Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

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Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Philosophers, and Other Creative Writers Who Died between 1800 and 1899, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

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Project Editor

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

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Don Juan

Lord Byron

English long poem, 1819-1824, written by George Gorden Noel, Lord Byron.

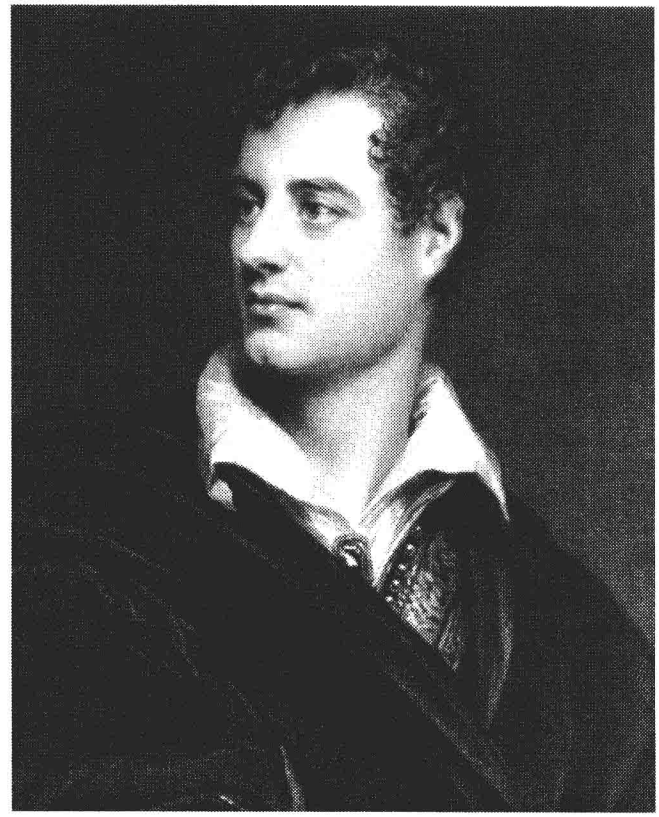
The following entry presents criticism on Byron's *Don Juan* from 1945 to 2000. For further information on *Don Juan,* see *NCLC,* Volume 12. For information on Byron's *Manfred,* see *NCLC,* Volume 109. For information on Byron's entire career, see *NCLC,* Volume 2.

INTRODUCTION

Don Juan (1819-24) is considered Byron's foremost achievement and one of English literature's great long poems. Variously described as a satire, epic, and novel in verse, the unfinished work defies critical categorization despite the consensus that it contains some of the sharpest social criticism in the English language. Writing in an animated style, Byron utilized a variety of narrative perspectives to comment on a wide range of concerns, including liberty, tyranny, war, love, sexuality, hypocrisy, and the mores of high society. The poet's ironic observations and brutally candid portrayal of human weaknesses garnered widespread condemnation from his contemporaries, who subjected *Don Juan* and its author to an unforgiving and almost relentless campaign of personal slander and critical abuse. Today, however, critics regard Byron's complex, profoundly skeptical yet often humorous work as a remarkable anticipation of both the mood and thematic occupations of modern literature.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The unique relationship between Byron and his audience that later played an important role in the reception of *Don Juan* began with the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: A Romaunt* (1812). When *Childe Harold* appeared in the spring of 1812, Byron became England's most celebrated author virtually overnight, gaining access to the country's highest social and literary circles. The close association in the public mind between Byron and his protagonists, first established in *Childe Harold,* continued throughout the poet's career and profoundly affected the critical reception of later works, especially *Don Juan.*



Byron continued to enjoy unyielding public adoration for several years following the publication of *Childe Harold,* attending exclusive social events and carrying on a series of affairs with married women, notably Lady Caroline Lamb and Lady Jane Oxford. In 1815 he married Annabella Milbanke, who left him just over a year later. The couple's separation has been the subject of extensive research, and some biographers have suggested that an affair between Byron and his half-sister Augusta Leigh prior to the marriage caused the estrangement. The breakup of the marriage and rumors about Byron's conduct drew scorn in his social circle, and Byron found himself snubbed by his peers and chastised in the press. Byron and Milbanke officially separated on April 21, 1816. Four days later, Byron left England forever.

