

## 6. ‘TWIXT LIFE AND DEATH’: *DON JUAN* AND THE SUBLIME

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From its inception, the discourse of the sublime has placed emphasis on the failure of the mind to comprehend the grand, the vast and the terrifying. At its most radical, in the neo-Lacanian revision of the Kantian sublime, proposed by Slavoj Žižek (1989), the connection between sublimity and Reason is brought to an absolute, nihilistic conclusion. For Žižek, since representations are always lacking – formed, that is, on the basis of their exclusion of some contradictory, impossible object, otherwise known as the Real – the truth is no longer a noumenal, freely indeterminate beyond, but rather ‘the ultimate emptiness of all our gestures’ (Milbank, 2004: 228). The truth revealed by the sublime is, on this understanding, nothing less than the ultimate nullity of being.<sup>1</sup> In this essay I seek to explore the relations between emptiness, negation and the sublime as presented by Byron in the closing cantos of *Don Juan*. I want to suggest that whilst Byron appears to share Žižek’s suspicion of the transcendental aspirations of the sublime, his particular critique is directed not against transcendentalism *per se* but rather against the ambitions of the sublime to take the place of religion. In a nutshell, this essay will claim that for Byron the encounter with the sublime leads not to the triumph of Reason, nor to its nihilistic voiding, but results, rather, in the opening out of consciousness to the haunting of the divine.

As David L. Sedley has argued, the emphasis in discourses of the sublime on cognitive failure originates in the sceptical tradition. Sedley’s argument, which

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<sup>1</sup> For a related discussion of the links between sublimity and nihilism, see Will Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern: The (Hi)Story of a Difficult Relationship from Romanticism to Postmodernism* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006).

focuses on the development of the sublime in Montaigne and Milton, relates the destructive tendencies of the concept to its origins in early modern doubt. In Montaigne's *Journal de voyage* (1580-1), for instance, a sceptical attitude to historical accuracy leads to the creation of a grand, or sublime style, which stems 'not from coherence but from fragmentation [...] not from the success of cognition but from cognition's collapse' (Sedley, 2005: 40). The object of Montaigne's attention is the ruins of Imperial Rome. Where previous scholars had invoked the Aristotelian category of *admiratio* to convey a passage from bewilderment to coherence, so that ancient ruins can become, after all, an object of knowledge, for Montaigne the idea that Rome cannot be known as a thing-in-itself precipitates a sense of cognitive failure, which fosters, in turn, a feeling for that which lies beyond the realms of representation. As with Kant, therefore, the truth of Rome hovers above the limitations of mere human understanding, but its status as a sublime object of desire has, as Sedley, suggests, the unfortunate side effect of encouraging the violent return of the radical doubt from which it emerged.

At first glance, Byron's poetry would appear to lend support to this sceptical conclusion. In his treatment of the sublime in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*,<sup>2</sup> for instance, the classical coupling of sublimity and *admiratio* is constantly undermined by an acknowledgment of the material effects of waste and ruin. This is seen, most obviously, in his withering description of contemporary Greece, in his trenchant observations on the Battle of Waterloo, and in his ambivalent portrayal of Rome. For Byron, the controlled bewilderment of *admiratio* – controlled because bewilderment is orientated towards cognition – falters in the face of a prodigious accumulation of blood, bones, and clay, which functions like a Žižekian 'indivisible remainder'

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<sup>2</sup> All references to Byron's poetry are taken from *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

(Žižek, 1996) to void all claims to knowledge and understanding. Like Montaigne, what Byron witnesses in Rome is a vast and empty sepulchre, a '[c]haos of ruins'; for

who shall trace the void,  
O'er the dim fragments cast a lunar light,  
And say, 'here was, or is', where all is doubly night?

(*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV, 80)

And of what does the gladiatorial arena tell us, other than that 'man' is 'slaughtered by his fellow man' to glut the 'imperial pleasure', and that 'battle-plains or listed spot [...] are but theatres where the chief actors rot' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV, 139)?

Yet still this wreck is 'impregnate with divinity', allowing 'Spirits [to] soar from ruin' (55). And elsewhere, most notably in the stanzas devoted to the Pantheon, amidst the proliferation of ruinous speculation, grandeur is allowed its place: 'Simple, erect, severe, austere, sublime – / Shrine of all saints and temple of all gods',

Relic of nobler days, and noblest arts!  
Despoiled yet perfect, with thy circle spreads  
A holiness appealing to all hearts –  
To art a model; and to him who treads  
Rome for the sake of ages, Glory sheds  
Her light through thy sole aperture; to those  
Who worship, here are altars for their beads;  
And they who feel for genius may repose

Their eyes on honoured forms, whose busts around them close.

(*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV, 147)

Montaigne, in his meditations on Rome, has little to say about the city's capacity for 'holiness', but for Byron the sacred emerges as a category in its own right, outshining and inspiring the endeavours of artists, worshippers, and historians alike.

