

The Byronic Thing: *Don Juan*, or License and Triumph of Libertinism

Timothy Feng-shan Tsai

Now no way can I stray Save back to England, all the world's my way.

--*Shakespeare, Richard II, I.iv*

As *Don Juan* is a poem so is Byron a poet of the thing. Rather than a symbol of permanence, the thing is destabilized by the frequent occurrence of the word "thing" whose semantic aspects are, to say the least, mercurial. What is commonly called Byron's mobility depends almost exclusively on the mutability of the thing which is thematized by the poem's self-image as "A non-descript and ever varying rhyme, / A versified Aurora Borealis." {1} The truth of the matter is that the poem is not only versified, it is also diversified. One can without exaggeration call the poem a *detour de force*. In the turn and return of its rhymes, the equivocation of the Byronic thing facilitates, on the one hand, the liberty and license the poem takes and, on the other, the licentiousness and libertinism that are the earmark of the Don Juan tradition. To the extent that, besides liberty and license, the poem also takes a linguistic turn, licentiousness and libertinism are given an ironic twist, so much so that Byronic thing appears in a quixotic (dis-)guise, drifting along a quick succession of discursive and sexual digressions. In terms of the latter, however, the poem as a versified aurora borealis encounters an impasse *vis-a-vis* the narcissistic and immobile Aurora Raby. Characterized as an "orphan" (15:44), she leads the poem to a literal dead end in the form of a fragment, which opens with a reflection on "orphans" (17:1), quickly deflects into a defence of "paradox" (17:6), and winds up pinning a hope on "a firm Post Obit on posterity" (17:9). With the death of the author, the poem that concludes with a fragment on orphans is literally left an orphan, and a "sterile orphan" {2} at that, compelled to adopt asexual modes of reproduction such as, to name only a few, the auto-production of subject-work, doubling by specular reflection, proliferation by self-division, and the reproduction of posterity effect by the issue of speculative post-obits. Insofar as the Don Juan tradition is a relay of representation, it is fit to see how Jacques Lacan's exposition -- both explication and exhibition -- of Don Juan as a compulsive type of male sexuality fits into that genealogy. In so doing, it is not so much to read Byron with Lacan as to read Lacan with Byron. Without wishing to fully delineate the Byronic thing, however, I hope that, by tracing its detours, one can nevertheless perceive its contours.



One of the difficulties one encounters in thinking about Byron's *Don Juan* is the promiscuous way in which the word "thing" is used. It is not simply that its usages exhaust all possible meanings which a capable dictionary can nevertheless manage to stabilize, nor that it floats as a signifier along the seemingly endless divagation of the *ottava rima*, unable to coincide with its signified. For though it is difficult to pinpoint the residue of meaning, it is still possible to conceptualize it as a "something evermore about to be" and be done with it. Indeed, one of the dictionary definitions for the word is precisely this: "an object or entity not precisely designated or capable of being designated." Nor does the difficulty lie in the way in which "thing" is used as a short-hand form to point to whatever is at issue. If it did, one could justly hope to understand

the poem by patiently thinking the interrelationships of the things the word “thing” refers to. Indeed, one could then follow the steps of Heidegger, who, in thinking the origin of the work of art, complains about the “rootlessness of Western thought” of the thing and, after many detours, affirms that “The work lets the earth be an earth.” {3}

As a versified Aurora Borealis, the poem makes it a point to “laugh at *all* things” as nothing “but a *Show*” (7:2). Reference is made only to be disclaimed, and after a world of references has been made, it is flatly disavowed: “My Muse despises reference” (14:54). Reference, that is, is displaced by self-reference. The difficulty, it seems, lies in the poem's self-reference, in the self-negation of reference, in the self that thrives on reference *and* the negation of reference (“I'm not Oedipus” [13:12]), and in the narrative that negates itself in the act of narration.

But what's this to the purpose? you will say.
Gent. Reader, nothing; a mere speculation,
For which my sole excuse is -- 'tis my way,
Sometimes *with* and sometimes without occasion
I write what's uppermost, without delay

This narrative is not meant for narration, But a mere airy and fantastic basis, To build
up common things with common places. (14:7)

With the way back to England foreclosed, and along with it the possibility of straying, the discourse in exile is compelled to take wandering as its proper way of post-haste progression, shuttling between narration and no narration, ground and no ground, place and no place, things and nothing. And the “without” that precedes “occasion” is forced by the slanted *with* to retroactively vacillate between “not having” and “being against,” making the sense of “opposition” sound rather self-willed *and* half-hearted. The doubling of meanings created by the slant, however, does not have the last giggle. {4}

In creating disturbance in the “without,” *with* is split within itself. Besides the original sense of “having” and the newly activated one of “being for,” something else is mobilized that seriously challenges the claim of “having,” the power of writing and, as if things were not complicated enough, the authority of the author and his “I.” What does it mean, one may ask, to have an occasion against (in the sense of “in relation to” or “in response to”) which one writes, sometimes *pro* and sometimes *con*? And if we understand “occasion” as meaning “circumstance,” namely, “an assembly or *gathering* of things,” what does it mean to have an occasion in and about which one writes posthaste, that is, “without delay”? A certain circumspection is perhaps needed when one tries to write *about* things, when the truth is that one is circumscribed, surrounded by them. Given that one is always more or less surrounded by things, it may be questioned at what moment and in what manner things emerge and manifest themselves as an occasion so that one can have or be had by it. In other words, when and how do circumstances emerge, as if with the disruptiveness of an event? Such questions are urgent in that, as Byron himself puts it elsewhere, also in relation to the idea and the futility of opposition, “Men are the sport of circumstances, when / The circumstances seem the sport of men” (5:15). It is no small matter that men are the plaything of things.

