

WARTON LECTURE

THE POETRY OF LORD BYRON

By JOHN BUXTON

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THOMAS WARTON, in whose memory this lecture was founded sixty years ago, was aware of a divergence of taste in the age in which he lived. The year after his pioneer *History of English Poetry*, vol. iii, was published he saw in the ante-chapel of New College the window which the Warden and Fellows had recently commissioned from Sir Joshua Reynolds, and he was moved to write some verses on the subject. The window is in Sir Joshua's best neo-classical manner: the figure of Charity derives from the Niobe in the Uffizi, which, with the Apollo Belvedere, Winckelmann had selected as perfect examples of that 'noble simplicity and calm grandeur' which he proclaimed to be the outstanding qualities of Greek art. Yet Warton could not conceal his regret that within this 'Gothic pile' such 'Grecian groupes' should displace

The Rows of Patriarchs, that sublimely rear'd,
Diffuse a proud primeval length of beard.

Gothic or Grecian: Thomas Warton's dilemma would continue (though not always in those categories) throughout the Romantic period. In no one was the conflict between Classical Sense and Romantic Sensibility more conspicuous than in Lord Byron, the 'Abbot' of Newstead who presided there over the revels of his monkishly-clad friends (for which he had a goblet fashioned out of a human skull), and the Liberator of Greece who designed a classical helmet to wear into battle; the creator of the potent myth of the Byronic Hero, and the man whose dominant characteristic, Disraeli said, was his 'solid common sense'. One might far extend this catalogue of paradoxes in the nature of the man, for he would apply to himself Dryden's line on Buckingham, who

Was every thing by starts, and nothing long;

but they must appear during an examination of his poetry. There, if anywhere, can the basic dogma of Romanticism,

Rousseau's 'the only interesting study is of myself', be justified, for Byron reveals a personality of such variety that he seems indeed to be

Not one, but all mankind's epitome.

Because this is so, we find in his later poetry an unique reconciliation of those conflicts; and the poet whom Goethe considered the greatest genius of the nineteenth century saw himself as the successor of Dryden and Pope rather than as the contemporary of Wordsworth and Keats.

Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope;
Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey,

were the first items in his Decalogue, from which any apostasy must be condemned. 'Pope', he once wrote to Moore, 'is a Greek Temple, with a Gothic Cathedral on one hand, and a Turkish Mosque and all sorts of fantastic pagodas and conventicles about him.'

Poets, like other men, need time to develop their full powers. However precocious, they are not likely to realize their best qualities at once. In Byron's earliest book of poems, privately printed at Newark when he was eighteen, there is a mixture of Augustan satire with Romantic sentiment. The expurgations which his friends advised resulted in the published volume, which came out a few months later, being more Romantic; but Byron soon followed this up with an Augustan satire, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. In this, his first major poem, he used the heroic couplet to assert his allegiance to Dryden and Pope against the Romantics—'the simple Wordsworth'

Who, both by precept and example, shows
That prose is verse, and verse is merely prose;

and 'gentle Coleridge' who, having addressed some serious *Lines to a Young Ass*, thereafter

brays, the Laureate of the long-eared kind.

Even in a poem where he was seeking vengeance for the harsh review in the *Edinburgh* of his juvenile volume Byron preferred to invite laughter at excessive solemnity rather than scorn at wickedness; but the classic medium for English satire is not equally well suited to comedy.

Byron's natural gift was for comedy, but there was no recent tradition of comedy except in the novel: the true progenitor of *Don Juan* is *Tom Jones*, a favourite with Byron. The introspective

character of Romanticism encouraged solemnity rather than comedy, since few people long enjoy laughing at themselves. For these and other reasons Byron needed a few years before he could realize his true genius in *Beppo* and *Don Juan* and *The Vision of Judgment*. But so rich was his poetic endowment that before that time came, even when he was deflected by that quality of his mind which he called 'mobility' into a Romanticism which he knew was false to his own nature, he achieved, at twenty-four, an instantaneous fame such as no other English poet has ever achieved.

