Byron and the Forms of Thought

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PART 2

POETICS
ESSAY III

The Need for ‘all this’

Johnson, Bowles and the Forms of Prose

On 31 March 1821 Byron, by publishing the prose essay known as the Letter to John Murray, publicly entered the controversy surrounding William Lisle Bowles’s provocative editing and subsequent pamphleteering which queried Pope’s status in the English canon. Appalled by what he saw as Bowles’s modish but ill-considered depreciation of Pope, Byron gave vent to his ire in an extended and uneven prose broadside. He was the only major literary figure of the day to become so involved; his prominent contemporaries, although they would have been aware of the controversy through its dissemination in the literary press, tended to be cautious about getting dragged into a grapple that was producing more heat than light.  

Byron was probably not on his strongest ground when arguing in prose and Hazlitt’s sense of the poet’s inadequacy in that regard has not entirely disappeared. In fact, Byron seems to have been wary about expressing himself in prose at all because (as was not the case with poetry) he found that it continually ran him into ‘realities’ and ‘facts’. Prose is pulled strongly by the weight of its traditions towards argument, and Byron was happier interrogating the notion of argument than he was arguing himself. He seems on stronger ground, for instance, in the first canto of Don Juan (published the same year as Bowles’s first pamphlet) where he thinks about becoming a prose controversialist but then nimbly holds off the idea amidst the ironic enfoldings of the poetic text:

If ever I should condescend to prose,
    I’ll write poetical commandments, which
Shall supersede beyond all doubt all those
    That went before; in these I shall enrich
My text with many things that no one knows,
    And carry precept to the highest pitch:
I’ll call the work ’Longinus o’er a Bottle,
Or, Every Poet his own Aristotle.’

Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope;
Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey;
Because the first is crazed beyond all hope,
The second drunk, the third so quaint and moutheay:
With Crabbe it may be difficult to cope,
And Campbell’s Hippocrene is somewhat droutheay:
Thou shalt not steal from Samuel Rogers, nor –
Commit – flirtation with the muse of Moore.

*(Don Juan, i, 204–5)*

By un-grounding his argument through the unstable and less accountable intelligence of his narrator, Byron evades the stasis he suspects of lying at the heart of all high-pitched polemic, be it brashly innovative or dourly conservative. He mocks the short-sightedness and arrogance of those (such as Bowles) who miss the irony inherent in any attempt to ‘supersede beyond all doubt all those / That went before’ while simultaneously recognizing that the incipient Romantic rule-making to which he objects cannot be rejected in kind: counterargument, that is, would only run counter to the kind of thinking Byron is dealing in here. He thus holds at bay both unthoughtful innovation and the kind of reactionary poetics that could lead only to ‘drouthey’ efforts such as those of Campbell and Crabbe. Byron stops short of taking full ownership of his words in a way that would be more difficult for the prose controversialist. He has, to some extent, rendered his thought ‘Inform’ (to recall Montaigne’s word) in order to evade the encroachments of ‘system’ upon any settled opinion. Yet we also know that Byron means it – even if he does not quite mean his Mosaic rhetoric – when he writes that ‘Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope; / Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey’. We also know that he *did* condescend to prose.

The question of how Byron negotiates these tensions between scepticism about argument and the wish to make claims about poetry is at the centre of what follows. Byron’s critical prose, I want to suggest, comes to life in its staging and mulling over the moment in which theory begins to crumble into its own projecting language. Its shadings into its object mark an important and still unwritten recognition in the history of Romantic poetics.

* * *

Byron’s main concern, in the *Letter to John Murray*, is not to defend Pope but to engage in a broader disagreement that spans and oversees the
rise of British Romantic writing. The problem, as he saw it, was one of language and its relation to what we take it to describe. What was being said about literature in contemporary debate had become untethered from the truthfulness that distinguishes the literary in the first place. This dissociation, as far as Byron was concerned, was linked not only to the poetic poverty he diagnosed among his contemporaries, but to the dire political situation to which Don Juan responds. What Bowles was saying about (Pope’s) poetry – and, crucially, how he was saying it – was for Byron inextricably linked to the kinds of linguistic dishonesty that expedite moral and political degeneration, and which he would address with particular energy in the siege of Ismail cantos of Don Juan.

In the Letter to John Murray Byron comprehends this delinquency of language in memorable terms:

The truth is that in these days the grand “primum mobile” of England is Cant – Cant political – Cant poetical – Cant religious – Cant moral – but always Cant – multiplied through all the varieties of life. – It is the fashion – & while it lasts – will be too powerful for those who can only exist by taking the tone of the time. – I say Cant – because it is a thing of words – without the smallest influence upon human actions – the English being no wiser – no better – and much poorer – and more divided amongst themselves – as well as far less moral – than they were before the prevalence of this verbal decorum. (CMP, 128)

Cant, a disfiguring, pervasive betrayal of thought, is seen as especially pernicious in its effect upon ‘those who can only exist by taking the tone of the time’ — those, that is, who are unable to reflect upon the linguistic structures that constitute their narrowed and dislocated world. Public language, in its increasing removal from the scene of ‘human actions’, has become a force for moral and spiritual enervation, and thus, as Byron also recognizes in Cain, a facilitator of tyranny. Byron’s urge to counteract this de-implication of language from morality helps to explain the forms and styles of Don Juan as a political poem; it also motivates the dashing compendious casting about of his prose.

Dishonesty always wishes to fragment itself because an island is easier to defend than a continent. Bowles, in these terms, is not really defining poetry at all; he is participating in a self-obscuring conspiracy that works to enchain the collective mind of society. Byron’s dashes (‘Cant political – Cant poetical – Cant religious – Cant moral’) resist this by scoring the links of the chain across the page; they cut into the paper to re-inscribe a truth that has filtered itself out of consciousness. The comma or the
semicolon would not have done for this stark exposure of a particularly effective and thus particularly nasty co-opting of the normal.

‘Cant’ is part of a vocabulary that polices a post-Lockean world in which words and ideas are understood as being connected only by convention. Aware of the word’s associations with religious enthusiasm, Swift has his unhinged Hack eagerly defend a ‘Language of the Spirit’ in which ‘Cant and Droning supply the Place of Sense and Reason’.

It is this supplanting of thought by emotive but hollow language, something Swift would have associated with the horrors of religious civil war, which exercises the eighteenth-century moralist. Cant, however, gets everywhere; it has a habit of infecting the apparently harmless as with the silliness of our managerial talk or, for Johnson, the bland politeness of social discourse. As Johnson tells Boswell, however, these irritations need to be watched carefully lest they affect the mind:

My dear friend, clear your mind of cant. You may talk as other people do: you may say to a man, ‘Sir, I am your most humble servant.’ You are not his most humble servant. [...] You tell a man, ‘I am sorry you had such bad weather the last day of your journey, and were so much wet.’ You don’t care six-pence whether he was wet or dry. You may talk in this manner; it is a mode of talking in Society: but don’t think foolishly.

Cant needs to be kept out of serious business like moral reflection – or literary criticism – because it opens the door to those whose enthusiasm to get on and conclude things is not matched by their thoughtfulness about words. Byron inherits Johnson’s sense of cant as a real problem in these terms (especially when it is turned to the purposes of defining poetry); he also sees its comic, sympathetic and subversive possibilities.

