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The New Realism of the *Roman*:

Friedrich Schlegel's Theory of the Novel and Byron's *Don Juan*

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The complex question of genre in Byron's *Don Juan* is often discussed in terms of the epic, but critics are increasingly turning to the novel to address the puzzling questions that remain about the generic status of Byron's last work.¹ In *The English Novel: A Panorama*, Lionel Stevenson contends that Byron's *Don Juan* belongs "essentially in the central tradition of the English novel, with its satirical realism, its picaresque series of adventures, and its complex panorama of contemporary society. Even the digressive comments are in the manner of Fielding."² Stevenson exclaims, "One cannot help but thinking that if Byron had lived longer he might have followed Scott in shifting from verse to prose, and could have become the great realistic novelist of the early Victorian era."³ I would like to suggest, however, that the novelistic elements identified by Stevenson do not anticipate the realist novel but are more closely aligned with Friedrich Schlegel's concept of the novel, an alternative tradition that can elucidate what Byron was trying to achieve both poetically and philosophically in *Don Juan*.

Theorists of the novel have had to contend with *Don Juan*'s uneasy generic categorization. Both Georg Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin separate the novel from poetry, and yet they admit that this does not apply as readily to *Don Juan*.⁴ Dino Franco Felluga notes that "Byron actively engages with each of the terms of the debate in a way that

resists the dominant critical maneuvers of the last two centuries, particularly the division of the critical field between lyric and narrative.”⁵ In doing so, *Don Juan* questions “the emergent theorization of the novel’s verisimilitude and the eventual tendency in the Victorian period to establish realism as the highest cultural form for the nineteenth-century aesthetic.”⁶ Felluga’s observations about *Don Juan*, however, are based on the assumption that Byron’s realism—his “contemporaneity and engagement with the historical specificity of the present”—is held in opposition to the “generic parameters of epic romance” that are also present in *Don Juan*,⁷ an assumption that reinforces the very same distinction between poetry and the novel that Felluga cautions against. I open my discussion by pointing out that in Schlegel’s concept of realism there is no such distinction between poetry and the novel. In fact, he contends that the realism of the modern novel is derived from the historical tradition of the romance. While Schlegel’s concept of irony has been used as a conceptual framework for interpreting *Don Juan*, which is a point that I return to later in this essay, his theory of the novel is curiously missing in critical conversations that address the question of genre in *Don Juan*. Indeed, the novel was central to Schlegel’s poetic theory.

In her study of Byron and Madame de Staël, Joanne Wilkes acknowledges the difficulty of identifying evidence for any direct influence between writers from different nations, but she suggests that a comparative study of the shared culture of nineteenth-century Europe can offer insight into the ways in which writers responded to the same currents of ideas.⁸ Felicia Bonaparte has recently demonstrated the enormous impact of German Romanticism, and especially the Schlegel brothers, on British concepts of history and art, documenting the sheer number of German Romantic works that were

translated into English and republished throughout the nineteenth century.⁹ Besides occupying a broader literary landscape that was shaped by German Romantic poetic theory, Byron we know read the work of the Schlegel brothers. Byron met de Staël, August Wilhelm Schlegel's partner, in 1815. After he left England following the breakdown of his marriage, he spent time at her home in Coppet. In 1816, de Staël gifted Byron her study *On Germany (De l'Allemagne)*, published in 1810, in which she analyzes literature through the lens of German Romantic historical and poetic theory, as well as the *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature (Über dramatische Kunst und Literatur)*, lectures given from 1809 to 1811 by Friedrich's brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel. Both of these works were enormously popular in England and were read by the British Romantics.¹⁰ From Byron's comments in his journal, we know that he was reading Schlegel's 1815 *Lectures on the History of Literature, Ancient and Modern* in 1821. Although Schlegel's "Brief über den Roman" (Letter on the novel), published in 1800, was not translated into English at this time, many of Schlegel's earlier ideas about the novel are applied to literary traditions in the translated lectures on history and literature that were read by Byron.

In order to consider the resemblance between Schlegel's concept of the novel and Byron's *Don Juan*, we must first see Schlegel's view of the novel within the context of his historical poetic theory. In his *Dialogue on Poetry*, Schlegel declares that the novel (*Roman*) is a "romantic book" ("Ein Roman ist ein romantisches Buch").¹¹ In calling the novel a romantic book, he proposes that the *Roman* and *Romantik* are cognates of the romantic (*romantisch*), and thus the novel for Schlegel is not a separate genre but rather the expression of the romantic view. Schlegel exclaims, therefore, "It must be clear to

you why . . . I postulate that all poetry should be Romantic and why I detest the novel as a separate genre” (101). It is important to note that when Schlegel talks about the romantic age, the age of the novel, he is not referring to the literary movement of Romanticism, but rather to his conception of the historical and epistemological paradigm shift from paganism to Christianity. For Schlegel, it is the development of the novel that marks the separation between the classical and the romantic ages, leading him to declare that “Just as our literature began with the novel, so the Greek began with the epic and dissolved in it” (101).

