Byron and the Forms of Thought

Anthony Howe

Published by Liverpool University Press

Howe, Anthony.
Byron and the Forms of Thought.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/72705.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72705

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2494848
ESSAY VI

‘Glory’s dream Unriddled’
Politics and the Forms of War

Byron’s participation in the Bowles controversy coincided with an increasing involvement in revolutionary politics, prompted by the poet’s relationship with the Gamba family in Italy and his consciousness of revolutions in Spain and Portugal in the summer of 1820. It is perhaps not surprising then that Byron’s defence, via Pope, of the sustaining values of literary tradition is charged with a political awareness that is very much of its moment. The polemical energies generated by the controversy, in turn, flowed into Don Juan, a poem that takes on a new philosophical and political directness from its new beginning with the Preface to canto vi. Overseen by his new publishers, the radical Hunt brothers, Byron was also no longer threatened by Murray’s conservative ‘cutting and slashing’.

The terms of Byron’s newfound political intent are suggested by a letter to Thomas Moore of August 1822 in which the poet discusses, among other things, the war poetry of Don Juan: ‘it is necessary’, Byron writes, ‘in the present clash of philosophy and tyranny, to throw away the scabbard. I know it is against fearful odds; but the battle must be fought’ (BLJ, ix, 191). Although the image is similar, Byron is saying something very different to Shelley’s (in A Defence of Poetry) ‘Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it’. Where Shelley vitally metaphorizes poetics to suggest its real political function, Byron sounds ready to give up on the whole business, to get on the next boat to Greece, dust off his pistols, and forget about metaphors entirely. The will to action threatens to eclipse the purposiveness of the written. As Byron knew, however, tyranny is bound up in cant and thus requires a response of mind as well as body. He would, of course, get on the boat to Greece, but before doing so he would re-vision war poetry as something essential to the fight. In a
world of ‘Cant Political’ the biggest battlefield is the public mind, and any thought of victory depends upon its shaping.

Although characteristically Byron chose to stick with Don Juan rather than starting a fresh poem, it is clear that the siege of Ismail cantos, which tell of Juan’s involvement (on the side of the invading Russian forces), represent a new departure. Byron signals this most clearly by writing a new Preface that is inserted before canto vi. The Preface centres in a vitriolic attack on Castlereagh, the British Foreign Secretary, who had recently cut his own throat, probably after being set up and then blackmailed on the grounds of homosexuality.2 Byron’s prose is drawn between liberal political anger and a fascination with the gory details of the suicide. The imaginative pull of the grim demise of ‘Carotid-artery-cutting Castlereagh’ (Don Juan, x, 59) brings Byron’s prose to life, but also threatens to upset its political concentration. On the other hand, the compound adjective, which Byron requires us to chew our way through, has its own political force. It stands in stark contrast to the dishonest writing that, according to Byron, characterizes the public response to Castlereagh’s death.

The official reading of Castlereagh’s legacy is accused of exploiting public sentiment to distract from political realities:

That he was an amiable man in private life, may or may not be true; but with this the Public have nothing to do; and as to lamenting his death, it will be time enough when Ireland has ceased to mourn for his birth. As a Minister, I, for one of millions, looked upon him as the most despotic in intention and the weakest in intellect that ever tyrannized over a country. It is the first time indeed since the Normans, that England has been insulted by a Minister (at least) who could not speak English, and that Parliament permitted itself to be dictated to in the language of Mrs Malaprop.

Of the manner of his death little need be said, except that if a poor radical devil such as Waddington or Watson had cut his throat, he would have been buried in a cross-road, with the usual appurtenances of the stake and mallet. But the Minister was an elegant Lunatic – a sentimental Suicide – he merely cut the ‘carotid artery’ (blessings on their learning) and lo! – the Pageant – and the Abbey! and ‘the Syllables of Dolour yelled forth’ by the Newspapers – and the harangue of the Coroner in an eulogy over the bleeding body of the deceased – (an Anthony worthy of such a Caesar) – and the nauseous and atrocious cant of a degraded Crew of Conspirators against all that is sincere and honourable. (CPW, 295–6)

Whether or not we agree with Kelsall that Byron’s is a ‘simplistic solution to political problems’ will likely depend on how we feel about the tradition of Paine and Shelley that Byron here approximates.3 As well as
recalling the attacks on Bowles, the accusation of an official conspiracy of ‘nauseous and atrocious cant’ has a similar logic to Paine’s famous riposte to Burke’s eulogy for Marie Antoinette: ‘We pity the plumage, but forget the dying bird’. Where Paine had pointed out that Burke’s mourning of the French Queen, while not inherently objectionable, is a distraction from the political realities of revolutionary France, Byron deplores the disingenuous and irrelevantly personal eulogizing of the newspapers. As Shelley puts it in *An Address to the People on the Death of Princess Charlotte* (1817), the ‘appeal to the feelings of men should not be made lightly, or in any manner that tends to waste, on inadequate objects, those fertilizing streams of sympathy which a public mourning should be the occasion of pouring forth’. Eulogy, as a public concern, has a duty not to allow personal sentiment to obscure the significance of public events, especially, as Byron implies, where this is done for dishonourable political ends. Its ‘character’, as Shelley puts it, ‘ought to be universal, not particular’.4

Byron’s commitment to abstract or ‘universal’ politics, not to mention the ‘poor radical devil’, does not match Shelley’s. He was also one of Princess Charlotte’s most prominent literary mourners (see *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, iv, 169–70) and, while he is happy to show his distaste for the ‘“the Syllables of Dolour yelled forth” by the Newspapers’, would have been less ready to dismiss fine rhetoric such as Burke’s on the grounds of its implicit political content. Indeed, it is Castlereagh’s alleged lack of flair as a speaker rather than his apparently despotic intent that seems to annoy Byron most. This ‘Orator of such set trash of phrase’ (*Don Juan*, ‘Dedication’, 13), who cannot ‘speak English’, is an insult to an establishment that Burke had graced.5

Byron’s pleasure in rhetoric distances him from Paine, but they clearly share an interest in the (corrupt) power structures of public discourse, an issue also at the heart of several of Byron’s later plays, including *Sardanapalus*, *Marino Faliero* and, as we have seen, *Cain*. These concerns are brought to the centre of the Preface via two quotations from Voltaire: ‘La pudeur s’est enfuite des couers, et s’est refugiée sur les lèvres’ and ‘Plus les moeurs sont dépravés, plus les expressions deviennent mesurées; on croit regagner en langage ce qu’on a perdu en vertu’.6 Thus understood, language is not a forum for honest communication and discussion, but a way of reacquiring, in debased form, the virtue we have lost through our actions. It becomes, by implication, a means of normalizing the immoral.

Byron usually, in attacking this most egregious form of cant, has one
eye on the figure of the contemporary poet, as he does in this unflattering invocation of Wellington:

Though Britain owes (and pays you too) so much,
Yet Europe doubtless owes you greatly more:
You have repaired Legitimacy’s crutch, –
A prop not quite so certain as before:
The Spanish, and the French, as well as Dutch,
Have seen, and felt, how strongly you restore;
And Waterloo has made the world your debtor –
(I wish your bards would sing it rather better).

