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Author(s): Jean Hall

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The Evolution of the Surface Self: Byron's Poetic Career

JEAN HALL

IN 1814 Byron wrote in his journal, "When I am tired—as I generally am—out comes this, and down goes every thing. But I can't read it over;—and God knows what contradictions it may contain. If I am sincere with myself (but I fear one lies more to one's self than to any one else), every page should confute, refute, and utterly abjure its predecessor."¹ The personal inconsistency he confesses to here was frequently commented on by others. Lady Blessington, who knew Byron well during his later years in Italy, gives a particularly vivid account of it:

Byron seems to take a peculiar pleasure in ridiculing sentiment and romantic feelings; and yet the day after will betray both, to an extent that appears impossible to be sincere, to those who had heard his previous sarcasms: that he is sincere, is evident, as his eyes fill with tears, his voice becomes tremulous, and his whole manner evinces that he feels what he says. All this appears so inconsistent, that it destroys sympathy, or if it does not quite do that, it makes one angry with oneself for giving way to it for one who is never two days of the same way of thinking, or at least expressing himself. He talks for effect, likes to excite astonishment, and certainly destroys in the minds of his auditors all confidence in his stability of character.²

Lady Blessington can feel no assurance of Byron's "stability of character." She suggests that his inconsistency includes not only a puzzling changeability of mood but also an unpredictable alteration of attitude from

1. *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, III, 1813–1814 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 233: entry for Monday, 6 December 1814.

2. *Lady Blessington's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 33.

sincerity to performance, and from true belief to sarcasm or irony. Byron's personality appears to be a dazzling succession of parts that do not cohere.

This conspicuous lack of personal wholeness is reflected in his poetry, which throughout his career displays a huge variety of postures and tones. Byron's incessant mobility seems to place him apart from the other Romantic poets, who value personal consistency and identity and work to achieve a sense of wholeness in their poetry. Indeed, the difference is so marked that Byron sometimes has been considered not a Romantic poet at all.³ I shall argue for Byron as a Romantic, albeit a perverse one, on the grounds that he shares categorical assumptions about wholeness with his contemporaries. Briefly put, Byron as well as the others assumes that personal identity results from the turn toward innerness, the creation of an interior poetic world that builds the core of selfhood. In this view personality becomes an affair of depth, not surface; of integrity, not display. Where the other Romantics believe that this turn toward innerness is both possible and desirable, Byron tends to doubt both the feasibility and attractiveness of the interior self. He tends to avoid self-exploration because it appears to him a futile process, an exercise in self-delusion. If the true interior self is an impossibility, then he prefers to turn his efforts outward and at least enjoy the pleasures of activity in the world. By tracing Byron's attempts to establish selfhood in some of the major poems of his career, this essay will sketch the main outlines of the Byronic surface self.⁴

Byron frequently sees adult innerness as impossible because he assumes

3. M. H. Abrams excludes Byron from his discussion of Romanticism in *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), because Byron "in his greatest work . . . speaks with an ironic counter-voice and deliberately opens a satirical perspective on the vatic stance of his Romantic contemporaries" (p. 13). See also "On Byron," *Studies in Romanticism*, 16 (1977), 563–587. This exchange between George M. Ridenour, for the Romantic Byron, and Jerome J. McGann for the anti-Romantic, was stimulated by Ridenour's reaction to McGann's *Don Juan in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

4. Critics disagree over the question of Byron's identity, or lack of it. Three of the best arguments for Byron's personal hollowness are Paul West's *Byron and the Spoiler's Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960), John Wain's "Byron: the Search for Identity" in his *Essays on Literature and Ideas* (London: Macmillan, 1963), and Philip W. Martin's *Byron: a poet before his public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Two approaches that trace the evolution of Byron's poetic identity are Jerome J. McGann's *Fierce Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) and Robert F. Gleckner's *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967).

that as children we were originally whole but we experience growth as an inevitable loss of this integrity. Wordsworth too sees the child's growth into adulthood as a kind of loss, but he regards the making of poetry as a satisfactory adult compensation. Poetry reconstitutes the child's active, exterior wholeness in a profound and powerful inner form. Here Byron demurs: for him poetry is usually not an integrative activity but a diversion, a form of escape from self. Unlike the other Romantics Byron often does not want to turn within himself, for he fears he will not like what he finds there. As he said of his versifying, "To withdraw *myself* from *myself* . . . has ever been my sole, my entire, my sincere motive in scribbling at all; and publishing is also the continuance of the same object, by the action it affords the mind, which else recoils upon itself."⁵ But if poetry can offer the pleasures of self-escape, it does so at the price of increased personal fragmentation. For the more Byron evades himself, the more completely he is lost. And this becomes the penalty of any kind of activity: when the fragmented self is roused to action, the outcome must be accelerated fragmentation, in the form of increased superficiality. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Byron images this degenerative process in the form of a shattered mirror that multiplies the reflection of an originally single image, splintering the whole into a proliferating series of parts. The mirror

makes

A thousand images of one that was,
The same, and still the more, the more it breaks;
And thus the heart will do which not forsakes,
Living in shattered guise.⁶

Thus, as the self becomes more various it also becomes more superficial. The image of one surface is exchanged for the reflection of untold thousands. At times Byron can live with this condition cheerfully, taking delight in the virtuosity of his poetic performances and scoffing at writers who aspire to meaningfulness and profundity. But in Canto III of *Childe*

5. *Byron's Letters and Journals*, III, 225; entry from Byron's journal, Saturday, 27 November 1813.

6. Canto III, stanza 33. The poetry is quoted from *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), except for *Don Juan*, where I cite Leslie Marchand's edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958).

Harold's Pilgrimage he tries to achieve depth by writing Wordsworthian nature poetry. Of course, this attempt at profundity may be superficially motivated, for he is both mimicking another poet's style and responding to pressures from the outside—at the time Shelley was urging him to write this sort of poetry.⁷ Nevertheless, for a person of Byron's temperament the poetry of depth may have held a great attraction: meditative innerness and its literary form, the self-contained organic poem, could have provided boundaries that organized the self and stilled its incessant, confusing mobility. If he could not bear to look into himself, possibly he could achieve coherence by looking into Wordsworthian nature. Perhaps "true Wisdom's world will be / Within its own creation, or in thine, / Maternal Nature!" (III, 46).

