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PONDERING O’ER THE SKELETON: DECAY AS CONTROLLING METAPHOR IN DON JUAN

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I

Byron was always fascinated with the idea of decay, as we know from his letters, his journals, and to an even greater extent, his poetry. That the theme of decay is important to many of Byron’s works has long been appreciated; but its fundamental and profound importance to the greatest of his works, Don Juan, is yet to be fully understood.

Little attention, for instance, has been paid to the fourth canto of Childe Harold in relation to Don Juan. More attention has been paid, instead, to the influence of Beppo; and it is perhaps because of the obvious stylistic relationship between these two poems that the significance of Childe Harold IV has been overlooked. With the first version of Childe Harold IV newly completed in 1817, and Beppo more or less hastily sandwiched in between this version and its later drafts, it is debatable which of the two works can be said, with greater accuracy, directly to precede Don Juan. In truth, Childe Harold IV is just as crucial to the development of Don Juan as is Beppo. The influence, however, is thematic rather than stylistic.

The theme of decay appears again and again in Childe Harold, but it is in Canto IV, written when Byron was twenty-nine years old, that decay as metaphor becomes increasingly complex and highly integral to the work—so integral, in fact, that it lies at the center of most critical interpretations, and has led at least two critics to comment upon the tradition of “ruin-poems” from which it descends.¹ This canto, in short, is about decay: decay of body, of spirit, of love and beauty, of art, glory, fame, and power. All of these themes figure prominently in Don Juan, and all of them suggest, in one way or another, the process of decay that seems to me a central metaphor in Byron’s greatest work.

It is a metaphor that is present in Don Juan on many levels: as an explicit theme, it appears repeatedly in narrative asides; as a structural device, it defines the poem’s linear, time-bound progression; as a moral context, it informs and heightens character and plot; as a function of style and tone, it reflects the continual passing from the “high” mode to the “low.” Within an overall context and atmosphere, finally, that might best be described as gradual degeneration, or a general “falling-off,” it reflects dissipation on physical, spiritual, moral, emotional, social—and even formal—levels. It is, finally, a metaphor that can
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reveal much to us, if we will let it, about the mind and the heart of its creator, about Byron himself.

II

The most explicit, extended passages on decay in Don Juan are often those in which the narrator takes a merciless, unflinching look into the grave, and invites us to do the same:

Death laughs—Go ponder o’er the skeleton
With which men image out the unknown thing
That hides the past world, like to a set sun
Which still elsewhere may rouse a brighter spring,—
Death laughs at all you weep for:—look upon
This hourly dread of all, whose threatened sting
Turns life to terror, even though in its sheath!
Mark! how its lipless mouth grins without breath!²

What are the hopes of man? old Egypt’s King
Cheops erected the first pyramid
And largest, thinking it was just the thing
To keep his memory whole, and mummy hid;
But somebody or other rummaging,
Burglariously broke his coffin’s lid;
Let not a monument give you or me hopes,
Since not a pinch of dust remains of Cheops.

(II: 1.219.1-8)

I pass each day where Dante’s bones are laid:
A little cupola, more neat than solemn,
Protects his dust, but reverence here is paid
To the bard’s tomb, and not the warrior’s column:
The time must come, when both alike decay’d,
The chieftain’s trophy, and the poet’s volume,
Will sink where lie the songs and wars of earth,
Before Pelides’ death, or Homer’s birth.

(II: 4.104.1-8)

As in Childe Harold, however, the narrator does not limit his fascination with decay to that following death, but is similarly taken with the idea of decay before death. And we find soon in the poem why this should be so:

But now at thirty years my hair is gray—
(I wonder what it will be like at forty?)
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I thought of a peruke the other day.)

My heart is not much greener; and, in short, I
Have squander’d my whole summer while ’twas May...

No more—no more—Oh! never more, my heart,
Canst thou be my sole world, my universe!
Once all in all, but now a thing apart,
Thou canst not be my blessing or my curse:
The illusion’s gone forever...

