Byron and the Forms of Thought

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PART 3

OUTLINES
The Flower and the Gem

Narrative Form and the Traces of Eden

Byron’s ‘wish to do as much by Poesy’ remains partially and crucially submerged in poetry itself. Its incompleteness as a moment of poetics is its first claim. Its second, perhaps surprisingly, is on behalf of theory, although not of the kind Byron associates with Bowles or Wordsworth. The narrator of Don Juan is always keenly susceptible to the advances of doubt, but he resists the sceptic’s satisfaction and conclusiveness; there is a restless search for origin with Byron that has something of Shelley but nothing of the Pyrrhonist. While sneering at ‘system’, Byron commits to theory where it recognizes itself as a process shaped both by knowledge of its own limits and the poet’s right to judge. Byron’s skiff and telescope are markers of this commitment, as is the notion of the ‘outline’ with its proposal of the poem as site of imaginative mediation and political possibility. As in the sketching, dashing critical prose, theory is both held off and pursued through an intellectual vitality that will not settle for a name. Byron’s ‘wish’ is to write a critical and wary visionary poetry that throws off Romantic acculturation and its post-Enlightenment scene of division to touch upon ‘Eternity’.

So far I’ve approached these ideas mainly through the narrator of Don Juan as digressive ‘philosopher’ and weaver of reflexive images. Byron’s poetics, however, can also be seen in the poet’s work as a narrative artist, in the forms and symbolic characters that shape Juan’s experience. As well as telling stories, Don Juan is fundamentally concerned with how stories are told; it is a poem preoccupied with the ethics of fictionality. Narratives are in their very nature selective, and their meaning depends upon their inclusions, exclusions and emphases. They are necessarily outlines of an implied whole that cannot be presented in its totality; as such they must assume (or evade) responsibility for the unrepresented. Much of this selectiveness is a form of disinterested and necessary filtering and a precondition for the production of plausible narrative
art; it may also, however, be bound up in ideological or other agendas that seek to reproduce the world through an act of bad faith. Narrative, thus understood, might be compared to argument (as both Byron and Keats understood it) in plotting its way through a sprawling range of experience and possibility. Locke was accused by his detractors of an implausible tidiness on such grounds, and Byron attacked Wordsworth and Bowles for establishing circumscribed narratives on poetry’s behalf. As if minded of this, the narratives of Don Juan are sharply sensitized to their own constructedness. They become self-comprehending and critically charged in confessing the extent of their emergence from origin. Their probing for cracks in the walls of Eden tells of the plight of the Romantic in an age of fallen words.

Paradise becomes a serious concern of Don Juan in the section of narrative that begins with Juan’s awakening into the world of Haidée after surviving the shipwreck, and ends with Lambro’s unceremonious hurling of Juan back into the poem’s containing narrative flow. Haidée, the beautiful inhabitant of an Edenic island, discovers a barely alive Juan, restores him to health, and the pair fall in love:

And thus they wander’d forth, and hand in hand,
Over the shining pebbles and the shells,
Goided along the smooth and harden’d sand,
And in the worn and wild receptacles
Work’d by the storms, yet work’d as it were plann’d,
In hollow halls, with sparry roofs and cells,
They turn’d to rest; and, each clasp’d by an arm,
Yielded to the deep twilight’s purple charm.

They look’d up to the sky, whose floating glow
Spread like a rosy ocean, vast and bright;
They gazed upon the glittering sea below,
Whence the broad moon rose circling into sight;
They heard the wave’s splash, and the wind so low,
And saw each other’s dark eyes darting light
Into each other – and, beholding this,
Their lips drew near, and clung into a kiss;

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

*(Don Juan, ii, 184–6)*

As well as including some fine descriptive poetry, these stanzas involve a complex act of placement. The lovers, we are told, ‘look’d up’ to the sky, which is likened to a ‘rosy ocean’, and also ‘gazed upon the glittering sea below’. They are located between sublime bodies that reflect upon each other in crosscurrents of literal and metaphorical exchange. Placed between these energies the lovers themselves seem faintly supernatural as they move over the surface of the earth (‘Glided along the smooth and harden’d sand’). In this charged environment of incanted rhythms, their kiss acts as a conductor, a site of concentration where understanding, unshackled from reason, is perfectly realized. Unlike ‘Doubt’, the ‘sole prism / Of the Truth’s rays’, the lovers are a ‘focus’ for a truth that is taken directly from ‘above’. This is no ‘common shore’, but a privileged space suffused by the perfection of young love.