But insofar as referentiality is disclaimed, it seems to matter little whether or not one is in the presence of a circumstance. What does it mean that something emerges of which only the “uppermost” gets written. It is perhaps an understatement to say “emerge” when “uppermost” suggests a depth out of which rise a throng of things, each contending with the other to come up on top, demanding writing. Pro or con, circumstance or no circumstance, something erupts, disrupts from an abyss, commanding an authority more imperative than imperality (“Monarchs are less imperative than rhymes” [5:77]). In the anarchy of thoughts, the kings or “the things called Sovereigns” (9:60) are nothing. The lawless thoughts only obey the law of rhyme (“The rhyme obliges me to this” [5:77]). The “I” that writes is at the bottom obliged by “what’s uppermost.” And where it dictates, friendship gives way to amour-propre, which, despite itself, takes not a little pleasure even in the fall of a friend. Like the other Romantics Byron develops a taste for the abyss, be it “great Nature’s or our own abyss / Of thought” (14:1). Or the strange abyss of thoughts from which the sea-changed Shelley is raised, as if from the dead, only to be stationed near the shore, drooping like Narcissus to gather himself:

It is a pleasant voyage perhaps to float, Like Pyrrho, on a sea of speculation; But what if carrying sail capsize the boat? Your wise men don’t know much of navigation; And swimming long in the abyss of thought is apt to tire: a calm and shallow station well nigh the shore, where one stoops down and gathers some pretty shell, is best for moderate bathers. (9:18)

According to the drift of the stanza, the sea is a dangerous place to practice the pyro-technics of scepticism, for it threatens to extinguish the fire, if not shorten the life, of the speculator. In the final analysis, swimming, rather than navigation, is the art of giving oneself immoderately to the sea and at the same time managing to retain one’s life. It is at once an unreserved giving and an insured preserving of one self. The thing is to survive, to live on so that one can return, as Byron does, to “hover on the brink.” {5}

And to swim long in the abyss of thought without drowning or tiring is to doubt or speculate and at the same time remain certain that “[t]here’s no such thing as certainty” (9:17). But certainly, Shelley also returns from the abyss of thought, not stationed near the shore, but hovering between the *with* and *without* of circumstances. Shelley, for once, resurrects as the uppermost in the insurrection of thoughts, demanding and commanding writing, haunting Byron on the brink of the ninth canto of *Don Juan*. It seems then that, in addition to the question of what it means to have an occasion, there is also the question of what it means to *own* an abyss of thought, including that from which the metamorphosed Shelley returns, like a “thing of air” (16:23), raising questions about possession and self-possession. {6}

National Chung Hsing University

Moreover, it also gives rise to questions concerning Byron’s insistence on “my way” and his speculation on “My chance” to “war . . . with all who war / With thought” (9:24). All the questions boil down to this: what does it mean to use the possessive case, to what extent the subject possesses or is possessed by the things that are said to be one’s own? Such a question is particularly pressing when a poet’s mobility is at stake.

That Byron is a quintessential poet, as *Don Juan* is a poem *par excellence*, of the thing has been confirmed and consecrated by the critical tradition which, appropriating the authority of Byron himself, focuses on a highly flattering notion of “*mobilité*.” Let one example suffice. As the editor of *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Don Juan: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Edward Bostetter observes that Byron

often mused on his “*mobilité*,” the fluctuating of his moods and attitudes according to the conditions and companions of the moment, and *Don Juan* *reflects* this “*mobilité*,” possessing consequently something of the *spontaneity* and unpredictability of improvisation. One might say that Byron was creating and shaping the genre of his poem as he wrote, *presenting* the world “exactly as it goes,” *mirrored* in the *stream of his consciousness*.” {7}

Moods vary as things change, but the subject of representation always remains spontaneously reflective, responding to and at the same time musing on his response to the scene of writing. The poet, in other words, is the master of his work, which in a specular play returns to him his image as a creator. Such oxymoronic formulation as spontaneous reflexivity -- or no less oxymoronic, reflexive spontaneity -- is very much in the grain of a well received concept of romanticism that posits self-reflexivity as its centerpiece. Under the sign of romantic irony, poetic consciousness is said to fold its creative energy and shaping power back on itself, on the one hand enabling the poetic consciousness to become self-consciousness -- or what amounts to the same thing, the subject to be present to itself -- and, on the other, demanding that literature write its own criticism or even formulate its own theory, absolutely. {8}