Byron's meteoric rise to fame and equally abrupt exile hardened him against a society whose rigid notions of decorum had always aroused his suspicion. The poet

was able to channel his acute awareness of social mores into his writing, and he produced his first satirical work in October 1817, while living in northern Italy. *Beppo: A Venetian Story* (1818) offers light, humorous criticism of Venetian morality and customs, and is largely regarded as a precursor to the stanzaic form and narrative style of *Don Juan.* The positive reception of the work pleased Byron, prompting him to investigate the rich tradition of Italian burlesque poetry written in ottava rima, including the works of Pulci, Francesco Berni, and Giambattista Casti. Under the influence of these models, he began drafting *Don Juan* in July 1818.

Don Juan, which is composed of sixteen cantos written between 1819 and 1823, is regarded as largely autobiographical in nature and can be traced to a wide range of literary and theatrical influences. In addition to the Italian poets, Byron borrowed from the epics of Virgil and Homer; the satire of François Marie Voltaire, Miguel de Cervantes, Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift; and the picaresque novels of Tobias Smollett, Henry Fielding, and Laurence Sterne. Byron also incorporated a broad selection of nonfiction, including passages from historical works, directly into his text. The result is a work satiric in tone, epic in scope, and harshly realistic in its portrayal of human behavior and events. Despite its wide-ranging commentary, the work remains incomplete. Byron moved to Greece in 1823 to aid the fight for that country's independence from the Turks. He died there on April 19, 1824, from an illness contracted after becoming drenched in a rainstorm, less than one month after the publication of *Don Juan*'s last completed cantos.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Don Juan follows the travels and relationships of a youthful protagonist who, though he shares the same name, bears little resemblance to the heartless libertine of popular European legend. Juan's story, however, represents only a part of *Don Juan.* Through the series of adventures as overprotected teenager, castaway, lover, slave, soldier, kept man, and ornament in English society, Byron deliberates on a vast array of social, political, poetic, and metaphysical topics. Byron's use of a narrator with a distinct personality, as well as the presence of the poet's own voice in the work, allows him simultaneously to tell Juan's story and to comment on it from various perspectives, a technique that contributes to the ironic qualification of nearly every level of meaning in the poem.

The poem begins with Juan's birth to Don Jose and Donna Inez, his education, and his early love affair with Julia, wife of Don Alfonso of Seville. Subsequently, the poem moves from one geographic area—and transformative episode—to another: a shipwreck on the voyage from Seville; a romantic encounter with Haidée on a Greek island; enslavement by Haidée's pirate father, Lambro; sale to Gulbeyaz, a Turkish sultana; escape and subsequent participation in the Siege of Ismail; service in Russia for Catherine the Great; and finally entrance into English aristocratic society and a possible affair with the Duchess of Fitz-Fulke. While his experiences and geographic range are vast, Juan's journeys are beset with disillusion. His romantic encounter with Julia dissolves into farce when Alfonso bursts into Julia's bedroom. Haidée offers a chance at true love, but the tryst is thwarted by the reappearance of Lambro. Juan next encounters the evils of war and conquest, imperialistic tyranny, and the hypocrisies of English society. Aurora Raby appears to offer another opportunity for romance, but is displaced by the flirtatious Duchess. Nothing in *Don Juan* is as idyllic as on its surface it seems. Grand passions and lofty ideals are consistently undermined by vicious schemes.

MAJOR THEMES

Although many of Byron's contemporaries focused on the poet's indictment of English high society in *Don Juan,* the poem actually contains myriad subjects and offers sardonic commentary on a vast range of societal ills. Upright Regency-era views of love and sexuality are among Byron's central targets, but *Don Juan* also offers biting commentary on war, religion, restraints on personal liberty and freedom of speech, and injustices rendered upon society's weakest inhabitants. A passive character, Byron's Juan reacts to, rather than manipulates, the world around him. Brave, resourceful, but essentially without motivation or direction, he is a victim of a harsh, hypocritical world. By casting outside forces as corrupting influences on a character traditionally depicted as extravagant and callous, Byron reversed popular legend to suggest that society, not the individual, bears responsibility for evil in the world.

