

“I’VE SEEN THE FUNDS AT WAR  
WITH HOUSE AND LAND ...”:  
A RADICAL READING OF THE POLITICS  
OF *DON JUAN*

PETER COCHRAN

*Don Juan* is a poem, not a prose tract, and certainly not a book or pamphlet offering a systematic, rational, all-inclusive analysis of anything, politics least of all. With any subject it covers, we mustn’t even expect a single, coherent perspective, but a variety of different insights, often partial, often contradictory, often heartfelt, often facetious, some radical, others conservative. Political “judgements” will be juxtaposed with literary “judgements”; they will sometimes coalesce with them, and sometimes clash with them, as Byron’s strictly non-linear creative processes dictate. Byron’s “judgements” will *sometimes* be subordinated to his narrative (which may *sometimes* suggest political “judgements”), *sometimes* support it, and many times digress from it, in a manner implied in one of his most revealing informal statements:

You must not mind occasional rambling I mean it for a poetical T. Shandy – or Montaigne’s Essays – with a story for a hinge.<sup>1</sup>

*Tristram Shandy* is a book which makes a point of never getting to the point.

Byron thought of himself as a political person, even though his record of active participation – he only gave three speeches in the House of Lords – suggests dilettantism. One could even argue that his status as an aristocrat was compromised. The fact that he inherited his title, not straight from his father but by accident from his great uncle, would not be held against him, for much stranger things happened: but finding himself in full ownership of his estate, as opposed to having it entailed, he actually sold it, as few peers could. He was trying to sell it within a year of his return to England in 1811. This lack of commitment to his landowner’s role was confirmed by his permanent departure from the country in 1816. After relinquishing his estate, however, he still insisted on the privileges of nobility, and took full advantage of the freedoms which his English title gave him on his travels in post-Waterloo Europe. When, on the death of his mother-in-law, he came into property again, he showed all the amateur unscrupulousness of an absentee landlord.

The England Byron knew was run, in the crudest way, by and for its landed interest. Several large commercial cities, where much of the country’s wealth was produced, had no representation at Westminster, even though many industrialists were richer than most landowners. No new boroughs had been created since just after the Civil War. The franchise varied crazily from constituency to constituency. In many towns, electoral majorities could be obtained by bribery – votes were up for sale. Who was to stand as member for the Commons was more often than not dictated by the local landowner or landowners. The People were seen by the ruling elite, not as a population to be represented, but as a potential enemy of whom to be wary: a large militia – recruited from The People’s ranks – was employed to keep The People repressed.

Opposition to this manifest corruption took a variety of forms. The mainstream Whig party, to whose “Buff and Blue” colours Byron proclaims his allegiance in *Don Juan’s* Dedication, was by and large as great a beneficiary of the status quo as were the Tories – who were in government for all of Byron’s adult life. Only on a few headline-grabbing issues, such as Catholic Emancipation, or how magnanimously to deal with the defeated Napoleon, did the Whigs show any independence. But there was, on what we should call the left of the Whig party, a growing minority who thought Something Should At Last Be Done. Most of Byron’s closest friends – Hobhouse, Moore, Kinnaird, Bruce, and Davies – were of this persuasion. At Cambridge, Hobhouse had founded a Whig Club with a radical agenda, and Byron had been a member: but his later attitude to it was cool – he claimed to hold radical Whig opinions, but to dislike radical Whigs – like the heroine of Stoppard’s *Night and Day*, who was all in favour of Freedom of the Press, but who hated newspapers.

---

**First published in *Aspects of Byron’s Don Juan* (CSP 2013), pp. 211-17.**

**1:** B. to Kinnaird, April 14th 1823; text from NLS Ms.43454; BLJ X 150.

There was an undercurrent of still more radical discontent, from relative moderates like William Hone, via Painite populists like Henry “Orator” Hunt and William Cobbett, to would-be actual revolutionists like Arthur Thistlewood, leader of the doomed Cato Street conspiracy.

Beyond even these dangerous extremists was a mad fringe, who believed in universal suffrage and even in votes for women. But nobody took them seriously.

Once Byron was out of England his conservatism hardened. He affected to confuse, and perhaps did confuse, radical Whigs with Painite revolutionaries. When Hobhouse was jailed from base Tory political motives without so much as a hearing, Byron wrote him a jolly song:

Who are now the people’s men,  
My Boy Hobby-O?  
There’s I and Burdett, gentlemen,  
And blackguard Hunt and Cobby-O.

In fury, Hobhouse tried to explain that he and Sir Francis Burdett had nothing to do with “blackguard Hunt and Cobby-O”, but Byron refused to listen to him.