Juan, upon arriving in Regency London, discovers a place in which signifier and signified are drastically at odds:

Through Groves, so called as being void of trees,
Like lucus from no light; through prospects named
Mounts Pleasant, as containing nought to please,
Nor much to climb; through little boxes framed
Of bricks, to let the dust in at your ease,
With ‘To be let,’ upon their doors proclaimed;
Through ‘Rows’ most modestly called ‘Paradise,’
Which Eve might quit without much sacrifice;

(Don Juan, xi, 21)
Byron is always concerned to trace the annihilations of Eden, and this regaining of ‘Paradise’ as purely ‘a thing of words’ suggests not only how far gone we are, but how complacently oblivious to the extremity of our lapse we have become. Concomitantly, cant (in this bureaucratic form at least) marks an absolute severance of language from poetry. Where the latter is concerned with glimpsing states of origin and recuperating fundamental truths, cant is involved in an act of extreme misdescription. Words, rather than tending towards ‘Eternity’, have become the raw material of a narrowed world in which, as Benjamin Disraeli put it rather well, ‘all thoughts and things have assumed an aspect and a title contrary to their real quality and style’. Instead of a referential and broadly sceptical function, language has taken on a role at once constitutive and delimiting. Bowles’s cant, therefore, is for Byron an especial disaster because it signals the infection of the literary by the very forces it must be set against.

However, where cant is understood as meaning localized jargon or phraseology (especially where this involves unofficial language as with the whining or ‘sing-song’ canting of beggars) it becomes, in its natural challenge to legitimate language, more interesting to a poet such as Byron. Here a trigger-happy Juan kills Tom, a Cockney highwayman, whose elegy is given by his own kind, in the cant of his place and social class:12

Who in a row like Tom could lead the van,  
Booze in the ken, or at the spellken hustle?  
Who queer a flat? Who (spite of Bow-street’s ban)  
On the high toby-spice so flash the muzzle?  
Who on a lark, with black-eyed Sal (his blowing)  
So prime, so swell, so nutty, and so knowing?  

*(Don Juan, xi, 19)*

Mixed in with a never quite dominant sense of the ridiculous is the poet’s attraction to a language of genuine energy and honesty. The cant of the lower classes did not interest Byron in quite the way it interested Wordsworth, but it is understood, by way of contrast to the empty signifiers of officialdom, as something closer to a direct apprehension of life. The language of these apparent criminals requires no policing because it is entirely straightforward in its attempts to grasp its physical and emotional environment. It expresses a culturally grounded and shared projection of experience, one that makes no attempt to dispute the reality it manifests. It has no stake in the ‘tone of the time’ and is thus crucially different to the cant Byron associates with Bowles.
Byron imagined his war on ‘Cant poetical’ as being in a direct line with the English Augustans, writing that ‘As to Johnson and Pope […] had they lived now – I would not have published a line of any thing I have ever written’ (BLJ, ix, 68). Despite Pope’s central importance to Byron, however, it was from Johnson that he drew most when thinking about the problems of contemporary literary criticism. Johnson’s influence is widely apparent in the Letter to John Murray, where the critic is described as a ‘great Moralist’ (CMP, 125) and ‘the noblest critical mind which our Country has produced’ (CMP, 138). Medwin reports Byron to have said that ‘I have been reading “Johnson’s Lives,” a book I am very fond of. I look upon him as the profoundest of critics, and had occasion to study him when I was writing to Bowles’.13

It would have been partly through Johnson that Byron came to know the history of the controversy about Pope in which he was becoming involved. We see this in a letter of April 1818 to John Murray from Venice, in which Byron describes the irritations that would eventually drive him to prose:

but Pope quoad Pope the poet against the world – in the unjustifiable attempts at depreciation begun by Warton – & carried on to & at this day by the new School of Critics & Scribblers who think themselves poets because they do not write like Pope. – I have no patience with such cursed humbug – & bad taste – your whole generation are not worth a Canto of the Rape of the Lock – or the Essay on Man – or the Dunciad – or “anything that is his” but it is three in the matin & I must go to bed. (BLJ, vi, 31)

What Byron calls the ‘depreciation’ of Pope might be traced back even further than Joseph Warton, to early biographies of the poet by William Ayre and Robert Shiels, both of whom raised questions about the pre-eminence of Pope on the grounds of his perceived generic restrictions.14 As Byron’s letter suggests, however, the challenge to Pope’s supremacy became serious in 1756 with the anonymous publication of the first volume of Joseph Warton’s An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope (in subsequent editions Genius precedes Writings).15

Warton, who was headmaster of Winchester when Bowles was among its pupils, began, like many middling poets of his day, as an imitator of Pope’s style. Around 1740, however, he seems to have had a change of heart. We get a sense of this from a letter to his father, in April of that year (just before he matriculated at Oriel College, Oxford), in which he declares ‘I shall read Longinus as long as I live: it is impossible not
to catch fire and raptures from his glowing style’. The terms of this enrapturing, Warton would later conclude, required clear critical instantiation and were to be defined, at length and in prose, against the style and subject matter of Pope.17

Warton’s Essay is a wide-ranging critical manifesto that puts forward its case in bold, uncompromising terms, arguing that ‘the sublime and the pathetic are the two chief nerves of all genuine poetry’ and that this ‘genuine poetry’ can be produced only by a ‘creative and glowing IMAGINATION’. Pope is applauded as a ‘MAN OF WIT’ and a ‘MAN OF SENSE’, but has no claim to the status of ‘TRUE POET’ (Essay, i, p.ii). It follows from this that Pope’s works – which are hardly homogenous – should be divided up into qualitatively loaded categories:

The reputation of POPE, as a Poet, among posterity, will be principally owing to his WINDSOR FOREST, his RAPE OF THE LOCK, and his ELOISA TO ABELARD; whilst the facts and characters alluded to and exposed in his later writings, will be forgotten and unknown, and their poignancy and propriety little relished. For WIT and SATIRE are transitory and perishable, but NATURE and PASSION are eternal. (Essay, i, 330)

Warton’s shift from what M. H. Abrams terms a ‘mimetic’ or ‘pragmatic’ to an ‘expressive’ poetics has, of course, been hugely influential; his voice is echoed by Matthew Arnold and persists into the twentieth century, where it sparked new (and very old) critical debates.20

Responses to Warton’s criticism, however, begin rather closer to the Essay’s original publication. Johnson, an acquaintance and fellow Literary Club member of Warton,21 reviewed the Essay for the Literary Magazine, describing it, in mutely thunderous terms, as a ‘very curious and entertaining miscellany of critical remarks’.22 Given the personal relationship between reviewer and reviewed it is perhaps not surprising that the review is restrained, but Johnson’s real opinions are not hard to detect. He picks up in particular on Warton’s ordering of the Pope canon, closely reproducing Warton’s own terms in his response:

He ventures to remark, that the reputation of Pope, as a poet, among posterity, will be principally founded to his Windsor-Forest, Rape of the Lock, and Eloisa to Abelard, while the facts and characters alluded to in his late writings will be forgotten and unknown, and their poignancy and propriety little relished; for wit and satire are transitory and perishable, but nature and passion are eternal.23

The skeleton of Warton’s classificatory account is left in place, but Johnson intervenes to complicate the tone and thus undermine the logic
of the original and its reliance upon strident rhetoric (and even typology). Warton’s exclamatory final sentence, with its capitalized absolutes, is dampened to a rather tired-sounding final clause recalled as by one who has heard it all before. Johnson releases Warton’s terms (such as ‘poignancy’ and ‘propriety’) from the coercive context of their rhetoric into a less confident and more questioning interpretative environment. He doesn’t formulate a counterargument as such, but implies that language has been co-opted without due deference to the problems language use entails.

