

Writing into Byron's *Don Juan* (Canto 9). The aporia of practice.

Frank Rumboll

Summary

The *point d'appui* of this exercise is the presumptuous attempt at uncovering, and the inhering failure to *add to*, the Byronic text, on our part. The insertion of a wishful, supplementary text into a tergiversating text is seen as a continuing process of becoming: moving fingers writing, and having written, moving on. This aporiacal practice, in a brief overview of selected theories, is delineated as being contrary to modern literary theoretical desires for 'full-fill-ment' and ontology before the Derridean divarication. Derrida's dialectic of denial and deferral appears, however, to have been prologized in literature, notably by Byron. Canto 9 of *Don Juan* is seen to be an effective prothesis (rather than a merely wishful prosthesis) of Derridean reductions of pretensions at probity and the rigorous referentiality of a transcendentalised, hierarchical *telos*. This interrogation of Canto 9 is not 'deconstruction-as-technique' but an exploration of Byron's own deconstructive attempts at 'resituating' a 'proem' (Canto 9.22.2): a prelude, which can only be a prelude to a prelude . . . to a prelude to the longed for ontology: the (?) poem (?).

Opsomming

Die doel van hierdie 'vingeroefening' is tweeledig van aard: Eerstens is dit 'n enigszins aanmatigende poging tot verklarung van 'n Byronse teks, en tweedens die doodgebore poging tot byvoeging tot hierdie teks. Die invoeging van 'n wensdenkerige, supplementêre teks in 'n rondspringend-ontwykende 'hoof'-teks, word gesien as 'n aaneenlopende proses van wording: met elke opeenvolgende woord, elke nuwe bydrae, word nuwe vistas geopen. Hierdie skeptiese praktyk word in 'n kort oorsig aangedui as 'n teenstelling met die moderne, teoretiese soeke na vervulling en ontologiese verklarings in die letterkunde voor die Derrideaanse vertakking plaasgevind het. Die dialektiese metode van Derrida wat op ontkenning en verkenning berus, lyk egter asof dit in die letterkunde deur veral Byron voorafgesê is. Canto 9 van *Don Juan* word gevolglik gesien as 'n effektiewe voorganger (eerder as 'n kunsmatige protese) van Derrida se kritiek op sogenaamde literêre objektiwiteit, en volgehoue verwysings na 'n getransendentaliseerde, hiërargiese *telos*. Hierdie ondersoekende blik geskied nie deur die oë van die 'dekonstruksie-as-tegniek' nie, maar is eerder 'n verkenning van Byron se eie dekonstruktiewe pogings om 'n 'proem' (Canto 9.22.2) te plaas. Dit kan alleenlik 'n voorspel wees: 'n inleiding tot 'n inleiding . . . tot 'n inleiding, totdat die verlangde spel, nl. die (?) gedig (?), hopelik gerealiseer word.

1. Introduction

The late Paul de Man noted that

[t]he advent of theory . . . occurs with the introduction of linguistic terminology in the metalanguage about literature. . . . Contemporary literary theory comes into its own in such events as the application of Saussurian linguistics to literary texts. (1982:8)

There will certainly be disagreement with de Man along a wide front regarding this easy, and, in many respects, atypical, dogmatism.

Some would deny that language constitutes reality, contrary to Lacan's assertion that '[i]t is the world of words that creates the world of things' (1977:65).

Others of Anglo-American theoretical persuasion might nominate the New Critics (who, it would appear, had no knowledge of, or interest in, Saussure) as the fathers of modern literary theory. Their positing of the ontological security of the literary work of art was an influential reaction against the hegemony of positivist assumptions in historical scholarship. As decided, and timely, was their rejection of genetic criticism, with its extra-textual emphases on the personality of the author, in particular.

Others might find little of major theoretical significance to justify de Man's sundering, and its lurking suggestion of a value distinction between the endeavours of the ages in literary 'criticism', and literary 'theory'.

However, whatever the reaction to this contested issue, there can be little doubt that the emphasis on 'modalities of production and of reception of meaning and of value prior to their establishment' (de Man, 1982:7) has generated highly problematic confutations, defamations (if you wish), of the traditional author-work-reader triad.

These so-called 'modalities of production' have been vigilantly obstructed by the deconstructive torch-bearer, Jacques Derrida. As a result, no enterprise has, to my mind, been more disruptive, or more momentous in contemporary literary theory, than Derrida's reaction to what he has displayed to be the vaguely unproblematical latching of word to meaning.

His postulation of the delinquent sign and marching signifiers had had a pre-trial in the earlier semiological work of Roland Barthes in which language was also seen as a profound problem, rather than an instrument of meaning. However, the larger aim of the Derridean project is, of course, the undermining of what is regarded as the ruling Western metaphysical-logocentric ideology, exhibiting the prodigality of the sign. This theoretical and, for once, unequivocal, departure from the tyrannical word has led to the espousal of the post-Structuralist *text*.

The post-structuralist thrusts of Derrida and Barthes' SZ contravene what is seen as a common desire of much literary criticism: the mimetic urge to construct reality, or 'presence'. Derrida, like the later Barthes, urges that this carefully wrought practice of transforming culture into clockwork categorisation be seen as a conserving ideology in which the free-falling imagination can be kept in check and enchained; in which the reader could be kept gentle.