On a variety of issues – Cato Street, the Peterloo Massacre, the “trial” of Queen Caroline – Byron was unsympathetic, more so after he came into more property, and gained a new title (“Noel Byron”): it was after this that he wrote most of *Don Juan*: Cantos VII-XVII.

What he heard from England alarmed him. Kinnaird expressed his delight in the first canto of *Don Juan* thus:

I think your Poem is justly bitter & exquisitely humorous – You will have the world on your side – The revolution is coming – Rely on it ...<sup>2</sup>

On the day of Queen Caroline’s funeral Kinnaird was still more alarming, and appeared again to associate *Don Juan* with a desire for revolution on the part of its author:

When I see or hear from Murray I shall probably have something to communicate to you about the monies to be paid for Don Juan &c &c &c – I am now writing in a city where civil war is raging – The stupid Gov<sup>l</sup> wished to carry the Corpse of the late Heroic & good Queen round instead of thro’ the City, where the Corporation wished to shew some marks of outward respect to it – There was a regular battle at Kensington – where the People beat the Constables – at Hyde Park Corner another fight, where the Life Guards fired – But the Blues would not – Some lives lost I hear – The People threw up retrenchments on the City Road, & turned the Procession down Tottenham Court Road Drury Lane & thro’ Temple Bar – where the Red-Coats were all turned back, But the Blues were admitted amidst the Cheers of the People –

It is a complete defeat of the military arm of this Stupid Government – Do not be in a hurry about the Funds – I am watching them – They will not fall yet – Before they do we will get a mortgage – But the fact is such things are difficult to find.<sup>3</sup>

Byron believed him. In an appendix to *The Two Foscari* (written in mid-1821, just when Kinnaird penned the above), he wrote:

Acts – acts on the part of government, and *not* writings against them, have caused the past convulsions, and are tending to the future.

I look upon such as inevitable, though no revolutionist: I wish to see the English constitution restored and not destroyed. Born an aristocrat, and naturally one by temper, with the greater part of my present property in the funds, what have *I* to gain by a revolution? Perhaps I have more to lose in every way than Mr. Southey, with all his places and presents for panegyrics and abuse into the bargain. But that a revolution is inevitable, I repeat. The government may exult over the repression of petty tumults; these are but the advancing waves repulsed and broken for a moment on the shore, while the great tide is still rolling on and gaining ground with every breaker.

It was a paranoid fantasy, based on Kinnaird’s scare-mongering, and on Byron’s fear for the safety of the £60,000 he had invested in government bonds. England was never anywhere near having a revolution on the French model: but to Byron (who was not “born an aristocrat”), facts didn’t matter.

From all this mental confusion on Byron’s part come passages in *Don Juan* like the following:

“Where is the World?” cries Young “at *eighty*? Where  
“The World in which a man was born?” Alas!  
Where is the world of *eight* years past? *’Twas there* –

2: Douglas Kinnaird to B., December 29th 1818; text from NLS Ms.43455.

3: Douglas Kinnaird to B., August 14th 1821; text from NLS Ms.43455.

I look for it – 'tis gone – a Globe of Glass!  
 Cracked, shivered, vanished, scarcely gazed on, ere  
 A silent change dissolves the glittering mass;  
 Statesmen, Chiefs, Orators, Queens, Patriots, Kings –  
 And Dandies, all are gone on the Wind's wings.

Where is Napoleon the Grand? God knows –  
 Where little Castlereagh? – the devil can tell –  
 Where Grattan – Curran, Sheridan – all those  
 Who bound the Bar or Senate in their spell?  
 Where is the unhappy Queen with all her woes?  
 And where the Daughter whom the Isles loved well?  
 Where are those martyred Saints the Five per Cents?  
 And where, oh where the devil, are the Rents? –

Talk not of seventy years as age! in seven  
 I've seen more changes – down from Monarchs to  
 The humblest individuals under heaven –  
 Than might suffice a moderate Century through;  
 I knew that nought was lasting, but now even  
 Change grows too changeable, without being new;  
 Nought's permanent among the human race,  
 Except the Whigs *not* getting into place. –

I've seen Napoleon, who seemed quite a Jupiter,  
 Shrink to a Saturn; I have seen a Duke  
 (No matter which) turn politician stupider,  
 If that can well be, than his wooden look.  
 But it is time that I should hoist my "Blue Peter,"  
 And sail for a new theme; I've seen – and shook  
 To see it – the King hissed, and then cared;  
 But don't pretend to settle which was best.