It was in the Life of Pope (1781) that Johnson delivered his most damning verdict on critics who were making Pope a scapegoat in the cause of cultural innovation:

After all this it is surely superfluous to answer the question that has once been asked, Whether Pope was a poet? otherwise than by asking in return, If Pope be not a poet, where is poetry to be found? To circumscribe poetry by a definition will only shew the narrowness of the definer, though a definition which shall exclude Pope shall not easily be made.\(^{24}\)

Johnson sets out the sceptical territory of his response by ‘asking in return’, by following one question with another, which is in turn left rhetorically open. Literary criticism must begin and end in awe of its object, not with a false sense of command drawn from wrong ideas about language. Warton’s attempt to ‘circumscribe poetry’ is by comparison diagnosed as a failure of intelligence, as the assertion of a brash conviction that involves no sense of the shifting textures of poetic reflection. Warton imposes ego where he should acknowledge limitation; he misconstrues cultural baggage as existential travelling.

The ‘shame’ of Warton’s Essay, as Johnson puts it in his similarly scathing review of Soame Jenyns’s ‘dogmatical limitations of omnipotence’, is to ‘impose words for ideas upon ourselves or others’. Warton writes ‘with too much vivacity for the necessary caution’;\(^{25}\) he fails to see that ‘Definition is [...] not the province of man’ because ‘everything is set above or below our faculties’.\(^{26}\) Where Warton rushes into definition, for Johnson any attempt to use words to comprehend other words is an ironic, essayistic, tough, committed activity. It is to enter territory that is ‘copious without order, and energetic without rules’, to struggle to make choices within ‘boundless variety’.\(^{27}\) This struggle is sensed in the hard-won progress of the prose of Johnson’s Preface, but also in the forms of the definitions themselves. His definition of ‘definition’ (‘To circumscribe; to mark the limit; to bound’), to take one example, recalls the terms of his critique of
Warton’s own definition of poetry; yet where the latter simply assumes its own success, the former is accompanied by an ironic sense of its own provisionality. This comes through the exemplary quotations which call into question the very enterprise for which they are being used. Locke’s acknowledgement that ‘there are some words that will not be defined’ is set alongside some sceptical verses of Matthew Prior:

Your God, forsooth, is found
Incomprehensible and infinite;
But is he therefore found? Vain searcher! no:
Let your imperfect definition show,
That nothing you, the weak definer, know.

Decided and strongly inscribed as it is, Johnson’s definition, when taken as part of the entry as a whole, assumes a self-questioning tendency that distinguishes it from the formally unreflexive language, as Johnson understands it, of Warton or Jenyns.

Warton’s failure, as a literary critic, to grasp the responsibilities that language bears towards thought is directly contrasted, for Johnson, by the vivacious literary criticism of Dryden’s *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*:

It will not be easy to find in all the opulence of our language a treatise so artfully variegated with successive representations of opposite probabilities, so enlivened with imagery, so brightened with illustrations. [...] the criticism of Dryden is the criticism of a poet; not a dull collection of theorems, nor a rude detection of faults, which perhaps the censor was not able to have committed; but a gay and vigorous dissertation, where delight is mingled with instruction, and where the author proves his right of judgement by his power of performance. (*Lives*, i, 412)

Johnson stresses the need for an alignment of critical and literary intelligence, arguing that without this an ossified and pedantic ‘detection of faults,’ such as the kind he found in Warton, will take the place of a critical discourse that is ‘variegated’, ‘enlivened’ and ‘brightened’ by the mind of the poet. This performative aspect of critical practice, however, is more than decorative. It is seen as essential, rather, in authenticating the critic’s ‘right of judgement’. Johnson attributes to Dryden, in other words, a ‘special critical authority’, one grounded in the critic’s observance of continuities between the didactic and the aesthetic. A gloomier and tougher version of this authority is behind Johnson’s ‘after all this it is surely superfluous to answer’. Rather than answering Warton, that is, Johnson invokes the ‘all this’ of his own essayistic prose, the complex biographical and critical textures of the (soon to end) *Life
of Pope, a work which, unlike Warton’s more intellectually linear and repercussive Essay, evades obvious master narratives. He does not turn out a competing theory or definition, but turns to the character of his own writing as a form of lived experience and as a form of argument where argument has been called into question.

* * *

Byron’s study of Johnson provided not only a model for the riposte to Bowles, but a way of thinking about literary criticism that informs both the controversial prose and Don Juan. In distinguishing critically valid expression from the morally bankrupt claims of cant, Johnson helped Byron to a powerful and expansive recognition, one that cannot be wholly reconstituted as a theory or philosophical position, but which can be felt along the pulses of the poet’s writing.

Although usually associated with the early 1820s, Byron’s response to Bowles dates from as early as 1807. This was the year he started drafting his satire English Bards and Scotch Reviewers, which was published in 1811 but begun four years earlier under the title ‘British Bards, A Satire’. English Bards, in this early form, was one of the first critical responses to the 1806 publication of Bowles’s edition of Pope, which contains, in its notes and in an introductory biographical sketch, views (both on Pope’s character and poetry) that would later be developed in the prose of the Invariable Principles. Bowles’s edition (which Byron owned) was not, on the whole, well received. The Edinburgh Review, for instance, accused the editor of espousing ‘principles of criticism by no means peculiar to himself, but which have obtained too great an influence over the public taste of our age’.29

Byron is more aggressively ad hominem, full of aristocratic prejudice, and more focused on the biographical aspects of the dispute:

BOWLES! in thy memory let this precept dwell: Stick to thy Sonnets, man! at least they sell. But if some new-born whim, or larger bribe Prompt thy crude brain, and claim thee for a scribe, If ‘chance some bard, though once by dunces fear’d, Now, prone in dust, can only be rever’d; If Pope, whose fame and genius from the first Have foil’d the best of critics, needs the worst, Do thou essay; each fault, each failing scan; The first of poets was, alas! but man! Rake from each ancient dunghill ev’ry pearl,
Consult Lord Fanny, and confide in CURLL;
Let all the scandals of a former age,
Perch on thy pen and flutter o’er thy page;
Affect a candour which thou can’t not feel,
Clothe envy in the garb of honest zeal;

(English Bards and Scotch Reviewers, 361–76)

Byron’s claim that Bowles’s critical ‘candour’ is inauthentic because it lacks the validation of personal experience is straight from Horace, probably via Johnson. What isn’t evident here is any sense of how such experience might be reasserted, as an act of (critical) form, beyond the limitations of basic satire.

After English Bards, discussion of Bowles seems to have lulled for more than a decade, before being stirred up again by Thomas Campbell in his 1819 Specimens of the British Poets, which was published by Murray and sent out to Byron in Italy. Campbell echoed Byron’s distaste for Bowles’s assessment of Pope’s character, accusing the editor of a tendentious reorganization:

The faults of Pope’s private character have been industriously exposed by his latest editor and biographer, a gentleman whose talents and virtuous indignation were worthy of a better employment. In the moral portrait of Pope which he has drawn, all the agreeable traits of tender and faithful attachment in his nature have been thrown in the shade, while his deformities are brought out in the strongest, and sometimes exaggerated colours.

Campbell’s assessment is reasonable enough. Although at first Bowles is circumspect and proposes himself as arbitrator between Warton and Johnson, it becomes clear, as his biographical sketch proceeds, that his sympathies are almost entirely with his old headmaster. He retains and expands upon many of Warton’s unflattering biographical observations and, while condensing Pope’s laudable characteristics into three lines, lingers for many pages over the poet’s jealousy, love of praise, animosity, and artfulness. He emphasizes Pope’s fault in his disputes with Dennis, Philips, Addison, Cibber and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and highlights the Chandos affair and the publication of his own letters as instances of Pope’s vanity, envy and scheming nature. Taken as individual details there was nothing here that Johnson hadn’t already said, yet Bowles’s manner of telling his story is very different in texture to the ‘all this’ of the Life of Pope.

