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# THE PROTEAN POET

## Byron's *Don Juan* in the Visual Arts

*Tim Killick*



What jolly talk into the small hours! Thackeray and Dickens again, and Tennyson and Byron (who was 'not dead yet' in those days); and Titian and Velasquez, and young Millais and Holman Hunt (just out); and Monsieur Ingres and Monsieur Delacroix, and Balzac and Stendhal and George Sand; and the good Dumas! and Edgar Allan Poe; and the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome [...]<sup>1</sup>

SO WROTE GEORGE DU MAURIER in *Trilby*, looking back at the 1850s from the vantage point of the 1890s. For Du Maurier's mid-century troupe of Parisian bohemians, Byron may have been 'not dead yet', but his fall first from critical and then from popular grace over the course of the century was preordained. Although this downward trajectory is broadly true, Byron could never quite be finished off. He would rise again and again, as readers found new ways to engage with his poetry. This essay is concerned with Byron's enduring popularity, and the ways in which the multiplicity of his works, coupled with the fascination regarding his life and personality, have given rise to a range of visual art which reflects the fluid, protean qualities of the man and his poetry. This is a broad subject, so the focus will be on illustrations to Byron's late epic, *Don Juan*. My intention is to employ the poem as a case study, not only to show the diverse ways of illustrating Byron, but also to argue that his representation in art may also be used as a barometer to assess broader attitudes towards the Romantic movement.

My central theme is the treatment of Byron's poetry in visual art across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By taking a long view and presenting a survey of images that span a century and a half of visual culture I hope to elucidate at least some of the ways in which Byronic art has evolved since the poet's lifetime. My interest lies in the different interpretations which Byron's work has experienced at the hands of artists, and in the cultural and ideological inscriptions which occur when art takes its cue from literature. Consequently, my discussion covers both book illustration and painting. This is not to suggest that the two modes of visual art are equivalent, or that their practitioners had the same audiences or intentions. Rather, it is an attempt to explore the connections between the different ways of reading Byron that have developed across

history and media: illustration in the broadest sense of the word. In pictures from *Don Juan*, the choices available to illustrators of Byron are most apparent, and through the lens of his unfinished narrative poem we can see how Byron's textual slipperiness gives rise to images of unparalleled range.

Readers have always had access to multiple and contradictory versions of Byron, both the man and his poetry. There is the quintessentially Romantic Byron, champion of intellectual liberty, personal freedom and individual genius; the Augustan Byron of *Childe Harold*, surveying European history with neo-classical verve; Byron the vibrant orientalist of the Eastern tales; the Goethian metaphysical searcher of *Manfred*; and the blasphemous radical of *Cain*—to list just some of the available constructions. All of these versions flow into one another to create fluctuating iterations of Byron's writing and persona. In *Don Juan*, Byron's satirical epic, these different strains come together to create a tragicomic tale of huge geographical and intellectual scope, in which the peripatetic adventures of the lover—hero are presented by a self-referential narrator who is by turns flippant, caustic, philosophical and humane.

Byron's inveterate multiplicity informs the treatment of his poetry in visual art—as does the unstable nature of the poet's own identity. His verse has always been refracted through the prism of his life, and artists have consistently been drawn to the blurred lines between biography and fiction, poet and protagonist. Byron was a celebrity—one of the first to whom that term might be applied in the modern sense—whose private life was a continued source of fascination for the press and the public. He was also a poet whose personality was conflated in the public mind with that of his leading characters. The abstract ideal of the Byronic hero resided in Lord Byron himself, with his scandalous lifestyle and self-imposed exile, as much as it did in any of his heroes.

From early in his career, Byron's poems were popular visual subjects, spanning mainstream and avant-garde art in both Britain and Europe. His powerful attraction for painters and illustrators held across most of the nineteenth century. As Richard Altick observes:

The popularity Byron's poetry enjoyed in the first half of the nineteenth century was amply apparent in the art exhibitions. Subjects from Byron were painted as often as subjects from those other two concurrent favourites, Burns and Scott (counting his poems only), and the number of scenes and figure studies bearing quotations from Byron but not directly related to his subjects was considerably greater than those from all other poets except Shakespeare, Thomson, and Tennyson [...] Only toward the end of the century did the demand for Byron subjects noticeably fade.<sup>2</sup>

Byron certainly waned as an artistic subject, but he never quite disappeared from the graphic world. Among his adherents, Byron developed a cult status. This made him a special kind of subject and muse, whose poetry was represented in visual art alongside his mythic persona. Byron himself became a universally recognisable Romantic symbol and his works correspondingly came to provide

a pre-primed space into which artists were able to project an array of meanings.

To some degree, Byron encouraged these connections between author and work through the elaborate, seductive series of masks which link poet, narrator and hero: an arrangement of nods and winks which Jerome McGann describes as the 'poetry of masquerade, where what [Byron] liked to call "realities" are represented in the form of conscious pseudodisguise'.<sup>3</sup> Behind these veils, the historical realities of George Gordon, 6th Baron Byron, are less important than the myth of 'Byron' the self-conceptualised poet–hero. Byron's own image became one of the key symbols of the Romantic movement: the open shirt-collar, dark cloak and well-cut tailoring which appeared in his widely circulated portraits operated as shorthand for a Romantic heroism that Byron deliberately courted and carefully (if not always successfully) negotiated. As Christine Kenyon Jones argues: 'Byron was the first contributor to the creation of his own legend', and, moreover, his ability to inhabit 'an odd feedback loop, whereby others' perceptions of him became an element in his subsequent presentation of himself' helped bolster his status as poet, hero and genius.<sup>4</sup> Byron's performative sense of self meant that his own persona(e) and those of his misanthropic heroes were often conflated in pictures, as they were in the mind of the reading public.<sup>5</sup> By extension, the wider figuration of both Byron and his poetry as Romantic *topos* became a vital component of his status as a visual subject.

