Byronic Irony in *Don Juan*

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There are only a few brief mentions of Lord Byron in the foundational texts of generative anthropology. Yet he is, surely, a person of considerable interest: his age's greatest celebrity, a virtuoso of postures, the grandest early "heir of Rousseau's legacy of the victimary self."(1) He was also a considerable poet and cultural critic, an astute and self-aware artist who discovered and exploited productive new applications of the principle of *nil admirari*–demonstrating indifference to desire as a means of attracting it–and then came to grasp the price, or ironies, of such strategies. His maturest poetry provided such recognitions, but also modeled–or deliberately proffered in open exchange–a practice or indeed "posture"(2) exceptionally effective in the developing market whose processes he was supremely well positioned to explore.

It's the mature phase of Byron's development we'll explore here–to ask, among other things, how well it corresponds to some of the language Eric Gans has used to talk about the Romantic ironist. For example, that he "is a masochist: his proof of being is furnished by suffering."(3) There is much suffering throughout Byron's poetry–it made him indeed. Rousseau's epochal claim that he had "the celebrity of his misfortunes"(4) was never sustained so effectively as by the young English poet who casually tossed a manuscript of verses about his recent travels onto the desk of the London publisher John Murray and then, a few months later in March 1812, "awoke to find himself famous"–in his own famous phrase about fame, incessantly cited ever since. (Byron did not *seek* fame! He awoke, and lo.) It was not an exaggeration: he became, and remained for much of the century and beyond, one of the world's best-known, most thought-about and imitated human beings. He vied with Napoleon. The poem in question, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, quite well justifies Matthew Arnold's later sneer about Byron trailing "the pageant of his bleeding heart" across Europe,(5) and was quickly followed by other works–such as "The Giaour" (1813), "The Corsair" (1814) and certain self-pitying lyrics on the subject of his marital separation in 1816–to which a "masochistic" tinge can with equal fairness be attributed.

All these poems all sold exceedingly well. But they do not, in the view of most readers,

constitute full-blown examples of Romantic Irony. The “Byronic Hero” they present is sated, disgusted, disillusioned. He *has* suffered, beyond the capacity of his readers, and now views all desire–but theirs of course most particularly–with a cold eye. He scorns objects they would die for: in Albania the Childe looks with bored contempt upon an impossibly exotic panoply of “slaves, eunuchs, soldiers, guests, and santons” (2.56)(6) and so forth, after having pointed out that he is almost the first tourist of any kind ever to have seen them (Byron’s own not implausible claim, in fact). He rebuffs every human comfort with fierce superiority: “Soothe not–mock not my distress!”(7) cries the Giaour. (Any soothing *would* be a mockery–an attack on his power–but Byron is far from confronting the implications of this yet.) There are, perhaps, a few hints of an incipient irony–in the structural device that doubles a bemused narrator and the suffering protagonist in *Childe Harold*, for example–but they are inconsistently worked out. And likewise through the murk occasionally flickers a piercing, high-toned sincerity–the tragic residue of titanic aspiration–but this simply serves to authenticate the prevailing lassitude. A brazen, entirely unironic, indeed almost triumphal note is everywhere: what you want, I care nothing for. I’ve had it–’twas nothing. Nor do I even notice, let alone enjoy, your resultant desire of *me*.

Even so, Byron did seem to recognise an instability in his relationship with his subjected readers. Or, he came to sense the ways in which the market for him was being conditioned by his own success. In any case, he adapted, remaining a step ahead of expectations. In 1816 he exiled himself from England under a cloud of scandalous notoriety clearly intensified by resentment of his previous power. This flight, predictably, left the obsessive attention of his audience undiminished–if anything it was enhanced. His response to the changed nature of his relationship to his public was crafted through a sequence of works, but with his acknowledged masterpiece, *Don Juan* (the first cantos of which reached English readers in 1819 and which continued until his death in 1824), something quite new emerged. This poem too was exceedingly popular, and Byron’s martyrdom to the seemingly hopeless cause of national liberty in Greece then fused the two aspects of his fascinatingly paradoxical persona–darkly fatal hero and wittily superficial ironist–more or less permanently in the public imagination.

