



## ORIENT, SELF AND OTHER IN BYRON'S *DON JUAN*

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In Byron's *Don Juan* the exploration of the (labyrinthine, sensual, feminine) "Orient", in opposition to which the (teleological, utilitarian, masculine) Western subject is constituted, is pushed to its limits, to the point at which that subject collapses. The closer Byron/Juan moves to the power-centre of the Other, the more the narrative slips into aporia: the Orient becomes the vanishing point for the Subject. Ultimately, when Juan has been feminised and orientalised, he disappears. This massive ellipsis in the poem remains almost entirely neglected by scholars. Incorporating, geographical, biographical, post-structural, psychoanalytical, gender-based and historical perspectives, this paper sheds light on how this iconic text represents Otherness, and yet collapses both the Other and the Western Subject as stable concepts.

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'These Oriental writings on the wall,  
Quite common in those countries, are a kind  
Of monitors adapted to recall,  
Like skulls at Memphian banquets, to the mind  
The words which shook Belshazzar in his hall,  
And took his kingdom from him'  
(*Don Juan*. III,lxv,513-518)

It is in *Don Juan* that Byron's fantasies (and thus his desires and fears) are given freest reign. Indeed, Byron's allowing himself absolute freedom to digress, coupled with his ease with *ottava rima* form, were such that the poem approached automatic writing in its speed and fluency of composition (Marchand 1993: passim). Identity and subjectivity are problematised through his counterposing of his protagonist and sense of self<sup>1</sup> with figures of alterity, many of them finding combination in the nexus of the "Orient". From Byron/Juan's interstitial and deeply ambivalent location, spaces are thus explored and attempts made at a repositioning of the subject in cultural space. Ultimately this results in exclusion, obfuscation or denial in the narrative, through which the self's underlying anxieties are revealed.

"The Orient" is of course a space which is configured in cultural terms as much as in those of geography. Even geographically in fact, it remains a social construct, especially so when the boundary between Asia and Europe, a site of cultural differentiation from at least the time of the

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<sup>1</sup> Although the fallacy of conflating author and hero should clearly be guarded against, as will become clear in subsequent pages, in the case of Byron/Juan there are sufficient parallels between biography and narrative to warrant a degree of extrapolation in this regard.

Persian/Hellenic wars (Cavaliero 2010: xii-xiii), is delineated (Lewis & Wingen 1997: 47-50). Through an act of 'imaginative geography' in which 'ideological suppositions, images, and fantasies' (Said 2003: 199) are inscribed, the Orient is constructed according to binary oppositions attributed to Other and Self, typically in terms of 'the corrupt, degenerate, voluptuous, seductive East' (Makdisi 2004: 70), contrasting with the decent, proper, moral and upright Western culture and subject. This is an act embodying a 'relationship of power, of domination' (Said 2003: 5), and 'grounding deeply ambivalent thoughts, feelings, fears and desires' (Makdisi 2004: 71). The Orient-as-Other thus becomes the 'contact zone' (Pratt 1992: 4), the 'agonistic space' (Bhabha 1994: 121) in which identity is tempered, tested and, in *Don Juan* (it is argued), brought to a point of collapse.

By Byron's time, the Orient had frequently been utilised in literature as a displaced zone from which to indirectly criticise practices "at home" (Makdisi 2004: 73). However, it was also construed – especially by the Romantics – as a seductive alternative to a cosy moralism. Both perspectives 'were critical of Europe – [...] for its despotic tendencies, [and] its cultural imperialism or short-sightedness' (Sharaffuddin 1994: xii). All of this was true for Byron too, who was at his 'most deeply *engaged*' when 'furthest along [his] paths of displacement and escape' (McGann 1983: 124). 'His discovery of the East' was not merely a demarcation of the boundaries of his own subjectivity and culture, but 'the discovery of *other* realities' (Sharaffuddin 1994: 236), even finding that 'the Orient is a form of release' (Said 2003: 167).

