

Byron and the Pathology of Creativity; or, the Biogenesis of Poetic Form

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In Canto I of Byron's frequently bawdy epic *Don Juan*, following several stanzas about Wordsworth's poetic "transports" and Coleridge's lofty metaphysical speculations, we find our pubescent hero, gentle Juan, strolling pensively by "glassy brooks" and through "leafy nooks"—those parts of the natural world where "poets find materials for their books"—in an attempt to deal with his building sexual desire for Donna Julia (90).¹ The Byronic narrator depicts young Juan as lost in typically Romantic, abstract contemplation of "himself, and the whole earth, / Of man the wonderful, and of the stars," sublimely wondering "How many miles the moon might have in girth," and musing on the flight of "air balloons" (92):

He poured upon the leaves, and on the flowers,
And heard a voice in all the winds; and then
He thought of wood-nymphs and immortal bowers,
And how the goddesses came down to men:
He missed the pathway, he forgot the hours,
And when he looked upon his watch again,
He found how much old Time had been a winner—
He also found that he had lost his dinner. (94)

One possible interpretation of the punch line of this episode is that since, as the narrator tells us earlier, "no one likes to be disturbed at meals / Or love" (89), Byron is suggesting that it is the body that yields the real satisfactions in life and not the metaphysical meanderings and eroticized, but wholly imaginative, communions with a surrogate lover found in nature. By condemning the tendency he sees among first generation Romantic poets to neglect the fundamental claims of the body, like shelter, warmth, and here, sex and food, Byron is making a comic argument in favor of the ultimate priority of these elemental, biological needs: if you attempt to spiritualize your desire too much, you go hungry and sexually unsatisfied.

Although according to one critic, this scene is designed to show that it is "unprofitable in the midst of the spiritual and poetic to forget the physical", Byron may also be demonstrating that purely imaginative indulgence, if possible at all, requires that one ignores the otherwise persistent realities of bodily existence, which, as we will see, poses a significant and far less humorous problem for Byron than what he presents here.² The pensive, philosophical, poetic mind, possessed of "Longings sublime, and aspirations high" (93), must be cut off from its own real source of desire in the body: in this instance, the desire for sex *qua* sex. The narrator, in his typically

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Byron's poetry are taken from *Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann. 7 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980-86.

Paraphrased references to both *Don Juan* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* are to stanza numbers rather than line numbers; for all other poems, line references are used.

² Ernest J. Lovell, *Byron: The Record of a Quest*. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1966, 54

punning manner, highlights the disjunction between the poetic contemplation of sex and the real physical act:

Nor glowing reverie, nor poet's lay,
 Could yield his spirit that for which it panted,
 A bosom whereon his head might lay,
 And hear the heart beat with the love it granted (96)

Though the first two lines address the spiritual reverie facilitated by poesy, it is not, finally, the "poet's lay" that Juan requires, as the rime riche makes plain. The bodily nature of Juan's desire is emphasized further as it encroaches upon the remainder of the stanza. With the jarring image of the spirit "panting" – panting is an unambiguously physical act – the mind-body split collapses utterly, and the stanza settles into the world of corporeal things, like cushiony bosoms and audible heartbeats. Even if such poetic posturing and nympholeptic fantasy can temporarily elide the need for or take the place of physical satisfaction, the reality of the body simply cannot be ignored and will ultimately assert itself. Although this episode reads like a satirical cautionary tale for overly romantic adolescent males (not to mention escapist Romantic poets), it hints at the ways in which the supremacy of the body was a more menacing reality throughout Byron's life and work.

Lord Byron and all his messy business has always been interesting to his readers. Though critics have never completely disregarded the details of Byron's physical body, criticism had tended to focus on the intriguing, adventurous, often scandalous events that shaped Byron's life, as well as the spiritual, emotional, or otherwise mental volatility that makes him such a preeminent example in the tradition of the mad genius.³ Byron's experience of his actual body – and its role in his writerly life – is a difficult issue for him, though it has not been discussed in any sustained manner in relation to his creative production or his formal choices. Byron's body was arguably his most compulsive and inescapable object of preoccupation and source of conflict. Although he was unable to deny the sensual pleasures his body afforded – infamous libertine, carouser, and man of passion that he was – he was plagued by a feeling of entrapment in a deformed and degenerating body that went beyond the typical Romantic grappling with human mortality, mutability, or questions of mind-body dualism. Unlike Wordsworth, who in "Tintern Abbey" relates the meditative poetic and therapeutic experience of "being laid asleep in body" to "become a living soul", Byron was unhealthily unable to imagine the spiritual or mental apart from the corporeal.⁴ The power of Byron's bodily existence eclipsed everything else, so that even if his thoughts could take a Wordsworthian excursion, they'd always come home to roost in a body fraught with problems. I want to suggest that Byron's identity as a man and as a poet, as well as his ideas about poetic composition, and ultimately, perhaps, his formal practices, are rooted in and defined by the inescapable experience of his body, which involves his persistently morbid sense of physical ruin, fragmentation, uncontrollability, and rapid decay. Byron's articulations of both his

³ For a brilliant recent articulation of the pathologization of genius and the poetic vocation, with particular reference to Byron and Walter Scott, see Dino Felluga's *The Perversity of Poetry: Romantic Ideology and the Popular Male Poet of Genius*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005.