Don Juan does not do away with the Byronic Hero and his victimary tactics, but it does ironize him, and them. This is widely accepted. Our argument here will be that it does so in a particular way, which Gans’s conceptualization of irony can help us grasp. Briefly, what is ironized is modelling itself; the poem makes self-conscious and thus vulnerable the representation of a hitherto imperiously indifferent self whose power to create a “local monopoly”(8)–Gans’s term for identity: none too local, perhaps, in Byron’s case–the poem now openly acknowledges. Experiencing the height of marketability, as he had, no doubt helped Byron grasp that revelation of the paradoxicality of desire which is a crucial result of the shift away from pre-modern forms of its control. However he may have figured to himself his own historical moment, he clearly saw the new powers and dangers involved in the aesthetic representation of the self to an audience for whom selfhood itself was a central

and increasingly contingent desideratum. He adopted his own kind of Romantic Irony as a means both to prolong his own centrality and to limit its perils. He thus sought–perhaps we can assess with how much success–an aesthetic-ethical solution not just to his own problem as celebrity, or that of the artist generally, but indeed potentially to that of any other self in the market world. He innovated in the use of such irony both to disarm and defer resentment and, to the degree this succeeded, to open up a productive, mutually beneficial exchange with his audience, or with parts of it at least. This ongoing exchange we will propose to call an "alliance," and try to place in its context in the modern world.

The best way to begin is probably through close analysis of a representative passage from *Don Juan*. In principle, the entire work–long and diverse as it is–might be shown to operate in similar ways, but we will choose a much discussed passage from Canto 16, acknowledging as we do that it is by no means the only option. The stanzas in question describe Lady Adeline Amundeville, one of the aristocratic Englishwomen circling around the fascinating foreigner Juan in the poem's later cantos. Juan himself, incidentally, is one of the prime foci for its pervasive ironies. The heroically autonomous seducer of recent legend–Mozart's *Don Giovanni* had only just arrived on the British stage(9)–is in Byron's putative protagonist reduced to a quite ordinary, albeit handsome young man, to whom things happen: he is shipwrecked, sold into slavery, drafted into the Russian army, and into the bed of the lascivious Empress Catherine. Above all, while he exhibits the ordinary hormonal proclivities of his sex and age, he is essentially passive in matters erotic–the women seduce *him*. If there is a Byronic Hero in the poem, he (or increasingly, she) is distributed amongst other characters, including Lady Adeline and the narrator himself. In England on a diplomatic mission for the Russian monarch, the Don gazes at his feverishly charismatic high-society hostess:

> … Juan, when he cast a glance
> On Adeline while playing her grand *rôle*,
> Which she went through as though it were a dance,
> Betraying only now and then her soul
> By a look scarce perceptibly askance
> (Of weariness or scorn), began to feel
> Some doubt how much of Adeline was *real*;

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> So well she acted, all and every part
> By turns–with that vivacious versatility,
> Which many people take for want of heart.
> They err–'tis merely what is called mobility,*

> A thing of temperament and not of art,
> Though seeming so, from its supposed facility;
> And false — though true; for surely they're sincerest,
> Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest. (16.96-97)

Byron then provides a footnote to the central term.

> *In French, 'mobilité'. I am not sure that mobility is English, but it is expressive of a quality which rather belongs to other climates, though it is sometimes seen to a great extent in our own. It may be defined as an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions–at the same time without *losing* the past; and is, though sometimes apparently useful to the possessor, a most painful and unhappy attribute.

To the seasoned reader–namely, almost every living reader of the day–the stanzas and note are richly coded reminders: not just of the victimhood, but of the restlessness, the social centrality merely played at and, in a clever hint in the note, the essential *foreignness* of this character (English opinion was still rather aghast that their national poet was disporting himself in such dubious continental locales as Venice). In short, from the start Lady Adeline's predicament has widely been assumed to be Byron's own, and the term "mobility" was then and is still now deployed in assessments of the particular genius of both poet and poem. It is a judgement slyly prompted, and undercut, by Byron himself. Mobility, as we shall see, is not irony. And Byron is in this crucial respect much more the adept than his putative fictional double.

