ESSAY IV

‘I wish to do as much by Poesy’
Amidst a Byronic Poetics

According to Peter Atkins

poets may aspire to understanding, [but] their talents are more akin to entertaining self-deception. They may be able to emphasise delights in the world, but they are deluded if they and their admirers believe that their identification of the delights and their use of poignant language are enough for comprehension. Philosophers, too, I am afraid, have contributed to the understanding of the universe little more than poets […]. They have not contributed much that is novel until after novelty has been discovered by scientists […]. While poetry titillates and theology obfuscates, science liberates.

Such diminutions of poetry are nothing new. In opposing ‘poignant’, ‘entertaining’ and ‘delights’ to the rather more solid-sounding ‘comprehension’ and ‘understanding’, Atkins stands in a long rhetorical tradition. Locke’s famous account of ‘wit’, for instance, although part of a broader and more thoughtful analysis of language and its representations, works along similar lines:

Men who have a great deal of Wit, and prompt Memories, have not always the clearest Judgment, or deepest Reason. For Wit lying most in the assemblage of Ideas, and putting those together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant Pictures, and agreeable Visions in the Fancy: Judgment, on the contrary, lies quite on the other side, in separating carefully, one from another, Ideas, wherein can be found the least difference, thereby to avoid being misled by Similitude, and by affinity to take one thing for another. This is a way of proceeding quite contrary to Metaphor and Allusion, wherein, for the most part, lies that entertainment and pleasantry of Wit, which strikes so lively on the fancy, and therefore so acceptable to all People; because its Beauty appears at first sight, and there is required no labour of thought, to examine what Truth or Reason there is in it.
The tone and diction imply a hierarchy of mental modalities in which ‘judgment’ (‘clearest’, ‘deepest’) is characterized as more careful, reliable and searching than ‘wit’ (‘entertainment’, ‘pleasantry’, ‘misled’) as a means of understanding ourselves and our world.

Primarily, Locke’s concern, part a larger Enlightenment effort to ‘make language more exact for philosophical purposes’, is to banish weak thought and the cumbrous baggage of its expression from intellectual discourse:

Many of the Books extant might be spared; many of the Controversies in Dispute would be at an end; several of those great Volumes, swollen with ambiguous words, now used in one sense, and by and by in another, would shrink into a very narrow compass; and many of the Philosophers (to mention no other,) as well as Poets Works, might be contained in a Nut-shell.

Many of our disagreements, Locke recognizes, result from nothing more than a lack of discipline and consistency in our use of language. As well as criticizing this unnecessarily ‘swollen’ philosophical discourse, however, Locke also argues that devices typically associated with literary writing, and metaphor in particular, are inherently rather than selectively problematic because they interfere with the processes through which the mind seeks to align itself with the external world:

similes always fail in some part, and come short of that exactness which our conceptions should have to things, if we would think aright [...] if all our search has yet reached no farther than simile and metaphor, we may assure ourselves we rather fancy than know, and are not penetrated into the inside and reality of the thing, be it what it will, but content ourselves with what our imaginations, not things themselves, furnish us with.

To think through metaphor is to activate the imagination – but this is only of secondary philosophical significance, something to be ‘content’ with; it is not to ‘think aright’ if our object is real knowledge of ‘things themselves’.

These views on metaphor were taken up and in some cases hardened by later thinkers, including Dugald Stewart, whose Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind (1792) and Outlines of Moral Philosophy (1793) Byron owned. Stewart, a disciple of Thomas Reid’s ‘Common Sense School’, was deeply indebted to Locke’s writing on language, especially Of the Conduct of the Understanding, which he admired for its ‘truth and good sense’. For Stewart, the ‘accidental circumstance’ and ‘ambiguity’ of literary devices have ‘no essential connexion with
that process of the mind which is properly called reasoning’. He is especially scathing of those who introduce ‘fancy and imagination’ into philosophical discourse, and thus produce what are contemptuously referred to as ‘philosophical romances’, works which are seen not only as intellectually corrupt, but as morally suspect; they are apt, as Stewart puts it, to ‘mislead young and inexperienced understandings’. Stewart rigorously polices the line of division and opposition which Locke’s dichotomy helped to draw, and deplores any challenge to it through generic innovation.

As well as influencing aggressive, anti-literary arguments such as Stewart’s, Locke also opened the door to more positive appreciations of literary language and its cognitive effects. He acknowledges (in his account of ‘wit’) that metaphors (his own ‘Nut-shell’ being an example) can possess an immediacy that gives them an advantage over the more arduous efforts of strict reasoning. Metaphor, he admits, can convey ‘Truth or Reason’, qualities that appear ‘at first sight’, without the need for ‘labour of thought’. This mitigated appreciation of metaphor contains the seeds of an ethically grounded poetics of Sensibility, something that was drawn out by Hume in the opening section of his An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, where a distinction is made between ‘an easy and obvious’ literary-philosophical style, and the ‘accurate and abstruse’ kind, of which Locke’s style of philosophy is seen as the great modern example. The value of the former ‘easy’ style, which is exemplified by Addison, is that it ‘moulds the heart and affections’ and makes its reader ‘feel the difference between vice and virtue’. We may sense something of a backhanded compliment here, but given the primary role afforded to emotion in Hume’s moral philosophy, his claim on behalf of the literary remains an important one.

Also distinctly post-Lockean in similar terms is Burke’s account of the sublime and its challenge to Locke’s tacit privileging of clarity through a recuperation of heightened indistinctness as a marker of the profound:

Let it be considered that hardly any thing can strike the mind with greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea.

For Burke, Locke’s ‘judgment’, which works by ‘separating carefully’ one idea from the next, misses something vital because it precludes the moments of loss that Burke sees as fundamental to sublime experience. ‘Exactness in every detail’, as Burke’s precursor Longinus would have it,
‘involves a risk of meanness; with grandeur, as with great wealth, there ought to be something overlooked’. Burke uses poetry, and particularly Milton’s, to exemplify the cognitive states with which he is concerned. Death in Paradise Lost, for example, is said to affect us as follows:

the mind is hurried out of itself, by a crowd of great and confused images; which affect because they are crowded and confused. For separate them, and you lose much of the greatness, and join them, and you infallibly lose the clearness. The images raised by poetry are always of this obscure kind.