Bowles was incensed by Campbell’s criticisms and threw himself into what would become a long line of pamphlets (beginning with The Invariable Principles) which set out to defend and expand upon the ideas
set down in his edition. Byron was by this stage monitoring the debate with some interest and was so annoyed by Bowles’s riposte to Campbell that he reached for his pen and dashed off ‘Some Observations’ in March 1820. He became distracted, however (most likely by the growing instability of his situation with Teresa Guiccioli in Italy), and the pamphlet remained on his desk. He did not, though, lose interest in the controversy, and early in February 1821, almost a year later, recorded in his Ravenna Journal that he had ‘Read some of Bowles’s dispute about Pope, with all the replies and rejoinders’. He goes on to note that ‘my name has been lugged into the controversy, but have not time to state what I know of the subject’ (BLJ, viii, 43). Two days later he wrote the Letter to John Murray.

By now Byron was somewhat embarrassed by English Bards, but makes a point of recalling his lines on Bowles as the part of the poem ‘I regret the least’ (CMP, 123). He maintains the view that Bowles was too inclined to ‘omit the good qualities’ (CMP, 152) of Pope’s character and had thus produced an unbalanced biographical sketch. His response is not, however, to aim at the man, as he had in his earlier satirical poetry, but to raise questions about the nature of life writing and the responsibilities that attend any act of biographical reconstruction:

Pope was the tolerant yet steady adherent of the most bigoted of sects – and Cowper the most bigoted and despondent Sectary that ever anticipated damnation to himself or others. – – Is this harsh? – I know it is – and I do not assert it as my opinion of Cowper – personally but to show what might be said – with just as great appearance of truth – and candour – as all the odium which has been accumulated upon Pope – in similar speculations. (CMP, 147)

Rather than opposing Bowles’s depiction of Pope with a more positive account of his own, Byron returns it to the realm of ‘what might be said’. By identifying Bowles’s biographical sketch as merely one possible construction among many, including his own deliberately ‘harsh’ reading, he makes the point that the totemic claims of the former (and ‘similar speculations’) depend upon the forcing of language against the truths of essayistic form.

Byron identifies Bowles’s failure with a failure to read Johnson; Bowles, that is, is unwilling or unable to grasp the significance of the latter’s ‘all this’:

If the opinions cited by Mr. Bowles, of Dr. Johnson against Pope, are to be taken as decisive authority, they will also hold good against Gray, Swift,
Milton, Thomson, and Dryden: in that case what becomes of Gray’s poetical, and Milton’s moral character? even of Milton’s poetical character, or indeed of English poetry in general? for Johnson strips many a leaf from every laurel. Still Johnson’s is the finest critical work extant, and can never be read without instruction and delight.

*(CMP, 150)*

Johnson’s criticism may be harsh (as Byron’s is made to be above), littered with prejudice and even open to the very charges it brings against Warton (that it has more to do at times with its author than its apparent object). Despite this, Byron still claims Johnson’s as the ‘finest critical work extant’, not necessarily because of its factual correctness but due to its self-understanding as a particular instance of ‘what might be said’. It recognizes, that is, its own constructedness as well as its subjection to history, language and the eccentricities of the individual mind. Johnson’s equilaterally abrasive textures – he ‘strips many a leaf from every laurel’ – goes beyond the ‘appearance of truth’ to participate in a different form of truthfulness. This is not personal or cultural agenda but rigorous textuality.

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As Richard Cronin has shown, Byron, in criticizing Bowles’s biography, was operating within an environment where the line between what ‘might be made public’ and what ‘must remain private’ was ‘unclear and rather fiercely disputed’. Bowles’s apparent impropriety in going through the bins of Pope’s personal life was, however, only part of the problem. Byron objected to Bowles-as-biographer not only because of his tired scandal-mongering, but because of the connections he perceived between Bowles’s biographical practice and his poetics. Both were firmly rooted in the moral wasteland of cant and were thus part of a much larger problem.

The most resonant cant-word – as Byron would see it – deployed by Bowles and his predecessors is ‘Nature’. Bowles, in his edition, makes no original claims about poetry and acknowledges that ‘criticism does not form part of my plan’. He does, however, lift freely from Warton’s edition of Pope, more than once without attribution. In particular he reiterates his predecessor’s case that Pope was not a poet of ‘nature’ and therefore cannot be considered as belonging to the highest ‘order’ of poets. If anything, Bowles hardens Warton’s line: where the latter had found room in his ‘eternal’ category for *The Rape of the Lock*, presumably
on the basis of its extraordinary imaginative qualities, Bowles tethers ‘nature’ more securely to the non-human, organic world, something Byron would mock towards the end of *Don Juan* in his quip that ‘in-door life is less poetical’ (*Don Juan*, xiv, 30). Bowles, in an attempt to claim the (Horatian) ground from which he would be assaulted by Byron, even links Pope’s alleged deficiency as a nature poet to his physical limitations. As a poet of the natural world, ‘Pope […] must evidently fail’, Bowles concludes, ‘as he could not describe what his physical infirmities prevented him observing’.36

Campbell, responding to Bowles’s edition, deplored what he saw as an implausible circumscription of what we mean when we use the word ‘nature’:

Nature is the poet’s goddess; but by nature, no one rightly understands her mere inanimate face – however charming it may be – or the simple landscape painting of trees, clouds, precipices and flowers. Why then try Pope, or any other poet, exclusively by his powers of describing inanimate phenomena? Nature, in the wide and proper sense of the word, means life in all its circumstances – nature moral as well as external.37

This rather Johnsonian reprimand – which widens and reattaches the word to ‘life in all its circumstances’ – helped to provoke the *Invariable Principles* in which Bowles expands upon and entrenches his opposition between ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’. Given that the ‘natural’ acts more strongly on the reader than the ‘artificial’, Bowles argues, and that Pope is primarily concerned more with the latter than the former, it stands to reason that his poetry must be of secondary status. Bowles’s certainty about this is reflected in the relentless forms of his prose: ‘all images drawn from what is BEAUTIFUL or SUBLIME in the WORKS of NATURE, are MORE beautiful and sublime than images drawn from art, and are therefore more poetical’. Or: ‘Works of nature, speaking of those more beautiful and sublime, are more sublime and beautiful than works of art; therefore more poetical’.38

Among those annoyed by this was another Murray-circle acquaintance of Byron, Isaac D’Israeli. The *Quarterly Review* for November 1820, which Byron read belatedly in July of the following year, includes a review by D’Israeli of Spence’s *Anecdotes*, in which space is found for a few swipes at Bowles’s *Invariable Principles*.39 Following Campbell, and with something of Johnson’s tiredness, D’Israeli takes issue with Bowles’s vocabulary: “‘Nature’, he quips, ‘is a critical term which the Bowleses have been explaining for more than two thousand years’. In terms that strike a decidedly Byronic note, D’Israeli continues: ‘We quarrel with Mr. Bowles for a kind of mysticism in the language of his criticism,
nebulous as the dreams of a Muggletonian or a Swedenbourghian'. D’Israeli senses something incantatory and fetishtic, but also nebulously untethered, about a mode of critical practice that takes its stand in the word rather than in the poem, in a denatured ‘nature’ rather than amidst ‘life in all its circumstances’.