Lady Adeline, clearly, *is* a new version of that Byronic Hero, who has suffered, indeed is trapped in the suffering occasioned by the disability of her superior sensitivity. "Weariness and scorn" are the badges of all her predecessors. For such a one the godless, centerless universe permits nothing better, is itself ultimately no more than a stage for the putative subjection of the sensitive self to the crassly importunate desires of others. In a familiar turn, those desires, even in her immunity to them, seem to poison every other possibility, even being, even reality. (The classic complaint: I behave in this fundamentally insincere, unreal way because "they" make me, or "society" does.) This is the commonest sense, for this most social of the great Romantic poets, in which "the world's failure to meet the [Romantic] ironist's expectations becomes proof of his victimary centrality,"(10) as Gans puts it. One is left, that is, with only the heroic self–a self unsatisfied but heroically *capable* of satisfaction, and thus still heroically indifferent to the satisfactions adequate to others, the lesser folk.

And many parts of *Don Juan* do wax eloquent on the "waste and empty clime" (7.2) which

mediated desire has created, its disappointments thus vehicles for the narrator's transcendence. Such "Byronism"–which never entirely leaves his tactical repertoire–has sometimes been called by more exalted names, though. For example, a "humanist celebration of man's endurance and defiance of his metaphysical limitations."(11) We *can* defy the desires of others! This *will* be celebrated. Byron apparently felt that such defiance remained an important means of adapting to the market world–an indispensable part of one's posture. It is perhaps not so unreasonable a notion. And he was certainly alive to the intense discomforts of that world, even as he nowhere implies there are viable alternatives to it.

Of course a major proposition to be derived from Byron's career *in toto*–by us, but also by him–is that such autonomy is not what it claims. No one is free of mediated desire, and Byron's poems in the years preceding *Don Juan* have been making this point with increasing self-consciousness and sophistication. When Gans says that the Romantic ironist "is aware of the non-originality of worldly desire"(12) he certainly describes the later Byron.

Irony, in *Signs of Paradox*, is

The expression, necessarily indirect, of the fragility of the absolute or "vertical" formal difference inaugurated by the sign with respect to its source, the relative or "horizontal" difference in the real world between the subject and the object of desire–ultimately between the eater and the potentially eaten.(13)It is also "a reproach directed at the originary project of language."(14) And as irony tends to put into question the formal structure which defers violence, it is "potentially tragic."

Irony is an "expression." But it is also an *event*, which cannot be said to have occurred without it being understood as such, as irony, by an audience.(15) An expression of fragility affects the relationship between the one emitting it and his or her audience. Irony, even more fundamental than the esthetic, is, like it, "oscillatory." The ironic event of *Don Juan*, then, shall we say, is an oscillation in the consciousness of a human subject, an individual reader,(16) purposely provoked by the behavior–the representations–of a human model, Byron. Recognition of irony, indeed, is itself a subjection. The subject is fascinated by the model's intentions, by an apparent oscillation in the model's desires.

"He who hesitates," as James Thurber once charmingly wrote (anticipating originary analysis), "is sometimes saved."(17) The model, who at least appears to oscillate, is protected–if not definitively saved–because his subjects, attempting to imitate him, also oscillate, between imagined satisfaction and anguished hollowness. Or, as one might also put it, between being (like) Byron and being his dupe, between insincerity and sincerity or, for that matter–since Byron is sometimes desirably sincere–between the betrayal of desire and its concealment, between warm and cool; the expert ironist makes his subjects oscillate, doubt, hesitate. Irony may, as Gans says, "make explicit the resentment that is at the heart

of all language."(18) But when the language effect ironized is the model's own centrality, the result for the audience may be more disarming. Subjects, feeling the ironic effect, remembering it even after it is over, may admire the skill that held them in suspension, that held their attention and held *off* their resentment. Their object of desire, in short, may become a modeling which is also not a modeling, and this object they contemplate in an aesthetic mode. Their object of desire may become the posture of the narrative persona, which is at once that of the familiar Byronic hero, and an ironized, self-conscious parody of it. *Don Juan*'s irony has a consistent and specific focus: the fragility of the difference between one particular kind of sign–that of a self-represented victimary persona–and *its* source, its self-aware and unheroic emitter.

Can the quality, the effectiveness of a specific instance of irony be said to inhere in the degree to which it appears to allow the ironist-model to shuttle rapidly, but *manageably*, between indifference and desire, even seemingly between the model and subject positions? By contrast, mobility, at least as Lady Adeline exhibits it, is an unmanaged flight from one subjection to the next, the hope apparently being that its very rapidity and brilliancy will attract the desires of others by communicating a kind of desperately superior apathy. It seems a fond hope, at least here in the "English Cantos," where Byron most fully realizes his paradoxical ambition to be the great Romantic satirist–or satirist of Romanticism–a Pope or Dryden for the age of Wordsworth and, well, Byron.

