“A novel word in my vocabulary”: Laughter and the Evolution of the Byronic Model into Don Juan

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When Lord Byron published *Don Juan* between 1819 and 1824, he subverted the rhetoric of victimhood and suffering that drove his previous works and that dominated British Romanticism. *Don Juan* in some ways baffled the Regency. William Hazlitt, an ever-astute critic, wrote in bemusement, “you laugh and are surprised that anyone should turn around and *travestie* himself” (75). Generative Anthropology provides an excellent prism through which to examine *Don Juan*’s destabilization of victimhood–better than the critical lenses available to Byron’s contemporaries. In this article, I will examine the metamorphosis of the Byronic hero from *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, the Oriental Tales and Byron’s dramas into the mock-heroism of *Don Juan*. I will rely extensively on Regency reviews to illustrate how the concepts of mimesis and the marketplace of desire worked in the minds of Byron’s contemporaries. While Byron sought to destabilize the idea of heroic victimhood in *Don Juan*, at the same time he secured his own position as a model for his readers. He moved from the unrelenting pride of the scapegoat and exile to happily engaging with the gossip, news, and financial enrichment of the marketplace. In examining *Don Juan*’s reception, I want to show what its share of the Regency market for books tells us about the poem’s share of the broader market of desire. *Don Juan*’s fortunes as a commodity show how the reading public adopted and embraced Byron’s new production.

Eric Gans describes how a victim may be self-selecting, and how victimhood came to confer power. Gans posits Christ as the first victim to retain a sacral role beyond the completion of the sacrifice (Victim as Subject 27-28). He argues that Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in the eighteenth century, was the next figure to advance the

mimetic paradigm by which an individual can claim centrality (3). Rousseau claimed the centre by renouncing his desire to participate in what he perceived as the corruption of society around him (6 n1). His social desirability lay in his perpetual rejection of the desiring society: “A well-adjusted Rousseau would have been courted by no one” (8). As Ian Dennis remarks, Byron “discovered and exploited productive new applications of the principle of *nil admirari*–demonstrating indifference to desire as a means of attracting it” (para 1). Byron’s *modus operandi* paralleled Rousseau’s; both men attracted attention through vaunting their lack of desire for public recognition. *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage I-II* was the first of Byron’s works to enjoy enormous acclaim and popularity. Its protagonist proudly rejects the temptations of English aristocratic society in order to embrace his own lofty solitude. Early in his career, Byron influentially equated heroism, victimhood, and alterity. The Byronic hero is profoundly Other to those around him: “He stood a stranger in this breathing world / An erring spirit from another hurled” (*Lara* 1.315-316). The hero is a stranger wherever his travels take him in this world; he is also alienated, through “erring,” from the society that produced him originally. He attains the victimary status of a scapegoat hurled over a cliff.

The heroes of Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and the Oriental Tales are aristocratic men, locked into conflict with the society around them, and in their prime when the poems’ action unfolds. In *Manfred*, Byron’s semi-autobiographical closet drama of 1816, the eponymous hero is wracked with guilt over the death of his sister Astarte, a death which for which he believes himself responsible: “Her heart / It gazed on mine, and wither’d” (2.2.118-19). Manfred’s desperation leads him to conjure up infernal spirits and to scorn the prospect of an afterlife. Manfred dies proudly wedded to a pain “which could nothing gain” from hellfire, and disdaining a “compact” with the devil himself as beneath his independent dignity (3.4.128, 114).

Lara’s (1814) close focus on Lord Lara makes the experience of virtually all the other characters invisible. Lara occupies centre stage: “his silence form’d a theme for others’ prate” (1.293). The serfs’ thoughts are limited to “glad”-ness at Lara’s return, and resentment at “infant monarch” and feudal “faction” (1.1, 226-229). Even the latter is swiftly subsumed into Lara’s individual story. Lara hoodwinks his followers; the sufferings of the peasants are a consequence of Lara’s “policy,” to secure himself against the inveterate enmity of his neighbours. “Whate’er his view, his favour more obtains / With these, the people, than with his fellow thanes” (2.196, 194-95). The serfs’ woes on the battlefield and during a losing campaign are both evoked and dismissed. “What boots,” demands the narrator, “the oft-repeated tale of strife, / The feast of vultures and the waste of life?” We feel for them as they flee oppression to band with the less rapacious Lara, and as their allegiance to Lara costs them their livelihoods and lives. Yet the poem unfolds from Lara’s perspective;

it is his tragedy, and not the tragedy of his followers. As readers, we enter into his subjectivity and learn of his thoughts far more than we do of any other character. Lara, not the peasants, holds the centre.