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*Don Juan* (1819–24) has always stood out. It is a poem which consistently refutes any single, stable interpretation. It has been read as a series of scurrilous sexual adventures, as a radical treatise on social and political mores and as a sprawling exercise in throwaway philosophy. Its conversational tone permits a sliding scale of fluctuating registers, and its dedication to what Jane Stabler has called 'digressive intertextuality', as well as to the probing of its own motives and devices, frequently threatens to overwhelm the progress of Juan's story.<sup>6</sup> Modern scholarship places it at the heart of Byron's *oeuvre*, but it has not always been so firmly situated. The poem was a commercial success, but its disreputable sexual and political overtones became something of an embarrassment for its conservative publisher, John Murray. As several critics have pointed out, no illustrated edition was produced by Murray during Byron's lifetime (nor by John Hunt, with whom Byron published the final ten cantos), but while there was a lack of sanctioned book illustrations during the late 1810s and early 1820s, artists have always found ways to visualise the poem and its subjects.<sup>7</sup>

Images derived from literature must negotiate the gap between the temporal world of words and the spatial realm of the pictorial. They need to find a way to translate the meaning that resides on the printed page into graphic form: to communicate elements of tone, theme, plot, character or argument via another medium. In the case of *Don Juan*, the interpretative task of the illustrator is made more difficult by the enormous scope of the poem, its variations in tone

and voice, and the fact that it is the digressions from the narrative, as much as the story itself, which give the poem its structure and meaning. Moreover, *Don Juan's* primary mode is ironic. The poem sets out to entertain by exposing delusion and puncturing hypocrisy, but its relentless dedication to satire also allows readers (and artists) to take its scenarios or declarations as lightly or as seriously as they choose. The poem itself declines to moralise or offer easy answers. Rather, the narrator declares with a wink that 'I tell the tale as it is told, nor dare | To venture a solution.'<sup>8</sup> *Don Juan* is one of the most slippery texts in the English language, and has consequently inspired an enormous variety of visual art. Individual pictures may well vehemently contradict one another in their readings of the poem, but they can still be connected back to an aspect of the text itself, whose flexibility and plurality permits, even demands, multiple readings and responses.

Byronic art is certainly wide-ranging. Nonetheless, it is possible to discern pictorial patterns that demonstrate comparable ways of reading Byron. In the nineteenth century, the majority of artistic treatments of Byron's poetry participated in three distinct modes, derived from different ways of visually engaging with the broader cultural significations of literary Romanticism. These are: Byron as a poet who addresses the past, Byron as a voice of the present and Byron as a poet of a previous, lost age. These approaches are not strictly historically consecutive; rather, they describe responses to various aspects of the Romantic movement, all of which are made available within Byron's poetry. These are broad, overlapping categories, and it is worth giving instances of the three approaches I have outlined.

The first mode of visual art constructs Byron as heir to an earlier poetic tradition, and seeks to sanction his potentially suspect verse through an association with neoclassical values. Artists drew on the classical allusions and Augustan tenor of his poetry to promote a reading of Byron as an enlightened and penetrating commentator on the relationship between modernity, history and antiquity. This process had the added benefit of distancing the illustrations from the dubious morality of some of Byron's heroes, and from the more radical elements of the author's politics. One way of achieving this kind of artistic mitigation involved non-narrative pictorial representation: using landscapes, cities and ruins as the primary mode of illustration. Byron's own travels, and his penchant for taking his heroes on exotic journeys, facilitated this kind of illustration, and connecting Byron's works to classical architecture and sublime vistas strengthened his credentials as a poet of history and deflected attention away from his personal politics or his private life. As well as enabling the images to neatly sidestep issues of taste and decency, choosing to illustrate by depicting places rather than dramatic episodes had the benefit of allowing artists primarily associated with landscape painting the opportunity to engage with Byron's work.<sup>9</sup>

Illustrating through architecture or landscape was not the only way to visually emphasise the neoclassical qualities of Byron's poetry. Other artists,

especially during the late 1820s and 1830s, drew on the aesthetics of sentiment to create arrangements portraying timeless heroes and beauties. The resulting pictures were nominally Byronic, but often they might have served to illustrate any number of canonical authors: from Shakespeare (notably Boydell's edition, 1791–1802), through James Thomson, to Walter Scott. The boom in illustrated editions of Scott, in particular, served to create a market for this neoclassical pictorial style. The *Waverley* novels were published in a number of collected editions throughout the 1820s, culminating in the *Magnum Opus* (1829–33), and the steel-engraved illustrations that accompanied these volumes established a distinct style. Engravings to Scott drew heavily on both the picturesque topography of travel literature and the sentimental scenes that appeared in the popular annuals or gift-books, and the success of the *Magnum Opus* meant that artists and publishers sought to repeat the process with other authors.<sup>10</sup>

*Don Juan's* rakish frisson made it a distinctly less popular subject for this kind of classicised or orientalisised sentiment than some of Byron's other poems (most notably *Childe Harold* and the Eastern tales). However, some *Juan* illustrations of this type did appear, showing how even the most confrontational of Byron's texts could be incorporated into a more polished and palatable aesthetic. One such example is an engraving from Henry James Richter (Figure 1, overleaf), which appears in *The Byron Gallery* (1833).<sup>11</sup> The scene shows the first embrace between Juan and Haidée:

They look upon each other, and their eyes  
Gleam in the moonlight; and her white arm clasps  
Round Juan's head, and his around hers lies  
Half buried in the tresses which it grasps;  
She sits upon his knee, and drinks his sighs,  
He hers, until they end in broken gasps;  
And thus they form a group that's quite antique,  
Half naked, loving, natural, and Greek. (*DJ*, II.194)

Byron's description is playful and allusive: it asserts nudity and implies sex. Richter moderates the sexual dimensions of the *Juan* myth by stressing the youth and beauty of the lovers, and their commitment to fidelity at the moment depicted. His picture reinforces this reading by giving the scene a formal, academic aesthetic—even if the fit is perhaps a little awkward.