The Schlegel brothers contend in their respective lectures that a momentous epistemological shift happens when the Germanic race of northern conquerors converted to Christianity, a transformation that was made manifest in the new code of chivalry, the embodiment of an inward ideal, and that was first embodied in art in the love poetry of the troubadours. In his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, August Wilhelm Schlegel chooses the term “romantic,” derived from the romance, to define this new inward paradigm, which he believes to be an apt description because it is the name given to the languages that were formed from the mixture of Latin and old Teutonic dialects, just as Europe was shaped by the mixture of the character of northern nations with those of antiquity. It was through this paradigm shift from paganism to Christianity, and the birth of the romantic or medieval age, that the Romantics conceptualized modernity, viewing the modern age, which of course referred to their own epoch, as a later stage in the development of the romantic worldview, and this is why they took the name romantic for their own movement. They both believed that an understanding of modernity and the future of art required a clear conception of this much earlier historical period.

The distinction between the classical and the romantic was a central tenet of the Schlegels' literary theory. Both the Schlegel brothers argue that in the classical world the fusion of soul and sense, of self and world, is reflected in the unity of form and content in their art, whereas the Christian longing for a transcendental home that is no longer located in the temporal realm results in a new internal intensity of soul that will always exceed its embodiment in the world and in art. For A. W Schlegel, the classical world is characterized by joy and the romantic by desire, not sexual desire but the desire to embody the infinite that is perceived by the individual soul,¹² and this is why in his "Letter on the Novel" F. Schlegel defines romantic poetry as "sentimental," which he notes is not a "sensual but a spiritual feeling" (99). He exclaims that romantic poetry is suffused with a spiritual love, but "only the imagination can grasp the mystery of this love and present it as a mystery; and this mysterious quality is the source of the fantastic in the form of all poetic representation" (100). Schlegel concedes, "The imagination strives with all its might to express itself, but the divine can communicate and express itself only indirectly in the sphere of nature. Therefore, of that which originally was imagination there remains in the world of appearances only what we call wit" (100).¹³

In his *Course of Lectures*, A. W Schlegel explains that the endeavor of romantic poetry, therefore, is to "reconcile these two worlds between which we find ourselves divided, and to blend them indissolubly together," and thus, "The impressions of the senses are to be hallowed, as it were, by a mysterious connexion with higher feelings; and the soul, on the other hand, embodies its forbodings, or indescribable intuitions of infinity, in types and symbols borrowed from the visible world."¹⁴ He explains that this is why "the romantic delights in indissoluble mixtures; all contrarieties: nature and art,

poetry and prose, seriousness and mirth, recollection and anticipation, spirituality and sensuality, terrestrial and celestial, life and death, are by it blended in an intimate combination.”¹⁵ Although there can never be a perfect assimilation, for the Schlegel brothers the real always implies the ideal just as the ideal always implies the real. It is this space between the ideal and the real that explains F. Schlegel’s concept of irony. Following Paul de Man, Schlegel’s irony has been seen by many critics today as a precursor to the postmodern concept of irony, according to which the universe is unknowable and therefore bereft of any sense of meaning or knowledge that is not fragmented; however, Schlegel’s concept of irony is shaped by his historical concept of romantic literature. I would argue that a consideration of Schlegel’s Christian understanding of the history of the *Roman* does not support a postmodern reading of his concept of irony. Schlegel makes it clear that irony—the gap between the ideal and the real—is the space in which the romantic poet attempts to shape the real in the image of the ideal, even though he knows that he or she can never fully realize in the world the divine visions of the poetic imagination.¹⁶

In order to reconcile these two centers of meaning, the transcendent and the material, Schlegel suggests in *Literary Aphorisms* that modern poetry not only must “reunite all separate genres of poetry and to put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetorics,” but should also “mingle and now amalgamate poetry and prose, genius and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature, render poetry living and social, and life and society poetic, poeticize wit, fill and saturate the forms of art with cultural material of every kind, and inspire them with the vibrations of good humor” (140). This can seem like a confusing statement, but here Schlegel uses his own idiosyncratic

symbolic language to convey the relationship between the ideal and the real. Poetry speaks for the realm of Platonic ideas whereas prose speaks for the real world. To make “poetry living and social” is to embody the ideal in the real, whereas to make “life and society poetic” is to raise the real to the ideal. For Schlegel, “genius” and “the poetry of nature” refers to the original imaginative perception of the transcendent, but “criticism” and “the poetry of art” refers to the self-consciousness that accompanies the imperfect expression of imagination in the creation of a work of art. It is this self-referential aspect that suffuses romantic poetry with “the vibrations of good humor” at the same time that it is able to “poeticize wit.”

It is important to note, however, that what the Schlegel brothers mean by the contradictory impulses of romantic poetry differs from Bakhtin’s conception of the modern novelization of the epic, a theory of the novel that has been popularly applied to *Don Juan* and seen to resonate with Friedrich Schlegel’s poetic theory.¹⁷ While Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic and polyphonic novel negates the possibility of absolutes, these opposites are for the Schlegel brothers symbolic of the eternal tension between the ideal and the real that is expressed in romantic art. Significantly for Schlegel’s theory of the novel, although imaginative perceptions of the ideal can never be fully realized in the material, this partial failure does not preclude the existence of spiritual ideas, because the ever-present tension between the ideal and the real in the novel serves to posit a relationship between both of these realms.

