

The *Je ne sais quoi* of Byron's Poetry: Foreignisms in *Don Juan*

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Edward Trelawny challenged the accuracy of Lady Blessington's accounts of Byron's conversations on the ground that they were filled with foreignisms, which, according to Trelawny, Byron and Shelley never used.¹ Yet Byron's informing Murray in a letter of February 16, 1821 that he plans to have Don Juan grow "gâté and blasé" might suggest Trelawny's "never" was an exaggeration, at least with respect to Byron.² The *OED*, in fact, quotes Byron's letters as the earliest instance of written usage for two French words. One of the words is *malgré*, which Byron used in a letter to Moore in 1815; after telling Moore about the death of Lord Wentworth, Byron goes on to say that he had gone to the theater "(*malgré* that I ought to have staid at home in sackcloth for unc., but I could not resist the first night of any thing)".³ The other word is *liaison* in the sense of "an illicit relationship between a man and a woman": of Teresa Guiccioli, Byron wrote (again to Moore), "She is by far the prettiest woman I have seen here. I believe I told you the rise and progress of our *liaison* in my former letter".⁴ Apparently, until the early nineteenth century, *liaison* pertained chiefly to cooking, meaning a thickening for sauces usually made from the yolks of eggs.

Foreignisms, also called loan words or borrowings, appear so frequently in *Don Juan* that their effect and significance invite consideration. To begin with, though, we face the difficulty of identifying a foreignism, especially a Gallicism, as opposed to a word originating in a foreign language that has become fully assimilated into English. (Hence the joke told about George W. Bush during the height of his administration's anti-France sentiment: that he gave a speech in which he said, "the French don't even have a word for 'entrepreneur.'") Especially when we consider an early nineteenth-century work, knowing where to draw the line between a foreign and an assimilated expression is not always clear. Does the narrator of *Don Juan* commit a foreignism when he uses words like *coterie* (IV.872), *ensemble* (V.631), *etiquette* (V.822), *tête-a-tête* (V.972), *à propos* [*sic*] (XV.3), *fêtes* (XII.455), *blasé* (XII.645), *debonnaire* (XII.676), and *élite* (634)?⁵ Or have those become good English words – and were they as English in the first two decades of the nineteenth century? And what about *boudoir* – which Byron informs his reader is "a sweet place / For love or breakfast" (VI.770-1)? Did Byron think a description was necessary because such a dual-purpose room was non-existent in the stately homes of England? Or was he merely reminding readers of what they already know via a playful zeugma (as he does in "Seville, famous for oranges and women" [I.58])? Most likely it's the latter as *boudoir*, a word for which the *OED* gives a first citation in 1781, occurs four times in *Don Juan*, never in italics or quotation marks, which frequently identify foreign terms in the early editions.⁶ On the other hand, italicization and quotation marks for foreign words are used inconsistently in the early editions and are therefore not wholly reliable indications of a word's relative foreignness or assimilation into English.

The *OED* is somewhat more helpful here, stating, for example, that *debonnaire*, which is italicized in the poem, had been common in Middle English but had become obsolescent by the seventeenth century and was perhaps beginning to re-emerge in or after Byron's day. For seventeen of the foreign words or phrases that occur in *Don Juan*, the *OED*, in its entries for these words and phrases, quotes the line in *Don Juan* among its illustrations of their usage. These words are *longueurs*, *coterie*, *sang-froid*, *mal-à-propos*, *barbette*, *recherché*, *pas*, *bon mots*, *géné*,

1: From the diary of W. M. Rossetti (who had interviewed Trelawny), excerpts of which were printed in the *Athenaeum* (July 15, 1882); rpt. *The Literary World*, Vol. 13 (Boston, August 26, 1882), 281.

2: BLJ VIII 78.

3: BLJ IV 290.

4: BLJ V 148.

5: To avoid the busy effect of quotation marks around the numerous foreign words from *Don Juan* quoted in this paper, I have instead italicized them, whether or not they are italicized in the poem. Throughout this paper, canto and line numbers refer to *Don Juan* in *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, edited by Jerome J. McGann, volume V (Clarendon Press, 1986).

6: Other occurrences of *boudoir* are at VIII.543, IX.501 (*boudoirs*), and XI.547.