Byron was no despiser of "Orientals"; indeed he was extremely widely read in Islamic and Middle-Eastern culture and history (Kidwai 1995: 249-252; Marchand 1993: 14), and has been praised for his accurate use of lexis from Arabic and Ottoman Turkish in his verse (Kidwai 1995: 81-119), as well as for his descriptions of "costume": 'topographical and cultural description' (Leask 1992: 20). In ethnic terms, he usually kept an open-mind and sense of fairness towards '[o]ur friends the Turks' (VII,xlii,329); in religious terms (although it seems implausible that he ever seriously considered conversion, as he had told his estranged wife), he saw merits in Islam, at least in elements of what he saw as its lifestyle (Cavaliero 2010: 81-82). It has even been claimed that Byron's writings 'mark an advance in the understanding of and sympathy with the Orient, and therefore a distancing from the centralizing complacencies of establishment patriotism' (Sharaffuddin 1994: xviii). Byron's Orient then, is not as narrowly-drawn or ignorantly envisioned as most of his contemporaries', except in one regard: gender and sexuality being lifelong concerns in Byron's sense of selfhood (Elfenbein 2004: 56-73), he accedes to the classic Orientalist conflation of the Eastern and the feminine.

Even before Juan embarks on his adventures, notions of sexualised femininity and the voluptuous Orient are inextricably paired, just as Juan's masculinity marks Westernness in him, and as his Westernness marks his masculinity.

Byron opens his narrative in Spain, which he counted as one of the 'sun-burnt nations' (I,lxiv,552) in which sexual liaison 'Is much more common [because] the climate's sultry' (I,lxiii,504), in contrast to the 'moral north' (I,lxiv,505). This setting and its properties may indicate Byron's new subscription to "The Cult of the South" (Butler 1981: 113-137), and also allow him to state his preference for a sexually libertarian ethos. Also, Spain was a territory which had once been occupied by the forces of the Orient. Indeed, Spanish society still bore the trace of the peninsula's Islamic history in its valorisation of being 'free from every stain | of Moor or Hebrew blood' (I,ix,66-67). These factors render Spain already a Western house with the political and erotic shadows of the Orient within it. Indeed, Juan's first love, Julia of 'Oriental eye', (amongst whose stanzas we read the narrator's reflections on North and South) is of partially 'Moorish origin; | (Her blood was not all Spanish, by the by; | In Spain, you know,

this is a sort of sin)' (I,lvi,441-4). Already desire is figured as transgression, both sexually and in entering the territory of the Orient, the two being inextricably paired from the poem's very outset. '[S]ex in *Don Juan* often has dire consequences' (Elfenbein 2004: 70) and, like many famous literary transgressions, this one leads to an expulsion.

Juan is made an exile from his place of birth and upbringing. It is significant that Byron also represented himself as an "exile", although "expatriate" is the more accurate term (Said 2002: 181), unless avoidance of offspring and creditors may constitute "exile"; nonetheless, expatriacy and exile are both states which render the subject an 'ambivalent and partial presence' (Bhabha 1994: 86) in a 'perilous territory of not belonging' (Said 2002: 177). He is then shipwrecked in the Mediterranean, an event allowing not only a symbolic death and rebirth, signalling his crossing of the frontline into the Orient (Leask 2004: 101), but also allowing a characteristic denial of agency and responsibility ('If people go beyond, 'tis quite a crime, | But not my fault – I tell them all in time.' (I,lxxx,639-40) is one apt instance among many of this denial), in which Byron/Juan 'is the slave of circumstance' (Elfenbein 2004: 70), his fortune decreed by chance and by contact with empowered women. At odds with this, Juan's whole Oriental journey is remarkably linear (Spain – Gulf of Lyons – the Cyclades – Istanbul), as befits an avatar of the Western, male subject, penetrating the Oriental, feminine other (Turhan 2003: 107-125).

Juan is nursed back to life by Haidee (female, Oriental, other) and when she leads him to her absent (like so many patriarchs in the poem) father's palace, it is clear that he has left his own world behind. Although we are in the Cyclades, these islands were a part of the Ottoman Empire, and the influence is clear from the moment Haidee's servants 'dress'd him, for the present, like a Turk, Or Greek – that is, although it not much matter'd, Omitting turban, slippers, pistols, dirk'. (II,clx,1276-8)