Within four months of the publication of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* Byron set off on the Grand Tour. After visiting Portugal and Spain he went on, by Gibraltar and Malta, to the country which he knew as 'Albania' or 'Turkey' but which, thanks to him, we call Greece. There he began a poem of a different kind from any that he (or, for that matter, anyone else) had yet attempted, a poem which gave scope to his immediate responsiveness to experience, to his ability to make poetry without any Wordsworthian need for 'recollection in tranquillity'. *Childe Harold* was, as he said, 'written amidst the scenes which it attempts to describe'. Just so, later, *The Lament of Tasso* was 'written in consequence of my having been lately in Ferrara'—in fact, on the road from Ferrara to Florence; and when, in December 1820, an Italian commandant was murdered outside his door in Ravenna he promptly added to *Don Juan* V some stanzas describing the incident. This quick responsiveness was no less a quality of his character. 'My character', he wrote to Miss Milbanke while they were engaged, 'takes its colours . . . from the circumstances in which I am placed.' Byron was not unlike Lady Adeline Amundeville in *Don Juan* XVI. xcvi:

So well she acted all and every part
 By turns—with that vivacious versatility
 Which many people take for want of heart.
 They err—'tis merely what is called mobility,
 A thing of temperament and not of art,
 Though seeming so, from its supposed facility;
 And false, though true; for surely they're sincerest
 Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest.

'Mobility', Byron's own word for this quality, he defined in a foot-note to this stanza as 'an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions—at the same time without *losing* the past'. He could hardly have given a clearer insight into his own nature.

In Greece, Byron responded not only to the historic associations of such places as Delphi and Phyle and Marathon, he responded also to the modern Greeks, without any sentimental idealization of 'the descendants of Pericles and Plato'. 'I like the Greeks', he wrote in a letter at this time, 'I like the Greeks, who are plausible rascals, with all the Turkish vices, without their courage.' And he learnt Romaic so that he might talk with them. He did not disregard the splendour of the classical past in which his mind had been educated, but he found his understanding of Greek poetry enhanced by visiting the country where it was written.

Where'er we tread 'tis haunted, holy ground;
 No earth of thine is lost in vulgar mould,
 But one vast realm of Wonder spreads around,
 And all the Muse's tales seem truly told,
 Till the sense aches with gazing to behold
 The scenes our earliest dreams have dwelt upon;
 Each hill and dale, each deepening glen and wold
 Defies the power which crushed thy temples gone:
 Age shakes Athenae's tower, but spares gray Marathon.

He refused to allow reverence for the past to obscure his response to the present: those 'plausible rascals' were as worthy of his attention as their famous precursors. Thus the greatest of the Philhellenes was also the first to respond to that other, Byzantine, element in the Greek character implied in the word *ρωμιός*.

In his letters home from Greece Byron never referred to *Childe Harold*, and when he returned in July 1811 he had no great expectations for it. Within twenty-four hours of reaching London he had handed to his publisher the MS. of an Augustan 'imitation', *Hints from Horace*, but only when his friend Dallas, a day or two later, expressed surprise that he had written no more during two years' absence did Byron admit to a number of Spenserian stanzas: 'They are not worth troubling you with, but you shall have them all with you if you like.' Dallas took them home, read them, and, after consulting a friend, wrote to Byron: 'I would almost pledge my life on its advancing the reputation of your poetical powers, and of its gaining you great honour and regard.'