Where Locke had despaired of ambiguity in ‘Poets Works’ as well as in philosophical discourse, Burke finds in the crowded confusions of poetry an affective capacity that is not available to the separating tendencies of ‘judgment’. This is not merely, as Locke would have it, to ‘fancy’ rather than ‘know’, but to come into the proximity of a ‘greatness’ that ennobles human experience.

Burke, like Hume, establishes claims for the literary in the wake of Locke that deeply inform Romantic aesthetics. Yet while these theorizations offer to reclaim some ground for ‘wit’ in the face of its Enlightenment downgrading, they also perpetuate some of the assumptions that underpin Locke’s isolation of the literary in the first place; they maintain a sense of sharp differentiation (Hume’s ‘easy’ versus ‘abstruse’; Burke’s ‘obscure’ versus ‘clearness’) that echoes Locke’s original dichotomy and thus accept the placement of literature within a larger framework that it inevitably becomes less able to challenge. Burke’s ‘images raised by poetry are always of this obscure kind’ (my italics), for instance, although recovering a value for ambiguity, also totalizes it as evidence, and thus places it in the service of a larger theoretical structure that assumes responsibility for the discourse of poetics in its entirety.

If Burke’s response to Locke is one of accommodation, others (including some of Byron’s strongest precursors) were more inclined to propose rupture. Sterne, from whom Byron learned not only how to work at the fine intersections of comedy and sincerity, but also about the opportunities created when texts are placed in dialogue with their own strategies of artifice, took direct issue with Locke’s account of ‘wit’, describing it as ‘the Magna Charta of stupidity’. Locke’s categorical assertiveness, Sterne thought, rather than clarifying our understanding of the human, impoverishes and simplifies it by downgrading comedy, irony and literary density as modes of investigation and expression, as well as guarantors of an appropriate complexity. Sterne’s parody counter-argument, which imagines ‘wit’ and ‘judgment’ as the two knobs on
the back of his chair, is a rewriting of linearity as simultaneity, and of abstraction as immediacy; it is a deliberate opening out of the earnestly philosophical to the comically energetic:

[...] lay your hands upon your hearts, and answer this plain question, Whether this one single knobb which now stands here like a blockhead by itself, can serve any purpose upon earth, but to put one in mind of the want of the other; —and let me further ask, in case the chair was your own, if you would not in your consciences think, rather than be as it is, that it would be ten times better without any knobb at all.18

Sterne argues, but he also thrusts the manner of his writing to the fore. He opposes the Lockean sideling of the written by rejecting its evaluative framework, but also by refusing to conform to Locke’s assumptions about what an argument is. He thus ends not with a conclusion but on a rhetorical question that prefers the reader’s imaginative engagement of metaphor to objectivity and fact.

This anti-Lockean line was picked out in more theoretical detail by Matthew Prior, who, in one of his Dialogues of the Dead (1760), places Locke in philosophical debate with another key intelligence for Don Juan, Montaigne (much to the advantage of the latter). Prior’s dialogue, which is both formally and intellectually indebted to the sceptical tradition,19 is a canny parody and highly attentive to the problematic nature of Locke’s account of metaphor as both a theoretical and a rhetorical proposition. Prior’s ‘Locke’ announces of his own philosophical writing that ‘I use these terms as instruments and means to Attain to Truth [...] ; I searched my own head, and dissected my understanding, with so great Diligence and Accuracy, that I cannot but think the Study of many Years, very usefully bestowed upon that subject’.20 ‘Montaigne’s’ response – one that recalls Byron’s attack on Bowles’s ‘dissection’ – is that Locke is one of the ‘System makers’ and that his ‘instruments’ do not penetrate to the truth of things at all, but – pointedly extending the metaphor – mutilate them beyond recognition: ‘Believe me, Mr. Lock, you Metaphysicians define your Object as some Naturalists divide it, in infinitum: But while you are doing so, the parts become so far Separated from each other, that You lose the sight of the thing in itself’.21 ‘Locke’, not to be put down, censures his antagonist for his imprecise, overly metaphorical language – ‘Simile upon Simile, no consequential proof, right Montaigne by my troth. Why Sir you catch at Similes as Swallows at Flies’ – but in so doing reveals the extent to which he is reliant upon the very devices about which he seeks to raise our suspicions. ‘Montaigne’ is quick to pounce upon this dependence and accuses ‘Locke’ of procedural inconsistency
before going on to outline a more positive case for the truthfulness of simile:

And you make Simeles while you blame them. But be that as it will, Mr. Lock, Arguing by Simele is not so absurd as some of you dry Reasoners would make People believe. If your Simele be proper and good, it is at once a full proof, and a lively illustration of your Matter, and where it does not hold, the very disproportion gives you Occasion to reconsider it, and you set it in all its lights, if it be only to find at least how unlike it is. Egad Simile is the very Algebra of Discourse.22

Where Locke, in his Essay, accepts that the ‘Beauty’ of simile appears ‘at first sight’, ‘Montaigne’ enters the more ambitious claim that it can manifest a ‘full proof’; he also makes a virtue of the very unreliability or ‘disproportion’ that motivates Locke’s critique in the first place. Where a simile does not ‘hold’, the reader is required to ‘reconsider’ the imperfect relationship between language and what it is taken to describe, a process of readerly involvement (‘you set it in all its lights’) seen as having its own value even in admitting a broader economy of failure. What Locke sees as a misadventure of mind into the trackless territories of metaphor is rewritten by Prior as a necessary precondition of the search for human truth.

