March 1984

The Dissipated Muse: Wine, Women, and Byronic Song

Frederick W. Shilstone

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 20, no.1, March 1984, p.36-46

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
The Dissipated Muse:  
Wine, Women, and Byronic Song

by FREDERICK W. SHILSTONE

During the later stages of his literary career, while he was residing in Italy and composing *Don Juan* and a series of "closet" dramas, Lord Byron allegedly counseled Thomas Medwin on the course the latter should pursue in order to become a successful poet: "Why don't you drink, Medwin? Gin-and-water is the source of all my inspiration. If you were to drink as much as I do, you would write as good verses: depend on it, it is the true Hippocrene."1 The same years saw Byron attributing his literary genius to sexual activity, intoxication's companion in the dissipated life. A bit of doggerel verse he shipped to his publisher John Murray from Venice in early 1818 contains the poet's wittiest claim on that subject: "There's a whore on my right / For I rhyme best at Night / When a C—t is tied close to my Inkstand."2 Few would dispute the authenticity of these statements. Not only are the works Byron wrote during his Italian residence pervaded with references to intoxication, sex, and dissipation in general; but, further, his public attitude toward himself as man and poet demanded that he appear casual about his craft, ever mixing composition with other, more important pleasures: "... if one's years can't be better employed than in sweating poesy—a man had better be a ditcher" (*BL&J*, VI, 105). When biographers portray Byron as a carefree rake and libertine, they do so on the poet's own authority. In addition, Byron's comments on the source and nature of artistic inspiration have served the needs of historians of literary theory, for, when one considers these pronouncements in the context of other Romantic writers' views on the unstudied, unconscious, even irrational nature of the composition process—Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow" and De Quincey's "pleasures of opium," for instance—it is easy to see how attributing poetic skills to "gin-and-water" and the female anatomy rank among Byron's gifts to the Romantic aesthetic.3 Nonetheless, however well Byron's claims for the

2. *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973-81), VI, 5. Further references to this series will be cited parenthetically in the text of my essay, along with volume and page numbers, as *BL&J*.
artistic necessity of intoxication and sex accommodate biographers and literary theorists alike, the poet's dissipated image has a far more vital contribution to make to our understanding of this writer, that being the manner in which it illustrates how he translated personal experience into myth and used that myth as the basis for metaphors embodying his ever-changing vision of the world. For the myth of dissipation contributes to the most famous and radical shift in perspective in Byron's entire career, the one responsible for the vacillating, celebratory kaleidoscope that is Don Juan.

To recognize how Byron's assumption of a dissipated image transcends mere biographical and artistic posing, one need only examine the particular chronology and circumstances of that image's appearance. First and most important, Byron's studied projection of his dissipation in journals, correspondence, conversations, and published works alike dominated only a relatively brief segment of his career. While occasional references to drinking bouts and sexual conquests appear throughout Byron's writings, his consistent exploitation of such activities as myth and, in his works, as metaphor is noteworthy only in the period running (roughly) between his completion of Manfred in early 1817 and his temporary abandonment of Don Juan after composing the fifth canto in late 1820. The pervasiveness of the image during that period is reflected in the fact that Byron's use of it went far beyond simple praise of intoxication and sex as aids to releasing the poet's subconscious genius (the gist of his comments to Medwin and Murray); for Byron, intoxication and its aftermath became parts of a mythical style of living that merged with sexual excess and, additionally, with alternate bouts of gluttony and fasting, all of which became components of the poetic vision inspired by what I have called the dissipated muse. Understanding why Byron assumed this image and how that act explains the poet's changing attitudes during the years 1817-20 first requires a brief look at the general attraction personal mythmaking held for Byron throughout his life.

