrator's act of writing to pass the time, creates an acute awareness of time as a suspended moment, the moment of composition. In short, it creates the impression of lyric timelessness.

59. Nellist, 52.

LARGER STRUCTURES OF PLOT AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF DON JUAN'S LYRICISM

The presence of lyrical aspects in Byron's narrative poems has been noted by a handful of critics. According to Peter Manning, "In Byron's early tales ostensibly mimetic narrative repeatedly modulated into a prolonged gaze at an unchanging crisis. The two modes, sequential narrative and lyric plaint, were in continual conflict, with plot forever yielding to static monologue."⁶⁰ But Manning thinks that *Don Juan* reduces this conflict between lyric and narrative: "In *Don Juan* Byron solves, or at least suspends, the problem by centering his poem on the narrator. Juan's adventures provide movement while the narrator self-consciously makes the contemplative impulse which had obstructed narrative into his most fertile subject."⁶¹ While I agree that Byron finds a solution for the harmonious coexistence of lyric and narrative impulses, Manning understates Byron's success and subtlety in doing so. The two genres are not merely suspended side by side, neatly divided with Juan the center of narrative and the narrator the center of lyricism, as Manning suggests. Rather, narrative means are used to serve lyric ends, and both genres exist simultaneously throughout the poem. The lyrical aspects of *Don Juan* are not restricted to sections marked by the narrator's self-presentation; the moment of composition is also made manifest by the poem's narrative structure.

Brian Nellist has astutely discussed the prominence given to the present moment of discourse in Byron's earlier narrative poems, and the resulting lyricism within them. He remarks of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, "It is this constituting of the poem at the point of its discovery which makes the process lyric, song-like. . . . The poetry in these lines is in the middle of its own coming-into-being."⁶² He bases his analysis on a definition of lyric that emphasizes its temporal aspects, and in this, my treatment of lyric is consistent with his. There are, however, some important distinctions between our definitions, as is shown in Nellist's characterization of the essential nature of lyric: "It is this constitution of the poetry at the moment of its occurrence which seems to be the special mark of lyric as genre. . . . This is to assume that, though lyric is often personal, that quality is not of its essence and indeed lyric can accommodate itself to any shape or form of subject. The characteristic brevity, that it is read at one go, seems more its *sine qua non* and in literature

60. Manning, "Byronic Hero," 64.

61. *Ibid.*, 65.

62. Nellist, 42.

space becomes time.”⁶³ First, I believe that the lyricism of *Don Juan* is even more pronounced than Nellist’s description of lyric as poetry constituting itself “at the moment of its occurrence,” fixed in the suspended time of the reader’s interaction with the present of the poem. *Don Juan* shares this focus on the time of discourse and the “now” of the reader and poem, but it also does more. It dramatizes its own “coming-into-being” by drawing attention to the narrator and the implied author, by emphasizing not only the “now” of the reader’s experience, but also the “now” of the poem’s composition. *Don Juan* does not present itself as mysteriously self-creating out of a void, but rather as the construction of a specific person (or rather, persona) in a suspended moment involving an author as much as a reader. My interpretation is based on an assumption that poetry in general, and lyric poetry in particular, does not necessarily create the illusion of being overheard. I disagree with John Stuart Mill’s assertion that poetry must appear to be unconscious of its audience. It might be argued that if the reader is aware of the poem’s status as a public, written document, then the reader would also be aware of a gap in time between the poem’s composition and the act of reading, and that such a gap would disrupt the lyric illusion of being caught up in the speaker’s present moment. I do not think such a disruption necessarily follows. In the case of *Don Juan*, Byron seems to invite us into his study as he writes, and describes the “old portraits” and “dying embers” that surround him during his late nights of writing (15.97). This illusion of being in the conscious (rather than unconscious, overheard) presence of the author creates the related illusion of inhabiting the same moment as him.⁶⁴ The moment of reading and the moment of writing are both called to our attention, and the moments seem to coincide, creating a resonance that intensifies, rather than diminishes, our lyric experience of time.