The 'gentle reader' (a phrase I borrow, to re-fashion, from Geoffrey Hartman [1984:8]) is seen to be methodically subjugated; forced to apply the communal values of his age (such as they might perhaps be) to the consensient contemplation of the critical *status quo*.

2. Ontology vs aporia

A brief and admittedly banal survey of some of the mainstream theories which were and are of influence in Anglo-American circles may perhaps

elaborate further this major Derridean suspicion that 'the speaking subject vainly seeks a place that is always missing' (Derrida, 1978:178).

The New Criticism, though strongly reactive against the gossipy Victorian and Edwardian cult of the author, is in many respects an extension of this 'gentle reader' countersignature. According to its theoretic, the creative poles of author and reader are unmanifestable as the controlling structural forces within the 'literariness' of the aesthetic aseity. The literary work is felt to have the ultimate capacity for hermeneutic play but always only within its own, ideologically conditioned, *raison d'être*. The gentle reader of this theoretical stance declares the work, not himself.

The phenomenologist, Georges Poulet, building on the concretisation theoretic of Roman Ingarden, would attempt to divine the possibilities of the individual psyche. Yet, his conjuration of the 'imperial cogito', a composite 'mind of minds', suggests yet another ontology after which the gentle reader must be driven by way of the collected works of the author.

Reception or Reader Response theory, which owes some of its theoretical impetus to the phenomenological school, appears to be of some moment in certain academic circles in South Africa at present.

It, too, it would appear, displays underlying tendencies towards veiled theoretical insistences and dogmatic metaphysics. Its reliance, for example, on *the message*, which, reworked and decoded, can eventually be drawn out of the work by the individual reader, sounds suspiciously like the New Critical imposition of the ontological artefact. In this influential theoretic the reader is acted upon by the well wrought urn which, ostensibly, is so meticulously constructed that only the privileged (most often the literati) are allowed, and may obtain, access to the mysteries of an inhering reality.

Another seminal impetus for Reader-Response theories is Structuralism. And its elitist notion of the ideal reader as opposed to the actual reader appears to be as preemptory.

Jonathan Culler (the Structuralist Culler, admittedly), has noted, for example,

[t]he question is not what actual readers happen to do, but what an ideal reader must know *implicitly* [my italics] in order to read and interpret works *in ways which we consider acceptable* [my italics], in accordance with the *institution of literature* [my italics]. (1975:123)

The emphasised assertions point to ideological and suspect halts, and the age old questions of the reference, efficacy and scope of authority arise.

The reader in Reader-Response theory would also appear to be (to employ Structuralist terminology) the *object* of the exercise, the manipulated, gentle *me* in receipt of the textual 'message', rather than the end-perceiving subject, the *I*, as would appear at surface.

Although the stewards of Iser and Jauss show a marked affinity with the Structuralist ethos of Saussure, deviation is, however, evident in their foregrounding of the 'literariness' or aesthetic possibilities of a text. In this respect they could be seen as positioned at the furthest remove from the post-Structu-

ralist derogation of the aesthetic promise of the text. Their underlying motif that literature, as perceived by the competent, aestheticising reader, can, somehow, reveal that long sought after image of reality which apparently inheres in the plentitudinous visions or dimensions of a profound work of art is in direct conflict with Derridean agnosticism, bafflement, indeterminacy, whimsy, diffidence.

In addition, their cumulative and highly sophisticated typologies and structurations of reader paradigms would appear to be symptomatic of the tussle with textual aberration rather than reader productivity; of pietism not power.

To illustrate further the theoretical distance between Reception theory and post-Structuralism, I should like to emplace in post-Structuralist perspective a brief extract from a topical and timely text in Afrikaans.

In his Introduction to *Letterkunde en Leser*, the Editor states

Literêre kommunikasie vind eers plaas wanneer die boodskap deur bepaalde lesers ontvang (geresepteer) word. Dit mag dus logies lyk dat nie slegs leserkundiges nie, maar ook die literêre kritiek en navorsing besondere aandag aan die rol van die leser behoort te gee. Maar die saak is nie so eenvoudig nie, *want die vrees ontstaan dadelik dat die fokus sal verskuif van die sentrale ondersoekobjek van die literatuurwetenskap, naamlik die teks, na sake buite die werk* [my italics]. (Malan, 1983:xiii)

The above extract, which would appear to set the tonal view for the publication as a whole, is, from a Derridean vantage, an interesting example of the metaphysical and ideological predilections against which Derrida launched his ambitious undertaking at the Johns Hopkins Humanities Centre, in October 1966.

3. The Derridean *démarche*

In his questing, Derrida's pursuit, briefly, thus is away from what he considers to be the wishful thinking inherent in the belief that the text can ultimately be emptied of meaning; that the ubiquitous message (Reception theory's 'boodskap' above) be imprinted on the work. His is a flight from ideological stoppages; against the closure suggested by Malan in 'bepaalde lesers' (in which we read 'bepaalde' as 'specified', 'ordered', 'regulated', 'ideologised') and the self-gratulatory systematisation and rationalisation apparently inherent in 'die sentrale ondersoekobjek van die literatuurwetenskap [sic] [my italics]', above.