David Cunningham notes how Schlegel’s theory of the novel as “a genre without genre” is curiously distinct from actual novels, rendering it is a general theory of art whose requirements can never be adequately fulfilled. Thus taking a postmodern view, he

suggests it “cannot but be continually haunted by the possibility that it will collapse into a ‘mere contingency and absolute indifference’ in artistic terms, since it lacks any given or a priori generic or disciplinary criteria of judgement from which some stable ‘collective’ poetic meaning can be derived.”¹⁸ Although Schlegel views his concept of the novel as distinct from the eighteenth-century novel, Cunningham does not account for the fact that Schlegel’s concept of the novel is formulated within his historical theory of literature. Schlegel fails to find examples of the *Roman* in the eighteenth-century realistic novel because he contends that it focuses on the real world without connecting it to the spiritual. Instead, Schlegel traces the origins of the novel back to medieval literature: “This is where I look for and find the Romantic—in the older moderns, in Shakespeare and Cervantes, in Italian poetry, in the age of knights, love, and fairytales in which the thing itself and the word for it originated” (101). The “older moderns” for Schlegel are Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, as well as Ariosto and Camoens, culminating in what he sees as the later romantic poetry of Cervantes and Shakespeare.

In his *Lectures on the History of Literature, Ancient and Modern*, Schlegel shows that Dante’s *Divine Comedy* offers a model for the modern novel. For Schlegel, the importance of Dante lies in his creation of a new mythology out of the materials of his own age. *The Divine Comedy* is a “work, comprehending within itself the whole science and knowledge of the time, the whole life of the later middle age, the whole personages and events in which the poet personally had interest; and not only this, but also a complete description of heaven, hell, and purgatory.”¹⁹ Thus, as he explains in the “Epochs of Literature” (“Epochen der Dichtkunst”) section of the *Dialogue on Poetry*, for Dante “everything was true to fact and truthful in the realm of the visible, and full of

secret meaning and relation to the invisible” (92). Crucially, when Camilla asks Ludovico to explain what he means when he calls for a “new realism” in poetry, Ludovico observes, “He who has in mind something like it, could do it and would want to do it only in the manner of Dante” (91). Andrea agrees that he has “set a worthy prototype” because Dante “through his own gigantic power, invented and formed a kind of mythology as was possible at that time” (92). For Schlegel, the new mythology of modern poetry should, like its romantic predecessors, be derived from the real world. Indeed, this is the defining feature of the *Roman*, starting with Dante’s *Divina commedia*. This is why Schlegel rejects the realism of eighteenth-century novels, which he sees as a product of empiricism, and presents his “older moderns” as the prototypes of a “new realism” or an “ideal realism” through which the poet reveals a connection between the finite and the infinite.

In his “Talk on Mythology” (“Rede über die Mythologie”), Schlegel declares emphatically that modern poetry needs a new mythology to conceive of the relationship between the ideal and the real. Schlegel suggests, therefore, that the modern poet should take inspiration from the works of Cervantes and Shakespeare, whose romantic poetry is an “artfully ordered confusion, this charming symmetry of contradictions, this wonderfully perennial alternation of enthusiasm and irony which lives in even the smallest part of the whole,” which “seem to me an indirect mythology themselves” (101). Here, Schlegel returns to the same notion of opposites, such as “enthusiasm”—or divine inspiration—and “irony”—or its imperfect realization in the material world and in art—to symbolize again the productive tension between the ideal and the real that he sees as inherent in all of romantic literature. Schlegel’s term “indirect mythology” here is key

since he reveals his belief that the irony of Cervantes and Shakespeare is yet another form of the “new realism” that he sees in Dante, which posits a connection between the spiritual and the material.

For Schlegel the modern novel should return to and develop the earlier tradition of romantic poetry. Cervantes is important for Schlegel’s theory of the novel, just as he is for Byron’s conception of *Don Juan*, because his use of narrative interruptions, deriving originally from the parabasis of Greek comedy, is associated by Schlegel with the irony inherent in a work of art that sees itself as an imitation of reality at the same time that it acknowledges itself to be a self-conscious literary creation. This self-consciousness, as Bonaparte points out, is not the same as the postmodern notion that art cannot point to anything but itself, but rather refers to the artist’s recognition that although the intuitions of the imagination can never be fully expressed, art must continually strive to shape the real in the image of the ideal. For Schlegel, the modern novel should combine the “arabesques” of earlier romantic poets, the pluralities and contradictions of the real world that are the indirect expression of the transcendent, with the personal “confessions” of the author, “the quintessence of his originality” (103). Ernst Behler explains how for Schlegel this ironic “awareness of the necessary incompleteness of poetic achievements, moreover, leads to literary criticism.”²⁰ Therefore, in Schlegel’s concept of the novel, the self-consciousness of the author would shape his work at the very same time that he devises his own theory of the novel through a critical study of other forms of poetry, and as Behler notes, “this awareness produces a search for the best conditions under which poetry may be regenerated.”²¹ Schlegel argues that poetry needs to be reformed in the modern novel because in his view all poetry is and should be romantic; that is, poetry—if

it is to be romantic at all—should always endeavor to express a relationship between the infinite and the finite.

Looking to the past for the regeneration of poetry is something that also preoccupied Byron before he started to write *Don Juan*. He vehemently denounces the state of modern poetry, exclaiming in a letter to John Murray, “All of us—Scott—Southey—Wordsworth—Moore—Campbell—and I—are all wrong—one as much as another—that we are upon a wrong revolutionary poetical system—or systems—not worth a damn in itself.”²² Wilkes notes how Byron was particularly hostile to the view that his poetry embodied the spiritual and emotional fervor that characterized Schlegel's sense of romantic literature. This is the view of Byron's poetry that de Staël perpetuated in *The French Revolution*, yet she sees it in a far more positive light than Schlegel in his *Lectures on the History of Literature*. Wilkes suggests that the “poetical system” that Byron wished to reject was de Staël's characterization of his poetry as forming a part of the poetic revolution in Britain that valorized imagination.²³

Although de Staël does not include Wordsworth and Coleridge, Byron saw the culmination of this kind of poetry in idealism, a tradition that he particularly criticizes in *Don Juan*. Wilkes points to the narrator's concession, “Now my sere fancy ‘falls into the yellow / Leaf,’ and imagination droops her pinion, / And the sad truth which hovers o'er my desk / Turns what was once romantic to burlesque,”²⁴ as an example of how the narrator's poetic power has faded, a diminution that she sees as serving to express Byron's rejection of imagination and any identification with the romantic (in Schlegel's sense) and Romantic poetry in Britain.