Byron was always quick to turn outward circumstances to his poetic advantage. His immediate exploitation of personal experiences and contemporary written accounts in Don Juan was only the last and most meticulous example of this tendency in his canon. More to the point, Byron was ever prone to seize on some aspect of his life and transform it into a controlling metaphor in his works, his correspondence, his very existence. Byron's literary career began with such an event; faced with hostile criticism of his early volume of lyrics, Hours of Idleness, he immediately assumed the image of the wounded Enlightenment man of letters, wrote English Bards and Scotch Reviewers (1809) and Hints

from Horace (1811), and became Pope’s most vocal advocate among the writers of early nineteenth-century England, a stance that, like all those Byron assumed throughout his life, he never completely abandoned. The most obvious example of Byron’s artistic use of personal events, though, came later, in the period just prior to his assumption of the dissipated image that is my chief topic in this paper. That was his projection of himself as a homeless exile following his departure from England in 1816. While no one can doubt that the poet felt at least some despair at his separation from friends, from his sister Augusta, from his daughter Ada, and perhaps even partially regretted the disastrous failure of his marriage, those feelings were likely nothing to what Byron made of them. All the formal writings of the late 1816–early 1817 period—chiefly Childe Harold III, Manfred, “Prometheus,” “The Prisoner of Chillon,” and “Darkness”—are dominated by a theme of personal, political, and philosophical exile. And that image extends, as always, to the poet’s correspondence. For example, as the “exile” wanders through the Alps and keeps a journal for his sister Augusta, he chooses his objective correlatives wisely: “Passed whole woods of withered pines—all withered—trunks stripped & barkless—branches lifeless—done by a single winter—their appearance reminded me of me & my family” (BL&J, V, 102). No matter that elsewhere (and frequently) Byron expresses an increasing repugnance at the thought of ever returning to England;^ the image of exile, and the gloom and alienation it casts over the writings of these months, must serve until another myth and metaphor might supersede it.

Ironically, it was the fact (as opposed to the image) of “exile” that allowed Byron to happen upon, almost to stumble into, the situation that would provide his new metaphor, that would change his projected image and with it the nihilistic vision of the compositions of 1816. In the autumn of that year, Byron left Switzerland, whose stark topography and Germanic earnestness had so well suited the tenor of his mind in the months immediately following his abandonment of England, traveled the Simplon Napoleon road to Milan and, ultimately, continued on to Venice. While the changes this movement led to in Byron’s vision were not immediate, signs that the brooding exile of the previous months would have to move aside began to appear, if only in a minor key, in the first correspondence Byron posted from his new resting place. While in Milan he wrote to Augusta Leigh: “... the whole tone of Italian society is so different from yours in England; that I have not time to describe it, tho’ I am not sure that I do not prefer it” (BL&J, V, 120). The tentative proclamations of this letter, among the earliest of the poet’s re-

^ As one instance, note Byron’s comment to Douglas Kinnaird in a letter of December 17, 1816 (while the writings of the “exile” period were being completed and were seeing their way into print): “I have it so much at heart—to divorce myself as much as possible—from all connection with the country called England” (BL&J, V, 140).
corded impressions of Italy, were soon to become more definite and enthusiastic. Byron had found a new and compatible environment, one where the image of exile was absorbed into, if not completely conquered by, the voice of the dissipated muse.

What Byron found in Italian society was a mode of living based on willing contradictoriness and a vigorous pursuit of the extremes of human emotional experience. Writing retrospectively in 1820 about the traits he had learned to love in Italian culture, Byron observed:

... I know not how to make you comprehend a people—who are at once temperate and profligate—serious in their character and buffoons in their amusements—capable of impressions and passions which are at once sudden and durable (what you find in no other nation) and who actually have no society. . . . (BL&J, VII, 42-3)

The extremes that Byron notes in the above passage and throughout his observations on Italy were nowhere more evident than in the ritual the poet engaged in soon after his arrival in Venice and repeated four times (by his account) subsequent to that: the Venetian Carnival, whose bouts of feasting, drinking, and sexual intrigue were the formative elements in Byron's creation of the dissipated muse.

Byron anticipated the first (1816-17) Carnival with enthusiastic curiosity, as Leslie Marchand notes in his description of this vital turning point in the poet's career: "There was something intriguing to Byron in a society that put so much energy into its gaieties. Everything was subordinated to the coming festival." 6 Once fully involved in the revelries, Byron gradually came to see the philosophical reasons underlying his attraction to the Carnival and to the society of which it was the most obvious symbol. The activities the poet engaged in with such gusto during this period of sanctioned dissipation are among those that highlight the extremes of human earthly experience. Having had his turn at the quest for transcendental truth—the search chronicled in the chief of the "exile" poems, Childe Harold III and Manfred, and, I think, the one ultimately abandoned, perhaps even slightly parodied, in Childe Harold IV—Byron turned to the sensations of the moment. In the succession of moods that attends upon intoxication, gluttony, and sex, he found in the Carnival of 1816-17 the origins of his new vision.