A more general difference between my view of lyric and Nellist’s involves the issue of brevity. While it is certainly easier for an author to create the illusion of a suspended moment in a short work, I do think

63. Ibid.

64. Jerome McGann agrees that, while much Romantic rhetoric aligns with Mill’s notion of poetry as overheard, Byron’s does not. He argues, “Byron’s work and his audiences, by contrast, always tend to preserve a clarity of presence toward each other. This remains true even when Byron is working in lyrical forms. In general, it is as if Byron in his work were not simply meditating in public, but were declaring or even declaiming his inmost thoughts and feelings out loud, and directly to others.” *Byron and Romanticism*, 117–18. Herbert Tucker comments on the intimacy between *Don Juan*’s poet and the reader “whom he flatters into attendance and convinces of the present reality of fellowship.” Tucker, *Epic*, 227.

it is possible for a lyric suspension of time to continue indefinitely, in a work that takes many sittings to read. Nellist, however, claims that brevity is a necessary condition for lyric. It is initially difficult to reconcile that claim with his characterization of the lengthy *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* as a lyric work. The key to their reconciliation seems to lie in his assertion that the poem "lives continuously in its own presentness and each Spenserian stanza becomes the realization of the moments that constitute that present."⁶⁵ I infer from this that Nellist thinks each stanza of *Childe Harold* functions like a separate lyric, that the poem as a whole is a connected series of individually brief lyrics. Nellist says this momentary aspect is "close in definition to . . . the lyric mode," but presumably is not quite the same as a single, autonomous lyric poem whose *sine qua non* is its brevity.⁶⁶ The reader of *Don Juan* can similarly focus on the stanza currently being read. The narrator invites such an approach with his frank admissions that one stanza often contradicts previous ones, and the most recent one should be given precedence. But *Don Juan* also has larger structures that contribute to its lyricism: a key example is the poem's proliferation of possible narrative paths, discussed earlier in this chapter. This is an extreme and unusual illustration of Nellist's claim that lyric can "accommodate itself to any shape or form of subject," even narrative, which often functions as its antithesis. More often, lyric requires a particular form; it must be organized by associational thinking, rather than by the causality that governs narrative.

Its associational logic is one of several reasons that digression is important for Byron's lyricism.⁶⁷ As J. Drummond Bone remarks of the digressions in *Beppo*, "Self-evidently they reduce the importance of plot in the poem by continually distracting our attention from its development."⁶⁸ That is, digressions derail narrative. Since the temporal progression required in narrative is usually antithetical to lyric, getting rid of plot can potentially clear the way for lyricism. But Byron sometimes gives a "digression on the bad habit of digressing. This makes the reader aware of the contingency of what is being read—it could have been

65. Nellist, 41.

66. *Ibid.*

67. Nellist himself comes close to suggesting this when he comments that if we recognize Byron's lyricism, his focus on the moment, then "digression is the centre." Nellist, 43.

68. Bone, 98. T. S. Eliot, however, thinks that digressions paradoxically draw our attention away from the plot yet make us care more about it: "The effect of Byron's digressions is to keep us interested in the story-teller himself, and through this interest to interest us more in the story." Eliot, 196.

otherwise, maybe should have been otherwise."⁶⁹ By highlighting the contingency of the author's or narrator's choices, digression can draw us into the time of discourse and composition, the time of lyric. And Byronic digression possesses a lyricism beyond derailing narrative progression and focusing on the suspended moment of composition. It also exhibits the associational, rather than causal, logic characteristic of lyric. In *Don Juan*, the narrator's asides go beyond the illustrations, amplifications, deductions, and generalizations that we expect in a narrative. These asides are not grounded in the particulars of the narrative and are not meant to heighten the importance of the story, as we would expect elsewhere. Rather, they truly are digressions that meander far enough from the plot almost to lose its path,⁷⁰ and they usually have much more to do with the personal predilections and subjective associations of the narrator and author than they have to do with the narrative. These associations are tied by memory, and can link items based on an individual's unique experiences, or on more general grounds of similarity or proximity. In either case, mental association can bring together (through memory and writing) objects and events that were widely separated in time. The causation of narrative requires that events can be reconstructed in a particular order in time; lyric association overcomes time, and suspends its objects out of time.