I would argue that Byron does not completely refute imagination but rather frames it, like Schlegel, within a historical framework of romantic poetry. It is impossible to miss the similarity of Byron's language to Schlegel's declaration that the "divine breath of irony" is "a truly transcendental buffoonery. Internally: the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations, even above its own art, virtue, or genius; externally, in its execution: the mimic style of an averagely gifted Italian *buffo*" (148). This is the definition of the romantic condition for Schlegel: the imagination perceives the infinite, but its manifestation into the real renders it into burlesque, which explains the humorous tone of romantic poetry. Stephen E. Jones also observes how Byron foregrounds Schlegel's Romantic irony in *Don Juan* by engaging with the idea of pantomime as an expression of the ironic outlook that is at the core of romantic art, focusing in particular on the buffo that Don Juan meets on the slave ship. With the buffo in chains, Jones argues that Byron's sense of romantic irony privileges the dialectical aspect of Schlegel's theory and not the idealism that is its foundation, and that Byron implies that his irony is merely a comic diversion from the meaninglessness of life—a view that explains the "corrosive skepticism" of *Don Juan*.²⁵ I will return to the question of skepticism shortly, but I suggest here that Byron's view of irony is shaped by his historical concept of romantic poetry, and that he does not entirely reject the romantic position but has a different stance on the future that this tradition should take.

In offering a corrective to the metaphysical poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Byron seeks to realign his poetry with the earlier romantic poets, Schlegel's "earlier moderns," who for Schlegel were the pioneers of the novel. Indeed, Byron's changing literary interests and his passion for Italian poetry reflect Schlegel's historical conception

of romantic poetry. Schlegel's theory of literature was so well known in England that people were familiar with it even if they had not read Schlegel. Byron had a firsthand knowledge of Schlegel's work, and his turn to Italian poetry was part of the renewed interest in Italian poets inspired by Schlegel's theory. In *The Lament of Tasso* and *The Prophecy of Dante*, Byron hints that he himself is part of a genealogy of Italian poets. Jerome McGann notes how at the same time that Byron was denouncing the Romantics and his own contribution to the movement, he began to rediscover Pope's witty mock-heroic style as well as to praise the seriocomic style of Aristo and Pulci, particularly the style of the Italian ottava rima.²⁶ Crucially for Schlegel, these writers still retained many aspects of the earlier romantic poets, and thus he considered them to be part of the very same romantic literary tradition of the *Roman*.²⁷

As Byron identified himself with Schlegel's "older moderns," Schlegel's theory of the *Roman* provides a useful lens through which to interpret the concept of realism in *Don Juan*. Like Schlegel's earlier romantic poets, the realism of *Don Juan* encompasses not only the plethora of details contained within Juan's historical moment but within Byron's milieu as well. As we recall, Schlegel suggested that the modern novel should include "cultural material of every kind" and Byron's cultural material encompasses societal and cultural norms, war and revolution, European politics and colonialism, and so much more. It is this wide-reaching realism, Schlegel observes in his *Lectures on the History of Literature*, that makes romantic art "a mirror of the whole circumambient world, an image of the age," and it is in this realism that the novel is made epic again.²⁸ Schlegel praises the realism of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* as epic in scope: it is "a universal national work, [which] has been equalled by no other writer of this order, and

which, as a picture of life, manners, and spirit of a nation, is almost entitled to be classed with the most admirable productions of the epic muse.”²⁹ Byron makes the same claim for *Don Juan* to Thomas Medwin when he declares, “If you must have an epic, there’s *Don Juan* for you. I call that an epic; it is an epic as much in the spirit of our day as the *Iliad* was in Homer’s.”³⁰ An epic “in the spirit of our day” is an important phrase because Byron indicates that he sees his poem as the epic of the modern age, which for Schlegel is actually the *Roman*.

Schlegel emphasizes that Cervantes, like Dante, is a prototype of the modern novel, but he argues in *Lectures on the History of Literature* that Cervantes’s realism has been sadly misinterpreted. Schlegel contends that a proper reading of Cervantes must acknowledge the juxtaposition and interpenetration of the poetry and satire, of the ideal and the real, and he warns against focusing on Cervantes’s satire at the expense of the poetry—poetry for Schlegel meaning not merely verse but the expression of the transcendent. Schlegel observes that Cervantes’s “mirth and seriousness, wit and poetry, are mingled with success elsewhere unparalleled in this rich picture of life, and that of no one of these elements can the worth and beauty be appreciated unless we observe how it is graced and adorned by the juxtaposition of absolute infusion of the others.”³¹ It is this interpenetration of the ideal and the real that makes his work an “indirect mythology” for Schlegel. It is indirect because it highlights the space between the ideal and the real, but it is mythology because it allows us to apprehend a connection between the spiritual and the material.

