

Byron, Conversation and Discord

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‘[H]ERE AT LAST I HAD FOUND A MAN who spoke only of what he had seen, and known; and spoke without exaggeration, without mystery, without enmity, and without mercy.’¹ John Ruskin’s choice of the verb ‘to speak’ to explain Byron’s influence over him is not unusual, but it is peculiarly emphatic: ‘Byron . . . said plainly what he saw and knew’; ‘Byron told me of thieves with whom he had ridden’; ‘Byron told me of, . . . the real people whose feet had worn the marble I trod.’² Ruskin thought he had found his man speaking to men, and he was not alone: Arthur Symons felt that ‘No poet had ever seemed to speak to men so directly’;³ H. J. C. Grierson called Byron ‘the most splendid talker and raconteur in English verse’.⁴ To what extent they were influenced by the conversational cast of nineteenth-century biographies and memoirs of Byron it is impossible to say: Hunt, Medwin, Kennedy, Trelawny, Moore and Lady Blessington all attempted records of Byron’s talk, and the same compulsion is evident in Ernest J. Lovell’s *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron*, which set out to be nothing less than a new

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¹ E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols. (London, 1908), 35, 149.

² *Ibid.*, 149; 151.

³ A. Symons, *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry* (London, 1909), p. 246.

⁴ H. J. C. Grierson, ‘Lord Byron: Arnold and Swinburne’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1919–20) (London [1921]), 444.

sort of biography, 'a complete and faithful transcript of the poet's actual voice and personality'.⁵

As Lovell's collection demonstrates, accounts of Byron's conversation were frequently contradictory and almost invariably influenced by what individuals remembered of hearing his poetry, reading about him, or what they thought they drew out of him. In 1812, Annabella Milbanke wrote to her mother: 'Lord Byron is without exception of young or old more agreeable in conversation than any person I ever knew . . . *Impulses* of sublime goodness burst through his malevolent *habits*.' Annabella saw her conversation as penetrating the illusion of settled character and enabling a redemptive interfusion of sympathy. The interlocutor's response, however, could be blank and negative: in 1816 in the wake of the Byrons' separation, the Duc de Broglie described meeting Byron at Coppet: 'His conversation was dull',⁶ and in Bologna in 1819 Count Rangone found that Byron 'does not much like conversation. He lets others talk and says little.'⁷ Thomas Medwin remembered his time with Byron in Pisa rather differently: 'I never met with any man who shines so much in conversation . . . His ideas flow without effort, without his having occasion to think . . . there are no concealments in him, no injunctions to secrecy. He tells every thing . . . without the least reserve.'⁸

Of course, these variants reflect not only different historical contexts—but different listeners, different languages and different sorts of conversation. In Regency London, ambitious drawing room conversation required some effort: it was, Keats complained, 'not a search after knowledge, but an endeavour at effect. In this respect two most opposite men, Wordsworth and Hunt, are the same.'⁹ Byron knew London clubs, the world of 'those who have studied their *bon mots*' (*Don Juan* XIII. 97),¹⁰ but he had also participated in Venetian conversazioni, conducted diplomatic exchange with Ali Pasha and experienced the discipline of an

⁵ E. J. Lovell, Jr. (ed.), *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron* (New York, 1954) (dust jacket). This marketing ploy is interestingly close to that of John Murray's edition of the conversations of Alexander Pope, which 'scrupulously delivers the identical language of the speaker' (E. Malone (ed.), *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men by the Rev Joseph Spence* (London, 1820), p. v).

⁶ Lovell, *His Very Self and Voice*, pp. 52; 190.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁸ T. Medwin, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. H. Buxton Forman (London, 1913), p. 331; *Conversations of Lord Byron*, 2nd edn. (London, 1824), pp. 419.

⁹ *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. H. E. Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA., 1958), 2. 43.

¹⁰ All references to Byron's poetry are to J. J. McGann and B. Weller (eds.), *The Complete Poetical Works*, 7 vols. (Oxford, 1980–93).

Armenian monastery. Byron's conversations even included nonsense language: in Pisa, he and Percy Shelley 'had invented a sort of macaronic language that was very droll. They called firing, *tiring*; hitting, *colping*; missing, *mancanting*; riding, *cavalling*; walking, *a-spasing*, &c.'¹¹ Medwin's anecdote dates from 1822 but it helps to colour Mary Shelley's recollection at the start of *Frankenstein*: 'Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout, but nearly silent listener.'¹²

It is the force of Byron as a 'talker' on that delicate edge between poetry and conversation in English verse that I would like to investigate in this lecture. While there has been much exploration of Byron as a conversationalist in life, I would like to focus on the conversational mode of his poetry that is often taken for granted. I am particularly concerned with Byron's mobile attention to the role of the reader and with the degree of dissonance or friction that the reader helps engender. Byron both enforces and erodes the boundaries between speech and poetry—what Robert Browning calls 'printed voice', what we listen to as we read.¹³ Virginia Woolf admired *Don Juan* because Byron 'could say whatever came into his head'.¹⁴ While getting speech into poetry usually involves a loosening of formal constraints, conversation is also more than speech: it is circumscribed by its attention to another receptive auditory intelligence. 'It is a certain way of acting one on the other, of sharing rapid and mutual moments of enjoyment . . . of taking pleasure, at a particular moment, in oneself', Madame de Staël enthused by way of explaining why the French were particularly good at it.¹⁵ But, she admitted, the spirit of conversation has the drawback 'of making you less true to your real character; this is not a calculated effort to deceive, but rather the result of improvisation'.

De Staël enfolds self-surveillance, dramatic self-projection and concern about the listener who is making judgements ('des blâmes à demi

¹¹ Medwin, *Life of Shelley*, p. 329.

¹² M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. N. Crook (London, 1996), p. 179.

¹³ R. Browning, *The Ring and the Book* (London, 1911), I, 166.

¹⁴ V. Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* (London, 1981), p. 13.

¹⁵ '[C]'est une certaine manière d'agir les uns sur les autres, de se faire plaisir réciproquement et avec rapidité . . . de jouir à l'instant de soi-même . . . L'esprit de conversation a quelquefois l'inconvénient d'altérer la sincérité du caractère; ce n'est pas une tromperie combinée, mais improvisée, si l'on peut s'exprimer ainsi.' Mme La Baronne de Staël Holstein, *De L'Allemagne*, 3 vols. (London, 1813), I, 96; 99.

formés') into the art of conversation.¹⁶ She suggests a play of inference between speaker and listener: the listener is engaged with possible interpretations of the speaker's words while the speaker must read all the signs on the listener's face as to what impression has been produced. Leigh Hunt suggests that Byron's vigilance about the impression he made inhibited conversation. Hunt found that Byron 'had no conversation'. The reason, he said, was that Byron 'was haunted with a perpetual affectation, and could not talk sincerely'.¹⁷ With less hostility, Lovell pointed out that Byron was 'feelingly aware of his own fame . . . and of the need to explain himself before posterity. Thus when talking with those who he knew or suspected were taking notes on his conversation, . . . he talked . . . deliberately . . . Such conversation is a form of self-protection, a carefully painted screen thrown up between a public figure and the public, a deliberate projection, even creation, of a selected personality.'¹⁸ William St Clair has suggested that Byron's propensity for bamboozling listeners went a lot further than many of his contemporaries suspected, but the implications of this research have yet to filter through into assessments of Byron's poetry.¹⁹ For a poet whose fame forced him to construct his identity on a day-to-day basis, depending on his audience, the creation of personality in verse is much more complex and versatile than critics have assumed.