In fact, desire is inherently unmanageable–this the ironist implicitly admits, this is the experiential ground of the fragility Gans speaks of. But the paradoxical acknowledgment of desire's uncontrollability appears, at least to the audience, to rob it of some crucial element of its force. (To say, I am helpless before desire–Wilde's "I can resist everything but temptation" comes to mind–is *much* cooler than boasting that I am immune to it. Even as we may rightly agree with the remark in principle.) To vaunt this partial immunity, this coolness, is of course to lose it. We are familiar with the way irony, tipping over into pride in itself, can turn sour and unsatisfactory. Bitterness, sarcasm, buffoonery, smugness, self-pity–these are among the holes into which the delicate virtues of irony can fall and be lost. Such culpably inexpert management, like impoliteness as opposed to mere gauche manners, betrays an insufficient underlying sincerity, an insufficient humility in the face of desire, thus betrays desire, and thus loses its audience.

The pivotal, unresolvable word in stanza 97 is surely "surely" (."..for surely they're sincerest, / Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest"). s "Surely" is a performative, an "ostensive"; a word (ostensibly) designed to nudge what is not-sure into what is accepted as sure, without any other evidence than the raw, mimetic appeal of the speaker's own ingratiatingly overt desire that we do. It speaks, that is, directly to the reader's desires, drawing attention, in the current instance, to the rhetorical aspect of what has up to this moment in the text been description, of a condition and of an error made by other people. Now the question becomes: are you, reader, making the same error? Surely not. Surely you

are more like me. Surely you are not trying to empty out Adeline's identity (or mine!) by accusing her behavior of being "art," which is to say, a detectable strategy for influencing us, a betrayed desire. Because, really, it is not so: it is in this sense that mobility is "false"–it is not what it seems, it is not an attempt to demonstrate a cool superiority to desire. We say false "though true" because mobility does betray desire, just not the way other people erroneously believe. It *is*false, in this sense, in that it seems to attempt to fly past desire, but is really caught up inextricably in desire's toils. It is a false falseness, therefore true. And surely anyone so helplessly sincere is to be pitied for her lack of cool!

But "surely"–as a function of its very overtness–also reminds us that we, we and Byron together, are being deliberately paradoxical. We say "surely" as a covert admission that we are not sure. It is thus something of a joke, a joke only partly at the expense of those other people who are in fact impressed by Adeline despite themselves. Are we really to pity this socially brilliant woman, the center of so much attention, whose sustained success is capped by intermittent expressions of her bored contempt for the effect she produces in us? Oh my, but it's lonely at the top! Surely this Adeline person is actually trouncing us, by having it all, having the social effect of cool indifference, and yet also the victimary ethical superiority of her helpless (unintentional) sincerity. And surely one has to laugh, both at the way she has pulled it off and at the way, pivoting on that depthless qualifier, Byron coyly gestures at this recognition, the way we and he together can see how it works, on us as much as on others. And if we are alert to the possibilities, we also catch the irony of the deliberate parallel between Adeline and the Byron who has decoded her, because *isn't* what she has achieved in her circle exactly what the Byronic Hero of yore achieved in his own cultural moment? And don't we smile the more to see how Byron is both making this play for our sympathy (as more obviously in the note) and wittily acknowledging that he is doing so, thus altering its emotive power?

And yet, is she, or Byron, really happy? One could go on. Explaining irony is like explaining a joke.(19) Enough, perhaps, to say that this ironical account of the true nature of Adeline's (and Byron's) fascination, their vivacious versatility, very nearly holds in suspension both 1) their resentable desirability with its attendant ("genuine"!) pang of pity, and 2) a decoding of its intended effect on us that can only provoke a smile of amusement. Yes, surely such people are, in their way, "sincere," since you put it that way. Or, thus, very nearly: are not we too like this, poor us, and yet isn't saying so such humbug, such an amusingly naked play for sympathy? Or: how beautiful and sad is the transitoriness of feelings, and even more beautiful and sad to be their slave, and yet perhaps there is nothing more–except, possibly, the superiority of just this recognition, this anchoring ironical perception of what such people as Adeline (and Byron) pay, for all their beauty, for not being able to stand back from desire and sincerity the way we can. This is a pleasingly mild tragic scenario, shall we say, that temporarily purges not so much fear and pity as a nagging anxiety that one might be missing something, or that one might not be quite so fascinatingly self-contained as are people like Adeline (and Byron). And indeed, this reassurance is borne out admirably in the