(II: 1.213.1-215.5)

So we find that the imminent passing of the narrator’s own youth (as the poet’s) explains the overriding obsession in the poem with both physical and emotional decay. Because of this obsession, “material” and “spiritual” decay are fundamentally related; and the dissolution of the human being on all levels becomes central to the poet’s vision of the universe.

This particular theme, furthermore, is reflected not merely in narrative asides; its mentality infuses the poem even on the levels of plot and characterization. The narrator’s preoccupation with his own physical decay is reflected, for instance, in a preoccupation with the characters’ ages, which are usually described in quite specific terms, and the implications thereof commented upon at some length. Though Julia is what one might ordinarily regard as a rather young twenty-three, we are made quite conscious of her age as being something less than young. This much is implied, at least in part, by the comparison we are invited to make of her with Juan: at sixteen his approach to their love affair is less worldly, more idealistic. On the other hand, we are also well aware of the contrast in ages between Julia and Alfonso, much being made of the difference between twenty-three and fifty. Similar contrasts occur later in the poem with the juxtaposition of Haidée and her father, and of the Empress Catherine and Juan.

Akin to this technique of contrasting characters’ ages is the “doubling” of characters—that is, the pairing of one major character with a minor character who is just a few years older. The minor character in such instances seems to suggest the younger character within a few years’ time. Typical of this device is Haidée, paired with the beautiful, but less beautiful and more down-to-earth, Zoe. Another example is the pairing of Juan with Johnson, who is the narrator’s age and the poet’s when he began Don Juan—thirty. Johnson’s greater experience and more cynical attitude towards both love and war are a clear contrast to Juan’s. At times, the suggestion of physical and spiritual decay becomes quite explicit:
“You take things coolly, sir,” said Juan. “Why,”
Replied the other, “What can a man do?
There still are many rainbows in your sky,
But mine have vanished. All, when life is new, 
Commence with feelings warm and prospects high; 
But time strips our illusions of their hue,
And one by one in turn, some grand mistake
Casts off its bright skin yearly like the snake.

"'Tis true, it gets another bright and fresh,
Or fresher, brighter; but the year gone through,
This skin must go the way too of all flesh. . . ."

(II: 5.21.1-22.3)

Emotional decay, then, is an important extension of the idea of physical decay—but it is still just one part of a larger, more cosmic vision. Even more pronounced than the idea of emotional decay is the suggestion of a moral decay within the poem. This particular dimension of the theme can be traced through the poem’s linear structure—particularly the structure of the first ten cantos. From the moment of Juan’s symbolic death and rebirth in the first half of Canto II (the shipwreck passage), he gradually works his way back towards a civilization similar to the one he left behind in Canto I. Thus he finds his way from the “sunny clime” of Spain, to the paradisal Greek island of Haidée, through the pagan society of Turkey, and finally to the Christian civilization of Russia. And as he travels from “paradise” towards this icy wasteland, he is also making his way towards the darkest of evils within man and within the universe—towards slavery, decadent sexuality, abuse of power, merciless warfare, and death. Thus we see a moral progression (or regression, if you will) that directly corresponds to geography, and to time—to both the civilizing and the aging processes.

The presence of Haidée, Gulbeyaz, and Catherine in Cantos II through X makes concrete not only the poem’s progression from youth to age, but its corresponding progression from innocence to moral corruption. This moral progression can be traced through two fundamental aspects of their characterization: love and power. With increasing age, we find a decrease in the capacity for love (that is, for idealized, selfless love), and a corresponding increase in power (and thus in cruelty and inhumanity). Haidée, for instance, has at least nominal power in her position as princess, heiress, and first lady of the land. But the true nature of her subjugated, and ultimately powerless, position is all too evident when her father returns to their island. On the other hand, her capacity for love—and love of the most ideal kind—
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is clearly of profound proportions. Gulbeyaz represents the second step in an evolution of both qualities. That she has power is indisputable: "‘To hear and to obey’ had been from birth/The law of all around her...” (II: 5.112.1-2). Her power is not complete, however: she, too, is subject to a Sultan’s whims. Her love, furthermore, though seemingly of a most sincere and passionate nature, is inferior to Haidée’s. That she chooses Don Juan from a line of slaves for the express purpose of loving is, needless to say, indication of a cynicism beyond the innocent Haidée’s capabilities. Both these tendencies culminate, finally, in Catherine. Her love is little more than open and undisguised lust; her power, too, appears to be absolute in nature (‘‘Glory to God and to the Empress!’’ exclaims Suwarow. “Powers Eternal!! such names mingled!” adds the narrator—III: 8.133.7-8). Furthermore, the bloody descriptions of the warfare for which she is responsible are the most explicit indication of her gross misuse of this power.