Byron's chronicles of his activities during the first and subsequent Carnivals show how fully and enthusiastically he assumed the dissipated image. Accounts of drinking and its aftermath punctuate his correspondence during the festivals, and what Byron inevitably points out in those accounts is the manner in which alcohol accentuates the roller-coaster changefulness of human emotions. As the myth begins to take shape in his correspondence, Byron projects the exhilaration, the idealization of the moment, the anodyne for pain that customarily resides in intoxication. He interrupts a catalogue of petty concerns and sadnesses in a let-

ter to Thomas Moore with the exclamation ‘‘Heigh ho! I wish I was drunk—but I have nothing but this d—d barley-water before me’’ (BL&J, V, 188). And he more than once mimics Farquhar’s Squire Sullen in his plea for a cure to an actual or metaphorical headache: ‘‘Scrub, bring me a dram!’’ (BL&J, VIII, 50). Such indulgences have their physical consequences, though, and Byron’s account in his Ravenna journal of the aftermath of a particular bout of intoxication (and also overindulgence in eating) shows his logical extension of the dissipated image:

Last night I suffered horribly—from an indigestion, I believe. . . . I was prevailed upon by the Countess Gamba’s persuasion. . . . to swallow, at supper, a quantity of boiled cockles, and to dilute them, not reluctantly, with some Imola wine. When I came home, apprehensive of the consequences, I swallowed three or four glasses of spirits. . . . All was pretty well till I got to bed, when I became somewhat swollen, and considerably vertiginous. I got out, and mixing some soda-powders, drank them off. This brought on temporary relief. I returned to bed; but grew sick and sorry once and again. . . . Query—was it the cockles, or what I took to correct them, that caused the commotion? (BL&J, VIII, 51)

The exhilaration, the debilitation, and the subsequent attempts at a cure with soda-powders: Byron’s interest in these extreme moods is obvious in a lengthy passage that is represented here only by excerpts. 7

The other main component of Byron’s dissipated image, sexual pro-miscuity, receives equal time in the poet’s descriptions of his life during the Carnivals. The initial festival led him to note in an aside to his friend Douglas Kinnaird: ‘‘. . . indulge in coition always’’ (BL&J, V, 162); he boasts to Hobhouse of ‘‘fair fucking’’ with his Italian mistresses (BL&J, VI, 40); and he never resists an opportunity to catalogue the numerous ‘‘pieces’’ he has enjoyed in the previous fortnight or so, as he does most obviously in a letter to Hobhouse and Kinnaird written at the height of the 1819 Carnival (BL&J, VI, 92). These sexual references, and the image that they build of the Byron of the early Italian period, merge with the accounts of intoxication discussed above, not only in the way they color our apprehension of the poet himself, but also in the manner in which Byron uses them, increasingly, to serve as metaphors for experiencing the extremes of human passion. Blind lust inevitably gives way, at the very least, to ‘‘love’s sad satiety’’ and to the inklings of regret that Byron occasionally gives vent to: ‘‘. . . I feel & I feel it bitterly—that a man should not consume his life at the side and on the bosom—of a woman. . . . and that this Cisisbean existence is to be condemned’’ (BL&J, VI, 214). More dramatically yet (and I hope far less
FREDERICK W. SHILSTONE

frequently), sex resulted in a truly precipitous emotional and physical descent for Byron, as happened during his second Venetian Carnival: "(... Elena da Mosta—a Gentil Donna) was clapt—and she has clapt me—to be sure it was gratis, the first Gonorrhea I have not paid for" (BL&J, VI, 14). Only Byron, I think, could discern the origins of a philosophy in venereal disease.