The Derridean 'technique of trouble' (as de Man characterised it) would consider this assuredness as mere flirtatious embracing: a facet of an all-encompassing Western authoritarianism; and a force of desire in the face of the undecidability of the text. He would reverse the certitude as another symptom of the fear and resultant panic flight into presence, reality, essence, truth, epistemology, phonē, logos, teleology, reference, ousia, stigmè, archia, the transcendental signified, term it what you will.

Contrary to the ambitions of Reader-Response theorists for the reader, the recipient of the text, in post-Structuralist thinking, would rather appear to

remain paradoxically rooted yet creatively active in his bemusement, 'sniffing around for a scent', 'casting around', adrift in the face of the ever-lowering artefact.

4. The promise of Derridean writing

Modern literary theories prior to Derrida would be considered by him to be symptomatic of the time-honoured appropriations of speech as communal full meaning superior to writing. This arrogation is subjected to the force of Derridean delimitation, as yet another denial, another *impensée* over the *Abgrund*: a palliative against *agnt*, against mortification, in a force-field of free fall.

The tincture, or 'trace', which generates Derrida's deliberate fall from grace, his suspension of belief, is reflected in his privileging of writing (*l'écriture*): an avowal of 'meaning' which is continuously deferred by and in its *différance*.

Writing, in Derrida's continuing deontologising drive, can only be an unsatisfactory and rationally unsatisfying translation of fleeting symbols of primordial equivocations and mystifications: the *arche-écritures*, engendering a moving text: the ur-pointer to silence; a dissemination which precedes but includes the 'civilised' (i.e. institutionalised) espousal of the logocentric-phonocentric dispensation.

The future development of the Derridean enterprise will, we suggest, be in the realisation of this freedom as play, freedom in play, the positing of immersion in experience, as rigorous controls of both the authoritarian self and the private self: the so-called 'ideal' and 'actual' reader.

And this brief appraisal might hopefully go some way towards dispelling some misreadings of Derrida as in Iain Wright's wishful observation in a recently published British text:

Deconstructive [i.e. post-Structuralist] criticism probably will go away: it is in the nature of sudden reflex-movements of absurdist [sic] cognitive scepticism to be short-lived. (Hawthorn, 1984:88)

Facing up to the impossibility of present meaning – different from the absurdist denial of no meaning at all (Derrida stresses again and again) – requires a difficult denial of the *vanitas vanitatum*. Nelson Goodman has encapsulated this new dispensation as 'restless, searching, testing . . . less attitude than action: creation and re-creation' (In di Giralomo, 1981:92). The peregrinations and the prerogatives on offer are redemptions from the bondage to the sovereign and consequently impassive work and the apparently wish-fulfilling reader.

This possibility for the growth of a wholesome aesthetic pertinence could locate alienation and interpretation as creative, exhilarating and humbling opportunities of writing.

5. The Derridean prosthesis: Canto 9, *Don Juan*

Jorge Luis Borges (perhaps unconsciously) questioned the efficacy of literary history in his intertextual thrust that

... every writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. (In Greene, 1978:26)

In briefly exploring Canto 9 of Byron's *Don Juan* it may become apparent, contrary to Borges' contention, that Byron's insights are not a vague foreshadowing of Jacques Derrida's rigorous dialectic of denial but an ectopic event, also delving into the concerns, confided by Derrida to his teacher, Hippolyte, as the attempt to put himself 'at a point so that [note, not 'where'] I do not know any longer where I am going' (Lentricchia, 1980:174).

Canto 9 of Byron's *Don Juan* has been chosen, not because it exemplifies Byron at his most fetchingly witty, nor at his most accomplished technically. It does, however, appear to me to approach the closest (with Canto 10) to the consummately sceptical view in a poem which turns on radical disbelief; on a deconstructive turn of its milieu.

After his fleeing disparagement of Wellington (the consummate villain, 'Vilainton', in 9.1.1), Byron interrogates the apparent uncertainty in the life of things. His inquisition revolves around Montaigne's motto *Que sais-je?* (9.17.1) and, thus, the possibility, if any, of knowledge.

Montaigne was strongly influenced by the scepticism of Pyrrho of Elis (late 4th and 3rd century B.C.) and Byron made contact with Pyrrhonism through the writings of this radically sceptical French philosopher.

Despite variations of emphasis, the common ground enjoyed by all the early Greek sceptics was the epistemological reaction against all philosophies which clamour to claim truth.

The basic flaw in sceptical philosophy is, of course, its stance that nothing can be known. This itself shields a dogmatism, an appropriation of at least one bit of knowledge: the truth of the sceptical principle itself. Byron grasps this self-refutation in stanza 17 ('one of their most favourite positions', 9.17.4). In the 'certainty' of this 'formulation' (9.17.5), he realises that they have unwittingly anchored themselves *in* an assurance.