What was the magic of the Byronic hero, and how did he take his place at the centre of attention? An anonymous reviewer, writing at length in the October, 1819 edition of the *Edinburgh Monthly Review*, believed Byron to be "gifted above all his contemporaries with that divine energy which wakens all its touches into fervid animation" (*EMR* 469; *Romantics Reviewed* 792). Byron's powerful imagery and arresting language made his poetry compelling and memorable. Yet for the reviewer, it is the protagonists, even more than the quality of the verse, that make Byron's works so "attractive:"

> The author stands identified in an unusual manner with the characters which he draws . . . It is this belief, whether erroneous or not . . . that fills and sustains their every line with the imagined presence of the author; and . . . enhances wonderfully their interest to that numerous class of readers who sympathise more readily with individual feeling than with universal truth. (*EMR* 470-471; *RR* 793)

The reviewer is concerned at the moral implications of readers' ready embrace of the Byronic hero. Readers judge Byron's heroes with excessive lenience, he believes, because "they steal upon us under the guarantee of the greatest poet and mightiest mind of his day." It is a troubling "matter indeed when we are taught to look upon this concentration of malignity as it stands illuminated by the approving smiles of the poet, and gilded by the countless fascinations which it is his prerogative to throw around it" (*EMR* 471; *RR* 793). All the "incarnations of this terrible spirit" do have "one redeeming virtue" each–which promotes the dangerous identification of reader with character yet further (*EMR* 473; *RR* 794). The reviewer posits an "intense feeling of sympathy with the character" being "extort[ed]" invariably from the reader (*EMR* 474; *RR* 795).

The Byronic hero's alienation and victimhood were so attractive because he allowed readers to imagine themselves into his wild deeds–his revolt against the constraints of society. Any reader who felt confined by the exigencies of Regency Britain could identify his–or her–feelings of suffering with the pain and alienation that drove the Byronic hero into exile. To readers of Byron today, however, much of the mystery and undisclosed biography of the Byronic hero seems an encryption of sexual discourse. As Gary Dyer writes, "not all the secrets in Byron turn out to be sodomy, but even when a secret is something else, the supreme dangers of sodomy have helped shape the nature of secrecy. Indeed, concealing sodomy obviously taught

Byron much of what he knew about concealment" (567). But if most of Byron's contemporaries were not alert to all the possible subtexts of his poetry, the secret spaces of the Byronic hero's heart provided them with a place to project their own sorrows and frustrations as well as desires. The Byronic hero, foregrounding his own suffering, permitted his readers' to contemplate their own sufferings (sufferings, one hopes, less acute than a Byronic hero's) in a new and cathartic way.

The one redeeming virtue of each protagonist (to which the *Edinburgh Monthly Review*'s article alludes) permits the reader to identify comfortably with the Byronic hero–yet the lawlessness of the hero's conduct provides a refreshing interlude in which, on some level, readers can imagine themselves as unbound by social norms. The *Edinburgh Monthly*'s reviewer imagines Byron's long-suffering and devoted readers drawn into an admiring "circle" around the poet (*EMR* 468; *RR* 792). This image truly reflects a mass-mediated desire; each person in the circle wants to imitate the Byronic hero, to replicate his mastery over his surroundings, his fellow men, and his own desires. The readers, too, would quite like to be encircled with admirers. Of course, to achieve this, they must affect the strictest indifference. After all, the Byronic heroes' hypnotic power stems from their claim to live within their own spiritual fortresses of reticence, strength, and unknowable pasts. When Byron refused to provide this model any longer, the *Edinburgh Monthly Review* writer imagined Byron's readers driven by *Don Juan* "to an agony of resentment and despair" (*EMR* 468; *RR* 792). This language is again strikingly similar to the terms of Generative Anthropology. In this case, however, it is not resentment of the Byronic hero–or indeed of Lord Byron himself–for having invented a desirable new behaviour, or despair at the realization that, as an imitator of Byron, one will never achieve his vast popularity and success. Instead, this reviewer suggests that readers will resent Byron for refusing to supply more avatars of the dark Byronic hero, and that their agony is the pangs of withdrawal from an addictive substance. Eventually, the readers' despair leads them to "burst the magic circle of his authority." The review "contemplate[s]" with "melancholy" the "scandalous . . . abuse" of Byron's talents that could so drive his readers away (*EMR* 468; *RR* 792). However, as we will see, Byron's redeployment of his talent in *Don Juan* actually enthralled readers all over again.

