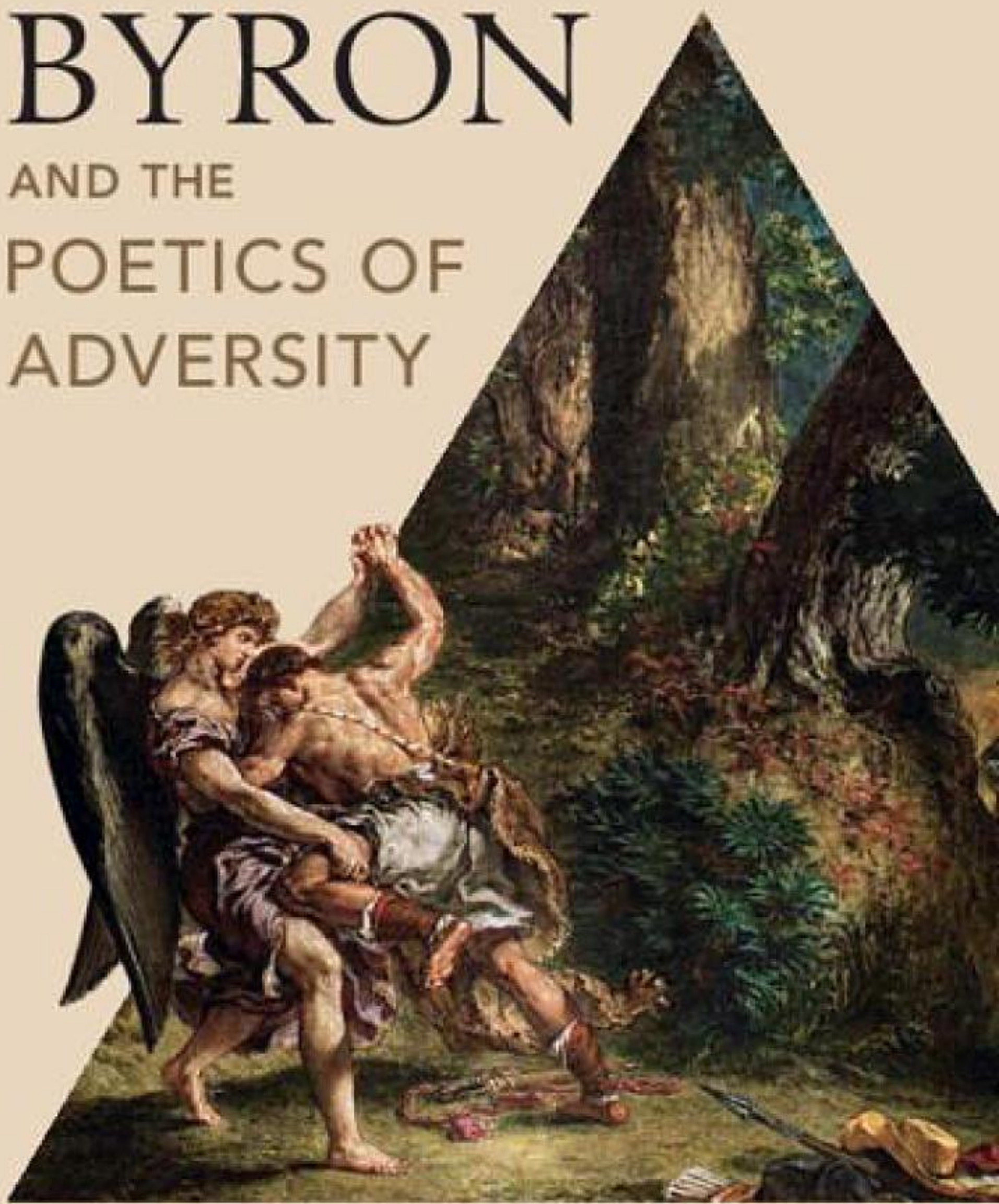


'A new book by Jerome McGann is an event. A new book by him about Byron is a special kind of event.' – James Chandler

BYRON

AND THE POETICS OF ADVERSITY



JEROME MCGANN

‘A new book by Jerome McGann is an event, though there have been many such events over his long career. But a new book by him about Byron is a special kind of event. No other scholar has done as much for Byron as McGann has, and few living scholars as much for any single author as he has done for Byron. This book marks a kind of return to origins since, like McGann’s first book, *Fiery Dust*, this one focuses on Byron’s work before *Don Juan*. The new emphasis, however, falls on Byron’s relationship to language and poetic craft and on how it differs from that of his major contemporaries. Playful, allusive, and itself ‘adverse,’ McGann’s style in this book, like Byron’s own, means to set our language free.’

James K. Chandler, William K. Ogden Distinguished Service
Professor, University of Chicago

‘This is a book written with much of Byron’s own intelligence, wit, and passion. It pays particular and welcome attention to the ‘dark’ poems which Professor McGann sees as ‘in some ways more impressive than the ottava rima masterpieces’. It moves between very wide perspectives and sustained, often dazzling, close reading helped by his unrivalled knowledge of the textual history.’

