

# Aspects of Byron's *Don Juan*



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Edited by

Peter Cochran

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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## PREFACE

Some of the papers in this book were given at a conference on *Aspects of Don Juan* organised by the Newstead Byron Society at Nottingham Trent University on May 5th 2012. I should like to thank Ken Purslow, Carl Thompson, and everyone else who assisted in making the day a success.

—P.C.

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**Diego Saglia** is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Parma (Italy). His research focuses on Romantic-period literature and culture, also in its contacts with other European traditions. In the field of Byron studies, he is the author of several essays and articles, and of *Byron and Spain: Itinerary in the Place of Writing* (1996) and *Lord Byron e la maschere della scrittura* (2009). His edited book *Byron e il segno plurale: tracce del sé, percorsi di scrittura* (2011) was awarded the 2012 Elma Dangerfield Award by the International Byron Society.

**Jonathon Shears** is Lecturer in English at Keele University and Editor of *The Byron Journal*. He has published books on Milton, Harold Bloom and Victorian *bric-a-brac* and is currently working on *The Hangover: A Cultural History, 1600-2000* and *The Great Exhibition, 1851: A Sourcebook*.

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**Valeria Vallucci** got her Ph.D. from the University of Rome Tor Vergata in 2010, on "Byron, Russia and Italy: aspects of the politics of Alexander I and of the first Risorgimento in Byron and in *Don Juan*". She has published a short book on Byron and Albania (*Lord Byron e Ali Pascià Tepelene. Childe Harold II e le strategie della Gran Bretagna nel Mare Ionio*) and several articles on Byron and Constantinople, Byron and Foscolo, Byron and the carbonaro Gigante, and Byron and the 1812 Russian Campaign. She is interested in Byron's role inside history and international diplomacy, as well as his travels and life in Italy.

## ABBREVIATIONS

To economize on space in the notes, the following abbreviations are used for the books referred to. See the Bibliography for further information.

- BJ: *The Byron Journal*  
Blessington: *Lady Blessington's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Lovell, Princeton 1969  
BLJ: *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (13 vols, John Murray, 1973-94)

When a citation from BLJ is headed "Text from", followed by a manuscript reference, it means that the text is not from BLJ but from the original manuscript. Codes are as follows: <Byron's erasures>; {Byron's interlineated corrections and second thoughts}; [editorial additions].

- Coleridge: *The Works of Lord Byron: A New, Revised and Enlarged Edition with illustrations. Poetry*, ed. E.H.Coleridge (7 vols, John Murray, 1898-1904)  
CHP: Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*  
CMP: *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991)  
CPW: *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller, 7 vols (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980-93)  
DJ: Byron, *Don Juan*  
GaP: Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*  
Green/Lapinski: Green, Matthew J.A., and Piya Pal-Lapinski (eds.) *Byron and the Politics of Freedom and Terror* (Palgrave 2011)  
Griggs: *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Griggs, 6 vols., Clarendon Press, 1956-71  
HVSV: *His Very Self and Voice*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell jr., (1954)  
NLS: National Library of Scotland  
JMS: *Journals of Mary Shelley* ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, Clarendon 1987

- Jones: Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964
- KSR: *Keats-Shelley Review*
- LJ: *The Works of Lord Byron, Letters and Journals*, ed. R.E.Prothero, John Murray, 1898-1904
- LJM: *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Liverpool University Press, 2007)
- Marchand I: Marchand, Leslie A., *Byron: A Biography* (3 vols Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1957)
- Marchand II: Marchand, Leslie A., *Byron: A Portrait* (Pimlico, 1993)
- Medwin: Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron*, edited by Ernest J. Lovell Jr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966
- MM: Pulci, *Morgante Maggiore*
- MSYR: *Manuscripts of the Younger Romantics*
- MWSL: *Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* ed. Betty T. Bennett, Johns Hopkins 1980-8
- RAP: Shelley's *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Reiman and Powers (Norton 1977)
- SAHC: Fischer, Doucet Devin and Reiman, Donald, eds., *Shelley and his Circle*, Harvard 1961-2002
- Schmidt: Schmidt, Arnold Anthony. Byron and the Rhetoric
- SoC: Byron, *The Siege of Corinth*
- TVOJ: Byron, *The Vision of Judgement*