Although Byron recognizes the fragile truth of this ‘romantic’ bliss, it cannot and does not dictate the limits of poetic consciousness. Paradise is marked out by the wisdom of tradition as susceptible and doomed. The lovers’ fall is also predicted by the part-comic rhyme patterns of Byron’s *ottava rima* which draw towards the inapposite ‘I think’ of a witty and deeply lapsarian narrator. Contrary to usual structurings of the sublime, a known, defined and all-too-human presence marks the limit of an immediate scene of transcendence and ineffability.

Where Juan is carried along by the picaresque momentum of the narrative, the poem’s female characters are generally fixed to their initial settings. Within these environments they act as transmitters and receivers of the sustaining and destructive energies that are carefully traced through the poem. Haïdée’s sustaining life force, as well as preserving Juan, prevents the total moral demise of her vice-riddled father, the pirate Lambro:

But whatsoe’er he had of love reposed  
On that beloved daughter; she had been  
The only thing which kept his heart unclosed  
Amidst the savage deeds he had done and seen;  
A lonely pure affection unopposed:  
There wanted but the loss of this to wean  
His feelings from all milk of human kindness,  
And turn him like the Cyclops mad with blindness.  

*(Don Juan, iii, 57)*
Lambro is positioned ‘Amidst’ a world of savagery, but remains ‘unclosed’ – not quite open – but not quite finally cut off from all hope either. Haidée prevents his final descent into madness by being herself ‘unopposed’; her ‘pure affection’, unlike the flawed efforts of reason and argument, is impervious to contradiction. She acts as a conduit between the origin from which Lambro risks absolute alienation and the energetic but deadly sphere of ‘deeds’ into which he has emerged.

If Haidée’s ‘affection’ is redemptive, however, it is also ‘lonely’; it is bound up in the very human frailty it promises to counter. Although she revives Juan from his ‘doubt’ and ‘despair’ (Don Juan, ii, 112), there is something desperate and consuming about this ‘lovely female face’ (Don Juan, ii, 112) that ‘Seem’d almost prying into his for breath’ (Don Juan, ii, 13). With a name that evokes the underworld and eyes as ‘black as death’ (Don Juan, ii, 117), Haidée is far from straightforward as a symbol of melioration. The giver of sustenance, like the narrative she inhabits, cannot be self-sufficient and must be sustained from elsewhere, a role performed in the poem by the maidservant Zoe (a name linked to Eve and meaning ‘life’), who helps Haidée move the feeble Juan to a nearby cave:

And lifting him with care into the cave,
    The gentle girl, and her attendant, – one
    Young, yet her elder, and of brow less grave,
    And more robust of figure, – then begun
    To kindle fire, and as the new flames gave
    Light to the rocks that roof’d them, which the sun
Had never seen, the maid, or whatsoe’er
She was, appear’d distinct, and tall, and fair.

(Don Juan, ii, 115)

While the vampiric Haidée is positioned over Juan ‘still as death / Bent, with hush’d lips, that drank his scarce-drawn breath’, Zoe ‘the meantime some eggs was frying’ (Don Juan, ii, 144). In the end it is the latter’s worldliness (she knows ‘by tradition, for she ne’er had read’ (Don Juan, ii, 158)) rather than Haidée’s purer energy that saves Juan’s life. Rather than a simple affirmation of transcendence in the face of a fallen world Byron’s narrative looks to bring Haidée’s dark-pristine energies into balance. Her redemptive function is framed by complex comic forces represented in different ways by both the narrator and Zoe. Byron’s poem conjures a strong sense of what lies beyond the narrowed frame of the ‘romantic’ story.