(Don Juan, ix, 3)

The authority of the European ancien régime, although it has been ‘repaired’ through military action, has nonetheless been called into question to an irreversible extent. This enervation of traditional power structures, however, is being offset by the poetically weak but politically coercive poets of the establishment – including, for Byron, the turncoats Wordsworth and Southey. The bottom line (literally here) is not martial action or moral truth but the conscience of the writer.

Byron’s siege cantos comprehend and oppose this complicity between corrupt politics and unreflective writing. They make a case, in the process, for the human importance of poetry as a means of (re)connecting virtue with expression and action. They urge, perhaps more clear-sightedly than any other section of the poem, their reader to think – not just about the immediate consequences of war, but about its connection with written culture: ‘Cockneys of London! Muscadins of Paris! / Just ponder what a pious pastime war is / Think how the joys of reading a Gazette / Are purchased by all agonies and crimes’ (Don Juan, viii, 124–5). Thinking here isn’t easy because it requires us to distinguish between propaganda and poetry. What we have to help us is a poem that is rigorously honest about its own status as ‘outline’.

***

Byron’s responses to war are remarkably diverse and shaped by a series of not always consistent factors. These include his self-identifying hero worship of Napoleon; his desire, one he acted upon, to become a military hero; his reformist, even radical, political leanings; his self-conscious membership of the English ruling class; his Whig inheritance; his keen sensitivity to unnecessary suffering; his detestation of imperial expansionism, and his sheer enthusiasm for history. This psychological
complexity is matched by Byron’s formal, thematic and stylistic diversity as a war writer. The Oriental Tales, which supplanted Scott’s more domestic military romances as the most popular fictional works of their day, are populated by guerrilla heroes and chivalrous, mysterious freedom fighters. It was a form Byron never quite abandoned, taking it through to The Island (1823), a poem that although based in the heroic action of earlier narratives is also touched by the comic modes of Don Juan.

Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, while emerging from the romance tradition, is also an edgily modern political poem that assesses Britain’s role in the Peninsula War (in canto i) and analyses the career of Napoleon and the climactic event of Waterloo (in canto iii) – a subject Byron would return to in The Age of Bronze (1823). The former also includes, in its final canto, a powerful vision of the battle of Thrasimene. Byron’s obvious interest in siege warfare is also explored in The Siege of Corinth (1816) and The Deformed Transformed (1824). The majority of his historical plays have military action and its political contexts at their centre.

One of Byron’s earliest poetic responses to war comes in the first canto of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, which was published in 1812 on Byron’s return from his tour of Portugal, Spain and the Levant. Echoing what had been a general outcry back in England, Byron laments the Convention of Cintra (1808) which allowed the French army to retreat largely unscathed following their defeat by British forces at Vimiero. Reporting on location (the treaty was signed at the Palace of Queluz), Byron’s narrator scorns decisions that were not, it would appear, in the national interest: ‘Behold the hall where chiefs were late conven’d! / Oh! Dome displeasing unto British eye!’ (Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, i, 24).

Perhaps the most displeasing thing for Byron was not Cintra’s apparent failure of British interests, but its betrayal of the heroic tradition that inhabits his poem’s Spenserian stanzas:

Convention is the dwarfish demon styl’d
That foil’d the knights in Marialva’s dome:
Of brains (if brains they had) he them beguil’d,
And turn’d a nation’s shallow joy to gloom.
Here Folly dash’d to earth the victor’s plume,
And Policy regain’d what arms had lost:
For chiefs like ours in vain may laurels bloom!
Woe to the conqu’ring, not the conquer’d host,
Since baffled Triumph droops on Lusitania’s coast!

(Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, i, 25)

Byron’s lines are fairly uncontroversial and there is no sympathy for
Napoleon, who appears in this context as the invader of independent countries, and as driving a project of imperialist expansion. What has been failed here is not the cause of liberty in a modern political sense but the ideals of an imagined past set ringing by the rhymes ‘victor’s plume’ and ‘laurel’s bloom’. ‘Policy’ has reversed the rightful and honourable outcomes of military conflict (‘Woe to the conqu’ring, not the conquer’d host’) and ‘Triumph’ has been ‘baffled’ into a corner.

Byron’s chivalric sense of things, however, coexists with a more modern and critical response to armed conflict. Where the traditions he mourns are designed to celebrate the qualities and achievements of the glorious individual, the reality is that in modern warfare, with its long-range weaponry and leaders who do not lead from the front, such heroes are not readily available. It was a problem that would generate the initiating irony of Don Juan:

I WANT a hero: an uncommon want,
    When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,
    The age discovers he is not the true one

(Don Juan, i, 1)

Don Juan’s textually sophisticated recognition that the scene of heroism has been emptied of truth and refilled with cant is anticipated by the simpler analysis of the Cintra poetry:

Enough of Battle’s minions! let them play
Their games of lives, and barter breath for fame:
Fame that will scarce reanimate their clay,
Though thousands fall to deck some single name.

(Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, i, 44)

‘Fame’, which in the later poem would morph into the cant of the gazettes, is recognized as a bloodthirsty and deeply undemocratic mistress as the price, in human life, for decking a ‘single name’ can run into the thousands. Byron’s longing for the past – and its rhetorical presence – is juxtaposed with suspicions about the textual conventions of elegy.

Byron’s strong sense of heroic continuity endured another crisis in 1814 when Napoleon was exiled to Elba. Later that year he wrote Lara, a poem set in a country bristling with revolutionary anger at its oppressive and corrupt ruling elite. Byron’s politics, however, are by no means straightforwardly the politics of revolution: ‘Within that land was many a malcontent, / Who cursed the tyranny to which he bent’ (Lara, ii, 57–8). The pejoratives are balanced across both sides of the
couplet: Byron anticipates Dickens’s sense, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, that the ‘malcontent’ is not uncritically to be preferred to the tyrant who breeds him. Heroism, moreover, which is embodied by the returning figure of Lara himself, is clearly dissociated from democratic interests: ‘What cared he for the freedom of the crowd? / He raised the humble but to bend the proud’ (*Lara*, ii, 252–3). Heroic action appears to have retreated into the sphere of personal whim and the fatalism of Byronic gloom.

The disappointments of *Lara* flow into Byron’s *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte* (1814), which deals directly with the poet’s disillusionment at Napoleon’s abdication. Part evocation of Ecclesiastes, part self-dramatization, Byron’s ode is notable for its fine turns of political thought and complex tapestry of allusions. Its ‘meditation on flawed heroism results in a poem of fractured tones and feelings’. Key to the poem’s intertextual manoeuvring is Shakespeare, through whom, as Simon Bainbridge suggests, Byron is able to ‘recast Napoleon in the role of the Shakespearean hero’. This recasting mitigates Byron’s disappointment that in his abdication ‘Napoleon had failed to play the part of the Shakespearean tragic hero that [Byron] had scripted for him’. The intricate and abundant literary life of the *Ode*, that is, helps to offset a reality in which heroic ideals have been let down by their most promising recent aspirant. Classical honour, as at Cintra, has been betrayed by modernity, and Byron’s response is to invoke the sanctity of literary tradition in one of its most elite forms.