The immediate success of *Childe Harold* when it was published in March 1812 has led to doubts of the sincerity of Byron's diffidence about it. But this is to misunderstand him. His

preference was for the Augustan tradition; *Hints from Horace* was in that tradition, and he might hope that it would match the success of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, of which the fourth edition was already exhausted. He knew that he could succeed in that manner: 'satire is my forte', he told Dallas. He could not know that this very different poem would succeed. He had kept it as a sort of journal. He felt that he had been deflected from his natural course by the mobility of his response to unfamiliar experience. He was not sure that this deserved to be called poetry at all. What, he wondered, would William Gifford, the editor of the *Quarterly*, make of it? Gifford had praised *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*: if he could accept the sentiment of *Childe Harold* all would be well. Byron showed the poem to Samuel Rogers and Thomas Campbell, so anxious was he to have the approval of the upholders of the Augustan tradition. Gifford advised Murray to publish, and all was well.

'I awoke one morning and found myself famous': Byron's comment on the reception of *Childe Harold* is true, for, as Lord Holland said, it was the publication of this poem, and not his birth, that gave Byron the entrée to London society. We may therefore inquire what qualities in the poem so much appealed to the age. It is common form nowadays to find fault with it: the Spenserian stanza is too solemn, and invites absurd archaisms; the figure of the Childe is a theatrical pose assumed by Byron to astound his readers; and so forth. But the Spenserian stanza gave more room than the heroic couplet and was, as Byron said, an approach to Ariosto. Thomson had recently shown in *The Castle of Indolence* that it need not be solemn. The archaisms may be awkward, but no one objects to the archaisms in *The Ancient Mariner* or *The Eve of St Agnes*: if Byron's archaisms offend more than those of Coleridge or Keats it is because the vivid immediacy of his poem makes them seem out of place as they are not in Gothick fantasy. The character of the hero is no pose for, from the first, Byron said that the Childe was 'introduced for the sake of giving some connexion to the piece', and he continued to deny that it was a self-portrait until he grew bored with iteration. If his readers would insist that he was 'melancholish' he would amuse himself by acting the part for which they had cast him.

The identification of Byron with Childe Harold was a natural outcome of the Romantic movement which, by this time, had accustomed readers of poetry to look for self-revelation. Here was an opportunity for discovering the personality of a glamorous

young aristocrat 'whose ideas' (as Scott said) 'were fired by having seen, in distant scenes of difficulty and danger, the places whose very names are recorded in our bosoms as the shrines of ancient poetry'. Byron described a present-day Greece whose exotic character was in strong contrast with the classical past. This especially appealed to a taste that was weary of the cool rationalism of the eighteenth century: 'the public are orientalizing', said Byron. And we must remember that Wordsworth's *Prelude* was unknown to those who read *Childe Harold* in 1812. *The Prelude* was not published until 1850, the same year as *In Memoriam*: it had its effect in mid-Victorian England. But *Childe Harold* stimulated the taste of the great age of Romanticism. If Byron had written nothing else he would still be remembered as one of the great poets of that time. *Childe Harold*, not *Don Juan*, was the foundation of his fame in the nineteenth century and though the two cantos he wrote after he left England in 1816 contributed to this, as one may see in the work of Turner or of Berlioz, they were nevertheless a continuation of the poem that brought him fame.

Childe Harold is a poem of travel, and though Byron would have resumed it had he revisited Greece (as he intended) in 1813, he could hardly do so while at home in England. Here, he could exploit its success in a series of *Tales* where the adventures and loves of a Byronic Hero, a man of passion at odds with society, are shown in an Oriental (that is, a Levantine) setting. They are founded on his own experiences or on stories heard during his travels, and form a sort of anecdotal supplement to *Childe Harold*. They were, in fact, even more successful—more immediately successful than any other poems have ever been.

Byron wrote these *Tales* with great rapidity: *The Bride of Abydos* in less than a week, and *The Corsair* (which is nearly 1,900 lines long) he began on 18 December and finished on 31 December 1813. He knew that these poems were not what he should be writing. A few days before he began *The Corsair* he wrote to Leigh Hunt: 'I hate being *larmoyant*, and making a serious face among those who are cheerful.' And he put little value on poems which had cost so little effort: they 'cannot have stamina for permanent attention', he shrewdly admitted; and so it has proved. Yet, for a generation which can admire so Byronic a hero as Che Guevara, it seems odd that the *Tales* should be out of fashion.