The narrator’s observation that ‘love must be sustain’d like flesh and blood’ (Don Juan, ii, 170) also bears a critical force. Zoe’s ‘most superior
mess of broth’, we are told, is a ‘thing which poesy but seldom mentions’ 
*(Don Juan, ii, 123)*, a reference to Homer that activates Byron’s larger 
satire about the limitations of contemporary writing. Poetry, the narrator 
opines, has become infected with an ‘air / Of clap-trap, which your 
recent poets prize’ *(Don Juan, ii, 124)*. Its language, under the influence 
of poets such as Wordsworth, has become stuck in a rut, something *Don 
Juan* challenges through its generic and rhetorical scramblings:

> And Juan, too, was help’d out from his dream,  
> Or sleep, or whatsoe’er it was, by feeling  
> A most prodigious appetite: the steam  
> Of Zoe’s cookery no doubt was stealing  
> Upon his senses, and the kindling beam  
> Of the new fire, which Zoe kept up, kneeling,  
> To stir her viands, made him quite awake  
> And long for food, but chiefly a beef-steak

*(Don Juan, ii, 153)*

The bliss of young love may be ‘kindled from above’, but here a similar 
phrase – the ‘kindling beam’ of Zoe’s cooking fire – is placed in a 
very different register and with reference to a very different sphere of 
experience. The word’s doubleness, its radical serio-comic reciprocity, is 
mobilized by the poem’s critical intelligence; it registers consciousness 
in transition and in so doing cuts against the mono-registers of cultural 
self-sufficiency (Bowles’s ‘Nature’). The unfamiliar realism proposed in 
giving us both Haidée and Zoe is present in the very words of the poem 
and their multiple inhabitation of experience.

As Haidée’s story nears its dissolution, the narrator’s broadly 
sympathetic framing of paradise becomes increasingly infiltrated by less 
controllable forces:

> They fear’d no eyes nor ears on that lone beach,  
> They felt no terrors from the night, they were  
> All in all to each other: though their speech  
> Was broken words, they *thought* a language there, –  
> And all the burning tongues the passions teach  
> Found in one sigh the best interpreter  
> Of nature’s oracle – first love, – that all  
> Which Eve has left her daughters since her fall.

*(Don Juan, ii, 189)*

Unlike Harold’s more Wordsworthian ‘mutual language, clearer than 
the tome / Of his land’s tongue’ *(Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, iii, 13)*, this 
supra-linguistic, Edenic communication is understood as doomed by a
narrator who cannot shake Eve from his thoughts. He is not writing about what happens to Haidée but about what has already happened to her. The lovers may fear neither ‘eyes nor ears on that lone beach’, but they have been seen many times before, and their ignorance of this will not defend them. Neither, in the end, can the narrator’s nostalgia, which must share its worldly purview with the world’s boundless capacity for disenchantment:

The gentle pressure, and the thrilling touch,
The least glance better understood than words,
Which still said all, and ne’er could say too much;
A language, too, but like to that of birds,
Known but to them, at least appearing such
As but to lovers a true sense affords;
Sweet playful phrases, which would seem absurd
To those who have ceased to hear such, or ne’er heard:

(Don Juan, iv, 14)

Again, it is the couplet that stages the incursion of knowledge into a paradise oblivious to its own permeability. Here, however, the likes of the narrator who have ‘ceased to hear such’ are accompanied by more threatening and unknown presences who have ‘ne’er heard’. Byron may invest in the (future) reader as site of imaginative mediation, but he also knew that much of his readership was locked up in a language that expressed its lack of self-comprehension as envy. As the poet knows only too well, the story of Adam and Eve is a story about the fall of words.

It is the forces of misunderstanding that finally overrun the lovers’ sphere of charged silence when it is broken apart by Lambro after a brief balancing of sublime and carnivalesque energies. Severed from Juan, Haidée is left at the mercy of an inrushing world:

She look’d on many a face with vacant eye,
On many a token without knowing what;
She saw them watch her without asking why,
And reck’d not who around her pillow sat;
Not speechless though she spoke not; not a sigh
Relieved her thoughts; dull silence and quick chat
Were tried in vain by those who served; she gave
No sign, save breath, of having left the grave.

(Don Juan, iv, 63)

Haidée is ‘Not speechless though she spoke not’: her unspoken language of thought continues, but without Juan it has no receiver and thus she is given over to the fatal misunderstanding of the surrounding throng.
In an exquisite moment just prior to her death she hears the music of a harpist, the beauty of which reverberates with her profound speechlessness and elicits a response. As she hears the music ‘her thin wan fingers beat the wall / In time to his old tune’ (Don Juan, iv, 66). This final act of connection with the ‘old tune’ acknowledges an informing world of song and tradition but also hints, amidst tragedy, at the energies of renewal that drive the comic progress of Byron’s poem. Haidée is not obliterated any more than Eve was; she is, rather, reimplicated in the tasks of the beyond.