**PART ONE:**

**ESSAYS ON *DON JUAN***

# *DON JUAN AND TRADITION* OR, LITTLE JUAN'S POTTY

PETER COCHRAN

Have a little patience, gentle, delicate, sublime critic; you, I doubt not, are one of those consummate connoisseurs, who, in their purifications, let humour evaporate, while they endeavour to preserve decorum, and polish wit, until the edge of it is quite worn off. Or, perhaps, of that class, who, in the sapience of taste, are disgusted with those very flavours in the productions of their own country which have yielded infinite delectation to their faculties, when imported from another clime; and d—n an author in despite of all precedent and prescription;—who extol the writings of Petronius Arbiter, read with rapture the amorous sallies of Ovid's pen, and chuckle over the story of Lucian's ass; yet, if a modern author presumes to relate the progress of a simple intrigue, are shocked at the indecency and immorality of the scene;—who delight in following Guzman d'Alfarache, through all the mazes of squalid beggary; who with pleasure accompany Don Quixote and his squire, in the lowest paths of fortune; who are diverted with the adventures of Scarron's ragged troop of strollers, and highly entertained with the servile situations of Gil Blas; yet, when a character in humble life occasionally occurs in a performance of our own growth, exclaim, with an air of disgust, "Was ever anything so mean! sure, this writer must have been very conversant with the lowest scenes of life";—who, when Swift or Pope represents a coxcomb in the act of swearing, scruple not to laugh at the ridiculous execrations; but, in a less reputed author, condemn the use of such profane expletives;—who eagerly explore the jakes of Rabelais, for amusement, and even extract humour from the dean's description of a lady's dressing-room; yet in a production of these days, unstamped with such venerable names, will stop their noses, with all the signs of loathing and abhorrence, at a bare mention of the china chamber-pot;—who applauded Catullus, Juvenal, Persius, and Lucan, for their spirit in lashing the greatest names of antiquity; yet, when a British satirist, of this generation, has courage enough to call in question the talents of a pseudo-patron in power, accuse him of insolence, rancour, and scurrility.

—Smollett, *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom*, I.

Byron's *Don Juan* plays with so much of the European and English literary traditions, and plays so many different games with them, that summarising is hard. Like *The Vision of Judgement*, it bears so much on its back, and with so much ease, that several books seem at first sight necessary to describe what's happening. It's a task in which we are both aided and hindered by Byron himself, who (a) often lists books to which he has been indebted in the poem's writing, but (b) doesn't, while listing them, say that they're his models, and (c) doesn't in any case list them all: there are some obvious influences about which he is completely silent.

### ***Homer: The Odyssey***

The first port of call is obvious – we start with Homer's *Odyssey* (“that eating poem of the *Odyssey*” as Fielding called it – see below). *Don Juan* is a rewrite of that epic, with the protagonist leaving home, and wandering, first around the Mediterranean, and then around all of Europe, encountering one Nausicaa, and numerous Circes and Calypsos, en route. In Canto III Juan even hears a singer, as Odysseus does, in the land of the Phaeacians. But at once we pause: this is not a systematic re-write and parody, like Joyce's *Ulysses*. Homer's singer, for example, is not a prostitute-poet, like Byron's. Juan, unlike Odysseus (and unlike Leopold Bloom), has no home for a destination. He has no wife, faithful or unfaithful, and no son. He has no followers, no loyal crew. Although he is a warrior, the battle he fights is in the middle of his adventure, not at its outset. In the English cantos he arrives at a kind of home – but Norman Abbey is a version of Byron's own former “home”, Newstead Abbey. In short, Byron's *Odyssey* has no Ithaca, no Penelope, no Telemachus, and Juan's Troy is Donna Julia's bed. There is no Polyphemus, no Syrens, no Bag of the Winds, no Scylla and Charybdis, and no Cattle of Helios. We can't even say that its hero has a god pursuing him, as Encolpius has in Petronius' *Satyricon* (another mock-*Odyssey*). Petronius' protagonist is hounded, not by Poseidon, the pursuer of Odysseus, but by Priapus, who interferes with his love-making as only an enraged Priapus can: Juan has no such problem, and the only Circe who disheartens him is Catherine the Great, by whom any young man would be disheartened.

But Juan is the only Odysseus-figure in the poem. Its first reference to Odysseus relates not to him, but to the homecoming of Lambro:

An honest Gentleman on his return  
 May not have the good fortune of Ulysses;  
 Not all lone Matrons for their husbands mourn,  
 Or show the same dislike to Suitors' kisses;

The Odds are that he finds a handsome Urn  
 . . . To his memory, and two or three young Misses  
 Born to some friend, who holds his wife and riches,  
 And that his Argus bites him by – the breeches.

(*Don Juan* II st.23)

The only other reference to Ulysses (XIII 105) is not about the *Odyssey*, but the *Iliad*. The Canto II reference would place Lambro in the role of the homecoming hero, and Juan is the role of a parasite eating up his household – into, not a prospective suitor for the hero's wife, but a successful suitor for the hero's daughter. It's a clever but confusing variation.