Immortality and physical decay, then, are clearly related in the linear structure of the poem; and the worst of evil is thus often compared to the passing of time:

The bayonet pierces and the sabre cleaves,
And human lives are lavished everywhere,
As the year closing whirls the scarlet leaves
When the stript forest bows to the bleak air,
And groans; and thus the peopled City grieves,
Shorn of its best and loveliest, and left bare;
But still it falls with vast and awful splinters,
As Oaks blown down with all their thousand winters.

(III: 8.88.1-8)

The passage, then, that is most often accused of “tastelessness” within the poem is simply in keeping with this metaphor, and with the world that Byron has created:

Some odd mistakes too happened in the dark,
Which showed a want of lanthorns, or of taste...
But six old damsels, each of seventy years,
Were all deflowered by different Grenadiers...

Some voices of the buxom middle-aged
Were also heard to wonder in the din
(Widows of forty were these birds long caged)
“Wherefore the ravishing did not begin!”

(III: 8.130.1-132.4)
The worst of evils—warfare, murder, rape—and the spectre of old age, or physical decay, all combine to reinforce Byron’s (predominantly) dark vision of the human condition.

So we can see that the concept of decay is important not only to the idea of emotion, but to the idea of morality; and not only thematically important, but structurally important, as well. Furthermore, this progressive linear structure is reflected and reinforced continually throughout the poem in the presence of more minute versions of the same technique. Stanzas 122 to 126 of Canto I, for instance, contain such a condensed progression. In what amounts to an extended description of the concept of “sweet,” the passage begins with highly romantic images of nature that anticipate many such passages in the Haidée episode:

... ’Tis sweet to hear
At midnight on the blue and moonlit deep
The song and oar of Adria’s gondolier,
               By distance mellow’d, o’er the waters sweep;
’Tis sweet to see the evening star appear;
’Tis sweet to listen as the nightwinds creep
From leaf to leaf. . . .

(II: 1.122.1-7)

In stanza 124, however, the language begins to shift from the romantic to reflect, instead, a heady, bacchanalian lust that anticipates, for instance, the Dudu episode in Canto VI:

Sweet is the vintage, when the showering grapes
In Bacchanal profusion reel to earth
Purple and gushing. . . .

(II: 1.124.1-3)

The passage then goes on (with the exception of one line, which describes the love of a father for his first-born) to mention both war-lust and greed for money in the same breath:

Sweet to the miser are his glittering heaps . . .
Sweet is revenge—especially to women,
Pillage to soldiers, prize-money to seamen.

(II: 1.124.5-8)
The theme of material greed is continued as the language now changes to reflect the caustic humor characteristic of the England cantos, and of those passages in the poem which come closest to satire:

Sweet is a legacy, and passing sweet
The unexpected death of some old lady
Or gentleman of seventy years complete,
Who've made "us youth" wait too—too long already
For an estate, or cash, or country-seat . . .

(II: 1.125.1-8)

The gradual shift in thematic emphasis, then, is accompanied by a corresponding shift in tone from pathos, or seriousness, to satire. Progressive series such as this one are found in even more condensed form elsewhere; and, if not precisely reflective of the poem's order of progression, they at least approximately suggest it:

Love's the first net which spreads its deadly mesh;
   Ambition, Avarice, Vengeance, Glory, glue
The glittering lime-twigs of our latter days,
   Where still we flutter on for pence or praise.