subsequent stanzas which expatiate on the ultimate insubstantiality of the achievements of mobile people. Sad, beautiful, but not, alas, thank goodness, me–not *all* of me. We both desire them, and smile at their desires and our own. “Surely” also means, that is, an acknowledgment both of Adeline’s helplessness, and that of the reader who can feel the justice of the observation. To admit it is to manage it–or to be more precise, to manage the audience’s response, their otherwise potentially resentful reaction to the degree of superiority to desire which the ironical manner communicates to them.

Byron is the ironist, though, not the reader. This he manages by being alternately within and beyond the process he ironizes. We only imitate him in this regard, and if he is really ironizing himself *to* himself as a subjected audience we can never distinguish this operation from a “mere” rhetoric modeling an oscillation of sincerity and insincerity. But this alternation, of course, is not a stable identity–this much we *can* tell, through our own only intermittently resentful response to it–and the management of desire is neither freedom from it nor its gratification. To accept desire in this way, without letting oneself fully pursue its offered rewards, is a kind of self-denial, an admission of defeat, perhaps indeed a masochism. Or perhaps … a high-art opting for the asceticism of the sign–in this case, the sign of a detected and ironized modeling. The sparagmatic satisfactions over which this is preferred *are* the rewards of represented victimhood: the centrality conferred by the unironized modeling of suffering, as offered in unalloyed form by the earlier representations of the Byronic Hero. Popular art will continue its celebration of this simpler form of heroism, long after the rather naïve poems that first purveyed it have dropped out of common reading. It will presumably feel that the pleasures of mere imagined heroic victimary autonomy (rebels ever without causes) outweigh or can turn to account the resentment of subjects unable or unwilling to make use of that modeling. But *Don Juan* sees more deeply into the implications of such a bargain.

The problem and the power of the artwork, Gans argues, is that “our relationship” with it “is a modality of unreciprocated mediation,” or what René Girard calls “external mediation,”(20) and that, let us add, Samuel Taylor Coleridge memorably figured as a circle of fear round the airy dome-builder of “Kubla Khan.”

> And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
> His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
> Weave a circle round him thrice,
> And close your eyes with holy dread,
> For he on honey-dew hath fed,
> And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Such a modality can only be safe from resentment as long as the creator of the artwork really does remain out of range of rivalry. Once it becomes clear, as it was becoming clear

by Byron's day, that the "authority of the author is only human" he or she both becomes "vulnerable to attack" and seems to take on ever-increasing power, as "resentment of the central figure … reinforces its domination."(21) Representations of self, and these are Byron's stock in trade as well as the most useful, most productive thing he can provide a hungry market, can be expected to be especially potent generators of what Girard calls metaphysical desire, and Gans includes under the general term resentment. Even more than with other kinds of fiction, readers may feel subjected to the model's willful manipulations of their desires, especially as their fascination intensifies.

For all that it can be coy or undecidable, however, in a crucial respect Byronic irony is a revealing, the opposite of the haughty withdrawal from mimetic exchange performed by the Byronic Hero. It is the contrary of what Gans speaks of as a "rhetoric of mastery,"(22) the most potent expression of which must be silence. Irony concedes the interest of the author in his or her influence on the audience–at least the audience that "gets" and is intended to "get" the irony. It's a potentially expensive concession, but only thus can the ironist lift the veil even slightly from the mechanisms of desire, or in Gans's terms, "preside…over [his] own deconstruction."(23) Such a revealing says to its audience: this poem is actually about *our* relationship, and about the role my will plays in that relationship, and about how you detect me in my attempts to control your desires. And yet, and thus, we continue! Such irony permits us to pay our tax of attention and desire to the poet, and almost simultaneously receive our (partial) refund of his own betrayed subjection to us, his gesture to our power, and to our cleverness for catching him out, for decoding his intentions, his willfulness.