*tout ensemble, grand monde, éclât, bienséance, demoiselle, bonne vivante, confitures, bouts rimés.*⁷ In addition to French words in *Don Juan*, the *OED* quotes from the poem for its illustration of the Russian *kibitka* and the Italian *improvvisatore*.⁸

The linguist Antoinette Renouf, in her essay “Shall We Hors D’Oeuvres?: The Assimilation of Gallicisms Into English,” offers an analysis of the reasons speakers and writers use foreignisms. My analysis of this practice in *Don Juan* is based on hers, and while her essay focuses on Gallicisms exclusively, in certain respects the reasons for French borrowings pertain to borrowings from other languages as well.

According to Renouf, one reason for a foreign borrowing is lacunae, or gaps: that is, the need for a word for which in one’s own language no word is adequate to convey the denotative or connotative meaning or nuance. Thus, Byron on *longueurs*: “We’ve not so good a word, but have the thing” (III.865); and on *ennui*: “a growth of English root, / Though nameless in our language:—we retort / The fact for words, and let the French translate / That awful yawn which sleep can not abate” (XIII.805). Similarly, when we are told that Juan “was received by Empress Catherine with much ‘*empressement*,’” the narrator explains:

These phrases of refinement I must borrow
From our next neighbour’s land, where, like a chessman,
There is a move set down for joy or sorrow
Not only in mere talking, but the press. Man
In islands is, it seems, downright and thorough,
More than on continents—as if the sea
(See Billingsgate) made even the tongue more free. (XI, st.42)

Similarly, there is no precise equivalent in English for “that undefinable ‘*Je ne sçais quoi*’” (XIV.570), by which Byron alludes to Lord Henry’s lack of sexual charisma. (At the same time, since “*Je ne sais quoi*” is essentially a phrase that signifies something that the French don’t have a phrase for, one can’t help wondering why we have to say it in French.)

Another explanation for loan words pertains specifically to their use in narrations, as opposed to mere conversation (though narrations may occur within or as a part of conversation). In storytelling, foreignisms may help to create a realistic background of foreign habits, customs, traditions, and conditions of life.⁹ Hence, clothing in *Don Juan*’s Spain includes the *basquiña* and the *mantilla* (II.959), while, in Canto XV, the food served at the Amundeville estate was prepared, as its guests surely would have expected, according to the popular cookbook by

7: *OED* entries are as follows: *longueurs*: “I know that what our neighbours call ‘*longueurs*’, / (We’ve not so good a word, but have the *thing*) ... Form not the true temptation which allures / The reader” [III.865] (this is the second illustration of the word; the earliest is from 1791). *coterie*: “Fame is but a lottery, / Drawn by the blue-coat misses of a coterie” [IV.872] (fourth illustration; the earliest is 1738). *sang-froid*: “With great sang-froid ..., he sat smoking Tobacco” [V.87] (third illustration; the earliest is 1750). *mal-à-propos*: “One who had no sin to show / Save that of dreaming once ‘mal-à-propos’” [VI.672] (seventh illustration; the earliest is 1630). *barbette*: “Two batteries ... Casemated one, and t’other ‘a barbette’” [VII.92] (second illustration; the earliest is 1772). *recherché*: “At Henry’s mansion, then ... Was Juan a recherché, welcome guest” [XIII.218] (fourth illustration; the earliest is 1689). *pas*: “We give the sex the pas” [XIII.626] (fifth illustration; the earliest illustration is 1707). *bon mots*: “What unexpected woes / Await those who have studied their bon mots” [XIII. 776; *bon mot* XIII.868] (third illustration; the earliest is 1735). *gêné*: “But none were ‘gêné’” [XIII.817] (second illustration; the earliest is 1806). *tout ensemble*: “The ‘*tout ensemble*’ of his movements wore a / Grace” [XIV.317] (fifth illustration; the earliest is 1703). *grand monde*: “She was fine and somewhat full-blown blonde ... For several winters in the grand, *grande* [sic] *Monde*” [XIV.331] (third illustration; the earliest is 1704). *éclât*: “With the kind view of saving an éclât” [XIV.473] (fourth illustration; the earliest is 1704). *bienséance*: “At least as far as *bienséance* allows” [XIV.532] (fourth illustration; the earliest is 1665). *demoiselle*: “A dashing demoiselle [sic] of good estate” [XV.330] (third illustration; the earliest is 1520). *bonne vivante*: “But though a ‘bonne vivante’ ... Her stomach’s not her peccant part” [XV.509] (third illustration, but the only one in the feminine form; the earliest illustration for *bons vivants* is 1695). *confitures*: “But even sans ‘confitures’, it no less true is, / There’s pretty picking in those ‘petits puits’” [XV.543] (second illustration; the earliest is 1802). *bouts rimés*: “... sonnets to herself, or ‘Bouts rimés’” [XVI.448] (second illustration; the earliest is 1711).