Byron's attention to the judgemental listener or reader makes his poetic conversations a formative influence on the art of the dramatic monologue. The differences between conversation and monologue appear to be obvious in that conversation usually requires a greater level of response or participation than monologue. In conversation, however, only one person can speak at a time and one speaker may have a much greater share of speech: while the first person talks it will be theoretically impossible to tell whether a conversation or a monologue will evolve. Both forms need an audience for the self-conscious speaker and both involve a displacement of sympathy. The silent auditor who may also be an interlocutor and a judge plays a vital role in enabling conversation and

¹⁶ '[P]our réussir en parlant, il faut observer avec perspicacité l'impression qu'on produit à chaque instant sur eux, celle qu'ils veulent nous cacher, celle qu'ils cherchent à nous exagérer, la satisfaction contenue des uns, le sourire forcé des autres; on voit passer sur le front de ceux qui nous écoutent des blâmes à demi formés qu'on peut éviter en se hâtant de les dissiper avant que l'amour propre y soit engagé.' (*De L'Allemagne*, 1. 101).

¹⁷ L. Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries* (Hildersheim, 1976), pp. 154–5

¹⁸ Lovell, *His Very Self and Voice*, p. xi.

¹⁹ W. St Clair, 'Bamming and Humming', *The Byron Journal*, 7 (1979), 38–47.

monologue.²⁰ Byron's dramatic monologues—*The Prisoner of Chillon*, *Mazeppa*, *The Lament of Tasso* and *The Prophecy of Dante*—have not received their full fame, but his better-known works, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Beppo* and *Don Juan*, lead readers to the border between the dramatic monologue's mode of fencing with the censures of a silent listener and the cut and thrust of conversation in verse.²¹

Childe Harold encouraged readerly identification and simultaneously challenged notions of lyric sincerity. Byron insisted that he was not Harold: 'I was not, and indeed am not even now, the misanthropical and gloomy gentleman he [Jeffrey] takes me for, but a facetious companion, well to do with those with whom I am intimate, and as loquacious and laughing as if I were a much cleverer fellow.'²² And there were some important exceptions to the general blurring of Byron and Harold. One of these was John Wilson's review of *Childe Harold* Canto IV in the *Edinburgh Review*. It was, Wilson wrote, like reading 'private and confidential communications . . . not felt, while we read, as declarations published to the world,—but almost as secrets whispered to chosen ears'.²³ Wilson acknowledged the power of Byron's confessional voice, but saw also that this notion of intimacy was a 'singular illusion', depending on the attitude of the reader at the moment of reading who must 'read with that tender or high interest which attaches to poetry'. 'Tender interest' is the language of sensibility and the play of sympathies between writer and reader described by Wilson with its criss-crossing of mutual obligations and potential tensions reminds us of the highly wrought attentiveness to the reader exhibited by Laurence Sterne:

Writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation. . . . The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself.²⁴

²⁰ For a classic account of the tension between moral judgement and sympathy in the dramatic monologue see R. Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* ([1957] Chicago, 1985). While Langbaum's certainty about the responses evinced by Browning's characters can be questioned, his account of the heightened, active role of the reader has not been superseded.

²¹ The generic differences between works such as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *The Prisoner of Chillon* were blurred for nineteenth-century readers who encountered them through extracts in Murray's tourist handbooks. See J. Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to 'Culture' 1800–1918* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 120–7.

²² L. A. Marchand (ed.), *Byron's Letters and Journals*, 13 vols. (London, 1973–94), 5. 186.

²³ *Edinburgh Review*, 30 (June–Sept. 1818), 87–120 at 90.

²⁴ L. Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy Gentleman*, ed. G. Petrie (London, 1986), p. 127.

Sterne's paradigm for the give and take of conversation makes novelists the opposite of poets who are granted 'a sort of privilege . . . to be egotists' as the *Edinburgh Review* put it in 1807.²⁵ Coleridge castigated readers who regarded a book 'as a Companion with whom I can have an easy cheerful chit chat': a desire for exchange is here seen to be pert and vulgar.²⁶ De Quincey points out that as a talker, Coleridge required exchange to be actively suspended: 'he *could* not talk unless he were uninterrupted. . . . It was a silent contract between himself and his hearers, that nobody should speak but himself. It was not, therefore, by an insolent usurpation that Coleridge persisted in monology through his whole life, but in virtue of a concession from the kindness and respect of his friends.'²⁷ Coleridge's powers of self-expression depend on suppressed conversation and his poetry—like that of his friend Wordsworth—relies on a similar silent accord.

'Mr Wordsworth is never interrupted'—so Mrs Wordsworth informed John Keats when he attempted to disagree with something Wordsworth had said.²⁸ Although Wordsworth and Coleridge sought in *Lyrical Ballads* to bring poetic language 'near to the language of men', it was understood that men would not answer back.²⁹ Coleridge's poem, 'The Nightingale' subtitled 'a conversational poem' is conversational in tone but, like the poems that have been grouped with it, it is conversational in one tone only—that heightened, intimate, blank verse revelation of the speaker's mind—a speaker who is of one accord with listeners who are defined as friends. It is a shock to discover that at least one of these friends grew to resent the role of silent auditor: Charles Lamb, addressee of 'This Lime Tree Bower, my Prison', was delighted to receive lines which recalled 'the tones of all your voices' although he remembered that 'I could not talk much, while I was with you'. But a few years later he was sharper: 'For God's sake . . ., don't make me ridiculous any more by terming me gentle-hearted in print, or do it in better verses.'³⁰ Here is a conversation with the poem we cannot ever imagine being let into the poem.

²⁵ *Edinburgh Review*, 11 (Oct. 1807– Jan. 1808), 285–89 at 288.

²⁶ S. T. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. J. Beer (London, 1993), p. 228.

²⁷ T. De Quincey, *The Art of Conversation and Other Papers* (Edinburgh, 1863), p. 171.

²⁸ Quoted in R. Gittings, *John Keats* (London, 1980), p. 180.

²⁹ R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (eds.), *Lyrical Ballads* (London, 1986), p. 251.

³⁰ E. W. Marris, Jr. (ed.), *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, 3 vols. (Ithaca, 1975–8), 1. 117; 217.

G. M. Harper who first categorised Coleridge's 'conversation poems' in 1928 was closer to the truth when he called them 'soliloquies' of a sociable man.³¹ Byron's poems have more often been recognised as the soliloquies of an unsociable man. But after the disastrous *Hours of Idleness*, excoriated for abusing the 'privilege of poets to be egotists', Byron's acceptance that readers will often differ, if not disagree, re-opens the conversational tradition of Horatian verse epistles and satires—'the pink of old Hexameters' as Byron called them.³² By placing his verse in this civic tradition, Byron signals openness to criticism and a readiness to give readers an equal say in determining the success of the poetry.