Richter's illustration is part of a mode of Byronic art in which the heroes and heroines are exoticised, orientalisised and idealised. Throughout the nineteenth century, there existed a polite vein of illustration which sought to emphasise the elegant and refined sides to Byron while minimising the libertarian and facetious. In such pictures, the poetry is pictorially smoothed and glossed; issues of politics, sex and violence are present, but their fangs are drawn by an immersion in classical vistas and precise formal arrangements. In Richter's scene, Juan and Haidée are presented as eternal lovers, captured in a moment of union, with their gently touching heads and the sweep of their linked arms producing a perfect heart-shaped connection. In turn, the lovers are framed by a sympa-





FIG. 1. HENRY JAMES RICHTER, ILLUSTRATION TO  
*DON JUAN*, IN *THE BYRON GALLERY* (1833)

thetic natural landscape which lends a harmonious balance and chaste poise to their relationship, effectively drawing a veil over their dubious unmarried state, and their doomed future. Sexual desire is not entirely absent—Haidée’s coquettishly discarded slipper provides a hint of indelicacy appropriate for a heroine described as ‘Passion’s child’ (*DJ*, II.202.2) and ignorant of the politics of polite courtship. The inclusion of the fallen slipper ensures that the illustration withholds approval by acknowledging the impropriety of the situation. Nonetheless, the picture remains essentially tasteful and decorative, helping to legitimise both *Don Juan* and Byron himself by placing the primary emphasis on a refined connection to the antique.



*The Byron Gallery: A Series of Historical Embellishments to Illustrate the Poetical Works of Lord Byron* (to give the work its full title) was an album of thirty-one prints designed to be inserted by the purchaser into existing editions of Byron's works. Richter's illustration was therefore part of a collection which had a civilising as well as aesthetic aim. Other contributors included leading academic painters, such as Thomas Stothard, Richard Westall and Henry Corbould—all of whom had variously provided illustrations for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery and for collected editions of Scott. By slotting their unimpeachably elegant images into the pages of a copy of Byron, the physical book could become an art object, elevating its status and confirming the good taste of the owner. In this way, neoclassical illustrations to Byron of this kind offered themselves as tools to assuage sensitive readers, ensuring that it was the decorous, rather than scandalous, elements of his poems upon which the gaze of the viewer and reader fell.

\* \* \*

A second kind of Byronic art situates the poet's work firmly within the radical and revolutionary context of the early decades of the nineteenth century. This approach was particularly prominent in France, where Byron became a Romantic figurehead and embodied a modern and progressive conception of post-Waterloo European history which a generation of artists were eager to embrace.<sup>12</sup> As Stephen Bann has argued, 'French artists did not simply borrow themes from British Romantic poets. They used them to force the pace of artistic change'.<sup>13</sup> Byron became an icon for a movement: a kind of ur-poet for visual representations of high-minded Romanticism. The most enthusiastic French exponent of Byronic art was Eugène Delacroix, who produced dozens of paintings, prints and drawings which directly illustrate scenes from Byron's poetry, as well as many more which broadly share subject matter with the poet's works and life. Delacroix identified keenly with Byron's writings, and with the man himself. He cautioned himself in his journal: 'always remember certain passages from Byron, they are an unfailing spur to your imagination; they are right for you.'<sup>14</sup> For Delacroix, Byron came to represent Romanticism, with a capital 'R' and all the implications of liberty, rebellion and revolution that the term held. In Byron's poems he found a banquet of extant set pieces, each carrying its own set of vivid and poignant Romantic associations, to which fresh meaning could be conferred by the artist through composition, colour and line.

Unlike Richter and his ilk, Delacroix was not concerned with sanitising Byron's poetry through an affiliation with neoclassical values and aesthetics, but his pictures nonetheless seek to bend Byron's texts to fit a certain ideological position. The French artist favoured a forceful and muscular version of Byron, which centred on cataclysmic finales or scenes of passion and danger. His pictures from *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *Marino Faliero* and *Sardanapalus* all concentrate on moments of bloody climax or intense confrontation,

and show a fierce engagement with the present moment.<sup>15</sup> In the first half of the nineteenth century, French artists were still attempting to come to terms with years of civil unrest, terror and war. Napoleon had provided the ultimate instance of revolutionary man, whose immense talents and tragic weaknesses enabled him to impose his will on history with terrible consequences. Delacroix's Byronic heroes are similarly flawed, and similarly enmeshed in the immediacy of their epochal struggle.

Delacroix's 1840 representation of *The Shipwreck of Don Juan* (Figure 2, below) is less dramatic than some of his other Byronic works, but it does generate a comparable intensity. The painting deals with aftermath of the wreck: depicting the lottery used to decide which unfortunate occupant of the lifeboat was to be eaten by the rest of the starving survivors: 'The lots were made and marked and mixed and handed | In silent horror' (*DJ*, II.75.1–2). Delacroix's picture carries its own referents to the antique—via Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19) and contemporary salon debates about classicism and Romanticism. At the same time, the image maintains a fundamental engagement with the politics of post-Napoleonic Europe. It shows lost souls, their humanity slipping away in the face of death, and explores the strain placed on the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity when ideology is suddenly brought into question by events which are catastrophically real.