* * *

Haidée’s ‘romantic’ energies, which keep in mind the culture of Byronic orientalism, are returned to a containing poem that in its own narrative journey is heading towards Regency England. It is there, in the poem’s final major narrative sequence, that these energies are most obviously recollected and redeployed. Instead of awakening into a blissful scene defined by the complimentary energies of Zoe and Haidée, Juan, in Don Juan’s English cantos, enters a busy social sphere in which two new female characters, Lady Adeline Amundeville and Aurora Raby, establish the erotic and existential framework within which the poem’s intelligence moves. Juan’s position between these two very different women is made explicit at the feast, where by ‘some odd chance [he] was placed between / Aurora and the Lady Adeline’ (Don Juan, xv, 75).

Lady Adeline Amundeville, a name suggesting a devilish urban worldliness, is a creature of society and her element is the ‘heterogeneous mass’ (Don Juan, xiii, 94) of guests assembled at her country home, Norman Abbey. Adeline is first encountered ‘amidst the gay world’s hum’ (Don Juan, xiii, 13), tuned to the low-level noise of social bustle. This immersive state – ‘amidst’ is an important word in the poem – glances back to Lambro, but also forward to the narrator’s own semi-careful self-positioning:

I perch upon an humbler promontory,
   Amidst life’s infinite variety:
With no great care for what is nicknamed glory,
   But speculating as I cast mine eye
On what may suit or may not suit my story

(Don Juan, xv, 19)

The state of plenitude that is also a state of oppression is an ambiguous one in Don Juan. To be amidst things can signal a proximity to origin as it does here for the narrator as he selects the materials for his ‘story’
out of ‘infinite variety’. His reflexive ‘amidst’, however, is very different to those that govern Lambro and Adeline. Where the narrator understands the relation between ‘infinite variety’ and ‘story’, between ‘Eternity’ and ‘miniature’, his characters are unaware of their miring in immersive abstractions.

The narrative that sees nothing beyond itself must concoct its own internal sublime. Thus Wordsworth gives us lakes not ocean. Adeline’s urban, spiritless world, in these terms, can only muster the lavishly proliferating, mock-sublime banquet at the centre of the English cantos. Unlike the nurturing sustenance provided by Zoe, the banquet bespeaks a world utterly dissered from origin. Poetry, by way of ironic sympathy, becomes a ‘conundrum of a dish’ (Don Juan, xv, 21), one restricted in its ingredients to the mock heroic (‘Great things were now to be achieved at table, / With massy plate for armour’ (Don Juan, xv, 62)) and Louis Ude’s famous The French Cook (1813), the latter supplying many of the fashionable dishes served up by the Amundevilles. Instead of being ‘Amidst life’s infinite variety’ the poet finds himself ‘Amidst this tumult of fish, flesh, and fowl’ (Don Juan, xv, 74).

The straining poet of vision is reduced to something more like an overworked food writer:

Alas! I must leave undescribed the gibier,
   The salmi, the consommé, the purée,
   All which I can use to make my rhymes run glibber
   Than could roast beef in our rough John Bull way:
I must not introduce even a spare rib here,
   ’Bubble and squeak’ would spoil my liquid lay;
But I have dined, and must forego, alas!
The chaste description even of a ’Becasse’,

(Don Juan, xv, 71)

In such a place the poet’s exclusion from Eden seems absolute. Where Paradise Lost resounds with divine creation, the nineteenth-century poet cannot ‘introduce even a spare rib’. The very idea of higher creation seems to have been cancelled amidst the linguistically dismal, cant-ridden sphere of the Amundevilles:

The mind is lost in mighty contemplation
   Of intellect expended on two courses;
And indigestion’s grand multiplication
   Requires arithmetic beyond my forces.
Who would suppose, from Adam’s simple ration,
   That cookery could have call’d forth such resources,
As form a science and a nomenclature
From out the commonest demands of nature?