The embodiment of these hopes becomes Lake Leman, a perfectly still, mirrorlike body of water which, like Thoreau's Walden Pond, is centered in the heart of nature. By its shores,

All heaven and earth are still—though not in sleep,
But breathless, as we grow when feeling most;
And silent, as we stand in thoughts too deep:—
All heaven and earth are still.

In this place of quiet fullness, motion is suppressed to create the soul of poet and of nature.

All is centered in a life intense,
Where not a beam, nor air, nor leaf is lost,
But hath a part of being. (III, 89)

The parts unite in the whole, brought together by a meditative centering

7. For an analysis of Byron's employment of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Rousseau in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto III, as a diversion from his sense of personal hollowness rather than as an approach to authentic Romantic identification with nature, see Philip Martin's discussion of the canto in *Byron: a poet before his public*. Wordsworth himself seems to have felt that Byron's enthusiasm for nature was derivative. In his *Memoirs*, Moore tells of a visit Wordsworth paid to him in October 1821: Wordsworth "spoke of Byron's plagiarisms from him; the whole third canto of "Childe Harold" founded on his style and sentiments. The feeling of natural objects which is there expressed, not caught by B. from nature herself, but from him (Wordsworth), and spoiled in the transmission. "Tintern Abbey" the source of it all; from which same poem too the celebrated passage about Solitude, in the first canto of "Childe Harold," is (he said) taken, with this difference, that what is naturally expressed by him, has been worked by Byron into a laboured and antithetical sort of declamation" (ed. John Russell [Boston: Little, Brown, 1853], III, 161).

of everything in the world which works toward the realization of spirit. "Then stirs the feeling infinite" (III, 90).

Byron is deeply attracted to this version of infinity, for it transcends not only the individuality of leaf, beam, and air, but also that of the poet's mind. The moment of being "purified from self" (III, 90), breaks the bonds of egotism to create a transpersonal, all-uniting reality. For Byron the achievement of depth offers an escape from self, an annihilation that converts Wordsworthian innerness into yet another form of Byronic surface. And even if he had found it possible to center self in nature, the Lake Lemman passage suggests that Byron would have experienced this still profundity not as fulfilling, but as boring. Transcendental stillness permeates Lake Lemman but a moment; almost immediately Byron finds it necessary to shatter this quiet by imagining a splendid storm approaching over the Alps. Wordsworthian calm has constrained his native mobility, and he must find relief through a vision of unsuppressed energy. The tempest is "wondrous strong, / Yet lovely in your strength . . . let me be / A sharer in thy fierce and far delight" (III, 92–93). But he cannot help realizing the flaw in the storm's magnificence: "But where of ye, oh tempests! is the goal?" (III, 96). The storm's drive, like the poet's own energies, is superficial motion, a splendid display without an interior purpose. And Byron reflects on his own ceaseless flow of words—"Could I embody and unbosom now / That which is most within me . . . into *one* word, / And that one word were Lightning, I would speak" (III, 97). The self-containment of the organic poem might center the self and allow it to utter its identity in one word—but this is an achievement impossible for Byron.

Transcendental stillness having proven unsatisfactory, Byron considers the opposite posture—heroic mobility. Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* mediates on the fate of great men, men of action who make an impact upon the world. Like the superb storm over Lake Lemman, such men seem to him splendid forces of nature. Napoleon becomes Byron's prime example. A man of mobility, an inconsistent "spirit antithetically mixt" and "Extreme in all things" (III, 36), Napoleon bestrides the world but finds that he cannot rule his self:

An empire thou couldst crush, command, rebuild,

But govern not thy pettiest passion, nor,
However deeply in men's spirits skill'd,
Look through thine own, nor curb the lust of war. (III, 38)

Napoleon's energy recoils against itself because his heroic mobility makes self-knowledge impossible. The same energy that fuels his victories becomes a "fever at the core, / Fatal to him who bears," a "fire / And motion of the soul . . . once kindled, quenchless evermore" (III, 42). Unable to look into himself, Napoleon becomes a driven soul, a compulsive activist who moves on helplessly from conquest to conquest, finally turning his heroism to villainy, his creative social effort to destruction. In his hands revolution degenerates into reaction; and now the vast European populations he has stirred up turn on him, reciprocating his aggressions with a popular outpouring of wrath. "He who surpasses or subdues mankind, / Must look down on the hate of those below" (III, 45). The collisions that fragment the great soul disease the social fabric and produce the mob, the "hot throng" that jostles and collides in endlessly irritating motion, causing the mind to "overboil" so that we "become the spoil / Of our infection . . . / In wretched interchange of wrong for wrong / 'Midst a contentious world" (III, 69). To be a man of action is to be an infected soul, and to be in collision with others. They all "join the crushing crowd, doom'd to inflict or bear" (III, 71).

The turn toward the outside represented by Napoleon's heroic activism produces chaos. Personal mobility gives rise to social collision, demonstrating that great spirits "antithetically mixt" can destroy not only themselves, but also the world. To contain these dangers and yet preserve the option of heroic mobility, Byron contemplates the notion of poetic heroism. His example is Rousseau, a hero of the imagination who glorified "ideal beauty" (III, 78). But in confining his activism to the realm of the imaginary, Rousseau does not succeed in protecting either himself or his audience. Quite the contrary: instead of satisfying human passions, Rousseau's flights of imagination artificially inflate desire, build up a terrific longing that makes any human satisfaction impossible. Instead of liberating man from life and preserving his peace, Rousseau's poetry of eternal pursuit and eternal unfulfillment drives him mad. It exaggerates the disruptive process of ordinary living, producing a

disease larger than life. Like Napoleon, Rousseau becomes a carrier of infection, a poet whose words precipitate dreadful actions—they “set the world in flame, / Nor ceased to burn till kingdoms were no more: / Did he not this for France?” (III, 81). Rousseau inspires his audience with revolutionary desires so tremendous as to be unfulfillable, and the result is a bloodbath. In spite of himself he becomes a man of action working in concert with Napoleon, and the readers of his poetry become the mob. Far from preventing violence, the case of Rousseau suggests that poetry may fuel it.