I've seen the landholders without a rap –  
 I've seen Johanna Southcote – I have seen  
 The House of Commons turned to a tax-trap –  
 I've seen that sad affair of the late Queen –  
 I've seen crowns worn instead of a fool's-cap –  
 I've seen a Congress doing all that's mean –  
 I've seen some nations like o'erloaded asses  
 Kick off their burthens – meaning the high classes.

I've seen small poets, and great prozers, and  
 Interminable – *not eternal* – speakers –  
 I've seen the Funds at war with house and land –  
 I've seen the Country Gentlemen turn squeakers –  
 I've seen the people ridden o'er like sand  
 By slaves on horseback – I have seen malt liquors  
 Exchanged for "thin potatoes" by John Bull –  
 I've seen John half detect himself a fool. –

(*Don Juan* XI sts.76-7 and 82-5)

The remarkable thing about this passage is the utter promiscuity of its subjects. The affair of the mad prophetess Johanna Southcote was freakish in the depth of English credulity which her career revealed, but was in a different category from Napoleon's problems on St Helena, and nowhere near as horrible as the Peterloo massacre (which is what Byron means by "the people ridden o'er like sand / By slaves on horseback": it's his only poetic reference to it). The fatuous and nationally embarrassing business of "the unhappy Queen" Caroline was in a different compartment from the problems of investors in five per cent government bonds, or landowners faced when trying to recover rents. One is reminded about what Byron wrote of his first impressions of Rome:

But I can't describe because my first impressions <at> are always strong & confused – & my <m/>Memory selects  
 & reduces them to order – like distance in the landscape – – & blends them better – although they may be less  
 distinct – there must be a sense or two more than we have as mortals – which I suppose the Devil has – (or t'other)

for where theres much to be grasped we are always at a loss – and yet feel that we ought to have a higher and more extended comprehension. -----<sup>4</sup>

It's the same with his unselective recollections of the history of England from the perspective of late 1822 in Genoa: even at a distance of several years, he can't get it sorted out, doesn't know how to prioritise its components, and throws everything in, in any order, fearful of leaving anything out.

But, to repeat, Byron isn't writing a cool historical analysis, in prose – he's writing poetry: in this case, a meditation in the *Ubi sunt?* tradition, as Mary Shelley, who copied it, understood at once:

I have nearly finished copying your savage Canto<sup>5</sup> – You will cause Milman to hang himself – “non c'è altro rimedio”<sup>6</sup> – I was much pleased with your notice of Keats<sup>7</sup> – your fashionable World is delightful – & your dove<sup>8</sup> – you mention eight years<sup>9</sup> – exactly the eight years that comprizes my years of happiness – Where also is he, who gone has made this quite, quite another earth from that which it was? –<sup>10</sup>

Seen in such an empathetic light, the jumbled, heterogeneous quality of the *Don Juan* passage works.

As political analysis, as opposed to political meditation, *Don Juan* doesn't reward study. At Pisa in October 1822 – just when Byron was writing the passages above – Hobhouse recorded,

We talked over old times and present times in the same strain as usual. Byron told me he had been against me at my election at first because he knew nothing about the matter: now he was anti-Whig.<sup>11</sup>

To confess one's complete ignorance of one's best friend's politics, and then to tell him that you're against them, does not say much for one's political sophistication.

When *Don Juan* arrives in England, he finds much smug corruption, but objects to none of it, being too polite. It's left to Byron the narrator to comment further, but this is the strongest his comments get:

Our ridicules are kept in the background,  
Ridiculous enough, but also dull –  
Professions too are no more to be found  
Professional, and there is naught to cull  
Of Folly's fruit, for though your fools abound,  
They're barren, and not worth the pains to pull;  
Society is now one polished horde  
Formed of two mighty tribes, the *Bores* and *Bored*.

(*Don Juan* XIII st.95)

He seems to imply that the English upper class may be a load of parasites, but that they're so dull that satire can have no effect on their parasitism, or on the public's attitude to it. He may be pointing to a defence mechanism on the part of the upper classes: we remember that, at Tory assemblies in London, only commonplace conversation was allowed, for to speak entertainingly on interesting topics was thought dangerous.

But to accuse the upper classes merely of dullness is hardly the plank for a radical agenda. Byron may have been too deeply implicated in his subject to be a good satirist of its frailties.

4: B. to Murray, May 9th 1817; text from B.L.Ashley 4730; BLJ V 221-2.

5: M.S. has just copied *Don Juan* XI.

6: See *Don Juan* XI, st. 58.

7: See *Don Juan* XI, st. 60.

8: “where?”

9: See *Don Juan* XI, 76, 3.

10: Mary Shelley to B., October 21st 1822; text from NLS Ms.43506; Bennett I 283-4.

11: Hobhouse diary, September 17th 1822; B.L.Add.Mss. 56545.