⁴ William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965, 46-7.

physical existence and his attitudes towards the process of writing share a common pathological vocabulary, indicating that for Byron the underpinnings of creative endeavour may be fundamentally biological.

Artistic Toxicity

There is a long and varied history that links literature to matters of illness, health, and healing. We can thank Plato for establishing the foundations for the perception that insanity and creativity are linked with his notion of the *furor poeticus*: the madness of artistic inspiration. As Rudolph and Margot Wittkower clearly outline in their classic study of the nature and personality of the artist and the psychological origins of creativity, “in historical perspective the problem of the ‘mad artist’ confronts us with three intrinsically different forms of madness: first, Plato’s mania, the sacred madness of enthusiasm and inspiration; secondly, insanity or mental disorders of various kinds; and thirdly, a rather vague reference to eccentric behavior”.⁵ For the Wittkowers, this “otherness” has been generally accepted throughout history, as there appears the unanimous belief that “artists are, and always have been, egocentric, temperamental, neurotic, rebellious, unreliable, licentious, extravagant, obsessed by their work, and altogether difficult to live with”.⁶ Lionel Trilling concurs and calls the connection between genius and madness “one of the characteristic notions of our culture”.⁷

The emphasis on these explanations is on psychological or mental illness as a necessary condition for creativity and genius. In their thoughts on “Literature and Psychology,” however, Wellek and Warren explain how one early and persistent conception in this tradition is that the poet’s “gift” is compensation for psychological or social deficiencies, but also for physical handicaps or deformities. They offer as a precedent the scene in the *Odyssey* in which the Muse blinds Demodocos but gives him “the lovely gift of song,” just as Tiresias is blinded but has prophetic vision. They list several other examples, Byron among them: “Pope was a hunchback and a dwarf; Byron had a club foot; Proust was an asthmatic neurotic of partly Jewish descent; Keats was shorter than other men; Thomas Wolfe much taller”. This seemingly random selection of facts is clearly intended to show that the connection between handicap and endowment is somewhat suspect, given that “everyone has liabilities which may serve him as spurs”.⁸ Their argument is that although handicap and creative endowment are not necessarily correlative, there nevertheless persists the widespread view that malady of some sort differentiates the artist from less creative types.

The Platonic distinction between clinical insanity and creative insanity becomes more difficult to maintain by the time of the Romantics, in part because developments in science and enlightenment thought gave rise to explanations of madness that emphasized its bodily, pathological component.⁹ By the early nineteenth century, according to G. S. Rousseau, clinical findings, particularly about the

⁵ Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists: A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution*. New York: Random, 1963, 101.

⁶ Wittkower and Wittkower, xix. See also 98-132.

⁷ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*. New York: Doubleday, 1953, 159.

⁸ Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*. 3rd edn. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956, 81.

⁹ Roy Porter, “‘All Madness for Writing’: John Clare and the Asylum.” *John Clare in Context*, ed. Hugh Haughton et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 268.

operation of the nerves and brain, had revealed that there was a connection between genius and physical illness: if genius could be diagnosed as a genuinely morbid condition or a symptom of constitutional abnormality, artistic activity could be regarded fundamentally as a product of a diseased body.¹⁰ Further smudging the line between body and spirit, the Romantics inherited a rather dubious legacy in the eighteenth-century literary and philosophical obsession with sensibility. With its morbid excesses of feeling and sensation, this trend encouraged the belief that a vigorous and hearty constitution was actually disadvantageous to poetic genius, not to mention moral sense. In Britain in the eighteenth century, the doctor George Cheyne (himself a materialist) confirmed that melancholy was “The English Malady,” while on the continent, Germans deeply affected by Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Werther* were exhibiting similarly gloomy tendencies. Indulgence in one’s own (as well as in others’) physical pains, psychological depressions, and general misfortunes had become quite fashionable. As the recent wave of scholarship focused on the Romantic body has demonstrated, the scientific and medical research that was most influential on Romantic writing – such as David Hartley’s *Observations on Man* (1746), Joseph Priestley’s *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (1777), or Sir William Lawrence’s lectures on corporeal psychology (1815-16) – was predominantly concerned with the materialist underpinnings of all mental activity generally, which significantly blurred the dualistic divide of body and mind.¹¹

As Frederick Burwick notes, with its emphasis on subjective experience – and, I would add, the fact that Romantic writers were, on the whole, a genuinely sickly bunch – Romantic literature quite naturally reflected contemporary developments in science, medicine, and psychology.¹² Not surprisingly, then, psychobiographical portraits of creative figures – “pathographies,” as Dino Felluga so winningly puts it¹³ – were increasingly widespread in the Romantic era, and gave renewed currency to the traditional, Platonic archetype of the sick artist while initiating new considerations of what Annette Wheeler Carafelli calls “the pathogenesis of art”.¹⁴ Felluga, looking back to Carafelli’s wonderful essay on “Byron and the Pathology of Genius,” cites William Hazlitt’s 1815 essay “On the Causes of Methodism” as a significant crystallization of the period’s ideas about the pathological sources of creative production. In the essay, Hazlitt – a friend of Byron’s who had in fact suggested that

¹⁰ G.S. Rousseau, ‘Nerves, Spirits, and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility.’ *Studies in the Eighteenth Century III: Papers Delivered at the Third David Nichol Smith Memorial Seminar, Canberra 1973*, ed. R.F. Brissenden and J.C. Eade, 1976, 137-57.