As well as identifying with the tones of Byronic satire, D’Israeli invokes Johnson as critical precursor. If the ‘Bowleses’ are nothing new then neither is the method for flicking them away:

It has frequently been attempted to raise up such arbitrary standards and such narrowing theories of art; and these ‘criterions’ and ‘invariable principles’ have usually been drawn from the habitual practices and individual tastes of the framers; there are a sort of concealed egotism, a stratagem of self-love. D’Israeli now immediately quotes, in full, the passage from the Life of Pope in which Johnson dismisses the ‘narrowness of the definer’. In dealing with Warson, D’Israeli implies, Johnson had already dealt with Bowles. No new argument has been made and thus no new argument is required by way of refutation.

Byron, in part, inclined to this way of thinking (‘had they lived now – I would not have published a line of anything I have ever written’), and shares D’Israeli’s sense of the controversy as a series of repetitions in which egotistical innovation is to be corrected by tradition. Although he hadn’t yet read him Byron sounds particularly like D’Israeli in ‘Some Observations’ where he stresses the lineage of Bowles’s argument (and by implication its lack of originality) as well as its basis in ego rather than insight:

The great cause of the present deplorable state of English Poetry is to be attributed – to that absurd and systematic depreciation of Pope, in which for the last few years there has been a king [sic] of Epidemical concurrence.– – Men of the most opposite opinions have united upon this topic.– Warson and Churchill began it, having borrowed the hint probably from the heroes of the Dunciad – and their own internal conviction that their proper reputation must be as nothing till the most perfect and harmonious of poets – he who having no fault – has had REASON made his reproach. (CMP, 104)

The critic, in these terms, is a custodian more than a controversialist. His job is to identify new outcroppings of critical ‘system’ and denounce them through alliances that connect present (D’Israeli, Byron) with past (Horace, Johnson).

Where for D’Israeli that is the end of matter, Byron’s prose fizzes with energies that have too much of the moment about them to settle for
anything like regurgitation. The past may ground us and protect us from absurdity but it cannot know everything about the present. To think otherwise, as *Don Juan* makes clear, is to go the way of the ‘drouthey’ Hippocrene, of Campbell, who saw the problems clearly enough but who had no ideas about where poetry was going and what it was to do. Moreover, Byron, unlike D’Israeli, has in mind the link between ‘Cant Poetical’ and ‘Cant Political’. Bowles, as a literary critic, may require only a wearied reiteration of Johnson’s already tired dismissal, but Byron is also thinking of a larger post-Waterloo situation in which the writteness of political control calls for new forms of scrutiny.

However much Byron agreed with Campbell and D’Israeli, he makes a point of entering the controversy on his own (sceptical) terms: ‘It is no affair of mine – but having once begun […] I am like an Irishman in a “row” “any body’s Customer”’ (*CMP*, 129). As his name has been dragged into the controversy by others anyway, he may as well appear in his own right, but he is not, he is at pains to stress, here to take sides: ‘Mr Campbell’, he asserts, ‘has no need of my alliance’ (*CMP*, 129). Byron wants to be a Bayle and wade into the absurdities of category criticism; he also, however, wants to establish a set of preferences (as he does with his commandments in *Don Juan*) against which true poetry can be measured. Are ‘we to be told’, Byron asks in return, ‘that Ethical poetry – or Didactic poetry – or by whatever name you term it […] is not the very first order of poetry?’ (*CMP*, 143). This is risky because ‘Ethical’ and ‘Didactic’ sound categorical and may be no easier to define than ‘natural’; but while Byron doesn’t have the ironic resources of *Don Juan* to hand here, he does still write himself an escape route with ‘or by whatever name you term it’. While offering up something that might easily be taken (as it was by Hazlitt) as a poetical commandment, he also undoes the totemic power of the critical word, thus leaving us not with an answer but with a reassertion of the question. ‘Ethical’ is a gesture or sketch; it registers due scepticism about contemporary vogues and asserts a bedrock connection between poetry and morality, but it also recognizes itself as a ‘term’, as a gesture within criticism rather than a final answer.

Byron’s critical prose is at its richest where it intervenes in the territory contested between Campbell and Bowles. Campbell had attempted to refute Bowles by introducing instances of ‘poetic’ spectacles from ‘artificial’ life and stressing their inherent poetic quality; he gives examples, that is, which we may well call ‘poetic’ but which have little or nothing to do with what Bowles calls ‘nature’ (i.e. precisely what Hazlitt accuses Byron of doing). The example that generated most interest was
a ‘ship of the line’ at sea which Campbell invokes as an instance of ‘the sublime objects of artificial life’. If the ship is both ‘artificial’ and ‘sublime’, Campbell reasons, then it follows that Bowles has drawn his line in the wrong place.

This was a red rag to Bowles, who replied that Campbell was mistaking the case entirely:

Let us examine the ship which you have described so beautifully. On what does the poetical beauty depend? Not on art, but NATURE. Take away the waves, the winds, the sun, that, in association with the streamer and sails, make them look so beautiful! take all poetical associations away, ONE will become a strip of blue bunting, and the other a piece of coarse canvas on three tall poles!!

Byron’s response to this was not to reassert Campbell’s argument, but to poke fun at the quasi-scientific thinking on which both sides rest their case; he also, however, wants to make his own claims about the nature of aesthetic experience:

Mr. B. asserts that Campbell’s “Ship of the Line” derives all it’s [sic] poetry not from “art” but from “Nature.” – – “Take away the waves – the winds – the Sun &c &c &c one will become a stripe of blue bunting – and the other a piece of coarse canvas on three tall poles.” – – – Very true – take away the “waves” – “the winds” and there will be no ship at all – not only for poetical – but for any other purpose – & take away “the Sun” and we must read Mr. B’s pamphlet by candle-light. – But the “poetry” of the “Ship” does not depend on the “waves &c.” – on the contrary – the “Ship of the line” confers it’s [sic] own poetry upon the waters – and heightens theirs […] the poetry is at least reciprocal. (CMP, 129–30)

The methodological problem noticed by Byron’s jokes here is given clearer form in the later ‘Observations upon Observations’: ‘If this is not “minute moral “anatomy”, Byron complains of Bowles’s approach, ‘I should be glad to know what is? – It is dissection in all it’s [sic] branches’ (CMP, 166). The image is recycled in Don Juan:

The lawyer and the critic but behold
The baser sides of literature and life,
And nought remains unseen, but much untold,
By those who scour those double vales of strife.
While common men grow ignorantly old,

The lawyer’s brief is like the surgeon’s knife,
Dissecting the whole inside of a question,
And with it the whole process of digestion.

(Don Juan, x, 14)
Where the envoy of ‘Cant poetical’ (again linked to ‘Cant moral’ in the despised figure of the lawyer) believes he is penetrating to the truth of his object he is in fact wielding the knife over the very processes and reciprocities upon which poetry depends. Poetry’s captureless incipience is unavailable to such brutal measures which, rather than participating in the subtleties of the poem, slice them up according to the dominant deceits of public discourse.

Byron may have Swift’s delusional Hack in mind here, but it is to Johnson that he turns to develop his point about reciprocity as an aesthetic virtue. ‘What makes the poetry’, Byron asks, ‘in the image of the “Marble waste of Tadmor [sic]” in Grainger’s “Ode to Solitude” so much admired by Johnson? – is the “marble” or the “Waste” the artificial or the natural object?’ (CMP, 132). Byron refers to a passage from Boswell where the following lines are quoted along with Johnson’s opinion (‘very noble’) of them:

O Solitude, romantick maid,
Whether by nodding towers you tread;
Or haunt the desart’s trackless gloom,
Or hover o’er the yawning tomb;
Or climb the Andes’ clifted side,
Or by the Nile’s coy source abide;
Or, starting from your half-years sleep,
From Hecla view the thawing deep;
Or, at the purple dawn of day,
Tadnor’s marble wastes survey.