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Finding Byron within this post-Lockean situation is not especially easy, and not only because the poet was disinclined to engage in extended theoretical speculation. We might, given the likelihood of his siding with Montaigne and Sterne, predict a cool reception of Locke. Yet he is seemingly one of the major Romantics least inclined to resist Lockean ideas about poetry. Unlike Blake, who thought of Locke’s theory of mind as a dire attack on human potentiality, Byron appears to have admired the broad reasonableness and orderly elegance of mind of ‘great Locke’ (Don Juan, xv, 18). Moreover, although he must have been acquainted with polemics such as Stewart’s, he nowhere appears to take exception to them; we might even conclude from some of the poet’s letters that he was in agreement:

I by no means rank poetry high in the scale of intellect— ―this may look like Affectation—but it is my real opinion—it is the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earth-quake. (BLJ, iii, 179)

The thing to notice here is that for all Byron’s off-hand disenchantment
(in this case for the benefit of the future Lady Byron) he manages, by the end of his sentence, to say something striking about the object of his dismissal. He makes no great Romantic claim for poetry, proposing it rather as a kind of personal safety feature, but his shift from argument to poetry’s own metaphorical grounding has its own interests. The terrain of Byron’s reflexive articulations demands a mode of travelling to which the reader of his poetry will be accustomed:

I can never get people to understand that poetry is the expression of excited passion, and that there is no such thing as a life of passion any more than a continuous earthquake, or an eternal fever. Besides, who would ever shave themselves in such a state? (BLJ, viii, 146)

The first sentence places poetry in an emotive sphere seen as limited with respect to a larger, containing sense of life. This seems to be confirmed by the second sentence and its well-judged reference to the mundane. Yet Byron isn’t quite separating poetry off in the way Locke does. He is also tapping his serio-comic reserves to escape the moribund theorization he initially appears to invite and dwell in. His final quip is thus not a closing down of the thought but an activation of the forces the writer can harness on writing’s behalf.

Such letters suggest a mind lacking high poetic ideals, but they also reveal a mental environment in which we are returned, repeatedly, to the possibilities of the written. Byron, to an eminent degree enactive of the forces that potentiate literary otherness, projects an awareness of and inquisitiveness about what is theorized as poetics. In what follows I want to track some of this thinking and attempt to discriminate some of the ways in which Byron’s writing articulates the value of its own happening. Bearing in mind Byron’s proximity to Miltonic, Burkean and Shelleyan notions of the sublime, and learning from the previous study of Byron’s prose, I want to move towards the narrator of Don Juan and his most direct utterances about his own art.

We might begin by grasping a connection between Don Juan and its theoretical contexts and then letting it go. This is part of the description, in the later sections of the poem, of Norman Abbey, a symbol of continuity set within a troublingly disserved past:

Huge halls, long galleries, spacious chambers, join’d
By no quite lawful marriage of the Arts,
Might shock a Connoisseur; but when combined,
Form’d a whole which, irregular in parts,
Yet left a grand impression on the mind,
At least of those whose eyes are in their hearts. 
We gaze upon a Giant for his stature, 
Nor judge at first if all be true to Nature. 

(\textit{Don Juan}, xiii, 67)

In a world of desiccated perception, Byron champions those whose ‘eyes are in their hearts’, conferring upon them, as Hume or Burke might have done, privileged access to a ‘grand impression’ that escapes rational scrutiny. According to any strict law of appreciation the Abbey is a collection of fragments, yet for those able to perceive through their feelings it can be experienced as a ‘whole’. In this sense it is a microcosm of its containing poem: both are fragments that allow the perceiver/reader to find his way beyond the patchy contingencies of immediate form to its supervening intimations of wholeness.

Whatever we see of Hume and Burke here, however, Byron is far from being their static inheritor. He was acutely aware of how easily such theoretical constellations could become faddish and, even in admiring their civilizing potential, questioned their pragmatism in the face of what he saw as an irremediable human nature. He was also far less ready than Hume to take the promptings of feeling as certain indicators of moral truth. His Sardanapalus attempts to rule his people by principles of generosity and sympathy, but finds his ideals overturned by greed and interest; as his empire collapses around him, the ironic and tragic recognition thrust upon him (through Salemenes) is that ‘Tis now too late to feel’ (\textit{Sardanapalus}, iv, i, 543). The play’s staging of its most potent moments beyond this brutal cessation of emotion registers Byron’s pessimism about the robustness of any proposed meliorative culture of feeling, and is in turn related to the poet’s complicated scepticism about the potential of art to sink into its own dedicated experiential categories. Transcending \textit{Don Juan’s} jagged provisionality, moreover, can never be in any sense (to recall Hume’s word) ‘easy’. Theories of emotive immediacy may run through the stanza but nothing is clinched in such terms. The relation between the stanza’s body and couplet, in particular, is oddly summative and generative at once; the juxtaposition of Abbey and Giant, although the two are apparently placed in a straightforwardly comparative relation, is more paratactic than the cursory reading encouraged by Byron’s grammar suggests. There is enough interpretative give between the two to preclude the kinds of easy immediacy associated with metaphor by Locke and Hume; for all the snappiness of Byron’s couplet, nothing here is given ‘at first sight’. Rather than being ushered to full understanding we are dragged back into the problems of the text.
The Byronic sublime knows its sources and can be blunt in confessing them, but it is also restless, misfitting. It is always searching for, but never quite finding, theoretical settlement. As well as the Abbey’s ‘grand impression’, Byron ranges through the looming Burkean shadowiness of ‘Darkness’ and *Cain*, the dramatically alliterative ‘dim desolate deep’ (ii, 49) against which the shipwreck scene of *Don Juan* is played out, and the Christian sublime of St Peter’s in Rome:

Enter: its grandeur overwhelms thee not;
And why? it is not lessened; but thy mind,
Expanded by the genius of the spot,
Has grown colossal, and can only find
A fit abode wherein appear enshrined
Thy hopes of immortality; and thou
Shalt one day, if found worthy, so defined,
See thy God face to face, as thou dost now
His Holy of Holies, nor be blasted by his brow.