But what, specifically, does Byron have to say about the holiness of the Coliseum? In stanza 144 the 'rising moon' brings the dead to life within the ruin's 'magic circle'. But something more than magic is suggested by the recent history of the arena: in medieval times the amphitheatre housed a Christian church and, more recently, had been endorsed by Pope Benedict XIV as a Holy relic, sacred to the memory of Christian martyrs. When Byron visited in the spring of 1817, he would have been able to walk the Via Delarosa, created by Benedict some fifty years earlier. Reframed by Holy significance, and thus by a mode of grandeur exceeding the limitations of human artifice, the blood impregnating the arena, shed for the purposes of pagan entertainment, could now be read, retroactively, as the sacrificial blood of Christ. Life, not death, had triumphed in the arena.

Whether Byron felt moved as a historian, as an artist, or as a Christian on his visit to the Coliseum is unclear, but I want to suggest that his invocation of divinity was more than merely procedural. Still further, I should like to argue that Byron's scepticism, which results in the creation of a grand or sublime style founded in fragmentation, lent itself to an earnest inquiry into the nature and significance of the divine.<sup>3</sup> What began as a critique of the aesthetic category of *admiratio*, so beloved of

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<sup>3</sup> As will become apparent, the argument presented here is influenced by Gavin Hopps' critique of sceptical reason in his introduction to *Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens*, ed. Gavin Hopps and Jane Stabler (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006). See, in particular, pp. 9-13. I have also benefited from the arguments that John Milbank advances against the Kantian sublime in

Renaissance historians and contemporary travel writers, thus became, almost despite itself, a critique of the limitations of human artifice. This critique took place on two fronts: the cognitive and the ethical. In terms of the former, Byron like Montaigne was eager to steer the discourse of the sublime away from a restricted economy of confusion and coherence. By allowing confusion to proliferate, the poetry worked, as a discourse of scepticism, to undercut the claims of cognition while, as a discourse of the sublime, it sought to awaken, perhaps, a sense of the divine. This latter claim is, I am aware, highly contentious, but by way of support it is worth attending to an early instance of Byron's critique of the ethics of the sublime.<sup>4</sup>

On his last day in Rome, Byron witnessed the execution of three criminals. As he wrote to Murray:

I saw three robbers guillotined – the ceremony – including the *masqued* priests – the half-naked executioners – the bandaged criminals – the black Christ & his banner – the scaffold – the soldiery – the slow procession – & the quick rattle and fall of the axe – the splash of the blood – & the ghastliness of the exposed heads – is altogether more impressive than the vulgar and ungentlemanly 'new drop' & dog-like agony of infliction upon the sufferers of the English sentence. Two of these men – behaved calmly

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*Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) and in 'Sublimity: The Modern Transcendent', in *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature and Theology Approach the Beyond*, ed. Regina Schwartz (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 211-34.

<sup>4</sup> This claim to contentiousness ought, of course, to be set within context. The idea that Byron was, after all, a Christian poet, has been advanced by a number of commentators, including E.D. Hirsch, 'Byron and the Terrestrial Paradise', in *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed. Frederick Hilles and Harold Bloom (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 567-95; G. Wilson Knight, *Poets of Action* (London: Methuen, 1967), p. 263; Michael G. Cooke, *The Blind Man Traces the Circle: On the Patterns and Philosophy of Byron's Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 212; M.K. Joseph, *Byron the Poet* (London: Gollancz, 1964), pp. 305-8; Bernard Beatty, *Byron's Don Juan* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985), *passim* and, most recently, by the contributors to two notable essay collections, *Byron, the Bible, and Religion*, ed. Wolf Z. Hirst (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1991) and the above mentioned *Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Steven*, ed. Hopps and Stabler (see note 3).

enough – but the first of the three – died with great terror and reluctance –  
 which was very horrible [...] (Marchand, 1976: 5.229-30)

Surveying the scene through an opera-glass ('I was close – but was determined to see – as one should see everything once – with attention'), Byron notes that the 'effect to the spectator [...] is very striking & chilling'. The first execution turns him 'quite hot and thirsty'; his hand shakes so badly that he can hardly hold the opera-glass. But by the second and third death he was, he confessed, quite unmoved, 'which shows how dreadfully soon things grow indifferent [...] though I would have saved them if I could'.

The emotional arc of this scene recalls the relations between sublimity and negation outlined earlier, only this time Byron registers a certain moral queasiness otherwise lacking in the elaborately choreographed sequences of the Kantian sublime. As Edmund Burke comments: 'there is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity; so that whether the misfortune is before our eyes, or whether they are turned back to it in history, it always touches with delight' (1990: 43). Disturbingly, the execution of a criminal, or the destruction of a city yield their own forms of perverse delight – call it the illusory delight of surveying and thus overcoming one's own extinction; but such delight is possible only on condition that the event does not involve any actual threat. For the sublime to take effect, death must be kept at a distance. Hence the importance of the opera-glass, which acts as a framing device, creating the effects of proximity whilst shielding the viewer from the unsettling effects of reality. By the second or third death, however, the effects of this painful pleasure have started to wane. No longer functional as a theatrical 'horror', the scene, with its grotesque parody of Christ's journey to Golgotha, rebounds on the