Following the spectacular collapse of Byron's marriage in 1815 and his subsequent move to continental Europe, critics applied the language of alienation and exile, formerly lavished on his heroes, to Byron himself. The *Edinburgh Monthly Review* discusses his "place of exile," from which "it now appears but too probable that he is fated never to return" (*EMR* 486; *RR* 801). The *British Critic* presents Byron as an exile whom none can mourn:

> His fate can now excite no more compassion in the minds of his former admirers, than that of a vicious racer sold to drudge in a night-cart: or if the comparison be somewhat unsavoury, we might remark . . . he has sunk from the dignity of Milton's fallen angel, to the vulgar horned and tailed devil of a puppet shew. (Hunt 188; *RR* 336)

The same publication compared Byron to "the prodigal son" and suggested that Byron "should feel a strong desire to return" home (*British Critic* 663; *RR* 341). The *Literary Museum*, while condemning Byron's morals, mourned that, "poor man! he is a wanderer about the earth; and in spite of all his affectations, a very unhappy man" (*LM* 564; *RR* 1510). Byron's heroes had so often exiled themselves that his contemporaries could only read his life as following the same pattern.

Don Juan, however, represents a revolution in Byron's thinking on Romantic victimhood. Part of its overthrow of Byron's previous paradigm takes place on a demographic level. One of *Don Juan*'s innovations is to remove suffering from one central victim and relocate it in segments of the population previously relegated to picturesque functions. By 1820, the central Byronic hero was losing his hold on the imagination of the British public. In 1819, the *British Critic* opined that "the cold reception" of Byron's latest publications "must have given [him] rather a broad intimation of his decline in the public favour" (*BC* 195; *RR* 296). In a letter to his publisher, Byron himself wrote that the number of copies sold "is not a bad sale in itself," but appeared low "comparative with the numbers" from earlier in his career, especially "as in the case of the *Corsair* [which sold] 13000 [copies]. . . the first day." Byron took this for "proof of a decline of popularity to a great extent" (*BLJ 10* 161). In 1823, John Hunt could write in the *British Critic* that "the spell and mystery which it was his Lordship's pleasure to cast about himself and his adventures" had "long since" become "as stale and palpable as most other pieces of solemn charlatanry; and his tall scornful heroes, all of one family, with hearts as black as their beards, and lips curling as regularly and duly as their whiskers, have ceased" to hypnotize (Hunt 178: *RR* 331). The *Literary Chronicle* told its readers that, although "there was a time when the bare announcement of a new work from Lord Byron, made the whole reading population of England look forward" to it "as a school-boy to a holiday. . . . That time is now gone past." The reviewer suggests that one reason that "a poem by his lordship excites very little sensation" by 1823 is Byron "writing so much" (*LC* 451; *RR* 1340). In short, the Byronic hero ceased to be central to readers' imaginations through his familiarity. Furthermore, widespread, prolonged, and acknowledged popularity was the very inverse of the Byronic hero's allure. If everyone was buying up Byron's latest works (and his sales had been phenomenal), or imitating his heroes' pose of *Weltschmerz*, their fact of their popularity put the very individual relationship of the reader to the character

under stress.

Intensive imitation leads to a disruption of the “triangle of mimetic desire.” (*Signs of Paradox* 38). “A’s peaceful imitation of B’s . . . routine ends when A challenges B for the last” resource. “The disciple becomes a rival,” and the relationship becomes a “conflict. The mediator who at first welcomed a disciple now rejects him” (38). As Byron finished *Childe Harold* and the Oriental Tales, haughty singularity was almost worn out as a means of captivating attention. Yet rather than rejecting the discipleship of his admiring readers, Byron wooed them all over again with a new paradigm. It was time for him to seek out a new kind of protagonist.

At the outset of *Don Juan*, Byron declares that he is in “want” of a hero, and lists numerous candidates for poetic memorialization. But fame is fleeting; contemporary heroes’ reputations decay as swiftly as poetic popularity. “Nelson,” for example,

once was Britain’s god of war,
And still should be so, but the tide is turn’d.
There’s no more to be said of Trafalgar,
’Tis with our hero quietly inurned. (1.1, 1.9-24, 1.25-28)Byron alleges that the Prince Regent has set new fashions in heroism: “Besides, the Prince is all for the land-service, / Forgetting Duncan, Nelson, Howe, and Jervis” (1.29-30). The market’s demand for novelty erodes not only the standing of a particular hero, but the very mode of heroism that the public prefers. When Byron seeks a hero “fit for [his] poem (that is, for [his] new one)” he finds a whole new paradigm in our “friend Don Juan” (1.40-41). Juan does not qualify as a traditional Byronic hero. He is in exile, perhaps, but only at his mother’s instigation, not his own (2.57-58). He feels no distaste or intolerance for the society he is leaving behind, and expects to return in “four springs,” unlike true Byronic heroes, who tend to wander indefinitely (2.67). Juan cannot claim the heroic grandeur of Byron’s earlier protagonists, and therefore is not likely to share their heroic suffering. As there is no Byronic hero to monopolize the poem’s centre, *Don Juan* allots suffering and victimary status throughout its cast of characters.