(*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, iv, 155)

Byron would have had limited exposure to Kant, although he would have known Madame de Staël’s bipartite paraphrase of the Kantian sublime: the ‘first effect of the sublime is to overwhelm a man, and the second to exalt him’.23 But where Byron’s logic certainly tends towards a form of exaltation, this is not generated (not here at least) in anything as uncontrolled as an overwhelming of mind. Consciousness is instead ‘Expanded’ in what sounds a more gradual and guided process. The mind may become ‘colossal’, but it is not fearfully overrun or translated out of itself. Unlike Burke’s heightened blurrings the experience described is one in which lucid realization remains in play; the subject is ‘defined’, brought into a distinct understanding predictive of an ultimate ‘face-to-face’ encounter with God. The Byronic sublime, in these terms, can be distinguished from, or even construed as a critique of, what Bernard Beatty terms the ‘new cult of the untethered Sublime’.24

If the experience is tethered, however, it is far from complacently so. The bristling complexities of Byron’s sentence structure, and even his rather forced and formal second-person address – which has something of the guide book about it – suggest a mind more than aware of the forces that loom up against the possibility of vision. Compare the description of the ocean in the same canto:

Thou glorious mirror, where the Almighty’s form
Glasses itself in tempests; in all time,
Calm or convuls’d – in breeze, or gale, or storm,
Icing the pole, or in the torrid clime
Dark-heaving; – boundless, endless, and sublime –
The image of Eternity – the throne
Of the Invisible; even from out thy slime
The monsters of the deep are made; each zone
Obeys thee; thou goest forth, dread, fathomless, alone.

(Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, iv, 183)

Amidst the tensions of running iambic phrases and striving trochaic inversions, Byron dramatizes rather than stabilizes the theological context of his scene, thus enfolding the staggering potential of the experience within its extreme precariousness. Those triple constructions that end the third, fifth and final lines seem to be pushing against the control of the stanza’s form, scratching at the white space that Byron’s alexandrines so often bring into play. Again Byron proposes something more realized than Burke’s shadow melding – a distinct ‘image’ – but rather than being abstracted, it is immersed in an environment of ‘fathomless’ and monstrous fecundity.

There is nothing here of Addison’s ‘sense of our own safety’, none of the confidence, that is, of his generalized, first-person theological sublime:

A troubled Ocean, to a man who sails upon it, is, I think, the biggest Object that he can see in Motion, and consequently gives his Imagination one of the highest Kinds of Pleasure that can arise from Greatness. I must confess, it is impossible for me to survey this World of fluid Matter, without thinking on the Hand that first poured it out, and made a proper Channel for its Reception. Such an Object naturally raises in my Thoughts the idea of an Almighty being, and convinces me of his Existence, as much as a Metaphysical Demonstration. The Imagination prompts the Understanding, and by the Greatness of the sensible Object, produces in it the Idea of a Being who is neither circumscribed by Time nor Space.

This gentlemanly, contemplative experience has more of the coffee shop than the perils of the high seas. Byron, although he does, like Addison, posit an ‘Almighty’ presence, can find no easy transition from ‘troubled’ to ‘pleasure’ and from there to ‘Metaphysical Demonstration’. For him, clarity and instability – as in that fine phrase ‘Glasses itself in tempests’ – are compacted, simultaneous, unresolved. If Byron’s poem quests after distinct, religiously invested sublime experiences then it does so against the grain of poetic textures that are all stormy tumultuousness. Where for Addison the imagination prompts the understanding, for Byron the two have blurred in the moment of form.
When Byron returns, towards the end of *Don Juan*, to the ocean as sublime object, his writing is far more descriptively subdued. We still don’t get Addison’s fast track to philosophical certainty, but we do get an odd kind of clipped serenity:

That Watery Outline of Eternity,
Or miniature at least, as is my notion,
Which ministers unto the soul’s delight,
In seeing matters which are out of sight.

(*Don Juan*, xv, 2)

The stark ‘image of Eternity’ of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* is replaced by a more evanescent ‘miniature’ or ‘Watery Outline of Eternity’. At the same time the mirror image of the religiously dreadful ‘Almighty’ is toned down to a sustaining, subtly religious process (‘ministers’) that works between human subject and that which is ‘out of sight’. Rather than striving for distinctness and clarity, the poet seems content to accept the ocean as a site of mediation, as the beginning of an as yet undetermined imaginative journey. Correspondingly, we find none of the warping collisions that mark the Spenserian stanzas of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Where the act of poetry in the earlier poem is dramatically and simultaneously lucid and chaotic, here it is calmed into a moment of reflection and opportunity. Byron still cannot invest his intuition with a definite value by bringing it into the purview of rational demonstration, but he can offset some of its threat against a ‘notion’ which comes with the promise of hope.

Like the trope of (in)digestion, Byron’s notion of the ‘Outline’ is one of *Don Juan*’s submerged but persistent poetic ideas; it is a sporadic outcropping of thought that has all the force but none of the organization or linearity of argument. Where digestion becomes a way of talking about and transforming epistemology, however, the latter is aligned with the visionary and with ideas of form (Byron’s critical prose, as we have seen, is structured by a relentless outlining of the unsaid). Byron seems to have had such ideas in mind, in particular, during (the pivotal) canto six of *Don Juan*, as in this description of the imperial sublimity of Gulbeyaz:

Her head hung down, and her long hair in stooping
   Concealed her features better than a veil;
And one hand o’er the Ottoman lay drooping,
   White, waxen, and as alabaster pale:
Would that I were a painter! to be grouping
   All that a poet drags into detail!
Oh that my words were colours! But their tints
May serve perhaps as outlines or slight hints.

*(Don Juan, vi, 109)*

Poetry is not, as the poetics of Sensibility would have it, a site of immediate intuition that is other to rational effort; it is, rather, an arduous and imprecise process: the poet ‘drags into detail’ his resistant object and, unlike the painter, must despair of anything like verisimilitude. The threat of total scepticism, however, finds mitigation in poetry’s ‘outlines’ or ‘hints’, which, in the absence of accurate reproduction, offer an unspecified hope. Although his veiled object cannot be stripped of its obscurity, it can be brought into a form of imaginative illumination that depends upon the unpredictable re-uptake of its transmission.

Compare another passage from the same canto:

Meantime Gulbeyaz, when her king was gone,
   Retired into her boudoir, a sweet place
For love or breakfast; private, pleasing, lone,
   And rich with all contrivances which grace
Those gay recesses: – many a precious stone
   Sparkled along its roof, and many a vase
Of porcelain held in the fettered flowers,
Those captive soothers of a captive’s hours.