Byron cleverly side-steps this dialectical extravagance and paradox by a deft and logically less enfeebling manoeuvre. Instead of the fundamental scepticism of Pyrrho and his followers, and later, Montaigne, Byron posits a suggestive and logically less obstructive position (interestingly anticipating Derrida):

I doubt if doubt itself be doubting. (9.17.8)

In 7.5.1-4, Byron's comment on the belief of Socrates, a seminal influence on Pyrrho, that 'our only knowledge was "To know that nothing could be known"' had been that this 'levels to an ass/Each man of wisdom, future, past, or present.' And Byron suggests that this is as pointless as Newton averring the ultimate 'Truth' (7.5.8).

Life, for Byron, is too complex for detachment, even if its navigatory aids are highly problematical (9.18.4). And man's carefully calculated but not entirely well meaning schemes in 'the abyss of thought' (9.18.5), could so easily be disturbed and come adrift as the 'carrying [i.e. slanting] sail' (9.18.3) capsizes the boat, driven by the strong wind of dogmatically held opinions.

Earlier on in Canto 9 Byron had clearly stated his active tactic: 'For my part, I'll enlist on neither side' (9.16.5). For him, life's questions and death's significance would remain indeterminate and contingent. And what better example to have utilised than Hamlet, that archetypal symbol of irresolution and impotence?

'To be or not to be?' Ere I decide,
I should be glad to know that which is being.
'Tis true we speculate both far and wide
And deem because we see, we are all-seeing.
(9.16.1-4)

Hamlet is closely and ironically preceded by the exemplars of men of action, Wellington and Buonaparte. These two men had opportunities accorded very few men to act in the positive interests of man, to free 'fallen Europe from the unity / Of tyrants' (9.9.34). Their active choice, their ideological self-assuredness in blindness, led, however, to dearth and death ('Go, hear it in your famished country's cries! / Behold the world and curse your victories!', 9.9.7-8).

In his belief in the powerful man's fundamental incapacity here and now for constructive good lies the kernel of Byron's *aporia*: His extensive questioning of regeneration is rigorously, if saltatorially, explored through the persons of high honour at the head of affairs in 18th and 19th century Europe and England. They are all found to be sadly wanting, as his famous 'heroes' in Canto 1, stanzas 2, 3, and 4 are each unsuited to blaze through a national epic.

Wellington's self-deceiving, cozy world of deceit and credulity, for example, is glanced at in '[t]ruths that you will not read in the gazettes' (9.10.3). It is exposed for its cant and its ephemerality, in the 'intertextual' reference to the grinning, ghastly skull of Yorick: all that remains of the 'gibes . . . gambols . . . songs . . . flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar' (*Hamlet*, 5.i.191-193) and a convivial, congenial life, free of self-interested manoeuvre.

Byron's recurring symbol for this liberated life is the sound digestion. He notes in 9.14.5-6 that he 'would much rather have a sound digestion / Than Buonaparte's cancer': an idea seminally and skittishly developed in his journal entry of 18 February 1814:

Is there anything beyond? – *who* knows? *He* that can't tell. Who tells that there *is*? He who don't know. And when shall he know? perhaps, when he don't expect, and generally when he don't wish it. In this last respect, however, all are not alike; it depends a good deal upon education, – something upon nerves and habits – but most upon digestion. (Gunn, 1984:140)

The grinning skull which 'laughs and scorns at all you are' (9.12.1) is itself the emblematic disclaimer of hopes for a better life on earth and the riddle after death, the 'set sun / Which still elsewhere *may* [my italics] rouse a brighter spring' (9.11.3-4).

In another intertextual reference, to the dying Talbot 'cheering himself up' (to use T. S. Eliot's notorious expression regarding Othello), his dead son in his arms, death is also depicted as laughing all these grandiose hopes to scorn:

From thy insulting tyranny,
Coupled in bonds of perpetuity,
Two Talbots, winged through the lither sky,
In thy despite shall scape mortality. (*I Henry VI*, 4.vii.19-22)

The heroic gesture, in the context, is however deflated by Byron's focus, the poet having already attempted to signal the delusion of such an *akedah*:

Death laughs at all you weep for. (9.11.5)

For Byron our desires are as dust. And in this continuing dread and diminishment (perhaps) of death, this pitiful movement towards death, the non-significant skull remains as the emblem of transitoriness and benightedness, 'its lipless mouth grin[ning] without breath' (9.11.8), '[m]ark how it laughs and scorns at all you are!' (9.12.1).

Similar tonal questioning is also prevalent in *Don Juan*, Canto 1:

The path is through perplexing ways, and when
The goal is gained, we die you know and then?
What then? I do not know, no more do you. (133, 7-8; 134, 1)

In 9.16.7-8 the poet also notes:

For me, I sometimes think that life is death,
Rather than life a mere affair of breath.

In *Notes on the Variorum Edition* (of *Don Juan*), Pratt (1971:194) refers to Montaigne's remark in his *Essays* in this regard:

The perpetual work of your whole life is but to lay the foundation of death; you are in death while you live, because you still are after death when you are no more alive. Or, if you rather have it so, you are dead after life, but dying all the while you live.