The critic Jane Stabler interestingly brings the terms "chance" or "risk" into her discussion of Byron's relation to his audience. He came to accept "the chance element in the reader's reception of his work" and "developed a mode that was capable of wooing, including and discarding readers" while it "gradually incorporated risk as part of the digressive texture of his reading."(24) This acceptance of risk is woven into the ironies of the poem, offered consciously to readers' awareness. On the one hand, he risks being misunderstood, rejected (not purchased!), even becoming the object of direct or indirect violence for his failed attempts to impose upon his readers. But on the other, his readers may detect his acceptance of risk, of an indeterminate relationship with them. Deliberately courted risk, an irony at the expense of rhetorical intention, interrupts direct authorial power.

Such a strategy, in the hands of a master like Byron, makes *allies* of readers, or of some of them. Jerome McGann, the poet's most important twentieth-century critic, calls *Don Juan* his "conversational alliance with his age."(25) Many readers, both at the time and since, have experienced the poem's narrative persona not as a usurper or monopolist of victimary centrality, but as a boon companion. This is, surely, a somewhat surprising outcome of the Romantic Irony described in *Signs of Paradox*. The fault lines are interesting, of course. Some readers detested both poet and poem–these readers tended to be the self-appointed

defenders of ritual culture against the market which so lionized a poetic Lord who ought to have known better than heed it, as these readers would have us know they themselves do *not*. But even so resentful a critic as William Hazlitt, the violence of whose animosity towards Byron's earlier self-representations as victim can barely be contained, found himself disarmed by *Don Juan*'s irony: "You laugh and are surprised that anyone should turn round and *travestie* himself."(26)

We may define an alliance as the mutual but limited–limited in degree, or temporally limited–suspension of mimetic rivalry between two or more persons. This would tend to distinguish the alliance offered in *Don Juan* from the "care" provided to the weaker reader that Gans depicts as a feature of the Romantic Esthetic. Works of this Esthetic, he argues, do not empower or give their readers voice, but depict themselves caring for them in an explicitly hierarchical relation. It is this hierarchy that Byronic irony disables. The knowledge and modeling offered by the poem certainly do suggest that "superior understanding of the postritual world" which Gans identifies as the "qualification" which enables the more novelistic Romantics to assume their dominance.(27) But Byron ironizes his understanding (implying we both share it), and himself (as alternately model *and* subject). He offers choices–the poem is actually a celebration of market choice, not the grim revelation of cosmic indeterminacy that the critical truism takes it to be. We at different times "pick and chuse" not just our attitude to its narrator, but its very language and metaphors. One of its most characteristic figures is the mock-heroic or ironized epic catalogue. The shopping list. At the end of the first canto Byron announces to his "gentle reader / And still gentler purchaser" that if he or she buys this first installment, he'll produce more. If not, he'll desist. And in fact, he does abide by the results of this market testing. This certainly does Romantic Irony's famous work of undercutting the pretensions of language to "transcend reality." But it is not the mockery of Baudelairean brotherhood, hypocrites all.(28) Or, if Byron is our Virgil, guiding us through the inferno and purgatorio of market society–it has no heaven–our deference to him is not so desperate or abject as Dante's to *his* model.

In short, it seems that in *Don Juan* one finds explicitly thematized, and ironized, that which Gans calls "the constitutive hypocrisy of Romanticism," its self-interested opposition in principle to the market. Byron ironizes his own pose as "ontologically prior to the collectivity,"(29) at least the collectivity of our alliance.

The simplest way to describe the alliance in question doubtless *is* to say that it encompasses those who do "get" the irony, or at least think they do. Some people won't or don't, and of course we establish our identities and our separate peace by excluding them, in the immemorial fashion whose most intense form we call scapegoating. But the irony of *Don Juan*, though often sharp, does seem minimally, or perhaps it is optimally exclusive. The ironic *tone* is pervasive, slipping from the obvious to the highly esoteric, but its ubiquity can serve to establish a bond of knowingness with those readers who do not reject it outright. It

is not necessary to “get” the *details* of every ironic nuance in order to feel included, to enjoy the feeling of amused superiority, the sense of delicious incongruity about almost everything–and with this feeling, share the “prestige”(30) of which Gans rightly speaks. This effect, this inclusiveness, is also aided by the broadness of much of the irony:

> I’m a plain man, and in a single station,
> But–Oh! Ye lords of ladies intellectual,
> Inform us truly, have they not hen-peck’d you all? (1.22)

This is very easy to grasp. No one is less a plain man than his Lordship, and his “single station” was the product of the most scandalous sexual outrage of the day. And what *rhyming* for the supposedly Great Poet! Its obviousness humbles the ironist, makes him desirably vulnerable. Once the reader accepts the basic ironical procedure of the poem (and inducements are offered early), the feeling that one is being duped (or “cared for”) is much less likely to develop.