If Byron was right to be sceptical about these poems, they

were not without their effect on his own poetic development, as Shelley understood. 'Byron', he wrote in the summer of 1822, 'touched a chord to which a million hearts responded, and the coarse music which he produced to please them disciplined him to the perfection to which he now approaches.' They taught Byron how to construct a narrative, to develop a character, to compose dialogue, which his earlier poems had not. They also allowed him to continue his experiments towards a satisfactory metrical form. In the dedication of *The Corsair* he has some pertinent things to say on this subject. *The Giaour* was in octosyllabic couplets, but only Scott, in Byron's opinion, had as yet triumphed over the 'fatal facility' of the form. Blank verse he, like Shelley, thought too difficult and therefore, again like Shelley, preferred the stanza of Spenser, which 'is perhaps too slow and dignified for narrative; though, I confess, it is the measure most after my own heart'. In *The Corsair* he returned to the heroic couplet, 'perhaps the best adapted measure to our language'; he admitted finding it more difficult than the Spenserian stanza, which was nearest to what he required. Thus, though the *Tales* might be exploiting the success of a greater work (as Shakespeare, with *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, exploited the success of Falstaff in *Henry IV*), they also contributed towards Byron's later poetry.

The Siege of Corinth and *Parisina* were published together on 7 February 1816. On 25 April, after signing the deed of separation from his wife, Byron left England for the continent. On 4 May he visited the field of Waterloo under the guidance of a Major Gordon. That evening Mrs. Gordon gave him her album, in which Scott had already written some lines on Waterloo, with a request that he should write something. Next morning Byron handed the album back to Mrs. Gordon: in it he had written the two opening stanzas (xvii, xviii) of the famous passage on Waterloo in *Childe Harold III*. In spite of all the turmoil of recent months Byron needed little more than a week abroad before he could resume his poem of travel.

He continued to write during his journey up the Rhine and through the months of summer by the Lake of Geneva. There he met Shelley who (he said) 'dosed him with Wordsworth', and to such effect that he was ready to claim that for him too

High mountains are a feeling.

However, Byron's common sense reasserted itself four stanzas later, with

But this is not my theme; and I return
To that which is immediate.

Byron and Shelley spent much time together and in spite of, or perhaps because of, the extreme contrast between their gifts, greatly respected each other. They made a Romantic pilgrimage by boat to the scenes described by Rousseau in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Byron, as usual, recorded his impressions at the time in *Childe Harold*, and when they were weather-bound for a couple of days at Ouchy he wrote *The Prisoner of Chillon* about the castle which they had visited the previous day.

We may compare Byron's gift for turning experience immediately into poetry with that of the painter who selects significant detail from the scene before his eyes and shapes it there and then into a work of art. Turner, following in Byron's footsteps a few years later, found in him inspiration 'so compelling, that . . . he endeavoured, as far as in him lay, to delineate the whole mind of Byron'. And Turner himself gave the lead to a host of lesser artists, who would pause in their Byronic pilgrimages to paint 'the castled crag of Drachenfels' or 'Ehrenbreitstein with her shattered wall', or, like Turner, taking their cue from *Childe Harold IV*, 'Sunset over Venice', and 'The Bridge of Sighs'. For that fourth canto, published in the spring of 1818, opened the eyes of English painters, Turner the first among them, already in 1819, to the romantic beauty of Venice. The classical and neo-classical enthusiasms of the eighteenth century had sent most of the English to Rome or Naples or Florence, but Venice was neglected.