For Juan, costumed (the passive use of the participle is apt) as an Oriental, Greece and the West are already being subsumed by the Other. For Byron, although Greece remains 'an Ideal against which the insufficiencies of the political and cultural present can be measured' (McGann 1983: 126), his Panhellenic ideal is now ironised by such devices as the casting of the 'sad trimmer' (III,lxxxii,649) as the singer of "The Isles of Greece" (III,lxxxvi), just as it is ironised by the very fact of Haidee's island being Ottoman (her father – a type of the Oriental despot – is a slave trader and pirate licensed by the empire) and Orientalised. In Lambro's palace with its sumptuous décor, in which Haidee's 'girdle sparkled, and the richest lace | flowed in her veil, and many a precious stone | Flash'd' (II,cxxi,965-7), as she and he enjoy their life of erotic leisure, there is no question that Juan is now in the Orient. However, sex has again been transgressive and (again against his will) Juan is taken on the final stage of his Oriental journey, this time into the very core of Otherness, which proves to be a vanishing point for the self.

The 'city of the world's desire', 'l'empire du monde'<sup>2</sup>: Constantinople (Istanbul as it was by then called, except in the West), as the Ottoman imperial capital, is the power centre of the poem's Orient; at the same time, as the former centre of the Roman and Christian worlds, it embodies a massive dislocation for the Occident in cultural terms: subsumed by the Other, the traces of New Rome and a united Christendom remain as resonant signifiers of loss and of mortal threat. Notably, this is almost an exact inversion of the poem's point of departure: the Spain which bears the traces of the Other. The city's geographical setting, astride the boundary between spaces which have been defined as Europe and Asia (although significantly the Ottoman

<sup>2</sup> An anonymous Byzantine, and Napoleon I; quoted in Mansell 1995: 3; xvi.

palace was on the European shore, which means that, as far as we know, Juan never quite made it to Asia) also marks the city as a liminal space: the zone of ultimate contact between the Subject and the Other standing in a relation of mutual definition (Turhan 2003: 107-125); the terminus of Byron/Juan's fears and desires.

Juan is sold into slavery and (against his will) enters the ultimate site of Orientalist erotic desire: the harem, 'one of those tropes through which Western fantasies of penetration into the mysteries of the Orient and access to the interiority of the other are fantasmically achieved' (Yeğenoğlu 1998: 39). By this point clear binary polarities, pitting the Subject against this Other, have been well established. Aside from the Christian/Muslim and European/Asian dichotomies, Byron/Juan is now facing the moment when the Occidental-male subject finally attains full entry into the feminised Orient.

In contrast to this phallic, Western, teleological trajectory, the harem's interior is labyrinthine and radically non-linear: a place where certainties break down:

It seem'd, however, but to open on  
A range or suite of further chambers, which  
Might lead to heaven knows where [...] (V,lxv,513-15)

The "costume" of the harem is also emblematic of a conventional sense of the 'prodigally rich' (V,lxv,516) Orient:

'[...] full of all things which could be desired,  
One wonder'd what to do with such a number  
Of articles which nobody required;  
Here wealth had done its utmost to encumber  
With furniture an exquisite apartment,  
Which puzzled much to know what art meant.' (V,lxiv,507-12)

The familiar trope of luxury is reiterated, but also enunciated is that of Oriental excess: a surplus of sensuality, hedonistic where the Western self is functional and utilitarian: 'one wonder'd what to *do* with such a number | Of articles' [emphasis added].

In other regards too, the harem destabilises Juan's cultural and subjective compass, most notably, through his encounter with the women of the harem. As Byron would have known through his extensive reading on the Middle East (Kidwai 1995: 249-252; Marchand 1993: 14), especially of Monagu (2007: *passim*), the harem was populated by many more than odalisques. While dwarves and eunuchs are described, providing a conventional sense of the grotesque and uncanny (Turhan 2003: 123), Byron's wilful exclusion from representation of the valide sultan and other matriarchs, as well as of the many children who would have lived there, is in line with popular Western stereotype regarding the harem's content and function (Cavaliere 2010: 31-48), allowing its delineation in purely erotic terms. In the figure of the odalisque we see the counterimage of the Western domestic ideal: she is highly sexualised, exists in a realm of languorous excess, and thus disrupts the contrary ideal of primness, chastity and diligent domestic labour (Turhan 2003: 47;123). Although the harem is considered restrictive, it is not unfavourably contrasted with 'that moral centaur' (V,iil,1264), marriage.