The recognition of genre and form is a comparative, communal venture: Byron's verse welcomes the hazard of competition. Coleridge used blank verse for his conversation poems, following Cowper's 'familiar style' in which verse 'speak[s] the language of prose without being prosaic' (although Cowper was defending the rhymed verse of Prior when he wrote this).³³ But Byron's conversational facility is not released in or confined to blank verse. He returns us to the tradition of conversational vigour initiated by Dryden and continued by Prior, and in a slightly different way, by Pope, Churchill and Crabbe. It is marked by a relish of rhyme. The volatile play between connection and impediment in finding a rhyme, the sound that will answer back, articulates the role of conversation in their poetry and in wider cultural spheres.

To see how far Byron's poetic conversation is from Coleridge we need only to open *Don Juan*. While waiting in Canto V to be sold at the slave market Juan tries to tell the Englishman, John Johnson, about his lost love, Haidée. This is, of course, in *ottava rima*, but Byron inverts normal syntactic order in the first couplet only, and that accords with Juan's consciously tragic self-presentation:

'Tis not my present lot, as I have said,
Which I deplore so much; for I have borne
Hardships which have the hardestst overworn,'

'On the rough deep. But this last blow—' and here
He stopp'd again, and turn'd away his face.

³¹ G. M. Harper, 'Coleridge's Conversation Poems' in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M. H. Abrams, 2nd edn. (London, 1975), p. 189.

³² A. Rutherford (ed.), *Byron: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1970), p. 31; *Don Juan*, VI. 18.

³³ Letter to William Unwin, 17 Jan. 1782. T. Wright (ed.), *The Correspondence of William Cowper*, 4 vols. (London, 1904), 1. 430.

‘Ay,’ quoth his friend, ‘I thought it would appear
 That there had been a lady in the case;
 And these are things which ask a tender tear,
 Such as I too would shed if in your place:
 I cried upon my first wife’s dying day,
 And also when my second ran away:

‘My third—’ — ‘Your third!’ quoth Juan turning round. (V. 18–20)

The first line of stanza 20 converts Juan from isolated Romantic sufferer into scandalised enquirer; having turned away from company, he quickly turns round and is beside himself with curiosity. I do not think we even register ‘quoth’ as an archaism. Macaulay saw the introduction of John Johnson as a striking failure: ‘How differently would Sir Walter Scott have drawn a bluff, fearless Englishman, in such a situation’,³⁴ but Byron does not want a portrait here—he wants the sound of another voice and the flint of another point of view. The signal of interest in something other than self comes with the dashes with which Juan breaks into Johnson’s speech because he is really listening to it. Byron’s dashes always register the presence of another questioning intelligence and they therefore enact in the syntax of a line what dramatic monologues do when they interpolate or forestall the reaction of the listener.

Byron is the great poet of interruption. Even Manfred, closest of Byron’s creations to a monologist, is interrupted and drawn into dialogue first of all by the chamois hunter who rudely bursts in upon what ought to have been a spectacular, silent leap from the Jungfrau and then refuses to leave him alone: Manfred’s dismissive half line ‘I am not of thine order’ is met with the hunter’s ‘Thanks to heaven! / I would not be of thine for the free fame / Of William Tell’ (II. 1. 38–40). We feel the pressure of Manfred’s courteous efforts to this pious man, an aesthetic irrelevance in a mental drama where Manfred could play all the parts himself. Macaulay was not entirely right, however, when he complained that ‘[t]he other interlocutors are nothing more than good listeners’.³⁵ In the last Act, Manfred’s soliloquy on the Coliseum comes close to the blank verse murmur of Coleridgean converse. Memory and allusion lead Manfred to speculate on the capacity of the mind to interrupt its own process, to veer and change direction:

³⁴ T. Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays*, ed. F. C. Montague, 3 vols. (London, 1903), 1. 333.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1. 336.

'Twas such a night!
 'Tis strange that I recall it at this time;
 But I have found our thoughts take wildest flight
 Even at the moment when they should array
 Themselves in pensive order.

My good Lord! (III. 4. 41–5)

At this point, Manfred is interrupted by the Abbot, another intellectual inferior, who unwittingly supplies him with the basis for his final defiance of the Spirits. The Abbot catches sight of the fiend then asks tremblingly: 'What doth he here?' and Manfred seizes on the words with something like a grunt of acknowledgement: 'Why—ay—what doth he here? / I did not send for him,—he is unbidden' (III. 4. 70–1). It is a tiny moment—dashes surrounding a minimal syllable of assent, 'ay', but it changes the course of the line and the final scene as Manfred takes a cue from something other than himself.

In this exchange, Manfred, somewhat unexpectedly, exemplifies the civilising force of conversation advocated by Addison in *The Spectator*: 'Every man . . . forms several reflections that are peculiar to his own manner of thinking; so that conversation will naturally furnish us with hints which we did not attend to, and make us enjoy other men's parts and reflections as well as our own.'³⁶ The overwhelming impression of the drama is Manfred's self-containment; but this unexpected fretting of conversation turns the revised third act towards a final gesture of relationship and connection with the world Manfred is leaving. 'Give me thy hand', Manfred says to the Abbot, and there is no indication that Manfred drops the hand as he utters his last words: 'Old man, 'tis not so difficult to die' (III. 4. 151).

The formal demands of conversational relationship are differently vital to the dramatic monologues Byron wrote between 1816 and 1819. While the Turkish tales featured the Byronic Napoleon figure who does not respond well to questions, the monologues ventriloquise liberal victims of tyranny whose ties with society have been forcibly severed. In *The Prisoner of Chillon* and *The Lament of Tasso*, Bonnivard and Tasso initiate maimed or stunted forms of conversation with the dead, the mad, the inanimate, or the indifferent. Bonnivard's desire for connection with life outside his cell shrinks into muted empathy with spiders, mice and, finally, the irons that hold him:

³⁶ No. 409 19 June 1712: J. G. Frazer (ed.), *Essays of Joseph Addison*, 2 vols. (London, 1915), 2. 175.

With spiders I had friendship made,
 And watch'd them in their sullen trade,
 Had seen the mice by moonlight play,
 And why should I feel less than they?
 . . .
 My very chains and I grew friends,
 So much a long communion tends
 To make us what we are. (ll. 381–4; 391–3)

The couplet form here dramatises Bonnivard's enervated but unstoppable drive to find an echo with something outside himself; it articulates the need for connection. This questing forward is what separates Byron's dramatic monologues from Browning's where the realisation and moral judgement of a relatively stable (even where it is unstable) psychological state is the main task of the reader. In Byron's monologues, the conversation is more demanding in that the reader is asked to intuit the possibility of the next step and the consequences of taking that step for both parties.