Scattered references to dissipation were not enough to complete an image to match and supersede Byron's earlier stance of exile; that process required conscious exploitation of the image as metaphor in correspondence and creative works alike. Such exploitation is clearly evident in Byron's writings of 1817–20. As early as in those letters written during the first Carnival, Byron seems engaged in a planned effort to reflect his developing view that the essence of life lies in the extremes of human emotional experience. His life in December of 1816, he reveals in a letter to Hobhouse, is "... studious in the day & dissolute in the evening" (BL&J, V, 142). And throughout that period Byron was careful to appear to be engaged in an endless progression of seemingly contradictory activities: drinking and wenching, to be sure, but also recovering from those pursuits and, significantly, studying Armenian and aiding his tutor, Father Pasquale Aucher, in publishing an Armenian-English grammar. Clearly Byron wished to live and project an existence that consisted of alternating episodes of indulgence, recovery, and studious abstinence, both day-to-day and over the long run: "... though I am subsided into a moderate dissipation ... Lent will bring me round again with early hours—and temperance" (BL&J, V, 172). Whether or not all of these claims were literally true (and I suspect they were), they provided Byron with a new image and, ultimately, with a new vision to conform to it.

To turn to the published works that reflect that new image and vision: both "Beppo" and the early cantos of Don Juan are products of the dissipated muse, speaking in ottava rima. "Beppo" is in many respects a welcoming of that image, a Carnival story in the Carnival mood, in which Byron tries out his new voice. The poem comments on the casual contradictoriness of Italian society and vacillates in mood from sentimentality to farce as it gradually and reluctantly unfolds the story of Laura, her Cavalier Servente, and her husband, who so unfortunately returns after several years at sea. But if "Beppo" successfully welcomes the new image, it takes Don Juan fully to develop and examine it.

Don Juan is solidly grounded in the vicissitudes of earthly experience; it openly mocks metaphysics and ideal philosophies of all kinds, as exemplified in the narrator's early address to Plato: "... You're a bore, / A charlatan, a coxcomb—and have been, / At best, no better

8. These studies are chronicled in Marchand, Byron, 675–76 and passim, as well as in many of Byron's letters of late 1816 and early 1817.
than a go-between." And it defies every attempt to discern a consistent theme or tone within it; indeed, it mocks such attempts:

If people contradict themselves, can I
Help contradicting them, and every body,
Even my veracious self? (XV, 88)

To illustrate these points, Don Juan establishes radical shifting as its norm: the work moves rapidly from the sublimity of Juan's love for Donna Julia to the mundane details of his forced departure from Spain, through the grotesqueness of the shipwreck sequence and back to sublimity again in the pastoral idyll involving Juan and Haideé. Occasionally, too, it breaks out in satiric furor at Wordsworth or Southey or anyone else who happens to invite Byron's wrath. And the poem has styles to match all of these moods and is as shifting and inconsistent on that level as any other. Critics have tried every language in their attempts to describe the vision of Don Juan: it is alternately the "high dream" and "low dream" that T. S. Eliot discusses in his essay on Dante; it is Byron's approximation of the varied art of the Italian improvisatore; it is this poet's hymn to the terrestrial paradise, where he can revel in "his astonishingly varied moods" of "gloom, ecstacy, flippancy, indignation, pride, self-immersion, self-assertion, guilt, insouciance, sentimentality, nostalgia, optimism, pessimism." Among the first to notice—and object to—this vacillation was William Hazlitt. His comments show that, despite his disfavor, he recognized a primary source of the contradictoriness that later critics have worked so hard to explain:

From the sublime to the ridiculous there is but one step. You laugh and are surprised that any one should turn round and travestie himself: the drollery is in the utter discontinuity of ideas and feelings. . . . A classical intoxication is followed by the splashing of soda-water, by frothy effusions of ordinary bile.