(II: 5.22.5-8)

Few mortals know what end they would be at,
   But whether glory, power, or love, or treasure,
The path is through perplexing ways, and when
The goal is gain'd, we die . . .

(II: 1.133.5-8)

This technique is quite similar to the "diminuendo" series that M. K. Joseph finds (p. 214)—a technique that he too sees as "microstructure" reflecting "macrostructure" (p. 212). He speaks about what Donald Davie has called, in his *Purity of Diction in English Verse*, "a deliberate courting of impurities in diction" (qtd. in Joseph, p. 220)—a series that reflects a falling-off, or a "break[ing of] decorum by drawing on the prosaic," thus leading to "anti-climax and deflation" (p. 214). Furthermore, he follows his description of this "controlled 'impurity'" (p. 223) with discussion of the "catastrophism" (p. 224) (as opposed to evolution) that some geologists of Byron's time supported, and that Byron himself, so Joseph argues, seems partial to within *Don Juan*. He does not make the connection explicit, but the affinities between Joseph's idea of "microstructure" (diminuendo series) and "macrostructure" (catastrophism and its related themes) are evident:
both reflect the dissipation, degeneration, or general “falling-off” that is characteristic of the poem on many levels. What is particularly interesting, however, is that in Joseph’s discussion of the “diminuendo” series he relates the technique, however briefly, to tone, suggesting that the “deflative” move is also a move from the “serious” to the “cosmic” (p. 214). This brings to mind Ridenour’s (and others’) discussion of “high and low” diction— and one is sorely tempted to see even the multiple shades of the narrator’s tone as a progression from seriousness to irony, pathos to satire, or a kind of “decay” within itself. Even more significantly, however, Byron himself suggests this idea in Don Juan when he directly relates “deflation” of style to the passing of time, and to his own physical decay:

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.

(II: 4.3.5-8)

From theme, to structure, to style—on moral, social, and literal levels—the concept of decay infuses the poem, and goes a long way towards helping us understand both narrator and author.

III

One important qualification must be made here to my reading of this poem. Although the importance of the concept of decay seems to me undeniable, Byron may well have been aware (at least instinctively) of the inherent complexities of such an idea, and of the dangers of oversimplification. Indeed, many critics—no matter which themes they have stressed in their own interpretations—must eventually do some kind of double-bind, and remark upon the same thing: Byron’s insistence on having things both ways—even a hundred different ways—at once. This artistic peculiarity gives rise to such critical examinations as the following: “The poem will allow us to formulate not an idea about itself but only ideas about what it is saying at any particular moment”; “The traditional associations of epic and satire are constantly being played against each other in the course of defining the sense in which a satire may be epic”; “And, after all, love and dreams of paradise regained are no different from ‘Fame, Ambition, Avarice.’” Rather than seeing this tendency as nothing more substantial than uncontrolled self-contradiction, I believe, on the contrary, that Byron was simply being true to his own philosophy about any “system”
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whatever, and therefore avoided imposing such a closed system upon the world of his poem.

The clearest indication of this possibility is the remarkable “balance” of Don Juan. The first, most blatant, example of this balance can be found in the peculiar nature and structure of Canto II. If the first half of Canto II is to be included in the linear structure of the poem, in its gradual “falling-off” process, then it is indeed placed in a peculiar position. The extreme pessimism and darkness of this section—the shipwreck passage—is not reached again in the poem—not even, in my opinion, in the war scenes of Cantos VII and VIII. Here, in this second canto, Juan encounters the darkest of the dark: cannibalism, insanity, unparalleled physical suffering, and death. This entire section is in fact a long, tortured, and hopeless scene of decay as the shipwrecked men waste away in body, mind, and spirit. They are reduced, in the end, to animals; and all ideals, all common bonds of humanity, are rendered absolutely meaningless.

