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Byron's Procreative Poetry

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> To withdraw myself from myself (oh that cursed Selfishness) has ever been my sole, my entire, my sincere motive in scribbling.
>
> Lord Byron

In the first canto of "Don Juan," Byron almost reluctantly records the amorous pull that has brought together Juan and his first beloved, the young, beautiful, and married Donna Julia.

> The hand which still held Juan's, by degrees
> Gently, but palpably confirm'd its grasp,
> As if it said, 'detain me, if you please';
> Yet there's no doubt she only meant to clasp
> His fingers with a pure Platonic squeeze;
> She would have shrunk as from a toad, or asp,
> Had she imagined such a thing could rouse
> A feeling dangerous to a prudent spouse. (DJ 1: 111)[1]

It is difficult not to advance to the next stage once one has been so palpably detained by erotic interest. The problem appears in the oxymoronic phrase "a pure Platonic squeeze." "Pure" and "Platonic" are nearly synonymous, both suggesting a kind of asceticism or at least chastity. But those two adjectives are, so to speak, held in the grasp or clasp of the verbal noun "squeeze." Thus does Byron "squeeze" Platonic love for its contradictions and tensions. A few stanzas later, as Juan and Julia are about to succumb to their passion, Byron allows himself an editorial flourish.

Oh Plato! Plato! you have paved the way,
With your confounded fantasies, to more
Immoral conduct by the fancied sway
Your system feigns o'er the controlless core
Of human hearts, than all the long array
Of poets and romancers:—You're a bore,
A charlatan, a coxcomb—and have been,
At best, no better than a go-between. (DJ 1: 116)

Has Plato ever been upbraided in such terms? Byron sees Platonic love—at least in the passionate circumstances of Juan and Julia—as less a repression than a via erotica far more compelling than the romantic road paved by more obvious poets and romancers.

The "confounded fantasy" of purely Platonic love has been squeezed until a paradox emerges: physical attraction leads resistlessly to physical procreation, not intellectual procreation, and in fact the hope that desire will remain chaste serves only to demolish that hope and hasten a very palpable consummation. On the cusp of consummation in one of his own affairs, Byron would write to his confidante, Lady Melbourne, that "Platonism is in some peril" (BLJ 3: 136).[2]

"[T]he controlless core / Of human hearts" may perhaps be interpreted as an encouragement to forget past loves in order to adore the next creature who happens into view. Defending this serial form of desire—traditionally misprised as "Don Juanism"—Byron offers a justification for inconstancy.

But to return: that which
Men call inconstancy is nothing more
Than admiration due where nature's rich
Profusion with young beauty cover o'er
Some favor'd object; and as in the niche
A lovely statue we almost adore,
This sort of admiration of the real
Is but a heightening of the 'beau ideal.'

'Tis the perception of the beautiful,
A fine extension of the faculties,
Platonic, universal, wonderful,
Drawn from the stars, and filter'd through the skies,
Without which life would be extremely dull;
In short, it is the use of our own eyes,
With one or two small senses added, just
To hint that flesh is form'd of fiery dust. (DJ 2: 211-12)

These "one or two small senses" added are precisely what keep Byron from becoming, as his friend and fellow poet Percy Shelley might say, "pinnacled dim in the intense inane." Byron's "fiery dust" also seems to echo Hamlet's wistful summation of man as "this quintessence of dust." Implicitly Byron considers a merely idealist position a dull, one-sided affair that also forgets the beautiful particulars our own eyes reveal to us every time "[s]ome favored object" materializes, teasing us into adoration. A winged creature, Eros is flighty.[3]

Richly profuse with eros, poems themselves may become favored objects leading to physical mischief for receptive readers. A love-poet from his earliest days, Byron appreciates how the relatively chaste act of writing poetry may have unchaste results.

> When amatory poets sing their loves
> In liquid lines mellifluously bland,
> And pair their rhymes as Venus does her doves,
> They little think what mischief is in hand;
> The greater their success the worse it proves,
> As Ovid's verse may give to understand;
> Even Petrarch's self, if judged with due severity,
> Is the Platonic pimp of all posterity. (DJ 5: 1)

This is indeed a severe reading of Petrarch, whose lyrical chastity was, like his ego, an event in European history, but the example serves to recall the seductive nature of certain poems and the consequences of letting oneself get swept from textuality to sexuality. Recall both St. Augustine and Paolo and Francesca in Dante's Inferno. Pimping poetry leads us straight into temptation from which we may be delivered by chaste, chastening texts, such as the one that called out to St. Augustine just in time to save his swooning soul. Or, one day we may put down the book, read no more, and fall into an "admiration of the real."