If Byron has one eye on Shakespeare, then the other is on Johnson, specifically *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, which provides the *Ode* both with its high moral tone and its model (Johnson’s Charles XII) for the depiction of Napoleon’s demise. Where Charles, after his fall from the heights of ambition, is ‘Condemn’d a needy Suppliant to wait / While Ladies interpose, and Slaves debate’ (*The Vanity of Human Wishes*, 213–14), Byron’s Napoleon, where he had been ‘The Arbiter of other’s fate’ is now reduced to being ‘A Suppliant for his own!’ (*Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte*, 39–40). Johnson’s famously decisive conclusion – ‘He left the Name, at which the World grew pale, / To point a Moral, or adorn a Tale’ (*The Vanity of Human Wishes*, 221–2) – is also present in Byron’s ‘Oh! ne’er may tyrant leave behind / A brighter name to lure mankind!’ (*Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte*, 89–90). Where Johnson’s stately couplet is glacially calm, however, Byron’s accusatory exclamation is far less steady. For all his morality his response remains in part that of the reader of romances who feels he has not got his money’s worth. He has
been taken in, ‘lured’ by a bright name that has turned out to be an *ignis fatuus*. Heroic narrative may be dismissed by Johnson (‘adorn a Tale’), but for Byron it is too pressingly real to abandon. If Johnson’s Charles fulfils his moral purpose by leaving a name, Byron’s Napoleon will never be forgiven for *losing* his:

’Tis done – but yesterday a King!  
And arm’d with Kings to strive –  
And now thou art a nameless thing  
So abject – yet alive!  

*(Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte, 1–4)*

By failing to provide appropriate narrative closure for his spectacular career, Napoleon has compromised the tradition he was born to extend and glorify. He has also failed his poet in not affording him suitable materials.

Byron’s response to Napoleon is marked by contrary thrusts, one coming from his partial subscription to the anti-war sentiments represented by Johnson, the other from his cherished belief in literary heroism. This is the poet’s journal entry on hearing of Napoleon’s abdication:

I don’t know – but I think I, even I (an insect compared with this creature), have set my life on casts not a millionth part of this man’s. But, after all, a crown may not be worth dying for. Yet to outlive *Lodi* for this!!! Oh that Juvenal or Johnson could rise from the dead! […] Alas! this imperial diamond hath a flaw in it, and is now hardly fit to stick in a glazier’s pencil: – the pen of the historian won’t rate it worth a ducat. (*BLJ*, iii, 256–7)

The shift from ‘imperial diamond’ through ‘glazier’s pencil’ to ‘the pen of the historian’ is slick, but its peevishness is also telling. As in the *Ode*, Byron’s disappointment leads him to consign Napoleon over to the morality of Johnson. The problem, however, is that he isn’t thinking about Napoleon as Johnson would have, as an exemplar of unsustainable ambition. Nor is he thinking – for that matter – of Napoleon the reformer or liberal administrator. His imagination lights instead upon the battle of Lodi, one of the brilliant early victories that highlighted Napoleon’s heroic resourcefulness, spirit and sheer will. Where the historian’s pen seems obliged to record Napoleon as a failure, the poet struggles to transcend linear narrative and its promise of decline. He is searching for something that the poet of the siege cantos will find on the other side of analysis.

Byron’s poetic interest in siege warfare begins amidst the bleakness of *The Siege of Corinth*. Based loosely around a Turkish assault of
1715, the poem describes a grimly ironic rather than a heroic sequence of events: the repulsed Turkish invaders are suddenly decimated by the accidental explosion of their own powder magazine; this drives them on to fury and slaughter where parley and compromise had looked more likely. Rather than being dictated by extraordinary acts of individual will, the narrative is shaped by the sheer blankness of circumstance. Even the poem’s hero figure Alp seems spare and dispirited, as much a passive observer of events as a determining partaker.

Through Alp’s eyes we see little of the laurel and plume side of war, the poem’s interests being more with the ghoulish aftermath of the siege:

And he saw the lean dogs beneath the wall
Hold o’er the dead their carnival,
Gorging and growling o’er carcass and limb;
They were too busy to bark at him!
From a Tartar’s skull they had stripp’d the flesh,
As ye peel the fig when the fruit is fresh;
And their white tusks crunch’d o’er the whiter skull,
As it slipp’d through their jaws, when their edge grew dull,
As they lazily mumbled the bones of the dead,

(\textit{The Siege of Corinth}, 409–17)

Alp’s stillness, his lack of heroic energy, makes his numb witnessing of the scene all the more effective. This is poetry where vigorous action (‘had stripp’d’) is in a past tense that has lapsed into a present of hideous enervation (‘lazily mumbled’). More uncomfortable still, at least for John Murray’s leisured reader,\textsuperscript{13} is that quick shift into the second person (‘ye peel the fig’) that leaves us just one quick metaphor away from a dog stripping the flesh from a dead soldier’s skull. Byron’s poetry here is anti-voyeuristic even in the midst of its voyeurism; it is charged with criticism and anticipates, in less direct terms, the emphasis on readerly thought in the siege poetry of \textit{Don Juan}. It is also, however, poetry devoid of hope, not just in modern warfare but in itself as a means of reconciling action with virtue.

The \textit{Siege of Corinth} was the first of Byron’s poems to be published after the event of Waterloo, a fact which may help to explain its pervasive gloom. A more direct response to the iconic battle of the age comes in the third canto of \textit{Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage}, written later the same year. Shortly after leaving England for the final time, Byron visited Brussels where he stayed with some old friends of his mother. He was keen to visit the nearby battlefield at Waterloo, although when he arrived he was
observed to view the scene in a sombre mood, after which he galloped over the field, probably re-enacting some of the cavalry charges.\textsuperscript{14}

Compared to his account of Cintra (published almost four years after the fact), Byron was now writing much closer to the event, his stanzas emerging amidst a flurry of Waterloo pamphlets and poems, the bulk of which are notable for their celebratory bombast and unreflecting patriotism. At the more thoughtful end of the spectrum was Scott, who, like Byron, was one of the first Waterloo tourists. His \textit{The Field of Waterloo}, written to raise a subscription for the battle’s many widows, mixes quiet wariness with conventional chivalric eulogy:

\begin{verbatim}
Period of honour as of woes,  
What bright careers ‘twas thine to close!  
Mark’d on thy roll of blood what names  
To Briton’s memory, and to Fame’s,  
Laid there their last immortal claims!  
Thou saw’st in seas of gore expire  
Redoubted Picton’s soul of fire,  
Saw’st in the mingled carnage lie  
All that of Ponsonby could die,  
De Lancey change Love’s bridal-wreath  
For laurels from the hand of Death,  
Saw’st gallant Miller’s failing eye  
Still bent where Albion’s banners fly,  
And Cameron in the shock of steel  
Die like the offspring of Lochiel;  
And generous Gordon, ’mid the strife  
Fall while he watched his leader’s life.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{verbatim}

Scott begins by balancing war’s twin outcomes, ‘honour’ and ‘ woes’, but it is the former, through his emphasis on ‘bright careers’ and ‘names’ that comes to dominate our experience of his lines. The heroic officers stand out from an aestheticized and de-individuated backdrop made up of phrases such as ‘roll of blood’, ‘seas of gore’, ‘mingled carnage’ and ‘shock of steel’. Scott’s rhetorical geography has the effect of eliding the experience of the rank and file soldiery, an unintended outcome, but, looked at from Paine’s point of view at least, an inescapably political one.\textsuperscript{16}