You know by now what *I* get: I get to be Byron, with all the proceeds. I get to live in your eye as Byron–I get with some plausibility to imagine myself living in your eye. What do *you* get? A number of things. A contagious attitude of superiority, or call it freedom, or irony. Practical things, too. Examples of how to be better than just Byronic, or anti-Byronic. Examples of how to hate, to love, to believe, to doubt, to be indignant, to recognize cant and scorn it, to look straight at things. Several ways of doing each, from which to pick and choose.

And the best, most crucial knowledge: discrimination, a *modern* guide to true taste, to the operation of the market. Who would, after all, want to go into it blind, without some such ally? He helps us not make fools of ourselves. And to say this is also to claim a more comprehensive and less deluded vision of the human condition. If reading *Don Juan* makes us feel worldly, it may also go some distance to making us so.

All this knowledge, obtainable elsewhere, in *Don Juan* is guaranteed by the terms of our alliance. We can trust it, even *know* it, because we trust it is not being used to impose on us, as its ironic designation as “commonplace” constantly reminds us. (Byron called his poem “a mere airy and fantastic basis / To build up common things with commonplaces” 14.7).

Is our alliance with Byron some sort of consumer fantasy, an unfree fixation on celebrity? Gans, among others, identifies celebrities as the “sacred figures” of the market era, in the sense that they are conceded possession of the old ritual center, as a hedge against the more troublesome calls on our desires from our neighbors and rivals.(31) But such concessions are selective and provisional, and plummets from celebrity are as constant as their creation–if these are our gods, they are far from immortal. Resentment, even hatred

does reach them, soon or late. The Byron of *Don Juan*, while he is still an avatar of the semi-fallen celebrity of 1812, has also survived his sacredness long enough to be able to reflect upon, ironize, indeed parody its original representations. His esthetic skills enable him to change the terms of the alliance as he changes his representations of the desirable self. No doubt any alliance with such a figure does move its participants some distance towards holy dread, and in the modern world some such relaxation of rivalrous desire is probably necessary or at any rate inevitable. "We cannot simply go without sacrality," claims Gans.(32) But the narrator of *Don Juan* draws us on past worship. His irony constantly reminds us of the fragility of his own centrality, of his status as an object of esthetic contemplation or of resentment. He is not a human sacrifice, nor is he a true external mediator, even if part of our pleasure in him is linked to the fact that he is further from plausible rivalry than most models, even most dead ones. His dimension, linked by literary alliance to us, scaled by irony but still perceptible, becomes indeed an inspiriting promise of human potentiality. One can be so clever, so strong, so free of other models. So scoffing and humane. But this is only one option, and he is only one option. Irony constantly offers implicit alternatives: he abandons centrality as quickly as he assumes it–a trick, a knack, that can only be pinned down in actual practice. His authority is only an effect, obtainable in open exchange, to be redeployed as needed and useful.

The characterization of his practice and posture developed above perhaps puts Byron historically in the second generation of Romantics, as Gans has defined it, well ahead, one may note, of the continental figures upon whom he exerted such incalculable influence — Baudelaire, Nietzsche, et al. It makes of him an originary anthropologist.(33) But one must also presume, from the continued strength of his market position (for the infinitely imitated persona as well as for the greatest of his poems) that features of this posture have proven of unusual usefulness in a de-ritualizing world, well beyond those of most of his generational peers. And one might guess that the feature that has mattered most is precisely the posture's notably *un*-Romantic acceptance — through irony — of the operation of the market itself.