In the autumn of 1816 Shelley, whom Byron had entrusted with the MS. of *Childe Harold III* to take back to England, wrote to urge him to undertake some larger and more coherent theme. What that might be he would not presume to suggest. 'I only know that your powers are astonishingly great, and that they ought to be exerted to their full extent.' Byron had shown this in poems he had already written with so little exertion, and Shelley felt, like other friends, that Byron had the power to write a poem 'which shall bear the same relation to this age as the "Iliad", the "Divina Commedia", and "Paradise Lost" did to theirs'. Gifford also had been urging Byron to undertake a greater work. Besides, Shelley knew from his recent intimacy with Byron that despondency was not characteristic of the man. Byron himself knew this. In a letter to Moore, 10 March 1817, he protested: 'I was not, and, indeed, am not even *now*, the misanthropical and gloomy gentleman [Jeffrey] takes me for,

but a facetious companion . . . and as loquacious and laughing as if I were a much cleverer fellow.' But he added, 'I suppose now I shall never be able to shake off my sables in public imagination.'

That was a candid recognition of the problem: how to escape from the bondage of his early fame, founded as it was in Romantic pessimism; how to write poetry that was facetious, loquacious, and laughing. How was he to find a form that would make accessible the Byron who delighted his friends with the wit and gaiety and good humour of his conversation, or of his letters? For indeed the nearer his poetic manner approaches that of his letters the better it becomes. The day before he wrote the letter to Moore from which I have just quoted he had written to Murray, referring to the recently completed *Manfred*: 'It is too much in my old style. . . . I certainly am a devil of a mannerist, and must leave off.' And six months later, when he had just finished *Childe Harold IV*, he wrote again to Murray: 'With regard to poetry in general, I am convinced, the more I think of it that . . . all of us, Scott, Southey, Wordsworth, Moore, Campbell, I,—are all in the wrong, one as much as another; that we are upon a wrong revolutionary poetical system, or systems, not worth a damn in itself, and from which none but Rogers and Crabbe are free.' Those two, Rogers and Crabbe, he called 'the postscript of the Augustans'. Clearly at this time Byron had been giving much thought to his own future as a poet, and the clue that was to lead him from the gloomy labyrinth of Romantic sentiment came into his hands in the late summer of this year, 1817, shortly after he finished *Childe Harold IV*.

This was a poem entitled

Prospectus and Specimen of an Intended National Work, by William and Robert Whistlecraft, of Stow-Market, in Suffolk, Harness and Collar Makers. Intended to comprise the Most Interesting Particulars relating to King Arthur and his Round Table.

The title alone would have reminded Byron of the somewhat pompous encouragement towards Epic with which his friends had been favouring him. But the most important features of the poem for Byron were its racy colloquial diction, and its use of *ottava rima* for comedy. Byron knew the form well in Italian, but he needed Frere (whom he immediately identified as the author) to suggest what might be made of it in English.

Byron wasted no time. On 29 August the husband of his

current mistress, Marianna Segati, told him and Hobhouse, who was on a visit, the anecdote which was to form the plot, or rather, the substratum, of *Beppo*. On 6 September he began this latest of his *Tales* and on 12 October he wrote to tell Murray: 'I have written a poem . . . in or after the excellent manner of Mr. Whistlecraft . . . on a Venetian anecdote which amused me.' (It had shocked Hobhouse.) Six months later he promised to follow up the experiment if it proved a success. 'It will, at any rate, show that I can write cheerfully, and repel the charge of monotony and mannerism.' Byron had shaken off his sables.

The *ottava rima* stanza was exactly the medium Byron had been looking for. It gave him as much room as the Spenserian stanza to be discursive in, but it also provided, in the final couplet, an opportunity for epigrammatic concision. For him it was a compromise between the Spenserian stanza and the heroic couplet. His self-confident ease in the form is at once apparent, most of all when he uses the stanza to comment on the stanza.

To turn,—and to return;—the Devil take it!
 This story slips for ever through my fingers,
 Because, just as the stanza likes to make it,
 It needs must be—and so it rather lingers;
 This form of verse began, I can't well break it,
 But must keep time and tune like public singers;
 But if I once get through my present measure,
 I'll take another when I'm next at leisure.