Maritime disasters exercised a powerful hold over the public imagination in the early nineteenth century. In his analysis of Romantic shipwreck narratives, Carl Thompson describes the social breakdown that occurs when a vessel is wrecked:



FIG. 2. EUGÈNE DELACROIX, *THE SHIPWRECK OF DON JUAN*, OIL ON CANVAS (1840)

it is not simply a physical structure that begins at this point to disintegrate. The social ties that bind the victims together as crews, and as communities can also begin to unravel, and with them those internalised structures, the web of customary social norms and taboos, by which the victims maintain their self-control and their sense of identity.<sup>16</sup>

Delacroix's *Shipwreck of Don Juan* exhibits precisely these characteristics. The disaster has brought about a forced and uneasy equality between the survivors, with rich and poor, passengers and sailors, obliged to share the nightmare of the lifeboat. At the moment of the painting they are engaged in a macabre parody of the defining democratic ritual: a reminder of the diabolical choices demanded by revolutionary change. Delacroix develops the motif of the shipwreck, deploying it as a metaphor for violent social upheaval, and gesturing towards the fear and pain of the post-revolutionary world. Moreover, like much of Delacroix's Byronic art, the picture foregrounds the destructive power that is unleashed when the thin veneer of civilisation begins to crack.

Byron and Delacroix were near contemporaries (the poet was born in 1788 and the painter in 1798) and they shared a certain *mal-du-siècle* perspective. In the decades after the defeat of Napoleon, Europe was buffeted by political upheavals and still held the promise of radical social change. Both men struggled with the disillusionment that followed Bonaparte's fall, but both were also fascinated by the possibility of a new order taking shape within their lifetime. Byron died as a consequence of his attempts to further the cause of Greek independence: a fact which only increased his personal Romantic appeal. Delacroix's politics were similarly radical-leaning, and his Byron paintings need to be considered alongside his explicitly political works, such as the *Massacre at Chios* (1824), *Greece Expiring on the Ruins of Missolonghi* (1826) and *Liberty Leading the People* (1830). The Byronic art, as much as these mytho-political pictures, frames Delacroix's post-revolutionary perspective, and presses home his belief that artists, writers and other liberal intellectuals had a crucial role to play in constructing, as much as reflecting, the events of their times.

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Delacroix's pictorial vision of Byron is characterised by its urgency and immediacy, and by a desire to align the poet with pressingly modern issues and ideals. In contrast, a third kind of nineteenth-century Byronic art looks back at the poet with a sense of nostalgia, and situates him as a tutelary spirit from a lost age of idealism. Many Victorian artists, led by the Pre-Raphaelites, turned to the Romantics for inspiration. They responded to those aspects of the Romantic movement which characterised their own art: the desire to pursue strong intellectual themes, the tendency towards myth-making and the fascination with extraordinary individuals who defied convention and tested themselves against society. Such qualities, combined with Byron's self-imposed exile and

the revolutionary context of his death, allowed late nineteenth-century artists to hold him up as a visionary, even a prophet. Under this uncomfortably reverent gaze, Byron is elevated to the status of a Romantic martyr: someone willing to sacrifice everything, even their life, for their ideals and for their art.

The most prolific Victorian illustrator of Byron was Ford Madox Brown. Though not a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Brown was a mentor of sorts to the younger group of artists. Like them, he was fascinated by the promise offered by the Romantic movement, and (like Delacroix) he came to view Byron as part of his personal canon: 'my never-faithless Burns, Byron, Spencer & Shakespear [*sic*]'.<sup>17</sup> Martin Meisel has argued that Brown regarded his pictures from Byron primarily as a test of his artistic talents: 'translating Byron's poetry into picture and then into paint was for him chiefly a technical problem.'<sup>18</sup> This may be part of the explanation for Brown's fascination with Byron, but there is also an ideological dimension to his interest in the poet. His painting, *The Finding of Don Juan by Haidée* of 1870–73 (Figure 3, below), presents a much more ambiguous portrait of the lovers than Richter's 1833 illustration.<sup>19</sup> Here, the unconscious nude figure of Juan invokes one of the central themes of Brown's Byronic art: the iconography of martyrdom. The figure of the martyr offers a model for an individual suffering alone and unaided, forced to fall back on the strength of their convictions. For Christian martyrs, this meant the absolute certainty of religious faith; for Byron's secular heroes, and for Brown, martyrdom meant drawing on personal convictions of knowledge and genius, or the validity of a philosophical or political cause.



FIG. 3. FORD MADOX BROWN, *THE FINDING OF DON JUAN BY HAIDÉE*, OIL ON CANVAS (1870–73)

*The Finding of Don Juan* balances disaster and renewal in its depiction of the aftermath of the shipwreck. Don Juan, the ever-flexible hero, is given another role to inhabit: that of the archetypal poet. From one perspective, the picture promotes the Romantic stereotype of the pale youth, dead before his time. It evokes Henry Wallis's *The Death of Chatterton* (1856), and, like Wallis, Brown participates in the Victorian tendency to idealise—even ossify—the figure of the poet. Crucially, however, the hero in Brown's picture is not dead: Haidée will revive Juan and the power of Romantic genius will endure. The arrangement offers up Byron's protagonist as a symbol of the eternal power of poetic inspiration. The resurrection theme is bolstered by the formal echoes of a *pietà*, with the broken oar suggesting the cross, allowing Juan to stand for both the fragility and the lasting legacy of Byron's writing and ideals.