To be receptive to all forms of seduction, either actual or textual, brings to mind a psychological capability Byron called mobilité, which he poetically glossed as

> 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 it nearest. (DJ 16: 97)

There is an odd affinity between inconstancy and mobilité. Both are at once cause and effect of "that vivacious versatility, / Which many people take for want of heart." Both also account for Byron's narrative agility and improvisational facility in composing Don Juan. One is reminded of Kierkegaard's spirited reading of Mozart's Don Giovanni in Part One of Either/Or. There, in the persona of the aesthetically-motived young man, Kierkegaard presents the idea that Don Giovanni is not much as an individual but as an erotic force, a force or energy Mozart perfectly captured in his music.[4] And indeed Byron's narrator of mock-epic, fully mobilized by his susceptibilities and impressions, presents a form of Romantic sincerity to challenge Wordsworth's, a spontaneous overflow that is not the result of emotion recollected in tranquility, but rather of emotion immediately transmuted into the quicksilver of poetry. The additive quality of Byron's epic, what one recent critic calls "the aesthetic of parataxis,"[5] is what I am calling procreative poetry, a mode of production that would seem to parallel the poet's mode of reproduction.

In an often quoted (but rarely fully-quoted) letter to a friend about the meaning and composition of his mock-epic, Byron reflects on the offense his opening cantos gave his English readers, and defends his work in a way that ties together the terms and categories I have been discussing.

> I feel lazy—I have thought of this for some time—but alas! the air this cursed Italy enervates—and disfranchizes the thoughts of man after near four years of respiration,—to say nothing of emission.—As to "Don Juan"—confess—you dog—and be candid—that it is the sublime of *that there* sort of writing—it may be bawdy—but is it not good English?—it may be profligate—but is it not *life*, is it not the *thing*?—could any man have written it—who has not lived in the world?—and tooled in a post-chaise?—in a hackney coach?—in a gondola?—against a wall?—in a court carriage?—in a vis a vis?—on a table—and under it— (BLJ 6: 232, italics Byron's)

For Byron, life and poetry interpenetrated, and the justification for his epic poem was nothing more or less than his own life, including his sexual experience. The poetic vehicle for this is his characteristic usage of ottava rima—the bouncy, rollicking stanzaic form that swept Byron and his libertine hero along for sixteen cantos. To put it more simply, Byron writes about what he knows, and he has found an answering form.

But there is an even more intimate relation between Byron's vitality, mobility, and his procreative poetry. In a letter to his friend and fellow poet, Thomas Moore, Byron writes:

> I feel exactly as you do about our "art," but it comes over me in a kind of rage every now and then, like ****, and then, if I don't write to empty my mind, I go mad. As to that regular, uninterrupted love of writing which you describe in your friend, I do not understand it. I feel it as a torture, which I must get rid of, but never as a pleasure. On the contrary, I think composition a great pain. (BLJ 8: 55)

A short queue of asterisks is a diacritical blush—one of the few times Byron ever blushes about anything—and we are left to fill in the meaning. Most readers assume Byron is describing a concentration of lust that eventually explodes into poetry, which Byron elsewhere defines as "the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake" (BLJ 3: 179). Until he can get the poetry outside of himself, he cannot achieve the literal sense of "ecstacy," which refers to getting outside oneself, to withdrawing oneself from oneself, as my opening citation from Byron suggests.

Let me conclude with another, more sentimental version of this oddly painful version of poetic procreation. In the second canto of Byron's epic, Juan washes up on the shore of a Greek island to find—what else?—a ravishing Greek girl waiting to nurse him back to health and fall helplessly in love with him.[6] Her name is Haidee. Juan and Haidee's ability to think a language reminds us of the erotic pleasures of dialogue, including Platonic dialogue. But, we might say, that Juan and Haidee procreate the Beautiful without resorting to any philosophical sublimation, and that Byron echoes their rhythms by setting their passion to the music of ottava rima.

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NOTES

[1]Lord Byron, *Don Juan, Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 5, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), Canto 1, stanza 111). Subsequent citations will quote from

this text and will parenthetically supply canto and stanza in the following abbreviated fashion: (DJ 1: 111).

[2]*Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A Marchand (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974). Subsequent citations will quote from this text and will parenthetically supply volume number and page number in the following abbreviated fashion (BLJ 3: 136).

[3]For a discussion of the Greek play on words involving "eros" and "pteros" (wing) see Anne Carson, *Eros, the bittersweet* (Princeton, N. J.: PrincetonUP, 1986) 159-64.

[4]In "The Immediate Stages of the Erotic" in Part One of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard regards Byron's *Don Juan* as a failure, interesting enough, precisely because the poet supplies us with too many biographical details about Juan, a more or less novelistic tactic that individualizes Juan and thereby reduces what Kierkegaard calls his "ideality," a force or an energy best and most immediately captured in opera.

[5]The phrase belongs to Charles Eric Reeves in his "Continual Seduction: The reading of Don Juan," *Studies in Romanticism* 17.4 (1978): 459.

[6]Byron's Greek island idyll has been discussed by major critics of the "Don Juan," many of them treating this episode as an oasis of non-ironic romance in an epic saturated by bathos and the systematic puncturing of matters sentimental. An important exception to such interpretations appears in Peter Manning, *Byron and His Fictions* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1978), where the author folds the episode into a full-scale, psychoanalytic discussion of Byron's major works. Haidee becomes another example of a potentially threatening, enveloping woman whom the narrator must dispatch—along with her unborn child—to hasten Juan on his way to his next 'conquest.'