References to Homer are fairly frequent, but there's only one to the *Odyssey* itself, and the rhyme deprives it of dignity:

His Classic Studies made a little puzzle,  
 Because of filthy loves of Gods and Goddesses,  
 Who in the earlier ages made a bustle,  
 But never put on pantaloons or boddices;  
 His reverend tutors had at times a tussle,  
 And for their Aeneids, Iliads, and Odysseys,  
 Were forced to make an odd sort of apology,  
 For Donna Inez dreaded the Mythology. (*Don Juan* I st.41)

When Homer is named, he too is deprived of dignity:

Oh Thou eternal Homer, I have now  
 To paint a Siege, wherein more men were slain,  
 With deadlier engines, and a speedier blow  
 Than in thy Greek Gazette of that Campaign;  
 And yet, like all men else, I must allow,  
 To vie with thee would be about as vain  
 As for a brook to cope with Ocean's flood;  
 But still We Moderns equal you in blood.

(*Don Juan* VII st.80)

Querying the Greek poet's veracity by comparing him to an army gazette does little to enhance our idea of Byron's respect. Lines like "Troy owes to Homer what Whist owes to Hoyle" (II 90 5) have the same effect of trivialising effect.

Byron may be taking issue with something written by Shelley in the Preface to *Hellas* (a work to which, admittedly, he never refers):

The modern Greek is the descendant of those glorious beings whom the imagination almost refuses to figure to itself as belonging to our kind, and he inherits much of their sensibility, their rapidity of conception, their enthusiasm, and their courage.<sup>1</sup>

If Shelley really believed that the savage and illiterate modern Greeks were on a spiritual and moral par with Odysseus and his company, he was even more removed from the real world than I think he was (although neither Odysseus nor his company are that refined – see below).

In Homer, warriors are honoured: in *Don Juan*, not. Wellington is “the Best of Cut-throats” (IX 4 1); Suvorov “like a Wisp along the marsh so damp, / Which leads beholders on a boggy walk” (VII 45 5-6). The line about whist, just quoted, is followed by,

The present Century was growing blind  
To the great Marlborough’s Skill in giving knocks,  
Until his late Life by Archdeacon Cox.

(*Don Juan* III st.90 6-8)

Byron shares with Ariosto a determination to bring heroic Homer into a direct continuum with his own banal present. Ariosto writes,

... E se tu vuoi che ‘l ver non ti sia ascoso,  
tutta al contrario l’istoria converti:  
che i Greci rotti, e che Troia vittrice,  
e che Penelopea fu meretrice. (*Orlando Furioso* 35 27)

[... if you want to know what really happened, invert the story: Greece was vanquished, Troy triumphant, and Penelope a whore.]

And Byron has,

There, on the green and village-cotted hill is  
Flanked by the Hellespont and by the Sea,  
Entombed the bravest of the brave, Achilles;  
They say so (Bryant says the contrary)  
And further downward tall and towering still is  
The tumulus of whom? – Heaven knows – ’t may be  
Patroclus – Ajax – or Protesilaus;  
All heroes who if living still would slay us.

(*Don Juan* IV st.76)

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**1:** *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Reiman and Freistat (Norton 2002), p.431.

Jacob Bryant had written a book denying that the Trojan War had ever occurred. In 1814, Byron had been upset: "... we *do* care about 'the authenticity of the tale of Troy'. I have stood upon that plain daily, for more than a month, in 1810; and, if any thing diminished my pleasure, it was that the blackguard Bryant had impugned its veracity" (London Journal; BLJ VIII 21-2). By 1819, writing *Don Juan*, he saw the opposite viewpoint.

Further on, I shall trace a later European tradition of writing, which stresses the importance of fleshly encounter, sensation, suffering, and general grossness – whether horrid, comic, or both – from which *Don Juan* stems. To show that Homer was no stranger to such matters, here's a passage from near the end of the *Odyssey*, a passage which most people like to forget. Melantheus the goatherd has been treacherous to Odysseus, having served and pandered to the suitors, who are all about to die:

And when Melanthius, the goatherd, was about to pass over the threshold, bearing in one hand a goodly helm, and in the other a broad old shield, flecked with rust—the shield of lord Laertes, which he was wont to bear in his youth, but now it was laid by, and the seams of its straps were loosened—then the two sprang upon him and seized him. They dragged him in by the hair, and flung him down on the ground in sore terror, and bound his feet and hands with galling bonds, binding them firmly behind his back, as the son of Laertes bade them, the much enduring, goodly Odysseus; and they made fast to his body a twisted rope, and hoisted him up the tall pillar, till they brought him near the roof-beams. Then didst thou mock him, swineherd Eumaeus, and say: "Now verily, Melanthius, shalt thou watch the whole night through, lying on a soft bed, as befits thee, nor shalt thou fail to mark the early Dawn, golden-throned, as she comes forth from the streams of Oceanus, at the hour when thou art wont to drive thy she-goats for the wooers, to prepare a feast in the halls." So he was left there, stretched in the direful bond, but the two put on their armour, and closed the bright door, and went to Odysseus, the wise and crafty-minded. There they stood, breathing fury, those on the threshold but four, while those within the hall were many and brave ... Then forth they led Melanthius through the doorway and the court, and cut off his nostrils and his ears with the pitiless bronze, and drew out his vitals for the dogs to eat raw, and cut off his hands and his feet in their furious wrath. Thereafter they washed their hands and feet, and went into the house to Odysseus, and the work was done. But Odysseus said to the dear nurse Eurycleia: "Bring sulphur, old dame, to cleanse from pollution, and bring me fire, that I may purge the hall; and do thou bid Penelope come hither with her handmaidens, and order all the women in the house to come." Then the dear nurse Eurycleia answered him: "Yea, all this, my child, hast thou spoken aright. But come, let me bring thee a cloak and a tunic for raiment,

and do not thou stand thus in the halls with thy broad shoulders wrapped in rags; that were a cause for blame.” Then Odysseus of many wiles answered her: “First of all let a fire now be made me in the hall.” So he spoke, and the dear nurse Eurycleia did not disobey, but brought fire and sulphur; but Odysseus thoroughly purged the hall and the house and the court. (Hom. Od. XXII 184-200 and 474-90; tr. A.T.Murray, Harvard / Heinemann 1919)

The huge difference between Odysseus and Juan I leave to last: Odysseus, challenged constantly, masters every situation he finds himself in, with great resource and courage – he even beats the interdict of Poseidon, and gets home to Ithaca. Juan never has such difficult situations to get out of, and though brave enough, never takes initiatives, being always passive before the dictates of fate. Odysseus makes decisions – Juan never has to. It’s a contrast as cunningly contrived by Byron as is that between Juan and Tom Jones – for which, see below.

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Homer is the most remote of *Don Juan’s* ancestors; and some work (though not enough), has been done on Byron’s study of the Italian tradition of mock-epic, from which it also derives, and to which Byron often draws attention.<sup>2</sup> But for the rest of this paper I want to concentrate on *Don Juan’s* more immediate predecessors, which form another great parallel tradition of comical, realistic writing in both verse and prose – all internally acknowledged, with almost every writer paying conscious and happy homage to his forefathers. Byron often refers to works in this tradition as examples of grossness much *worse* than anything in *Don Juan* – thereby disguising the fact that *Don Juan* represents a continuation of it. The tradition is anti-idealistic, anti-spiritual, anti-“romantic”, and does not hesitate to rub our noses in brute, odoriferous physical reality – indeed, does so deliberately, as surely as Homer does in the Melanthius passage just quoted. Before you try and get religious and spiritual, it implies, you must come to terms with the human body in which the elusive, indefinable “spirit” is encased. The writers thus stress not only eating and drinking (which are common themes of much other, more dignified writing), but also the complementary and necessary issues of excreting, body-odour, urinating, farting, indigestion, constipation, and of course sex. In so far as most writers avoid these themes as ignoble, they are in denial, since without eating, drinking, excreting, body-odour, urinating, farting,

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2: See Cochran, *Byron and Italy* (CSP 2012), Chap. 1.

indigestion, constipation, and of course sex, human life just wouldn't be there.

Byron's problems with his own body – part beautiful, part deformed – functioning very well in matters of sport and sex, a lot less well in matters of stress-management, nail-biting, digestion and obesity – are doubtless at the root of these preoccupations. He puts all this neatly at the start of *Don Juan's* eleventh canto, in which one's confidence in the notion of spirit, and on the truths of religion, is made entirely dependent on the health of one's flesh:

When I am gay, I'm all agog for Spirit;  
 When I am sober, then comes heavy Matter;  
 My very thought so clogged that I can't bear it –  
 My nerves so lumpish – thoughts torn to a tatter –  
 Their every shred's a Mountain, but I wear it,  
 And them, as well's I can; and as the Water  
 Sustains all ships, I bear the usual bore  
 Till I can drown, or dash it on the shore.