Brown's painting, like all images from *Don Juan*, represents a choice. In full satirical flow, the poem is as arch and scathing as anything in literature, but its tone is never constant and the narrative voice occasionally leavens its irony by elevating optimism over cynicism:

The love of higher things and better days;  
 The unbounded hope, and heavenly ignorance  
 Of what is called the world, and the world's ways.  
 (DJ, XVI.108.1–3)

In contrast to the consciously libertine figure that inhabits most versions of the Don Juan legend, Byron's hero remains relatively uncorrupted by his amorous adventures, and his innocence allows him to represent, at least in part, the ideal of spiritual and intellectual purity in a morally relative world. Ford Madox Brown's painting develops these aspects of the poem by showing the Byronic hero in a state of poised isolation: within reach of, but disconnected from, an offer of sympathy and human fellowship and a new beginning. The hero has passed his trial and may now re-enter the world in a changed state. This situation is echoed in other pictures from Byron by Brown: his illustration to *Sardanapalus* shows the sleeping hero watched over by his lover, ready to awaken to an altered world, and his scenes from *The Prisoner of Chillon* and *Manfred* depict the protagonists at their most desperate and isolated junctures, summoning the resolve to take the final steps on their spiritual and intellectual journeys.<sup>20</sup>

Brown's emphasis on individual existentialism counters Delacroix's tendency to depict Byron's heroes in moments of fierce social crisis. Several decades separate the two artists, but as well as reflecting diachronic shifts in readings of Byron's poetry, this variance may in part be due to the differing demands of the British and French art markets. The British artist Richard Redgrave observed in the mid-century that 'there is a marked difference between the French and English in their choice of subjects. French art shows a people familiarised with blood, and with the horrors of war'.<sup>21</sup> Brown was interested in the portrayal of suffering, but he was less visceral in his depictions of violence than the French artist. Delacroix and Brown may have had to appeal to their own audiences, but their divergence also indicates different attitudes towards the Romantic



eneration of the power of the individual imagination. Delacroix depicts the hero as a man *in* time: a special kind of man, but one nonetheless bound up with the historical moment he is born into. In contrast, Brown's Byronic heroes float free of history: they present archetypes of questing artistic geniuses who transcend their particular epochs and speak to future generations, rather than immerse themselves in Delacroix's scenes of bruising realpolitik.

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These three approaches—representing alternate visions of Romanticism—dominated nineteenth-century Byronic art. Don Juan and Byron's other heroes were presented as inhabiting a neoclassical ideal, a post-revolutionary struggle or a realm of eternal genius, but while these constructions are prevalent, they are not the whole story. All three kinds of art are concerned with presenting an idealised pictorial version of Byron. They celebrate certain qualities in the poetry, and correspondingly elevate the status of the poet, and therefore require the incorporation of Byronic illustration into established visual frameworks. Byron's works are necessarily viewed through a particular lens, and the ambiguities that are at the core of *Don Juan* are often trimmed to suit an agenda. The wider history of illustrating Byron also reveals other kinds of visual construction.

William St Clair has argued that *Don Juan* reached a new audience: a class of reader 'not much interested in the former Byron, the Byron of *Childe Harold* and the *Tales*'.<sup>22</sup> This broader readership was in part served by the numerous pirated editions of *Don Juan* which appeared throughout the early nineteenth century. These were cheap, pocket-sized volumes, which often included visual material, and which Byron's legitimate publishers were unable to suppress completely.<sup>23</sup> Among the unauthorised versions of *Don Juan* was George Smeeton's 1821 edition, which carried a set of illustrations by Isaac Robert Cruikshank. These are indicative of one particular strain of pirate illustration, representing the poem in a series of dramatic set pieces whose caricature style draws on Rowlandson and Gillray, while simultaneously mirroring the poem's own bathetic, self-deflating qualities. These jaunty, ribald pictures suit the burlesque origins of Byron's *ottava rima* metre, and treat each scene with a stagy self-awareness, showing us a Juan lurching helplessly from one melodramatic crisis to the next.

Cruikshank's brightly coloured images present *Don Juan* as theatre. The frontispiece to the edition places the reader firmly in the role of audience by placing the action on a stage, framed by a curtain, with Juan in full declamatory pose. The rest of the illustrations maintain the theatrical viewpoint, and the overall tone of Smeeton's edition, set by its visual content, is one of good-natured popular entertainment. *Don Juan*'s narrator makes a promise to speak plainly to a wide audience: 'I *won't* philosophize and *will* be read' (*DJ*, x.28.8). Cruikshank's illustrations take this populist dictat to one logical conclusion by giving Juan's various predicaments their full comic effect. The image here (Figure 4, overleaf) shows the tussle between Juan and Donna Julia's cuckolded



husband, Alfonso.<sup>24</sup> The picture matches the farcical style of Byron's description, with the half-dressed combatants engaging in an undignified sequence of pommellings, grapplings and throttlings. This is a very different *Don Juan* to that presented by Richter, Delacroix or Brown. Cruikshank illustrates the gleeful, irreverent and above all entertaining *Don Juan* which sold thousands of pirate copies, and which was not afraid to amuse as much as edify, or to stimulate the blood as much as the mind.