Byron recognizes, like Schlegel, the end result of solely acknowledging the satirical or skeptical aspect of this new realism and its ironic stance. To appreciate the

philosophical outlook of romantic poetry requires a perception of the oppositional thrusts of irony—both the ideal and the real. Byron shares Schlegel’s view that to misread irony is to misread romantic poetry, and in *Don Juan* he too emphasizes the importance of recognizing both the satire and the poetry in *Don Quixote*. Indeed, the narrator of *Don Juan* exclaims that it is not Cervantes’s irony that undermined chivalry in Spain, but the misreading of his work:

Of all tales ’tis the saddest—and more sad,
 Because it makes us smile: his hero’s right,
 And still pursues the right; to curb the bad,
 His only object, and ’gainst odds to fight,
 His guerdon: ’Tis his virtue makes him mad!
 But his adventures form a sorry sight;—
 A sorrier still is the great moral taught
 By that real Epic unto all who have thought.

(13.9)

The “sorry sight” of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* is Quixote’s failed heroism, but the even “sorrier sight” for Byron is how this has been read as skepticism, a view that “smiled Spain’s Chivalry away” (13.11)—chivalry for the Schlegels expressing the first embodiment of the romantic spirit and representing the pursuit of the ideal. For Byron, as for Schlegel, Quixote’s failed heroism indicates Cervantes’s larger philosophic stance as a romantic novelist who sees the ironic space between the ideal and the real as a way of revealing a productive relationship between them. Indeed, the narrator exclaims that to

misunderstand Cervantes's irony as skepticism would be as misguided as viewing Socrates, another figure who often plays the fool and chases windmills in his quest for truth, as a failed hero (13.10). Roger Salomon notes that "the mode of the Cervantean mock-heroic is almost invariably tragi-comic," torn between "the normative reality of experience," which is expressed in comedy, or else "responding sympathetically to the spiritual ardency of life lived according to absolute values," which is the perspective of tragedy.³² He also observes, "In Byron's poem as in all Cervantean mock-heroic, illusions and ironic awareness co-exist without the kind of resolution that disillusionment (loss of illusions) would seem to imply."³³ It is this mixture of tragedy and comedy, as evinced by Cervantes and Shakespeare, that for Schlegel is the culmination of romantic poetry and that leads to the modern novel. Byron hints that critics are misreading his modern epic in the way that Schlegel believed Cervantes's romantic irony was mistaken for skepticism instead of hinting at a larger philosophic point of view.

Since Schlegel and Byron held a similar view of Cervantes, Schlegel's theory of the novel provides a vital clue to Byron's intended achievement with *Don Juan*, which was nothing less than a new mythology for the modern age. Indeed, Byron locates this quest for a new mythology within the ironic tradition of romantic poetry—which for Schlegel lays the foundation for the development of the modern novel. At the start of *Don Juan*, Byron had already warned his readers, just like Schlegel did for Cervantes, not to misread his own poem. Byron makes this connection when, in response to criticism of the first two cantos, the narrator emphasizes that *Don Juan* is a continuation of this earlier romantic tradition:

Some have accused me of a strange design

Against the creed and morals of the land,
 And trace it in this poem every line:
 I don't pretend to understand
 My own meaning when I would be *very* fine,
 But the fact is that I have nothing plann'd,
 Unless it were to be a moment merry,
 A novel word in my vocabulary.

To the kind reader of our sober clime
 This way of writing will appear exotic;
 Pulci was sire of the half-serious rhyme,
 Who sang when chivalry was more Quixotic,
 And revell'd in the fancies of the time,
 True knights, chaste dames, huge giants, kings despotic;
 But all these, save the last, being obsolete,
 I chose a modern subject as more meet.

(4.5–6)

Byron suggests that his audience has crucially misread *Don Juan*. “How I have treated it, I do not know; / Perhaps no better than they have treated me / Who have imputed such designs as show / Not what they saw, but what they wish'd to see” (4.7). He locates his poem within the same historical context as Schlegel's earlier moderns and the romance to

emphasize that his poem should be understood as forming a later development of this tradition.

After defining the novel as a development of romantic poetry, Schlegel exclaims that the modern iteration of this earlier romantic tradition “would have to be itself a novel which would reflect imaginatively every eternal tone of the imagination and would again confound the chaos of the world of knights” (102). Therefore, “The things of the past would live in new forms; Dante’s sacred shadow would arise from the lower world, Laura would hover heavenly before us, Shakespeare would converse intimately with Cervantes, and there Sancho would jest with Don Quixote again (102). He explains, then, how these “arabesques which, together with confessions . . . are the only romantic products of nature in our age” (102–3).

Similarly, Byron’s famous self-conscious, personal digressions of his narrator are coupled in *Don Juan* with the narrator’s own invocation of Schlegel’s “older moderns.” The narrator often highlights the space between his imaginative perceptions and his inability to sustain these philosophic heights, and this corresponds with the shaping of his novel through an engagement with other poetic forms and genres. The novel for Schlegel, as a modern expression of romantic poetry, would need to reunify all genres as well as connect poetry with philosophy and rhetoric, and Byron attempts this in *Don Juan*. Indeed, Frederick Beaty has analyzed the detailed knowledge of the rhetorical theories of satire from Horace and Juvenal that Byron demonstrates in *Don Juan*, and both McGann and Mellor observe the oppositional pull of elegy and the epic with satire throughout the poem.³⁴ Although many critics have noted that Byron infuses the epic with satire, this has not been viewed in the larger context of Schlegel’s concept of the novel. Significantly,

embedding these genres, among many others, allows Byron to self-consciously invoke classical and romantic genres in order to reveal his Schlegelian notion that the modern stage of romantic poetry must be both a theory and a history of its form.