The polarities on which Juan's subjectivity have been drawn (male/female, linear/labyrinthine, functional/sensual, monogamous/polygamous) are being challenged, in rapid succession, within a locus that constitutes his 'ambiguous counterimage' (Turhan 2003: 49). Significantly, in Canto VI especially, Eastern and Western figures are insistently paired up and

their similarities stressed: those rivers which are such metonymic figures of East and West - 'The Tigris hath its jealousies like Thames' (VI,xi,88); the harem and the convent ('where all the passions have, alas! but one vent' (VI,xxxii,254-6); and the everyday customs of Turks and Greeks (VI,1,396); to list but three.

At this point, in the heart of 'the Asian pomp of Ottoman parade' (V,li,408), Byron enters into a further, repeated and disingenuous, exclusion/refusal: that of his descriptive powers: 'I won't describe' (V,lii,409; see also VI,xcviii,781-4 and VI,cvi,844). While this ellipsis may truly be because 'every fool describes' (V,lii,410), or because the Oriental interior and its inhabitants have already been invoked in beautiful detail in the Haidee episode, its abrupt and strident occurrence at this conjunction, or collision, of cultural and subjective values is telling, and prefigures the key ellipse in the narrative which follows.

By the time Juan enters the heart of Otherness, the chamber of Gulbeyaz, the sultan's favourite wife, he has been richly costumed (acceding after much protest) in oriental drag (V,lxxiii-lxxx). Fairly smoothly, there has been a 'perfect transformation' (V,lxxx,637) of the Western male into the Oriental female. The Subject finally penetrates the inner sanctum of the Other, bearing all its signifiers, and stripped of all his own; the Don Juan figure, who might be expected 'to wreak seductive mayhem' (Cavaliero 2010: 36) in the erotic zoo of the harem-in-Western-eyes, arrives to meet Gulbeyaz with his inner subjectivity well on the way to becoming disempowered, 'unsex'd' (V,lxxv,598). Truly, Byron has consigned 'his alter-ego Don Juan, en route to hell, in a pantomime' (Kelsall 1988: 150). When Gulbeyaz directly propositions him ("Christian, canst thou love?") (V,cxvi,927), the only words she addresses to him in the poem he initially refuses but, as with the cross-dressing episode, accedes:

'[...] Juan's virtue ebb'd, I know not how;  
At first he wondered why he had refus'd;  
And then, if matters could be made up now;  
And next his savage virtue he accused' (V,cxlii,1130-3).

All of the standards, of every kind, which defined his subjectivity are on the point of collapse.

The action is, however, interrupted by the entrance of the Sultan. Unlike the other patriarch of the poem, Lambro, who also walked in on one of Juan's trysts, the Sultan is not merely one type of the Oriental despot; he is its archetype. In contrast to the utilitarian, linear, Western male, he 'show'd but little royal curiosity' (V,cxlviii,1180); he is religiously traditional (V,cxlvii,1177-8), and subject to bouts of compassionless cruelty (V,xcv-cl): the epitome of Eastern tyranny. (Incredibly, this is the closest in the narrative that Juan gets to meeting a Turk: Gulbeyaz is Circassian, Baba is Numidian, and the other harem-inmates whom he encounters are all of non-Oriental origin. Just as Juan has managed never to set foot in Asia, so he has travelled to the heart of the Orient without meeting an Oriental.)

Singling out Juan 'amongst the damsels in disguise' (V,clv,1235), the Oriental despot picks him/her for his bed (although at length dissuaded by the charms of Gulbeyaz). The Other's ultimate repository of power has interpellated Juan as wholly Other: as Oriental, female, and slave. When we next encounter our protagonist, when Dudù shows 'Juan, or Juanna, through and through | This labyrinth of females' (VI,lvii,452-3), his transformation is complete:

'And next she [Dudù] gave her (I say *her*, because  
The Gender still was Epicene, at least  
In outward show, which is a saving clause)

## An outline of the Customs of the East[.]' (VI,lviii,457-60)

In his use of emphatic capitalisation of nouns, effectively reifying the terms as proper names, and in his insistence on feminine pronouns and feminised name, which continues throughout the canto, he also interpellates the protagonist as a monstrous hybrid of East and West, female and male.