FIG. 4. ISAAC ROBERT CRUIKSHANK,  
*DON JUAN. VERSE CLXXXIV—CANTO 1* (1821)

While the nineteenth-century visual tradition does provide low- as well as highbrow versions of *Don Juan*, it fails to offer an adequate reflection of the self-referential complexity of the poem. Neither does nineteenth-century illustrative art attempt to convey the multiplicity at the heart of a text that is only one contribution to the vast web of retellings of the Don Juan/Don Giovanni legend. Byron's version of Juan is characterised by his lack of interiority. The absence at the hero's core allows him to reflect back the desires of those he encounters, creating a repeating pattern of connection and release, which enables him to seduce, or be seduced, and continue his peregrinations with scarcely a backward glance. The fractured, free-flowing nature of the poem, written quickly and without a definite end in sight, produces a picaresque series of set pieces, glossed by a playful narrator whose sense of humour frequently oversteps the boundaries of decorum. Recognition and celebration of these tropes has dominated twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary criticism of *Don Juan*, but art has seldom shown us this version of the poem.

There are, however, notable examples of this ironic, plural *Don Juan* in visual art, specifically in two twentieth-century sets of illustrations: one by

John Austen and one by Milton Glaser. Both artists developed new modes of Byronic art: modernist (in the case of Austen) and postmodernist (in the case of Glaser). Austen and Glaser leave behind the classicised and romanticised veneration of the nineteenth century to create new pictorial idioms for the poet and his poems. These twentieth-century responses reflect developments in academic criticism of *Don Juan* by presenting densely layered, fluid visual references which match those of the text. Moreover, they both acknowledge that there is a void at the heart of Byron's poem (and at the centre of Juan himself) that can be filled in manifold ways.

John Austen's sexually frank illustrations for the *Campion Edition of Don Juan* (1926) provide an adult reading of Juan's adventures—distant relations of the saucy belles and turbaned bandits of the pirate illustrators of the 1820s. Don Juan, in his 1920s' incarnation, appears as a Regency dandy, filtered through a modern sensibility that incorporates the arch grotesquery of Aubrey Beardsley and the deco angularity of Tamara de Lempicka. Austen's illustrations strip away the last vestiges of nineteenth-century decorum still clinging to the poem and expose its raw carnality. The images focus predominantly on a combination of sex and violence, with numerous pre- and post-coital depictions of the hero, first as a dashing buck and later as an aging roué. The illustration shown here, *Haidée and Juan were not married—the fault was theirs, not mine* (Figure 5, overleaf), follows convention by depicting the lovers in one another's arms, but Austen gives us a languorous tryst, rather than the virginal blossoming of youthful ardour depicted by earlier illustrators.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Richter's coyly adolescent embrace, which seeks to minimise sensuality, Austen's image directly confronts the sexual dimension of the relationship. The choice of caption tips a wink to the narrator's ironically overstated lack of guile, while the picture itself gives Byron's description of his couple, 'Half naked, loving, natural, and Greek' (*DJ*, II.194.8), its full licentious resonance.

The illustrations to the *Campion Edition* present a somewhat cold and cruel version of *Don Juan*, emphasising the antihero's existential anxieties and self-destructive streak, rather than his seductive charm and good-humoured fatalism. In fact, Austen appears to be depicting quite a different character to Byron's mostly boyish and ingenuous creation: a much less sympathetic Juan, who embodies an iconoclastic, Modernist reaction to decades of Victorian disapproval of the Don's escapades. This is in part a recognition of the decadent, even gothic, potential of the text. In the poem, Byron's narrator lets slip an occasional expression of anxiety about the moral health of his hero:

About this time, as might have been anticipated,

Seduced by youth and dangerous examples,

Don Juan grew, I fear, a little dissipated. (*DJ*, X.23.1–3)

For the most part, Juan floats through life, unrestrained by conventional ethical considerations. In Austen's illustrations, however, the moral toll extracted by his wanderings becomes apparent. The images hint at a Dorian Gray-style façade, as Juan's boyish good looks serve to disguise an inner corruption.





FIG. 5. JOHN AUSTEN, *HAIÐÉE AND JUAN WERE NOT MARRIED—THE FAULT WAS THEIRS, NOT MINE* (1926)

*Don Juan*, with its editorial self-reflexivity and recurrent patterning, has a sense of turning inward—of the poem tracing a decaying orbit and starting to devour itself. In textual terms, it is the digressions of Byron's narrator, rather than the adventures of his protagonist, which exhibit a sardonic awareness of the dissolute elements of Juan's story:

If in the course of such a life as was  
 At once adventurous and contemplative,  
 Men who partake all passions as they pass,  
 Acquire the deep and bitter power to give  
 Their images again as in a glass,  
 And in such colours that they seem to live;  
 You may do right forbidding them to show 'em,  
 But spoil (I think) a very pretty poem. (*DJ*, IV.107)

The narrator is keen to maintain a distance between the hero of his 'pretty poem' and the consequences of his voluptuary lifestyle—not least the cynical worldliness that the narrator himself exhibits. In Austen's illustrations, however, some of the scars of experience become visible on Juan himself. It is these degenerative qualities which his pictures stress, finding a hollowness behind the glib mask of Byron's hero.<sup>26</sup>

Milton Glaser's illustrations to Isaac Asimov's 1972 edition of *Don Juan* move even further away from the urge to prettify or classicise the adventures of Byron's hero. Instead of standard set-piece narrative compositions, Glaser employs double-page spreads to present collages of sketches, decorative designs and other graphic fragments. In this edition, Byron's verse is almost overwhelmed by Asimov's extensive, obsessively detailed footnotes, which on occasions take up as much space as the poem itself. The notes go far beyond providing scholarly ballast and take on a life of their own: a fact which Glaser's illustrations acknowledge in their dense melange of narrative, character and motif. Reflecting on his career in *Graphic Design*, Glaser describes his approach to the Byron project:

I tried to echo the complexity and richness of the poem and the commentary by executing a series of drawings that had an almost 'annotated' quality themselves. I used images that came out of both Byron's and Asimov's writing, arranged in an overlapping, sometimes irrational, juxtaposition.<sup>27</sup>

Glaser's illustrations offer a way of visually expressing the poem's protean qualities. They provide a kaleidoscope of styles, encompassing cubism, abstract impressionism, surrealism and much more. They also celebrate a Romantic profusion—an overflowing abundance of ideas, invention and influences. Many of the individual motifs were drawn from picture archives, which Glaser scoured for inspiration, and the accumulated scavenged images include architectural designs, natural history sketches, fragments of classical ruins and sculpture, anatomical drawings, erotica and portraits of kings, queens, knights and beauties, all of which are overlaid to capture the anarchic turmoil of the poem.