In drawing a parallel between Napoleon and Rousseau, Byron recognizes that poetry is not always the harmless, escapist activity he often wishes it to be. Nevertheless the conclusion of Canto III reverts to the escapist posture, suggesting that “these words” may be “a harmless wile, — / . . . Which I would seize, in passing, to beguile / My breast, or that of others, for a while” (III, 112). Perhaps, then, the perfect solution for Byron’s contradictory needs is a poetry of maximum mobility and forcefulness and yet minimum effect—a poetry that appears to be powerful but actually has no impact on the world. These requirements could be met by a poetry of superficial power, a dazzling poetry that implies the existence of innerness and depth without actually creating it. And thus the Byronic hero is born. This figure is repeated over and over again in the *Turkish Tales*, which are escapist works because they present a hero who feigns profound innerness without actually possessing it. Like Napoleon and Rousseau, and like Byron himself, the Byronic hero is always a figure “antithetically mixt,” a man of extraordinary but self-confounding energy whose personal wholeness has been shattered by some dark action in the past. He responds to fragmentation by displaying a cold, firm, silent posture toward the world. “Prometheus” conveniently summarizes this attitude: Byron sees in the Titan “A silent suffering, and intense,” a “patient energy,” the “endurance, and repulse / Of thine impenetrable Spirit” (lines 6, 40–42).⁸

8. There is disagreement over the literary merit of Byron’s heroic poetry. For a defense of the *Turkish Tales* see Robert F. Gleckner’s *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* and Jerome J. McGann’s *Fierce Dust: Byron’s Poetic Development*. For a sympathetic approach to the Byronic hero, see McGann’s *Don Juan in Context*, Chaps. 2, 3, and 4; also Peter L. Thorslev Jr.’s *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962). Attacks on Byronic heroism include John Jump’s chapter on “Heroes and Rhetoric, 1812–1818” in his *Byron* (London and Boston:

Byron creates a poetry of glittering surface, a heroic rigidity that exists for the purpose of being seen. He feigns interior resonance through a clenched posture, an attitude that identifies heroism with the resolve to never change. Militant implacability, not growth of the mind, becomes the value promoted by Byron's heroism. By his spectacular suffering the Byronic hero elevates himself above the throng, so that he can be properly wondered at. His armored public posture isolates him, suggests his superiority, creates an outlet for the energy of his hostilities—but it does not produce innerness, soul.

But if the Byronic hero is a superficial figure, at any rate he does share one characteristic with the Romantic poetry of depth: both Byronic heroism and the organic poem establish boundaries in order to produce identity. The self-containment of the organic poem permits the creation of Romantic wholeness, and it is this wholeness that the rigidly isolated Byronic hero mimics. The Byronic hero exaggerates normal Romantic practices by an absolute separation of innerness from outerness. Where the Wordsworthian poem is bounded but nevertheless permeable, allowing interchange between the poet's mind and nature, Byronic innerness is impermeable—and, therefore, conveniently inaccessible. The Byronic hero can only be observed from the outside, and so his inner life can only be inferred. In this figure Byron has discovered a superficial method of feigning depth, a kind of inversion of the organic poem.

"The Prisoner of Chillon" becomes an important commentary on the Turkish Tales, for it seriously explores the effects of absolute self-contain-

Routledge, 1972), and Andrew Rutherford's chapter on the Turkish Tales, "Romantic Fantasy," in *Byron: A Critical Study* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961). The most interesting criticism of the Turkish Tales is Philip W. Martin's chapter in *Byron: a poet before his public*, which sees the heroic poetry as providing a sense of gentility for the rising middle-class Regency public at the same time that it gives Byron a sense of independence from middle-class values. Daniel P. Watkins suggests that *The Giaour* offers an attack on idealism "for its absolutist element that cannot accommodate the changes, contradictions, and transience of everyday life." See "Idealism in Byron's 'The Giaour,'" *The University of Southern Florida Language Quarterly* 19 (1981), 32–33. Although I do not find Watkins' notion convincing in the case of the Turkish Tales, his position seems much stronger in relation to Byron's history plays. In a series of articles Watkins argues that the plays criticize idealism and Romantic individualism by rendering a historical analysis of ideology and class struggle: see especially "Byron and the Poetics of Revolution," *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 32 (1985), 95–130. See also "Violence, Class Consciousness, and Ideology in Byron's History Plays," *ELH*, 48 (1981), 799–816, and "The Ideological Dimensions of Byron's *The Deformed Transformed*," *Criticism*, 25 (1983), 27–39.

ment. This poem departs from the glorification of Byronic heroism by turning Byron's isolated hero into a wretched prisoner confined in a dungeon. Like the Byronic hero or the organic poem, Bonnivard, the prisoner of Chillon, is isolated from the world. He is imprisoned along with his brothers, but they die one by one, at last leaving him entirely alone. The result is not the creation of his depth and character, as might be expected from the normal constitution of the Byronic hero, but the very opposite: the prisoner's personality is annihilated, rendering his innerness a void.

Bonnivard and his two brothers are lively men—for them, imprisonment is a torture, for it blocks their expression of energies. These men of natural mobility are forced to be still, and Byron is outraged by the constraint. Emphatically, their stillness does not build Wordsworthian resonance of soul. Because they are deprived of the opportunity to react to the world's stimuli they grow weak in body, they become "rusted with a vile repose" (line 6); and eventually, this lack of exercise, this decline in physical feelings, leads to the loss of feeling in the heart. Bonnivard's energy is replaced by a coldness, a stillness of spirit, an inability to respond. He ends in a quiet that is tantamount to the death of the soul.

The prisoner's ordeal climaxes with the death of his second and last brother, the only remaining companion in his dungeon world. This "last—the sole—the dearest link / . . . Which bound me to my failing race" (lines 215–217) now becomes a part of the prison's stillness; and as Bonnivard clasps "that hand which lay so still" he realizes that "my own was full as chill; / I had not strength to stir, or strive" (lines 221–223). The loss of all life, all motion, in Bonnivard's world leads to a corresponding stillness in his soul—not a peaceful quiet, but a horrifying blankness.

First came the loss of light, and air,
 And then of darkness too:
 I had no thought, no feeling—none—
 Among the stones I stood a stone. (lines 233–236)

In this moment of negative vision, everything disappears:

There were no stars—no earth—no time—
No check—no change—no good—no crime—
But silence, and a stirless breath
Which neither was of life nor death;
A sea of stagnant idleness,
Blind, boundless, mute and motionless! (lines 245–250)

This annihilation becomes a negative version of the organic poem—it solves the problems of mobility and variousness by expunging everything so that the world, insofar as it still can be said to exist, lies in a homogenous state of profound calm. Here is a whole and consistent universe, but one without life.