The vision of Don Juan, pluralistic and provisional, readily accepting both the truth (and mood) of the moment and the inevitable supplanting of that truth by an equally strong and perhaps completely contradictory one, is grounded in the narrator's use of the metaphor of intoxication, a logical extension of the mode of living Byron was projecting in his cor-

respondence. That metaphor is, in fact, the first one a reader generally sees in Byron's poem, as it rules the fragment, originally written on the back of the manuscript of Stanza 218 of the first canto, that editors usually choose as a headnote to the work:

[I would to Heaven that I were so much Clay—
   As I am blood—bone—marrow, passion—feeling—
   Because at least the past were past away—
   And for the future—(but I write this reeling
   Having got drunk exceedingly to day
   So that I seem to stand upon the ceiling)
   I say—the future is a serious matter—
   And so—for Godsake—Hock and Soda Water.]
(Rejected Stanzas, I, 8)

Read outside the context of Byron's image-making, this stanza might seem simply to present intoxication as a form of escape from damaging speculation about the future. But the poet's correspondence has led us to expect more, and if that were not enough stimulus, the narrator returns often to the same metaphor of intoxication and recovery from its consequences, most evidently in a passage near the end of the second canto, one of the most famous quotations in all Byron's works:

Man, being reasonable, must get drunk;
The best of life is but intoxication:
Glory, the grape, love, gold, in these are sunk
The hopes of all men, and of every nation;
Without their sap, how branchless were the trunk
Of life's strange tree, so fruitful on occasion:
But to return,—Get very drunk; and when
You wake with a head-ache, you shall see what then.

Ring for your valet—bid him quickly bring
Some hock and soda-water, then you'll know
A pleasure worthy Xerxes the great king. . . . (II, 179-80)

The extremes of human emotion are enshrined here, as they are throughout the entire poem, dominating passages that express the provisional truths Byron's narrator accepts temporarily in full knowledge that they soon will disappear: moments of ideal love and of belief in the palliative effects of art (the intoxications); periods of satiric rage and of grotesque submersion in the basest animal experiences of humankind, such as the shipwreck and the siege of Ismail (the hangovers); and episodes of simply getting on with the business of living, of telling us what Juan packed and where he went (the hock and soda-water). The sub-

15. One particular series of letters in Byron's correspondence of early 1817 indicates how much this philosophy of emotional vacillation had already become so natural for the poet that he readily fell into an almost casual use of its metaphors, even if in a less studied manner in the letters than in the published works. On February 19 Byron wrote Augusta Leigh that "The Carnival closed last night" (BL&J, V, 171). After several letters recapitulating his dissipations during the festival, he informed Thomas Moore in a February 28 epistle that he had taken up an "invalid regimen" in the wake of those dissipations (BL&J, V, 176); clearly he was in the "hangover" stage of the cycle at that point. He remained there for some time, for he told John Murray on March 3, "... my Armenian studies are suspended for the
lime, the grotesque, and the mundane are all to be accepted, even enjoyed, unencumbered by a despairing quest after consistency and higher truth. The other aspects of Byron's dissipated image—those relating to eating and sex—are not as literally explored in *Don Juan* as is intoxication, but they are nonetheless strikingly present. In the early episodes, Juan is a victim of both famine and feast; the shipwreck leaves its castaways starved to the point of cannibalism, while the interlude Juan spends with Haidee is marked by almost baroque descriptions of the lavish meals the lovers prepare and consume. The sex theme is one of the main sources of the poem's innuendos; when the narrator accuses Southey of being guilty of "a-dry, Bob" (Dedication, 3)—Regency slang for coition without emission—the Laureate's philosophical impotence is as certainly implied as his sexual inadequacy. Byron's persona suffers no such problems, however, and his projection of the dissipated image ensures that the vision of *Don Juan* will square with the one Byron described himself, in less metaphorical terms than those used in the poem, as holding to: "My time has been passed viciously and agreeably—at thirty-one so few years months days hours or minutes remain that 'Carpe diem' is not enough—I have been obliged to crop even the seconds—for who can trust to tomorrow? tomorrow quotha? to-hour—to-minute" (*BL&J*, VI, 211). When coupled with a view that each of those moments needs to be devoted to one of the fleeting extremes of human emotion, this statement expresses the essence of the dissipated vision of Don Juan.