It is dangerous, however, to talk about romantic irony without irony. For, in so doing, one risks a naive fixation of a *fluid* process, be it (self-)consciousness or creativity. Moreover, in succumbing to the seduction of the specular play, one is no longer able to distinguish between the “I” as the subject of the statement and as the subject of representation on the one hand, and between the subject and his statement on the other. Indeed, it is the confusion of the two pairs that enables Bostetter to talk about the mirroring of the poet and the poem in terms of possession, while at the same time suppressing the fact that the possessive subject can be and, as in Byron, is the possessed. To do justice to Byron, it is he himself that positions the “I” between *within* and *without*, thereby triggering the fluctuation between identity and multiplicity. Byron is evidently playing with higher stakes. For, playing upon the disparity between “temperate” and “temper,” the “I” is led through a series of shifting contrasts culminating in the inside/outside opposition: “I almost think that the same skin / For one without -- has two or three within” (17:11). Acted upon by internal and external forces, the hedonist subject is driven beyond the pleasure principle to alternate between hysterics and histrionics of a compulsive nature, elsewhere dramatized as a thing called “temperament” and paradoxically attributed to the Popean Adeline:

So well she acted, all and every part By turns – with that vivacious versatility,

Which many people take for want of heart. They err – ‘tis merely what is called mobility, A thing of temperament and not of art, Though seeming so, from its supposed facility; And false -- though true; for surely they're sincerest, Who are

strongly acted on by what is nearest. (16:97)

As Byron defines it, *mobilité* is “an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions -- at the same time without *losing* the past; and is, though sometimes apparently useful to the possessor, a most painful and unhappy attribute.”{9} Though it is by no means clear whether the displeasure is occasioned by the present impressions or triggered by the past, or by the convergence of both, mobility gives rise not only to mixed feelings but also to serious doubt concerning the agency of the subject, situated as it is in the play of within and without, true and false, past and present, identity and multiplicity, pleasure and pain, temperament and art, sincerity and theatricality, acting and being acted on, being and seeming, thing and plaything. Perpetual agitation and “eternal agility,”{10} it seems, are the two sides of the same coin made of irony.

But need it be said that it is equally, if not more, dangerous to read irony, romantic or not, with irony? For one thing, it is far from sure whether or not Byron retains his control in musing on his mobility while giving it a free rein. In other words, to what extent is he in control *inowning* such mobility, in the double sense of possession and recognition of something alien and alienating. One cannot but wonder what kind of stance it is to be knowingly possessed. On the other hand, it is equally uncertain whether or not, in following the trajectory of the thing from “what’s uppermost” to “what is nearest,” one ends up playing into the hand of the ironist, i.e., into the infinite regression of self-referential statements. The statement “I am an ironist” is perhaps as perplexing as the classical paradox that inhabits the statement “I lie.” One simply is disoriented by the endless doubling whichever way he turns in the hall of mirrors. As Paul de Man succinctly puts it in an interview with Robert Moynihan, “irony is not a figure of self-consciousness. It’s a break, an interruption, a disruption. It is a moment of loss of control, and not just for the author but for the reader as well.”{11} With irony, one enters an uncertain ground.

However, if there is something diabolical *and* absurd about the statement “I’m possessed,” the self-reflexivity is given a peculiar turn in the statement “I’m possessed by that which possesses itself.” To put it in a nutshell, it is the enigma of self-possession that puzzles the ironist. In addition to Shelley’s coolness and self-possession, referred to earlier, there is the “coldness” or “self-possession” (15:57) of Aurora Raby, whose “indifference / Confound[s]” (15:83) not only Don Juan the puppet but also Lord Byron the puppeteer. She may very well be the prototype of Freud’s narcissistic woman *par excellence*. As a cold and self-possessed young woman, she has nothing whatsoever in common with the warm-blooded Haidee, whose loss of control proves only too costly.



In his book on Byron's strength, Jerome Christensen makes romantic irony a strategic issue with which he questions Jerome J. McGann, Marjorie Levinson and, beyond them, the critical tradition that reifies irony as a stylistic component of a no less reified concept of romanticism. It is strategic in the sense that, as a point of attack, romantic irony bears with it a peculiar absence or virtual presence. In one of the rare occasions in which the term actually occurs, it is indicted and interdicted by a verbal echo of the Popean authority: “Romantic irony rushes in where philosophes fear to tread.”{12} Earlier on, he displaces the term, in the double sense of whisking it onto the discussion of Byron's Oriental tales, and *there* replacing it with a Lacanian formulation

of the scopic drive: “This desire of the eye to see itself seeing with no blind spots, with nothing behind it, is the formula for paranoia, for Romantic irony, and for the Oriental tale, a *self-reflexive narrative with notes*” (p. 98; emphasis added). The psychoanalytic underpinnings notwithstanding, his reformulation of romantic irony parallels to a large extent the above-mentioned work by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, who do not have recourse, as Christensen does, to psychosis as “the last refuge against irony” (p. 352).