In this crisis Byron explores the possibilities for an organic innerness that could fill the void of Bonnivard's soul. But the forms of organic focus contemplated by the prisoner turn out to be fallacious. The first is a bird that perches in the dungeon window and begins its song. Similar circumstances stimulate Keats's narrator into poetry in "Ode to a Nightingale," and for a moment it appears that this also will happen to Bonnivard. As he listens to the melody, "by dull degrees came back / My senses to their wonted track, / I saw the dungeon walls and floor" (lines 259–261). As he begins to perceive the world again he also begins to regain his capacity for feeling. And it seems to him that the bird links him to life, sings a "song that said a thousand things, / And seemed to say them all for me!" (lines 269–270). Perhaps this bird even "might be / My brother's soul come down to me" (lines 287–288). But this illusion of purpose, the impression that human feelings and natural events are significantly related, evaporates for Bonnivard when the bird suddenly flies away. After all, the song was not meant for him. The bird's appearance and disappearance do not manifest meaning, they merely embody the incessant mobility of nature. The bird turns out to be a creature of surface, not depth.

Next Bonnivard climbs up to his dungeon window, and for the first time since his imprisonment sees the world outside—a beautiful vista of Lake Lemán and the Alps. Here is the world of nature, the landscape of Wordsworthian poetry, which perhaps may revitalize his feeling. But the view does not elicit a Wordsworthian poem. Quite the contrary: it acts

ironically and disassociatively, for the life of nature brings home to Bonnivard the death of his own soul. The eternal organic forms of the mountains “were the same, / They were not changed like me in frame” (lines 332–333). The unchanging aspect of nature, which links Wordsworth to life and leads him to intuitions of eternity, only serves to alienate Bonnivard. So nature’s stillness emphasizes man’s mobility and degeneration, and Bonnivard’s meditative sequence reverses the normal progression of Wordsworthian nature poetry from surface event to the creation of spiritual innerness.

Having failed to revitalize his soul through organic forms of focus, Bonnivard at last comes to find blankness a comfort. He avoids the view from his window, he avoids activity, he protects himself from any kind of stimulation—for to bring his feelings alive is to live in a world of pain. The dungeon becomes his chosen home; protective isolation and voided feeling become his chosen mode of selfhood. When the prisoner eventually is freed he makes peace with his life by turning the entire world into a replication of his prison. He has “learn’d to love despair” (line 374), and so he avoids action as much as possible. Bonnivard ends as an extremely inner being, but Byron shows this to be a pathological state. The dazzling trappings of Byronic heroism recede here, to reveal absolute isolation as a pathetic rather than a heroic condition. The possibility raised by “The Prisoner of Chillon” is that effective selfhood may actually be an affair of surface, not of depth. Perhaps the poets of innerness are incorrect in suggesting that it is the meditative activation of organic poetry that builds the self—for what Bonnivard needs is not increased innerness, but rather the courage to reach outside himself and become involved in the activities of life.

“The Prisoner of Chillon” suggests that a case can be made for the surface personality. Perhaps the profound innerness, consistency, and integrity promoted by the poets of organic unity are not the only possible human values. In Canto iv of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* the poem’s narrator sings a hymn to the ocean, which suggests the values made possible by a surface approach to life. The depths of this Byronic ocean certainly do exist, but they are made evident only as surface effects—the pitch and roll of the waves. Where the prisoner of Chillon imagined his voided world as “a sea of stagnant idleness, / Blind, boundless, mute and mo-

tionless!" (lines 249–250), this lively ocean is "boundless, endless, and sublime— / The image of Eternity" (iv, 183). The petty ravages of man "mark the earth with ruin" (iv, 179) but ocean lifts him up and dashes him to pieces, "Spurning him from thy bosom to the skies, / [Thou] send'st him, shivering in thy playful spray / And howling, to his Gods" (iv, 180). But where other men die in the depths, the narrator of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* loves the ocean's rolling surface and learns to skim over it; he was "a child of thee, / And trusted to thy billows far and near, / And laid my hand upon thy mane" (iv, 184). The risk of riding the breakers creates a "pleasing fear" (iv, 180), transforms ocean's destruction into the singer's exhilaration. He knows life's wholeness, but he knows it as a surface; what he experiences is not profound innerness, but the stimulus of the waves' challenge and the pleasure of his own mastery.⁹

And so the Byronic vision of infinity converts innerness to surface, which in turn implies the conversion of action to reaction. Byron finds it more congenial to adapt to events than to initiate them, for the kind of focus needed to control activity requires a purposeful inner self, a core of identity that he lacks. The Byronic hero cannot really organize action; his firmness is limited to the capacity for heroic resistance. But the kind of reactive flexibility demonstrated by the rider of the sea in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is exploited by the Byron of *Don Juan*. This poem abandons the heroic posture of resistance for the comic posture of adaptation. Just as the rider learns to stay mounted on the ocean's billows, appropriating the power of the waves by adjusting himself to it, the narrator of *Don Juan* adapts to his poem's flow of events and thereby masters them. He does not originate the power of infinity, but by becoming a creature of surface and learning to stay afloat, he appropriates powers that far exceed the capacity of Byronic heroism.¹⁰

9. The sense in which Ocean is taken by the narrator of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is shared by Byron himself, as is suggested by a letter of 26 September 1813 to Anabella Millbanke: "You don't like my 'restless' doctrines—I should be very sorry if *you* did—I can't *stagnate* nevertheless—if I must sail let it be on the ocean no matter how stormy—anything but a dull cruise on a level lake without ever losing sight of the same insipid shores by which it is surrounded" (*Byron's Letters and Journals*, III, 119).

10. For a superb analysis of *Don Juan* which regards "the two master symbols of the poem" as "fire and ocean" (p. 181), see Alvin B. Kernan's chapter on the poem in *The Plot of Satire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965). Where I shall approach the Byronic ocean as an opposition between surface and depth, Kernan emphasizes the aspect of onward flow.