Glaser's aggregated images also reflect, and perhaps even gently mock, the scholarly scaffolding of Asimov's edition. As an editor, Asimov takes an exhaustive approach to Byron's epic, and Glaser correspondingly creates visual reference points which reinscribe Asimov's painstaking verbal expositions of Byron's own multifarious allusions. The illustrations to this version of *Don Juan* treat the poem as an academic goldmine: a textual tapestry in which reader, and artist, can find virtually any meaning that they choose. To declare the possibility of any meaning is to edge perilously close to finding no meaning, and Glaser's overlapping images avoid presenting any one single reading in the same way that the chameleon versatility of Byron's protagonist defies attempts to fix his true essence. In this way, the pictures return to the vacancy at the centre of a hero capable of being 'all things unto people of all sorts' (*DJ*, XIV.31.2). Juan moves through his life and adventures with little discernible alteration to his character and philosophy. He is a cipher, whose signification is remade afresh with each new narrative encounter. Glaser's palimpsests match Juan's own insubstantiality, providing swirling pictorial echoes which generate a series of dynamic, shifting representations of the poem. It is this melting pot of borrowed motifs that best reflects the *Don Juan*, and the Byron, which has been of greatest interest to modern literary criticism.

\* \* \*

In the visual realm, *Don Juan* came to represent aspects of evolving conceptions of the Romantic movement across the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Byron's poem makes available various iterations of literary Romanticism, and artists have responded by celebrating the abundant potential offered by the intellectual, historical and philosophical scope of the work. As a result, visual art has presented a range of often contradictory readings of Byron, some of which sit uneasily with our modern conception of the poet, and many of which Byron himself may have had trouble recognising. To be configured as stern classicist, revolutionary standard-bearer or dreamy visionary are ironic fates for a poet who could be worldly and reactionary in equal measure, but these are just some of the ideologies and agendas into which Byron's poetry has been incorporated during his pictorial afterlife.

The desire to revere and to venerate circulates behind many illustrations to Byron. Artists have sought to elevate the textual referent, and by association enhance the status of the picture. Affirming the cultural worth of the source text is important for any illustrator, and serious-minded engagement with the poetry has been crucial to the process of constructing Byron as a fit subject for visual art. Perhaps more so than with any other of his works, the pictorial treatment of *Don Juan* is at the heart of this process. The poem is Byron's *magnum opus*: a sprawling epic which has consistently polarised readers and critics. In response to this insistent iconoclasm, much illustrative art has sought to palliate *Don Juan* by interweaving it with an established aesthetic or movement,

marginalising the vitriolic properties of the poem and incorporating Byron into more readily acceptable intellectual and ideological frameworks.

Across the historical spectrum, however, some artists have been more willing to engage with the more disreputable and subversive elements of Byron's work, and, equally importantly, to acknowledge his sense of humour. Nonetheless, there can be no definitive way to illustrate *Don Juan*: the poem is too contradictory and self-reflexive for any artist to have the final say. Indeed, Byron's notoriously flippant riposte to John Murray's comments on the poem could have been directed at many of the pictorial representations of his writing: 'you are too earnest and eager about a work never intended to be serious;—do you suppose that I could have any intention but to giggle and make giggle?'<sup>28</sup> Byron's work has been valorised, solemnised and sentimentalised in visual art, but however idealistic the treatment the text has always managed to keep intact its sense of irreverence and contrariness. In this way, the pilgrimages and passions of Byron's heroes—with the irredeemably plural Don Juan at the heart—have provided a protean, flexible core around which successive generations of artists have found space to construct their own, distinct Romantic visions. 

#### NOTES

1. George Du Maurier, *Trilby*, ed. by Daniel Pick (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 26.
2. Richard D. Altick, *Paintings from Books: Art and Literature in Britain, 1760–1900* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985), pp. 436–47.
3. Jerome J. McGann, *Byron and Romanticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), p. 144.
4. Christine Kenyon Jones, 'Fantasy and Transfiguration: Byron and his Portraits', in *Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture*, ed. by Frances Wilson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp. 109–36 (pp. 132 and 123). For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between Byron and his portraits see also Christine Kenyon Jones (ed.), *Byron: The Image of the Poet* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008); Tom Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), ch. 5; and Annette Peach, 'Portraits of Byron', *Walpole Society*, 62 (2000), 1–144.
5. Byron's private correspondence gives numerous instances of such confluences. In his journal entry for 10 Mar 1814, he wrote: '[Hobhouse] told me an odd report,—that I am the actual Conrad, the veritable Corsair, and that part of my travels are supposed to have passed in privacy [piracy?].—*Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols (London: John Murray, 1973–82), III, 250 (editor's parenthesis).
6. Jane Stabler, *Byron, Poetics and History* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), p. 104.
7. See William St Clair, 'The Impact of Byron's Writings: An Evaluative Approach', in *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, ed. by Andrew Rutherford (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 1–25 (p. 21).
8. Byron, *Don Juan*, XIII.13.1–2, in *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: OUP, 1980–93), v, 528. All quotations are from this edition.
9. Some of the best examples of this kind of Byronic illustration can be found in *Finden's Illustrations of the Life and Works of Lord Byron*. Published in numbers by John Murray between 1832 and 1833, the full edition contains 160 engravings