This passage, clearly, should come after the Haidée episode if it is to be in keeping with the dominant structure of the poem. But we are reminded in its particular placement that decay is something more than a process—that Juan, in short, must die before he can be reborn to paradise. Death must come first in the progression because it is inherent in everything that contains Life; and this much is clear in the second half of the canto, which is infused with vestiges of its first half. After the dark vision of sin and death in the shipwreck passage, echoes of this vision throughout the rest of the poem, especially in the Haidée episode, are particularly effective. Love may be at its most beautiful in Canto II, but it is also a source of sin and suffering. The narrator even goes so far as to call it the “god of evil” (205.7), and likens it to Death itself (st. 197). Haidée also embodies elements of evil and death. Her eyes, we learn almost immediately, are “black as death” (117.2), and she stands over Juan, as he sleeps, “still as death” (143.7). Finally, we are reminded that the warmth with which she restores life to Don Juan is kindled by the broken remnants of wrecked ships:

They made a fire, but such a fire as they
Upon the moment could contrive with such
Materials as were cast up round the bay,
Some broken planks, and ears, that to the touch
Were nearly tinder, since so long they lay
A mast was almost crumbled to a crutch. . . .

(132.1-6)
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With this passage, the image of decay surfaces once again; and thus we see that the life of the canto’s second half is quite literally dependent on the decay of its first half.

The first half of this canto, then, serves to “open” what I see as a system of morality that would otherwise, in many ways, remain closed. In Cantos II through X the increasing decay of morals is unmistakably associated with the growth of civilization—with monarchy, imperialism, and war in particular. Such inferior stanzas as the Daniel Boone passage in Canto VIII (sts. 61-67) are indication of the banality that such an oversimplification—or closed system—must inevitably lead to. The first half of Canto II, however, anticipates that problem. While the rest of the poem clearly suggests that civilization equals evil, the message of the first half of Canto II is just as clear that evil lies, not within society, but within the heart of man. It is a scene, after all, cut off from all vestiges of civilization: it is the bottom line—man left to himself in a moral void, struggling for nothing but survival. A fitting beginning to the poem’s long trek towards civilization, it is the opposite of civilization—of Catherine’s world—and thus balances the all-too-simple presentation of evil that her world might sometimes seem to suggest.

But perhaps the most poignant and condensed example of this kind of balance lies in what Ridenour sees as the poem’s controlling theme: that of the Fall. Byron’s many paradisal allusions in the poem contain, in essence, two contradictory ideas: that of man in his ideal state and that of man falling away from his ideal state. Paradise, then, is an allusion to both timeless perfection, as well as to the beginning of both spiritual and physical decay for man—that “slip” which “tumbled all mankind into the grave” (III: 9.19.3-4). That such a paradox is indeed central to the work, and conscious on Byron’s part, is evident in passages such as the following in which he describes the “paradisal” homeland of Haidée’s mother:

Her mother was a Moorish maid, from Fez,
Where all is Eden, or a wilderness.

There the large olive rains its amber store
   In marble fonts; there grain, and flower, and fruit,
Gush from the earth until the land runs o’er;
   But there too many a poison-tree has root,
And midnight listens to the lion’s roar,
   And long, long deserts scorch the camel’s foot,
Or heaving whelm the helpless caravan,
   And as the soil is, so the heart of man.

(II: 4.54.7-55.8)
Innocence is corruption, beauty is evil, life is death: such ideas are everywhere in the poem, both implicit and explicit ("For me, I sometimes think that Life is Death," says the narrator—III: 9.16.7, my emphasis). About these passages one could accurately say what Ridenour says about certain other passages in his discussion of the Fall:

The statements, taken in themselves, are clearly contradictory. But again this is not indecision or confusion. Not only do both points of view have their validity, but Byron supplies us with a consistent metaphor in terms of which the fact may be contemplated. That basis is again the Christian myth of the Fall. (28-29)

Within a structure, then, that clearly reflects a linear and time-bound progression, Byron does indeed manage to have it both ways—and successfully.