Where the Byronic hero remains in one rigid posture, adopts a hyperbolic consistency meant to authenticate his innerness, the mobile narrator of *Don Juan* blithely announces his poem has no plan or purpose. And indeed, *Don Juan* abounds in contradictions, chance collisions, abortive episodes, incongruous juxtapositions, sudden reversals. These fragmentations, these testaments to man's inability to maintain purpose, become the motive power of the poem—the force that propels it randomly onward. Byron's Juan is tossed ahead by the surging ocean of life, and this becomes comic because he cannot sink; he is a superficial creature and he continually bobs up like a cork. Juan learns very little from his experience, which is why he can happily continue his experiencing.¹¹

And so *Don Juan* becomes the great Romantic poem of surface, as *The Prelude* is the great Romantic poem of depth. *The Prelude* is the autobiography of a man who examines his past in search of an inner self that is latent there and needs to be brought into present awareness. Thought and speech are vital to Wordsworth's procedure, for he is reflecting upon himself, examining the apparently incomplete events of his past to bring out the fullness of their meaning, the manner in which these parts have contributed to the development of his whole self. In making his poem he both recounts and extends his own self-development; the inwardness initiated by his childhood experiences is continued and expanded by his ongoing poetic interpretations. But while Wordsworth's procedure creates an immense field of inner activity, it also does pose problems. He must see all the events of his life through the focus of his self-development, a focus that validates not only the significance of his own life but the way in which all parts lead to the whole, all episodes partake of infinity, all things of the world rest in God. Therefore, to affirm the harmony of the world he also needs to assert the success of his own self-development.

11. See Jerome J. McGann's anti-Romantic analysis of the poem, *Don Juan in Context*: Chap. 6, "Form," is particularly important. McGann argues that Byron proceeded not on organic models of poetry but by the order he discovered in Horace, who offered a tradition "rhetorical and functional" (p. 109). The poem becomes a series of rhetorical experiments that reveal the multiple contexts and uses of language—so that variety, not organic unity, must become the central linguistic technique of the poem. For critical accounts that argue for the unity of the poem, see Ernest J. Lovell's "Irony and Image in *Don Juan*" in *The Major English Romantic Poets: A Symposium in Reappraisal*, ed. Clarence D. Thorpe, Carlos Baker, and Bennett Weaver (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1957), George Ridenour's *The Style of Don Juan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), and Robert F. Gleckner's chapter on "*Don Juan and The Island*" in *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*.

In contrast, Byron's poem of surface denies all claims to unity and focus. The author of *Don Juan* gives up the attempt to make complete sense of his experience. His is a poem of middle age, a stream of words that begins to flow when "I / Have spent my life, both interest and principal, / And deem not, what I deem'd, my soul invincible" (I, 213). He writes because he is losing the physical capacity to act, and he believes that the next best thing to sensuous experience is the imagination of it. So Byron splits his self between the mindless but cheerful physicality of the young Juan, who learns nothing from his experiences and never grows up, and the incessant verbal flow of the poem's middle-aged narrator, who exists to escape Wordsworthian interpretation—to avoid looking into himself by constantly searching for new external stimuli, new diversions. Wordsworth and Byron become contraries: where Wordsworth's poem is halted by his middle age, Byron's begins there. Wordsworth's poetry of spontaneous overflow is inhibited and finally cut off by his immense need to have the spontaneous reveal design, to have utterance in the present embody the significance of the entire past life. But it is Byron who truly practices poetry as spontaneous overflow: "I write what's uppermost, without delay," and the words become "a straw, borne on by human breath," a self-created but meaningless plaything that evokes the enthusiasm to produce an additional rush of words (xiv, 7–8). The openness, the inconsistency of *Don Juan* allow it to become endless. As long as Byron's life continues, his poem also is free to proceed. As an alternative to the focus of the organic poem, he offers the delights of extension—the indefinitely prolonged unfurling of new surfaces, new stimuli.¹²

So Byron manages to write an autobiographical poem that is the polar opposite of *The Prelude*: instead of going into himself, he turns himself

12. For an interesting stylistic comparison of *Don Juan* and *The Prelude*, see pp. 89–99 of Jerome J. McGann's *Don Juan in Context*. McGann suggests that Wordsworth's need to integrate mind and nature, to "transform landscape into either interior or apocalyptic categories" (p. 90) creates problems of stylistic transition that often are poorly solved in *The Prelude*. Since Byron is not committed to integration, he "can manage such shifts and transitions because the whole point of the style of *Don Juan* is to explore the interfaces between different things, events, and moods. *Don Juan* is a poem that is, in fact, always in transition—not in the Wordsworthian sense of 'something evermore about to be,' but in the Byronic sense that 'there woos no home nor hope, nor life, *save what is here*' (*Childe Harold IV*, 105, my italics). And for Byron, 'what is here' is a vast spectacle of incongruities held together in strange networks between the poles of sublimity and pointlessness. Transitions between styles, lines, stanzas, and tones not only do not present a problem for Byron, they are the locus of all his opportunities" (p. 95).

inside out and becomes the world. For him youth is the time of innerness, the time when one believed in one's dreams and subscribed to the proposition that the self is its own universe. But at thirty, the poet cries, "No more—no more—Oh! never more, my heart, / Canst thou be my sole world, my universe!" Now "The illusion's gone forever" (I, 215) and the poet is left "To laugh at all things—for I wish to know / *What* after all, are all things—but a *Show?*" (VII, 2). Byron himself becomes this show of life by unleashing an incessant flow of words that cause a world to appear.

It is his most effective way of fulfilling the desire expressed in 1813, "To withdraw *myself* from *myself*. . . has ever been my sole, my entire, my sincere motive." The poetic shows of *Don Juan* become a form of self-escape. They lead not to the growth of the poet's mind, but to displacement from selfhood, to entertainment. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Byron had criticized Rousseau for making his audience believe in the illusion of a poetic idealism that created havoc in the actual world. His own poetry does not promote the willing suspension of disbelief that can lead to this unfortunate result; he constantly deflates his performances by his own narrative intrusions, which become yet another kind of amusing show. We are never allowed to forget for long that everything in this poem is surface. Given these procedures, the compulsive force of a Rousseau simply cannot build up. Like the poem's narrator, who fails to develop a consistent center of self, *Don Juan* may lack a central purpose—but reading it certainly is a pleasure.¹³

But if the poem attempts to escape innerness, its superficiality cannot be branded as wholly escapist. It is the Turkish Tales that offer true escape, for their heroes are designed to create the illusion of power without its actual impact. In his completely escapist moods Byron wants poetry to be "a harmless wile," but *Don Juan*, as well as seeking pleasure, has one item of real business—to attack the notion of the inner personality and to debunk the poetry of innerness, on the grounds that the imagination of inner selfhood is the only dangerous illusion. Where the poet of *Don Juan* brings illusion to the surface, constantly unmasking his own

13. For a discussion of *Don Juan* as a meaningless poem, see Brian Wilkie's "Byron and the Epic of Negation" in his *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition* (Madison and Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965).

performances, those who believe in innerness create an illusion that they mistake for truth.