Although Byron would deny the assuredness of Montaigne's ideology (note his 'I sometimes think' in 9.16.7, above), the triviality of human aspirations, incapable of transcendence, is Byron's *leit motif*, as it is Montaigne's. Human desire for both is considered to be fragile and frangible, enveloped into one patterning: a stripping off to the bone of that hope of fallen man to be

reincarnated through grace into the better world, the greater life ('that mantle . . . his incarnate skin', 9.12.6,7).

What remains is therefore all that can remain, under the circumstances:

It is a sad merriment,
... and with such example
Why should not Life be equally content
With his superior in a smile . . . (9.13.1-4)

Like Yeats and the sceptical Eliot below, Byron wistfully and rhetorically interrogates the improbity, which can only be assuaged, perhaps, by the heroism, the laugh behind the tear:

They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
Gaiety transfiguring all that dread. (W.B. Yeats. *Lapis Lazuli*, 16-17)

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots. (T.S. Eliot. *Preludes*, IV, 14-16)

As Byron stressed in his letter of 12 August 1819 to John Murray

You are too earnest and eager about a work [i.e. *Don Juan*] never intended to be serious. Do you suppose that I could have any intention but to giggle and make giggle? – a playful satire, with as little poetry as could be helped, was what I meant: . . . (Gunn, 1984:237)

By living in archetypal and solitary doubt, the stratagem, the manoeuvre, the tactic, but not the exit from the impasse, is Byronic *jouissance*, the 'content . . . in a smile' (9.13.3,4) while we

. . . trample
Upon the nothing which are daily spent
Like bubbles on an ocean much less ample
Than the eternal deluge, which devours
Suns as rays, worlds like atoms, years like hours. (9.13.4-8)

In the masterful manipulation of images of evanescence and destruction, of wishful thinking, death and dying, of the very transitoriness *in* being, Byron's agnosticism is evocatively expressed. In the stress on the miniature in the face of the indifferent cosmos, on the sum of things always misunderstood, always unattainable, glimmers the thematic thread that runs through *Don Juan*.

Byron returns again and again to this theme of essential fallibility and insignificance. Even while sneering at Shakespeare and the bardolatry of Coleridge, Hazlitt and Lamb, he plays tricks of reverse irony with copious quotes from this subject of his dismissal, including the noumenal line which so cogently sums up Hamlet's, and Byron's, *idée fixe*:

To be or not to be! That is the question. (9.14.1)

The 'question' is the *aporia*, the bold face of the fractured perception. And Byron's continuing play of mind as the protective barrier for the self deprived

of power brings us to another obsession (perhaps the only preoccupation about which he did not desire to take a capricious stance):

[his] plain, sworn, downright detestation
Of every despotism in every nation. (9.24.7-8)

But, as will be shown, even this is held with typical Byronic tenuousness. Rigorous eclecticism is *au fond* the cause of his unwillingness to presume.

His theoretical aversion to any form of assignation lies of course at the heart of Byron's well known and instinctive dislike of philosophy:

Tis true we speculate both far and wide
And deem because we see, we are all-seeing (9.16.3-4)

The strong implication here is that *all* speculation is always wide of the mark. For Byron this centring did not hold and this view finds some sort of coherence in line 4 above, where he chafes at all forms of dogmatism.

Under the circumstances, '[f]or my part', Byron's only alternative is to 'enlist on neither side' (9.16.5). To act otherwise would be to commit one's *self* to the mouthing of untruths and trivia: 'hot air', 'a mere affair of breath' (9.16.8): all summed up in that Byronic anathema, cant.

This radical indeterminism with its fundamental core of ambiguity, is well expressed in the *serio ludere*, the play with words, intentionally non-referential and rambling as in Cassio's garbled, histrionic, drunken speeches from *Othello* (2.iii.106-108, 116-117), deliberately misconceived and significantly droll:

We have
Souls to save, since Eve's slip and Adam's fall,
Which tumbled all mankind into the grave,
Besides fish, beasts, and birds. (9.19.2-5)

The mobility of Byron's mind is a crucial cunning in his contemplation of an out of joint and incoherent cosmos, of fallen man rooted in the present, short on redemption. It finds tangible expression in Cassio's whimsical riddle-me-ree above; as it also does in the deliberate misreading of Hamlet's '[t]here is special providence in the fall of a sparrow' (5. ii. 220-221).

'The sparrow's fall / Is special providence' (9.19.5-6) is, after all, nothing more than Byron's deliberately absurd verbal trickery ending up as a willed preposterousness, quite removed in its fatuity from Hamlet's profound desire for visionary commitment and comforting security. This is also immediately contrasted by our being inexorably drawn to the ramblings of Hamlet's disillusioned, confused mind, at its most ambiguous and agnostic, intent on clarity, on the reconciliation of the antinomies of existence, which Byron had circumvented by enlisting on neither side:

If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not
to come, it will be now; if it be not now,
yet it will come. The readiness is all. (*Hamlet*. 5.ii.222-224)

All this is so much wishful thinking for Byron, always on his guard against the miring of philosophic speculation. He sidesteps the profundities in the frivolous sophistry of 'though how it [i.e. the sparrow] gave / Offence, we know not; probably it perched / Upon the tree which Eve so fondly searched (9.19.6-8).