For ever and anon comes Indigestion  
 (Not the most "dainty Ariel") and perplexes  
 Our soarings with another sort of question –  
 And that which after all my Spirit vexes  
 Is, that I find no spot where Man can rest eye on,  
 Without confusion of the sorts and sexes –  
 Of Being – Stars – and this unriddled Wonder  
 The World – which at the worst's a Glorious blunder,

If it be Chance; or if it be according  
 To the Old Text, still better; lest it should  
 Turn out so, we'll say nothing 'gainst the wording,  
 As several people think such hazards rude;  
 They're right – our days are too brief for affording  
 Space to dispute what *no one* ever could  
 Decide, and *every body one day* will  
 Know very clearly, or, at least, lie still. –

And therefore will I leave off Metaphysical  
 Discussion, which is neither here nor there –  
 If I agree that what is is, then this I call  
 Being quite perspicuous and extremely fair;  
 The truth is, I've grown lately rather Phthisical –  
 I don't know what the reason is – the air,  
 Perhaps – but as I suffer from the shocks  
 Of Illness, I grow much more orthodox:

The first attack at once proved the Divinity  
 (But *that* I never doubted – nor the devil);  
 The next, the Virgin's mystical Virginité;  
 The third, the usual Origin of Evil;  
 The fourth at once established the whole Trinity  
 On so uncontroversial a level,  
 That I devoutly wished the three were four,  
 On purpose to believe so much the more.  
 (*Don Juan* XI, deleted stanza and sts.3-6)

If the strength of your belief in the Divinity, the Trinity, and the Blessed Virgin's virginity, depends so much on the state of your digestion, it rather looks as if the World and the Flesh will have the upper hand, at least until the moment comes for their dissolution. Meanwhile, Byron stresses at intervals the uneasy way in which Aspiration and Appetite coexist ("Everything in this life depends upon the weather & the state of one's digestion" "... who / Would pique himself on intellects, whose use / Depends so much upon the Gastric Juice?").<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes Aspiration and Appetite clash ...

Love, who heroically breathes a vein,  
 Shrinks from the application of hot towels ...  
 (*Don Juan* II st.23 3-4)

They grieved for those who perished with the Cutter,  
 And also for the Biscuit Casks and Butter. - - - -  
 (*Don Juan* II st.61 7-8)

Well – Juan, after bathing in the Sea,  
 Came always back to Coffee and Haidee.  
 (*Don Juan* II st.171 7-8)

Oh Ye! who build up Monuments defiled  
 With gore, like Nadir Shah, that costive Sophy,  
 Who, after leaving Hindoostan a Wild,  
 And scarce to the Mogul a cup of Coffee  
 To soothe his woes withal, was slain – the Sinner!  
 Because he could no more digest his dinner.  
 (*Don Juan* IX st.33 3-8)

Sometimes Spirit predominates:

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3: B. to Lady Melbourne, August 20th 1813; text from NLS Ms.43470 f.69; BLJ III 91; DJ V 32 6-8.

She looked as if she sate by Eden's door,  
 And grieved for those who could return no more.  
 (*Don Juan* XV 45 7-8)

Sometimes The Body overrides all:

'Tis strange the Mind, that very fiery Particle,  
 Should let itself be snuffed out by an Article. –  
 (*Don Juan* XII 60 7-8)

Sometimes Spirit appears to predominate over the Body, but it's an illusion ...

How odd – a single Hob-Goblin's non-entity  
 Should cause more fear than a whole Host's identity! –  
 (*Don Juan* XVI st.120 7-8)

... for here the Hob-Goblin turns out to be a woman.

The theme gets its most powerful (and least examined) embodiment in the cannibalism episode from Canto II. You may be glad to hear that another vital issue treated by all the writers I'm itemising (as well as by Byron) is the inoffensive one of education – but the most important teacher in *Don Juan* is Pedrillo, who, before he can do any educating at all, gets eaten by his fellows (though not by his pupil). Byron wrote nothing as disturbing as the cannibalism episode after Canto II: "I have not yet sent off the Cantos –," he wrote, of Cantos III and IV, "and have some doubt whether they ought to be published – for they have not the Spirit of the <firs> first – <your> {the} outcry has not frightened but it has hurt me – and I have not written "con amore" this time. –"<sup>4</sup>

Cannibalism is disturbing enough by itself (though I'm impressed by the news that eating human flesh is no different, nutritionally, than eating animal flesh): but Byron combines it with a modicum of discreet blasphemy relating to the Trinity and the eucharist ...

... out they spoke of lots for flesh and blood,  
 And who should die to be his fellow's food. – – – –  
 (*Don Juan* II st.73 7-8)

... and relating to the Incarnation and Suffering ...

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4: B. to Murray, February 7th 1820: text from NLS Ms.43490; BLJ VII 34.

He died as born, a Catholic in faith,  
 Like most in the belief in which they're bred,  
 And first a little Crucifix he kissed,  
 And then held out his Jugular and Wrist.

(*Don Juan* II st.76 5-8)

Here the demands of the Flesh (that is, starvation) cross over and combine with those of the Spirit (that is, salvation) to make one *trompe-l'œil* unit;<sup>5</sup> though it's Flesh that wins.