IV

There could be no more fitting conclusion to a poem with the structural and stylistic characteristics of Don Juan than for the hero to find himself, eventually, in the poet’s native England. England is indeed the very height of “civilized decadence” within the poem—the true culmination of all that has gone before. Lust for power is replaced by lust for money in the final six cantos—for the “wealth of worlds” (III: 10.83.4), which is associated with decay, or old age, more than once:

Youth fades, and leaves our days no longer sunny;
We tire of Mistresses and Parasites;
But oh, Ambrosial Cash! Ah! who would lose thee?
When we no more can use, or even abuse thee!

(III: 13.100.5-8)

Consequently, as pathos, drama, and horror wane, satire emerges as the most fitting approach to the decadence characteristic of England.

As tone changes, then, and the linear structure of the poem as we have seen it dissolves, other elements of the poem must naturally and inevitably change, including the nature and treatment of the poem’s controlling metaphor. The stark, condensed, and vivid images of decay that appear so often in the first ten cantos become less frequent. At the same time, those passages which do treat specifically of decay, though fewer and more subtle, are generally longer, and take on new and
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powerful urgency. The ubi sunt passage in Canto XI (sts. 76-85) is a fine example. The theme of decay, though muted here, is undeniably present; and in these ten stanzas universality, pathos, and a genuine grieving for humankind all blend perfectly and eloquently with satire:

“Where is the World?” cries Young, “at eighty”—“Where
The World in which a man was born?” Alas!
Where is the world of eight years past? ’T was there—
I look for it—’t is gone, a globe of glass!
Cracked, shivered, vanished, scarcely gazed on, ere
A silent change dissolves the glittering mass.
Statesmen, Chiefs, Orators, Queens, Patriots, Kings,
And Dandies—all are gone on the Wind’s wings.

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

(III: 11.76.1-77.8)

Another example of an extended passage of decay lies in Canto XIII. Here, no less than seven stanzas are devoted to describing the ruin and decay of the old Abbey:

A glorious remnant of the Gothic pile,
(While yet the church was Rome’s) stood half apart
In a grand Arch, which once screened many an aisle.
These last had disappear’d—a loss to Art:
The first yet frowned superbly o’er the soil,
And kindled feelings in the roughest heart,
Which mourn’d the power of time’s or tempest’s march,
In gazing on that venerable Arch . . . .

A mighty window, hollow in the centre,
Shorn of its glass of thousand colourings,
Through which the deepen’d glories once could enter,
Streaming from off the sun like seraph’s wings,
Now yawns all desolate: now loud, now fainter,
The gale sweeps through its fretwork, and oft sings
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The owl his anthem, where the silenced quire
Lie with their hallelujahs quench'd like fire.

III: 13.59.1-62.8

This is in fact a brilliant reappearance of the theme of decay, and its corresponding romantic elements, in a setting now predominantly given over to satire. Throughout Don Juan, it is true, romance and satire alternate, intermingle, complement one another, to add up to what is finally a powerful medley of art and social commentary. Tragedy is tempered with irony, and satire with pathos—we are “scorched and drenched” at once. But the story of the Black Friar is perhaps the greatest medium for this technique within the English cantos. It is a story at once romantic and burlesque—a parody of contemporary Gothic works, and thus one that provides an atmosphere easily inclusive of both the romance of an Aurora Raby, and the wit and worldliness of a Fitzfulke. With this introduction, then, of Gothic elements into British society at its most burlesque, Byron is truly in his element: an element that seems quite clearly linked in some fundamental way to the concept of decay and all that it means to the poet—be it satire, romance, decadence, evil, mortality of man, or immortality of theme.

V

The natural question arises, then, about Byron’s intent: did he or did he not fully and consciously plan all of this? My own sympathies, on the contrary, tend to lie with those critics who believe that Don Juan was a fundamentally fortuitous work—that the growth of the poem was, for the most part, both organic and more or less haphazard. But the presence of decay as a powerful image, a central metaphor, a significant theme, is nevertheless clearly conscious in many places; and I believe that the strength of Byron’s fascination with the idea—particularly at this time of his life (from thirty, to his death at thirty-six)—was enough to make it unconsciously reflected throughout the entire work. Many critics of Don Juan have suggested (McGann, indeed, calls the idea a “commonplace”) that the unifying principle of the poem is nothing other than the character of Byron as narrator, and I am in agreement with this view. In the end, the vision of human existence as decay is nothing less than an attitude, a state of mind, that informs virtually every line of Don Juan, and—because of its depth and pervasiveness—has the potential to reveal a great deal about the poet’s own consciousness besides.