The overall pattern of Byron's creation and use of the image of dissipation was clear both to himself and to the closest of his contemporaries. While defending *Don Juan* in a letter to Douglas Kinnaird, the poet fell naturally into a language that should come as no surprise: "Could any man have written [Don Juan]—who has not lived in the world?—and tooled in a postchaise? 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? . . . I had such projects for the Don—but the *Cant* is so much stronger than *Cunt*—now a days,—that the benefit of experience in a man who had well weighed the worth of both monosyllables—must be lost to despairing posterity. (*BL&J*, VI, 232)

Byron had certainly "weighed the worth of both monosyllables" when he wrote this defense; it might even be said that some of the *Cant* he decries is in his own earlier works, to the extent that they posit or seek present—till my head aches a little less" (*BL&J*, V, 179). The mundane would have to wait until the "hangover" was gone—and gone it certainly was not when Byron penned a scathing letter to Lady Byron on March 5 (*BL&J*, V, 180-81), his personal version of the satiric attacks that mark the "headache" phases of *Don Juan*. I regard this sequence of letters as chronicling the period when the aptness of the dispased image became apparent to Byron and as providing a clear prelude to the incorporation of that image into the visions of "Beppo" and *Don Juan*. The psychological implications of Byron's descriptions of food and eating in *Don Juan* are closely examined in W. Paul Elledge's "Byron's Hungry Sinner: The Quest Motif in *Don Juan*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 1XXIX (1970), 1-13.
some consistent and abstract meaning beyond the emotions of the here-and-now. Shelley certainly thought that was at least part of what his fellow poet’s new image and vision meant. In agreeing with his friend Peacock’s objections to the last canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, the verses that examine and then sweep away many of Byron’s old images to prepare the way for the new, Shelley complains:

The spirit in which *Childe Harold* is written is, if insane, the most wicked and mischievous insanity that ever was given forth. . . . Nothing can be less sublime than the true source of these expressions of contempt and desperation. The fact is, that first, the Italian Women are perhaps the most contemptible of all who exist under the moon. . . . Well, L. B. is familiar with the lowest sort of these women, the people his gondolieri pick up in the streets.”

Shelley’s repugnance here stems at least in part from his noting only the literal side of Byron’s dissipation. But he would not have been pleased with the ultimate product of this personal mythmaking either: Byron’s embrace, to the exclusion of all metaphysical speculation, of the passionate mundane.

The dissipated image was not to be the final one Byron added to his increasingly complex literary character. The last of his journals and correspondence and the concluding episodes of *Don Juan* (among other works) indicate a movement away from the image I have discussed here—indeed, a movement away from the entire process of identifying the poet’s life with his art, as Byron began to embody an increasingly absurdist vision in his works while committing himself personally to an ethic of action for its own sake in the Greek adventure. As a result, while the “dissipated” vision developed in the early cantos of *Don Juan* and the correspondence of 1817–20 is perhaps the purest example we have of romantic irony, what Anne K. Mellor defines in part as participation in “the fertile chaos of life,” that vision too gave way to something else, as do all structures of the romantic ironist. And when that happened, Byron moved toward embracing a view close to the one later developed by the existentialists. It is doubtless, too, that the dissipated image is but one of the many factors responsible for the ironic perspective of the first part of *Don Juan*. Nonetheless, while that image suited Byron’s changing personal and poetic vision, it provided him with one of those “fictions . . . necessary to organize reality.”

---

18. Just as Byron had earlier anticipated the decline of his exile image, in the 1816 letters that express increasing distaste at the prospect of ever having to see England again, he foresaw how the image of dissipation would fall from prominence well before he worked out what the implications of its fading might be. Several of the letters Byron wrote after completing the fifth canto of *Don Juan* reject the teachings of the dissipated muse, notably his October 6, 1821, words to Thomas Moore: “I can drink, and bear a good deal of wine (as you may recollect in England); but it don’t exhilarate—it makes me savage and suspicious, and even quarrelsome” (*BL&J*, VIII, 236). Similarly, references to the new “chaste” life Byron was leading pervade the letters of this period. Unfortunately, the poet never got the chance completely to evolve his new image and set of metaphors to suit it.
ality and circumstances during the early years of his Italian residence were probably the key factors in his literary use of intoxication, gluttony, and sexual excess, and that use was thus limited and temporary. But the fact that the dissipated muse helped to inspire much of one of the greatest long poems in nineteenth-century literature, *Don Juan*, has enabled Byron's personal mythmaking to help effect a transformation in the literary image and uses of intoxication and the other forms of excess discussed here, one that has echoed throughout the works of his literary heirs.

*Clemson University*
South Carolina