Mother of pearl, and porphyry, and marble,
   Vied with each other on this costly spot;
And singing birds without were heard to warble;
   And the stained glass which lighted this fair grot
Varied each ray; – but all descriptions garble
   The true effect, and so we had better not
Be too minute; an outline is the best, –
A lively reader’s fancy does the rest.

*(Don Juan, vi, 97–8)*

The varying – but beautiful – effects of the ‘stained glass’ bring to mind the garbling effects of language and its grounding in ‘Doubt’, that ‘sole prism / Of the Truth’s rays’. Pressed by the poem’s endlessly suggested scepticism the narrator acknowledges the limitations of his tools and brings a halt to descriptive proceedings. He then, however, moves quickly to mitigate his brief breakdown by finding a value for writing in its role as ‘outline’ or point of departure for the ‘lively reader’s fancy’. Achieving the ‘true effect’ in these terms depends not so much on accuracy of description as a capacity to engage and activate the imagination of the reader. The ‘disproportion’ of language, to recall Prior once again, invokes the reader who is required
to ‘set’ the object of description ‘in all its lights’. This can be construed not simply as a compromise but as a clear (political) gain in its activation of collective interpretative imagination. It suggests, moreover, that poetry’s doing must never become overdoing as this would be to close down the space that determines the possibilities of its dissemination. In line with this Byron’s own poetry, for all its loquacity, has a whisked through quality; it is at most half committed to the symphonics of verbal sensuousness. There is no Keatsian lingering here, no opportunities for readerly indulgence or indolence. There is only a sense of dashing on amidst the desires of narrative to hint at the silent visions beyond what must be said.

The clustering of these ideas behind this part of Don Juan may not be entirely coincidental. Byron had been writing Cain with its submerged poetics of silence and vision. It may also be significant that not long after Byron resumed his poem with a new Preface (inserted before the sixth canto) he was visited in Ravenna, in August 1821, by Shelley. The latter, in February and March of the same year, had written A Defence of Poetry, a work formed in its repeated striking out from the linguistic scepticism in which it is grounded. For Shelley, the act of poetics is fated to occur ‘on the verge where words abandon us’. The encounter of poetry itself, however, ‘defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions’; it ‘purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being’ and ‘withdraws life’s dark veil from before the scene of things’. Where the efforts of direct description conduct to frustration (‘how vain are words’, Shelley exclaims), poetry’s cognitive possibilities suggest a hope that for Shelley is emancipative and collective.

Byron’s poetry is less certain about what is being held in reserve (‘The One remains, the many change and pass’ (Adonais, 52)) than Shelley’s; it is thus less mournful and less directly hopeful in the face of what lies beyond. Although quick to test the trajectories of what Shelley calls ‘the scene of things’, it lacks Shelley’s pervasive sense of yearning beyond words and is quicker to rebound on its ironies into the moment. Byron’s words are also more radically split by the prism, more evasive in their serio-comic tracings. While gesturing at theory his ‘better not / Be too minute’ also suggests a mock-chivalrous joke about not looking too minutely into this intimate female scene of ‘love or breakfast’. Byron is also refusing to commit to what is understood, finally, as a mode of enriched captivity. A pall of enslavement hangs over Gulbeyaz, infecting and defamiliarizing the conventionally decorative; even the flowers (‘Those captive soothers of a captive’s hours’) are ‘fettered’ in their
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porcelain vases. Pulling up short of Keatsian luxuriance, in these terms, becomes an act of political awareness.

These differences acknowledged, there remain Shelleyan presences in Byron’s idea of the ‘outline’ that are harder to detect in earlier sections of the poem. The point of connection is the proposition that poetry’s cognitive impact – its engagement of the reader as locus of imaginative production – works to offset the apparently insurmountable difficulties incurred by the descriptive urge. In these terms the poetry of Don Juan comes to theorize itself, at least partially, as a site of cognitive renewal and initiation.

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Between the two oceans of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage and Don Juan we see a shift in focus from ultimate goal to middle distance, from mirror image to outline or sketch. Some of the pressure has been taken off; the energies that worked the language of the earlier poem have been redistributed. This alteration mitigates the risk of egotistical trauma and unblocks the conduits between poet and reader; it also involves, according to the prerogatives of mimesis, a loss of written presence. Form is no longer thrust into the face of the sublime because form has been emptied, reshaped and (ironically) refilled according to a different and humanly more extensive and hopeful dynamic. I think this has something to do with Shelley. I also think we are touching here on the root of Byron’s difference with himself. If we want to understand the poetics of Don Juan, then, we need to think about the poem’s emergence from Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage.

Don Juan revels in its discovery of new serio-comic energies, but it also refuses to bury the fact that it has hurtled beyond the visions of youth. If we want to place the poem at the end of a narrative of poetic development then we should bear in mind that Byron did not quite see it that way:

Now my sere fancy ‘falls into the yellow
   Leaf,’ and imagination droops her pinion,
   And the sad truth which hovers o’er my desk
   Turns what was once romantic to burlesque.

(Don Juan, iv, 3)

This is a poem in the process of transformation, not the product of such a process. The ‘romantic’ is placed not in the past but the present continuous (‘Turns’). While always fresh in its reciprocities for the
(new or old) reader it is also poetry on the turn, a massive structure for predicting the death of its author. The individual life of the poet, as Auden recognizes so powerfully in his elegy for Yeats, must be given up to the poem’s ungovernable afterlife. Amidst these Shandean tracings any gains in self-comprehension and symbolic reach are to be gleaned through sacrifice.

In this sense *Don Juan* is not so much a clean break from or abandonment of earlier ‘romantic’ Byronic texts as a haunting of their problematic possibilities. We see this most where Juan’s wanderings fall into the tracks of Harold’s pilgrimage, as they do, for instance, along the course of the Rhine. This is from the earlier journey:

Away with these! true Wisdom’s world will be
Within its own creation, or in thine,
Maternal Nature! for who teems like thee,
Thus on the banks of thy majestic Rhine?
There Harold gazes on a work divine,
A blending of all beauties; streams and dells,
Fruit, foliage, crag, wood, cornfield, mountain, vine,
And chiefless castles breathing stern farewells
From gray but leafy walls, where ruin greenly dwells.