Byron also returns to the Byronic myth (the so-called autobiographical elements) in 9.20,21: intriguing aspects of *Don Juan* in particular, and a source, even now, of controversy among critics.

Inherent in Byron's aleatory technique and the sceptical diminishment of his milieu lies a strong problematic probing of self; but a self that is also always held in suspension of belief.

Much has been made by the textually self-reflexive schools of theory of Byron's numerous personal references in his poetry and in his journals. For me, however, the most significant views are expressed in Canto 4.5.1-8:

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 planned,
 Unless it were to be a moment merry,
 A novel word in my vocabulary

And in the much abused and misinterpreted extract from Byron's letter to John Murray, 23 August 1821:

Almost all *Don Juan* is *real* life, either my own, or from people I knew. . . . I want to make a *regular* English drama, no matter whether for the Stage or not, which is not my object, – but a *mental theatre*. (Gunn, 1984:348-349)

Of course Byron *did* weave much of the notorious, heart-scalding and jaunty figments of his experiences into the word-fencing pageantry of his poetry. Yet the point he makes in the final quotation above, and over and over again in his poetry, especially in *Don Juan*, is that these experiences are not singular but universally applicable:

Mother, and sire, and son, our futures are
 Reflected in each other; as they are
 In the clear waters, when they are gentle, and
 When thou art gentle. (*Cain*. Act 3.i.144-147)

Art, for Byron, I would suggest, is not only a grappling with the self, but the breaking free of enclosing forces, *including* the self; it is not only the indulgence of the poet as writer and spectator, but of the audience as onlooker and as re-writer: all in one vast mental theatre of cathartic give and take.

Byron's standpoint, the myth of his position-taking, is that suffering is not confined to the single soul but to mankind in general, fallen and thrown adrift. His own experiences often provide the brief anchorage, yet the view is

not intensive but extensive, not inner-directed but outward, to the furthest shores of possibly attainable calm. Being the sceptic he is, his view of the so-called 'essential' Byron is eternally quizzical: the product of other people's air-drawn ideations. He *could* never presume to know the essence of man, nature, and God. And decidedly not his own.

This goes some way towards explaining why I cannot agree with the great Byron scholar, Leslie Marchand, that 'no writer was ever more patently autobiographical in the creations of his imagination' (1965:13). Byron's life was only one source of a continuing recreation of myth in his poetry. In itself it was a figment of many imaginations, attempts at scraping together numerous fragments.

It ultimately, therefore, *cannot* matter to Byron whether the personal references are 'Byron' or not. They might be, but then, on the other hand, they might not be. They needn't be, and, on the other hand, they need be. Like Moses (9.21.2), Byron does not enjoy the saving grace of a NAME. He has neither the consolation of God's conviction of being nor Coleridge's romantic exemplar:

We begin with the I KNOW MYSELF, in order to end with the absolute I AM.
We proceed from the self, in order to lose and find all self in GOD. (*Kantian thesis IX in Biographia Literaria*, 1956:154)

Like Moses he is 'nobody' (*Exodus* 3.11). And like the great German pietist, Philip Schwartzerd (1497-1560), he is hidden by and from a name 'like . . . Melancthon' (9.21.2), eternally anonymous in the striving after identity.

This perhaps explains statements which are so obviously at variance with some of the known Byronic historical (and histrionic) behaviour patterns, in being too good to be true. For example, '... I, the mildest, meekest of mankind / . . . who have ne'er / Done anything exceedingly unkind' (9.21.1-3).

Byron deliberately elicits them as the groundswell of his technique, and plays on these disparities. This is essentially relevant to his poetic structuration otherwise commentary on them would be of only peripheral importance in a critical appraisal.

The 'essential' redeemed and fictionalised Byron is perhaps felt to be this model of perfection, but the operative, fallen Byron, the anonymous *man*, is inevitably apposite, in the negation, the despair of desire.

This tergiversating grappling with appearance and reality is a fundamental issue in Byron's poetry (and in post-Structuralism):

For I maintain that it is really good,
Not only in the body, but the poem,
However little both are understood. (9.22.1-3)

His poem will always be a 'poem': a prelude, a preface, like Wordsworth's side-chapels to his unrealised Gothic cathedral (*The Recluse*), but without Wordsworth's crucial, if problematical, hope and later acceptance.

Byron will not allow himself the luxury of dogmatism:

Without me, there are demagogues enough
 And infidels to pull down every steeple
 And set up in their stead some proper stuff. (9.25.2-4)

The 'Truth' which 'by and by . . . will show 'em' (9.22.5) is *not*, according to Byron, the visionary accession, but the realisation that there is no *attainable* truth, yet. Truth, in her 'sublimest attitude' can only ultimately teach those who 'war / With thought' (9.24.2-3) that life is to be lived and fought in each individual soul. There is no signification, no ultimate celebration, method, ritual, practice, or sacrament. Only by realising this, can man, according to Byron (and Derrida), ultimately be freed from the deadening rites of passage:

I wish men to be free
 As much from mobs as kings – from you as me. (9.25-7-8)

It has been noted that Byron despised the luxury of excessive philosophising, of splendid illusions, and we are turned from this discourse on unreality to reality, from the desire to the pain, always with the realisation that the real cannot be ideal, nor the ideal real.