To Annabella Byron wrote,

The great object of life is sensation—to feel that we exist, even though in pain. It is this “craving void” which drives us to gaming—to battle—to travel—to intemperate but keenly felt pursuits of every description, whose principal attraction is the agitation inseparable from their accomplishment.<sup>6</sup>

What to an ascetic (like Annabella, he implies), is an issue to transcend – “sensation” – is for Byron the thing which impels people to live, even at the cost of what he euphemistically calls “agitation”. The alternative is not what the ascetic aims at – union with God – but is ‘this “craving void”’, as he calls it, attributing it by his quotation marks to an unspecified authority (though in fact it's his own phrase).<sup>7</sup> And yet filling up the “craving void” brings its own problems:

“To be or not to be, *that* is the question,”  
 Says Shakespeare – who just now is much the fashion;  
 I'm neither Alexander nor Hephæstion,  
 Nor ever had for *abstract* fame much passion,  
 But would much rather have a sound digestion  
 Than Buonaparte's Cancer; I could dash on  
 Through fifty victories to shame or fame;  
 Without a Stomach – what were a good name? –

“*O dura Ilia Messorum!*” “Oh  
 “Ye rigid Guts of reapers!” – I translate  
 For the great benefit of those who know  
 What Indigestion is – that inward Fate  
 Which makes all Styx through one small liver flow –

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**5:** For a more detailed analysis, see *Don Juan, Shipwrecks and Narratives*, below.

**6:** B. to Annabella Milbanke, September 6th 1813; text from LJ III 400; BLJ III 109.

**7:** He may be alluding to Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book I, which stresses the importance of voids.

A Peasant's sweat is worth his Lord's estate;  
 Let *this* one toil for bread, *that* rack for rent –  
 He who sleeps best may be the most content.

(*Don Juan* IX sts.14-15)

Sensation will come when it will, whether we will it or not, and whether we enjoy it or not; and the reign and supremacy of sensation is the main subject of *Don Juan*, Byron's greatest poem.

### ***Rabelais: Gargantua and Pantagruel***

Rabelais rarely features in Byron's writing.<sup>8</sup> He admits to having read him when young;<sup>9</sup> but the only quotation which he parades is the reference to the afterlife as "un grand peut-être".<sup>10</sup> and even then he never attributes it to Rabelais. It is not from *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. However, Byron sold a complete, four-volume Rabelais of 1807 in the 1816 sale: this does not appear in the 1813 sale catalogue, so must have been a recent purchase. It is a very learned edition of the famous Urquhart and Motteux translation, with substantial notes which sometimes overwhelm the text. It quotes an early eighteenth-century editor, John Ozell,<sup>11</sup> as writing that "in my private opinion, Rabelais is fit for none but wise men to read" (I iii).

I think it will be agreed that, if *Gargantua and Pantagruel* has been read just once, it is only forgotten with determination, whether the reader is wise or not.

Rabelais' satirical ethic is articulated at the end of his second book:

If you say to me, Master, it would seem that you were not very wise in writing to us these flimflam stories and pleasant fooleries; I answer you, that you are not much wiser to spend your time in reading them. Nevertheless, if you read them to make yourselves merry, as in manner of pastime I wrote them, you and I both are far more worthy of pardon than a great rabble of squint-minded fellows, dissembling and counterfeit saints, demure lookers, hypocrites, pretended zealots, tough friars, buskin-monks, and other such sects of men, who disguise themselves like masquers to deceive the world. For, whilst they give the common people to understand that they are busied about nothing but contemplation and devotion in

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**8:** We know from Hobhouse's diary (B.L.Add.Mss.47232: April 26th 1816) that B. possessed a copy of *Justine*: but look in vain for any reference to it or to de Sade by B. himself.

**9:** CMP 6.

**10:** BLJ I 4, VIII 35, and CMP 177, 186.

**11:** "... those were slander'd most whom Ozell praised" – Pope, *The Translator*.

fastings and maceration of their sensuality – and that only to sustain and aliment the small frailty of their humanity – it is so far otherwise that, on the contrary, God knows what cheer they make; *Et Curios simulant, sed Bacchanalia vivunt*. You may read it in great letters in the colouring of their red snouts, and gulching bellies as big as a tun, unless it be when they perfume themselves with sulphur. As for their study, it is wholly taken up in reading of Pantagruelian books, not so much to pass the time merrily as to hurt someone or other mischievously, to wit, in articling, sole-articling, wry-neckifying, buttock-stirring, ballocking, and diaboliculating, that is, calumniating. Wherein they are like unto the poor rogues of a village that are busy in stirring up and scraping in the ordure and filth of little children, in the season of cherries and guinds, and that only to find the kernels, that they may sell them to the druggists to make thereof pomander oil. Fly from these men, abhor and hate them as much as I do, and upon my faith you will find yourselves the better for it. And if you desire to be good Pantagruelists, that is to say, to live in peace, joy, health, making yourselves always merry, never trust those men that always peep out at one hole.<sup>12</sup>

Byron's is a different idiom, but his aims, and his targets, are the same – to make the reader “fly from these men” [*the Southeys, the Wellingtons, the Castlereaghs*], “abhor and hate them as much as I do”.