While digressions are so frequent that they constitute a large percentage of the poem and form a pattern in *Don Juan* as a whole, individually they operate on a small scale. There are, however, large-scale structures in the poem that replace causal logic with associational logic. Each episode, taken as a substantial individual unit, technically operates according to the causality characteristic of standard narratives. But this narrative causality is severely weakened by repeated reminders that events all-too-easily could have happened differently, and by the characters' inability to act successfully on their intentions. Perhaps *Don Juan's* weakened sense of causation is most evident in its reader's inability to arrive retrospectively at a sense of the story's governing order. Many theorists consider such a retrospective understanding to be an essential aspect of standard causal narratives.

The importance of retrospection derives from the forked-path structure, discussed earlier in the chapter, which underlies many narratives. At the beginning of such a narrative, there are many possible paths that

69. Bone, 98–99.

70. I agree with Anne Mellor that the narrator "creates the tale of *Don Juan* by telling it; he de-creates it by digressing so far from it that for moments at a time we forget that it exists." Mellor, 60–61.

the reader can imagine the plot taking, but as a standard narrative progresses, it must follow one path at the exclusion of others. The end of a story is not usually predictable when viewed from the beginning; it is only when the final outcome has been reached that it seems inevitable, and it is only from the vantage point of the ending that we can retrace the steps of the plot and judge its coherence and probability. As Roland Barthes has said, "Disclosure is the final stroke by which the initial 'probable' shifts to the 'necessary': the game is ended, the drama has its dénouement."⁷¹ Paul Ricoeur expresses a similar view when he writes, "Rather than being predictable, a conclusion must be acceptable. Looking back from the conclusion to the episodes leading up to it, we have to be able to say that this ending required these sorts of events and this chain of actions."⁷² The beginning, to a first-time reader, does not require the ending that follows, but the ending, once reached, should seem to require everything that preceded it. It is only after events have played themselves out that we as readers can look back and assign causes for the end result, that we can identify which incidents were crucial for the final outcome and which were irrelevant. What distinguishes a standard narrative from a mere series of events is this overall structure and meaning that can be conferred only from a backward-looking gaze. Only retrospection can firmly establish causation, and that is why narratives are often taken to be, by definition, retrospective.⁷³

The reader of *Don Juan*, however, gains no such retrospective understanding, and this lack cannot be attributed solely to the unfinished state of the poem. It is true that the poem was left off abruptly due to Byron's death, that it has no finished ending from which the reader can view the work as a whole. But the existing episodes of *Don Juan* are only flimsily connected in the first place, and each individual episode functions as an autonomous unit. Even if the reader treats an episode as its own freestanding story, the end of the episode does not lend a retrospective order and significance to the events leading up to it. Jerome McGann argues for the absence of necessity in each episode's dénouement: "After the event, in the apparent security of retrospective understanding, the chains of causation and relationship which one perceives represent themselves not as the operation of necessary order but as a bizarre series of coincidental linkages. The result of a Byronic

71. Barthes, 188.

72. Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980-81), 170.

73. Peter Brooks, for instance, calls narrative "in essence a retrospective mode." See *Reading for the Plot*, 77.

narrative in *Don Juan* is not even retrospectively a sense of probabilities but of achieved possibilities.⁷⁴ Even from the viewpoint of the end of an episode, events do not necessarily lead to that end. Rather than providing the reader with a final sense of inevitability, *Don Juan* provides an astonished sense of improbability, of fortuitous contingency. The absence of retrospective understanding corresponds to the weakened sense of causation within the poem. Events are so coincidental that the world inhabited by the characters seems to lack comprehensible laws of cause and effect, and the providential responsibility for the outcome of events shifts to the narrator and author. If incidents cannot be explained within the world of the story, the reader naturally looks for explanations within the world of discourse; the more contingency the characters experience, the greater the author's control appears to be. Although a standard narrative in which retrospection strongly functions requires a sense of authorial selection and ordering, the author's presence in *Don Juan* is of a different nature, which makes the author's act of selection more obvious but which confers less meaning.