¹¹ For a recent survey of body-based developments in Romantic criticism, see Alan Richardson, ‘Romanticism and the Body.’ *Literature Compass* 1 (2004): 1-14. See also Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason: The Modern Foundations of Body and Soul*. New York: Norton, 2003.

¹² Frederick Burwick, *Poetic Madness and the Romantic Imagination*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, 9-12. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, to offer one classic example, is remarkable for its Gothic absorption of contemporary scientific theories. Gothic fiction and drama, such as works by Ann Radcliff and Matthew Lewis, commonly make use of developments phrenology, physiognomy, and psychology to explore various facets of human deviance. Substantial scholarly work has been done to establish the debts of numerous other Romantic-period writers—who were frequently sick themselves—upon scientific and medical research, among them Coleridge, Percy Shelley, and, of course, Keats, who also had formal training.

¹³ Felluga, 115.

¹⁴ Annette Wheeler Carafelli, ‘Byron and the Pathology of Genius.’ *Rereading Byron: Essays Selected from Hofstra University’s Byron Bicentennial Conference*, ed. Alice Levine and Robert N. Keane. New York: Garland, 1993, 205.

the poet's "misshapen feet...made him write verses in revenge"¹⁵ – suggests that, like religious fanaticism, poetic enthusiasm is the product of "an uncomfortable mind in an uncomfortable body".¹⁶ Hazlitt overturns the more common eighteenth-century notion that creative productivity makes the artist weak and sick and replaces it with the idea that the writing life is pursued by those with inherent intellectual and physical inadequacy. Though, as I have suggested, Hazlitt's argument is not exactly original, Carafelli describes the essay as "a contemporary landmark in the study of creativity, locating artistic predisposition in constitutional infirmity and articulating perhaps the first general theory of the pathology of artistic genius".¹⁷

The essay is also especially relevant to a consideration of Byron, given the extent of pathologization that surrounds both the body of the man and his poetic corpus. As Felluga elegantly argues in *The Perversity of Poetry*, especially in the case of Byron, the metaphorical language of health and disease that was part of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century pathologization of the poetic vocation emerged as a key feature of his literary and personal reception.¹⁸ From the star-making moment of the publication of the first two Cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* onwards, naysaying critics tended to represent Byron's poetry as a rampant pandemic infecting the body politic. For Peacock, the melancholic, angst-ridden, and misanthropic Byronic Hero was a toxic figure, capable of "poisoning" its "reading public".¹⁹ This conservative, censorial critical mode would reach a fever pitch in the wake of *Don Juan* many years later, as reviews were often virulent in their loathing for both the satire and its author. The publisher William Blackwood, for instance, claims that "I never in my life was so filled with utter disgust...I felt such a revolting at the whole book," while Southey, one of Byron's more rabid critics, describes *Don Juan* as one those "lascivious books" written by "men of diseased hearts and depraved imaginations" who "labour to make others as miserable as themselves, by infecting them with a moral virus that eats into the soul!".²⁰ Of Byron's work's first arrival and popularity in America, Peter Parley Goodrich describes the "fearful plunge" readers took from the elevated moral tone of New England's popular literature at the time into "the dreary if not blasphemous skepticisms of the new poet...What was at first revolting became a fascination...Byron could no more be kept at bay than the cholera".²¹ By embracing and cultivating the self-image of the mad genius, the poet is himself patient zero for "Byromania," the wonderful term coined by Annabella Milbanke to describe the frenzied fandom that spread first throughout England, then to the continent, and beyond. The view that emerges is of Byron the infectious pervert, the monster of immorality, the madman of the kind who can "make men mad / By his contagion," as the poet once said of Napoleon (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III.43). Byron exploited this body-based, highly metaphorical, medicopathological rhetoric as part of an effort

¹⁵ M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, 142.

¹⁶ William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols. London: Dent, 1930-34, 4.58.

¹⁷ Carafelli, 205.

¹⁸ Felluga, 2-3.

¹⁹ Thomas Love Peacock, *The Letters of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. Nicholas A. Joukovsky, 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, 1.123.

²⁰ Andrew Rutherford ed., *Byron: The Critical Heritage*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970, 164, 180.

²¹ Leonard, William Ellery. *Byron and Byronism in America*. New York: Haskell Press, 1964, 19-20.

to perpetuate the perception of his genius and to flaunt the transmission of his popularity, and if that meant being “mad, bad, and dangerous to know,” he could live with that. His own body, however, was much more difficult to live with.