In *The Lament of Tasso*, this reaching for a respondent is complicated by the impending disintegration of the self; Tasso suffers 'Imputed madness, prisoned solitude' (l. 4) on the orders of his Sovereign. He voices the nightmarish isolation of being housed with madmen:

In this vast lazar-house of many woes[,]
 Where laughter is not mirth, nor thought the mind,
 Nor words a language, nor ev'n men mankind;
 Where cries reply to curses, shrieks to blows,
 And each is tortured in his separate hell—
 For we are crowded in our solitudes—
 Many, but each divided by the wall,
 Which echoes Madness in her babbling moods;—
 While all can hear, none heed his neighbour's call— (ll. 83–91)

In an inferno of mismatched and disjointed communication, Tasso comes to suspect that he may indeed bear 'A taint of that he would impute to me' (l. 233). His dialogue, we think at first, is with a memory of Leonora rather than Leonora herself 'who blushed to hear / To less than monarchs that [she] couldst be dear' (ll. 229–30). But Tasso's obsessive desire to join her name with his makes us increasingly unsure of his mental state. In the last section, the direct addresses to 'Thou, Leonora! thou' (l. 228) suggest he thinks she is really there. The couplets are scattered, dispersing into alternate rhymes which get further and further apart before suddenly converging again as Tasso gathers his wits. The rifts in the monologue, marked by dashes, work as rests in a musical score; the rest is silence, and

in those increasingly painful gaps Tasso waits for a voice that will not come or—more disturbingly—is interrupted by a voice we cannot hear. The monologue is played out cunningly against what Byron knows his readers suspected of him—madness and bitterness about one woman—an Annabella rather than a Leonora.

Even before his discovery of the *ottava rima* form, Byron's poetry—including his trial of monologue—is intrinsically conversational in its manner of anticipating and incorporating recalcitrant, external material and dissonant opinion. Disruptions to pensive order occur throughout Byron's poetry—evident in *Childe Harold* in all the 'yets' and 'buts' at the beginning of stanzas: 'But this is not my theme' (III. 76); 'But who was she?' (IV. 100); 'But where is he?' (IV. 164); 'But I forget' (IV. 175). Byron's first readers were unaccustomed to such abrupt changes of direction, and felt, too, that the rapid switches of diction were perverse creations of harshness or discord.³⁷

Readers were obviously jarred when Byron transgressed certain political or religious beliefs, in the sort of juxtaposition Coleridge refers to as Byron's 'want of harmony' in '[connecting] very great intellectual powers with utter depravity'.³⁸ But they also registered breaches in the movement of the line, which continued and intensified in his later career. In his review of Byron's late dramas Jeffrey revised his impression of the earlier work: this now seemed 'melodious' when contrasted with the 'cumbrous and unmusical' blank verse. 'Instead of the graceful familiarity and idiomatical melodies of Shakespeare', Jeffrey complained, the dramas 'fall into clumsy prose, in their approaches to the easy and colloquial style; and, in the loftier passages, [they] are . . . deformed by low and common images, that harmonize but ill with the general solemnity of the diction.'³⁹

When Hazlitt called *Childe Harold* Canto IV a 'mass of discordant things', he was attempting to explain how Byron's verse could be 'obscure, tortuous, perplexed, and abortive' and, at the same time, 'beautiful, striking, and impassioned'.⁴⁰ Hazlitt was baffled by the way the critical mass

³⁷ F. Jeffrey, *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review* (London, 1853), p. 563. Scott argued that 'the effect of the general harmony is, as in music, improved by the judicious introduction of discords' (*Quarterly Review*, 19 (April 1818), 215–32). In 'The Music of Poetry', T. S. Eliot asserted that 'Dissonance, even cacophony, has its place' (F. Kermode (ed.), *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* (London, 1984), p. 112).

³⁸ S. T. Coleridge, *Table Talk*, ed. C. Woodring, 2 vols. (London, 1990), 1. 29.

³⁹ Jeffrey, *Contributions*, p. 402.

⁴⁰ P. P. Howe (ed.), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 21 vols. (Tokyo, 1967), 19. 41; 40.

of the poem (Eliot referred to it as Byron's 'distressing bulk')⁴¹—so unyielding and obtrusive—could generate such energy. Virginia Woolf grappled with this in *Childe Harold*: 'How odd a mixture: the weakest sentimental Mrs Hemans combined with trenchant bare vigour. How did they combine?'⁴²

Like Woolf, many of Byron's most persuasive critics preserve a doubled perspective on him: Hazlitt, Arnold, Swinburne and Eliot change their minds about Byron as they encounter and re-encounter the unevenness of his verse. Arnold agonised over its 'slovenliness' and 'tunelessness'.⁴³ 'No poet of equal or inferior rank ever had so bad an ear', Swinburne said. 'His smoother cadences are often vulgar and facile; his fresher notes are often incomplete and inharmonious. His verse stumbles and jingles, stammers and halts, where there is most need for a swift and even pace of musical sound.'⁴⁴ Thirty years later, John Churton Collins agreed: 'No eminent English poet, with the exception of Browning, had so bad an ear. His cacophonies are often horrible; his blank-verse is generally indistinguishable from prose; and his rhythm in rhymed verse is without delicacy, and full of discords.'⁴⁵

As well as disputing Byron's skill at prosody, this critical emphasis on discord expresses continuing unease about the simultaneity of Byron's ideas and the way in which his abrupt juxtapositions put separate spheres of experience on to a collision course. Like harmony, discord depends on what listeners expect to hear. A peculiarly poignant illustration of this conditioning comes from Mary Shelley's recollection of Byron speaking in October 1822:

The words of the conversations . . . seemed all to convey two senses to me, & touching a chord within me to form a music . . . of which the speaker was little aware. I do not think that any person's voice has the same power of awakening melancholy in . . . me as Albe's—I have been accustomed, when hearing it, to listen & to . . . speak little;—another voice, not mine, ever replied, a voice whose strings are broken; . . . When Albè ceases to speak, I expect to hear *that other* voice, and when I hear another instead, it jars strangely with every association.⁴⁶

⁴¹ T. S. Eliot, 'Byron' in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M. H. Abrams, 2nd edn. (London, 1975), p. 261.

⁴² Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, p. 152.

⁴³ M. Arnold, *Essays in Criticism*, second series (London, 1908), p. 177.

⁴⁴ A. C. Swinburne, *Essays and Studies* (London, 1875), p. 246.

⁴⁵ J. C. Collins, *Studies in Poetry and Criticism* (London, 1905), p. 120.

⁴⁶ P. R. Feldman and D. Scott-Kilvert (eds.), *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814–1844* (Baltimore, 1987), p. 439.