As the narrator of *Don Juan* claims, "For me, I know nought; nothing I deny, / Admit, reject, contemn" (xiv, 3). Apparently it is not this speaker but the people who aspire to innerness who are constantly denying, admitting, rejecting, contemning—using words to proclaim a truth they then proceed to impose on themselves and on others. But if interpretations are merely another form of appearance, then they have no special claim to authority. They should be worth neither more nor less than any other show. Wordsworth particularly draws Byron's fire because of all contemporary poets he is the strongest advocate of interpretation, of the word as a guide to meaning, innerness, and reality. Byron did not have the opportunity to read *The Prelude*, but an acquaintance with "Tintern Abbey" and the other *Lyrical Ballads* would have been enough to give him a feeling for Wordsworth's methods of building innerness. In "Tintern Abbey" childhood action is exchanged for the adult's poetic interpretations—the body's activity is succeeded by the authority of the word. Wordsworth's exchange of the body for the word, of action for interpretation, builds an innerness that Byron is moved to discredit. What he notices is not the Wordsworthian soul, but the willing surrender of body that has produced it. Why should soul be valued over body, innerness over surface?

Juan's first experience of love dramatizes these issues. When he begins to have feeling for Julia, it registers as thoughts "unutterable" (I, 90), an unfocussed, restless affect that creates the need for definition, outlet, activity, the drive toward some kind of goal. But Juan cannot find relief in action because he does not know what troubles him. In his perplexity he becomes a naive Wordsworth, wandering in nature and hearing "a voice in all the winds" (I, 94), thinking great thoughts and pursuing "His self-communion with his own high soul." He turns "without perceiving his condition, / Like Coleridge, into a metaphysician" (I, 91). Juan interprets his restlessness through the use of words, but this is not a case of unveiling reality. On the contrary, it is the transposition of energy from one form to another—not a higher form, merely a different one. The body's urges and the mind's metaphysics both are forms of appearance; the only sure thing is that interpretation fails to soothe Juan's restlessness.

His naive poetry formulates his energies, but does not terminate them. This inner focus cannot bring stillness, for it neglects to notice the original source of restlessness in the human body itself. "If *you* think it was philosophy that this did, / I can't help thinking puberty assisted" (1, 93). Finally Juan finds relief in sexual activity with Julia, but this is not a lasting answer either—it leads to an imbroglio with her husband that forces his exile from home and begins the wanderings recounted in *Don Juan*. Mobility may be channeled through various forms of appearance, but it never can be finally centered or stilled. Wordsworthian sacrifice of the body therefore strikes Byron as a form of repression, of authoritarianism. As the contrary of Wordsworth, Byron stands for the liberation of all appearances, the free play of energies through whatever forms they may take. In unbinding the life force Byron releases delight and vitality, which he feels is surely preferable to the deadliness of Wordsworth's interminable explanations. If life is purposeless, at least it might as well be enjoyed.

Although Byron rejects the claim of the word to meaning and authority, he by no means condemns verbal behavior. To do so would be to repeat Wordsworth's error in inverted form, by authorizing body over word. Words and bodies both are forms of appearance that incarnate energy, and Byron recognizes that in some situations words may do the better job. Middle age is one example; the body's decreased capacity gives way to the lightning of the mind, which produces *Don Juan*. Another example is the intrigue hatched by the Duchess of Fitz-fulke. Her story of the ghostly Black Friar, who walks the halls outside Juan's bedroom every night, employs the conventions of the Gothic novel to stir up Juan's interest and apprehension. She maneuvers him into a state of mind where his supernatural frisson can be converted into an expression of sexual energies, as he finally reaches out to touch the ghostly Black Friar but instead finds his hand upon the Duchess. In using fiction to create the conditions that give her sexual possession of Juan, Fitz-fulke is engaging in a manipulative process that compares to the audience manipulations incessantly attempted by the narrator of *Don Juan*. For this speaker, manipulation is an amusing, enlivening process.

The poets of innerness cannot adopt Byron's cheerful attitude toward manipulation because their business is to create the illusion of innerness,

not only for their audiences but for themselves. The creation of innerness involves a necessary element of self-deception, a problem that is salient in Julia's developing responses to her lover Juan. Juan himself first felt the physical restlessness of love and then transposed it into Wordsworthian verbalizing, and similarly, Julia sublimates her physical feeling into the terminology of Platonic love. By adopting the language of Platonism she seeks to create love on the spiritual plane, the realm of innerness and soul. But in focussing on Platonic visions she neglects the sexual energy they sublimate and allows herself to be overpowered by the force hidden within her own expressions. In becoming Juan's lover she at last does what she has really wanted to do all along, but her satisfaction must be prepared for by what Byron sees as a complicated and ridiculous process of self-deception. Those who believe in innerness must elaborately manipulate themselves before they are able to do anything at all. The narrator of *Don Juan* himself proposes to be more direct, and more active. He wants to be the master rather than the pawn of his own words; they will do things for him, rather than the other way around. By denying innerness, by bringing everything to the surface, he liberates words as an effective form of energy. The rider of the sea who writes *Don Juan* also must become the rider of the word—the poet who has the skill to use words to his own advantage.

Since life is an affair of power not purpose, the narrator really can see no way out of manipulation. He himself undoubtedly manipulates by using words as a form of power, but then so do the interpretationists. Interpretation is simply another form of appearance, and since it is constantly rearranging its own appearances, interpretation itself must be a manipulation. Therefore, the only difference between the poet of *Don Juan* and the Lake poets must be in the gravity of their operations. The Dedication to *Don Juan* condemns these Laker interpretationists because not only are they manipulators, they are also longwinded and distinctly boring. Where Byron offers vitality and entertainment, Wordsworth writes "a rather long 'Excursion' . . . "the vasty version / Of his new system to perplex the sages" (Dedication, 4). Coleridge, the "hawk encumber'd with his hood" is forever "Explaining metaphysics to the nation— / I wish he would explain his Explanation" (Dedication, 2). Like Julia, these poets conceal their motives behind a massive smokescreen of

sanctimonious words, which stuns the audience. But putting people to sleep is exactly what the British government wants its poets to do—for a slumbering populace cannot revolt. By diverting people into a dull semblance of action through writing and reading the poetry of innerness, of a self-contained world, Wordsworth and his colleagues help preserve the status quo. A grateful government, relieved of the necessity to directly suppress its citizens, rewards its poets with sinecures and respectability.