The Foot, the Hair, and the Battle of the Bulge

“Everyone knows me – I am deformed,” was Byron’s rather dramatic and deeply sad response to a friend’s observation that the street boys always recognized him. Byron is referring specifically to the incurable clubfoot with which he was notoriously born, a malformation that taught him early about the power of bodily limitation and difference. About the overall impact of this physical distinction, biographers tend to concur, identifying it as “the greatest personal disaster of his life”²² and “the crucial catastrophe of his life,” causing him “emotional injury beyond any other psychic wound he would ever sustain”.²³ Though for the most part he seems to have borne with stoic pride, and occasional rage, both the physical pain of his treatments and special boots and the emotional indignation associated with his limp and his extremely thin calf, he always felt himself to be physically deficient, disabled, and like his most famous Byronic hero, Childe Harold, “Droop’d as a wild-born falcon with clipt wing” (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III.15). Byron was acutely sensitive about and always conscious of his relative inability to demonstrate the physical prowess he otherwise felt came naturally to him. Perhaps in an attempt to prove himself he never shied away from sports, playing cricket, boxing, and pistol shooting frequently.

He was, most famously, a proficient swimmer,²⁴ a reputation he firmly established for himself in May, 1810, when he swam the Hellespont from shore to shore. Given the challenging nature of the task, the poem Byron generated out of this apparent triumph might have been more celebratory. Instead, in “Lines Written After Swimming From Sestos to Abydos,” Byron undermines his significant natatory accomplishment and in doing so reinscribes the very idea of physical weakness he had aimed to overcome. First, he contrasts his single successful swim, which he hastens to point out occurred “in the genial month of May” (10), with those of Leander, Byron’s legendary object of imitation who regularly made it to Hero’s doorstep despite the weather. Whereas Leander’s story ends tragically with his drowning and Hero’s subsequent suicide, Byron’s ends ironically:

’Twere hard to say who fared the best:
Sad mortals! Thus the Gods still plague you!
He lost his labour, I my jest:
For he was drowned, and I’ve the ague. (17-20)

Indeed, Byron made it to the other shore, but only at the cost of his health. As the neat parallelisms in the final couplet demonstrate, he still perceives his victory as a “loss” because he catches a cold. The note of physical vulnerability on which this

²² Phyllis Grosskurth, *Byron: The Flawed Angel*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997, 11.

²³ Benita Eisler, *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame*. New York: Knopf, 1999, 13. For a discussion of his actual medical condition and overall health, see A.B. Morrison, ‘Byron’s Lameness.’ *Byron Journal* 3 (1975): 24-30 and Philip Marshall Dale, MD, *Medical Biographies: The Ailments of Thirty-Three Famous Persons*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952.

²⁴ Grosskurth points out that Byron always swam in long trousers so as not to reveal his withered leg (32).

poem ends reflects Byron's awareness that although one may gain temporary mastery over parts of one's body, the whole is beyond one's control.

Though his foot may have been the most obvious way in which he felt he lacked control of his physical existence, the issue of control was central in other aspects of Byron's bodily life. The awareness of his malformation was only amplified by a feeling of persistent deformation or degeneration. He was obsessed with his health as well as with his doctors, whom he distrusted profoundly, though would never cease to need for his fits and fevers, hemorrhoids, kidney stones, venereal diseases, catarrhs, and countless other ailments that he writes about with often embarrassing detail. He was also unusually attuned to his own aging, a natural process he pathologizes as one chronic debilitating disease, his "constant plague," he calls it, regularly noting his thinning hair, his loosening teeth, his yellowing and withering skin.²⁵ Even at the relatively young age of seventeen, a time when most adolescents are still feeling invincible, Byron was woefully conscious of the fleetingness of youth, aware:

That the time must arrive, when, no longer retaining
Their auburn, those locks must wave thin to the breeze;
When a few silver hairs of those tresses remaining
Prove nature a prey to decay and disease... ("To Caroline" 9-12)

The notion of being a "prey to decay" underscores Byron's sense of the ultimate futility of any efforts he might make to prevent the often unpleasant changes that come with growing older, recognizing that he is, as are all human beings, an unwilling, though inevitable, *victim* of time. Although this kind of sensitivity to the mutability of all things was by no means unique to Byron among his literary and philosophical peers, the morbid extent of his personal focus on the issue is remarkable.²⁶

Most notably, however, he found himself stuck in a body that kept getting fat. Byron was a chubby boy, but as he grew up, it was as if excess weight was always stalking him and it was a constant battle for him to stave it off. In an effort to manage his troubling corpulence, he engaged in a variety of what he called "reducing methods," highly aberrant, self-destructive eating habits and other weight-loss tactics—many of which today would be associated with eating disorders like anorexia and/or bulimia, diseases largely driven by the sufferer's desire to control his or her body through its relation to food.²⁷ By the fall of 1806, he weighed over two hundred

²⁵ Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron: A Biography*. 3 vols. New York: Knopf, 1957, 1.155.