In contrast to the previous works, *Don Juan* puts people of different classes at the centre of its depiction of victimhood. A shipwreck at the outset of Juan’s travels creates a microcosm of society. The lifeboat contains sailors, passengers, a clergyman or scholar in the form of the licentiate Pedrillo, and an aristocrat in the shape of the licentious Juan. The narration emphasizes their sameness. The lottery that determines “who should die to be his fellow’s food” makes the shipwreck’s survivors interchangeable (2.584). It is not only the play of probabilities that makes individuals of all ranks equal and indistinguishable. The survivors’ thoughts, too, are identical: “When his comrade’s thought each sufferer knew / ’Twas but his own”

(2.581-2). “None to be the sacrifice would choose,” and “none were permitted to be neuter” (2.588, 599). Just as social rank and individuality collapse, so too does the distinction between the noteworthy suffering of the eponymous protagonist and the suffering of other characters. For instance, the sorrow of a father in the lifeboat, who loses his “mild / And patient” son, commands the narrator’s sustained attention (2.699-700, 697-720). The boy smiles, “now and then,” “As if to win a part from off the weight / He saw increasing on his father’s heart,” and the father shows equal consideration, scrutinizing the boy’s face to discern what he can do to solace him (2.701-03, 705-12). Readers not only experience the father’s grief, but see much in the tender relationship of father and son that they could well wish to emulate or share. Juan is not the only character whose interiority the narrator explores, or whom he sets up as a potential model.

A few contemporary reviewers seized on this point. The *Literary Gazette* quoted approvingly from Byron’s “highly wrought picture” of the “general distress” of the shipwreck and his evocation of drowning, “A solitary shriek, a bubbling cry / Of some strong swimmer in his agony” (*LG* 471; *RR* 1410). “Two hundred are lost in the ship, but their fate is nothing in comparison with that of one strong swimmer out-living all the rest . . . Thus does . . . [a] single [sufferer] excite a far stronger emotion than a cart-load of declamations on . . . misery” (*LG* 471; *RR* 1410). Byron employs a successful strategy for representing the suffering of hundreds of unremarkable people by entering for the moment into the feelings of one such person. *Don Juan* confers centrality on minor characters–and hence on whole classes–in a way that Byron’s previous poetry only achieved for its heroic protagonists.

John Murray, Byron’s publisher and chief bookseller, became increasingly reluctant to publish the radical and controversial *Don Juan*. Pirated editions began to circulate almost immediately on the first cantos’ publication in Britain. When Murray balked entirely in 1823, Byron began to publish instalments of *Don Juan* with John Hunt’s press. The price of *Don Juan* dropped immensely, opening the poem to a new readership.

Conservative critics observed this change in market as a falling-off: Byron’s “works, banished from the polite sanctum of Albemarle-street [John Murray’s address], are gibetted in effigy in every twopenny book-stall” (*BC* 662; *RR* 340). The *Literary Museum*, too, condemned Byron’s new market, referring to his buyers as “the lowest and vulgarest classes,” to whom “he has very judiciously accommodated the price of his poetry . . . If every one cannot contrive to muster a shilling, at least two or three can club their pence, and so compass the purchase of a copy of Don Juan.” The reviewer claims that Byron’s conduct verges on the “*ig*-noble,” and “argues something like a consciousness in his mind, that his verses are . . . mere twelve-

penny trash" (*LM* 769; *RR* 1512). Others, however, saw it as a transition to an equally valid model of literature in the marketplace. In August, 1821, the *Literary Chronicle* showed great insight into Byron's new market posture:

> The mysterious announcement . . . the want of a publisher's name to the work, and the stanzas of asterisks, which were supposed to have marked the curtailments, all tended to . . . excite an unusual degree of curiosity respecting the poem. It was universally read, much admired, often abused . . . abjured by married men, and read in secret by their wives throughout the whole kingdom. The price at which it was first published was some restraint on public curiosity, but . . . pirated editions gratified most abundantly the avidity of the reading world. (*LC* 495; *RR* 1297)

Byron's publishing strategy appears totally successful; according to the *Literary Chronicle* two years later, "we should not be surprised to learn that the fourpenny cantos have been the most lucrative, since small gain fills a heavy purse" (*LC* 769; *RR* 1349).