Byron’s response to Waterloo, which deplores the Congress of Vienna and is far from orthodox in its take on the vanquished Napoleon, is very different to Scott’s. There are, however, some similarities. Like Scott, Byron uses archaic poetic diction to describe the British commanders, including the Duke of Brunswick (George III’s nephew, who was
killed at Quatre Bras), or ‘Brunswick’s fated chieftain’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, iii, 23). Byron also, like Scott, uses the weight of his rhetoric to distinguish particular individuals, as when he singles out Frederick Howard, who was killed at Waterloo:

> Their praise is hymn’d by loftier harps than mine;  
> Yet one I would select from that proud throng,  
> Partly because they blend me with his line,  
> And partly that I did his sire some wrong,  
> And partly that bright names will hallow song;  
> And his was of the bravest, and when shower’d  
> The death-bolts deadliest the thinn’d files along,  
> Even where the thickest of war’s tempest lower’d,  
> They reach’d no nobler breast than thine, young, gallant Howard!  
> (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, iii, 29)

Howard is brought forth from a ‘throng’ that is acknowledged but then pushed to the background in phrases such as ‘thinn’d files’ and ‘war’s tempest’. Where similar acts of selectiveness in Scott’s poem are broadly untroubled, however, Byron is far more self-conscious about narrowing his focus. He talks his reader through his reasons, clearly feeling a need to justify himself. Partly his motives are personal (Howard was Byron’s cousin); partly they come from a perceived obligation to tradition (‘bright names will hallow song’). Byron seems uneasy, however, about turning the spotlight on his own family where thousands have perished – he may also be recalling past problems with ‘bright names’ (Napoleon’s ‘brighter name’) and his attempts to establish them in ‘song’. The stanza seems haunted by an apprehension that writing about war has become a precarious, untrustworthy activity.

The stringing out of ‘gallant Howard’ at the end of an overgrown alexandrine tells of Byron’s anxieties about the heroic mode. It also suggests the displacement of the hero himself, the emptying of a central space that can no longer be filled unproblematically by the allegedly exceptional individual. Byron responds to this emptiness by activating the energies of self and adapting history for the purposes of self-analysis:

> And Harold stands upon this place of skulls,  
> The grave of France, the deadly Waterloo!  
> How in an hour the power which gave annuls  
> Its gifts, transferring fame as fleeting too!  
> In ‘pride of place’ here last the eagle flew,  
> Then tore with bloody talon the rent plain,  
> Pierced by the shaft of banded nations through;
Ambition's life and labours all were vain;
He wears the shattered links of the world's broken chain.

*(Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, iii, 18)*

For Johnson, the stanza's penultimate line would always be the end of the matter, but Byron lingers in his disappointment into the thick vowels of his alexandrine. He needs every syllable he can find to come to terms with what has happened. This turning away from world to self, however, confers upon the latter a new heroic momentum.

Where, in the *Ode*, Byron rewrites Napoleon as Shakespearean tragic hero, here he absorbs him:

> But quiet to quick bosoms is a hell,
> And *there* hath been thy bane; there is a fire
> And motion of the soul which will not dwell
> In its own narrow being, but aspire
> Beyond the fitting medium of desire;
> And, but once kindled, quenchless evermore,
> Preys upon high adventure, nor can tire
> Of aught but rest; a fever at the core,
> Fatal to him who bears, to all who ever bore.

*(Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, iii, 42)*

After the perfectly deployed semicolon of the second line (one of Byron's favoured dashes would not do here) the narrator abandons the second-person address that marks Napoleon's individuality, shifting instead to a generalized account of the Byronic psyche in which Napoleon is subsumed. If the military 'hero' can no longer be relied upon to represent the traditions of virtue and honour, then his role will need to be reassigned. Byron's solution is to assume the burden himself, to become, as exiled poet, not just the custodian of heroic tradition but its uncertain agent. His present ('who bears') may be one of suffering, but at least it *is* a present, a submerged possibility, one, moreover, in direct correspondence with a past of 'all who ever bore'.

***

Byron's war poetry leading up to and concerning Waterloo demonstrates a strong attachment to a heroic tradition under pressure from unheroic modern realities and the poet's own sense of political urgency. Much of the poetry's tense thoughtfulness – and resistance to simple political paraphrase – is a consequence of Byron's inability to resolve these apparently contending impulses. This breakdown of tradition also turns
Byron inwards, most strikingly in the figure of the Byronic poet-hero, in search of answers. The problem with the Harold poet as tradition’s embattled standard bearer, however, is his limited scope for analysis. The traditional virtues represented by the poetry of the past had not simply been abandoned and replaced by a corrupt modernity; they had been co-opted and subsumed at the level of rhetoric. The truth of political events was being falsely but persuasively claimed by the kinds of bad writing Byron saw as simultaneously misrepresenting the sublime and propping up legitimacy. His own earlier poetry, something the Byron of Don Juan often reflects upon critically, was too close to these problems to be part of the solution.

If Byron was going to revise the traditions of war writing he would first need to step outside of their agreed parameters. This would require a mode of poetry highly sensitized to its own representations. At Waterloo slaughter is tidied up in phrases such as ‘thinn’d files’; at Ismail a decimated column of troops is described as ‘now reduced […] Into an elegant extract (much less massy) / Of heroism’ (Don Juan, viii, 34). Both sidestep the blood and guts, but where the former does this as an inevitable consequence of rhetorical convention, the latter foregrounds and draws attention to the transformative nature of the written. This newly robust and reflexive written style was perfectly calibrated to register the distortions being forced upon the realities of war by writers that in Byron’s view were motivated by entirely the wrong interests. Thus, also, the pointedly irrelevant choice of Juan as hero:

Brave men were living before Agamemnon  
And since, exceeding valorous and sage,  
A good deal like him too, though quite the same none;  
But then they shone not on the poet’s page,  
And so have been forgotten: – I condemn none,  
But can’t find any in the present age  
Fit for my poem (that is, for my new one);  
So, as I said, I’ll take my friend Don Juan.

(Don Juan, i, 5)

Byron’s ‘new’ poem begins not by identifying contemporary heroic possibilities (such as those that had clustered around Napoleon) but by thinking through the processes of textual transmission. Crucial to this reimagining, as with the poet’s visionary negotiation of ‘infinite variety’, will be reflexive acts of selection. Byron has (largely) ditched the role of elegist to think about how and why the individual emerges from the variety of ‘Brave men’ who have ‘shone not on the poet’s page’. His ironic
choice of Juan, while reasserting his disappointment with an unheroic ‘present age’, also, however, marks the discovery of new comic, critical and formal energies. Juan may have no more character than the stilled hero of *The Siege of Corinth*, but his surrounding poetic environment is anything but listless. The poetry of endgame has been exchanged for a poetics of incipience.