And there they stand, as stands a lofty mind,
Worn, but unstooing to the baser crowd,
All tenantless, save to the crannying wind,
Or holding dark communion with the cloud.
There was a day when they were young and proud,
Banners on high, and battles pass’d below;
But they who fought are in a bloody shroud,
And those which waved are shredless dust ere now,
And the bleak battlements shall bear no future blow.

(*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, iii, 46–7)

This is Juan’s rather different experience of the same place:

From Poland they came on through Prussia Proper,
And Konigsberg the capital, whose vaunt,
Besides some veins of iron, lead, or copper,
Has lately been the great Professor Kant.
Juan, who cared not a tobacco-stopper
About philosophy, pursued his jaunt
To Germany, whose somewhat tardy millions
Have princes who spur more than their postillions.
And thence through Berlin, Dresden, and the like,
   Until he reached the castellated Rhine: –
Ye glorious Gothic scenes! How much ye strike
   All phantasies, not even excepting mine:
A grey wall, a green ruin, rusty pike,
   Make my soul pass the equinoctial line
Between the present and past worlds, and hover
Upon their airy confine, half-seas-over.

*(Don Juan, x, 60–1)*

This is not just a geographical revisiting but a stylistic reconfiguration. By returning to the ‘grey but leafy walls, where ruin greenly dwells’ of the earlier poem in the much sketchier ‘grey wall’ and ‘green ruin’ of the later Byron reveals how closely he was thinking of Harold when writing of Juan. What has changed, aside from the narrator’s tone and focus, is the extent and emotional emphasis of the descriptive poetry. Within the quasi-Wordsworthian framework of the earlier poem, the teeming description of ‘Maternal Nature’ is a ‘divine’, Burke-ish ‘blending of all beauties’. The whole, to recall Byron’s own description of his poem, is a ‘fine indistinct piece of poetical desolation’ *(BLJ, v, 165)*. What seems particularly fine, although not quite ‘indistinct’, is the extraordinary sense of compressed vastness in the second stanza. That detail ‘shredless dust’ is both imaginatively precise and evocative of the graded historical sublime that distinguishes the poem. The dust contains no shreds to indicate its origin (the banners that once fluttered ‘on high’) yet the reminder of ‘shred’ in ‘shredless’ serves to comprehend the gradualness of decay nonetheless. Although blurred at the edges, this is a scene centred in dense economies of meaning.

The narrator of *Don Juan*, on the other hand, offers a much barer sense of the surrounding ‘glorious Gothic scenes’. There is no retenanting of the ‘chiefless castles’ by the Byronic ‘lofty mind’, no merger of ruin and ruined ego in their concurrent ‘holding’ of ‘dark communion’, and only the briefest of glances at a ‘castellated Rhine’ that has already received its descriptive dues. These losses are compensated by a broader tenanting of a serio-comic existence that contains the sublime moment while remaining critical of the contemporary culture of the sublime. The poetry’s descriptive sketchiness – its acceptance of outline where Harold grasps and blurs at the whole – conducts, finally, to a fuller sense of a world glimpsed in the disfiguring of acculturation. Not being ‘too minute’ is ‘best’ in asserting a scene of things that engulfs and redetermines the Romantic while dismissing any claims upon it from a critic such as Bowles. The
‘burlesque’, rather than being distinct from the ‘romantic’, becomes a guarantee of the latter’s authenticity in marking what the sketch must omit. This compacting of visionary and comic is most visible in the final couplet: to ‘hover / Upon their airy confine, half-seas-over’ scrambles its own vatic resonance (‘half-seas-over’ is slang for drunk), but it does so for more important reasons than those of simple parody.

One of the reasons why the Shelleyan sublime must tear up the Addisonian is that the latter is so politically uninteresting. It depoliticizes our most radical way of seeing. A similar but more nuanced and troubled version (certainly not a tearing up) of this dynamic is going on between Don Juan and Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage. The latter is a strongly political poem as those with interests in orientalism and the Napoleonic Wars will tell us. What it doesn’t see as clearly as Don Juan is that modern poetry is not needed to tell us about the Convention of Cintra (such things frame and prompt and inform poetic intelligence, but the future will breed more efficient modes of reportage and commentary). The Harold poet sees the reclamations offered by imaginative life, but he cannot extricate these sufficiently from the mire of ego to grasp the full political significance of form.

The reader of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage is a compelled witness to the firework display of Byronic psychodrama; he is also shut out from the poem’s sublime egotistical ground, a problem Byron is pressed to acknowledge:

Could I embody and unbosom now
That which is most within me, – could I wreak
My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak,
All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe – into one word,
And that one word were Lightning, I would speak;
But as it is, I live and die unheard,
With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword.

(Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, iii, 97)

Where Milton’s Raphael ponders how to describe to Adam what ‘surmounts the reach / Of human sense’, here the arch-Romantic despairs of communicating ‘That which is most within me’. Milton’s angel, in the face of an intensely present but reserved divine other, establishes a poetics of constructive mitigation. By contrast, Byron looks stymied amidst the decay of self and is forced to concede that his efforts may be little more than a scattering of words across the void. But some hope remains. If
interiority is incommunicable it can at least be recuperated and extended, albeit in gloomy, spectral ways:

'Tis to create, and in creating live
A being more intense, that we endow
With form our fancy, gaining as we give
The life we image, even as I do now.
What am I? Nothing; but not so art thou,
Soul of my thought! With whom I traverse earth,
Invisible but gazing, as I glow
Mix'd with thy spirit, blended with thy birth,
And feeling still with thee in my crush'd feelings' dearth.

(Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, iii, 6)

The prominently central ‘Nothing’, while exerting its pull on Byron’s various personal pronouns, is offset by the ‘life we image’, a vital and primary mode of existence that contrasts the spent force of the poet’s ‘I’. What is gained in the act of giving – in reaching out to the imagination of audience – is a recharging of self in the ‘birth’ of poetry.

Such gains, of course, remain poignant in their reliance upon the logic of testament:

But I have lived, and have not lived in vain:
My mind may lose its force, my blood its fire,
And my frame perish even in conquering pain,
But there is that within me which shall tire
Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire;
Something unearthly, which they deem not of,
Like the remembered tone of a mute lyre,
Shall on their softened spirits sink, and move
In hearts all rocky now the late remorse of love.

(Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, iv, 137)

These sentiments, which do now form a permanent witnessing of the poet (in Westminster Abbey) are revisited in Don Juan in terms that seem less fraught with the anxieties of ego and less gloomily tethered to Byronic autobiography. Those ‘hearts all rocky’ – the disaffected, immediate audience of Byron’s personal life – are replaced by a less specifiable but potentially more extensive and politically meaningful readership:

But words are things, and a small drop of ink,
Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces
That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think;
'Tis strange, the shortest letter which man uses
Instead of speech, may form a lasting link
   Of ages; to what straits old Time reduces
Frail man, when paper – even a rag like this,
Survives himself, his tomb, and all that’s his.

 *(Don Juan, iii, 88)*

Byron is still concerned with the poem as self-epitaph, but his focus is less on the compensatory gains of the individual (the ‘I’ that proliferates above has disappeared), than the possibilities of poetry’s dissemination amidst a collective consciousness yet to be.29 The Harold narrator’s discourse of personal damnation and salvation shades into a more politically suggestive idea of community: the entrapped ‘voiceless thought’ of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* is succeeded by an uncluttered and intransitive ‘think’. Isolated at the end of its line the word is striking in its unadorned simplicity, but it is also strongly drawn, through bold rhyming links, into the formal weave of the stanza. Rather than being attributed with a specific democratic value, the act of thought is associated with the bonds of poetic form and the informing wealth of tradition.30 The political moment, so often discovered on the outskirts of the literary, wants to divest itself of the mundane and occupy the ever-yet-to-be of literary thought.

* * *

If the symbolic territory of the ocean is adapted to accommodate the reflexiveness of *Don Juan*, it also stands in direct critical contrast to the poetics of ‘narrowness’ which Byron, as Johnson’s inheritor, associated with a contemporary Romantic culture that had grown out of (as Johnson and Byron thought them) the misshaped ideas of Joseph Warton. At the centre of this problem – or perhaps an emblem of it – was Wordsworth. Byron’s ‘war’ against the ‘Lake School’, as McGann notes, was fought ‘under the twin banner of the traduced genius of Pope and the betrayal of enlightened political ideals’.31 It is also concerned with the possibilities of poetic vision and the relationship of style and form to thought. It was at the door of the ‘Lake School’, therefore, that Byron placed Johnson’s accusation of a narrow, theory-engendered mistaking of poetry:

You, Gentlemen! by dint of long seclusion
   From better company have kept your own
At Keswick, and through still continued fusion
   Of one another’s minds at last have grown
To deem as a most logical conclusion
That Poesy has wreaths for you alone;
There is a narrowness in such a notion
Which makes me wish you’d change your lakes for ocean.

(Don Juan, ‘Dedication, 5’)

Disinformed by tradition and excessively subject to the coerciveness of theory, the Lake Poets, according to Byron, are not innovators but prisoners of an immediate culture they have conspired to overdefine on their own behalf. Wordsworth, in some respects, was for Byron what Locke was for Matthew Prior: an optimist whose language, rather than probing the extent of human possibility as it thinks, has retracted into an unengaged sphere of self-admiration which is both too narrow and too complete. His organicist rhetoric – ‘still continued fusion / Of one another’s minds’ – represents for Byron a basic confusion about the relation of poetic language to experience. Its undoing, within the more expansive serio-comic environment of Don Juan, is a reassertion of poetry’s right to range through language in all its modulations. Byron claims a visionary poetry that cannot be guaranteed by visionary-sounding language.

The oceanic counterclaim of Don Juan, and its radicalization of vision, begins in an encounter between Romantic rhetoric and the prodigious verbiage of comedy and digression. Byron reinvents silence. What remains unspoken in so many words can be glimpsed here in the poem’s drowning of philosophical thought:

WHEN Newton saw an apple fall, he found
In that slight startle from his contemplation –
‘Tis said (for I’ll not answer above ground
For any sage’s creed or calculation) –
A mode of proving that the earth turned round
In a most natural whirl called ‘Gravitation;’
And this is the sole mortal who could grapple,
Since Adam, with a fall, or with an apple.

Man fell with apples, and with apples rose,
If this be true; for we must deem the mode
In which Sir Isaac Newton could disclose
Through the then unpaved stars the turnpike road,
A thing to counterbalance human woes;
For ever since immortal man hath glowed
With all kinds of mechanics, and full soon
Steam-engines will conduct him to the Moon.
And wherefore this exordium? – Why, just now,
   In taking up this paltry sheet of paper,
My bosom underwent a glorious glow,
   And my internal Spirit cut a caper:
And though so much inferior, as I know,
   To those who, by the dint of glass and vapour,
Discover stars, and sail in the wind’s eye,
I wish to do as much by Poesy.

In the Wind’s Eye I have sailed, and sail; but for
   The stars, I own my telescope is dim;
But at the least I have shunned the common shore,
   And leaving land far out of sight, would skim
The Ocean of Eternity: the roar
   Of breakers has not daunted my slight, trim
But still sea-worthy skiff; and she may float
Where ships have foundered, as doth many a boat.

*(Don Juan, x, 1–4)*

Anne Mellor paraphrases this remarkable articulation as follows:

Unlike Newton, who by his own admission has been content merely to pick up pebbles on the seashore, the narrator’s imagination has ventured out into the ocean of eternity. His creative wit has thus been able to apprehend and to communicate the ultimate incomprehensibility of the universe. In this sense, the imagination provides a surer road to truth, whatever the toll in self-deception, than Newton’s more cautious mechanics.32

Byron, it is suggested, makes the case for ‘creative wit’ as a ‘surer road to truth’ in preference to the more scientific methods of comprehension associated with Newton. Where the latter, in a famous moment of humility, compares the ocean to the vastness of his ignorance,33 Byron’s narrator, with uncertain haughtiness, shuns the ‘common shore’ that establishes the limits of Newton’s ‘mechanics’ and sets sail, however precariously, upon the poet’s true element, the boundless ‘Ocean of Eternity’34 Byron’s scorn in these terms would put him somewhere near Blake and his attack on Newton as the mechanical scourge of spiritual possibility, with the difference that where the latter is full of visionary confidence, the former can only confirm his scepticism, his fixed sense of the ‘ultimate incomprehensibility of the universe’.