While the narrator does sometimes claim a definitive understanding of events, the source of his knowledge seems to be his authorial improvisation, rather than his retrospective thoughts on prior events.⁷⁵ When the narrator asserts that a specific, different outcome would have resulted from a specific change in circumstance, he does so at the moment he is describing the situation, not after the fact.⁷⁶ The narrator's focus on the present is shared by the reader. Since in this poem the reader understands no greater meaning and finds no larger significance by looking

74. McGann, *Context*, 101.

75. I believe Bernard Beatty attributes retrospective understanding to the narrator, and by implication a retrospective structure to the poem, when he claims, "Juan lives forwards, the narrator understands backwards." "Fiction's Limit and Eden's Door," in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, eds. Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), 29. Here I disagree with him. For the importance of improvisation in *Don Juan* and the inspiration provided by the improvisatore Tommaso Sgricci, see Angela Esterhammer, "Improvisational Aesthetics: Byron, the Shelley Circle, and Tommaso Sgricci," *Lord Byron's Canons*, ed. Jeffrey Vail, spec. issue of *Romanticism on the Net* 43 (August 2006).

76. This phenomenon of frustrated retrospection provides another similarity between *Don Juan* and *Le Rouge et le noir*, as it is analyzed by Peter Brooks. Brooks comments, "Stendhal makes curiously non-retrospective use of narrative. . . . The Stendhalian protagonist ever looks ahead, planning the next moment, projecting the self forward through ambition. . . . The narrator generally seems concerned to judge the present moment, or at most the moment just past, rather than to delve into the buried past in search of time lost." Brooks, 77. The characters in *Don Juan* often 'look ahead, planning the next moment,' albeit unsuccessfully. And the poem's narrator very rarely reviews the past events of his story, focusing instead on the present moment he is describing (when his attention is directed toward the story and not elsewhere).

back at past happenings in the poem,⁷⁷ he or she can stay focused on the present moment within the narrative, on what is currently happening in the story (that is, when the narrator is not digressing from the story). And since the lack of satisfying causality calls attention to authorial figures, the reader can also focus on the present moment of discourse, on the act of writing. The lack of retrospection in *Don Juan* thus creates a double presentness: narrative immersion and lyric intensity.

If the understandable relations of cause and effect, upon which standard narratives are based, are weakened within *Don Juan*, then we must look elsewhere to find the poem's structuring principle and method of organization. The answer may be the poem's affinities with the picaresque. In the picaresque, one event does not clearly lead into the next, and the tight causal relations of other narratives are relatively absent. *Don Juan* makes us aware of this picaresque narrative option through its large-scale episodic structure. Causality (obscure though it may be) operates within individual episodes but does not strongly link one episode to the next. The poem usually explains the shift from one situation to another; Juan travels from Russia to England to perform a diplomatic mission and to recover his health, for example. But these are mere pretenses to move Juan quickly into another episode, and the reason for the transition never plays an important role in the subsequent episode.⁷⁸ As Geoffrey Ward remarks, "The relatively two-dimensional hero will be bounced from escapade to escapade with a bravura that is anecdotal virtually to the point of amnesia."⁷⁹ It is as if Juan finds his way out of one narrative labyrinth only to be dropped in the midst of another,

77. I imagine that some readers find that the meanings (in terms of both social criticism and generic categorization) of certain episodes are clarified by their endings. In particular, Julia's relegation to a convent and her self-contradictory farewell letter to Juan reinforce the light-hearted comedy of canto I, and highlight the social restrictions placed on women. Haidée's death reaffirms the strength of her love and transforms the idyllic into the tragic. But other episodes undermine the reader's wish for the ending to confer significance. The attempted comedy of Ismail's aged virgins waiting to be ravished undermines the seriousness of what went before, confusing the significance of the episode. Juan's stay in Russia ends when his languor causes him to leave, making the Catherine episode seem even more pointless than it did midway through. And the harem episode is abruptly left off, without any explanation of how Juan and his companions managed their remarkable escape: here the reader isn't even *given* an ending from which she can struggle to foist meaning on what came before.

78. McGann might have had something similar in mind when he wrote that "formal coherence and probability" applies within an individual episode, but not to the plot of the poem as a whole. *Context*, 122.

79. Geoffrey Ward, "Byron's Artistry in Deep and Layered Space," in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, eds. Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), 212.

very differently shaped, maze. These abrupt transitions, where causation within the story is unimportant, emphasize the narrator's caprice and the author's control over Juan's fate. It may be true that "Byron, the god of his poem, is a local deity,"⁸⁰ but he is also a very powerful one. Once again, *Don Juan* draws attention to its status as a fictive creation, and in this case, it also draws attention to the conventions of picaresque narrative by taking them to their extremes. Since the poem's overall organization is strikingly, self-consciously, picaresque, and the individual episodes strikingly, self-consciously illustrate their contingent causal relationships, the poem thus exposes the conventions of both episodic and causally coherent narratives.