As well as the selections upon which narrative depends, Byron also draws our attention to the critical possibilities of form. The now iconic misfitting of ‘Juan’ into the poem’s rhyme scheme reflects modernity’s heroic unfitness, a play on words resumed at Ismail when the poet struggles to fit the rapacious and (from an English poet’s point of view, awkwardly named) Russian forces into his stanzas:

> The Russians now were ready to attack;  
> But oh, ye Goddesses of war and glory!  
> How shall I spell the name of each Cossacque  
> Who were immortal, could one tell their story?  
> Alas! what to their memory can lack?  
> Achilles’ self was not more grim and gory  
> Than thousands of this new and polished nation,  
> Whose names want nothing but – pronunciation.

Still I’ll record a few, if but to encrease  
> Our euphony – there was Strongenoff, and Strokonoff,  
> Meknop, Serge Lwow, Arseniew of modern Greece,  
> And Tschitsshakoff, and Rougenoff, and Chokenoff,  
> And others of twelve consonants a-piece;  
> And more might be found out, if I could poke enough  
> Into gazettes; but Fame (capricious strumpet)  
> It seems, has got an ear as well as trumpet.

*(Don Juan, vii, 14–15)*

As well as the unfortunate Turkish city, the very possibility of poetry – both as an aesthetic object and as a carrying forward of the past – is under threat. These ‘names’, and the ‘new and polished nation’ from which they arise, are not fit material for poetry; they belong, rather, in the ‘gazettes’ that Byron can barely bring himself to ‘poke’ into.

We might conclude from this that Byron has grown up into a proto-Marxist who now understood the writer’s role strictly in terms of demystification and social progress. There is something to this, but Byron’s poetry is not so easily claimed for such unwavering positions. He remained healthily suspicions of the democratic and thus wary of the ends of unmasking; he also, for all *Don Juan’s* textual meltdown,
remained deeply invested in traditional ideas of heroic virtue. The war poetry of *Don Juan* is not bent on annihilation, but wants to strike honest balances and make clear-sighted distinctions between good and bad acts of military intervention. Cooke captures this aspect of the siege cantos in describing them as Byron’s ‘most profound statement of counter-heroic principles, specifically deflating the hero of mere power, specifically celebrating the life of courage and virtue’.\(^{21}\) If the poem rejects the military efforts of conquest as ‘nothing but a child of Murder’s rattles’ (*Don Juan*, viii, 4), it also picks out counterexamples, such as the Tartar Khan, one of the ‘truly brave’ who defends his family and city to the last. He is an instance of how ‘Compassion breathes along the savage mind’ (*Don Juan*, viii, 106), of how virtue can emerge in the direst circumstances, and may even depend upon them.

Compare the poem’s presentation of Leonidas and Washington:

\begin{quote}
Whose every battle-field is holy ground,
Which breathes of nations saved, not worlds undone.
How sweetly on the ear such echoes sound!
While the mere victor’s may appal or stun
The servile and the vain, such names will be
A watchword till the future shall be free.
\end{quote}

*(Don Juan*, viii, 5)

Where the names of the Russian aggressors are not and do not fit, the names of true heroism sound ‘sweetly on the ear’; each is a ‘watchword’ that it is the poet’s duty to preserve and transmit. Such names, which invoke moral beauty by association, are for Byron inherently pleasing; they are aesthetic objects in their own right. If the war poetry of *Don Juan* delves deeper than its predecessors into a sceptical critique of language and textual presence, then it is also claims that words can be instinct with virtue.

As is often the case, Byron is playing something of a double game. On the one hand he is determined to expose a false, modern heroics based in irresponsible acts of selection. On the other he still insists upon poetry’s traditional right to elegy. The two aims are by no means incompatible, but their mutual presence means that Byron was involved in building structures very similar to those he was also in the process of toppling. Indeed, Byron has been accused of blundering badly here, notably with respect to his sudden (and admittedly rather odd) digression, amidst the flames of Ismail, on the idyllic life of Daniel Boone, the ‘back-woodsman of Kentucky’ (*Don Juan*, viii, 61),\(^{22}\) who is presented as an ideal of rustic goodness and simplicity:
Crime came not near him – she is not the child
Of Solitude; health shrank not from him – for
Her home is in the rarely-trodden wild,
Where if men seek her not, and death be more
Their choice than life, forgive them, as beguiled
By habit to what their own hearts abhor –
In cities caged. The present case in point
Cite is, that Boon lived hunting up to ninety;
And what’s still stranger, left behind a name
For which men vainly decimate the throng,
Not only famous but of that good fame,
Without which Glory’s but a tavern song –
Simple, serene, the antipodes of shame,
Which hate nor envy e’er could tinge with wrong;
An active hermit, even in age the child
Of Nature, or the Man of Ross run wild.

(Don Juan, viii, 62–3)

Where Johnson forges the name bequeathed into a warning, Byron still holds to the possibility that names ‘left behind’ can be emblems of pure virtue. Of course, the fact that he has to swerve so dramatically from his main subject to find such a name does not seem promising. It suggests an unwilling admission on Byron’s part, as Kelsall has it, ‘that the vestiges of incorruptibility are now beyond the Atlantic, and retreating ever further westward’. In saying this, virtue is not for Byron so strictly a question of geography or indeed of the immediate present. Also in mind here is the informing vitality of literary tradition, specifically represented by Pope’s ‘Man of Ross’, a figure of pure goodness whose very presence magically banishes ‘variance’ and ‘contest’. What is perhaps more striking than the allusion, however, is the risk Byron was prepared to take in asserting the continuity of virtue within poetic writing. While assembling an effective satire aimed at specific, deserving examples of (morally) bad writing, he was also determined to keep in mind the ideas of origin that validate true poetry. Whether he could find a more convincing and relevant way of doing this than by swerving away to the ultramontane figure of Boone remains to be seen.

* * *

The siege cantos of Don Juan relentlessly associate the politics of war with the politics of authorship:
The Russian batteries were incomplete,
   Because they were constructed in a hurry;
Thus the same cause which makes a verse want feet,
   And throws a cloud o’er Longman and John Murray,
When the sale of new books is not so fleet
   As they who print them think it necessary,
May likewise put off for a time what story
Sometimes calls ‘murder,’ and at others ‘glory.’

(Don Juan, vii, 26)

The shoddiness of the Russian batteries, and the rushed rapacity it implies, flows into a reflection on the decline of poetry under the pressure of political and market forces. Driven by a common principle of gain, the arts of war and literature have both abandoned the honesty of genuine craft. In the case of the Russians this poor workmanship is briefly if darkly merciful in putting off ‘for a time’ widespread loss of life. The literary equivalent – the war poetry that is being hacked out for all the wrong reasons – suffers from a lack of moral clarity. Unlike Byron’s scrupulously reflexive narratives such stories are not honest about their acts of selection; they cannot be trusted, therefore, to distinguish ‘murder’ from ‘glory’.