spectator, forcing him to take account of his moral obligations: 'I would have saved them if I could'. Here, with an echo of Augustine's critique of his own, youthful fascination with the staging of pain (Augustine, 1992: 3.2.2), Byron moves from wrapt fascination to indifference, to something approaching shame. The conventional pagan idea that theatricalised displays of violence are in some way cathartic – yielding insight into the horrific underpinnings of self and society – is challenged by this passage. When the aesthetic framework collapses, when the viewer is no longer held at a distance from the object of sublime terror, so that the object is revealed as a vulnerable subject, at *that* point the viewer becomes a witness, implicated in the suffering of a fellow human being.<sup>5</sup>

Byron seems often to take account of the victims of spectacular violence. The impulse emerges, typically, during the course of a set-piece presentation of the sublime. In the stanzas which follow on from the description of the Coliseum, for example, the focus closes on a shadowy couple, a destitute young woman and her aged father. Somewhat disturbingly, the old man is discovered suckling from his daughter's breast. As an instance of human degradation, the scene, which Byron derives from the legend of the Caritas Romana, appears to modern eyes merely grotesque. Yet, out of such unpromising material, Byron raises an idea of greatness, which, on account of its intimacy, yields far more, in terms of its cosmic significance, than the studied theatricality of most conventional accounts of sublimity. Not for the first time, the poem's significance is derived from allusions to Catholic iconography; in this case the daughter, 'Blest into mother' (IV, 149), emerges as a Marian figure,

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard Beatty writes in a similar vein that the sublime, for Byron, 'is not there simply to give us Keats's dizzy pain at aesthetically realised scale but gives us moral insight. The focus of that moral insight is exactly the same as the Romantic Sublime – the relationship between human finitude and a graspable infinity – but the point is quite different'. See Bernard Beatty, "'An awful wish to plunge within it': Byron's Critique of the Sublime' in *Revue de l'Université de Moncton: Des actes sélectionnés du 30<sup>e</sup> Congrès international sur Byron*, 'Byron and the Romantic Sublime', ed. Paul M. Curtis (Moncton: Université de Moncton, 2005), pp. 265-76; pp. 273-4.

offering ‘to old age the food, / The milk of his own gift’ (IV, 148). In the preceding lines, where attention is devoted to the beauty of the human form, to the blood as ‘nectar’ and the breast as fructifying ‘fountain’, a link between the spirit and the flesh is forged.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to the standard Enlightenment view of the sublime as the negative apprehension of the supersensible, Byron seems to insist here on the continuity of the sensual and the divine. To adapt the words of the contemporary theologian John Milbank, the scene, in its pathetic and, admittedly, unsettling beauty, seems ‘to recover the sense that the unknown is not simply that which cannot be represented, but is also that which arrives, which ceaselessly but imperfectly makes itself known again in every new event’ (Milbank, 2004: 217). Like the ‘Glory’, shining through the amphitheatre’s ‘sole aperture’, the return of the father’s love gift, manifested in imperfect and all-too-human form, becomes a principle of restoration, working like prayer to reverse the vitiating effects of time:

The starry fable of the milky way  
 Has not thy story's purity; it is  
 A constellation of a sweeter ray,  
 And sacred Nature triumphs more in this  
 Reverse of her decree, than in the abyss  
 Where sparkle distant worlds: – Oh, holiest nurse!  
 No drop of that clear stream its way shall miss  
 To thy sire's heart, replenishing its source  
 With life, as our freed souls rejoin the universe.

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<sup>6</sup> See Bernard Beatty’s comments on these stanzas in ‘Milk and Blood, Heredity and Choice: Byron’s readings of *Genesis*’ in *Eve’s Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuisen (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 143-155. The piety of Pero toward her father, Cimon is the subject of numerous paintings. Notable examples include studies by Rubens, Greuze, Mellin and Zoffany.



(*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV, 151)

The link between the universal and the particular, which underpins this conception of the Byronic sublime, is granted theoretical perspective in the ensuing description St Peter's Basilica, that 'vast and wondrous dome'. Here again, rather than blockage or disjunction, those stock features of the Wordsworthian and Kantian sublimities, it is the sense of a correspondence between the human and the divine that is stressed.<sup>7</sup> In this, the poem accords with Joseph Addison's belief that noble buildings, such as temples or cathedrals, 'imprint' the mind, 'and fit it to converse with the divinity' (de Bolla, 1989: 45). 'Enter', writes Byron, 'its grandeur overwhelms thee not';

And why? It is not lessen'd; but thy mind,  
Expanded by the genius of the spot,  
Has grown colossal, and can only find  
A fit abode wherein appear enshrined  
Thy hopes of immortality; and thou  
Shalt one day, if found worthy, so defined,  
See thy God face to face, as thou dost now  
His Holy of Holies, nor be blasted by his brow.