Don Juan is intensely episodic, or as Jerome McGann phrases it, "radically, aggressively episodic."⁸¹ Although the episodes are not linked through cause and effect, they are linked through association; the episodes are variations on a theme (or themes, for instance, love and war). In this I agree with Harold Bloom, who says of *Don Juan*, "The poem organizes itself by interlocking themes and cyclic patterns, rather than by clear narrative structures."⁸² One could treat these variations and cycles as McGann does, seeing them as related experiments, in which some initial conditions are kept constant and others are varied, in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of how the world works. But one could also treat them as a string of mental associations, as all the things that occur to the narrator or author when he contemplates the themes of the poem. In the latter case, the poem's large-scale episodic structure mimics its smaller-scale digressiveness in its associational, rather than causal, logic. The poem is thus organized according to the logic of lyric rather than the logic of narrative. McGann himself comes close to suggesting this: "As in a Coleridgean conversation poem, or as in *The Prelude*, ideas and perceptions in *Don Juan* generate other, further ideas and perceptions. But *Don Juan* differs from such works because its associational movement does not build up comprehensively (i.e., 'organically'). . . . The point of *Don Juan's* 'piecemeal' (*Childe Harold* IV, 157) method is to prolong the experience, and the activity, of learning in the human world."⁸³ Coleridge's conversation poems are preeminent examples of a lyric genre, and *The Prelude*, as I shall argue, both is composed of small lyric segments, and functions as one large lyric whole. McGann's likening of *Don Juan's* "associational movement" to these poems strongly hints at the lyricism underlying Byron's poem.

80. McGann, *Context*, 116.

81. *Ibid.*, 3.

82. Bloom, 3.

83. McGann, *Context*, 111.

McGann is also right, however, in asserting the poem's lack of organic wholeness, and its tendency to 'prolong the experience' of the reader. Indeed, one of the consequences of associational logic is the potential for interminable extension. A standard causal narrative cannot continue indefinitely: it requires the story to progress more and more inexorably toward a seemingly necessary ending from which the reader can retrospectively understand all that went before. Associational logic is resistant to retrospection and does not require an ending. Instead, associations can accumulate indefinitely, and are limited only by the author's imagination, or lifespan. Indeed, *Don Juan* has no teleology driving it toward a necessary end, but rather ends arbitrarily with Byron's death. As Geoffrey Ward has said, "*Don Juan* is unfinished, yet interminable; the ending, in one sense made arbitrary by the author's death, is simultaneously apt."⁸⁴ The cantos do not build toward a probable ending, but rather "the function of each canto in *Don Juan* is to make the next one possible, and the poem is interminable."⁸⁵ Byron could have added episode after episode, narrative after narrative, and could have paradoxically created an indefinitely suspended lyric moment.

Don Juan is constructed out of narrative episodes which each, due to the very nature of narrative, require temporal progression. Yet the frantic gallop of Byron's story paradoxically results in the lyrical suspension of time. Byron's poem uses narrative means to achieve lyric ends. Although *Don Juan* seems in many ways antithetical to *The Prelude*, and although the sensibilities of Byron and Wordsworth are so different that they divide many readers and critics into opposing camps, there are strong similarities between the two poems when viewed in the context of lyric and narrative. *The Prelude* is as potentially interminable as *Don Juan*, and shares its large-scale associational structure. Wordsworth's poem, however, is overtly and inescapably teleological, and in this way differs from Byron's poem. *The Prelude* is able to sustain the contradiction of being interminable and teleological through its very unusual narrative structure. Whereas *Don Juan* is composed of small narratives held together by lyric association, *The Prelude* consists of small lyrics held together by a larger narrative. And yet Wordsworth's poem provides a narrative model that functions associationally, and allows the poem as a whole to function as one large lyric. Wordsworth, too, is using narrative means to achieve lyric ends.

84. Ward, 221.

85. *Ibid.*, 219.