²⁶ For detailed examinations of Byron's sensitivity to time and age and how it is revealed in a variety of forms and themes, see Itsuyo Higashinaka, 'Byron's Sense of Ageing.' *Byron Journal* 7 (1979): 48-60 and Ronald A. Schroeder, 'Byron's Sense of Time and Age Before 1810.' *Byron Journal* 11 (1983): 4-20.

²⁷ According to Grosskurth, Byron's manic dieting, which began when he was in his late teens, was an attempt to disassociate himself from his fat mother, suggesting that becoming thin was a kind of adolescent rebellion (134). Eisler corroborates this view by pointing out the similarities between Byron's equation of starvation and self-mastery and the testimony of girls suffering from anorexia (308, note). In *Lord Byron's Relish: The Regency Cookery Book*. Glasgow: Dog and Bone, 1990, Wilma Paterson discusses Byron's anorexic tendencies and the links between his eating and his sex life, while gastroenterologist Jeremy Hugh Baron and psychiatrist Arthur Crisp work together to diagnose Byron's eating disorder in 'Illness and Creativity: Byron's Appetites, James Joyce's Gut and Melba's Meals and Mesalliances.' *British Medical Journal* 7123 (20-27 Dec. 1997): 1697-1703.

pounds, which, as biographer Benita Eisler points out, is “more than pleasingly plump” for a young man, 5 feet 8 1/2 inches tall.²⁸ This near obesity prompted the first of a series of slimming regimens involving extraordinarily rigorous measures that Byron would periodically employ throughout the rest of his life in order to shed pounds and enhance the delicacy of his features.

As he confesses quite openly throughout his letters and journals, he was prone to “*thinning...with fasting and purgatives,*”²⁹ erratically denying and voiding his body. When he wasn’t deliberately starving himself or eating only foods with absolutely no nutrition like boiled potatoes and vinegar or hard biscuits and soda water, he would feast on food and wine in such excessive amounts as to cause vomiting: “I have been eating and drinking; which I always do when wretched,” he wrote in a letter to lady Melbourne, “for then I grow fat and don’t show it” (*BL&J* August 20, 1813). Induced sweating through extreme physical exertion and really hot baths which he hoped would “boil off his fat” was a favorite approach, one he often combined with a restrictive, sometimes wildly idiosyncratic diet and a bit of purging:

I shall continue my Exertions, having no other amusement, I wear *seven* Waistcoats, & a great Coat, run & play at Cricket in this Dress, till quite exhausted by excessive perspiration, use the hot Bath daily...no Suppers, or Breakfast, only one meal a day..., & Take physic occasionally, by these means, my Ribs display Skin of no great Thickness, & my Clothes, have been taken in nearly half a yard, do you believe me now?” (To Hanson, *BL&J* 1.113-14)

The rather sudden drop in Byron’s weight since January 1807 caused some concern in his acquaintances that he might be suffering from a life-threatening illness, since a little excess weight on a body was considered a sign of good health at the time: “you will be surprised to hear I am grown very thin,” he writes earlier in the letter to Hanson, “however it is the Fact, so much so, that the people here think I am going.” But, as Byron proudly explains his intentions, there is no cause for alarm since “I have taken every means to accomplish the end, by violent exercise, & fasting, as I found

Obviously, suggesting that Byron was suffering from *anorexia nervosa* as we understand it today – a disease that was not named officially until 1874 – raises certain methodological issues despite the substantial evidence of Byron’s extreme body consciousness and fraught relationship with food. There have been a number of other studies of Byron’s eating habits and attitudes about food that attempt to avoid this potentially anachronistic “diagnostic” method, focusing more on Byron’s issues with power and self-control. In ‘The Order and Disorder of Eating in Byron’s *Don Juan*.’ *Disorderly Eaters: Texts in Self-Empowerment*, ed. Lilian J. Furst and Peter W. Graham. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1992, 113-23, Peter Graham, for example, explores the ways in which eating is a means of self-empowerment in *Don Juan*, and Christine Kenyon Jones addresses Byron’s understanding of the ideology of food and eating as a cultural activity (“Man is a Carnivorous Production”: Byron and the Anthropology of Food.’ *Prism(s): Essays in Romanticism* 6 (1998): 41-58). Focusing on the character of Conrad in *The Corsair*, Tom Mole explores the relation for Byron among food, self-control, and celebrity (*Byron’s Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutics of Intimacy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007). For a sustained treatment of the anorexia in literature (that doesn’t discuss Byron), see Maud Ellman’s *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment*. London: Virago, 1993.

²⁸ Eisler, 120.