As Byron was permitting new demographics to hold the centre of attention in his verse, and according their suffering the same value as the aristocratic hero's, so his readership was expanding to people who previously were unable to purchase his works. The production values of a book become a part of the rhetoric of its text. Because Byron had deliberately decided to release his later cantos at a lower cost, poorer book-buyers had the feeling that the Noble Poet had been writing with them in mind, producing a text he intended them to be able to purchase. They may well have felt confirmed in their belief as they saw minor and working-class characters being given the narrator's full attention–an attention that hitherto had been largely confined to aristocrats. The move away from a single, tormented Byronic hero in fact gave Byron an even greater share of the marketplace of readers' desires.

"If there is a Byronic Hero in the poem, he (*or increasingly, she*) is distributed amongst other characters" (Dennis para 6, italics mine). Caroline Franklin notes the increasing heroism and agency of Byron's female characters. Although at first "the extreme polarization of sexual roles" in Byron's poetry was remarkable even to "his contemporaries," the female characters became "more and more resourceful and independent" throughout the Oriental Tales which he wrote before embarking on *Don Juan* (286-288). The heroines of these tales often do display great courage and decisiveness; for instance, the heroine Leila of *The Giaour* prosecutes an affair with a foreign man, even in the knowledge that it is likely to cost her her life. Gulnare, the formidable woman who abandons her husband and liberates the captive Conrad in *The Corsair*, also shows a great spirit of daring. However, these daring women act

only when inspired by love for their men–to whom they are utterly submissive. John Thelwall, the radical reformer and poet, wrote with disgust in the *Champion* of Byron's early female characters–yet warmed to the women in *Don Juan*. He acknowledges Byron's increased ability to create female characters of "interest" and notes that "we become familiar with them at once–we see them realised before us" (Thelwall 488; *RR* 540). In other words, female characters in *Don Juan* have interiority–and this, in Byron's poetry, means the capacity to suffer acutely, to endure a suffering so extraordinary that it puts them in the centre of our attention, at least for a moment.

Leila, a war orphan whom Juan saves from the Cossacks in Ismail, differs the most from the previous Byronic heroines. She incorporates the most aspects of the traditional Byronic hero, and her marginal position in the text is crucial to understanding Byron's changing rhetoric of heroic victimhood. Juan's dealings with Julia and with Leila show the development of his character. He is quite passive in his precocious affair with the married Julia; he recognizes his desire for her at Julia's prompting and is then more than happy to act on it. When their affair is discovered, the unresisting Juan allows himself to be hustled away all too easily from his inamorata and on to his Grand Tour. However, he shows a great deal more independence and tenacity in his dealings with Leila. Juan first encounters Leila during the Siege of Ismail, where he demonstrates great independence and resolution in saving Leila from two Cossacks' bloodlust.

Despite Juan's courage in battle, Leila displays more of the characteristics of the traditional Byronic hero than he does. She is certainly unlike the heroines of the Oriental Tales. Leila may be as "docile" and beautiful as "a pure and living pearl," but her docility is not a heroine's submission to her lover (10.409, 408, 425). Unlike the Leila of *The Giaour*, this Leila does not consent to forsake her community or her faith for anyone–even Juan. She and Juan have no romantic or "sensual" feelings for each other, and Byron is at pains to emphasize how unprecedented Juan and Leila's relationship is: "I cannot tell exactly what it was," the narrator confides, rejecting the ideas of an amorous, parental, or sibling-like relationship between the two (10.425, 419). Nor is Leila prepared to renounce her chance of Heaven for Juan. He is "the only Christian she could bear"–but even for Juan's sake Leila will not convert (10.449, 440). Byron emphasizes Leila's adamant retention of Islam. He rephrases this information three times: "The little Turk refused to be converted," "She showed a great dislike to holy water," "She also had no passion for confession" (10.440, 444, 445). Leila's defence of her faith suggests the importance that she herself attaches to retaining her own beliefs; not even "three bishops" are enough to convert her (10.443). In her passionate entrenchment in her beliefs, despite the blandishments of established religion, Leila actually resembles an earlier Byronic hero–Manfred, who refuses to be persuaded into Hell or Heaven, by demons or

clergymen.