(Don Juan, xv, 69)

Adeline’s world is abstracted from nature, debarred, through the categorizing effort of ‘science’ and its ‘nomenclature’, from Haidée’s supra-linguistic paradise. Hers is a spirit weighed down amidst the uncreative aftermath of Enlightenment. Similarly mired in this post-Adamic (and post-Lockean) situation, the poet is confronted with a language that seems dead to the potentiality of human life. Where Adam named the animals with ontologically vital words of origin, the modern poet lives in a world of ‘dictionaries, / Which encyclopedize both flesh and fish’ (Don Juan, xv, 68). Something has been lost behind Shelley’s (Coleridgean) ‘film of familiarity’; category has replaced apprehension at the ground of linguistic function.

What hope remains here certainly has nothing to do with Bowles’s ‘Nature’ but does seem to involve the frozen-out yet unextinguished human (female) spirit. Byron does, after all, find a spare rib from somewhere. Adeline, with her ‘two transcendant [sic] eyes’ (Don Juan, xv, 75), is more the victim of her world than its contemptible emanation. Far from being a simple object of satire, she is identified with the poet himself as sharing that characteristic Byronic quality of ‘mobility’ or ‘an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions’. Her fascinating spiritual compression is also a prompt to poetic creativity:

But Adeline was not indifferent: for

(Now for a common place!) beneath that snow,
As a Volcano holds the lava more
Within – et caetera. Shall I go on? – No!
I hate to hunt down a tired metaphor:
So let the often used volcano go.

Poor thing! How frequently, by me and others,
It hath been stirred up till its smoke quite smothers.

I’ll have another figure in a trice: –
What say you to a bottle of champagne?

Frozen into a very vinous ice,
Which leaves few drops of that immortal rain,
Yet in the very centre, past all price,
About a liquid glassful will remain;
And this is stronger than the strongest grape
Could e’er express in its expanded shape:

(Don Juan, xiii, 36–7)
The comparison of a passionate but suppressed interiority and a volcano, a simile to which Byron admits being no stranger (‘the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake’), is now recognized as ‘tired’; it has become part of the ‘clap-trap’ that spoils contemporary poetry. It is not so much that the volcano is inapposite as that it has lost its spark as a moment of creation. It has become more like the stuff of the encyclopedias than the language of Adam. Adeline’s ‘quintessence’ (Don Juan, xiii, 38) thus requires a more original figure, which it becomes the task of the poet to hunt down.

This questing for identity takes us to the verge of nihilism as metaphor becomes an act of energetic staving off:

The evaporation of a joyous day
Is like the last glass of champagne, without
The foam which made its virgin bumper gay;
Or like a system coupled with a doubt;
Or like a soda bottle when its spray
Has sparkled and let half its spirit out;
Or like a billow left by storms behind,
Without the animation of the wind;
Or like an opiate which brings troubled rest,
Or none; or like – like nothing that I know
Except itself; – such is the human breast;
A thing, of which similitudes can show
No real likeness, – like the old Tyrian vest
Dyed purple, none at present can tell how,
If from a shell-fish or from cochineal.
So perish every tyrant’s robe piece-meal!

(Don Juan, xvi, 9–10)

The telling moment here is the redirecting stutter in the second stanza (‘or like – like nothing’). Byron’s dash represents a tiny stretch of the infinite quietness predicted by any quest for figurative identity. Indeed, it is only through sleight of hand (by using the failure of simile as a simile itself) that the narrator is able to continue at all. The poet has verve and range – he ends by flicking out his couplet politically – but his energies, nonetheless, seem hectic and unsustainable. He has found an answer of sorts to Harold’s ‘voiceless thought’, but one that comes with the suspicion that we have merely exchanged despair for textuality.