The strategic issue is what McGann and Levinson respectively call “Byron's Romantic Irony” and “Byronic Irony.” For Christensen, there is no such thing as romantic irony, pure and simple, that in itself guarantees what McGann calls the “Juan effect,” or that which can be “recuperated,” as Levinson puts it, “by the biographical subject-form coded in all the poem.”{13} In the light of Christensen's “poststructuralist biographical criticism” (xxii), life and writing are radically disjuncted, so much so that each can no longer be articulated in terms of the other without risking the reification of the poetic form or, for that matter, the subject-form. And the question of the subject, if it can be broached at all, is legitimate only if the poet is no longer the “master strategist of his poem.” (p. 215). Byron is not to be given credit, despite his family motto “Crede Byron” (p. 43), nor is he to be trusted, given his insistence, in his August 12, 1819 letter to John Murray, that he have his “own way” with *Don Juan*.

A basic assumption of my discussion is that reading *Don Juan* as a psychotic text is not necessarily incompatible with the way Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe would probably read it in terms of romantic irony, or even in terms of the fragment. Indeed, it can be argued that the textual operation of the fragment is largely responsible for the form in which the poem appears. By this, I do not mean the state in which the last canto was left unfinished at Byron's death, although it is also questionable whether he would have been able to finish it, had he lived on. Rather, what makes *Don Juan* a fragment of such a colossal stature is the compulsive repetition of the endless digressions, the sudden turns and returns that twist and tear through the text on the one hand and fold the text back on itself on the other. The digressive and self-reflexive moments fragment the narrative, splitting the narrator along the way into the subject of the statement and the subject of representation. In both cases it is less a question of the narratorial persona than that of the narrator as a personification of that which articulates from the abyss. It is not the thing of and about which the subject speaks. Rather, it is the thing that speaks through and in (spite of) the subject. But to answer the question this way, without irony, is to have already missed the thing that calls for a persona or personae in the first place. For one thing, it is a paradox, if not bad faith, to give speech to that which makes speech possible. Furthermore, the dramaturgical metaphor presupposes that a clear distinction between the mask and the face behind it is possible, whereas it is precisely in the blurring of the two that that thing speaks. What readily comes to mind is the dramatics involved in the prosopopeia Jacques Lacan employs to articulate the Freudian thing via a Heideggerian discourse on the thing. {14}

National Chung Hsing University

Byron's insistence, in his August 12, 1819 letter to John Murray, that he has his “own way” with *Don Juan* seems to negotiate a middle way between those of Friedrich Schlegel and Jacques Lacan or, more specifically, between Transcendental and psychoanalytic buffoonery. {15} For in the insistence of the letter, what is “own” or proper is immediately instanced by a reference to dramatic personae acting mad, and by an analogy with the kind of performance that invokes the removal of constraints as the law of the genre and associates the style of dress with that of address:

You might as well make Hamlet (or Diggory) “act mad” in a strait waistcoat as trammel my buffoonery, if I am to be a buffoon: their gestures and my thoughts would only be pitiably absurd and ludicrously constrained. Why, Man, the Soul of such writing is its license; at least the liberty of that license . . .

Where thoughts sway, writing takes all kinds of liberties to stray. But soon enough, both liberty and license give way to libertinism and licentiousness when buffoonery becomes a certain order of *fooling*.

It is easy to see how *Don Juan*, as a *detour de force*, digresses along the itinerary of the thing which, in the quick succession of appearances and disappearances, occasions the mobility that is Byron's strength. It is not so easy, however, to outline the displacement of the Byronic thing. Take Aurora Raby again for example. With her “coldness” and “self-possession” (15:57), she's almost a she-Shelley, whose “indifference / Confound[s]” (15:83) not only Don Juan the puppet of desire but also Lord Byron the puppeteer. What is particularly seductive about the Byronic orphan's self-possession is that it gives rise to the fantasy of self-identity, against which the self-division as objectified by Adeline's histrionic mobility is contrasted. If Adeline is where the divided subject once was, Aurora Raby is where he would want to be, but somehow he ends up fooling around with Lady Fitz-Fulke. The confusion of feminine positions is further complicated when Aurora Raby is contrasted with Haidee, making it difficult to tell which is the “flower” and which, the “gem” (15:58). Somewhere in the labyrinth of these and other feminine positions the subject is lost. In light of this, the claim that Don Juan is “most things to all women” (14:31) sounds rather quizzical. Yet, it is of a piece with the Don Juan myth, which the Lacanian psychoanalysis takes upon itself to perpetuate. In order to allow the Lacanian position to come out in starker relief, it is necessary to let the Byronic thing play itself out and to make clear what is supposedly Don Juan's way with woman:

with women he was what
They pleased to make or take him for; and their
Imagination's quite enough for that:
So that the outline's tolerably fair,
They fill the canvass up – and ‘verbum sat.’
If once their phantasies be brought to bear
Upon an object whether sad or playful,
They can transfigure brighter than a Raphael. (15:16)