Johnson’s approval of these lines, Byron suggests, has something to do with the co-presence of the different ‘associations’ that Bowles dissevers in his account of the ship. To put ‘marble wastes’ under the critical knife would be absurd because the effect of the image relies precisely on the conflation of the ‘natural’ and the ‘artificial’. Such poetry might also be described as ‘Ethical’ in so far as it traces human presences in human absence. Without the symbolic heft or political edge, Grainger’s imagery has something of Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ and its interrogation of permanence as a human conceit. ‘Trackless’ both gestures towards and engulfs human endeavour.

Byron is thinking here not only of reciprocity as a poetic virtue, but of the necessarily reciprocal relation between poetic and critical practice. What Bowles gets wrong for Byron is his assumption that the claim to truth negates the critic’s responsibility to participate in his object. Byron makes this point by showing Johnson not just as a judge (‘very noble’)
of poetry but as a critic who is also a fine writer. He quotes, to this end, Johnson’s famous praise for Gray’s *Elegy*:

He who reads those lines enjoys for a moment the powers of a poet; he feels what he remembers to have felt before, but he feels it with great increase of Sensibility; he recognizes a *familiar image*, but meets it again amplified & expanded, embellished with beauty – & enlarged with Majesty (Quoted by Byron, *CMP*, 138).

At its best, Johnson’s criticism deserves the compliment it pays to Dryden by shaping itself to the contours of the experience with which it contends. Here Johnson revisits and generalizes his reading of the poem, not by placing it under the banner of a single word but by running his critical vocabulary – ‘amplified’, ‘expanded’, ‘embellished’, ‘enlarged’ – into a larger effect that captures something of the cultured expansion of sentiment he describes. Poetry occurs between sites of secure rational reflection and thus shakes off the words that locate such places. Johnson’s writing, which extrapolates more than defines its object, is minded of this. His criticism, thus understood, lives out Byron’s claim that poetry is a ‘thing to be felt – more than explained’ (*CMP*, 160). The critic proves his ‘right of judgement’ in his ‘power of performance’.

Byron is using Johnson to establish in prose some of the ideas that were driving the innovations of *Don Juan*. He also, however, risks creeping back towards the ‘drouthey’ Hippocrene problem. If Campbell (as poet or critic) and Crabbe are not the way to go – and Byron wasn’t going anywhere near them with *Don Juan* – then neither, *a fortiori*, was Grainger. Such poetry may be useful in pointing to the failings of Bowles’s logic, but it was hardly a model for poetic practice in the 1820s. Even Johnson, whose resilient integrity galvanizes Byron’s prose effort, is too wedded to the rhetorical terms of Sensibility for Byron’s purposes. Reciprocity in *Don Juan*, to put this in different terms, is far more immediate than the connectivities Byron the critic was pulling out of the eighteenth century. It responds, for one thing, to a more immediate threat of dissection. As well as the long-running attempt to cut Pope out of the picture for not being ‘sublime’ enough, Byron was also faced with the more pressing irritation of his own work being put under the knife. There were Murray’s apprehensive editorial interventions to endure, his ‘damned cutting & slashing’ (*BLJ*, vi, 105) as Byron called it. There were also the critics, who had not greeted the first two cantos of *Don Juan* with much enthusiasm. They deplored, on the whole, not only the daring irreverence of Byron’s poem, but its deliberate blurring of expected generic, tonal and experiential
distinctions.\(^\text{48}\) *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, for instance, although concerned more with the poet’s behaviour towards Lady Byron than with *Don Juan*, wields the scalpel in remarking that it would have been better had the ‘wickedness been less inextricably mingled with the beauty and the grace, and the strength of a most inimitable and incomprehensible muse’. ‘It is indeed a sad and an humiliating thing to know’, it continues, ‘that in the same year there proceeded from the same pen two productions, in all things so different, as the Fourth Canto of Childe Harold and this loathsome *Don Juan*.\(^\text{49}\) This was the review that provoked Byron’s ‘Some Observations’, largely because of its highly personal nature, but also because it flies in the face of everything Byron was trying to do with *Don Juan* and its deliberate swerve away from the style of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*.

The *Blackwood’s* reviewer may have had in mind stanzas such as this, which describes Haidée’s maternal tenderness for Juan:

\begin{quote}
And she bent o’er him, and he lay beneath,
   Hush’d as the babe upon its mother’s breast,
Droop’d as the willow when no winds can breathe,
   Lull’d like the depth of ocean when at rest,
Fair as the crowning rose of the whole wreath,
   Soft as the callow cygnet in its nest;
In short, he was a very pretty fellow,
Although his woes had turn’d him rather yellow.
\end{quote}

*(Don Juan, ii, 148)*

Taken singly, the similes that precede the couplet might be sourced from any of Byron’s most popular and approved poems. Taken together, their sincerity comes under pressure from the comic form of the list before being undermined more fully by the couplet. Is the poet really feeling his metaphors or just plucking them out of overstocked poetic ether? In a world full of cant the poet cannot behave as if style were a guarantee of feeling; any such claim, Byron thought, had become perilously bound up in the enthusiasm of cultural self-definition. This does not mean, however, that *Don Juan* is merely a wrecking ball for the poetic world according to Bowles. This would mean the poem was an act of system or argument.

If the prerogatives of recognized Byronic (Romantic) practice needed careful monitoring, this did not mean that they were necessarily false. They simply needed to be played within newly connective generic environments:
An infant when it gazes on a light,
    A child the moment when it drains the breast,
A devotee when soars the Host in sight,
    An Arab with a stranger for a guest,
A sailor when the prize has struck in fight,
    A miser filling his most hoarded chest,
Feel rapture; but not such true joy are reaping
As they who watch o’er what they love while sleeping.

(\textit{Don Juan}, ii, 196)

Here the list begins in similar fashion to the one above, using naturalistic images typically associated with emotional sincerity; it quickly loses its tonal consistency, however, under the pressure of increasing internal incongruities. Byron’s ‘beauty’ and ‘grace’, as the \textit{Blackwood’s} reviewer would see it, have been contaminated by lower quality poetic substances. Such strategies on Byron’s part are entirely deliberate and stand against precisely the kinds of aesthetic assumption according to which they were condemned. They do not, however, represent anything as final as a decision about Romantic poetic culture. The couplet here, unlike the previous one, surprises us not with an assertion of wit over emotion, but with an attempt to recover the feeling with which the stanza begins. The ‘romantic’ is not simply overturned into the ‘burlesque’ (\textit{Don Juan}, iv, 3) but is quested after along a pair of lingering, eleven-syllable lines that seem all the more authentic for not succumbing to the comic forces that surround them. The ‘beauty’ and ‘grace’ of the final line are not vocally or formally pure; they have been transplanted from the easier conditions of the Byronic Spenserian stanza and feel hard won. They have been tested and approved for a world in which the poetry of feeling can no longer assume automatic rights.

What was at stake in \textit{Don Juan} was nothing less than the grounding if unpredictable connection between poetic writing and human experience,\textsuperscript{50} something that was at risk not only from the theoretical enthusiasms of second-rate Romantic thought, but from a critical and political establishment that was too happy with the dominant idea of the Byronic. \textit{Don Juan}, by way of riposte, insists that the ‘reciprocal’ and ‘Ethical’ are linked as poetic virtues; it is the poem’s tracing of life beyond the authorized limits of culture that gives it moral compass. Such thinking is inherently critical and, for Byron, political, in its claim to discover, in its own reciprocities, an antidote to cant in all its forms. It is also, while very much of its moment, firmly rooted in the tradition
of Horace, Pope and Johnson in sourcing its critical power from the decentred insights of literary form.