²⁹ Lord George Gordon Byron, *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand. 12 vols. London: J. Murray, 1973, 8.165. This will be abbreviated hereafter as *BL&J*.

myself too plump” (*BL&J* 1.113). By the fourteenth of May he had lost over twenty-seven pounds, at which point he admits to being “metamorphosed not a little” (*BL&J* 1.119). He claims to have lost a total of fifty-six pounds by January of 1808, which was enough weight to have altered his appearance so dramatically that even when he returned to Cambridge six months earlier in June of 1807, he was unrecognizable to those who had known him. This self-transformation brought Byron to an emaciated state so unnatural that he looked, by his own account, a bit vampiric, with a “figure & visage [of] preternatural Longitude” (*BL&J* 1.121-22). Rather than feeling awkward about looking sickly and unnatural, however, the change was reportedly empowering for him. “Far from sinking his spirits,” claimed one of Byron’s kinsmen, “he felt himself lighter and livelier for it; and that it had given him a greater command over himself in every other respect”.³⁰

Byron was trying literally to dematerialize himself by steadily getting rid of his bodily mass – a rather odd method detaching the self from the body, by trying to, in a sense, detach the body from the self. Part of what motivated Byron’s compulsive efforts at physical reform was certainly that his body had become a commodity; superficial image was then, as it is now, a crucial aspect of the celebrity package, and he wanted to control what others saw as much as possible (he was also notorious for showing up to public events in costume). Acquaintances, admirers, and total strangers would fetishistically, often savagely, comment on and gossip about individual aspects like his hair, his hands, his face, and, everyone’s favorite, his weight. If gossip about Byron was frequent while he was still a part of London society, it only increased after his exile, as reports of those who saw him while traveling abroad made their way home. Newton Hanson, who had seen a lot of Byron during his earlier years of fame, was appalled by the man he met again in Venice in 1818: “Lord Byron could not have been more than thirty but he looked forty. His face had become pale, bloated and sallow. He had grown very fat, his shoulders broad and round, and the knuckles of his hands were lost in fat”.³¹ Lord Glenbervie, in his diary, would confirm the “multiplied anecdotes of Lord Byron’s metamorphoses into a fat, fat-headed, middle-aged man. Slovenly to the extreme, unkempt, with long, untied locks that hang down on his shoulders, shabbily dressed...”.³² In combination with his own hypercritical self-scrutiny, awareness of this attention taught him that his body was something to be experienced part by part rather than as a healthy whole, and as an object that could be taken apart and analyzed in bits and pieces. It would have been nearly impossible for Byron to feel like he had any structural integrity. Byron, rather pathetically, gives an account of his own appearance at thirty-two years old in a letter to Wedderburn Webster in July 1819 that reflects precisely the fragmented, dis-integrated way in which he views himself:

With regard to the imputed ‘Corpulence’—my size is certainly increased considerably; but I am not aware that it amounts to that ‘Stupendous’ degree which you enquire after. At eight and twenty I was as thin as most men, and I believe that hitherto I have not exceeded the decent standard—of my time of

³⁰ Robert Charles Dallas, *Correspondence of Lord Byron with a Friend...Also Recollections of the Poet*. 3 vols. Paris: Galignani, 1825, 1.129.

³¹ Higashinaka, 50.

³² Marchand, 2.746.

life. However, my personal charms have by no means increased; my hair is half grey, and the Crow's-foot has been rather lavish of its indelible steps. My hair, though not gone, seems going, and my teeth remain by way of courtesy; but I suppose they will follow, having been too good to last." (*BL&J* 6.174)

If this pathological perception of his own body prevents him from experiencing himself as a whole that can overcome the limitations of its parts, it is not surprising that images of architectural fragments figure so prominently throughout much of Byron's poetry, as they are suggestive to him of his fleshly imperfections, of his deformity, and of his degeneration. Embedded in the panoramic scenes through which Byron travels in Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, for example, are "chiefless castles" with "grey but leafy walls, where Ruin greenly dwells" (46). In spite of the natural growth garnishing their facades, the many now empty fortresses along the Rhine River have proven to be, like his own human body, vulnerable, slowly crumbling houses for their ambitious occupants.³³ Rather than being able to relate his own poetic fertility to the natural abundance in the area, Byron feels drawn to identify instead with the crumbling structures he sees along the way, the kind of sites at which he will continue to "meditate amongst decay, and stand / A ruin amidst ruins" (IV.25).

The architectural analogy of body and building offers other possibilities for Byron to express his sense of physical confinement. The language of bondage and imprisonment that Byron uses so copiously in his letters, journals, and more autobiographical poetry reveals a general association of the body with a lack of freedom; the body is depicted as a powerful, unavoidable impediment to genuine self-mastery. In other words, if his body is a building, that building functions like a prison, an agent of containment and barrier to creative freedom. "Oh, that I were / The viewless spirit of a lovely sound, / A living voice, a breathing harmony, / A bodiless enjoyment," Manfred exclaims, longing to leave his body behind to become as intangible as music in the air (*Manfred* I.ii, 52-55). In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* we find a similar expression of desire for the "bodiless thought," "when, at length, the mind shall be all free / From what it hates in this degraded form, / Reft of its carnal life" (III.74). All efforts at detachment, all wishes to surmount the limitations of the physical, however, produce increased awareness that "mortality predominates" (45). Even though the mind or spirit may have aspirations of its own, it is fundamentally bound by and to his pathological body. Whether he depicts the body as a "sad jar of atoms" or characterizes human existence as "'a Soul which drags a Carcase'— —a heavy chain to be sure," Byron imagines his natural state to be one of "Mortal bondage" (*Oxford Authors* 1016; *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* IV.5). He is "coop'd in clay" (*Manfred* I.ii.157), a "barr'd up bird" (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III.15), a "link reluctant in a fleshy chain / Classed among creatures when the soul can flee" (72). Byron's vexed relation to his own physical form dramatically intensifies this