The line of this return (in stanza 29) is concerned with man's inhumanity to man '[w]here blood was talked of as we would of water' (9.29.3). The life-giving sustenance becomes a symbol of destruction. The milieu under description is bleak, desolate and a rebuttal of all hope. We are led through a scarlet, apocalyptic landscape of 'carcasses' (9.29.4) and 'silenced cities' (9.29.5), ruled over by Catherine II of Russia, the type of nymphomania, endlessly but forlornly searching for supposedly supreme fulfilment on earth ('a main of cocks, / Wherein she liked her own to stand like rocks', 9.29.7-8).

Don Juan's physical journey, like his spiritual one, is rough, bone-jarring, 'cursèd' (9.30.2). And the *kibitka*, carrying him through an ever-desolate winter, is the symbolic vehicle for the event in charge of the individual, and not the *individual* in control of experience.

He is swept along by time, a Byronic conception of microcosmic man always in the process of becoming as in Nietzsche's seminal statement, in which he questions

whether creation has originated in the desire for motionlessness, immortalization, *being*, or in the desire for destruction, change, future, the new, *becoming*. (Hollingdale, 1977:133)

In this continuing process of change Don Juan '[p]onder[s] on glory, chivalry, and kings / And orders' (9.30.4-5), 'wishing' for the 'wings / Of Pegasus' (9.30.6-7), who, significantly, had the ability to lead to visionary completion (the 'deep ways' of 9.30.8). Yet Pegasus also symbolises the failure of the ordinary human being to surmount his fixedness and rootedness. Bellerophon, like his fellow human beings, like Byron, like Don Juan, demonstrates

the irresolution of the will to power. Unlike in Nietzsche's conviction, the forces of dissolution and decay ('the manure of human clay', 9.34.5) are all-pervasive.

Don Juan has been on stage, only briefly and fitfully (for little more than 2 stanzas), when the managerial author obtrudes and again the vista of depletion and repression is spread before us more forcefully. The burlesque style is also most evident here in the force of comic and trivial detail which disrupts, distracts and eventually dominates, often by a juxtaposition with the more profound, which is thereby rendered absurd. This carefully plotted linguistic misrule is created by sudden shifts of tone and attitude. And these 'brusques changements de ton', as Francis Bar typified them in *Le genre burlesque en France au XVII siècle* (In England, 1975:92), are reinforced by an apparent lack of structural shape, deliberately contrasted with the ordered formality of the epic, which celebrates all that Byron dismisses.

The evocation of a meaningless march to ruin is taken up again in '[a] propos des bottes ['in regard to nothing in particular']', (9.36.1): another keynote phrase for Byron, the 'one comfort for (his) lost advice' (9.36.7). It will be another reminiscence, another meaningless memoir, like Paphos which 'fell by Time – accurséd Time!' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. 1.66.1):

it will one day be found
With other relics of 'a former world',
When this world shall be *former*, underground, . . . (9.37.1-3)

Yet Byron realises that this nihilistic strain is itself a dogmatism, a pretence at knowing, a reaching after the security of metaphysical enlightenment (9.41.1) which he knows to be impossible of attainment in '[t]he time which is out of joint' (9.41.2). He rejects this failing assumption, this retreat from the rut, by resorting to his habitual Hamletian jolt: "The time is out of joint", and so am I'. (9.41.2)

Poetry, and life, he knows, and has fervently demonstrated, can only be 'merely quizzical' (9.41.3), '[s]o on I ramble, now and then narrating, / Now pondering' (9.42.1-2). The poem can only interrogate, forever questioning a life which is shadowy and shielded. Unlike Hamlet, who has, at the very least, a belief that he might be able to set right the 'disjointed time' (*Hamlet*. 1.v.188), by avenging his father's death, Byron has no such consolation. Not even the comfort that '[t]here are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (*Hamlet*. 1.v.166-167). An assertion of this nature would be, for Byron, a question of 'matters rather dry' (9.41.4): an act without issue, a meaningless motion, a glance at the 'Regency bob': coition without emission.

The gambit (and it is, after all, only that) is *not* to 'know why / [We] write and for what end'. It is, rather, 'never' . . . [to] know the word which will come next' (9.41.6-8), because predictability and prophecy are not for Byron meaningful recourses in extreme art.

In this germ of an idea we are perhaps given the insight as to why *Don Juan*

and other Romantic fragments such as Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*, Keats's *Hyperion* and Wordsworth's *Recluse* could presumably never end, and why the plot (and Don Juan himself) is merely *part* of the process of the creative act and art. In attempting to reflect a view of life, the highways and the byways are of equal importance; the streams of unconsciousness as crucial as the participators and the events.