Byron’s thinking here also pours into the textures of the critical prose where it finds itself untethered from the (liberating) confines of the ottava rima. ‘I do hate that word “invariable”, he complains in the *Letter to John Murray*: ‘What is there of human – be it poetry – philosophy – wit, wisdom – science – power – glory – mind – matter – life – or death – – which is “invariable”? (*CMP*, 129). Byron, we imagine, was hard on his paper; his dashes become the perforations through which we glimpse the life beyond. Their clearing out of more considered schemes of punctuation hints at the hardwiring of things. They endlessly echo the hyphen in ‘serio-comic’.

Take Byron’s well-known response to Francis Cohen (a friend of Murray and frequent contributor to the *Quarterly* and *Edinburgh Review*) who followed the magazines in complaining of *Don Juan*’s ‘quick succession of fun and gravity’. Byron’s reciprocities are once more cast across the page:

His metaphor [Cohen’s] is that “we are never scorched and drenched at the same time!” – Blessings on his experience! – Ask him these questions about “scorching and drenching”. – Did he never play at Cricket or walk a mile in hot weather? – did he never spill a dish of tea over his testicles in handing the cup to his charmer to the great shame of his nankeen breeches? – did he never swim in the sea at Noonday with the Sun in his eyes and on his head – which all the foam of ocean could not cool? did he never draw his foot out of a tub of too hot water damning his eyes and his valet’s? did he never inject for a Gonorrhrea? – or make water through an ulcerated Urethra? – was he ever in a Turkish bath – that marble paradise of sherbet and sodomy? (*BLJ*, vi, 207)

Byron’s prose here is deeply mimetic in its recognition that experience is variable and simultaneous, that it incorporates opposites and exists in its own backwash. It captures a roughness and tumultuousness in this process that can be harder to find with the more controlled – if more sophisticated – reciprocities of *Don Juan*.

In recognizing the intellectual contexts of Byron’s enriched carelessness in prose we glimpse something important about *Don Juan*. We also, I think, see a writer who was starting to break paths as a literary (self-)critic. Byron’s prose seems incipiently aware of the period’s need for fresh springs of critical thought and practice to match what was happening in verse. He did not, of course, see this or act upon it as comprehensively as Hazlitt did, but he does, in moments, seem powerfully immersed in the formal-critical possibilities of prose in ways Hazlitt refused to see. This is Byron’s prose reunion with Venice in the *Letter to John Murray*:
There can be nothing more poetical in its [sic] aspect than the City of Venice – does this depend upon the Sea or the canals? [...] Is it the Canal which runs between the palace and the prison – or the “Bridge of Sighs” which connects them that render it poetical? – Is it the “Canal Grande” or the Rialto which arches it, – the Churches which tower over it? – the palaces which line and the Gondolas which glide over the waters – that render this city more poetical than Rome itself? (CMP, 134)

Byron echoes and recalls (‘the palace and the prison’) some of his most famous lines (‘I stood in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs; / A palace and a prison on each hand’ (Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, iv, 1–2)). The recollection, however, is more critical than nostalgic. Harold’s static ‘stood’ marks a darkened, resonant connection in human psychology and history, but his presiding over things lacks the generic quicksilver and critical edge of Don Juan. For all its power, Harold’s procession over the imaginative depths of Italy does not possess the immediacy required by the provocations of cant. Byron’s prose, while reasserting the reciprocities slashed by Bowles, is thus also informed by a re-visioning of poetry that had led to Harold being jettisoned from Byron’s ‘slight, trim, / But still sea-worthy skiff’ (Don Juan, x, 1–4). In retracing Venice’s imaginative bridgings and blurrings, Byron wants to pull their aesthetic power into the bustling immediate political moment that his prose is always bordering. In so doing he marks an important difference between his two most significant poems.

Compare the poet’s vivid recollection of a storm in the spring of 1810 when his ship was anchored off Cape Sigeum. His immediate thoughts are with the ‘ship of the line’ problem, but in the background we sense the deep symbolism and (anti-Wordsworthian) critical intent of Don Juan’s ‘Ocean of Eternity’:

what seemed the most ‘poetical’ of all – at the moment – were the numbers (about two hundred) of Greek and Turkish Craft – which were obliged to “cut and run” before the wind – from their unsafe anchorage – some for Tenedos – some for other isles – some for the Main – and some it may be for Eternity. – – The Sight of these little scudding vessels darting over the foam in the twilight – now appearing – and now disappearing between the waves in the cloud of night – with their peculiarly white sails (the Levant sails not being of ‘coarse canvas’ but of white cotton) skimming along – as quickly – but less safely than the Sea-Mew which hovered over them – their evident distress – their reduction to fluttering specks in the distance – their crowded succession – their littleness as contending with the Giant element – which made our stout 44’s teak timbers (she was built in India) creak again, – their aspect – and their motion – all struck me as something far
more “poetical” than the mere broad – brawling – shipless Sea & the sullen winds could possibly have been without them. (CMP, 131–2)

Byron’s listing, as Curtis elegantly puts it, ‘enacts, rather than simply describes, variability’ – it ‘communicates the unspoken’. This is also serio-comic writing in that its descriptive flow is punctuated by witty asides that express Byron’s suspicions about uninterrupted emotional playback. These hard-shelled parenthetical injections insist that we might think in more ways than one and at the same time. To do this might, it is suggested, be the opening of a meaningful discussion about poetry. In one sense Byron is being anti-theoretical in refusing to allow this specific experience (‘at the moment’) to ground an objective theory of the ‘poetical’ (a word he crosses out in writing it). The mimesis of form, in these terms, is always anxious as well as knowing because the writer is a craftsman working at one remove from his materials, especially in such places where the vagaries of memory are at their most pressing. On the other hand there is a prescriptive side to Byron’s thinking, one related to his sense that scepticism’s conclusions are often mere cleverness or brittle sophistry. Poetry, it is asserted, depends upon specific configurations of human and environmental reciprocity. One such is the encounter between the precariousness of human life and its final, demolishing, yet wondrous context – ‘their littleness as contending with the Giant element’. As well as their critical force, then, Byron’s dashes hint at the poet’s sense of vision. While cutting into the presentness of the page they also have something of Cain’s experimental force in gesturing at what they confess to be beyond them. This agency in the face of a deeply metaphorical ocean – one that begins in the mediatory sketch, hint or outline – is the object of the partially emergent poetics voiced by the narrator of Don Juan. It is also the object of my next essay.

Notes

1 Although the Letter to John Murray was the only contribution to the controversy published at the time, Byron wrote three related prose pamphlets defending Pope and offering opinions on contemporary poetry. The others are ‘Some Observations upon an Article in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine’ (1820) and ‘Observations upon Observations of the Revd. W. L. B.’ (1821). In the notes to CMP, Nicholson provides a detailed and lucid account of the various pamphlet exchanges. I acknowledge a debt to Nicholson’s fine scholarship.

2 Shelley wrote to Byron (in a letter dated 4 May 1821) of a ‘dispute in taste, on which, until I understand it, I must profess myself neuter’. ‘[T]true genius’, Shelley proclaims, ‘vindicates to itself an exemption from all regard to whatever has gone before’; he can, he adds, ‘feel no interest’, therefore, in a dispute about Pope’s
importance (The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. Jones, II, 290). Hazlitt wrote a contemptuous review of the controversy that lampoons Byron as a brawling aristocrat out of his depth when it comes to points of serious intellectual concern. ‘He doles out his opinions’, Hazlitt quips, ‘with a great deal of frankness and spleen, saying, “this I like, that I loathe”; but he does not trouble himself, or the reader, with his reasons, any more than he accounts to his servants for the directions he gives them’. Hazlitt’s review appeared in the London Magazine (June 1821) and is reprinted in The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London: Dent, 1930–4), XIX, 62. Also of relevance is Hazlitt’s essay ‘On the question whether Pope was a Poet’ (Complete Works, ed. Howe, XX, 89–92).