Even without Byron, in our paradoxical desire for a centrality that our betrayal of that desire would deny us, we knew we were suffering. But in the end he models a plausible way to respond to the situation, to manage it. Evidently enough this is a form of the "deferral of violence" central to the originary hypothesis–Byron's posture is a significant ethical innovation. Irony is essential to it because irony replicates and enables us to deal with the open paradoxicality of market desire, and by extension with the vastness of simultaneously designated desires which the market urges upon us. If we are not to go crazy from too much choice, we need means to organize and make hierarchical our imagination. Irony is such a means, as it creates a space of indifference and relativity, a crucial, oscillatory moment of freedom which falls neither into desperate affirmation nor into equally desperate rejection, into neither desire nor counter-desire. It offers a moment of peace in which more carelessly to decide, indeed, to live. If we are not to be emptied out entirely we need some of the

superiority (to our many models) offered by irony. For everyone's sake: because if we have to buy it all, we really can buy none of it. Without irony our resentments will not re-circulate as productive or emulative energy, and our exclusion from identity will become unbearable–the precondition for violence. Irony–this comes close to the core meaning of *Don Juan*–thus makes generosity, commerce, admiration, all human value possible in the market world. We cannot all be Byron–a circle has only one center–but if, following his own lead, we can ironize his victimary claims upon our attention, ironize his fragility itself, and thus our own, we may resist killing him, or trying to destroy the market that brought him to us. We may even treat him with compassion, or love. As others, in turn, in exchange, may treat the ever-fragile Byron in *us*.

Notes

1. Eric Gans, "Opening the GATE: The Vancouver 'Thinking Event,'" *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 347 (August 18, 2007), http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views. (back)

2. In the sense Gans develops in *The Origin of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 279-86. (back)

3. *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 68. (back)

4. "Preface to the Neuchâtel Edition," in Confessions, trans. Angela Scholar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 645. (back)

5. "Stanzas From the Grand Chartreuse," line 136. (back)

6. Quotations of Byron's poetry are from Jerome J. McGann, ed., *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-93). Canto and stanza number are indicated in parentheses where appropriate. (back)

7. Line 1217. (back)

8. *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 128. (back)

9. In 1817. Moyra Haslett, *Byron's* Don Juan *and the Don Juan Legend* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 4. (back)

10. *Signs of Paradox*, 69. (back)

11. Caroline Franklin, *Byron: A Literary Life* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), 100. (back)

12. *Signs of Paradox*, 70. (back)

13. *Signs of Paradox*, 65. (back)

14. *Signs of Paradox*, 67. (back)

15. See Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), 3, 5. In the GA chronology all expressions of irony, and certainly of Romantic irony, must presumably follow the advent of the declarative. The fragility Gans speaks of is not *expressed* in the originary scene. It is the condition of that scene. (back)

16. "The esthetic … is an effect that exists in principle only for the individual. … Art … operates on the community one member at a time." *Originary Thinking*, 143. (back)

17. "The Glass in the Field," in *The Thurber Carnival* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), 225. (back)

18. *Signs of Paradox*, 67. (back)

19. A point also made by Hutcheon. *Irony's Edge*, 7. (back)

20. "Why Art Defies Analysis," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 298 (April 10, 2004), http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views. (back)

21. Gans extends this analysis into the late twentieth century: "Deconstruction has the sacrilegious structure of the black mass: *brûlez ce que vous avez adoré*, which is nothing other than the structure of resentment in general. The dark secret of postmodernism is that not only its axiology of liberation but its epistemology of unveiling are based on resentment." "Why Art Defies Analysis." (back)

22. *Signs of Paradox*, 174. (back)

23. *Signs of Paradox*, 68. (back)

24. Stabler's argument also involves Byron's appeal to older forms of "discrimination" or taste, and raises the possibility that his procedure stems from "a democratic desire to keep poetry as a communal discourse." *Byron, Poetics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 58, 98. (back)

25. Jerome McGann, *"Don Juan" in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 79. (back)

26. "Lord Byron," in *The Spirit of the Age*: *or, Contemporary Portraits* (1825; Menston: Scolar Press, 1971), 173. (back)

27. *Originary Thinking*, 169. (back)

28. “Baudelaire mocks us all for pretending that language can transcend reality, and that he as writer can use language to transcend even that transcendence.” *Signs of Paradox*, 70. (back)

29. *Originary Thinking*, 166. (back)

30. *Signs of Paradox*, 64. (back)

31. “On Celebrity,” no. 108 (September 6, 1997), and “Famous for Being Famous,” no. 321 (August 13, 2005), both in *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views. See also Leo Braudy on “secularized sainthood.” *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 540. (back)

32. “On Celebrity.” (back)

33. “The romantic ironist grasps from above the unity of the scene that he cannot experience in the world. His is an authentic mode of anthropological thought.” *Signs of Paradox*, 70. (back)