8: *kibitka*: “There in a kibitka he roll’d on, / (A cursed sort of carriage without springs)” [IX.233] (second illustration; the earliest is 1806). *improvvisatore*: “Just as I feel the ‘Improvvisatore’” [XV.160] (fourth illustration; the earliest is 1765; as the third illustration of this word, *OED* quotes *Beppo*, from st. 33: “He patronised the Improvisatori ... Wrote rhymes, sang songs, could also tell a story.”)

9: *The Notion of Stylistics*. www.durov.com/study/1-40-1047.doc

Louis Eustache Ude (first published in 1813) and included *soupe à la bonne femme*, *dindon à la Périgieux*, *fowls à la Condé*, “God knows what ‘à l’Allemande,’” *timballe*, and *salpicon*, not to mention *petits puits d’Amour* – served *sans confitures* (sts.63-8). Of course, you can’t portray local conditions without local money, and in *Don Juan* characters get or spend the *scudo* (IV.655), the *paul* (IV.670), the *sou* (XI.586), *Louis* (I.864), *francs* (II.440), *zecchini* (IV.669), *rubles* (IX.630), and *rouleaus* (XII.89). For local customs, there’s the *cavalier servente* (III.190, IX.405), and for local culture, there’s the opera: with its “*Mamma Mia*’s!” and “*Amor Mio*’s!,” its “*Tanti palpiti*’s” and “*Lasciami*’s,” along with the “*Tu mi chamas*’s from Portingale, / To soothe our ears, lest Italy should fail” (XVI, stanza 45).

Foreignisms, linguists also note, often provide occasions for humor (Renouf, 530), and foreign words – and names – supplied Byron with fresh opportunities for the poem’s incessant clever word play – its pervasive facetiousness wrought on the linguistic level. To start with, humorous rhymes and slant rhymes derive from the obviously anglicized pronunciation of foreign names: as in *new one / true one / Juan* (I, st.1), or *river / Guadalquivir* (1.63-4), or *fine as / Inez* (1.87-88). (While I’m on the subject of rhymes with foreign words, I would like to point out that Byron rhymes *forte* – as in “description is my forte” (V.409) or “according to their forte” (V 383) with the English *court*, *sport*, and *short*, and not with the Italian *morte*. I mention this with some personal satisfaction, as I find the triumph of *for-tay* over *fort* a regrettable linguistic barbarism of the late twentieth century.) But besides rhyme, *Don Juan* includes other instances of word-play on foreignisms. “Count *Corniani* (I.1187), for example, embeds a pun on the Italian word for cuckold (*cornuto*, literally “horned”). Count *Chapeau Bras*, we are told, had a head so aristocratic that, when shot at, it received “no injury / More than the cap” (VIII.77-8). The fact that Juan, having been wounded by one of Lambro’s men, “had on a bandage rather bloody” gives special resonance to his *sang-froid* (V.87). Later in the poem, Juan, ready for bed, is described as “‘*sans culotte*,’ and without vest” (XVI.931). Of the gentlefolk who have come from abroad to assemble at the Amundeville country estate, the narrator alludes to their less-than-reputable behaviors when he observes, “the passport shrouds / The ‘*passée*’ and the passed” (XIII. 639). *Goût* invited Byron to invite the reader’s preferred pronunciation: “*Taste* or the *gout*, – pronounce it as inclines / Your stomach!” (XV.571-2).