As with Adeline, to whom histrionic mobility is transitivistically attributed, here, phantasies and imagination are ascribed to all women with the certainty of a paranoid knowledge. Well, not exactly all, but pretty close. Since in Aurora Raby the Byronic thing encounters an impasse, one has to take her away from the set of “all women,” thus leaving it a set of “all but one.” It may not have the appearance or descriptive details of a catalogue, but it is perhaps as close as one can get to Leporello's list of *mille e tre donne* in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Elsewhere, Byron produces a list, not of women's names, but of places where a man can *fool*. Although Byron as a rule defends himself against the charge of bawdiness, he is more than willing to own it in his October 26, 1819 letter to Douglass Kinnaird, demanding recognition from the latter by force of rhetorical question coupled with sexual bravado characteristic of the Don Juan tradition:

As to "Don Juan," confess, confess -- you dog and be candid -- that it is the sublime of *that there* sort of writing--it may be bawdy but is it not good English? It may be profligate but is it not *life*, is it not *the thing*? Could any man have written it who has

not lived in the world?--and [f]ooled in a post-chaise?--in a hackney coach?--in a gondola?--against a wall?--in a court carriage?--in a vis a vis--on a table?-- and under it? (Quennell, p. 491)

When art becomes autonomous, as far as the argument goes, contents dictate form, and formality gives way to liberty and license, which in turn give way soon enough to libertinism and licentiousness.

To sum up a bit, discursive digression in *Don Juan* takes the form of self-reflexivity that is closely associated with irony understood as “permanent parabasis.”{16} As such, they are also related to a specific type of theatricality, namely, buffoonery. But, increasingly, buffoonery assumes an aspect of seriality each time fooling veers towards digressions of a sexual nature. Within the confines of the poem, the sexual is of course an effect of the textual, precisely in the same way the “I” wanders from one to another place which is no place.

Of digression as a self-conscious buffoonery in Byron's *Don Juan*, one could almost say, as Francois Roustang does of Lacan's style of (ad)dress, that the “form of his discourse was itself also subject to this double impression of being at once a rigorous sequence and an uninterrupted digression,” and that his work resembles a “vainglorious desperation in which the *clown* who thinks he is pulling the strings is merely redoubling the madness he had posited at the outset as his first principle.”{17} Theoretical equivocation is immediately translated into the theatrical, both in turn reduced to a problem of style. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen is much more specific and terse about the connection, calling Lacan a “chameleon whose thought was as motley as his garb.”{18} Theatricality seldom escapes the self-conscious individuals, be they poets, philosophers, or analysts, whose businesses require that they be vigilant with words. In fact, it is Lacan who sets the terms in characterizing himself as a “perfect hysteric,” and the best way, according to Stuart Schneiderman, to talk about a perfect hysteric is to do it “theatrically . . . histrionically.”{19} This is precisely what Borch-Jacobsen does before launching a philosophical critique of Lacan's psychoanalysis. The seductiveness of a hysteric, male or female, is something to reckon with, which he does by discrediting Lacan's achievement as an actor, in terms somewhat reminiscent of Kleist's marionette theater, Diderrot's theatrical Rameau, and even Byron's histrionic Adeline:

Lacan, whose exhibitionism was immense (it verged on the ridiculous), exhibited nothing after all but his own *histrionics*--that is, his own absence of “self.” This fascinating personage, who so obligingly took the *stage* in his seminars and in private life, was a *terrific actor* (or “clown,” as he himself said), capable of *all roles* to the same extent that he was incapable of any one in particular. {20}

Borch-Jacobsen seeks to deflate, if not to purge, the psychoanalytic mode of theatricality. For Byron, however, theatricality is precisely the soul of his poem. In want of hero, Byron derives his *Don Juan* from a pantomime which, in turn, is derived from Thomas Shadwell's play *The Libertine*. {21} It is as if, in a discussion of Byronic digressions, one could not approach the subject except via a detour by addressing Lacan as a male hysteric and a marionette-like harlequin without, of course, the iconoclastic bite of either Roustang or Borsch-Jacobsen. But

what about Lacan as a Don Juan? Again, I depend on Schneiderman's *inside* stories about Lacan's mistresses, who "were almost as legion [as] his followers," about his running "afoul of the patriarchy [of Marie Bonaparte and Anna Freud]," about his tendency "to expressing his amorous intentions toward women in flagrant ways" and, above all, about how he *fooled* around with a woman "in the back seat" of a taxi cab. {22} If these stories were to be given credit, Sheila McDonald's distinction between public and private sides of the libertine--that is, between Byron as the narrator and Don Juan as the manipulated puppet--would lose a substantial part of its credibility, {23} the substance of libertinism being precisely its denial of the distinction between the public and the private or, what amounts to the same thing, making public the private. In terms of exhibitionism as a form of *Selbstdarstellung*, therefore, it is probably not accidental that, in the letter to Kinnaird, Byron explicitly asserts *Don Juan* as the *life* and the *thing*, and thereby associates the thing with the life of a man who *fools* around virtually everywhere except in his own bedroom (since, in Byron's case, to do so does not create scenes but scandals, the boudoir having always already been heavily patrolled by norms, sexual, contractual or legal).