(*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV, 155)

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<sup>7</sup> Stuart Curran reads the St. Peter's sequence as an allegory of Byron's quest for artistic and personal unity. For Curran, therefore, the claim to transcendence is regarded as a purely aesthetic phenomenon. This reading is challenged by Alan Rawes in 'Byron's Confessional Pilgrimage', *Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens*, ed. Hopps and Stabler (note 3 above), pp. 130-1.

The allusion in the penultimate line to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is a reminder both of the limitations of mortal knowledge and a promise of the perfect understanding to come, an understanding based on recognition or love. What the dome allows the mind to glean is an intimation of the resulting correspondence of human and divine conceptions:

Our outward sense  
Is but of gradual grasp – and as it is  
That what we have of feeling most intense  
Outstrips our faint expression; even so this  
Outshining and o'erwhelming edifice  
Fools our fond gaze, and greatest of the great  
Defies at first our Nature's littleness,  
Till, growing with its growth, we thus dilate  
Our spirits to the size of that they contemplate.

*(Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, IV, 158)*

The stress on the dilation of human 'spirit' does not serve as a figure for the primacy of mind or reason, but points rather to the analogical 'fit' between the mortal and the divine. Instead of insisting on the disjunction between sublime feeling and sensible expression, a disjunction which yields a negative intimation of the infinite, with Byron, though 'Outshining' otherness 'outstrips' 'expression', the 'spirit' is able, as a result of its correspondence with the divine, to relay its participation in otherness to the 'gradual grasp' of 'sense'. Contra Kant, the faculty of Imagination does, after all, conceive the transcendental in sensible terms.

This, at least, is one potential pathway for the development of a critique of the Romantic sublime. At other times, pursuing his sceptical inclinations to the limit, as it were, Byron seems irresistibly attracted to the notion of a fatal divide between the human and the divine, a divide that maps neatly on to the division outlined earlier between cognition and wonder. At its bleakest, the emphasis on the impossibility of knowing suggests a form of nihilism.<sup>8</sup> In the late verse drama, *Cain*, for instance, Lucifer pronounces what readers take to be the definitive expression of Byronic despair:

Didst thou not require Knowledge? And have I not, in what I showed,  
Taught thee to know thyself?

*Cain*. Alas! I seem Nothing.

*Lucifer*. And this should be the human sum

Of knowledge, to know mortal nature's nothingness ... (2, 2, 419-22)

The seeds of faith, hinted at in Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, would seem, on the evidence of Byron's later pronouncements, to have fallen on stony ground.

The knowledge of mortal nature's nothingness is taken up again in Canto XIV of *Don Juan*. Stanza 2 opens with an assertion of radical doubt: 'can you make fast / After due search your faith to any question?' (XIV, 2) The poem then goes on to endorse the sceptical view that philosophy, *qua* philosophy, is a matter of mere appetite: since 'system' eats 'system' (XIV, 1) it makes no sense to talk of Truth; better to rest content with the knowledge that there is no Truth, only the blind, empty

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<sup>8</sup> As Gavin Hopps points out, it is this aspect of Byron that Jerome McGann pursues in support of his 'project in radical unbelief' (Hopps and Stabler, 2007: 11). What McGann's emphasis on the sceptical Byron tends to ignore, however, is the extent to which the poet regards doubt as coeval with faith.

pursuit of power. Within this proto-Darwinian realm, philosophical systems are judged on the basis of their indigestibility; that system is 'good' (XIV, 1) or 'best' (XIV, 2) which survives the longest in the gut.

Yet, here, at the very moment when the sceptic teeters on the edge of despair, something strange begins to happen. First Descartes is invoked: 'Nothing more true than not to trust your senses'. In his *Second Meditation*, after concluding 'that body, figure, extension, movement and place are only fictions of my mind', Descartes pauses to consider the nihilistic corollary 'that there is nothing certain in the world' (1968: 102). As is well known, the philosopher entertains this position only briefly; structurally this nothing is retroactively informed by the irrefutable certainty of 'I am, I exist'. So there is something after all. But *Don Juan* serves to complicate this claim: 'And yet', the speaker goads, 'what are your other evidences?' (XIV, 2). Can we be certain that we exist on the basis that we think? Does the question mark at the end of this sentence grant 'fast' my faith that there is something in the world? And is the evidence of the mind any less delusory than the evidence of the body? 'For me', the speaker admits, aping Socrates and his own Lucifer, 'I know nothing'. But then, critically, 'nothing I deny / Admit, reject, condemn' (XIV, 3), the reverse of which also holds true: 'He who doubts all things nothing can deny' (XV, 88). Or, as the poet writes in Canto 9, 'So little do we know what we're about in / This world, I doubt if doubt itself be doubting' (IX, 17). The uncompromising sceptic turns out, after all, to be open to possibility:

and what know *you*,

Except perhaps that you were born to die?

And both may after all turn out to untrue.