These genres, which were once organic expressions of the conceptual worlds that they evolved from, are revealed in *Don Juan* to be merely empty shells when they are employed by the modern poet. Schlegel observes in his theory of literature and history how the classical world fixes the spiritual in the material world and how this fusion is expressed in art through ideal types and heroic actions. In contrast, in the romantic paradigm the ideal is displaced from the material and is now intuited through the inward contemplation of the imagination. Romantic art still strives to embody the ideal, but now it can only be intimated through the oppositional poles of romantic irony, which is expressed in romantic poetry through a greater sense of realism.

The only instance in Byron's verse novel of the perfect fusion of the ideal in the real is seen in the pastoral of Juan and Haidee, and yet the narrator exclaims that the pastoral can no longer coexist with the realism of romantic poetry: "They were not made in the real world to fill / A busy character in the dull scene" (4.15). Herbert Tucker observes that if the poet "reneges on his promise of 'new mythological machinery, / And very handsome supernatural scenery,' these shortfalls turn out to be part of the cost of doing business under the new management of a spanking new realism."³⁵ This realism for Schlegel is a distinctive characteristic of romantic poetry. In his "Talk on Mythology," Schlegel observes, "Ancient poetry adheres throughout to mythology and avoids the specifically historical themes," whereas romantic poetry "is based entirely on a historical foundation, far more than we know and believe" (100). Thus, "Any play you might see,

any story you read—if it has a witty plot—you can almost be sure has a true story at its source, even if variously reshaped. Boccaccio is almost entirely true history, just as all the other sources are from which all Romantic ideas originate” (100). Schlegel uses the term historical in its original meaning, not to say that the plots of romantic poetry are derived from actual events but that they are grounded in the real world.

Byron also emphasizes the scrupulous reality of his poem, and his narrator assures his reader that while the poem is epic in scope, “There’s only one slight difference between / Me and my epic brethren from before,” with “Their labyrinth of fables to thread through,” because his story is “actually true” (1.202). Thus, although Juan is based on a legendary character, like the realism of romantic poetry, Byron’s story is “historical” because it is grounded in empirical reality. When the narrator exclaims that “Don Juan, who was real or ideal,— / For both are much the same” (10.20), he means that he is the ideal hero manifested into the real, and that although Don Juan is imperfect, it is precisely this realization that points back to an ideal type.

According to Schlegel, in romantic poetry the transcendent perceptions of the imagination cannot be fully made manifest in the real, and this results in its witty tone. The real can never live up to the ideal realm, which is why Byron’s narrator also refers to his poem as an “epic satire” (14. 99). But, crucially, the transcendent can be hinted at through the very ironic space between the ideal and the real. Byron’s philosophic stance is expressed very humorously through the many instances in *Don Juan* of the lowering of the ideal into the real, which reveals the space of philosophic irony. One such example can be seen in his defense of philandering:

'Tis the perception of the beautiful,
 A fine extension of the faculties,
 Platonic, universal, wonderful,
 Drawn from the stars and filter'd through the skies,
 Without which life would be extremely dull;
 In short, it is the use of our own eyes,
 With one or two small senses added, just
 To hint that flesh is form'd of fiery dust.

(2. 212)

Byron's narrator argues that the sexual is the embodiment of Platonic ideas in the real and that it is only the discrepancy between the Platonic ideas and their multiple manifestations into the material that allows us to see how everything in the real ultimately partakes of the ideal—taking the form of a “hint” that we are actually “formed of fiery dust.” This is the same philosophic point that Shelley makes in “Epipsychidion,” but of course it is expressed with far more irreverence in *Don Juan*. Byron also lowers the ideal by mocking the disjunction between love and marriage, where love “Is sharpened from its high celestial flavor / Down to a very homely household savour” (3.5). Again, this is a philosophical point for Byron about the purpose of realism in romantic poetry. Indeed, when Byron's narrator discusses the popularity of mistresses over wives, he exclaims, “Some persons say that Dante meant theology / By Beatrice, and not a mistress,” but “I think that Dante's more abstruse ecstasies / Meant to personify the mathematics” (3.11). While for most people Dante's erotic passion for the real Beatrice is symbolic of ideas, it is the narrator's conviction that it is actually Dante's love for the infinite—where

theology and mathematics are seen as the representation of abstract truth—that is bodied forth and realized in Beatrice. Thus, while the sexual is a lower manifestation of love, for Byron it still hearkens back to the ideal source. This same idea of imperfect realization or irony is iterated when the narrator ponders the relationship between truth and lies: “And, after all, what is a lie? ’Tis but / The truth in masquerade; and I defy / Historians, heroes, lawyers, priests to put / A fact without some leaven of a lie” (11.37). A lie is “The truth in masquerade” because it is one of the many adulterated embodiments of truth in real life, but that is not to say that these elaborations are not derived from an original idea or principle—the unchanging “true truth” (11.37).