High on Byron’s list of targets, again, was Wordsworth, who Byron attacked not just as a mistaken poet of the sublime but as a dishonest poet of war. The two failings, for Byron, were closely linked, the ‘narrowness’ or written misapprehension of the beyond detected in The Excursion following a similar pattern to the questionably selective post-Waterloo Thanksgiving Odes of 1816. The two longest of these poems imagine the post-victory celebrations back in a Britain that glows with patriotic sanctity:

   But Thou art foremost in the field: – there stand:
   Receive the triumph destined to thy hand!
   All States have glorified themselves; – their claims
   Are weighed by Providence, in balance even;
   And now, in preference to the mightiest names,
   To thee the exterminating sword is given.25

Scott had ushered the rank and file into his poem’s background imagery, but Wordsworth goes a step further by losing even the ‘mightiest names’ of Waterloo in a blinding blaze of divine glory. God himself, with ‘exterminating sword’ in hand, becomes agent of, as well as justification for, military conflict. God even assumes a parental responsibility for killing:
But Thy most dreaded instrument,  
In working out a pure intent,  
Is Man – arrayed for mutual slaughter,  
- Yea, Carnage is thy daughter!26

Byron could hardly be expected to miss the opportunity:

The columns were in movement one and all,  
But of the portion which attacked by water,  
Thicker than leaves the lives began to fall,  
Though led by Arseniew, that great son of Slaughter,  
As brave as ever faced both bomb and ball.  
‘Carnage’ (so Wordsworth tells you) ‘is God’s daughter:’  
If he speak truth, she is Christ’s sister, and  
Just now behaved as in the Holy Land.

(Don Juan, viii, 9)

Wordsworth’s maladroit earnestness, his carelessness with human life and his unwitting travesty of Christianity are simultaneously deplored. What links these failings with the Wordsworthian sublime for Byron is their closed-down, sham evocation of the text’s prevenient object. What is on the page, in both cases, does not stand in an honest relation to what the page cannot directly comprehend. True visionary process has been hijacked, respectively, by a Romantic rhetoric of ego and by establishment forces that have turned Wordsworth’s coat and, through him, churned out a bankrupt theology of smug, nationalistic violence. By way of riposte, Byron deploys a typically deft and expansive joke (‘she is Christ’s sister’) that follows Wordsworth’s logic in order to haul it back into a semblance of the complexity it blithely overlooks.

The most important text for the spinning out of Byron’s critical vision in the siege cantos of Don Juan is Castelnau’s Essai sur l’Histoire ancienne et moderne de la Nouvelle Russie (1820). This was Byron’s main historical source for the siege cantos, one he followed ‘very closely to ensure his story’s accuracy in all particulars’.27 Byron uses Castelnau, however, to do more than get his facts right. By playing off an apparently factual but in fact politically interested account of the siege he could explore the swerves and deceptions that occur during the transmission of historical events.28 Typically, Byron is interested not just in the events of narrative but in the moral dynamics of their selection:

‘If’ (says the historian here) ‘I could report  
All that the Russians did upon this day,  
I think that several volumes would fall short,
And I should still have many things to say;  
And so he says no more – but pays his court  
To some distinguished strangers in that fray;  
The Prince de Ligne, and Langeron, and Damas,  
Names great as any that the roll of Fame has.

(Don Juan, vii, 32)

Castelnau is right, of course, to say that he cannot describe everything that has happened during the siege simply because such events will always outstrip the capacities of the written. His reflexiveness, however, is revealed to be corrupt due to its obsequious logic. The space he does have has not been used, as it should be according to Byron’s ethics of vision, to assemble a simulacrum of human and political reality (a ‘miniature’ or ‘outline’); it is dominated, rather, by the author’s paying court to the ‘Prince de Ligne’ and other powerful, although not necessarily heroic, figures.

The workings and limitations of historical narrative are never far from Byron’s thoughts as he constructs his account of the siege:

History can only take things in the gross;  
But could we know them in detail, perchance  
In balancing the profit and the loss,  
War’s merit it by no means might enhance,

(Don Juan, viii, 3)

It may be that an ‘outline is the best’ for the purposes of responsible visionary and imaginative writing, but this is not the same as taking things ‘in the gross’. Our narratives can never comprehend complex events in their full ‘detail’, but to know this is to inherit a responsibility, one with respect to which both Wordsworth and Castelnau have been found grossly wanting. War, Byron’s narrator recognizes, is inescapably a textual construct, a fact also apparent to Sardanapalus in his exchanges with his brave – but textually uncritical – advisor Salemenes:

SARDAPALUS. I understand thee – thou wouldst have me go  
Forth as a conqueror. By all the stars  
Which the Chaldeans read! the restless slaves  
Deserve that I should curse them with their wishes,  
And lead them forth to glory.

SALEMENES. Wherefore not?  
Semiramis – a woman only – led  
These our Assyrians to the solar shores  
Of Ganges.  
SARDAPALUS. ’Tis most true. And how returned?
SALEMENES. Why, like a *man* – a hero; baffled, but
Not vanquish’d. With but twenty guards, she made
Good her retreat to Bactria.

And how many
Left she behind in India to the vultures?
SALEMENES. Our annals say not.
SARDAPALUS. Then I will say for them –
That she had better woven within her palace
Some twenty garments, than with twenty guards
Have fled to Bactria, leaving to the ravens,
And wolves, and men – the fiercer of the three,
Her myriads of fond subjects. *Is this* glory?
Then let me live in ignominy ever.

*(Sardanapalus, I, ii, 121–39)*

The heroism of an apparently masculine woman is offered as a spur
to an apparently feminine and dilatory ruler. Sardanapalus’s response,
however, is not one of cowardice or lazy luxuriousness but of critical
reading. Where the Assyrian ‘annals’ from which Salemenes draws
are at pains to record and celebrate the event described, they are less
forthcoming about the general loss of life upon which ‘Glory’ generally
depends. Sardanapalus’s response to this, rather like the narrator of *Don
Juan*, is to draw attention to the gaps in the narrative to which he is
being made subject. By speaking ‘for them’ he becomes a revisionary
author, one concerned with correcting the processes of interested textual
manipulation.

Similar processes are again explored, darkly and brilliantly, in the
figure of Suwarrow, the commander of the Russian forces at Ismail.
For Castelnau, Suwarrow is the great conquering hero; for Byron he is
a rather more complex figure. Unlike Sardanapalus, Suwarrow has the
right qualities to get the job done, qualities that in other circumstances
might have made him a Leonidas or Washington. The line between
greatness and infamy, as Byron had learned with Napoleon, can be a
very fine one:

A single step into the right had made
This man the Washington of worlds betrayed;
A single step into the wrong has given
His name a doubt to all the winds of heaven;

*(The Age of Bronze, 233–6)*

Unlike Napoleon’s, however, Suwarrow’s career has provided few opportu-
nities to step into the right, and his immersion in butchery has eroded
any moral sensibility he may have had (‘habit sears / Men’s hearts against whole millions’ (Don Juan, vii, 69)). Where Lara, the Byronic nobleman, evades the taint of his corrupt homeland – ‘long absence from his native clime / Had left him stainless of oppression’s crime’ (Lara, ii, 170–1) – Suwarro is a grotesque emanation of the modern imperialist state. He is also an aspiring poet. On finally overrunning Ismail, he ‘threw’, we are told, ‘Into a Russian couplet rather dull / The whole gazette of thousands whom he slew’ (Don Juan, ix, 60). A hideously careless written compression of human life links Suwarro with Wordsworth and also, more explicitly, with the ‘gross’ historian encountered above:

Suwarro, – who but saw things in the gross,

Being much too gross to see them in detail,

Who calculated life as so much dross,

And as the wind a widowed nation’s wail,

And cared as little for his army’s loss

(So that their efforts should at length prevail)

As wife and friends did for the boils of Job, –

What was’t to him to hear two women sob?