An age may come, Font of Eternity,

When nothing shall be either old or new. (*Don Juan*, XIV, 3)

This, it seems to me, is radical doubt of an altogether different flavour.<sup>9</sup>

But where is Byron's doubt taking us? Stanza 3 ends with an allusion, one of many in the poem, to *Hamlet* (III, ii, 65-68); a speech that draws in turn on Socrates's claim, in his *Apology*, that death would be good if it gave man sleep untroubled by dreams. Byron, in the following stanza, notes the impossibility of testing this hypothesis: 'and yet / How clay shrinks back from more quiescent clay!' (XIV, 4). It is, in other words, the dread of death that prevents most men from committing suicide; and yet, in a further dialectical twist, the poet avers that death too may have its attractions. The lines which pursue this thought draw, significantly, on the discourse of the sublime:

when the mountains rear

Their peaks beneath your human foot, and there

You look down o'er the precipice, and drear

The gulf of rock yawns, – you can't gaze a minute

Without an awful wish to plunge within it. (*Don Juan*, XIV, 5)

The happy man holds back from this wish; but still, Byron insists, 'look into your past impression / And you will find ...

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<sup>9</sup> For readings sympathetic to the secularising tendencies of Byronic doubt see Wolf Z. Hirst, 'Byron's Revisionary Struggle with the Bible', in *Byron, the Bible, and Religion*, ed. Hirst (see note 4 above), pp. 77-100 and Allen Hoagwood, *Byron's Dialectic: Skepticism and the Critique of Culture* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1993).

The lurking bias, be it truth or error,  
 To the *unknown*, a secret prepossession  
 To plunge with all your fears – but where? You know not  
 And that's the reason why you do – or do not. (*Don Juan*, XIV, 6)

Socrates may know nothing, but the nihilist goes further and wishes to become nothing. That the lines in which this thought is expressed are not themselves nihilistic is a consequence of the stanza's framing commitment to uncertainty: we plunge or do not plunge because we 'know not' where we end. It is the saving gesture of faith, a faith founded paradoxically on doubt, which prevents the poem from succumbing to the appeal of its own abyss.

In the lines quoted above, the 'lurking bias' to negation, which elsewhere, as we have seen, Byron identifies with the self-destructive tendencies of the sublime, is weighed alongside the prevailing instinct for survival: we choose, on the whole, 'not' to plunge to our deaths because we believe, reasonably enough, that to do so would mean the end of our lives.<sup>10</sup> In a sense, it is ignorance that keeps us going. Byron, throughout *Don Juan* confronts the reader with a number of related moments of suspended thought. Most notably, in Canto I, the poet proclaims, 'Man's a phenomenon, one knows not what, / And wondrous beyond all wondrous measure'. The lines are a parody of Longinian *ekstasis*, an instance of the work-a-day poetics of wonder churned out by the dozen in 'this sublime world'. Fittingly, this expression of

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<sup>10</sup> Bernard Beatty, in a particularly fine discussion of this passage, suggests that the phrase "the lurking bias" – is ... an assault on the new cult of the untethered Sublime'. Beatty goes on to add that the 'comic tone' of the final couplet 'is a long way from the exalted Wordsworth on Snowdon's precipice'. In this, of course, Byron does not seek to disavow a relationship with the infinite; rather, his aim is to show that 'it is not only the vast spatial sweep that is sublime but a combined sense of finite and infinite which is not merely aesthetically grasped ... but is the grandeur and limitation known to the moral understanding'. See "An awful wish to plunge within it": Byron's Critique of the Sublime', p. 269; p. 274.

quasi-rapture, which functions as a mockery of the Wordsworthian ‘something every more about to be’, ends with a chiasmic joke: ‘’Tis pity [...] Pleasure’s a sin and sometimes sin’s a pleasure’ (I, 133). It takes a healthy dose of the finite to deflate man’s visionary flight from the ‘measure’ of his own mortality. And yet, here again, the verse turns suddenly grave:

Few mortals know what end they would be at,

But whether glory, power or love or treasure,

The path is through perplexing ways, and when

The goal is gain’d, we die you know – and then –

What then? – I do not know, no more do you –

And so good night. – Return we to our story. (*Don Juan*, I, 133-4)

That we will die is certain, is it not? Perhaps. But for Byron the ‘hopes of immortality’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, IV, 155) persist. In what follows, the desire for continuity beyond cognitive and expressive limits is signified by the dashes, question mark and stanza break. Since knowledge is unable to inform these silences, the significance of which declines from wonder to incoherence as the dashes proliferate, the poet and, by implication, the reader, must commit, once again, to their respective stories.