In explicating Jacques Lacan's thought concerning Don Juan, Kiana Rabinovich highlights the compulsive nature of that type of masculine sexuality. What anguishes the Don Juan types is that they are "captured" by what Lacan calls an open set, the set of *not-all* women. {24} Women as not-all, i.e., as an open set, can be counted (as in the case with Leporello's list of *mille e tre donne*), and the womanizers feel "condemned to continue making this infinite enumeration of women, not only compulsively but also impulsively" (Rabinovich, p. 87). Don Juan *is* a slave, and not just in the seraglio. Above all, the Don Juan types and prototypes are slaves to women's fantasy is that they are "capable of responding to all feminine fantasies"; consequently, they are especially "docile" in the way they adapt themselves to "women's fantasies, one by one . . . , concerned with saying the words each woman wanted to hear and figuring out exactly how each woman wanted him to talk" (p. 90). In Byronic language, the Don Juans are slaves, not because they are but because they want to be "most things to all women." Their way with women is to begin by offering little more than a "canvass" with a "tolerably fair outline," allowing them to fill in their "imagination" and "phantasies." Strategically, it is called "insinuating without insinuation" (15:15); in terms of praxis, however, it may become *mobilité* in the sense of "an excessive susceptibility to immediate impressions, etc."

I have deliberately juxtaposed Byronic and Lacanian Don Juans in order to suggest the almost point for point correspondences between them. If we remove Lacan's technical innovations upon the formalistic and mathematical components of the libertine tradition, the story or at least the outline of the story is vary much like that of Byron's. The point is, take Lacan's mathemes and algorithms a way, you take away the soul of his *crits*. This is in a sense what Borch-Jacobsen and Roustang, valuable as their works may be, have attempted in taking away his theatricality as well as his algorithms, the soul of such writings being its license, the formalization that works so hard to be incomprehensible. Roustang spells out Lacan's affiliation with Surrealism, which he thinks sought to "go much further than German Romanticism," and which he proposes to call "hyperromanticism." {25} German Romanticism, for Roustang, is not altogether negative because insofar as it "always maintained a certain distance between the relation to the world of dreams and fantasy," order and rationality are still viable. Addressing romanticism as "this repetitive compulsion," Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy speak of an "exigency" to guard against fascination and temptation," and call for some distance, some "vigilance" and a "minimum of lucidity." {26} Between the romantics and their critics, there is a conflict of principles, not between pleasure and reality principles, but between the pleasure principle and the beyond of the

pleasure principle. As such, it is more or less a formal question, that is, how can we maintain our formal organization of the ego and its objects without succumbing to “formal stagnation” and paranoia that is bound to occur with it. {27} Given Lacan's famous hostility to the ego psychology, vigilance, rationality and order are at best ineffective defense mechanisms. At their worst, according to Schneiderman, they are themselves the “apotheosis of psychopathology” (p. 16). Buffoonery is probably an alter-native to madness.

Notes

1. Byron, *Don Juan*, 7:2. My discussion of the poem relies on the text prepared by Jerome J. McGann, in *The Oxford Authors: Byron* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). All further references are likewise identified by canto and stanza numbers.
2. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 135. As an image of “solitary misfortune,” the sterile orphan is for Blanchot an epitome not only of Ovid's Narcissus but also of the “absolute subjectivity” of romanticism, both unhappy in having “neither forebears not [sic.] descendants.” Reflecting on Laboue-Labarthe's reflections on Friedrich Schlegel's formulation that “Every poet is Narcissus,” he contests the narcissistic structure informing a certain received notion of romanticism, according to which “creation – poetry – is absolute subjectivity and the poet a living subject in the poem that reflects him, just as he is a poet by virtue of having transformed his life into poetry by incarnating in it his pure subjectivity.” Consciousness has no access to itself unless by a detour through the other, which nevertheless radically changes and thereby falsifies it. In terms similar to Lacan's mirror stage, Blanchot argues that “in the poem, where the poet writes himself, he does not recognize himself, for he does not become conscious of himself.” If the poem is a mirror at all, it is one in which the poet misrecognizes himself and from which he is precluded, “unable even to be present by virtue of the non-presence of his very death.” Dead or dying, the poet *is* the creation of what he writes, and consciousness as reflected in the poem is not self-consciousness *per se*, but consciousness of an other, of the poem *qua* other. Thus Blanchot supplements Schlegel's formulation with a reversal: “The poet is Narcissus to the extent that Narcissus is an anti-Narcissus: he who, turned away from himself – causing the detour to which he is the effect, dying of not re-cognizing himself – leaves the trace of what has not occurred.” At once the cause and effect of the detour, the (anti-)narcissistic poet has no recourse to his consciousness, except as the retroactive construction in the place of the other. Fertility, in fact, is never main issue with the Narcissus tradition – not even in Freud's “On Narcissism,” – nor is it the central concern of the Don Juan tradition, which, despite its emphasis on virility or at least a sign of it, puts little stock in sexual reproduction. For a discussion of the auto-production of the subject-work, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (SUNY Press, 1988), p. 77. The concept of auto-production, however, is already present in Byron's fragment when he bewails the fate of the orphans as “parents to themselves” (17:4).
3. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperColophon Books, 1971), pp. 23, 46. In “The Thing,” Heidegger goes to the common root of the word “thing” in German and English, which is a “gathering” (p. 174). It is interesting to note that Byron, despite his allegedly mechanistic ideology, does not hesitate to capitalize on a Romantic commonplace: “’Tis sad to hack into the roots of things, / They are so much intertwined with the earth . . . ” (14:59).
4. In his August 12, 1819 letter to his publisher John Murray, Byron defends his happy-go-lucky approach to Donny Johny with some frivolity: “You are too earnest and eager about