Lastly, I would like to consider the reason for the use of foreignisms, especially French words, in English speech that H. W. Fowler believes is to be avoided at all costs: pretentiousness.¹⁰ According to Fowler, “display of superior knowledge is as great a vulgarity as display of superior wealth. . . . To use French words that your reader or hearer does not know or does not fully understand, to pronounce them as if you were one of the select few to whom French is second nature when he is not one of those few (and it is ten thousand to one that neither you nor he will be), is inconsiderate and rude” (Fowler, 212). Providing a historical view of this tendency among English speakers, Renouf points out, “The Age of Exploration, beginning in 1650, brought to England an increasing number of French words . . . and in the eighteenth century, French was a highly popular source of loans, being at the height of prestige among the English upper class” (Renouf, 528). Using French expressions indicated one’s membership in a social or educational elite. Not surprisingly, the approximately eighty French words or phrases in *Don Juan* outnumber by far borrowings from any other single modern European language, including Juan’s own native Spanish and Byron’s own adopted Italian. In this regard, they are both one more sign of Byron affecting to “rattle on exactly as I’d talk” (XV.151) – in other words, exactly as the members of his class talk – and, at the same time, of his satirizing the very social class to which his narrator belongs. Byron was not in fact the first writer to ridicule the pretentious use of French phrases by upper-class Englishmen and – in particular we might note – Englishwomen, for whom French signified not only refinement but sentiment. In Dryden’s *Marriage à la Mode* (1673), Melantha, identified in the *dramatis personae* as “an affected lady,” is famous for speeches peppered both with her favorite expression of emotional intensity – “Let me die” – and with Gallicisms, as the following passage from her dialogue with the courtier Palamede in Act 2, Scene 1 illustrates:

Palamede: I want many things, madam, to render me accomplished; and

10: According to Renouf, “Fowler (1980) . . . saw pretension as the chief motivation (e.g., in saying *distrain* instead of ‘absent-minded’; *bien entendu* for ‘of course’)” Renouf agrees that Gallicisms are “used to indicate membership of educated, cosmopolitan English elite . . . a desire, or a need, to impress through the use of Gallicisms; to associate oneself with the sophistication and cosmopolitanisms attached to the term, sometimes laying oneself open to the charge of pretension or snobbery, whether social or intellectual” (Renouf, 528, 529).

- the first and greatest of them is your favour.
- Melantha: Let me die . . . but this is extremely French; but yet Count Rhodophil—a gentleman, sir, that understands the *grand monde* so well, who has haunted the best conversations, and who, in short, has voyaged, may pretend to the good graces of a lady.
- Palamede [Aside]: Hey-day! *Grand monde! Conversation! voyaged!* and *good graces!* I find my mistress is one of those that run mad in new French words.
- Melantha: I suppose, sir, you have made the tour of France; and, having seen all that's fine there, will make a considerable reformation in the rudness of our court: For let me die, but an unfashioned, untravelled, mere Sicilian, is a *bête*; and has nothing in the world of an *honnête homme*.

In *Don Juan*, following in the footsteps of Melantha are the Bluestockings, who “talked bad French of Spanish” (XI.397); Donna Inez, who “read some French romances here and there, / Although her mode of speaking was not pure” (I.99-100); and Donna Julia, who actually “thought / In French” (I.671-2). Julia’s penchant for Gallicisms, natural enough to her class, is used by Byron to lend a whiff of cant to her sentiment – in punishment for which her letter declaring her undying love for Juan and sealed with “*Elle vous suit partout*” (I.1582) is not only vomited upon by the seasick recipient but is eventually torn up for the grim lottery that follows the shipwreck.

As if to underscore the use of foreignisms as an English upper-class affectation, Juan’s speech, in contrast to the speech style of the English gentleman narrator, is free of foreignisms, despite that fact that “Juan knew several languages” (XI.417). (Truly, the speed at which Juan becomes conversant in Turkish, Russian, and English is impressive, if not incredible.) In point of fact, Juan speaks remarkably little for an epic hero (maybe a hundred or so lines, and even the poem’s most devoted readers can scarcely recall any of them), though the narrator occasionally describes Juan’s thoughts, paraphrases his statements, or conveys them by indirect address. It is the narrator who attributes to Juan’s speech its single foreignism, when reporting that he defended Dudù by saying that no one should be punished merely for “dreaming so *mal-à-propos*” (VI.672). In this instance, one might say, the narrator plays Lady Blessington to Juan’s conversations, as the French phrase, though consistent with the linguistic style of the narrator, is unlike that of the youthfully sincere Juan – who tends to blurt out simple, straightforward, German-rooted declarations like “Love is for the free!” (V.1012).