Leila shares the traditional Byronic hero's sense of loss and alienation, and tenacity in adhering to her isolation. Leila's violently aversive introduction to nominal Christians leaves her feeling profoundly different in perpetuity from the Christians around her. She has the alterity of the Byronic hero. Yet her deracination differs from that of Byron's previous heroes in that she has had no choice in the matter. Her lonely state is not willed. Byron draws attention to Leila's isolation and terrible suffering during the Siege of Ismail. The narrator remarks on how remarkable and "strange" it is that she should "retain the impression" of her former life "thro' such a scene of change and dread and slaughter" (10.441-442). The scar on Leila's face is her "last link with all she had held dear" (8.758). It acts as a permanent reminder of her lost mother and ravaged homeland, and differentiates Leila from earlier, physically unblemished heroines. Leila differs both from other heroines and from other heroes; she is a different kettle of fish from Harold, who flees Albion virtually on a whim, because "with pleasure drugg'd, he almost longed for woe / And e'en for change of scene would seek the shades below" (*CHP* 1.53-54).

In Britain, Leila embodies the *nil admirari* aspect of Byronism. Leila "saw all Western things with small surprise, / To the surprise of people of condition" (12.211-12). Her coolness in the face of "novelties" generates the glamour of "mystery" around her (12.213, 216). Although Leila's mystery is merely "fashionable," it works by the same means as the grand "romantic history" of earlier heroes (12.216, 215). Leila continues in a faith that Byron presents as outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition of sacrifice. Her refusal of Christian notions of centrality makes her the cynosure of all eyes–in a society she despises more genuinely than does any previous Byronic hero.

Leila provides Byron with a tool for demoting the figure of the Byronic hero. It is not simply that the hero is forced into the guise of a person of much lower social status–a female, a foreigner, a Muslim, and a child. After all, *Don Juan* contests such social conventions. The true demotion is not that the soul of the Byronic hero is forced into the body of a twelve-year-old girl, but that a heroic character can be relegated to the sidelines. Previous Byronic heroes are main protagonists: works like *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *The Giaour*, *The Corsair, Lara, Manfred* all feature the hero in their very titles. However, embodying the essential characteristics of the Byronic hero no longer has enough purchase to guarantee Leila a poem of her own. In *Don Juan*, even the most heroic of characters is necessarily often marginal, because no one character monopolizes the centre. The heroic Leila's marginality is manifested in her mutism.

Juan's abandoned mistress Julia commands the centre when she speaks in her own

voice through her letter; Leila, however, never expresses herself through direct speech. Distractingly funny rhymes underline the absence of Leila's own words. Leila herself would probably not frivolously rhyme "prophet" with "of it" ("Whate'er the cause, the church made little of it–/ She still held out that Mahomet was a prophet") (10.447-48). Leila, in fact, is present in a supporting role to Juan. Juan has hitherto been passive, and, except in situations of total emergency, ultimately compliant. Yet in the Siege of Ismail, he makes a decision (to save Leila) that he will look back on with pride: "he loved the infant orphan he had saved, / As patriots (now and then) may love a nation; / His pride too felt that she was not enslaved" through his agency (9.257-58, 10.434-38). This is almost the first time that Juan has shown himself "immoveable," and the first time that he has been able to give substantial help to another human being (8.810).

Working-class men, Christian and Muslim women, and adolescents are all newly enabled to command the centre in their suffering–at least momentarily, as *Don Juan* voices their travails as they endure or exit their lives. *Don Juan* finds aspects of minor characters that provoke our desire to be like them–to have their emotional warmth or cool courage or sincere eloquence. Minor characters who are enabled to display the workings of their minds and souls, and model desirable qualities, take on the centrality of previous Byronic heroes, but only for an instant. In the previous theatre of Byron's poesis, the spotlight rested solely on the hero, incidentally illuminating others as they crossed his path. In *Don Juan*, the light frequently strays from the protagonist, and lights on characters we might have taken for members of the audience, who paid their sixpence for a ticket and sat down–to be illuminated in their stations on the sidelines, and offered the chance to model some desirable attribute, to show a glimmer of nobility or wit.

Does the Byronic hero exist intact anywhere in *Don Juan*? The narrator himself is the most promising avatar of the Byronic hero. His astute observation, profound compassion, and lively wit all make him a strong model for mimesis. The narrator preserves the Byronic hero intact in the sense that he retains the same position in the mimetic triangle–the hyper-successful model whose strategies other copy. But the Byronic hero does undergo an important evolution to become *Don Juan*'s narrator.