a work never intended to be serious. Do you suppose that I could have any intention but to giggle and to make giggle? –a playful satire, with as little poetry as could be helped was what I meant” All further references to Byron's letters are based on *Byron: A Self-Portrait in his own Words*, ed. Peter Quennell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

5. In his August 8, 1822 letter to Thomas Moore, Byron reports the drowning of Shelley thus: “There is another man gone, about whom the world was perhaps, ill-naturedly, and ignorantly, and brutally mistaken. It will, perhaps do him justice *now*, when he can be no better for it.” Before the world does, Byron proceeds to do justice to Shelley by writing the ninth canto of *Don Juan*, to which the letter also refers: “I have written three more cantos of *Don Juan*, and am hovering on the brink of another (the ninth).”
6. On receiving “the first proof of *Don Juan*” by the post, Byron wrote John Murray a letter (May 15, 1819), setting a rule for the collateral possession between the writer and his publisher: “There is a rule to go by: you are my publisher (till we quarrel), and what is not published by you is not written by me.” The letter then proceeds to relate Shelley's peculiar spiritual composition. The occasion was that Byron and Shelley were on the same boat when “a gale of Wind” was on the verge of capsizing boat and crew. “The sail was mismanaged and the boat was filling fast.” Shelley, not knowing how to swim and having “no notion of being saved,” coolly refused to be saved when Byron the “expert swimmer” offered to save him, telling him to “strip off his coat and take hold of an oar,” and not to struggle when he took hold of him.” Unlike Shelley's, Byron “self-possession” is grounded on an *apres-coup* calculation of the circumstance: “the chance of swimming naturally gives self possession when near shore.” Unlike Byron's, Shelley's self- possession seems unconditional, that is, regardless of circumstance. And yet what equally puzzles Byron is that “the same Shelley, who was as cool as it was possible to be in such circumstances . . . certainly had the fit of phantasy which Polidori describes.” Perhaps the Shelley who retains his *sang-froid* when his life is at stake is after all not the same Shelley who was taken hold of by ghost stories of a certain type. As a hint of how Byron or Don Juan *man*-handles the Black Friar or Lady Fitz-Fulke in Canto 16, I quote Peter Quennell's note to Byron's letter, concerning the Shelleys and their ghost stories: “During the summer of 1816, when they were both in Switzerland. Shelley, after an evening of ghost-stories, had been seized with sudden panic. Later, he explained that, while gazing at Mary, he had remembered a tale he had been told of a woman who “had eyes instead of nipples, which taking hold of his mind horrified him” (Quennell, p. 449).
7. Bostetter, p. 12. Emphases added.
8. In *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe set out to define the nature of that self-reflexivity. They highlight the two operative models in the characteristically Romantic fragment: literature as productivity and literature as reflection. According to the “fragmentary exigency,” a literary work, produced in view of an essential totality, cannot but be fragmentary. As a finite instance of that totality, however, it represents a reflective excess of literature in relation to itself. The fragment as the genre of literature, that is, should be read as literature's auto-production that embodies its infinite demand for completion and perfection. As such, it is the “absolute” of literature. But, according to the authors, it is also literature's “ab-solute,” i.e., its “isolation in its perfect closure upon itself (upon its own organicity), as in the well-known image of the hedgehog in Athenaeum fragment 206” (*The Literary Absolute*, p. 11.). Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, it is true, avoid the pitfall of romantic irony, but irony is nevertheless clearly articulated in the disparity between the finite and the infinite on the one hand, and between “chaos” and the “construction of chaos” on the other, i.e., between confusion and deliberation, where it is asserted that “truth must be sought in irony” (p. 51). Most significantly, in the fragment they see the unworking of literature's work: “The fragment . . . is the genre of the parody of the putting-into-work, or of the parodic putting-

into-work, which inevitably refers back to 'chaos' also as an exemplary Work, particularly in Roman satire and, above all, in Shakespeare By also affirming itself as a dramatization, fragmentation would thus refer, both parodically and seriously, to itself, to its own chaos as the genre of the Work" (p. 51). Without taking advantage -- if indeed it could be taken -- of the fragmentary form in which the last canto of Don Juan is found, it is evident that Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's formulation can be applied to that colossal wreck, which stages its final scenario among Gothic ruins.