(Don Juan, vii, 77)

Like Castelnau, Suwarro is guilty of a profound failure to see ‘in detail’, something Byron connects simultaneously with a weak apprehension of literary form and with an allegiance to the grotesque forces of tyranny, specifically, in Suwarro’s case, Catherine the Great, to whom he sends his poem as tribute. The narrator’s wide-scoping role, in response to this, is one of ironic counterbalance. He offsets Suwarro’s mis-scripting of his soldiers as so much ‘dross’ with a telling allusion to Job, the type of the afflicted and neglected Christian hero. He also reorganizes the traditional geographies of eulogy to emphasize the human facts of collateral damage. Where we might expect the poet to save his most striking images for his main character or hero, Byron’s lyric tribute, in the form of the haunting, echoing ‘as the wind a widowed nation’s wail’, is directed offstage.

This insistence on the innocent victim repeatedly complicates the claims of rhetoric, tradition and even grammatical order:

The town was entered: first one column made

Its sanguinary way good – then another;

The reeking bayonet and the flashing blade

Clashed ‘gainst the scimitar, and babe and mother

With distant shrieks were heard Heaven to upbraid; –

Still closer sulphury clouds began to smother
The breath of Morn and Man, where foot by foot
The maddened Turks their city still dispute.

(Don Juan, viii, 69)

‘The reeking bayonet’, ‘flashing blade’ and clashing ‘scimitar’ are recalled from the same collective memory bank as Lara’s ‘And flash the scimitars, and rings the steel’ (Lara, ii, 363). What is different here is the manner in which Byron brings the ‘babe and mother’ up close to the edge of his otherwise conventional ‘blade’. Separated from ‘Clashed’ only by the comma after ‘scimitar’, and hidden from their intended verb (‘upbraid’) by the enjambment, the defenceless pair, in a stanza that compels rapid reading, seem to invite an illogical but ghoulish misapprehension. The easily stumbled upon clash of ‘scimitar’ with ‘babe and mother’ amidst the ringing echoes of ‘bayonet’ – ‘blade’ – ‘babe’ is as disturbing as it is logically incorrect.

The narrative of Lara, as well as an eye for disturbing detail, has a strong pictorial feel in its aestheticized framing of war’s aftermath:

Day glimmers on the dying and the dead,
The cloven cuirass, and the helmless head;
The war-horse masterless is on the earth,
And that last gasp hath burst his bloody girth;

(Lara, ii, 394–5)

Compare this to Don Juan, and its critical concern with its own subject matter:

But here I leave the general concern,
To track our hero on his path of fame:
He must his laurels separately earn;
For fifty thousand heroes, name by name,
Though all deserving equally to turn
A couplet, or an elegy to claim,
Would form a lengthy lexicon of glory,
And what is worse still, a much longer story.

(Don Juan, viii, 17)

The narrator’s decision to ‘leave the general concern’ in order to concentrate on Juan (‘we must give the greater number / To the Gazette’ (Don Juan, viii, 18)) should immediately put us on our guard because it mimics the strategies of Castelnau (Byron even recycles the latter’s excuse of not having enough space). It also recalls and further problematizes Byron’s decision to zoom away to Boone at a point where his responsibilities seem to lie elsewhere. What is happening is that
in order to make us think Byron has morphed into the object of his own critique. He raises, to the highest possible pitch, the issue of trust between reader and author by probing the relation between immediate narrative moment and the ‘much longer story’ of which his fragments ceaselessly give notice.

Acts of selection and extraction crop up in the siege cantos with unwavering regularity. Here, an apparently heroic senior officer rescues a Prince:

Also the General Markow, Brigadier,
   Insisting on removal of the Prince
   Amidst some groaning thousands dying near,—
   All common fellows, who might writhe, and wince,
   And shriek for water into a deaf ear,—
   The General Markow, who could thus evince
   His sympathy for rank, by the same token,
   To teach him greater, had his own leg broken.

*(Don Juan, viii, 11)*

As Cochran notes, Byron takes the incident directly from Castelnau.30 What he adds to the latter’s less than democratic account are the ‘common fellows’ placed in the centre of the stanza, an addition that allows him to highlight the coercive strategies of his source. Where Castelnau’s reader is encouraged to approve Markow’s actions, Byron’s reader is confronted with a more problematic reading experience. The *Prince* may be distinguished on the page, but, rather like Bowles’s capitalized absolutes, his distinction is forced and hollow. Our attention (unless we have a ‘deaf ear’) is more likely to be grabbed by the arresting literary effects that follow, the drawn out vowels and piercing alliteration that commemorate the writhing and wincing ‘thousands dying near’. If, in the cant-ridden world of Castlereagh and Castelnau, the conventions of heroic writing can no longer be trusted, we can, Byron suggests, still put our faith in the clear-sightedness and craft of the genuine poet. Realigned with a linguistic past that Byron both cherishes and questions, the small-scale but resounding immediacies of lyric writing are brilliantly reasserted.

Byron’s anxieties about the hearing of his readers were well founded, especially when it comes to the tricky but fundamental question of Juan’s heroism. On the one hand, Byron’s least likely hero is an admirably brave soldier, particularly when compared with his mercenary colleague Johnson, who runs away when the odds become unpromising. On the other, he seems scarcely admirable in that he is not defending his home from invaders (as Conrad, for instance, does in *The Corsair*), but has
enlisted in a foreign army for no other apparent reason than to quench ‘The thirst / Of Glory’ (Don Juan, viii, 52). There can be nothing glorious, however, about Juan and Johnson’s willingness ‘To burn a town which never did them harm’ (Don Juan, vii, 76). The problem, as usual, is the absence of a corresponding act of mind to regulate martial action. Juan and his colleague fight ‘thoughtlessly enough to win, / To their two selves, one whole bright bulletin’ (Don Juan, viii, 19). Their lack of reflection befits them only for the most debased forms of war writing, the bulletins and gazettes that reconstitute chaotic slaughter as neat lists of names.

War, luckily for Juan, has a habit of throwing up opportunities for redemption. His occurs when he encounters the orphaned Turkish child Leila in grave danger at the hands of the brutish Russian invaders. At the risk of his own life Juan gallantly saves the girl from destruction, thus mitigating, as more than one commentator has pointed out, his otherwise suspect contributions to the siege.31 Thorslev may be right in saying that Juan ‘does not seem at all to share a common paternity’ with the majority of Byronic heroes,32 but his rescue of Leila, nonetheless, places him right at the centre of Byronic heroic consciousness. His act of courage recalls Byron’s own (alleged) heroism in saving a young Turkish woman from being drowned,33 an episode the poet, who traded on intriguing overlaps between autobiography and fiction, had refocused in The Giaour (1813), where the eponymous hero avenges the drowning of his beloved (also called Leila) by the Turk Hassan. The incident also recalls The Corsair when Conrad heroically conveys Gulnare ‘From reeking pile and combat’s wreck – away –’ during a ‘pause compassion snatched from war’ (The Corsair, ii, 222, 227). Juan, it seems, has stepped back towards the right by acting upon his poem’s wisdom: the ‘drying up a single tear has more / Of honest fame, than shedding seas of gore’ (Don Juan, viii, 3).