³³ There is, of course, a long tradition for the building/body analogy, perhaps going as far back as the Socratic dictum that "the eyes are the windows of the soul." See Leonard Barkin, *Nature's Work of Art: The Human Body as Image of the World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975. During the Renaissance, Paracelsus theorized the body as home for the soul, an image that is taken up by Spenser, among others (see *Faerie Queene* II, in which the House of Alma is a body). For the theme of ruins, see Laurence Goldstein, *Ruins and Empire: The Evolution of a Theme in Augustan and Romantic Literature*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977, and Rose Macaulay, *Pleasure of Ruins*. London: Weidenfeld, 1953. See also Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

general sense of restriction that the body imposes in Byron's view of the human condition.

Formal Therapies?

So what function does art serve in this self-image of inescapable deformity and ruin? One critic has commented that "Art for Byron was anesthesia, an attempt to silence an omnipresent, pained body,"³⁴ though the language Byron uses does not exactly support the notion that art relieves him of somatic feeling, thereby allowing him to forget about his body for a while. Rather, this language remains firmly connected to the body. Just as Byron characterizes his various episodes of ill health as "vesuvian" fevers (*BL&J* 2.44) and sweat-drenched fits, so too does he describe finished poetic works as "fit[s] of writing" (*BL&J* 5.146) that are products of the "fever of [his] mind" (*BL&J* 4.35). "All convulsions end with me in rhyme," he says in a phrase that beautifully captures the bodily generation of his verse (*BL&J* 2:295). This association of poetry and illness is made even more explicit in a letter to his mother from Greece in which he explains that in order to remember the scenes of his travels most clearly he employed an artist to paint some of the views, a method that "will be better than scribbling, a disease I hope myself cured of" (*BL&J* 2.35).

If poetry is a disease, however, Byron also depicts it as a potential cure, or at least as offering some form of relief through expression. Composing poetry may be a "torture" and "a great pain" that "he must get rid of" (*BL&J* 5:215), but like his loosely autobiographical persona, Manfred, his "pangs shall find a voice!" (*Manfred* II.ii.50). Writing is therefore another example of Byron's overall penchant for removing things from his body. Echoing the language of purging and sweating that characterize his writings about weight loss, Byron bemoans the process of "sweating poesy" and the passionate need to "write to empty [his] mind" (*BL&J* 4.284). One of Romanticism's familiar tropes, manifested in a wide variety of forms, is the analogy between the expressive, creative act and the natural process. In *Don Juan*, for instance, Byron refers to those "unquiet feelings," "As on the beach the waves at last are broke, / Thus to their extreme verge the passions brought / Dash into poetry" (IV.106). Byron's most memorable metaphor for poetic creation compares expression to volcanic activity: "poetry," he sublimely writes, "is the lava of imagination, whose eruption prevents the earthquake" (*BL&J* 3.405). This "lava" metaphor prompted M.H. Abrams, in his brief discussion of the Romantic period's manifestation of the Aristotelian legacy, to refer to the "hydrodynamics of the poetic process" whereby cathartic expression often yields from pent-up emotion.³⁵ It seems that Abrams is reading Byron's remark as a revision of Wordsworth's famous definition of poetry in his "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*" as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings".³⁶ Significant is Abrams's choice of the word "hydrodynamics," by which he intends to suggest the fluid nature of emotions that eventually bubble to the surface of the Romantic fountain of mind, and, to complete the metaphor, pour onto the page in the form of poems. By drawing increased attention to the implications of imagery of "overflow," Abrams throws into relief the natural, and, therefore, material sources of

³⁴ Steven Bruhm, *Gothic Bodies: The Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994, 136.

³⁵ Abrams, 138.

³⁶ William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965, 448.

these kinds of expressive metaphors. For Byron, however, the earthly world and its natural processes that provide the source of such metaphors are clearly related to his complicated relationship with his own body (which is, materially, of nature). In fact, Byron draws a three-way analogy among earthly processes, creative processes, and human bodily processes. Byron's grand geological image for poetic production, despite its obvious psychological underpinnings, transforms the natural process of the earth's eruptions into what is essentially a human bodily process. The buildup of pressure from within the body of the Earth becomes a fitting analogy for the buildup of pressure within one's own body (especially when we see it in light of Byron's fondness for purging and sweating).³⁷ When Byron compares his own impulse to create poetry to the rumblings within the Earth, and the eventual imaginative effusion to a volcanic eruption that may be explosive but is the very thing that prevents a much more serious natural disaster, he suggests that his own poetic impulses are similar to the natural processes that protect Earth's body. According to Byron's metaphor, writing reduces the risk of being blown apart by his own insides.