Such a reading runs into problems when we pay attention to the intricacies of what Byron has written. The language of the first three stanzas in particular, rather than supporting a sceptical, anti-Enlightenment reading, is in fact strikingly non-antagonistic; it tends rather towards
inclusiveness and an imaginative breaking down of the dichotomies upon which oppositional readings depend. The poetry conjures an act of negotiation and enlargement that both depends upon and celebrates the plasticity of words. Clearly, the narrator of *Don Juan* has his doubts about scientific progress – ‘This is the patent-age of new inventions / For killing bodies, and for saving souls’ (*Don Juan*, i, 132) – but his inclination here is not to distance poetry from science, but to hold the two together under the sign of linguistic accommodation; he matches up the ‘glorious glow’ of his poetic insight with the ‘mechanics’ that ‘glowed’ in the previous stanza, as well as uniting poetry and science in the figure of the telescope.35 Newton’s own discoveries, similarly, do not result from the laborious processes that Locke and Hume associate with scientific method, but from a ‘slight startle’, a sudden interruption (of thought and rhythm) that seems closer to the poet’s inspiration than the scientist’s toil.

Byron, like Shelley, was gripped by the imaginative and mythic suggestiveness of new technologies,36 and presents Newton, that ‘Proverb of the Mind’ (*Don Juan*, vii, 5), not as a figurehead of the Enlightenment, but as a character of primal significance positioned within, rather than against, the depth of literary and biblical meaning stirred up in these stanzas. He is a second Adam, a new rising (‘fell with apples, and with apples rose’) in the undulating rhythms of post-lapsarian human perception. He is also, however, that very different progenitor, Milton’s Satan, moving through the ‘unpaved stars’ with sin in his wake. Like Plato earlier in the poem he has reconceptualized knowledge and created the world afresh, but he has also ‘paved the way’ for lesser minds – like the ‘poets and romancers’ following in Plato’s wake – to extend, in their obliviousness to the vital mimesis of creativity, the sway of ‘system’ over the ‘controlless core’ of human truth.

Rather than taking sides with a Romantic version of ‘wit’ over ‘judgment’, Byron seems more concerned to distinguish and mythologize a tradition of genius and originary creation that is seen to pre-exist (and implicitly critique) any such divisive conception of mind. If he is being sceptical here then his scepticism is directed not towards the possibility of knowledge per se, but towards historical and cultural processes that have conspired to diminish the vitality of thought and language through acts of controlling categorization and narrowed circumscription. As a Romantic, Byron wants to trace poetry to its source, but he does this against the grain of determined Romantic styles – the Wordsworthian, the Harold-Byronic, and anything argued for by Bowles. Poetry, in such deep places, is chaotic, undecided, uncontrolled; it lurches into
definition, lucidity and ideation. It happens along the hyphen of ‘serio-comic’. Anything more homogenized and endorsed will take us away from such primal energies towards the deceits of ego and the flatteries of immediate culture.

Notes
5 Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 523.
7 See the 1816 sale catalogue of Byron’s books (reprinted in CMP, 242).
8 Byron allegedly claimed (in conversation) that ‘the philosophy of common sense is the truest and the best’ (HHSV, 275), although how far we can associate this with the ‘Common Sense School’ is another question.
10 Stewart, Collected Works, ii, 180.
11 Stewart, Collected Works, iv, 225.
12 For a broader account of Locke’s eighteenth-century reception see Kenneth MacLean, John Locke and English Literature of the Eighteenth Century (New York: Russell, 1962).
16 Burke, The Early Writings, 234. Burke refers to Paradise Lost, i, 589–99.
17 Tristram Shandy, II, 238.
18 Tristram Shandy, II, 236.
19 Where Prior takes sides, Pope is more radical in his untethering: ‘Sworn to no Master, of no Sect am I: / As drives the storm, at any door I knock, / And house with Montagne now, or now with Locke’ (‘The First Epistle of the First Book of Horace Imitated’, 24–6).
Prior, *Dialogues of the Dead*, 241, 228.

Prior, *Dialogues of the Dead*, 223.


Steele, *The Spectator*, IV, 234.

Shelley’s *Poetry and Prose*, 508, 533. Compare William Keach: ‘Shelley’s style […] is the work of an artist whose sense of the unique and unrealized potential in language was held in unstable suspension with his sense of its resistances and limitations’. William Keach, *Shelley’s Style* (New York: Methuen, 1984), xvi.

Compare, for instance, the initial description of Julia in canto i (55), which, although ironically aware of its own struggling attempts at description (‘But this last simile is trite and stupid’), lacks the philosophical suggestiveness of the descriptions of Gulbeяз.

We need to bear in mind here the rising ‘tension between Byron and his readership’ that characterizes the post-Harold period (Stabler, *Byron, Poetics and History*, 99).

Byron has Shakespeare in mind: ‘Nor marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme’ (Sonnet 55). *The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint*, ed. John Kerrigan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), 104.


Byron refers to the following alleged remark: ‘I don’t know what I may seem to the world, but as to myself, I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undisclosed before me’. Spence, *Anecdotes, Observations, and Characters*, 54. Byron also alludes to the anecdote at *Don Juan*, vii, 5 and ix, 17.

Compare Shelley’s anxious sense of superiority in *Adonais*: ‘my spirit’s bark is driven / Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng / Whose sails were never to the tempest given’ (488–90).

Byron also uses the image in ‘The Dream’, 177–83 and *The Vision of Judgment*, 106.

Thomas Medwin records Byron asking ‘Where shall we set bounds to the power of steam? […] Might not the fable of Prometheus, and his stealing the fire, and of Briareus and his earth-born brothers, be but traditions of steam and its machinery? (Medwin’s *Conversations of Lord Byron*, 188). A similar compression occurs in Shelley’s *Letter to Maria Gisborne*, when the poet imagines himself as a ‘mighty mechanist, / Bent with sublime Archimedean art’ (16–17).