With this end in view, he borrows a number of Rabelais' tricks: facetious addresses to the reader; macaronic passages; empty appeals to not-always-trustworthy authorities; never-ending lists; and frankness about matters physical – though Byron's frankness is nothing beside that of Rabelais.

The fourth book of *Gargantua* is a satirical version of the *Odyssey*.<sup>13</sup> It contains (IV 18-22), the detailed description of a storm at sea, in which the protagonists nearly perish. Rabelais ladles almost as much nautical detail over it as does Byron in Canto II of his epic. It is Panurge who yells:

“Murder! This wave will sweep us away, blessed Saviour! O my friends! A little vinegar. I sweat again with mere agony. Alas! the mizen-sail's split, the gallery's washed away, the masts are sprung, the maintop-masthead dives into the sea; the keel is up to the sun; our shrouds are almost all broke, and blown away. Alas! alas! where is our main course? Al is verlooren, by Godt! our topmast is run adrift. Alas! who shall have this wreck? Friend, lend me here behind you one of these whales. Your lantern

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**12:** All quotations from the Urquhart and Motteux translation of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* downloaded from Project Gutenberg.

**13:** IV 28 contains the announcement that “The great god Pan is dead”: compare B.'s late fragment *Aristomenes*.

is fallen, my lads. Alas! do not let go the main-tack nor the bowline. I hear the block crack; is it broke? For the Lord's sake, let us have the hull, and let all the rigging be damned. Be, be, be, bous, bous, bous. Look to the needle of your compass, I beseech you, good Sir Astrophil, and tell us, if you can, whence comes this storm." (IV 19)

Both writers aim (sometimes) at such verifiable authenticity.

Shocking as *Don Juan* may have been in the 1820s, it is mild in comparison with several writers with whom Byron was familiar – Casti and Buratti to name but two (if Buratti's *Elefanteide* isn't Rabelaisian, I don't know what is). As I've pointed out elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> *Don Juan* may include, among its incidental themes, constipation, indigestion, defecation, urinating, menstrual flow and the relative durations of the male and female orgasms – but you have to look hard for these references, so discreetly are they worded. His thesis, in so far as he parades one, is that it's very hard to locate any divine spirit in a being such as man, encumbered as he is with so many functioning and malfunctioning bodily processes. Rabelais may be another writer whose "concern with enlarging the boundaries of the acceptable" he had no wish to emulate, but whose preoccupations he shared, in a less impolite style – no-one celebrates the body (if that's the word) so thoroughly as Rabelais.

*Gargantua and Pantagruel* starts, like *Don Juan*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Peregrine Pickle*, and other books I shall mention, with a slow trot through the birth of its first hero (out of his mother's left ear), his boyhood, and education – which is, unlike Juan's, a great success. The same happens with Pantagruel in Book II. Unlike Juan, Gargantua enjoys a good relationship with his father, Grangousier, just as his son, Pantagruel, will with him. The book relates (I, 8-9) the style in which he was dressed, as do several passages in Byron's epic, relative to Juan. Gargantua's delight in going to the lavatory is made clear in the famous chapter (I, 13) in which he lists the best means of cleansing one's posterior: Byron is never concerned with this topic, not at least in his writings; but the first glimpse we have of little Juan is of him emptying a chamber pot over the narrator.<sup>15</sup> One of Rabelais' digressive chapters (I, 25) relates the best cures for "those who are costive [*that is, constipated*] in their belly". Byron sketches in the same problem with Nadir Shah, who dies of constipation at *Don Juan* IX stanza 33. When in 4, 17 of *Gargantua*, the giant Widenostrils dies of indigestion, it's hard not to recollect the gigantic

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**14:** *Byron and Women* [and Men], pp.183-26.

**15:** In Chap.XVI of Smollett's *Launcelot Greaves*, Crabtree, Greaves's Sancho Panza, throws a urinal in his doctor's face.