Mary Shelley articulates the double sense of conversation: the other voice that 'ever replied' is essential to her conception of Byron's conversation to the extent that another respondent creates the auditory effect of discord. Her enduring memory of her husband's voice resonates in the present moment so that the speaker who has taken his place appears to be talking, jarringly, at the same time. Hearing the wrong note creates dissonance, but it is also possible to be unsettled by discord while reading a single voice. In November 1820 *Galignani's Literary Gazette*, the literary journal Byron read in Italy, reprinted an article 'On the Living Novelists' which digressed into consideration of one writer; one who exhibits

no sustained feeling—no community of emotion—no extended range of thought . . . His cleverness breaks the charm which his feeling spreads around us. His exquisite sensibility is ever counteracted by his perceptions of the ludicrous and his ambition after the strange. No harmonious feeling breathes from any of his pieces. He sweeps 'that curious instrument, the human heart,' with hurried fingers, calling forth in rapid succession its deepest and its liveliest tones, and making only marvellous discord.⁴⁷

The writer under discussion was Laurence Sterne but the kinship with Byron is unmissable. The reader's or listener's experience of such writers falls outside inherited eighteenth-century notions of harmony, but the idea of 'marvellous discord' suggests that the regulating force, the governance of conventional harmony, is being challenged at the same time. This is not *concordia discors*, but discord in its own right and for its own sake that suddenly makes the listener aware of his or her role as a listener and of a responsibility for interpretation.

Critical analysis of discord in a linguistic medium takes us back to the conversational rhythms of poetry. In the 1940s T. S. Eliot was convinced that 'the music of poetry . . . must be a music latent in the common speech of its time'.⁴⁸ He suggested that every revolution in poetry was apt to be, or announced itself as, a return to common speech (in this argument he

⁴⁷ *Galignani's Literary Gazette*, 132–3 (5 and 12 Nov. 1820), p. 246.

⁴⁸ Kermode (ed.), *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, p. 112. T. S. Eliot praised Dryden for '[making] poetry out of what we took for granted to be only matter for prose, written or often only spoken prose' (Quoted in A. V. C. Schmidt, 'Eliot and the Dialect of the Tribe', *Essays in Criticism*, 33 (1983), 36–48 (p. 43)). Trying to convince his publisher about the merits of *Sardanapalus*, Byron informed him: 'I have broken down the *poetry* as nearly as I could to common language' (L. A. Marchand, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, 8. 152). But Byron's critics were unimpressed: 'how cleverly he manages to turn prose into indifferent verse', one of them remarked witheringly (*Literary Gazette*, (19 July 1823), 452). Both Dryden and Byron are identified as hasty writers and their negligence is seen as both an impediment and as a sign of genius.

makes no distinction between ‘speech’ and ‘conversation’).⁴⁹ Over the last year, several pieces of neuroscientific research have examined the connections between music and speech in the right and left hemispheres of the brain and have suggested that our perceptions of pitch, rhythm and harmony are all influenced by native speech patterns.⁵⁰ There is, it appears, a correlation between variations in vowel sounds in a given language and harmonic intervals. Composers absorb the speech rhythms that they have heard since childhood and incorporate linguistic patterns into their work so that music echoes speech.

Byron’s *ottava rima* might now seem to be the perfect vehicle for carrying the speech of the time, but it was received as ‘unmusical drawl’ by many of his contemporaries. In 1823 the *Blackwood’s* reviewer decided that Byron ‘has positively lost his ear, not only for the harmony of English verse, but for the very jingle of English rhymes’.⁵¹ There was political animus against the Italian Byron behind these attacks but the idea that Byron’s versification is dissonant and un-English dates from the first cantos of *Childe Harold* and persists into the twentieth century. In 1812 Wordsworth ‘allowed [Byron] power, but denied his style to be English’;⁵² a hundred years later, Arthur Symons suggested that Byron’s lines only ‘ring true to the ear which has not naturalised itself in English poetry’.⁵³ Swinburne was more scathing: ‘one may perceive how men to whom English poetry was a strange tongue might mistake [Childe Harold] for an impressive and effective example of English poetry’.⁵⁴ And T. S. Eliot also detected an alien: ‘I cannot think of any other poet of his distinction who might so easily have been an accomplished foreigner writing in English.’⁵⁵

Two things are felt to be ‘foreign’: Byron’s diction and the movement of the line.⁵⁶ As Yeats pointed out, both the syntax and the vocabulary of

⁴⁹ Kermode (ed.), *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, p. 111.

⁵⁰ P. Ball, ‘Concerto for mother tongue’, *New Scientist*, 9 July 2005, pp. 32–3; R. Zatorre, ‘Music, the food of neuroscience’, *Nature*, 17 March 2005, pp. 312–15; J. Kane, ‘Poetry as Right-Hemispheric Language’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 11.5–6 (2004), 21–59.

⁵¹ *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 14 (July–Dec. 1823), 88–92 at 90.

⁵² E. J. Morley (ed.), *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Authors*, 3 vols. (London, 1938), 1. 85.

⁵³ Symons, *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry*, p. 243.

⁵⁴ A. C. Swinburne, *Miscellanies* (London, 1911), p. 76.

⁵⁵ Eliot, ‘Byron’, p. 268.

⁵⁶ For the strangeness of Byron’s diction, see P. Graham, *Don Juan and Regency Society* (Charlottesville, 1990) and R. Cronin, ‘Words and the Word: The Diction of *Don Juan*’ in *Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens*, eds. G. Hopps and J. Stabler (Aldershot, 2006 forthcoming).

common personal speech were vital to poetry, and the natural momentum of syntax was more important than simplicity of vocabulary.⁵⁷ Yeats thought Byron excelled in the movement of verse, anticipating Woolf's approval of his 'springy random haphazard galloping nature'.⁵⁸ If we look at Byron's prosody in the light of a conversational dynamic it is evident that many of the violations that upset critics on generic and national grounds constitute the quick of successful conversation. In place of Eliot's emphasis on the word, conversation advances the importance of relationships between words and between speaker and listener.⁵⁹

Conversation reaches across and gets over rupture—the 'very awful pause' described by Jane Austen.⁶⁰ 'Were the loosest and freest Conversation to be transcrib'd', Hume wrote, 'there would immediately be observ'd something which connected it in all its Transitions.'⁶¹ It is the task of conversation, according to Bacon, 'to vary and intermingle speech of the present occasion with arguments'.⁶² Conversation is a medium in which things dwell alongside other things, where thoughts are brought together and are interchanged. Conversation is the art of communal survival. The speed and the strength of Byron's poetry come from the way conversation navigates or—in some cases—springs from discord.

There is no better image for this than the one supplied by the poem's enthalment with its own process: in *Childe Harold* IV we see and hear the structures of classical perfection pulled into verbal process: Venice 'Rising like water-columns from the sea' (IV. 18); the tomb in Arqua 'rear'd in air' (IV. 30); the motion of the waterfall, a 'broad column which rolls on' (IV. 71) or the ocean 'where the Almighty's form / Glasses itself in tempests' (that distinctively Byronic use of glass as a verb (IV. 183)). Spenserian stanzas are meant to meander, but Byron charges at them and through them with what was seen as 'wonderful rapidity'. His combination of irregular enjambement—running over the lines and between stanzas and strong mid-line breaks—creates the impetuosity of conversation

⁵⁷ A. Wade (ed.), *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London, 1954), p. 710.

⁵⁸ Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, p. 13.