In *Don Juan*, for example, the mind muses and meditates on the action, but the action is furtive and fugitive, the sights fleeting and evanescent like the picaresque 'flitting' of the hero, who is supposed to be in Petersburg '[t]hat pleasant capital of *painted* [my underlining] snows' (9.42.8). (But then he could be anywhere else, for what Byron cares.) And what the reader would care to suppose is repeated four times in three stanzas (9.42-44), and closely associated with 'seems' in 'suppose'.

Art, like life, is delineated as chimerical, dreamlike and beguilingly heroidal, dependent on a cunning juggling with words and images ('[s]eeing how Art can make her work more grand', 9.44.5). A similar thought, perhaps more lambently and plangently expressed, occurs in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, 4.122:

Where are the charms and virtues which we dare
Conceive in boyhood and pursue as men,
The unreach'd Paradise of our despair,
Which o'erinform the pencil and the pen,
And overpowers the page where it would bloom again?

Even words, the mainsprings of action, are inadequate for the heroic and imaginative transportation into the world of dreams. Thoughts too profound for earthly grasp overwhelm the human gifts and faculties.

Such is the art, such the deception. And this is further reflected in the change of tone: from the aggressive rumination and flaring invective to the gay, frolicsome *double entendre*, the posed sanguinity and clever word-juggling which in itself exposes the problematics of art and its emptiness. Using his other *bête noire*, Castlereagh, and his notorious ability to mouth sweet nothings, Byron, for example, exposes the meaninglessness of words such as 'action' and 'reality': that 'odd string of words, all in a row' (reminiscent of Canto 1.7.5-6), '[w]hich none divine and everyone obeys.' (9.49.5-6)

Catherine's Russian court itself reinforces this meaninglessness, and arbitrariness. In the predominance of sexual innuendo the inanity of love is exposed and shown to be vanity, '[s]elfish in its beginning as its end' (9.73.2). Unlike a convinced Platonist like the younger Shelley, Byron, having downgraded most conceivable value systems, comes to another fervent anchorage of man and metaphysics: the power of love, as the 'mainspring of the universe' (9.73.8). Love in all its forms (stanza 74) is seen as a mere pretence, a slave to the senses and the 'worst cause of war' (9.56.1), the most important source of contention in society. This denigration of the act of loving reaches its climax in the arch manoeuvring, and witty anglicisation of the word, *beyond* (as is so often the case) the well-bred text of Horace's *Satires* (I, 3, 107-108) in 9.55.1.

Horace's text reads: *nam fuit ante Helenam cunus teterrima belli causa*. (Byron's selection of Latin is stressed). The polite translation of Byron's choice is 'For even before Helen, woman was the worst cause of war'. '[C]unus', however, clearly signifies 'pudendum' and there can be little doubt that Byron intended this connotation to be the drift and the pointer to a court which so brazenly revolves around the satisfaction of Catherine's predatory sexuality, which takes and rejects at random, and her disreputable political ambitions:

Her Majesty, who liked to gaze on youth
Almost as much as on a new dispatch, . . . (9.61.6-7)

The further suggestion is that the world at large is oriented likewise through the services of the 'God-knows-what' (9.67.3), the 'falls and rises' (9.55.6) of 'all the standing army who stood by' (9.78.8).

The blind, unjust exercise of power, of ideology, which was a fundamental concern of Byron's ethic, is seen for what it is: like love

. . . vanity
Selfish in its beginning as its end, . . . (9.73.2)

Any form of despotism, whether in love, in sexuality, in politics, in systematised thought, or in art, has, for Byron, the same debilitating, destructive end: 'clothing souls in clay' (9.75.8).

6. Concluding remarks

Byron's lickish obsessiveness is not a salacious wallowing in exhibitionistic impudicity. It is rather the manifestation of a soul, itself debased and cheapened (like Don Juan's, and Catherine's – the list is endless, encompassing all humanity) by a twilight existence in a slumped and depressed world of doubt and loveless life.

His savage sensibility is neither ameliorated by the clinging to systems, dogmatics or beliefs, nor in the wishful belief in the earth as a 'heaven-kissing hill' (9.85.4).

The only comfort, such as it is, is the heroic awareness of ultimate isolation and needful maintenance, 'tak[ing] a quiet ride in some green lane' (9.85.8) like the other 'wanderers o'er Eternity / Whose bark drives on and on, and anchored ne'er shall be' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, 3.70). Which is perhaps why *Don Juan*, despite its superficially grand conceptions, is kept deliberately rooted in its ironic skittishness, in piquant yet profligate diminishments.

Byron's aporia, like Derrida's, is an act of stoic acquiescence: a liberating 'neutralization of time and history' (Derrida, 1981:291), which, tactfully and tactically, resigns itself to life, seen as

a problem, like all things.
(*Don Juan*. 17.13.1)

Notes

1. Texts and line numbering of the following Shakespearian editions are referred to in this paper:
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2. Texts quoted with regard to Eliot and Yeats are as follows:
 Eliot, T.S. 1963. *Collected poems, 1909-62*. London: Faber and Faber. Yeats, W.B. 1958(1933). *Collected poems*. London: Macmillan.
3. The textual reference to Coleridge's *Biographia literaria* is from Watson, George (ed.). 1956. *Biographia literaria*. London: Dent, p. 154.

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