While Juan is largely regarded as an innocent victim of the harsh world in which he lives, the poem's narrator provides a more hardy voice. A continually shifting character who at times represents Byron, the narrator sympathizes with the weaknesses displayed by the various characters in *Don Juan,* although his overall tone is one of cynical amusement. His eventual argument that pity, humor and compassion must counteract a chaotic, unfair world becomes the poem's overarching message.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Byron had an early taste of the imminent critical backlash against *Don Juan* when his publisher, John Murray, vehemently contested the poet's plans to publish the

first two cantos of the work in 1819. Byron's attack on the Poet Laureate Robert Southey in the Dedication, his thinly veiled, unflattering depiction of Lady Byron in the character of Donna Inez, and the irreverent attitudes toward sex and religion made publication of the poem impossible, Murray and his advisors contended. Eventually, Byron and Murray reached a compromise, with Byron agreeing to retract the Dedication and several slanderous stanzas. The first two cantos were published with neither Byron's nor Murray's names on the title page in July 1819, and a critical uproar followed. The influential Scottish journal *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* launched the first salvo, praising the artistic merit of the work but thoroughly condemning its moral implications and subject matter. Other influential critics followed suit, many noting the autobiographical elements in the poem and using their reviews to deride the author as well as his work. One highly regarded critic, Leigh Hunt, came to Byron's defense in the liberal *Examiner.* Hunt defended both the morality and realism of *Don Juan* and offered his own attack on conservative values. Hunt's praise notwithstanding, critics continued to rebuke Byron and *Don Juan* with the release of subsequent cantos between 1821 and 1824. The general public's opinion countered the critics', however; while the first two cantos sold poorly, the remainder of the series proved immensely popular. Despite the brisk sales, Murray refused to publish *Don Juan* after the fifth canto, and the rest of the poem was published by Leigh Hunt's brother, John.

Don Juan remained largely contested or ignored for over a century following Byron's death, but the publication in 1945 of book-length studies of the poem by Elizabeth French Boyd and Paul Graham Trueblood (see Further Reading) began to turn the tide. Both the serious approach to and the quantity of essays on the poem during this period helped to establish it as Byron's most important work. Since 1945, scholars have focused on the structure, style, literary background, and philosophy of *Don Juan.* The appearance in 1957 of both Leslie Marchand's biography of Byron (see Further Reading) and a variorum edition of the poem edited by Truman Guy Steffan and Willis W. Pratt (see Further Reading) provided critics with a wealth of primary source material and information about the work's composition, textual history, and place in Byron's oeuvre. A surge in *Don Juan* criticism followed. Modern-day critics have countered their nineteenth-century predecessors with regard to Byron's portrayals of women, love, and sexuality, casting Byron's female characters as powerful and his views on sexual mores as liberated. Critics have maintained that the women characters in *Don Juan* are as diverse and complex as those created by William Shakespeare, have traced the literary traditions from which *Don Juan* stems, including the tradition of popular spectacular theater. Scholars have also offered psychoanalytic approaches to the poem, applying the noted theories of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Otto Rank to Byron's use of myth, his portrayals of women and relationships, and noting an overarching theme of guilt in the poem. Critics have also commented on the religious and geo-cultural themes in *Don Juan.*