⁵⁹ More recently Roland Bottrall and Peter Manning have emphasised the importance of the relationship between words and the mode of address to the reader. See R. Bottrall, 'Byron and the Colloquial Tradition in English Poetry', *The Criterion*, 18 (1938–9), 204–24 and P. Manning, *Reading Romantics: Text and Context* (New York, 1990), pp. 115–44.

⁶⁰ J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd edn. (Oxford, 1967), p. 359.

⁶¹ D. Hume, *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding* (Hildesheim, 1986), p. 31.

⁶² F. Bacon, *The Essays*, ed. J. Pitcher (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 160.

which Hazlitt also detected in the mix of ‘far-fetched metaphor and bald simplicity’ in the diction.

—Look back!

Lo! where it comes like an eternity,
 As if to sweep down all things in its track,
 Charming the eye with dread,—a matchless cataract,
 Horribly beautiful! but on the verge,
 From side to side, beneath the glittering morn,
 An Iris sits, amidst the infernal surge,
 Like Hope upon a death-bed, and, un-worn
 Its steady dyes, while all around is torn
 By the distracted waters, bears serene
 Its brilliant hues with all their beams unshorn:
 Resembling, ’mid the torture of the scene,
 Love watching Madness with unalterable mien. (IV. 71–2)

There is, Hazlitt said, ‘in every line an effort at brilliancy, and a successful effort; and yet, in the next, as if nothing had been done, the same thing is attempted to be expressed again’.⁶³ The restlessness of the poetry, its apparent dissatisfaction with its own brilliance; its way of talking through its own applause; is characteristic of an art of conversation with an oppositional intelligence midway between internal and external influence: if this is oratory, it expects hecklers. It is the art of conversation to sweep up things that present themselves and to move along energised by their resistance. But the question remains: how much discord can conversation sustain?

The happiest conversation, remarked Samuel Johnson, was that ‘where there is no competition, no vanity, but a calm, quiet interchange of sentiments’.⁶⁴ But he also envisaged a more combative exchange. When Boswell asked him “‘But, Sir, may there not be very good conversation without a contest for superiority?’” Johnson replied, “‘No animated conversation, Sir, for it cannot be but one or other will come off superior.’”⁶⁵ Hunt recalls that Byron liked to copy Johnson and ‘say “Why, Sir,” in a high mouthing way, rising, and looking about him’.⁶⁶ Hunt also recalled the painful effect of Byron’s ‘raillery’: ‘Like boys fighting in sport, some real blow is given, and the rest is fighting in earnest.’⁶⁷

⁶³ Howe (ed.), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 19. 41.

⁶⁴ R. W. Chapman (ed.), *Boswell’s Life of Johnson* (London, 1953), p. 623.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 693.

⁶⁶ Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*, p. 111.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

Hunt felt bruised by Byron's conversational manner, but Shelley's *Julian and Maddalo* also captures 'Talk interrupted with . . . raillery' (l. 37) and a force of opposition which carries into the landscape 'for the winds drove / The living spray along the sunny air / Into our faces' (ll. 21–3).⁶⁸ With fellow poets and the fickle English public, Byron's dialogues are vigorous to the point of pugnacity. A compelling authority for this sort of verbal skirmishing comes in Montaigne's essays which were invoked in 1822 along with *Tristram Shandy* as the model for *Don Juan*:

To my taste the most fruitful and most natural exercise of our minds is conversation. Studying books has a languid feeble motion, whereas conversation provides teaching and exercise all at once. If I am sparring with a strong and solid opponent he will attack me on the flanks, stick his lance in me right and left; his ideas send mine soaring. Rivalry, competitiveness and glory will drive me and raise me above my own level. In conversation the most painful quality is perfect harmony.⁶⁹

This is a very different sort of conversation from the smooth, cooperative art favoured by Medwin. Byron's poetry takes its momentum from this more adversarial mode of address. Later in the nineteenth century, Thomas De Quincey remarked that an over-reliance on disputation 'is the vice of the young, the inexperienced' and 'especially those . . . fresh from academic life', but very finely he noticed that the vital property of conversation is its rapidity: in conversation 'a velocity in the movement of thought is made possible (and often natural), greater than ever can arise in methodical books.'⁷⁰ The rapidity of conversation means that you go further or in a different direction because intellectual contact with another person allows thought to refract and to ricochet.

Although the styles and manners of western conversation have changed over time, the principle of tolerant exchange is continuous. This continuity is evident in our own time in the words of the late twentieth-century political philosopher, Michael Oakeshott, in whose writing conversation becomes a way of organising society:

In conversation the participants are not engaged in an enquiry or debate; there is no 'truth' to be discovered . . . they may differ without disagreeing . . . In conversation 'facts' appear only to be resolved once more into the possibilities from which they were made; 'certainties' are shown to be combustible, not only by

⁶⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Poems and Prose*, ed. T. Webb (London, 1995).

⁶⁹ M. de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (Harmondsworth, 1991), p. 1045.

⁷⁰ De Quincey, *The Art of Conversation*, pp. 178; 156.

being brought into contact with other 'certainties' or with doubts, but by being kindled by the presence of ideas of another order.⁷¹

Manfred is 'kindled by the presence of ideas of another order'. From Montaigne to Johnson to De Quincey to Oakeshott we can see that conversation preserves the charge of the erotic, the fanciful, the playful and the competitive. It is exciting because unpredictable and it captures the way Byron's 'flow of speculation' unfolds the uncertain, the probable and the doubtful within the certainty of rhyme. Conversation is a free market: 'There is no symposiarch or arbiter', says Oakeshott,⁷² but the exigency of rhyme is an arbitrary power: '(The rhyme obliges me to this; sometimes / Monarchs are less imperative than rhymes) —' Byron admits in *Don Juan* (V. 77).⁷³ From Canto VII onwards, Byron insistently places himself in an eclectic community of writers and thinkers whose 'talk' interferes with the smooth running of previously established systems. The poets and philosophers he selects are all discordant particles in society: 'Socrates said' (VII. 5); 'Ecclesiastes said' (VII. 6); 'I merely mean to say what Johnson said' (XVI. 16);

I say no more than has been said in Dante's
Verse, and by Solomon and by Cervantes;

By Swift, by Machiavel, by Rochefoucault,
By Fenelon, by Luther, and by Plato;
By Tillotson, and Wesley, and Rousseau,
Who knew this life was not worth a potato. (VII. 3–4)

Byron's editors have noted that Joseph Spence's *Observations, Anecdotes and Characters of Books and Men* is the source for Byron's Newton anecdote:

Newton (that Proverb of the Mind), alas!
Declared, with all his grand discoveries recent,

⁷¹ M. Oakeshott, *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind. An Essay* (London, 1959), p. 10.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Dryden suggested that refined conversation accompanied the return of the king, who 'traveling, and being conversant in the most polish'd courts of *Europe*; . . . At his return . . . waken'd the dull and heavy spirits of the *English*, from their natural reserv'dness: loosen'd them, from their stiff forms of conversation; and made them easy and pliant to each other in discourse' (J. Dryden, 'Defence of the Epilogue' (1672), in W. F. Bolton (ed.), *The English Language: Essays by English and American Men of Letters 1490–1839* (Cambridge, 1966), p. 68). For Dryden, conversation has a vital cosmopolitan part to play in releasing society from civil discord. His distinction between natural stiffness and artificial spontaneity gets to the core of Byron's formal experiments.