James Chandler contends that the “materialist” bent of Byron’s jokes in *Don Juan* are on the whole “anti-philosophical” in nature, and yet I would argue that these jokes are in fact the expression of Byron’s larger romantic philosophic position.³⁶ It is tempting to focus only on the satiric deflation in *Don Juan*, but it is in fact only a part of his broader conception of romantic poetry in which realism—or the embodiment of the ideal—and the irony that results from imperfect realization, is a means to conceptualizing a deeper and more profound relationship between the material and the transcendent, which is the very same distinction that both Schlegel and Byron make about Cervantes. Indeed, Byron’s narrator declares that his unwavering realism is based on the foundation of the ideal:

This narrative is not meant for narration,
 But a mere airy and fantastic basis,
 To build up common things with commonplaces.

You know, or don't know, that great Bacon saith,
 "Fling up a straw, 'twill show the way the wind blows;"
 And such a straw, borne on by human breath,
 Is Poesy, according as the mind glows;
 A paper kite, which flies 'twixt life and death,
 A shadow which the onward soul behind throws:
 And mine's a bubble not blown up for praise,
 But just to play with, as an infant plays.

(14.7–8)

After a typical digression in the story, the narrator explains that he starts from the ideal—"the airy and fantastic basis"—and tries to fit this to the real in order to construct his narrative—"To build up things with commonplaces." It is the poet who can see the obfuscated relationship between the spiritual and the mundane, and whose mind is therefore able to fly between the ideal and the real. The narrator states that it is poetry that inhabits the space between the ideal and the real, but it is the real that provides a clue to where the soul comes from—the transcendent realm from which all things in the world are embodied. The narrator exclaims that this kind of poetry is written not for fame, but like a child who plays, it seeks to learn the properties of the world.

Schlegel redefines realism when he argues that the "older moderns" created a new mythology out of their own cultural materials—a realism that enabled them to convey a relationship between the infinite and the finite. For Schlegel, romantic poetry holds in balance the oppositional thrusts of wit and imagination, and realism and poetry, as well as

skepticism and belief. Byron also delights in the ironies that exist between the ideal and the real, and decries the misreading of *Don Juan* as an immoral poem just as Schlegel's own novel *Lucinde* (1799) was denounced as immoral and scandalous. Byron's narrator emphasizes over and over again that there is a right way to read his poem, and Byron's discussion of Cervantes emphasizes that Cervantes's realism and its attendant irony was a kind of mythology because it in fact conceived of a relationship between the ideal and the real. While undoubtedly there is much that is skeptical in Byron, viewing *Don Juan* through the lens of Schlegel's theory of the novel points to the possibility of another perspective on the modern condition in *Don Juan*, one that sees irony and a degeneration of the ideal in the real as pointing to an ideal prototype, and one in which to idealize or poeticize is to keep in mind the edges of the ideal when viewing the real. This, I believe, is why Shelley remarked after reading canto 5 that "every word" of *Don Juan* "is pregnant with immortality" and was more "transcendentally fine" than Byron's plays.³⁷

Correcting what he saw as the dead end of idealism in Coleridge and Wordsworth, Byron emphasizes that *Don Juan* is a continuation of the romantic poetry of Schlegel's "older moderns," particularly Cervantes, whose romantic poetry for Schlegel lay the foundations for the modern novel. Therefore, I would argue that Byron—whether he realized it or not—was writing a novel in Schlegel's sense of the term, and that in *Don Juan*, Byron perfected the modern novel as Schlegel conceived of it. Indeed, since Byron established a continuity between himself and Schlegel's "older moderns," we can infer that his new realism does not belong to the eighteenth-century realist novel but rather to the historical tradition of Schlegel's *Roman*.

¹ See Nicholas Halmi, “The Very Model of an Epic Poem,” *European Romantic Review* 21, no. 5 (2010): 589–600; Arthur David Kahn, “Byron’s Single Difference with Homer and Virgil: The Redefinition of the Epic in *Don Juan*,” *Arcadia* 5, no. 2 (1970): 143–62; Donald H. Reiman, “*Don Juan* in Epic Context,” *Studies in Romanticism* 16, no. 4 (Fall 1977): 587–94; John Lauber, “*Don Juan* as Anti-epic,” *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 8, no. 4 (Autumn 1968): 607–19; and Brian Wilkie, *The Romantic Poets and the Epic Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), 188–226.

² Lionel Stevenson, *A Panorama of the English Novel* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 220.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 33; and M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 59.

⁵ Dino Franco Felluga, “Truth is Stranger than Fiction: *Don Juan* and the Truth Claims of Genre,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (March 2016): 108. Nick Bujak takes a different approach in his analysis of the question of poetry and the novel in *Don Juan* by exploring “how changes in a reader’s perception or experience of a text leads to changes in generic categorization.” However, like Felluga, Bujak still analyzes the changing perception of the novel through “the novel-poetry binary” (“Becoming a Novel: *Don Juan* and the Historical Perception of Genre,” *Modern Philology* 115, no. 2 [November 2017]: 246).

⁶ Felluga, “Truth is Stranger than Fiction,” 108.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁸ Joanne Wilkes, *Lord Byron and Madame de Staël: Born for Opposition* (Farnham: Ashgate, 1999), 13.

⁹ Felicia Bonaparte, *The Poetics of Poesis: The Making of Nineteenth-Century English Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Byron and Friedrich Schlegel each had strong opinions about the other. Byron made it clear in his journal that he disliked Schlegel, particularly the incomprehensibility of his writing and the sweeping claims that he made about literature and history.