This is the last we see or hear of Juan in the Orient. From this interpellation of symbolic castration and androgyny, his narrative falls into a gulf of silence, into aporia: we will never know if Juan(na) was seduced by or cut a deal with Gulbeyaz, or indeed the Sultan, or if s/he made a daring escape. Every binary polarity which has informed Juan's self-definition (as Western, male, heterosexual, linear/phallic) has been collapsed. This collision with the Other and explosion of the Subject seems to result in a form of post-traumatic reaction of amnesia or repression. When Juan abruptly resurfaces, it is to make war on the Ottomans at the Siege of Ishmael. As if in denial of his hybridity, a heroic and stereotypically manly Juan reacts with violence against his accuser.

Following this, Juan's trajectory turns towards the West and Christendom, but he is a broken man. At the court of Catherine of Russia, all is revealed to be as despotic, erotic, dissipated and cruel as in Constantinople: the myth of the Orient's difference has been deflated. It is even proposed that Catherine and the Sultan 'dismiss her guards and he his harem, | And for other matters, meet and share 'em.'(VI,xcv,759-760). Juan descends into a shade of his former chivalrous and honourable self:

'Few youthful minds can stand the strong concussion  
Of any slight temptation in their way:  
But *his* just now were spread as is a cushion  
Smoothed for a monarch's seat of honour: gay  
Damsels, and dances, revels, ready money[.]' (X,xxi,163-7)

About this time, as might have been anticipated,  
Seduced by youth and dangerous examples,  
Don Juan grew, I fear, a little dissipated[.]' (X,xxiii,177-9)

Juan's disillusion, and his dissolution, only increase as he journeys back into the West. Again and again, there are diatribes against cruelty, vice and tyranny (in the form of Wellington or Castlereagh (VIII,cxxv), to choose but two of many examples), climaxing in the magnificent denunciation of XI,76-85; its repetitions of "Where is...?" and 'I have seen...' reminiscent of a prophet calling down the wrath of God. All of this intimates that the West, so longed for by the subject at the outset of Juan's journey, is qualitatively no better than the East. Juan's existence becomes a 'laborious nothing | That leads to lassitude' (XI,lxv,514-5); Byron's lost homeland is '[t]hat worse than *worst of foes*, the once adored | False friend, who held out freedom to mankind' (X,lxvii,534-535).

Ellipsis was nothing new for Byron. In terms of characterisation, it underpinned the charisma of the saturnine Byronic hero; at sentence-level it was used to convey innuendo (Elfenbein 2004: 61; 66-67). However, such massive ellipsis in plot had not been employed before (even in *The Giaour* the narrative gaps are primarily to create an air of mystery around the protagonist), and it is as significant, perhaps moreso, than that of the poem's unfinished ending. Byron/Juan's 'liberationist ethic requires the hegemonic tendency to justify its opposition'

(Kelsall 2004: 54), yet his opposition and ‘his illusions (which are part of his loves) have always been threatened with collapse’ (McGann 1983: 144), and in the contact zone of the Orient, this has come to pass. Such has been the ‘cultural dissonance’ (Makdisi 2004: 72) of the encounter, ‘that there is no escape [...] only revelation’ (McGann 1983: 131), and this revelation can only be evaded by silence, ellipsis; as Elfenbein puts it (although referring to the poem’s end-point), we are left with ‘a perpetual deferral of closure about the hero, *even after his death.*’ (2004: 61; emphasis added):

‘[...] shuddering at the mirror  
Of your own thoughts, in all their self confession,  
[...]  
To plunge with all your fears – but where? You know not,  
And that’s the reason why you do – or do not.’ (XIV,vi,43-8)

In *Don Juan*, impossible strains are put on the identity of the protagonist, strains which were shared by the author: Byron/Juan is an exile who attempts to negotiate the ambivalence of his interstitial cultural location – ‘*almost the same, but not quite*’ (Bhabha 1994: 86) - by forming a hybrid subjectivity through contact with the Oriental Other. In doing so, it was discovered that the Other was either unknowable, or was not the Other at all. Rather than endeavouring to dominate the Other through the continued production of claimed knowledge, Byron fell into silence. It is perhaps to his credit that, at the point of ultimate contact, words failed him.

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