(Ixiii)

(In *Don Juan* he would show his virtuosity in the form by the brilliance of his rhyming, and by composing a prescription, or a menu, in *ottava rima*.) The stanza allows him to digress humorously in his own person instead of with rhetorical apostrophe, as in *Childe Harold*; to replace that 'misanthropical and gloomy gentleman' with the 'facetious companion' his friends knew; it allows him at last to become the comic poet he was born to be, and to

rattle on, exactly as I'd talk
 With anybody in a ride or walk.

In fact he very seldom rattled on in English now except with his valet 'the learned Fletcher'—'and his is *Nottinghamshire*'—yet he had found the means to convey a selection of the language really used by Byron.

Thus Laura, when she has recovered from the shock of Beppo's revelation that he is her long-absent husband, speaks with all the vivacity and inconsequent opportunism of one of Byron's Venetian mistresses talking herself out of a compromising situation.

Beppo! what's your pagan name?
 Bless me, your beard is of amazing growth!
 And how came you to keep away so long?
 Are you not sensible 'twas very wrong?
 And are you *really, truly*, now a Turk?
 With any other women did you wive?
 Is't true they use their fingers for a fork?
 Well, that's the prettiest Shawl—as I'm alive!
 You'll give it me? They say you eat no pork.
 And how so many years did you contrive
 To—Bless me! did I ever? No, I never
 Saw a man grown so yellow! How's your liver?

And she concludes with

How short your hair is! Lord! how grey it's grown!

After that, over a cup of coffee with Laura and her *cavalier's servente*, Beppo capitulates.

Beppo is in the sequence of *Tales* that Byron wrote to supplement *Childe Harold*: a Venetian Tale for canto IV to match the Turkish Tales for canto II and *The Prisoner of Chillon* for canto III. But it is also the first true comedy by the poet whose only rivals here are Chaucer and Shakespeare, and in it he declares his final preference for comedy over satire:

I fear I have a little turn for Satire
 And yet methinks the older that one grows
 Inclines us more to laugh than scold.

Even in his early satire there had been signs of this, and now, ten years later, at the age of twenty-nine, he knew what he must do.

There could be no return to *Childe Harold's* melancholy though nearly a year would pass before Byron began the larger poem in the manner of *Beppo* which he promised. Indeed, when Shelley came to visit him in Venice in August 1818 the poetry uppermost in his mind was *Childe Harold IV*, of which 'he repeated some stanzas of great energy' to Shelley as they rode together on the Lido. Since its publication in April Byron had been writing his *Memoirs*, of which he also spoke to Shelley. But

three days later he wrote to tell Murray that he was discontented with them. Shelley now reminded Byron of his earlier advice to concentrate his powers on some great work. Byron always respected Shelley's critical judgment and, realizing that the manner of *Beppo* must replace his earlier manner, almost immediately began *Don Juan*. A fortnight later he read to Shelley what he had already written, and Shelley at once realized that Byron had discovered the means to exert his full powers.

The arrival in London of the MS. of the two first cantos caused some consternation among Byron's friends, as he had warned Murray to expect. Hobhouse's anxious prudery continued, and was rebuked: if he wants indelicacy 'let him read Swift, his great Idol', in *Gulliver's Travels* he would find 'grossness without passion and misanthropy without feeling'. When Douglas Kinnaird joined the chorus of protest: 'As to *Don Juan*', wrote Byron, 'confess, 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*?' (There is much more, but Byron was not wishing to spare Kinnaird's blushes. . . .) *Don Juan* is as vivid and varied as life, as life lived by Lord Byron, as life observed by Lord Byron with that undeflectable honesty which characterizes the greatest—perhaps only the greatest—writers. Since the function of literature is to extend our imaginative understanding of human life, it must be the extent of experience within reach of a poet's imagination that gives him his stature. Ruskin ranked Byron with Homer and Milton as the most universal of poets. Or, like Chaucer and Shakespeare, who might also claim that description, Byron delighted to observe life as it really is, and to describe it, with compassion, certainly, but without any concealment of human folly. That is why to Byron the great enemy was Cant—the pretence to be other than we are. This he would mock wherever it appeared, in morals, in society, in literature. The Revd. W. L. Bowles aroused his derision by prating about 'invariable principles of poetry', Leigh Hunt by referring to his 'system'. 'When a man talks about his system', said Byron, 'it is like a woman talking about her virtue. I let them talk.'