And yet, the blank space between the certainty of death and the return to narrative continuity resonates profoundly. In Lacanian thought, the significance of the space between the acknowledgement and the acceptance of death is conveyed by the metaphor of ‘being between two deaths’, with the first death referring to physical

death and the second to symbolic death (Lacan, 1992: 320). For Lacan, the space between physical and symbolic death is literally ‘un-dead’ and since it cannot find a place in either realm it keeps insisting, or returning. Another term for this ghastly realm is, of course, the Real. As Felix Ensslin summarises:

[...] the real, lacking representation, never appears in reality as such. It neither is given nor finds itself an order; it has no symbolic existence, that is, no name that remains, no space that persists, no place in the calculable and countable. (Ensslin, 2007: 2)

In one sense, the Byronic Real is the impossible object that must be excluded so that life, or story, can continue. Yet, in another sense, it marks the existence of that deadly void, or contradiction, around which Byron’s verse is orientated and towards which it is fatally attracted. In Canto XIV, stanza 8, for instance, ‘poesy’ is described as a ‘paper kite, which flies ’twixt life and death’. Elsewhere, Don Juan himself is said to hover, like a ghost, between ‘the real or ideal, – / For both are much the same’ (X, 20) – and when regarded from the point of view of the Lacanian Real both are, indeed, more or less the same. In light of this, the desire expressed in other parts of the poem for contact with the divine might be regarded as an attempt to inform this fatal contradiction with symbolic significance. But it might, from another perspective, be regarded as a reconfiguration of the Real, not as that which in the standard Lacanian sense, marks the futility of signification, but rather as that which marks the return to



signification of transcendental plenitude or, to adopt a Christian register, the return to language of divine rapture.<sup>11</sup>

Though I am uncertain of the extent to which *Don Juan* commits to either faith or doubt, it remains, of all the great Romantic poems, the poem that is most invested in ideas of God. More often than not, of course, divine significance is invoked by Byron only to succumb to the foil of scepticism: one thinks, for example, of the satirical treatment of the Noah story in the ship wreck episode (II, 91-5) or the debunking of the Fall in Canto IX, stanza 19 and Canto XIV, stanza 9. There are times, however, when the satire on religion seems merely conventional, as if, having reached the limits of signification, the poet felt compelled to recommit to the everyday business of narrative continuity. In a Lacanian sense, the return to ‘story’ thus becomes a way of fending off the terrifying sublimity of the Real.

To examine this point more thoroughly, I should like to return to Canto IX. In stanza 16 of this canto, *Hamlet* is quoted again: “‘To be or not to be?’ – Ere I decide, / I should be glad to know that which *is being*’. Having opened up this suicidal void, the space of the ‘between two deaths’ outlined above, the poet draws on Montaigne’s statement of radical self-doubt, ‘Que sçais-je?’ to proclaim the end point of sceptical reason: ‘I doubt if doubt itself be doubting’ (IX, 17). Since, as the Sceptics proclaimed, nothing can be known in and of itself and that against every statement the contrary might be advanced with equal reason, then doubt too must be subjected to doubt. The doctrine of intellectual suspense turns out, after all, to be freighted by questions of faith.<sup>12</sup> Such questions, as the poem goes on to aver, may well be

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<sup>11</sup> John Milbank mounts a spirited critique of Žižek’s Lacanianism in his contribution to Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 110-233.

<sup>12</sup> As Gavin Hopps explains, ‘one of the most surprising discoveries of postmodernity is that, if scepticism is pushed to its limits, it reflexively undermines [...] its own enterprise, and thus

perilous: for whilst it is ‘pleasant [...] to float / Like Pyrrho, on a sea of speculation’, what if the boat capsizes? ‘Swimming long’, the poem reminds us, ‘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. (*Don Juan*, IX, 18)

Like the suicidal gulf explored in Canto XIV, the abyss of thought leads the sceptic to the very limits of human understanding: is there something or nothing; is it better to be or not to be? Faced with such unanswerable questions it is better, perhaps, to stay close to shore so that we may commit, once again, to story.<sup>13</sup>

That Byron himself is not wholly convinced by this proposition is evident when one considers the verse’s indebtedness to *Paradise Regained*.<sup>14</sup> In book 4, Christ rebukes Satan for his advocacy of Greek philosophy, arguing – by way of Augustine – for the primacy of wisdom (*sapientia*), which is divine, over knowledge (*scientia*), which is mortal. In the course of his speech, Christ singles out for special attention the Sceptics who ‘doubted all things’. Finally, echoing *Ecclesiastes*, he

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paradoxically opens up a route to that which it also calls into question – namely, faith’ (Hopps and Stabler, 2007: 11).

<sup>13</sup> In *Don Juan*, VII, 5 Byron observes of Newton that ‘he himself felt only “like a youth / Picking up shells by the great ocean – Truth”’. Peter Cochran (<http://petercochran.wordpress.com/?s=don+juan>) notes that Joseph Spence provides the source for this anecdote: ‘Sir Isaac Newton, a little before he died, said, “I don’t know what I may seem to the world; but as to myself, I seem to to have been only like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”’ See Joseph Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men*, ed. Edmund Malone (London: John Murray 1820), pp.158-9. I am grateful to Tony Howe for alerting me to the source of this allusion.