But the narrator’s foreign vocabulary if anything surpasses that of the lingua franca of the English country estate. The narrator drops words that reflect Byron’s firsthand familiarity with, if not fluency in, foreign languages, and, by extension, his travel. Many of these words are not French but Italian, such as *mi vien in mente* (I.494), *buon camerado* (XII.125), *maggiore duomo* (X.557), *villegiatura* (XIII.617, 658), and *figuranti* (IV.673). These words may be Italian commonplaces, but they are not in the *OED* (nor, for that matter, is *cavalier servente*). (Amusingly in the context of this study, Jerome McGann in his notes gives as the English translation of *figuranti* “corps de ballet” [CPW V.705].) Even some of the narrator’s French expressions must have sent, if not the Amundeville guests, many of the poem’s English readers in search of the *dictionnaire*.¹¹ *Tracasserie* (XIV.327), *agaçerie* (XIV.328), and *apropos des bottes* (IX.281) are in the *OED* and in certain English and American dictionaries, but they are not sufficiently common in English speech to have made it into the unabridged *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (1966). *Ivresse* (XI.309) and *ci-devant jeunes hommes* (XIV.143) are not even in the *OED*. *Epreuveuse* is a term not only, as Byron tells us, “inexplicable to the Muse” (IX.671-72), but apparently also to the compilers of the *OED*, of *Cassell’s New French-English Dictionary*, and of *Nouveau Petit Larousse*, which have no entry for it. (*Larousse* does, however, give *éprouver*, meaning “*essayer vérifier les qualités*,” the verb from which the title of Miss Protasoff’s “mystic office” derives.) Then there are the words Byron took from French books, such as Ude’s cookbook and Gabriel Castelnau’s *La Nouvelle Russie* (1820), from which stanza 12 of Canto VII borrows such military terms as *cap-a-pèe* [*sic*], *cavaliere*, and *a barbette* (meaning a platform or mound of earth on which guns are raised). The last of these French words was unfamiliar enough in Byron’s day for Mary Shelley to have transcribed it as “a barbottle,” which Byron corrected, deleting the “a” too, without leaving it clear whether he intended “a” or “à.” His French accents are often unreliable, and he also writes “cap-apeè,” which Mary transcribes as “Cap-apeè”; it should be “cap-à-pe” or “cap-à-pie” (head to foot).

11: Among the earliest French/English dictionaries is Randle Cotgrave’s *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (1611); a second edition (1632) was published together with an English-French dictionary by Robert Sherwood; it was revised and enlarged by James Howell (1650, 1660, 1673).

Writing to one of her friends of Byron's first eastern tale, Anna Barbauld inquired, "do you pronounce Giaour hard *g* or soft *g*?" (*Works of Barbauld*, 96) – an uncertainty echoed in Chapter 11 of *Persuasion*, in which the poetry-loving Captain Benwick wondered "how the Giaour was to be pronounced." Barbauld further revealed some peevishness in face of Byron's foreignisms: "I do not like . . . [*The Bride of Abydos*] so well as his last; and I cannot see any advantage in calling a nightingale *bulbul*, or a rose *gul*, except to disconcert plain English readers" (*Works of Barbauld*, 130). In *Don Juan*, Byron feigned a preemptive apology for his indulgence in linguistic exotica:

(Excuse a foreign slipslop now and then,
If but to show I've travell'd; and what's travel,
Unless it teaches one to quote and cavil?) (XIII.374-6)

More lyrically, he reflected in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, "I've taught me other tongues . . . [and sought out] a home by a remoter sea" (IV.sts.8-9). Though affirming, in the same poem, that "I twine / My hopes of being remembered in my line / With my land's language" (IV.76-8), in *Don Juan* Byron seems to allow that "a foreign slipslop now and then" is as much the real language of men as anything Wordsworth intended by that formulation. Indeed, one could hardly imagine finding in a poem by Wordsworth a *soi-disant* this or that (XIII.691, XIV.668), to say nothing of an *éprouveuse*. But it is as much through the use of foreignisms as through other class-signifying linguistic indicators that the narrator of *Don Juan* – like the annotator of *English Bards*, *Childe Harold*, and *The Giaour* – identifies himself not as a Wordsworthian man speaking to men but as an English gentleman speaking to other English gentlemen – and gentlewomen. Whether part of the narrator's conversational style, the poet's virtuosic versification, or the poem's descriptive content, the foreign terms in *Don Juan* are an unmistakable part of its fabric, a linguistic reflection of both the poet's cosmopolitanism (his changing lakes for ocean) and the poem's human comedy.

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