Incomprehensibility would be one of the main criticisms leveled against the German Romantics in Britain, as Thomas Carlyle notes in his essay “Novalis” (1829). While Byron shared in the view of German Romanticism as an overly obscure movement, Schlegel was responsible for the conception of Byron in the nineteenth century as a poet of despair. Interestingly, the short passage on Byron that was included in the tenth lecture of Schlegel’s *Lectures on the History of Literature, Ancient and Modern* [*Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur*] (1815) was omitted from the Lockhart translation that Byron read (see n. 19), although it would be included in the Bonn translation of 1859.

Nevertheless, Byron was surely aware of this conception of his poetry, since he openly criticized this aspect of his poetry himself.

¹¹ Friedrich Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), 101; translation hereafter cited parenthetically.

¹² August Wilhelm Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. John Black (London, 1846), <https://archive.org/details/acourselectures02morrgoog>, 27.

¹³ René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 148, discusses Byron's dislike of this categorization but notes how many critics used these terms to define Byron's poetry.

¹⁴ Schlegel, *Course of Lectures*, 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 356.

¹⁶ The problem with analyzing Schlegel's concept of irony is that it is often interpreted in isolation from his other writings, most of which have not been translated into English. Some of these crucial works were translated in the nineteenth century and are available in reprints or online, which I have quoted from in this essay. Without considering how irony is related to the novel, which Schlegel argues arises with the Christian paradigm and romantic literature, a large body of English criticism on Schlegel has seen him as the creator of modern irony and as anticipating postmodern theoretical assumptions. A few critical works that take this approach are Ann K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); Frederick Garber, *Self, Text, and Romantic Irony: The Example of Byron* (Princeton University Press, 1988); Christopher A. Strathman, *Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative: Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); and Kevin Newmark, *Irony on Occasion: From Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and de Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

I am indebted to the work of Ernst Behler, Frederick C. Beiser, and Felicia Bonaparte, who in placing Schlegel's concept of irony within the context of his other

writings on history, literature, and philosophy, do not interpret his irony as a postmodern critique. See Behler's discussion of irony in *German Romantic Literary Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), Beiser's examination of this debate in *The Romantic Imperative* (Harvard University Press, 2003), and Bonaparte's analysis of Schlegel's irony in relation to his theory of the novel (*Poetics of Poesis*, 210).

¹⁷ See Philip W. Martin, "Rereading *Don Juan* with Bakhtin," in *Don Juan*, ed. Nigel Wood, Theory and Practice (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), 92–118; Michael Makovski, "Byron, Bakhtin, and the Translation of History," in *Rereading Byron: Essays Selected from Hofstra University's Byron Bicentennial Conference*, ed. Alice Levine and Robert N. Keane (New York: Garland, 1993), 21–32; and Suzanne Ferriss, "Romantic Carnavalesque: Byron's *The Tale of Calil, Beppo*, and *Don Juan*," in Levine and Keane, *Rereading Byron*, 133–49.

¹⁸ David Cunningham, "Genre without Genre: Romanticism, the Novel and the New," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 196 (March/April 2016): 19.

¹⁹ Friedrich Schlegel, *Lectures on the History of Literature, Ancient and Modern*, trans. J. G. Lockhart, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1818), 39, <https://archive.org/details/lecturesonhisto02lockgoog>.

²⁰ Ernst Behler, introduction to Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Lord Byron to John Murray, September 15, 1817, in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, vol. 5 (London: Murray, 1976), 265.

²³ Wilkes, *Lord Byron and Madame de Staël*, 11.

²⁴ *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 5, *Don Juan*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 4.3; hereafter cited parenthetically by canto and stanza.

²⁵ Stephen E. Jones, *Satire and Romanticism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 191.

²⁶ Jerome J. McGann, "*Don Juan*" in *Context* (University of Chicago Press, 1976), 55.

Catherine Ann Addison also discusses Byron's debt to Italian authors, highlighting the importance of *ottava rima* for a theory of the novel. See Addison, "Ottava Rima and Novelistic Discourse," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 133–45.

²⁷ See Schlegel's comment on Swift and Sterne in *Dialogue on Poetry*, 97, and on Pulci in *Lectures on the History of Literature*, 240.

²⁸ Schlegel, *Lectures on the History of Literature*, 175.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 303.

³⁰ Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron* (London, 1822), 200, <https://archive.org/details/conversations00medw>.

³¹ Schlegel, *Lectures on the History of Literature*, 303.

³² Roger Salomon, "Mock Heroes and Mock-Heroic Narrative: Byron's *Don Juan* in the Context of Cervantes," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 76, no. 2 (1976): 69.

³³ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁴ In her analysis of Byron's romantic irony in *Don Juan*, Anne K. Mellor notes how a "contradiction of genres involves the poem in a constant alternation between romance and realism, between potentially tragic and the comic" and that "the achievement of *Don Juan* is to balance these antithetical impulses without reconciling or synthesizing them," (*English Romantic Irony*, 58). Alvin B. Kernan also notes the mixture of epic and satire in *The Plot of Satire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965). In "*Don Juan*" in

Context, McGann observes the alternation between elegy and satire in *Don Juan*. For an in-depth study of Byron's knowledge of the satirical tradition, see Frederick L. Beaty, *Byron the Satirist* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1985).

³⁵ Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse, 1790–1910* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 225.

³⁶ James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 363.

³⁷ Percy Bysshe Shelley to Thomas Love Peacock, August 10, 1821, in *Select Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Richard Garnett (London, 1882), 167, <https://archive.org/details/selectlettersofp00shelrich>.