<sup>14</sup> The following quotations from *Paradise Regained* are taken from John Milton, *Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey (London and New York: Longman, 1971).

criticises those ‘wise men’ who, unable to bring wisdom to bear on their studies, become ‘Uncertain and unsettled’,

Crude or intoxicate, collecting toys  
And trifles for choice matters, worth a sponge;  
As children gathering pebbles on the shore.

(*Paradise Regained*. IV, 326-29)

In Byron’s version of this speech, though the bather is portrayed as ‘moderate’ rather than ‘intoxicate’, he nevertheless remains a child, fixated with the fleeting beauty of ‘some pretty shell’ rather than with the infinite glory of the divine.

Yet, though a sense of divine sublimity was granted earlier through the cognitive derailment of ‘I doubt if doubt itself be doubting’, the question of how to account for the inexpressible within ordinary language remains. For Byron, somewhat archly, it is the classical scholar, a man of *scientia*, rather than *sapientia* who comes closest, as a consequence of literal drunkenness, to articulating the divine. This man is Shakespeare’s Cassio:<sup>15</sup> ‘well, God’s above all and there be souls that must be saved [...] Let’s ha’ no more of this, let’s to our affairs. God forgive us our sins! (*Othello* II, iii, 103-13), or as Byron has it: ““But heaven [...] is above all, – / No more of this then, – let us pray!”” (IX, 19). As the stanza draws to its close, quotation from Shakespeare becomes the means by which Byron grants form to the overwhelming effects of divine unreason. It is fitting that, having begun with Hamlet’s glimpse into the suicidal abyss, the verse should end with Hamlet’s affirmation of the ‘divinity that shapes our ends’ (*Hamlet* V, ii, 10): ‘The sparrow’s fall / Is special providence’

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<sup>15</sup> The following quotations from Shakespeare are taken from William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

recalls the poet, more or less correctly (IX, 19). God is admitted then, somewhat wearily and with a presiding sense of bathos – a remnant perhaps of the deflated balloon of scepticism – but God is admitted, nevertheless.

But what sort of God? Famously, towards the end of Canto XV, Byron turns to matters spiritual, or, to be precise, to the ghostly. Teasing the boundary between the sublime and the ridiculous, the speaker insists his ‘belief is serious’ (XV, 95). The paradox of serious laughter is a persistent theme in *Don Juan*, but in Canto XV, stanza 96, it is linked with the dissolving relation between fiction and reality. Referring to Hobbes’s confession that what he read concerning apparitions almost convinced him of their existence, the poem turns at this point to reflect on the ability of fiction to create reality. Here, caught between two deaths, or, as stanza 99 has it, ‘Twixt night and morn’, the poem once again reaches the limit point of understanding: ‘How little do we know that which we are!’ In a bid to overcome this abyss, the poem finds refuge in the taught paradox of Canto XVI, stanza 2: ‘In some things, mine’s beyond all contradiction, / The most sincere that ever dealt in fiction’. Insisting that the ensuing ghost story is ‘of all truths which she [the poem] has told, the most / True’ (XVI, 4), the verse then goes on, in stanza 5, to cite Tertullian’s proto-Kierkegaardian claim: ‘*sepultis, surrexit; certum est, quia impossibile*’ ([‘Christ] was buried and resurrected; this is certain because it is impossible’). Believe, in other words, in this miracle *because* of its absurdity.

The poem goes on, as many commentators observe, to complicate this claim.<sup>16</sup> Yet even as the ghost is shown to be merely absurd, or ridiculous – the spectral presence haunting Juan turns out after all to be lady Fitz-Fulke disguised in a monk’s

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<sup>16</sup> Most notably Bernard Beatty in the closing pages of *Byron’s Don Juan* (see note 4), pp. 202-11, *passim*. Having noted the complex interplay of ‘[l]aughter, unease, poise, absurdity and reverence’ in stanzas 6-7, Beatty concludes that the encompassing tone of the poem is, ultimately, religious.

habit – in another sense, the poem's materialist or comic solution to the problem of spirit is haunted by the persistently enigmatic status of Aurora Raby. There is a part of the poem, in other words, that remains in thrall to the '*quia impossibile*', to the idea of a higher truth shining through the fiction – the Symbolic order? – that we mistake for reality.

Introduced in Canto XV, Aurora is linked, then, from the outset, with the religious sublime:

In eyes which sadly shone, as seraphs' shine.  
 All youth – but with an aspect beyond time;  
 Radiant and grave – as pitying man's decline;  
 Mournful – but mournful of another's crime,  
 She look'd as if she sat by Eden's door  
 And grieved for those who could return no more. (*Don Juan*, XV, 45)