Bernard Beatty, Senior Fellow in English, Liverpool University and
Editor of *The Byron Journal* 1987–2004

‘Take physic, cant. The words are nowhere, the command everywhere in Byron and McGann. The physic is philology: a word-loving that embraces the cunning, ambivalence, and enthrallments of language along with its beauties and benevolences. If words are actions (and who today could doubt that), McGann’s ‘inner standing point’ (D. G. Rossetti) on Byron is as a sword that divides, setting fiction against factitiousness, expressive contradiction against the suavities of doublespeak. McGann’s ‘little book,’ as he calls it, is a work of pity and rage; its perfectly measured disorders a min(e)d-field to blast the pieties of the present. Go litel book...’

Marjorie Levinson, F. L. Huetwell Professor,
University of Michigan

‘Combative, liberatory, and dazzling, Byron’s poetics receive the close attention they deserve in McGann’s beautiful book. *Byron and the Poetics of Adversity* illuminates the full sweep of Byron’s poetic experimentation and ruthless unveiling of his culture’s cherished

illusions in poems such as *Manfred*, *The Giaour*, *Lara*, and *Cain*, difficult poems often undervalued in favor of the poetic pyrotechnics of the epic *Don Juan*. McGann's scholarly and playful close readings of the full range of Byron's 'perversifications' and their 'disastered heroes' reveal new dimensions of what made these poems both scandalous and brilliant, and how they engaged with leading writers of the age like Blake and Goethe.'

Adriana Craciun, Emma MacLachlan Metcalf Chair of Humanities,
Boston University

Jerome McGann shows that Byron's "treasonous" attitude to poetry, his "perversification," his unfit and shifty tones, his Blakean refusal of invariable aesthetic systems, his "spoiler's art" is as pertinent now as it was 200 years ago. By repeatedly exposing the shibboleths of lyric and Romantic verse culture, McGann's sweeping advocacy of Byron's inventive, performative, rhetorical, and adverse genius is a defense of poetry for our time as well.

Charles Bernstein, Donald T. Regan Professor, Emeritus, of English
and Comparative Literature, University of Pennsylvania

'Byron and the Poetics of Adversity is a genuinely revolutionary book in which Professor McGann returns to the textual entanglements of Byron's prosody and looks afresh at the two phases of Byron's poetic career in 1808–16 and 1817–24. Seven brilliant, compelling essays trace the poetic offensives that connect *The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, *Lara*, *The Siege of Corinth*, shorter lyrics and *Manfred* with the offensive poetics of *Don Juan*. Identifying practical criticism as the vital, oppositional act which Byron's poetry commits on its readers and demands from them, this bold and provocative study goes back to where all the ladders start – in close readings of some of the most perverse lines in Romantic period poetry.'

Jane Stabler, Professor of Romantic Literature,
University of St Andrews

Byron and the Poetics of Adversity

A long line of traditional, often conservative, criticism and cultural commentary deplored Byron as a slipshod poet. This pithy yet aptly poetic book, written by one of the world's foremost Romantic scholars, argues that assessment is badly mistaken. Byron's great subject is what he called "Cant," the habit of abusing the world through misusing language. Setting up his poetry as a laboratory to investigate failures of writing, reading, and thinking, Byron delivered sharp critical judgment on the costs exacted by a careless approach to his mother tongue. Perspicuous readings of Byron alongside some of his Romantic contemporaries – Burns, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley – reveal Byron's startling reconfiguration of poetry as a "broken mirror" and shattered lamp. The paradoxical result was to argue that his age's contradictions, and his own, offered both ethical opportunities and a promise of poetic – broadly cultural – emancipation. This book represents a major contribution to ideas about Romanticism.

Jerome McGann is Professor Emeritus in the Department of English at the University of Virginia. He is the editor of Byron's *Complete Poetical Works* (seven volumes, 1980–1993) and is one of the leading authorities on Romanticism and its aftermath. This book is a major addition to his influential argument for a "Literature of Knowledge," which he first outlined in his 1989 Clark Lectures (Trinity College, Cambridge) and Carpenter Lectures (University of Chicago).

Byron and the Poetics of Adversity

JEROME MCGANN

University of Virginia



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009232951

DOI: 10.1017/9781009232968

© Jerome McGann 2023

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2023

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ Books Limited, Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-009-23295-1 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of
URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication
and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain,
accurate or appropriate.

For Bernard Beatty, Geoffrey and Dianora Bond, and Drummond
Bone and

implora eterna quiete

Marilyn Butler, Peter Cochran, Elma Dangerfield, Michael Foot,
Doris Langley Moore, Jock Murray, Andrew Nicholson, William St
Clair

The ethical responsibility to object.

Barry Lopez, *Horizon*

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page x</i>
INTRODUCTION	I
1 DON JUAN AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE	9
2 BYRON AGONISTES, 1809-1816	38
Philology, Pope, Poetics	38
Byron's Perversifications	64
3 MANFRED: ONE WORD FOR MERCY	82
4 BYRON AND THE "WRONG REVOLUTIONARY POETICAL SYSTEM"	103
5 BYRON, BLAKE, AND THE ADVERSITY OF POETICS	119
6 THE STUBBORN FOE: BAD VERSE AND THE POETRY OF ACTION	154
<i>Notes</i>	183
<i>Index</i>	207