We might set against this Prior’s (‘Montaigne’s’) claim that where a simile ‘does not hold, the very disproportion gives you Occasion to reconsider [the apparently unknowable object], and you set it in all its
lights’. Prompted imaginative activity generates illumination (however dim) in scenes the sceptic wants to tell us are covered over with irrevocable pitch black. In these terms we can reconstrue Byron’s brilliantly shifting and integrally human lines as activations of human imagination that glimpse the very thing (the ‘human breast’) acknowledged to be indescribable. It is important to note here, however, that Byron’s lists don’t all operate in the same way (they don’t all annihilate knowledge claims, nor do they all seek to replace them); they may suggest patterns, but they never overwrite the particularized moment. The ‘bottle of champagne’, unlike the ‘last glass of champagne’, is not carried off upon a tide of signification; it appears, in Prior’s terms, to ‘hold’. It may not rank with the perfect significations of Adam’s language, but neither is it the stuff of the encyclopedias. In Shelley’s terms, Byron has exchanged language that is ‘dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse’ with language that ‘marks the before unapprehended relations between things’.5 Reality, in however small a way, has been re-exposed.

Byron’s poetry thinks a great deal about what it is doing in these places. Its characters, images and narrative forms are all worked by an intelligence deeply concerned with the questions that motivate poetics. With Haidée, poetry is investigated through the fall it has already endured. Paradise is not mocked off the stage but accepted as unavailable in any direct sense. What Byron does attack is the secular Romantic claim to have rediscovered origin in the rhetoric of Nature. The narrator’s role in this gradually shifts from storyteller to reluctant conduit for offstage forces that are preparing rupture. When Juan enters the very different isolation of Regency England the poet is retasked as his primal ‘amidst’ shrinks to a mock one. He becomes trapped at the centre of his own (comic) tragedy and must do what he can to write himself – and his reader – an escape. This he does, with Adeline, through a return to human essence as a prompt to and regrounding of metaphor. He takes a different and altogether more ambitious path with Juan’s other love interest.

Aurora Raby, who signals a more direct return to Haidée than Adeline, is Byron’s most resplendent symbol of poetic possibility. Rather than Haidée’s fragile Romantic and pantheistic associations, Aurora is tangibly religious and specifically Roman Catholic.6 She is ‘pure as sanctity itself from vice’ (Don Juan, xv, 52) and her beyondness, unlike Haidée’s, is full of self-possession: her ‘spirit seem’d as seated on a throne / Apart from the surrounding world’ (Don Juan, xv, 47). She is like
Haidée in being ‘unopposed’, but her transcendence seems more secure, knowing and untroubled:

The dashing and proud air of Adeline
   Imposed not upon her: she saw her blaze
   Much as she would have seen a glowworm shine,
      Then turn’d unto the stars for loftier rays.

\textit{(Don Juan, xv, 56)}

Where Haidée depends upon Zoe, Aurora’s soul is ‘strong / In its own strength’ \textit{(Don Juan, xv, 47)}. The differences between the two are developed in detail:

Juan knew naught of such a character –
   High, yet resembling not his lost Haidée;
Yet each was radiant in her proper sphere:
   The Island girl, bred up by the lone sea,
   More warm, as lovely, and not less sincere,
   Was Nature’s all: Aurora could not be
   Nor would be thus; – the difference in them
   Was such as lies between a flower and a gem.

\textit{(Don Juan, xv, 58)}

Unlike Pope, who places the gem above the flower, Byron establishes a more nuanced contrast. Aurora lacks Haidée’s natural warmth but does, like the poet himself, have self-knowledge. Aurora ‘could not’ in any case be ‘Nature’s all’, but she also ‘would not’ even if she were given the choice. It is as if she knows the tragedy of her ancestry in her DNA and has evolved away from its errors.

Where Haidée is engulfed by miscomprehension and Adeline is compressed by vulgarity, Aurora is liberated and powerfully interstitial:

Radiant and grave – as pitying man’s decline;
   Mournful – but mournful of another’s crime,
She look’d as if she sat by Eden’s door,
   And grieved for those who could return no more.

\textit{(Don Juan, xv, 45)}

Aurora’s ‘throne’ occupies the margin of paradise and the fallen world, commanding views over both. Part sentry, part conduit, she draws together the spheres of Adam and the encyclopedias. She also possesses depths of compassion that have a distinctly visionary feel:

The worlds beyond this world’s perplexing waste
   Had more of her existence, for in her
There was a depth of feeling to embrace
Thoughts, boundless, deep, but silent too as Space.