Combining the attributes of cherubim and seraphim, of infinite wisdom (*sapientia*) as well as infinite love, Aurora, as her name implies, is both luminous and unreachable. Residing 'beyond time', 'Apart from the surrounding world', she naturally inspires 'awe in the homage which she drew' (XV, 47). Significantly, she is linked with stillness, quietness and calm, even, as Bernard Beatty has argued, with the benign indifference of the Buddha (Beatty and Newey, 1988: 35). But whether as Catholic or Buddhist, Aurora's 'depth of feeling', combined with her capacity 'to embrace / Thoughts, boundless, deep, but silent too as Space' (XVI, 48), is presented in the poem as a divine solution to the brute materialism of the Fitz-Fulke episode. Tellingly,

by the end of the poem Juan too is ‘silent’: ‘the ghost’, writes Byron, ‘had done this much good, / In making him as silent as a ghost’ (XVI, 107).<sup>17</sup>

So the flesh has become spirit, the real has become ideal and we might, on the basis of this miraculous substitution be ready to advance a Christian conclusion to Byron’s epic poem. But *Don Juan* leaves us with a choice: either we interpret Juan’s and Aurora’s silences, by way of Lacan, as the stupefying sublimity of the empty ‘thing’, the pure nothing, or void, around which signification coils, or we respond, with joy, to the alternative posed in stanzas 107-8:

And certainly Aurora had renewed

In him some feeling he had lately lost

Or hardened, feeling which, perhaps ideal,

Are so divine that I must deem them real: –

The love of higher things and better days;

The unbounded hope, and heavenly ignorance

Of what is called the world, and the world’s ways [...] (XVI, 107-8)

For Žižek, writing in the *Fragile Absolute*, the distinction between unbounded divine love and worldly progress corresponds with the fundamental tension between the Real and the Symbolic; as Žižek considers: ‘what comes first, the signifier or some deadlock in the Real?’ On the one hand, the conception of the Symbolic order as that which cuts into or shapes the natural organism, forcing it to pursue an unreachable object of desire is ‘clearly idealist; it is ultimately a new version of

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<sup>17</sup> For a related discussion of Aurora’s spiritual significance see Gavin Hopps, “‘Eden’s Door’: The Porous Worlds of *Don Juan* and *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*”, *The Byron Journal*, 37, 2 (2009), 109-20; 117-18.

Divine intervention in the natural order'. On the other hand, the idea of the Symbolic as that which emerges as 'the answer to some monstrous excess in the Real' is clearly 'materialist', since it acknowledges, by way of Marx, the inherently contradictory nature of the world, the fact that it is driven from within to 'some kind of natural excess or imbalance, a malfunctioning, monstrous derailment' (2000: 91-2).

Taking the materialist alternative first, the Byronic commitment to 'story' may thus be read as a secondary intervention, designed to 'gentrify' the ghastly, life-threatening excess of the poem's silences; thus, the interminable, suspended status of the ghost in Canto XVI is filled in, given life, yet in a sense finally killed off, by the symbolic revelation that the ghost is, after all, merely a human being. But what of the idealist reading? Aurora, unlike the pantomime ghost, remains in this state of suspension; her silences seem to resonate beyond words and thus beyond the Symbolic. Can these silences, speaking volumes, be dismissed as a 'fantasy-construction' designed to conceal, or render invisible, the debilitating antagonism at the core of Byron's verse?

Writing to Thomas Moore on 8 March 1822 presented another version of this conundrum:

As I said before, I am really a great admirer of tangible religion [...] What with incense, pictures, statues, confession, absolution, – there is something sensible to grasp at. Besides it leaves no possibility of doubt; for those who swallow their Deity, really and truly, in transubstantiation, can hardly find any thing else otherwise than easy of digestion.

I am afraid that this sounds flippant, but I don't mean it to be so; only my turn of mind is so given to taking things in the absurd point of

view, that it breaks out in spite of me every now and then. Still I do assure that I am a very good Christian. Whether you will believe me in this, I do not know [...] (Marchand, 1976: 9.122)

First there is Byron's materialism: the miracle of transubstantiation, like the doctrines described at the beginning of *Don Juan*, Canto 16, is hard to swallow. But for those who believe, this miracle, once digested, is the '*quia impossible*' *par exemplar*. And there is, no doubt, something absurd about such belief. As Žižek, might argue, by way of Hegel, the sense in which the host *is* the body of Christ is a reminder of the essential materiality of the sublime. Where, for instance, in Kant, the mountain points to the existence of a supersensible realm, beyond appearance, for Hegel there is an Idea, of the State or of God, only in so far as there is some thing, the finite body of the king, or the vulnerable, mortal body of Christ that prevents the Idea from attaining its full ontological identity. As Žižek maintains, there is a sublime Idea only in so far as there is some material thing, in this case a host, in which the Idea *cannot* be fully presented (1989: 203-6).

Yet the point about the host is that it *is* the body of Christ. Unlike the Hegelian or Lacanian thing, the host is not an object that is orientated around a determinate lack but rather it serves as the determinate expression of a divine plenitude. This is the real absurdity. But it is an absurdity rendered digestible by an act of faith. In Byron's letter to Moore, faith is manifested in the difference between the (apparent) flippancy of the opening statement and the (apparent) gravity of the closing statement. Byron doesn't know whether we believe him or not, but this state of suspension is, it seems to me, evidence enough of a yearning for the divine, both on his part and on ours.