Byron charges that the poetry of innerness deadens feeling, the sense of individuality, and the capacity for response. Far from contributing to the growth of the mind, it suppresses and atrophies human powers. His audience relationships will aim at the opposite effect—to wake people up. The narrator of *Don Juan* does this by releasing his aggressive feelings, which can assume a positive role in the poem. His tendency to irritate, to jolt, to collide with people, functions to startle his audience into awareness. This adversary relationship with the audience minimizes the morally suspect aspects of manipulation and maximizes its possibilities for liberation, for by jarring people the poet forces them to become alert and think for themselves. As he says, “I wish men to be free / As much from mobs as kings—from you as me” (IX, 25).

Before *Don Juan* Byron had maintained a collaborative rather than an adversary audience relationship. He wrote of the Byronic hero again and again not only to feign his hero’s innerness, but also his audience’s. For through reading the Turkish Tales every man could imagine himself a hero and every woman could experience romance. The spiritual collusion in this arrangement had as its physical analogue the exchange of cash. Byron’s poetry sold well; flattery turned out to be a viable commodity. In *Don Juan* Byron casts the Lakers in this pandering role, remarking that “You have your salary; was’t for that you wrought?” (Dedication, 6). Manipulation, it turns out, is not practiced only by poets—audiences too can manipulate, by paying for what they like to hear and encouraging the poet to produce more of it. But this mutually manipulative relationship falsely enriches both parties at the same time it really demeans everyone. In *Don Juan* Byron rejects such an exchange by rudely calling attention to its suppressed basis: he hails us as his “gentle reader! and / Still gentler purchaser!” (I, 221).¹⁴

14. For the most sustained analysis of Byron’s relations with his audience see Philip W. Martin’s *Byron: a poet before his public*. In addition, see Andrew Rutherford’s short history of Byron’s lifetime

We are forced to see that the relationship between poet and reader always threatens to become mutually manipulative, an exchange of cash for an inflated sense of self-importance. The author of the Turkish Tales certainly knows what he is talking about here; but as his youth gives way to middle age Byron ceases to see any point in taking cash in exchange for poetic flattery. He imagines his past life as an analogue of money, and realizes that "I / Have squander'd my whole summer . . . I / Have spent my life, both interest and principal" (I, 213). His past is spent, and no amount of money can recover it or offer adequate compensation for the loss of his youth. Still:

I have succeeded
 And that's enough; succeeded in my youth,
 The only time when much success is needed:
 And my success produced what I in sooth
 Cared most about; it need not now be pleaded—
 Whate'er it was, 'twas mine. (XII, 17)

Recovery of the past is impossible, and so the only wisdom must be to live as fully as one can in the present. Byron cheerfully squandered his energies in his youth, and he continues to do so in middle age by openly speaking his mind, squandering his credit with his audience. He is the spendthrift, but the spendthrift is the only truly wise man—he realizes he cannot save anything, and so he throws everything away, tries to use all his energies before he loses them. Generosity becomes the best adaptive posture toward the inevitable decline of life.¹⁵

By spending his energies Byron becomes the antithesis of Wordsworth, who tries to conserve his. *The Prelude* is written in the faith that one's past is not lost, that it can be recovered and compounded in value

reception in his Introduction to *Byron: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), pp. 3–12. Edward Bostetter offers a history of the composition and reception of *Don Juan* in his Introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Don Juan* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1979), as does Elizabeth French Boyd in her chapter "Against the Wind" in *Byron's Don Juan: A Critical Study* (1945; reprint, The Humanities Press, 1958). The most complete history of Byron's composition of *Don Juan*, and of his relations with his publishers and the friends who read the manuscript of *Don Juan* is volume 1 of Truman Guy Steffan's *Byron's Don Juan, The Making of a Masterpiece* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1957, 1971).

15. For an analysis of the economics of *Don Juan* which identifies Byron with the misers rather than the men of generosity, see Frank D. McConnell's "Byron's Reductions: 'Much Too Poetical,'" *ELH*, 37 (1970), 415–432.

through the process of interpretation. Like Byron, Wordsworth practices an economy of the word. Because he believes in focus, in the possibility of the organic poem, he finds it possible to gather his life's energies and compress them into the intensity of poetic speech. The analogy between poetry and money, suppressed in Wordsworth, is brought to the surface in *Don Juan*. But where Wordsworth would have thought of himself as a prudent investor, Byron sees conservative poets as misers. Or rather, he sees the miser as "your only poet;—passion, pure / And sparkling on from heap to heap, displays / Possess'd, the ore" (xii, 8). Like the recollective poet, the miser turns to hoarding money when his youth is spent, and he is no longer able to physically exert power in the world. He becomes a parody of the interpretive poet, a man who despises "every sensual call, / Commands—the intellectual lord of all" (xii, 9). In possessing the world the miser cannot truly enjoy it, but he certainly can exert intellectual domination by owning everyone and everything possible. In *Don Juan* money and worldly power finally buy the heroes and the lovers; the Empress Catherine purchases the victors of war for her bed, and English society turns love into a marriage market. The miser carries these tendencies to the extreme by sacrificing all sensuous enjoyment to his intellectual lust for absolute domination. He is the ultimate, the pure manipulator, and his heaps of pure gold are the analogue to the pure compression of the self-contained poem.

The analogy between money and poetry remains only an analogy for Byron; as with the other analogies in *Don Juan* it never is granted symbolic status. For symbolism is an assertion of identity, a claim that the part indeed is the whole. Byron cannot move from part to whole symbolically, for although he does identify one great whole in life—the eternal ocean of surging energy—he also believes that the whole manifests itself only variously, appearing now as money, now as love, now as physical power, now as verbal dexterity, and so on. There is never a great moment of meaningful unity, of reality focussing all the appearances, such as is expressed by the symbol. Instead, "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" (xv, 99). Given this state of affairs, the fiscal conservatism of symbolic poets is misplaced. For life becomes a moving surface requiring the economics of risk and liquidity.