In two respects *Don Juan* follows *Childe Harold*: Byron constructs both poems about the framework of a journey, and in both he presents a fictitious hero alongside a personal narrator. For the hero of *Don Juan*, instead of the guilt-stricken, melancholy Childe we have someone who is neither guilt-stricken nor

melancholy but rather *l'homme moyen sensuel*. The narrator is Byron, the ironic, tender, humorous, tolerant observer of the human comedy, someone not unlike Fielding for whom also 'affectation [was] the only true source of the ridiculous'. Thus Byron gets the whole of himself into the poem: the Romantic liberal with his sympathy for the oppressed, his humanitarianism, his pacifism, his passion for liberty of thought, but also the Whig aristocrat who could smile at the incongruity in his possession of such ideals.

'Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps', Hazlitt says, 'for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be.' At the end of *Childe Harold* Byron confronts this duality with defiance:

Our life is a false nature—'tis not in
The harmony of things,

he wrote,

Yet let us ponder boldly—'tis a base
Abandonment of reason to resign
Our right of thought—our last any only place
Of refuge.

There the conflict had seemed inescapable. In *Don Juan* he is less scornful, and more compassionate, able to reconcile the disharmony in man's nature through the saving power of comedy, for

If I laugh at any mortal thing
'Tis that I may not weep.

As in himself Augustan and Romantic existed side by side, so in *Don Juan* he discovered that sensibility could be accepted with humour instead of with a gloomy and reluctant surrender.

The anxiety of Byron's friends in England about the reception of *Don Juan* proved unnecessary. Though published anonymously it was at once recognized as Byron's and soon repeated the success of the earlier poems. Comparison with *Childe Harold* was inevitable. When Byron told Teresa Guiccioli that he 'suspected it would live longer than *Childe Harold*', she replied, 'Ah but I would rather have the fame of *Childe Harold* for three years than an immortality of *Don Juan*.' Her real objection, as Byron saw, was 'that it is too true, and the women hate everything that strips off the tinsel of *Sentiment*'. But its more robust readers had no doubts. The author of a *Letter to Lord Byron*, by *John Bull*, 1821, advised him: 'Stick to *Don Juan* . . . it will live

many years after all your humbug Harolds have ceased to be, in your own words, "a school-girl's tale, the wonder of an hour".'

This was Byron's opinion and he continued to defend his poem against the charges of indelicacy and plagiarism and so forth. As for plagiarism, 'I laugh at such charges, convinced that no writer ever borrowed less, or made his materials more his own.' Even where he borrows most, as in his account of the Siege of Ismail (cantos VII and VIII) he borrows as Dryden said Ben Jonson borrowed: 'He invades authors like a monarch; and what would be theft in other poets, is only victory in him.' If these two cantos make less appeal than the rest of the poem it is not because they derive from written sources, but because Byron's sense of the cruelty and shame of war turned them from comedy to satire, so that they lack the gay good humour of the whole. One might compare Byron's treatment of Southey in the dedication of *Don Juan* (which he suppressed) with his good-humoured mockery in *The Vision of Judgment*. Not that provoking laughter at Southey's expense was less effective than satire—it was far more so; but Byron's genius was at its best when he could be detached, when he could say 'Lord! what fools these mortals be!' without any wish to go on and say 'But need they be *such* fools?'