The implications of this theme, indeed, are such that they can call forth strikingly similar reactions to the poem by some of the poem’s
shrewdest interpreters—reactions that are reflected in an even more strikingly similar vocabulary. Rutherford senses a “deflation” of romantic sentiment; Joseph sees not only “deflation” but “anti-climax” and even “catastrophism”; Ridenour gives great emphasis to the Fall as well as to the concepts of “time and disillusion”; McGann talks about the “lowering” of love and ideals, and about the literary and social “decline,” “degeneration,” and “corruption” which Don Juan seems “intended . . . to correct.”9 McGann’s comments are particularly interesting in that he later relates this “gain and loss, rise and fall” pattern to contemporary political and social events, as well as to Byron’s own life.10

Byron’s letters and journal entries, indeed, merely serve to confirm all of our instincts on the matter. This is a man who is so specifically obsessed with the idea of decay that he cannot fail to visit every ruin or graveyard within his reach, nor keep himself from literally carrying pieces of such sites away with him. In November of his twenty-eighth year, on his way to Venice, he writes the following description of Juliet’s legendary tomb in Verona:

It is a plain, open, and partly decayed sarcophagus, with withered leaves in it, in a wild and desolate conventual garden, once a cemetery, now ruined to the very graves. The situation struck me as very appropriate to the legend, being blighted as their love. I have brought away a few pieces of the granite. . . .

(BLJ V, 126)

Six months earlier, on the same journey, he had written of a similar, even more macabre, experience:

We went over the site of Aventicum . . . a column or two down—several scattered shafts—& one solitary pillar in the midst of a field—the last of its family . . . . From Morat I brought away the leg and wing of a Burgundian. . . .

(BLJ V, 78)

Four years later—and hard at work on Don Juan—he continues to display a preoccupation with the subject of physical decomposition that borders on maniacal intensity:

. . . I have seen a thousand graves opened—and always perceived that whatever was gone—the teeth and hair remained of those who had died with them.— —Is not this
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odd?—they go the very first things in youth—and yet last
the longest in the dust—if people will but die to preserve
them?—It is a queer life—and a queer death—that of
mortals.

(BLJ VIII, 228)

It was Venice—the city of decay—that seemed to provide the most
fertile grounds for Byron’s imagination. He writes to Thomas Moore
in his twenty-eighth year:

It is my intention to remain at Venice during the winter,
probably, as it has always been (next to the East) the
greenest island of my imagination. It has not disappointed
me; though its evident decay would, perhaps, have that
effect upon others. But I have been familiar with ruins too
long to dislike desolation.

(BLJ V; 129)

And it is within Venice that he begins work on the greatest artistic
achievement of his life, Don Juan. He was thirty at the time.

To Byron, the metaphor of decay was a metaphor so complex as to
encompass all the greater concerns of his life: the waning of his own
physical, emotional, and sexual powers; the disintegration of his family
life; the corruption of his society; the degradation of his literature; the
sadly ephemeral nature of his world. And yet, at the same time, decay
had a fascinating, morbid beauty about it that would find expression in
the romance and history of a Norman abbey or a Venice; in the
excitement of a short-lived, adulterous affair; in the deeply troubling
paradox of beauty and evil within man. Byron sensed the heart of the
universe within the metaphor, and then rightly tapped it to produce
some of his most profound, and most beautiful, art in Don Juan.

NOTES


All subsequent references appear in the text with volume, canto,
stanza, and line numbers.
DECAY AS METAPHOR IN DON JUAN


5I am indebted to Jerome McGann for bringing to my attention not only the beauty, but the critical importance, of these stanzas.


7See in particular, “Don Juan” in Context, Ch. 1.

8“Don Juan” in Context, pp. 66, 174n.