Perhaps the finest example of the link between Byron's bodily model and his views on poetic composition is his humorous implication that reading Wordsworth—whom he more than once refers to as “Mr. Turdsworth” (*BL&J* 7.158, 167, 168, 253; 8.66, 68) – worked like a medicinal laxative. “Shelley, when I was in Switzerland, used to dose me with Wordsworth physic,” Byron reportedly claimed, making the somewhat vulgar, though not original, link between poetic creativity and the expulsion of bodily waste.³⁸ (In its original usage, physic refers to knowledge of the human body, diseases, and their treatments, but in its more specific usage in the medical sciences, physic is the word for any drastic remedy for constipation, like a purgative or aperient.) Byron's intimations of the potentially cathartic effect of composition – the dematerializing, the getting rid of – thus seem rooted in and derive from his physiological experiences.

But this purgative vocabulary is in tension with a discourse (that Byron also employs) that figures writing itself as potentially compensatory process of embodiment, a wish to “body forth the heated mind” (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* IV.104). At the beginning of Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, written during a period of particularly intense bodily anxiety (he was in exile for rumours of sodomy and incest; he was fat again), Byron speculates as to the possible therapeutic effects of

³⁷ The sublime imagery of earthquakes and volcanoes that Byron employs to describe his inner stirrings recalls Milton's use of the body/earth analogy in *Paradise Lost*, especially fitting since Byron is often read as a Satanic figure. In Book I, in an epic simile describing Satan, Milton compares him to the volcanic Mount Aetna, “whose combustible / And fuell'd entrails thence conceiving Fire, / Sublim'd with Mineral fury, aid the Winds, / And leave a singed bottom all involv'd with stench and smoke” (John Milton, *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. New York: Macmillan, 1957, 230-37). Another volcano is similarly described as a body, “whose grisly top / Belch'd fire and rolling smoke; the rest entire / Shone with a glossy scurf, undoubted sign / That in his womb was hid metallic Ore” (I.670-73). For more of Milton's use of the analogy, see the description of Earth's body in Book I, ransacked by “impious hands” who “Rifl'd the bowels of their mother Earth / For Treasures better hid” (686-88), and similarly in Book VI, when the devils “Part hidd'n veins digg'd up (nor hath this Earth / Entrails unlike) of mineral and Stone” to forge their engines of war (515-16). For a thorough discussion of demonic, or parodic, images of creation like these, see Michael Lieb, *The Dialectic of Creation: Patterns of Birth and Regeneration in Paradise Lost*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970.

³⁸ Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966, 194.

putting thoughts into form: "'Tis to create, and in creating live / A being more intense, that we endow / With form our fancy" (6). In this passage, Byron imagines the creative act – the shaping of thoughts into forms – quite consciously as a process of embodiment, rather than as a relatively formless or dematerializing cathartic output, such as sweating, purging, or spewing lava. This deliberately constructive depiction of form or embodiment is the precise opposite of Byron's pathologically fragmented and degenerative experience of his body, the view of composition that derives from that experience, and the drive to disembodiment himself.

To counteract the more challenging aspects of his literal body, Byron turns to the control and manipulation of poetic form, thereby displacing his concern for his own physical structures and surfaces onto a concern for the structures and surfaces of his poetry. Such a reading helps to account for Byron's otherwise odd love of the Augustans. Their neoclassical fondness for decorum and their adherence to strict formal rules and conventions would not have appealed to Byron's rebellious nature and overall mistrust of systems, but they would have appealed to his desire and need for control in his life, for self-mastery. The blank verse, sweeping lyricism, and subjective meditative sequences of so much of the poetry of his contemporaries, however, made him feel "half mad" with disorder (*BL&J* 5.165). Ruins and fragments figure prominently throughout much of Byron's poetry and are suggestive of his sense of his own body. The episodic, multi-generic structure of *Don Juan*, composed in response to an abundance of stimuli, can be seen as a formal analogue for this thematic content, but the effect is very different. The poem's quick transitions between genres and its clever play with the bits and pieces of poetic convention represent the work of an author confidently wielding the tools of his trade, not one at the mercy of a failing body. In addition to the technically demanding Spenserian stanzas of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, many of the other poems written in Switzerland are highly complicated structurally: he composes two Petrarchan sonnets, (which are challenging to write in English), a range of poems in heroic couplets, and one poem in ottava rima, in which all of *Don Juan* would eventually be written (also challenging to write in English because of the paucity of rhyming words relative to the Italian language).³⁹ Byron's claims to spontaneous composition free of editing and revision are frequent in his letters and are announced in a typically exaggerated way in *Don Juan* (IX.41). However, this is clearly a rhetorical move, since the highly structured nature of his verse, from its complex and limited rhyme schemes, to its stanzaic properties, to the balance and symmetries of whole poems, for the most part requires great discipline and control and would have been impossible to write extemporaneously.⁴⁰ It is perhaps in this way, through the mastery of his content via the deliberate mastery of form, that poetic composition proves most therapeutic for Byron – a way for his ruined body to be reconstituted by the formal analogue of the poem itself.

³⁹ Drummond Bone, 'First Look at Exile: Byron's Art in 1816.' *Byron Journal* 19 (1991): 78.

⁴⁰ John A. Hodgson, 'The Structures of *Childe Harold* III.' *Studies in Romanticism* 18 (1979): 363.

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