That is why *Don Juan* has room for so much. There is the mocking portrait in Donna Inez of Annabella, his 'Princess of Parallelograms':

Oh! she was perfect past all parallel
Of any modern female saint's comparison;
So far above the cunning powers of Hell,
Her Guardian Angel had given up his garrison;
Even her minutest motions went as well
As those of the best time-piece made by Harrison:
In virtues nothing earthly could surpass her,
Save thine 'incomparable oil' Macassar!

There is Inez' friend, the twenty-three-year-old Julia, whose initiation of the sixteen-year-old Juan into the mysteries of love is no less tender than amusing:

One hand on Juan's carelessly was thrown,
Quite by mistake—she thought it was her own.

And so to,

And Julia's voice was lost, except in sighs,
Until too late for useful conversation;

The tears were gushing from her gentle eyes,
 I wish, indeed, they had not had occasion;
 But who, alas! can love, and then be wise?
 Not that Remorse did not oppose Temptation;
 A little still she strove, and much repented,
 And whispering 'I will ne'er consent'—consented.

A few months later the same Julia hurls a passionate tirade against her suspicious husband when, accompanied by his attorney, he breaks into her bedroom; a little later still the same Julia—and we never doubt that it is the same—writes from her convent a pathetic letter of farewell to Juan.

Juan's next affair, with the Greek Haidee, is the most idyllic love-story in Romantic poetry, with a tragic ending that Byron treats with tender pathos. And so Juan passes through a series of adventures, amatory and other, 'a quick succession of fun and gravity', until he reaches England, where he 'was received into the best society'. There follows an incomparable picture of that society of Regency England in which, for four years, Byron had been the most celebrated 'lion',

A ball-room bard, a foolscap, hot-press darling
 To hear the compliments of many a bore,
 And sigh 'I can't get out', like Yorick's starling.

In Italy, Byron said, there was nothing that an Englishman would call 'society', and therefore no comedy 'because they have no society to draw it from'. So the most sustained comedy in *Don Juan* comes in the last six or seven cantos, from the moment when Juan surveys London from Shooter's Hill until he joins the house-party in the setting of Newstead Abbey, whose walls are adorned, among other portraits, with

Some beauties of Sir Peter Lely
 Whose drapery hints we may admire them freely.

Juan takes part in the usual round of country-house life: he hunts (and inquires 'if men ever hunted twice'), attends a political dinner, is introduced to an eligible debutante, and lastly is beset by the family ghost which, on investigation, proves to be

In full, voluptuous, but not o'ergrown bulk,
 The phantom of her frolic Grace, Fitz-Fulke.

The youthful fooleries in which Byron had indulged with his friends at Newstead had led him, prompted by the unholy

alliance of a conscience trained by Calvin with a *Zeitgeist* raised by Rousseau, to claim in *Childe Harold* that, at twenty-one, he through sin's long labyrinth had run. Now, in *Don Juan*, he could look back to Newstead and to English society, with a certain nostalgia, perhaps, but also with the humorous detachment of a Whig aristocrat who was also, in the general opinion, the foremost poet of his age.

Byron knew that he was so regarded, and he expected, as he wrote in *Childe Harold IV*, to be

remembered in my line*
With my land's language.

Yet, like the aristocratic poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, 'the mob of gentlemen' to whom he had compared himself in the preface to his first published book, he never thought of poetry as his primary vocation. Had he lived the few years more to witness the Independence of Greece he would certainly have regarded that as a finer achievement than *Don Juan*. He wrote no more of the poem after he sailed for Greece, nor did he add to *Childe Harold*: the two serial poems to which he had constantly returned during the fourteen years since he came of age were laid aside. But in the last verses he ever wrote, at Mesolonghi, on his thirty-sixth birthday, he addressed himself, as he would sometimes do when with his friends:

Awake! (not Greece—she *is* awake!)
Awake my spirit! Think through *whom*
Thy life-blood tracks its parent lake,
And then strike home!

Seek out—less often sought than found—
A soldier's grave, for thee the best;
Then look around, and choose thy ground,
And take thy Rest.

* The line of the Byrons.