Potemkin, who dies of the same complaint at *Don Juan* VII stanzas 36-7. However, Byron neglects to use the idea of people who die, farting, from dropsy, as Rabelais does (IV 43); nor does he tell us the myriad pet-names which Juan's nurses invent to call his willy, as Rabelais does of Gargantua's nurses in I, XI. It's true that we hear no more about Gargantua's willy in the book, whereas Don Juan's willy is implicitly present for most of his poem (as is Tristram Shandy's, which is absolutely central to his book: see below). Rabelais' Panurge, we concede, has a codpiece "three foot long" (II XV); but he is not a hero, being unwise, mendacious, and self-indulgent. In II 27, Pantagruel begets children by farting them (little men) and pissing them (little women).

The two writers differ in their approach to the subject of sex, but are at one in their implication about its universal importance to both men and women (as, in his idiom, is Sterne). Rabelais takes both male and female sexual impulses for granted, and tells bawdy stories with appropriate panache – see III 19:

Do you remember what happened at Rome two hundred and threescore years after the foundation thereof? A young Roman gentleman encountering by chance, at the foot of Mount Celion, with a beautiful Latin lady named Verona, who from her very cradle upwards had always been both deaf and dumb, very civilly asked her, not without a chironomatic Italianizing of his demand, with various jectigation of his fingers and other gesticulations as yet customary amongst the speakers of that country, what senators in her descent from the top of the hill she had met with going up thither. For you are to conceive that he, knowing no more of her deafness than dumbness, was ignorant of both. She in the meantime, who neither heard nor understood so much as one word of what he had said, straight imagined, by all that she could apprehend in the lovely gesture of his manual signs, that what he then required of her was what herself had a great mind to, even that which a young man doth naturally desire of a woman. Then was it that by signs, which in all occurrences of venereal love are incomparably more attractive, valid, and efficacious than words, she beckoned to him to come along with her to her house; which when he had done, she drew him aside to a privy room, and then made a most lively alluring sign unto him to show that the game did please her. Whereupon, without any more advertisement, or so much as the uttering of one word on either side, they fell to and bringuardized it lustily.

But Byron is not a bawdy writer in this style. Tales of spontaneous, unfettered lust do not interest him. In *Don Juan*, love must be forbidden – by either god or man (preferably both).

Byron finds Juan's sexual appetite natural; but he depicts some of his heroines' sexual appetites satirically, showing them concerned to deny its

existence until too late (Julia) or to confuse it with Christian charity (Haidee). Later heroines such as Gulbeyaz, Catherine, or Fitz-Fulke, on the other hand, have no such problems of self-deception to overcome. Rabelais leaves it, neither to Gargantua nor Pantagruel, but to the ignoble Panurge, to express an opinion of the female sexual appetite:

The divine philosopher Plato was doubtful in what rank of living creatures to place and collocate them, whether amongst the rational animals, by elevating them to an upper seat in the specific classis of humanity, or with the irrational, by degrading them to a lower bench on the opposite side, of a brutal kind, and mere bestiality. For nature hath posited in a privy, secret, and intestine place of their bodies, a sort of member, by some not impertinently termed an animal, which is not to be found in men. Therein sometimes are engendered certain humours so saltish, brackish, clammy, sharp, nipping, tearing, prickling, and most eagerly tickling, that by their stinging acrimony, rending nitrosity, figging itch, wriggling mordicancy, and smarting salsitude (for the said member is altogether sinewy and of a most quick and lively feeling), their whole body is shaken and ebrangled, their senses totally ravished and transported, the operations of their judgment and understanding utterly confounded, and all disordinate passions and perturbations of the mind thoroughly and absolutely allowed, admitted, and approved of; yea, in such sort that if nature had not been so favourable unto them as to have sprinkled their forehead with a little tincture of bashfulness and modesty, you should see them in a so frantic mood run mad after lechery, and hie apace up and down with haste and lust, in quest of and to fix some chamber-standard in their Paphian ground, that never did the Proetides, Mimallonides, nor Lyaeon Thyades deport themselves in the time of their bacchanalian festivals more shamelessly, or with a so affronted and brazen-faced impudency; because this terrible animal is knit unto, and hath an union with all the chief and most principal parts of the body, as to anatomists is evident (III 23).

Byron would agree, but is too polite to say so. However, from his own position, not as a cuckold, but as a cuckold-maker, he would certainly agree with Rabelais' Rondibilis, who assures the horrified Panurge,

“Shall not I be a cuckold? ... what is this you ask of me? If you shall be a cuckold? My noble friend, I am married, and you are like to be so very speedily; therefore be pleased, from my experiment in the matter, to write in your brain with a steel pen this subsequent ditton, There is no married man who doth not run the hazard of being made a cuckold. Cuckoldry naturally attendeth marriage. The shadow doth not more naturally follow the body, than cuckoldry ensueth after marriage to place fair horns upon the husbands' heads. And when you shall happen to hear any man