- from prominent artists, including J. M. W. Turner, William Westall and Frank Stone. For a detailed history of this project, see David Blayney Brown, *Turner and Byron* (London: Tate, 1992), pp. 43–51.
10. For a discussion of Scott and the illustrated book market in the 1820s, see Richard J. Hill, *Picturing Scotland through the Waverley Novels: Walter Scott and the Origins of the Victorian Illustrated Novel* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010) and Peter Garside, 'Illustrating the Waverley Novels: Scott, Scotland, and the London Print Trade, 1819–1836', *The Library: The Transactions of the Bibliographical Society*, 11.2 (June 2010), 168–96.
  11. See Henry James Richter, illustration to *Don Juan*, in *The Byron Gallery: A Series of Historical Embellishments to Illustrate the Poetical Works of Lord Byron* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1833), Part 1, unpaginated. The table of contents lists this as illustrating Canto 11.185. Image digitised by Google Books from a copy held in Harvard College Library, and downloaded from the Internet Archive <www.archive.org> [accessed 20 Dec 2013].
  12. Notable early-nineteenth-century French artists who produced paintings from Byron included Théodore Géricault, Alexandre Marie-Colin, Horace Vernet and Henri Fantin-Latour.
  13. Stephen Bann, 'Print Culture and the Illustration of History: An Anglo-French Perspective', in *Constable to Delacroix: British Art and the French Romantics*, ed. by Patrick Noon (London: Tate, 2003), pp. 28–37 (p. 32).
  14. *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix*, trans. by Walter Pach (New York: Hacker, 1980), p. 39: entry for 11 May 1824.
  15. See, respectively: *The Combat of the Giaour and Hassan*, oil on canvas (1826, Art Institute of Chicago); *Selim and Zuleika*, oil on canvas (1857, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth); *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero*, oil on canvas (1825–26, Wallace Collection, London); and *The Death of Sardanapalus*, oil on canvas (1827–28, Musée du Louvre).
  16. Carl Thompson (ed.), *Romantic-Era Shipwreck Narratives: An Anthology* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2007), p. 14.
  17. Virginia Surtees (ed.), *The Diary of Ford Madox Brown* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 2: entry for 4 Sep 1847.
  18. Martin Meisel, 'Pictorial Engagements: Byron, Delacroix, Ford Madox Brown', *Studies in Romanticism*, 27.4 (1988), 579–603 (p. 585).
  19. This picture was first designed as an illustration for *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron*, ed. by W. M. Rossetti (London: Moxon, 1870).
  20. See, respectively: illustration to *Sardanapalus*, in *Poetical Works*, ed. by Rossetti (1870), p. 273; illustration to *The Prisoner of Chillon*, in *The Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by R. A. Willmott (London: Routledge, 1857), p. 111; and *Manfred on the Jungfrau*, oil on canvas (1840, City Art Gallery, Manchester).
  21. *Richard Redgrave: A Memoir, Compiled from his Diary by F. M. Redgrave* (London: Cassell, 1891), p. 130: entry for 13 Apr 1855.
  22. St Clair, 'Impact of Byron's Writings', p. 18.
  23. For more details of the history of *Don Juan's* pirate editions, see St Clair, 'Impact of Byron's Writings'; Hugh J. Luke, 'The Publishing of Byron's *Don Juan*', *PMLA*, 80.3 (1965), 199–209; and Colette Cooligan, 'The Unruly Copies of Byron's *Don Juan*: Harems, Underground Print Culture, and the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 59.4 (2005), 433–62.

24. Isaac Robert Cruikshank, *Don Juan. Verse CLXXXIV—Canto 1*, in *Don Juan. Cantos 1.–v. A Correct Copy from the Original Edition* (London: Smeeton, 1821), p. 49 (private collection).
25. John Austen, *Haidée and Juan were not married—the fault was theirs, not mine*, in *Don Juan. The Champion Edition. With 93 Illustrations and Decorations by John Austen* (London and New York: John Lane, 1926), p. 83 (private collection).
26. See *Asimov's Annotated 'Don Juan'. Illustrated by Milton Glaser* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972).
27. Milton Glaser, *Graphic Design* (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 67.
28. *Byron's Letters and Journals*, VI, 208: letter to John Murray, 12 Aug 1819.

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**Fig. 2** © Eugène Delacroix, *The Shipwreck of Don Juan*, oil on canvas (1840, Musée du Louvre, R.F. 359). Image reproduced by kind permission of the Musée du Louvre, via Article 11 of French law no. 78-753 (17 July 1978). Available online <[http://cartelen.louvre.fr/cartelen/visite?srv=car\\_not\\_frame&cidNotice=22728&langue=en](http://cartelen.louvre.fr/cartelen/visite?srv=car_not_frame&cidNotice=22728&langue=en)> [accessed 20 Dec 2013].

**Fig. 3** © Ford Madox Brown, *The Finding of Don Juan by Haidée*, oil on canvas (1870–73, Birmingham Museum & Art Galleries). Image reproduced by kind permission of Pre-Raphaelite Online Resource, Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery. Available online <[www.preraphaelites.org/the-collection/zoom/1912P22/finding-of-don-juan-by-haidee/](http://www.preraphaelites.org/the-collection/zoom/1912P22/finding-of-don-juan-by-haidee/)> [accessed 20 Dec 2013].

### REFERRING TO THIS ARTICLE

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