Byron was never solely wedded to one narrative mode. *The Giaour* employs a variety of narrators to tell its story, *Manfred* is a drama without a narrator, and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* has three narrative modes. In the first two Cantos, an omniscient third-person narrator describes Harold's journey. In the third, Byron writes in the first person before giving himself a figurative shake and returning to his protagonist, with "Something too much of this: – but now 'tis past / . . . Long absent Harold re-appears at last" (*CHP* 3.64-66). In Byron's dedication of the fourth

Canto, he writes that “there will be found less of the pilgrim than in any of the preceding, and that slightly, if at all, separated from the author speaking in his own person” (509). He declares that he was simply “weary” of delineating a distinction between author and hero “which every one seemed determined not to perceive” (509). In *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III, the narrator is closest to the author’s own persona and to the first of the Byronic heroes. This narrator insists on a self that is immutable and which the events of his life, however tumultuous and wounding, cannot fundamentally alter: “. . . there is that within me that shall tire / Torture and time, and breathe when I expire” (*CHP* 4.1228-29). *Don Juan*’s narrator embraces the changes that time has wrought in him; he is more pleased than not to be at a remove from his youthful follies, and he is more concerned with putting his past experience to use than with preserving himself untarnished. The narrator of *Don Juan* has also discovered the potency of laughter.

In the Oriental Tales, “there was in” the hero “a vital scorn of all / As if the worst had fall’n which could befall” (*Lara* 1.313-14). In the “the perils he by chance escaped, . . . his mind would half exult and half regret” (1.318, 320). It is as though his disillusionment with the worst that could befall takes the form of regret, for the Byronic hero’s capacity to suffer is in fact much greater than the world’s ability to torture him. Once he realizes this, the Byronic hero turns his unused capacity to laughter. For *Don Juan*’s narrator, suffering and humour work as closely together as the two halves of his beating heart: “And if I laugh at any mortal thing, / ’Tis that I may not weep” (4.25-26).

The narrator models for us a sense of gravity and compassion for every sentient creature–yet is always ready to turn and laugh, at himself especially. After a mournful couplet on the necessity of forgetfulness to endure this world–“Thetis baptized her mortal son in Styx; / A mortal mother would on Lethe fix”–the narrator turns with disconcerting celerity to laugh at both his detractors and himself (4.31-32).

> Some have accused me of a strange design
> Against the creed and morals of the land,
> And trace it in this poem every line:
> I don’t pretend that I quite understand
> My own meaning when I would be very fine,
> But the fact is that I have nothing plann’d,
> Unless to be a moment merry,
> A novel word in my vocabulary. (4.33-40)

The narrator’s putative attack on the creed and morals of the land lies partly in his

compassionate attention to the people excluded from centrality in the politics of the Regency: non-Christians, the working class, and women. The anxiety that *Don Juan* provoked in Byron's ultra-conservative accusers is partly to do with the epic's liberal politics, and partly to do with the narrator's merriment. At the moment when the *Weltschmerz* of the Byronic heroes had seemingly done all it could in the literary marketplace, the dangerous poet had found a new way to captivate readers. In fact, the narrator's merriment seems a much more desirable commodity than the anguish of the earlier Byronic heroes. *Don Juan*'s narrator offers readers a deeply desirable model which they do not have to pay for through untold suffering. The narrator's refusal to take himself too seriously, which so puzzled Hazlitt, models an accompanying insouciance about the previously central self.

The narrator's laughter puts him in a commanding position. From the outset of *Don Juan*, amusement is clearly linked to an extensive knowledge of the world. The narrator has amassed enough experience to pronounce authoritatively on manners and mannerisms:

> When people say, 'I've told you *fifty* times,'
> They mean to scold, and very often do;
> When poets say, 'I've written fifty rhymes,'
> They make you dread that they'll recite them too. (1.857-860)

Very early in Juan's career, the narrator swiftly divines Juan's secret when he is falling in love with Julia. The narrator arrives at a true "idea" of "his case" sooner than Juan himself does (1.681-88). The narrator's ejaculation–"poor little fellow!"–is sympathetic, lightly mocking, and utterly worldly. The knowing, laughing narrator is a much more desirable model to follow than Juan, whose immaturity and lack of self-knowledge makes him into a comic figure. Yet the narrator himself confesses to episodes of youthful folly. ". . . in a fit /Of wrath and rhyme, when juvenile and curly, / I railed at Scots to shew my wrath and wit," admits the narrator–then points out that his railings were more "sensitive and surly" than memorable. If we read *Don Juan* attentively enough, our mimicry of the mature narrator can help to prevent us seeming quite as callow as Juan. The narrator's pose of amusement demands a certain self-mastery, an overcoming of the desire to weep; by imitating and attaining the poise that the narrator has achieved, we bypass his earlier incarnations–casting the dark, brooding Byronic hero into the shadow as we bask in *Don Juan*'s wit.