6 According to Richard Steele, ‘Cant is, by some People derived from one Andrew Cant who, they say, was a Presbyterian Minister in some illiterate part of Scotland, who by Exercise and Use had obtained the Faculty, alias Gift, of Talking in the Pulpit in such a Dialect, that it’s said he was understood by none but his own Congregation, and not by all of them’. The Spectator (no. 147), ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), II, 80.


9 Christopher Ricks writes about Johnson, Byron and cant in Allusion to the Poets (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 121–2.


15 Byron owned Warton’s *Essay* (as well as his edition of Pope) and when he had finished with it he sent it to Leigh Hunt remarking that ‘it is perhaps better as more condensed than his Notes to the formal Edition’ (*BLJ*, x, 83).


17 In Warton’s ‘Ranelagh House: A Satire in Prose in the manner of Monsieur Le Sage’ (1747), Pope receives a striking backhanded compliment: ‘Mr. Pope took his place in the Elysian fields not among the Poets but the Philosophers, and that he was more fond of Socrates’ company than Homer’s’ (Quoted in Wooll, *Biographical Memoirs, 178*).


23 *The Literary Magazine*, I, 38.


28 I borrow the phrase from Robin Sowerby’s discussion of Horace (‘Pope and Horace’, in Horace Made New: Horatian Influences on British Writing from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century, ed. Charles Martindale and David Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 159–83 (160). Pope had something like this in mind when he wrote of Horace that ‘His precepts teach but what his works inspire’ (Essay on Criticism, 660). Byron’s farewell to Horace on Mount Soracte (Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, iv, 77) recognizes Horace both as ‘Bard’ and ‘Moralist’. Horace is a ‘Satirist’ who can pierce the conscience, but also a poet of ‘lyric flow’ who awakens the heart.
30 ‘Before you can move me to tears / you must grieve yourself. Only then will your woes distress me’. Horace, Ars Poetica, 102–3. Horace Satires and Epistles / Persius Satires, trans. Niall Rudd (Harmondsworth: Penguin [1973], 2005), 124. Compare Johnson’s Life of Cowley: ‘the basis of all excellence is truth; he that professes love ought to feel its power’ (Lives, i, 6) as well as his description of Matthew Prior’s ‘Amorous Effusions’ as ‘the dull exercises of a skilful versifier resolved at all adventures to write something about Chloe, and trying to be amorous by dint of study. […] He talks not “like a man of the world”’ (Lives, ii, 202). Byron’s letters are littered with comparable remarks: ‘I could not write upon any thing, without some personal experience and foundation’ (BLJ, v, 14); there is also the amusing attack on Keats in the Letter to John Murray: ‘a System-maker must receive all sorts of proselytes. – When they have really seen life – when they have felt it – when they have travelled beyond the far-distant boundaries of the wilds of Middlesex – when they have overpassed the Alps of High-gate – and traced to it’s [sic] sources the Nile of the New River – then & not till then – can it be properly permitted to them to despise Pope’ (CMP, 157). Also see Stephen Cheeke’s account of how ‘the notion of being there’ is a ‘powerful and complex aspect’ of Byron’s writing: Stephen Cheeke, Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 6.
32 Although Johnson by no means gives a glowing character reference, he does not amass his evidence on one side, preferring to interlace positive and negative judgements. According to Johnson, Pope could be socially graceless (Lives, iii, 201) and gluttonous (Lives, iii, 199), yet had a potential for ‘magnificence’ (Lives, iii, 203); we are told ‘he never flattered those whom he did not love’ (Lives, iii, 205), but that he boasted of his acquaintances (Lives, iii, 204); he is accused of ‘artifice’ (Lives, iii, 206) and parsimony (Lives, iii, 203), yet praised for ‘liberality, gratitude, constancy, and tenderness’ (Lives, iii, 206); he was on occasion ‘malign’ (Lives, iii, 213) and self-important (Lives, iii, 211), but ‘it does not appear that his [religious] principles were ever corrupted’ (Lives, iii, 215).
33 Cronin, Paper Pellets, 48.
35 In his notes to Windsor Forest, for instance, Bowles keeps Warton’s initial long note, his separate section outlining Pope’s ‘Imitations’ and lack of originality, and
retains a further note on Somerville’s purported superiority to Pope (Bowles, The Works of Alexander Pope, i, 132).

36 A similar low blow (perhaps with the Life of Pope in mind) is aimed at Johnson who, by virtue of his poor eyesight and general physical infirmity, is considered as ‘not a proper judge of this sort of Poetry’ (Bowles, The Works of Alexander Pope, i, 123–4).

37 Campbell, Specimens of the British Poets, I, 264.


39 Byron dedicated ‘Some Observations’ to D’Israeli, although he hadn’t at that point read the review in the Quarterly. When he did read it he guessed the anonymous author’s identity, writing to Murray that ‘D’Israeli wrote the article on Spence – I know him by the mark in his mouth – I’m glad that the Quarterly had so much Classical honesty and honour as to insert it – it is good & true.’ (BLJ, vii, 223). He also described D’Israeli as ‘the Bayle of literary speculation’ (BLJ, viii, 237).


41 Quarterly Review (July 1820), 410.

42 ‘You see, my dear Bowles’, Hazlitt’s Byron pontificates, ‘the superiority of art over nature’ (Howe, The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, XIX, 63).

43 Campbell, Specimens of the British Poets, II, 265.

44 Bowles, The Invariable Principles of Poetry, 11.

45 ‘I have some Time since, with a World of Pains and Art, dissected the Carcass of Humane Nature, and read many useful Lectures upon the several Parts, both Containing and Contained; till at last it smelt so strong, I could preserve it no longer. Upon which, I have been at great Expence to fit up all the Bones with exact Contexture, and in due Symmetry; so that I am ready to shew a very compleat Anatomy thereof to all curious Gentlemen and others’ (Swift, A Tale of a Tub, 123).

46 Boswell, Life of Johnson, III, 197.


48 We should bear in mind here Cronin’s description of Byron’s ‘serio-comic’ as the ‘most characteristic expression of the distinctly modern aesthetic that characterized the period’ (Cronin, Paper Pellets, 171). Don Juan, ironically, has much in common, stylistically speaking, with the very magazines that were falling over themselves to attack it.

49 The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers, ed. Donald Reiman, 9 vols (New York: Garland, 1972), Part B, Byron and the Regency Society Poets, 5 vols, I, 143, 146. Francis Jeffrey, writing in the Edinburgh Review, takes a similar line by describing it as poem in which ‘pure affection and uncorrupted honour [...] have flowed, in all their sweetness, from the very lips that instantly open again to mock and blaspheme them’ (Reiman, The Romantics Reviewed, 936).
50 ‘[Y]ou have so many “divine” poems’, Byron grumbled to Murray in defence of his poem, ‘is it nothing to have written a Human one?’ (BLJ, vi, 105).

51 Curtis, ‘The Bowles–Pope Controversy’, 144. Compare Nicholson’s description of how the dashes ‘often enshrine or capture Byron’s accretive mode of thinking or writing; they reflect a desire to gather the scattered impression and to communicate its immediacy’ (Nicholson, ‘Byron’s Prose’, 192–3).