The poet must become a speculator; he must learn to play fast and loose with the appearances.¹⁶

In the final cantos of *Don Juan* Byron shows English society behaving in just this way. The marriage mart in which Juan finds himself enmeshed is a “sweepstakes for substantial wives,” a “lottery” in which the speculator may “draw a high prize” (xii, 37); and the women who are the prizes carefully tend their “floating balance of accomplishment” (xii, 52). In this society every relationship is in a speculative key, “For good society is but a game . . . / Where every body has some separate aim, / An end to answer, or a plan to lay” (xii, 58). The poet of analogy sees manipulation surfacing everywhere, in the financial ventures and in the games of relationship that people forever play to get the better of each other.

Once again the narrator's adaptation to life threatens to dissolve, for he knows that this English shell game of appearances is cold—it lacks heart, interior. He can cheerfully disregard his own lack of inner identity, but when he looks at English society he can see only meaningless motion and vacant quiet. In this superficial and sensation-mad society, life speeds on at a terrifying rate until “Change grows too changeable, without being new” (xi, 82), motion accelerates until it becomes a vapid stillness. At that point “Society is now one polish'd horde, / Form'd of two mighty tribes, the *Bores* and *Bored*” (xiii, 95).

But the solution cannot be to develop interior being, for the narrator feels no sense of inner existence. His only option is to take bigger risks, to play the inevitable game with even greater verve. And this, finally, is why poetry is important for him—not because it means anything, but because it is the best game of all. The insular and self-contented English think their world is everything, just as the poets of innerness believe their poems are worlds—but Lord Byron in exile looks back on “that microcosm on stilts, / Yclept the Great World” (xii, 56) and knows its insignificance. He resists it not by setting up poetry as a rival, a source of the significance society lacks; instead, poetry becomes valuable because it is

16. Jerome J. McGann acutely discusses normal Romantic symbolic techniques and Byron's evasion of them in Chap. 6 of *Don Juan in Context*. As McGann says, “To know by symbols is to make up for what Wordsworth calls ‘the sad incompetence of human speech’ (*The Prelude*, iv, 592). Byron opposes a discourse ruled by symbols, which drive into silence and ecstatic revelation, with a discourse of “conversational facility” (xv, 20). The structure of *Don Juan* is based upon the structure of human talk, which is dialectical without being synthetic” (p. 111).

the best device for keeping the poet afloat in a treacherous but boring world. To counterpoint the financial speculations of the English, the narrator floats his own kind of paper; "I'm serious—so are all men upon paper; / And why should I not form my speculation, / And hold up to the sun my little taper?" (xii, 21). The notion that poetry is a cultural resource, that poems link the generations and provide a kind of immortality, is ridiculous to him. Poetry simply cannot harbor and conserve meaning in this way. Asked why he publishes, the narrator replies, "why do you play at cards? / Why drink? Why read?—To make some hour less dreary." The fallible and perishing results of his labor "I cast upon the stream, / To swim or sink" (xiv, 11).

But if he finds no solutions, at least he is brought alive by his poetic game—for it involves risk. Where Wordsworth values spontaneous overflow because it reveals the latent meaning of his life, Byron enjoys it because it results in happy accidents, marvellous recoveries, spectacular fabrications. These bringings together of appearance are comic, not symbolic; the organic fusive power that truly reconciles opposites is no part of Byron's experience. Instead, he delights in taking great risks and winning tremendous, but temporary, resolutions. He constantly threatens to drown in the sea of life, but yet once more he resurfaces. In poetry, "I think that were I *certain* of success / I hardly could compose another line: / . . . In play, there are two pleasures for your choosing— / The one is winning, and the other losing" (xiv, 12).

Poetry gives him the power to adapt, the power to remain ebullient, not only when he considers English society, but when he reflects on life itself. For if the English are incessant manipulators, their devices are nothing compared to the world's. It is life's energy and not the poet which is the original manipulator of us all—for it fuels a restlessness, an unremitting mobility, that suddenly can turn love to hate, honesty to deception, good to evil. A prime example of this occurs in the war cantos of *Don Juan*, which climax in a vision of Juan as "Love turned a Lieutenant of Artillery!" (ix, 44). We see that if it is Juan's extraordinary energy that makes him an ardent lover, it is this same energy that fuels his lust to kill. Energy surfaces in contradictory forms that can be suddenly reversed. Byron responds to this confusing situation by attempting to out-manipulate life. His poetry becomes a creative adaptation that plays

fast and loose with the facts in order to avert destruction. As he says, his muse is “the most sincere that ever dealt in fiction” (xvi, 2), for by the sudden reversals of poetry the false can become true and the contradictory consistent—or the other way around. He makes this remark as prologue to the story of Fitz-fulke and Juan, which indeed does demonstrate how the manipulations of fiction can creatively rearrange the facts of life. We marvel at the Byronic mobility that can change faster than life itself, beat life at its own game. The poet of surface becomes the great trickster, the saver of appearances who preserves our capacity for laughter and keeps us afloat on the ocean of eternity. Byron's achievement is essentially manipulative. In *Don Juan* the rider of the sea converts the lack of inner identity and of consistency of purpose that had vexed his early career from tragedy into comedy, from his loss into his triumph over life.¹⁷

But by inverting the normal Romantic assumptions, perhaps Byron does manage in some sense to confirm their desirability. He repudiates the inner self, consistency of character and purpose, the organic poem—the great Romantic postulates of wholeness. To replace them *Don Juan* exfoliates an endless world of incessantly mobile surfaces that is at once an escape and an exile from the central self. Byron struggles for equilibrium in the absence of any fundamental organizing principle in self or in society. He can conceive of wholeness only as a form of anarchy— anarchy manipulated and temporarily bested by the poet's improvisational art.

California State University, Fullerton

17. Although I recognize the tragic undertones in *Don Juan*, it seems to me that the narrator's ebullience, his pleasure in his manipulations, dominates. But several critics emphasize the tragic tone of the poem. For Alvin Kernan it is part of a mingling of genres—comic, satiric, and tragic. The tragic element emerges “When viewed from the angle of the solitary man”; for “the movement of life which flows through *Don Juan* darkens to a tragic setting in which while Life rolls on, the individual is fated to stillness and obliteration”—*The Plot of Satire* (p. 213). Ridenour sees a dark *Don Juan* that continually exfoliates repetitions of the Fall, and Robert F. Gleckner carries this interpretation farther in *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*.