The experience of the world which the narrator has accrued in his earlier incarnation as the solitary exile, locked in struggle with cosmic forces, underlies the narrator's voice. The lessons that Byron learned as a poet of heroic suffering

included how to dominate the marketplace. And, in *Don Juan*, he puts that knowledge to use again. Residues of the sacred are part of the commodity of the Byronic mock-epic. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, "the castled crag of Drachenfels" evokes potent emotion, stimulating character and narrator to meditate on love, on history, and on nature (*CHP*3.496). In *Don Juan*, we pass Drachenfels again, and although the narrator acknowledges the scene's power to "make [his] soul pass the equinoctial line," this time Drachenfels "frowns . . . like a spectre . . . On which I have not time just now to lecture" (10.486, 490-492). For the narrator, his present success as a comic poet is rooted in his previous incarnations as the successful model for a generation of readers, whose souls he could harrow even by lecturing on the iniquities of the Middle Ages.

The behaviour not only of individuals, but of whole classes, sparks the narrator's amusement. He mordantly observes "the life of a young noble" through to its interment: "And having voted, dined, drank, gamed, and whored, / The family vault receives another lord" (11.593-600). Again, readers realize that the narrator was once perhaps very similar to the young noblemen he pillories, as the next stanza sweeps into a great lament for the lost world of Regency London where he once thrived. "Where is the world of *eight* years past?" the narrator cries, before answering himself, "'tis gone, a Globe of Glass! . . . A silent change dissolves the glittering mass. / Statesmen, chiefs, orators, queens, patriots, kings, / And dandies all are gone on the wind's wings" (11.603-08). *Don Juan*'s lament modulates into a political critique:

. . . I have seen
The House of Commons turned to a tax-trap . . .
I have seen a Congress doing all that's mean –
. . . .
I have seen the Funds at war with house and land–
I've seen the Country Gentlemen turn squeakers–
I've seen the people ridden o'er like sand
By slaves on horseback–I have seen malt liquors
Exchanged for 'thin potations' by John Bull–
I have seen John half detect himself a fool. (11.665-80)The narrator's political credibility is ensured by his humour. Readers know that the narrator is more than capable of detecting–and exposing–foolishness in himself, as well as humorously revealing it in others.

As earlier reviews show us, readers during the Regency identified the Byronic hero with Byron himself. In 1966, W.H. Auden suggested that *Don Juan* represented Byron himself–but the urbane, witty Byron whom we know through his letters (vii-viii, x). Regardless of biographical interpretations, these readings of Byron's oeuvre

confirm the idea that the hero has become the narrator. The hero gains in authority from the transition. The narrator of *Don Juan* presents himself as an almost inconsequential figure, with no control over the poem's events. "What I say is neither here nor there," he announces in the very first Canto (1.402). In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage III*, the narrator dwells on a failure of communication throughout the Byronic oeuvre; despite his extensive popularity and reputation, he insists, he "live[s] and die[s] unheard, / With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword" (3.912-913). The "lightning" of this one word is too potent for him to communicate–and so Byron takes a step backward, apparently into a state of tranquility, resigning as pilot of the ship and writing simply as an intelligent passenger. Just as the earlier Byronic hero acquired the lion's share of attention by claiming to disregard popularity, so *Don Juan*'s narrator achieves great authority by apparently relinquishing the desire to exert control over his writing. The sheathing of his sword ceases to be a gesture of despair and failure, but a productive gesture, laying down the weapons of combat.

The self-command that enables him to elect laughter over weeping, too, assures readers that the narrator is not given to tempests of feeling on slight pretexts. Where the Byronic hero was passionately at odds with his society, *Don Juan*'s narrator is in a position to alter the way his readers perceive their society. The narrator demystifies the ruling classes and received political opinion through measured mockery. *Don Juan* allows a representative sampling of humanity to occupy the centre of our attention, as souls whose sufferings are meaningful. The succession of characters who momentarily become central destabilizes the notion of a centre from which acute suffering–like the traditional Byronic hero's–can speak. *Don Juan*'s narrator shows that, in order to retain the desirable/desired position in the mimetic triangle, suffering is not enough–mastery over suffering, which in the narrator's case manifests itself as humour, is what gives the narrative an even more lasting and transformative power in the literary marketplace.

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