That he himself felt only 'like a youth
Picking up shells by the great Ocean—Truth.' (VII. 5)

As well as the content of the anecdote—its context is vital: it is what Newton *said* to someone; at one time it was brought up in conversation. The vitality of conversational flow makes it almost impossible to extract from Byron's long poems, and it means that critical pronouncements on isolated stanzas are often completely at odds. The last stanza of *Don Juan* Canto XV is an example of the sort of thing that has provoked discord among the critics:

Between two worlds life hovers like a star,
'Twixt night and morn, upon the horizon's verge:
How little do we know that which we are!
How less what we may be! The eternal surge
Of time and tide rolls on, and bears afar
Our bubbles; as the old burst, new emerge,
Lash'd from the foam of ages; while the graves
Of Empires heave but like some passing waves.

T. S. Eliot was derisive, seeing this as 'one of Byron's many sonorous affirmations of the commonplace with no depth of significance'.⁷⁴ Commenting on Eliot's essay, Peter Manning agreed that the lines were 'melodramatic' but also suggested that they evinced a 'fundamental unsettledness'.⁷⁵ Michael G. Cooke praised the stanza on the philosophic grounds that 'to stay afloat is credit in itself';⁷⁶ M. K. Joseph saw in the passage 'Byron's Augustan gist for giving new life to the great truisms'.⁷⁷ Although I would side with Joseph rather than Eliot on the effect of the stanza, Eliot's detection of 'fakery' and 'imposture' is not without cause.

It is significant that the 'Between two worlds' stanza comes after a rapid exchange with a questioning reader: 'Grim reader! Did you ever see a ghost?' In this guise, Byron insists on respect for 'That source of the sublime and the mysterious:— / For certain reasons my belief is serious.' He anticipates scornful laughter: 'Serious? You laugh.' In the five stanzas at the end of Canto XV, Byron sets up what we expect from dramatic monologue: a speaker who is not, exactly, the poet; a specific place and occasion ('The dying embers dwindle on the grate— / I think too that I have sat up too late'); an implied listener and the gradual revelation of

⁷⁴ Eliot, 'Byron', p. 263.

⁷⁵ Manning, *Reading Romantics: Text and Context*, p. 129.

⁷⁶ M. G. Cooke, *Acts of Inclusion* (New Haven, 1979), p. 233.

⁷⁷ M. K. Joseph, *Byron the Poet* (London, 1964), p. 233.

character: 'But you must be in my condition / Before you learn to call this superstition.' The 'Between two worlds' stanza articulates 'this condition'. It is a philosophical position that might be recognised as 'tired and emotional' or, as W. W. Robson would say, 'the histrionic profound'.⁷⁸ But it holds a few surprises: 'time and tide' is a cliché, but I think we falter on 'foam of ages' (surely that should be rock?). Originally Byron wrote lashed 'by the foam' of ages, but if we are lashed 'from the foam' of ages, we become the froth rather than leaving a trail of bubbles. Occurring where it does, 'foam of ages' is always oddly disconcerting—perhaps because of a subliminal association with saliva and the 'foam' of passionate speech—it is Swinburne who writes of Byron's 'debauched excesses of bad taste run mad and foaming at the mouth'.⁷⁹

Another way of pin-pointing the auditory effects of Byron's verse texture is to listen to Arnold's conversation with him in 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse'. Arnold's editors have pointed out that Byron's 'Between two worlds' stanza is probably the source for 'Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born'.⁸⁰ Acutely sensitive to the ebb and flow of Byron's lines, Arnold's alternating rhymes reach for and then relinquish the wonderful crests of Byron's lines 'verge', 'surge' and 'emerge', but he sustains and intensifies Byron's more muted cadence in the couplet: Arnold's voice is confirmed in its melancholy. When he immolates his generation in a dark forest: ('We are like children reared in shade')—there is another memory of the end of Byron's stanza:

Deep, deep the greenwood round them waves,
Their abbey, and its close of graves!

Arnold uses the same rhyme, but inverts the order. Instead of rolling on and bearing afar, Arnold's green depths well up and close over. Because of the buoyancy of the *ottava rima* and the life jacket of fictive personality with Byron's narrator we are waving, not drowning.

The same image of human transience sounds markedly different when voiced in blank verse by Caesar in *The Deformed Transformed*, the drama Byron was composing in parallel with *Don Juan* in 1822–3. This difference suggests that there is a much greater range and nuance to Byron's

⁷⁸ W. W. Robson, 'Byron and Sincerity' in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M. H. Abrams, 2nd edn. (London, 1975), pp. 275–302 (p. 296).

⁷⁹ A. C. Swinburne, *Miscellanies*, p. 78.

⁸⁰ K. and M. Allott (eds.), *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, 2nd edn. (London, 1979).

sceptical personae than has been allowed—partly because the creation of personality in verse is bound up with different forms:

They are gone,
And others come: so flows the wave on wave
Of what these creatures call eternity,
Deeming themselves the breakers of the ocean,
While they are but its bubbles, ignorant
That foam is their foundation. So another! (II. 3. 52–6)

Temporality is one of Byron's great themes, and his conversational medium its perfect vehicle, constantly aware of the physical act of drawing breath to get over enjambed line endings and aware too, that as the moment of reading passes, poet and reader leave nothing behind to account for their time together.

In *Don Juan* Canto XVI we are back in a gothic gallery lined with family portraits which 'Look living in the moon; and as you turn / backwards and forwards to the echoes faint / Of your own footsteps.' But it is a different occasion from the previous canto or the gothic gallery of *Manfred*; instead of the sagging philosopher before the fire who wishes that the portraits 'would not look so grim' (XV. 97), we now have a sardonic connoisseur:

And the pale smile of Beauties in the grave,
The charms of other days, in starlight gleams,
Glimmer on high; their buried locks still wave
Along the canvas; their eyes glance like dreams
On ours, or spars within some dusky cave,
But death is imaged in their shadowy beams.
A picture is the past; even ere its frame
Be gilt, who sate hath ceased to be the same. (XVI. 19)

This takes Byron's familiar *ubi sunt* mode and turns it for a specifically feminine context. It has been prepared for by the playful image of the ladies in Norman Abbey withdrawing for the night: 'The last thin petticoats were vanished, gone / Like fleecy clouds into the sky retired' (XVI. 8). They slip away very prettily, but the flow of stanza 19 recreates the way all of life and beauty is swallowed by passing time. In one of Byron's telling enjambements 'their buried locks still wave / Along the canvass': simultaneously mixed with clay but flowing on the surface of the picture. The awkward phonetic shifts from 'gleams' to 'glimmer', 'even' to 'ere', 'gilt' to 'sate', 'sate' to 'same' create a linguistic encroachment as everything slides towards the same yawning pit. But the gothic key does not prevail; it is interrupted by the sound of a mouse 'Whose little nibbling

rustle will embarrass / Most people as it plays along the arras' (XVI. 20). It is not a mouse, of course—it turns out to be a real live dead ghost—but the littleness of the interruption is important.