9. Quoted in Jerome J. McGann ed. *The Oxford Authors: Byron* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1986), p. 1071.
10. Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 100.
11. Moynihan, *A Recent Imagining: Interviews with Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hill Miller, and Paul de Man* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1986), p. 137.
12. *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 283. All further references to the work appear in the text. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 283. All further references to the work appear in the text.
13. Quoted respectively in Christensen, pp. 214 and 351.
14. Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), pp. 121-23.
15. Schlegel, *Athenaeum Fragments*, #42; Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, p. 124.
16. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 218.
17. Roustang, *The Lacanian Delusion*, trans., Greg Sims (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 18 and 20.
18. Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, trans., Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 4 and 2.
19. Stuart Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan: The Death of an Intellectual Hero* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 16. For an unknown reason, when the French version of this work appeared, it was retitled *Jacques Lacan: maistre Zen?*
20. Borsch-Jacobsen, p. 3; italics added. The sexual connotation in "exhibitionism" is perhaps unintended, since it is used as an equivalent of "self-display" (*Selbstdarstellung*), which as a psychoanalytic jargon means nothing but "self-representation." But then again, is there ever an "innocent" self-representation in the analytic circle? In his earlier study on Freud, Borsch-Jacobsen denounces Freud and other Freudians precisely for their penchant for dramaturgical language. The question, ultimately, is whether it is possible for the subject to represent himself to himself without resorting to metaphorical language. The judge from Borsch-Jacobsen's practice, he does not concern himself with providing an alternative but, on the contrary, indulges in a vicarious play of theatrical metaphors. See his *The Freudian Subject* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 16-30.
21. Jerome McGann, ed., *The Oxford authors: Byron* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 1044.
22. Schneiderman, pp. 12-4. The taxi driver called the next morning and "went on to spend several years in analysis with Lacan" (p. 14).
23. McDonald, "The Impact of Libertinism on Byron's *Don Juan*," in *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* 1983-5, vol. 86 (3), p. 291.
24. Rabinovich, "Don Juan as Slave," *Newsletter of the Freudian Field*, 5, nos. 1-2 (Spring/Fall, 1991), pp. 85-95. Failing to gain access to Lacan's *Seminaire*, X, I rely on Rabinovich's lucid discussion, to which all further references appear in the text.
25. Roustang, p. 119.
26. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, p. 17.
27. Lacan, p. 17.

Works Consulted

- Boothby, Richard. *Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud*. New York: Routledge. 1991.
- Borsch-Jacobsen, Mikkel. *The Freudian Subject*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1988.
- . *Lacan: The Absolute Master*. Trans. Douglas Brick. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1991.
- Bostetter, Edward E. Ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Don Juan: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall. 1969.
- Christensen, Jerome. "Marino Faliero and the Fault of Byron's Satire." In *Studies in Romanticism*, 24 (Fall 1985). Pp. 313-33.
- . "Setting Byron Straight: Class, Sexuality, and the Poet." In Elaine Scarry. Ed. *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1988. Pp. 125-59.
- Clement, Catherine. *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. New York: Columbia University Press. 1983. Originally published in French as *Vies et legendes de Jacques Lacan*. Paris: Bernard Grasset. 1981.
- Conrad, Peter. *Shandyism: The Character of Romantic Irony*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978.
- . *The History of English Literature: One Indivisible, Unending Book*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1987. Originally Published in Great Britain by J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd. 1985.
- De Man, Paul. "The Rhetoric of Temporality." In Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. Eds. *Critical Theory since 1965*. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press. 1986. Pp. 199-222.
- England, A. B. *Byron's Don Juan and Eighteenth-Century Literature: A Study of Some Rhetorical Continuities and Discontinuities*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press. 1975. Felman, Shoshana. *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1983.
- Furst, Lilian R. *The Contours of European Romanticism*. London: University of Nebraska Press. 1979.
- Garber, Frederick. *Self, Text, and Romantic Irony: The Example of Byron*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. 1988.
- Graham, Peter W. *Don Juan and Regency England*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. 1990.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe and Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. Trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester. New York: SUNY Press. 1988.

Laplanche, Jean. *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1976.

----- . *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*. Trans. David Macey. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 1989.

Mandrell, James. *Don Juan and the Point of Honor: Seduction, Patriarchal Society, and Literary Tradition*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 1992.

McDonald, Sheila J. "The Impact of Libertinism on Byron's *Don Juan*," In *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities 1983-85*, vol. 86 (3), pp. 291-38.

McGann, Jerome. *Don Juan in Context*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1976.

----- . *The Oxford Authors: Byron*. Ed. Jerome McGann. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1986. Quennell, Peter. Ed. *Byron: A Self-Portrait in his Own Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990.

Roustang, Francois. *The Lacanian Delusion*. Trans. Greg Sims. New York: Oxford University Press. 1990. Originally published in French as *Lacan: de l'équivoque à l'impasse*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit. 1986.

Schneiderman, Stuart. *Jacques Lacan: The Death of an Intellectual Hero*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 1983.

Smeed, J. W. *Don Juan: Variation on a Theme*. London: Routledge. 1990.



National Chung Hsing University