*(Don Juan, xvi, 48)*

Cain seeks to comprehend the boundlessness of space with reason and falls into tragic perplexity. Like other mistakers of poetry he misses the true poetic logic of the ‘outline’. Aurora, however, seems to exceed any such compromises in her ‘embrace’ of ‘Thoughts, boundless, deep, but silent too as Space’. She presides over a paradox by containing (embracing) that which can permit no bounds. For all her surface intellectual coldness she is marked by depths of angelic feeling: ‘In figure, she had something of sublime / In eyes which sadly shone, as seraphs’ shine’ *(Don Juan, xv, 45)*. This sublime simultaneity of thought and feeling has something of the pre-Enlightenment scene conjured by the narrator, a place in which Newton can be numbered among the poets. Where the narrator tentatively navigates the ‘Ocean of Eternity’, however, Aurora’s embrace (her face was ‘always clear, / As deep seas in a Sunny Atmosphere’ *(Don Juan, xvi, 94)* implies a supernaturally lucid poetics of origin.

Aurora gazes out over the severe fragmentariness of Byron’s life. We can only speculate about what might have followed the suggestions made by her powerful symbolism. What seems likely is that Byron would have continued to create remarkably reflexive poetry of a kind that remains underestimated within the canons of Romantic thought. We cannot, without slicing up Byron’s poetic textures, turn Aurora into a philosophical or theological position on Byron’s behalf (or a political or feminist one against him). We can, however, notice the forms of her thoughtfulness. We can notice that her gaze is fixed upon the written word:

Aurora, who look’d more on books than faces,
    Was very young, although so very sage,
Admiring more Minerva than the Graces,
    Especially upon a printed page.

*(Don Juan, xv, 85)*

This reminder of the ‘printed page’, which has more to it than bluestocking satire, in turn generates one of the narrator’s most revealing philosophical digressions:

If people contradict themselves, can I
    Help contradicting them, and every body,
Even my veracious self? – But that’s a lie;
I never did so, never will – how should I?
He who doubts all things, nothing can deny;
Truth’s fountains may be clear – her streams are muddy,
And cut through such canals of contradiction,
That she must often navigate o’er fiction.

Apologue, fable, poesy, and parable,
Are false, but may be render’d also true
By those that sow them in a land that’s arable.
’Tis wonderful what fable will not do!
’Tis said it makes reality more bearable:
But what’s reality? Who has its clue?
Philosophy? No; she too much rejects.
Religion? Yes; but which of all her sects?

(Don Juan, xv, 88–9)

Aurora may have access to ‘Truth’s fountains’, but this only serves to remind the poet of his own far muddier sceptical mire. He quickly, however, scrambles up again through his usual trick of undoing doubt into endless possibility (‘He who doubts all things, nothing can deny’), an epistemological state that is, however, inherently unstable and drawn back to the looming questions that overrun the final lines. Philosophy offers no anchorage here. Religion – in Aurora’s presence – does offer a ‘clue’ but is also, from Byron’s fallen position, unable to shake off scepticism. He can’t get beyond the ‘sects’ to the real thing. Another source of hope lies with ‘fiction’, a word that hinges the stanzas in a shift of meaning: it begins as a synonym for ‘falsehood’ but then brings to mind ‘Apologue, fable, poesy, and parable’, which may be ‘false’ but which can be ‘render’d also true’. What is required for this quasi-mystical transformation is ‘a land that’s arable’. This is the ‘lively reader’s fancy’, an object of great anxiety but also of great hope. This takes us back to Byron’s ‘wish’ and its unique contribution to Romantic poetics. It also reminds us that in Don Juan poetic reflex and political intent are simultaneous, a claim I now want to pursue.

Notes

1 Byron’s ‘they wander’d forth, and hand in hand’ recalls the final lines of Paradise Lost: ‘They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, / Through Eden took their solitary way’ (xii, 648–9).
3 There is also perhaps something of Pope’s Eloisa here: ‘Ev’n thought meets thought, / And each warm wish springs mutual from the heart. / This sure is bliss (if bliss on earth there be)’ (Eloisa to Abelard, 95–7).
4 See CPW, V, 769; for Byron’s own ‘mobility’ see HVSV, 241–2.
5 Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, 512 (A Defence of Poetry).
6 Aurora is identified as a Catholic at xv, 46.
7 ‘We prize the stronger effort of his pow’r / And justly set the Gem above the Flow’r’ (Epistle to Cobham, 99–100).