Byron was always mindful of 'insatiate' death, but an apprehension that he was racing towards his own grave seems to have intensified in 1822–3 as Juan turned towards the English society his creator had abandoned. In the later cantos of *Don Juan* and in his metaphysical dramas we can see Byron casting and recasting questions of connection and relationship, how big and little things, events and people come into contact. Questions he had earlier turned over as 'Detached Thoughts': 'how one man acts upon himself and others—or upon multitudes' and, 'what is poetry?' now become linked and urgent.⁸¹

In the last cantos of *Don Juan* a large cast of characters gathered in an English country house engages in different sorts of talk: Parliamentary orators, wits, voluble parsons, the professional conversationalist Kit Kat and members of feminine conversazione. They are all appalling in their efforts to control or dominate others and the society they form is as stiflingly predictable as their talk. Juan shines in this company; somehow on his travels he has become a brilliant conversationalist beloved of the ladies because—unlike most English men—he does not fall asleep just after dinner. He also possesses De Staël's supersensory tact in abundance:

But, light and airy, stood on the alert,
And shone in the best part of dialogue,
By humouring always what they might assert
And listening to the topics most in vogue. (XIV. 37)

The narrator watches Juan, aware that his performance as model interlocutor makes him tarnished, but aware too that like the much-travelled poet of Canto III, this fluency is another reflection of the poet's own art. Juan's artificiality is a warning about the dangerous appeal of polished language which comes just at the point when Byron is defending his own 'conversational facility': 'I rattle on exactly as I'd talk / With any body in a ride or walk' (XV. 19) he tells us in a beautifully cast couplet. The discipline of form and the screen of intermittent dramatic monologues are vital to Byron as ways of putting distance between himself and a mode of address that sounds too vulgar or insidiously chatty. The last cantos of *Don Juan* are—amongst other things—a stylistic answer to the unre-

⁸¹ *BLJ*, 9. 46; *BLJ*, 8. 37.

solved problem of how to fend off intimacy (Leigh Hunt; Teresa Guiccioli) without cutting all the ties of social responsibility.

From late 1822–3 we can hear a preoccupation with the tenor of communication in Byron's writing. Byron chides Murray's breaches of confidence in his refusal to hand over manuscripts to Hunt: 'as a tradesman and as a gentleman you are bound to be decent and courteous in your intercourse with all classes' (*Byron's Letters and Journals*, 10. 28); meanwhile, on the domestic front, Byron frets over relations with Lady Byron: 'both sides have hitherto proceeded as they did in the feudal times—where people used to shake hands with iron *gauntlets* or through a hole in the door—after being searched for concealed arms—by way of ascertaining the sincerity of their politeness' (*BLJ*, 10. 14). Accompanying this heightened sense of social obligation, there is a curious stocktaking of different sorts of friendship. Defending his treatment of Leigh Hunt to Mary Shelley, Byron wrote that, apart from his friendship with Lord Clare:

All my others are men-of-the-world friendships . . . I will do my duty by my intimates . . . I may be pleased with their conversation—rejoice in their success—be glad to do them service, or to receive their counsel and assistance in return. But as for friends and friendship . . . I have had, and may have still, a thousand friends, as they are called, in *life*, who are like one's partners in the waltz of this world—not much remembered when the ball is over. (*BLJ*, 10. 34)

Here Byron is borrowing from Isaac D'Israeli's notes on *The Literary Character*: 'Men of the world may look on each other with the same countenances, but not with the same hearts . . . the more they know one another, the less is their mutual esteem.'⁸² But, D'Israeli added in 1822, 'Literary friendships are marked by another peculiarity; the true philosophical spirit has learnt to bear that shock of contrary opinions which minds less meditative are unequal to encounter. [Men of genius] live in the unrestrained communication of their ideas, and confide even their caprices with a freedom which sometimes startles ordinary observers.'⁸³ Trying to come to terms with himself as a poet, it is only in 1822 that Byron can write to D'Israeli and offer to answer 'any questions which you would like to ask me as connected with your Philosophy of the literary Mind (*if mine be a literary mind*)' (*BLJ*, 9. 172). Searching for the right address for his readers of the present day and for posterity, Byron redefines the optimum conversational basis of friendship: 'a man and a

⁸² I. D'Israeli, *The Literary Character* (London, 1818), p. 276.

⁸³ D'Israeli, *The Literary Character*, 3rd edn., 2 vols. (London, 1822), 2. 171.

woman—make far better friendships than can exist between two of the same sex—but *then* with the condition—that they never have made—or are to make love with each other . . . Lovers . . . never can be friends—because there must always be a spice of jealousy—and a something of Self in all their speculations’ (*BLJ*, 10. 50).

‘We feel as if chosen out of a crowd of lovers’, Wilson had said about *Childe Harold* Canto IV; ‘I write only for the reader’, Byron sulked in 1821, ‘and care for nothing but the *silent* approbation of those who close one’s book with good humour and quiet contentment’ (*BLJ*, 8. 68). This stringent scrutiny of the tone in which readerly relationships are conducted is a vital part of Byron’s interrogation of the nature of poetry—a debate which runs throughout his career.⁸⁴ In a note to *Childe Harold* Canto III Byron reflected that: ‘The great error of Napoleon . . . was a continued obtrusion on mankind of his want of all community of feeling for or with them; perhaps more offensive to human vanity than the active cruelty of more trembling and suspicious tyranny.’⁸⁵ Byron likened himself to a grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme but, towards the end of his life, we can see him working out with furious intensity how the poet ought to relate to society. Byron’s ‘rattling on’ is not Coleridge’s luminous, resonant conversation, nor is it Hunt’s cosy chat. Byron is more cavalier, more strict and more distant—the verse form opens the channels of communication but screens the poet, keeping him at an uncertain remove from his readers and creating transient personalities, tintured objectivities that would preoccupy all the great dramatic monologists who followed.

Like no work before or after him, Byron’s poetry is poised between the wordless spell of music and the dissonant fray of conversation. He resisted all the attempts of his friends and publishers to pull him more securely into one world or the other. His poetry tells us that how we speak to one another makes us, not just what we are, as at the end of *The Prisoner of Chillon*, but that from moment to moment, poetry creates and tests the possibility of an ‘us’, a company that is decidedly ‘mixed’. The last tilt of Byron’s life was towards involvement: that involvement interrupted a conversation which most of us wish had been longer but we are lucky to have the restless works of art that he left behind.

⁸⁴ After addressing the English public as an ex-lover, Byron turns to posterity as a friend; not a man-of-the-world friend, but a feminine, literary friend. I think this goes some way to explaining Byron’s appeal to later nineteenth- and twentieth-century female critics.

⁸⁵ *Complete Poetical Works*, 2. 304.

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