What Cronin refers to as a ‘sentimental [… ] episode’,34 however, is in fact a radical challenge to our conditioning as readers. The manner of Byron’s narration cuts against the emotionalism often drawn by such incidents. After two powerful stanzas (Don Juan, viii, 87–8) describing the devastating effects of the Russian victory, the narrator becomes exhausted with his ‘awful topic’ and, once again, leaves the ‘general concern’ in order to ‘track’ his hero:

And one good action in the midst of crimes
Is ‘quite refreshing,’ in the affected phrase
Of these ambrosial, Pharisac times,
With all their pretty milk-and-water ways,
And may serve therefore to bedew these rhymes,
A little scorched at present with the blaze
Of conquest and its consequences, which
Make Epic poesy so rare and rich.

Upon a taken bastion where there lay
Thousands of slaughtered men, a yet warm group
Of murdered women, who had found their way
To this vain refuge, made the good heart droop
And shudder; – while, as beautiful as May,
A female child of ten years tried to stoop
And hide her little palpitating breast
Amidst the bodies lulled in bloody rest.

*(Don Juan, viii, 90–1)*

As well as being Castelnau’s stock-in-trade, such myopic closing in on
‘one good action in the midst of crimes’ is also associated with other
questionable, ‘pretty milk-and-water’ writers of these ‘Pharisaic times’.
This sounds like Wordsworth again, who, as well as being a hypocrite
(in Byron’s view), was a fond bedewer of war.35

Byron, by way of contrast, wants to look at things as steadily as
possible while encouraging his reader to do the same:

If here and there some transient trait of pity
Was shown, and some more noble heart broke through
Its bloody bond, and saved perhaps some pretty
Child, or an aged, helpless man or two –
What’s this in one annihilated city,
Where thousand loves, and ties, and duties grow?
Cockneys of London! Muscadins of Paris!
Just ponder what a pious pastime war is.

*(Don Juan, viii, 124)*

We may not want to hear it, but the ‘pretty / Child’ does not rescue
us from, or even balance out, the discomforts of Byron’s war writing.
Like her rescuer, Leila is nothing more than a rhetorical device, one
picked out from a ready-made and overlarge pile of such things. When
she has served her purpose (to make the reader ponder) she is thrown
away again:

But first of little Leila we’ll dispose;
For like a day-dawn she was young and pure,
Or, like the old comparison of snows,
Which are more pure than pleasant to be sure.

*(Don Juan, xii, 41)*

Leila dissolves back into a tired poeticism with which *Don Juan* takes issue. Byron takes us to the edge and throws the scabbard from it. Yet to dismiss the moral doggerel of dawning day, purity and snow, is not to call time on poetry. The fires of Ismail may burn away the kinds of still-seductive Romantic rhetoric that for Byron had been subsumed by the enemies of thought, but much remains for the ear and eye of the undistracted reader. The ‘yet warm group / Of murdered women’ that form the background to Juan’s heroic act, to give one immediate example, still demand to be heard. That horribly incongruous reminder of female tenderness in the warmth of newly dead flesh and the suggestion, in ‘lulled in bloody rest’, of the mother’s lullaby, arrest us in the margins of an event that wants us to think seriously about marginality. The call of the lyric voice and the unstated claim of form adapt the logic of vision to an immediate, pressing need for collective political thought.

**Notes**

4. *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 625. Shelley used Paine’s ‘We pity the plumage, but forget the dying bird’ as an epigraph for his pamphlet, which argues that the Princess’s public mourning has been disproportionate and, implicitly, that such outpourings distract from real public issues, such as the Government’s brutal treatment of the so-called ‘Penridge Three’.
5. Compare Byron’s later attack on the ‘parts of speech’ of that ‘long Spout / Of blood and water, leaden Castlereagh’ (*Don Juan*, ix, 49–50).
6. *CPW*, V, 196. ‘Modesty has fled hearts and taken refuge on lips’ and ‘The more depraved our conduct, the more careful our words become; people believe they can reacquire through language what has been lost in virtue.’ I quote the translations from *CPW*, V, 720.
12 Byron would return to Charles XII in *Mazeppa* (1819), which draws not from Johnson but Voltaire’s *Histoire de Charles XII* (1772) and which is more concerned with Charles the man than Charles as moral exemplar.
13 William Gifford urged Byron to cut some of the poem’s more graphic sections, including these lines.
16 Scott approximates the conventions of Napoleonic war painting, which tends to draw the eye to a single heroic figure centrally positioned within a generalized and often chaotic wider scene. Prominent examples include Benjamin West’s ‘The Death of Nelson’ (1806) and John Singleton Copley’s ‘The Death of Major Pierson’ (1783).
19 Also see Peter Cochrane, ‘*Byron and Castelnau’s History of New Russia*’, *The Keats–Shelley Review*, vol. 8 (1993–4), 48–70.
20 Byron’s ‘position is implicit in all of his mature poetry; he believed that social amelioration would be possible only when existing values assumed to be natural and universal were understood as being historically and socially determined, serving specific political ends that were not necessarily in the best interests of the people’. Daniel P. Watkins, *A Materialist Critique of English Romantic Drama* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1993), 141.
21 *The Blind Man Traces the Circle*, 186. Similarly, Shaw writes that ‘Byron is both attracted to and disgusted by war, impelled on one hand by youthful “ardour”, constrained on the other by “repugnance to a Life absolutely & exclusively devoted to Carnage” [BLJ, i, 118]’. Shaw, ‘Byron and War’, 214.
23 Kellsall, *Byron’s Politics*, 156.
24 *Epistle to Bathurst*, 271–2. Pope celebrates the life of John Kyrle, who (according to Pope’s note) lived to ninety, an age at which Byron’s Boone was still hunting.
26 *Ode, 1815*. These are the original lines composed in 1816 and read by Byron. They were replaced, in 1845, by the less sanguinary couplet: ‘But Man is Thy most awful instrument, / In working out a pure intent’.
29 The primary meaning of ‘gross’ here is ‘concerned with large masses or outlines; general, opposed to particular’ (*OED*), although, of course, the more pejorative sense of the word lurks close in warning.
31 By ‘rescuing the “moslem orphan” Leila [Juan demonstrates] the capacity to put principles before the hot intoxication of mayhem and plunder’ (Cooke, *The Blind Man Traces the Circle*, 195). Juan’s ‘unmitigated and unjustifiable slaughter’ is balanced by his ‘determination to preserve the orphaned Leila’, an act which establishes ‘a brighter, fresher image of military action that transcends the merely brutal savagery’ (Mellor, *English Romantic Irony*, 51, 68).
34 Cronin, *Paper Pellets*, 201.
35 ‘Clear-sighted Honour, and his staid Compeers, / Along a track of most unnatural years; / In execution of heroic deeds / Whose memory, spotless as the crystal beads / Of morning dew upon the untrodden meads, / Shall live enrolled above the starry spheres’ (*Ode […], Thanksgiving*, 57–64).