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Hours of Idleness (poetry) 1807
English Bards and Scotch Reviewers (satire) 1809
Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: A Romaunt (poetry) 1812
The Bride of Abydos: A Turkish Tale (poetry) 1813
The Giaour: A Fragment of a Turkish Tale (poetry) 1813
Waltz: An Apostrophic Hymn (poetry) 1813
The Corsair (poetry) 1814
Lara (poetry) 1814
Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte (poetry) 1814
Hebrew Melodies (poetry) 1815
Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: Canto the Third (poetry) 1816
Parisina (poetry) 1816
The Prisoner of Chillon, and Other Poems (poetry) 1816
The Siege of Corinth (poetry) 1816
The Lament of Tasso (poetry) 1817
Manfred, A Dramatic Poeming (play) 1817
Beppo: A Venetian Story (poetry) 1818
Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: Canto the Fourth (poetry) 1818
Don Juan, Cantos I-XVI. 6 vols. (poetry) 1819-24
Mazeppa (poetry) 1819
Cain (play) 1821
Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice (play) 1821
Sardanapalus (play) 1821
The Two Foscari (play) 1821
The Vision of Judgment (poetry) 1822
Heaven and Earth (poetry) 1823
The Island; or, Christian and His Comrades (poetry) 1823
Werner (play) 1823
The Deformed Transformed (play) 1824
The Works of Lord Byron: Poetry. 7 vols. (poetry) 1898-1904
Letters and Journals. 11 vols. (letters and journals) 1975-81

CRITICISM

Elizabeth French Boyd (essay date 1945)

SOURCE: Boyd, Elizabeth French. "The Literary Background of *Don Juan*: Incidents." In *Byron's* Don Juan: *A Critical Study,* pp. 112-38. New York: The Humanities Press, 1958.

[*In the following essay, originally published in 1945, Boyd examines several figures and events that may have inspired various characters and scenes in* Don Juan.]

Don Juan is a compound of self-expression and literary reminiscence. We have seen that Byron wrote fundamentally from his own feelings and ideas, and that when he read, he was likewise habitually conscious of himself and his world at the center of the book. He identified himself with characters, and visualized scenes, making them his own. He associated scenes and ideas from one book to another, and from books to his own life. The details that appealed to him were those that corroborated his own experience and tastes. In all Byron's poetry, therefore, purely autobiographical elements are blended with echoes of the literature he had absorbed so deeply as to make it part of himself. Thus his poetry has both personal and cultural qualities to appeal to his readers. In the following analysis of each section of ***Don Juan,*** I shall endeavor to show how the personal elements are fused with the literary, and thus to restore the full literary flavor of the poem for modern readers.

1

The motto of the first and second cantos of ***Don Juan*** may perhaps be blamed for part of the public conviction that Byron was writing literal autobiography. He selected it from Horace's *Ars Poetica*: "Difficile est proprie communia dicere," "It is hard to treat in your own way what is common." Byron's friends took this to be a confession that he was writing about his domestic affairs, which were certainly common property. In Horace's context, *communia* means literary subjects which have been often handled by the poets and are well-known to the public, for he continues, "you are doing better in spinning into acts a song of Troy than if, for the first time, you were giving the world a theme unknown and unsung."[1] The motto was highly appropriate for a new version of the Don Juan legend. Byron was noted, however, not only for public confessions in his poetry, but for puns, and Hobhouse in his letter of January 8, 1819, advising Byron not to publish ***Don Juan,*** must have accused Byron of substituting in his mind for *communia* the words *domestica facta.*[2] Replying on January 25, Byron said:

> "The motto 'domestica facta' merely meant *common life* which, I presume, was Horace's meaning—the *Julian* adventure detailed was none of mine; but one of an acquaintance of mine (Parolini by name), which happened some years ago at Bassano, with the Prefect's wife when he was a boy; and was the subject of a long case, ending in a divorce or separation of the parties during the Italian Viceroyalty. . . ."[3]

Byron's understanding of *communia* as common life, and his further interpretation of that phrase as what had actually occurred within his knowledge, throw light on his conception of the term Nature, an eighteenth century concept based in part on this very passage in Horace. As with ***Beppo,*** Byron was founding his story on an anecdote from real life, resolved to incorporate nothing in Juan's adventures except actual fact.

Although Parolini's story may have been uppermost in his mind, there is undeniable autobiography in his account of it, for example, the characterization of Donna Inez, who combines the features of both Byron's wife and his mother, and the resemblance of the whole plot to an affair of Byron's Southwell days, when he is supposed to have been allowed undue freedom with the daughter of a neighboring family who hoped thereby to entrap him for her husband. Perhaps there is autobiographical recollection in the closing scene of the Julia episode, when Juan becomes seasick while reading Julia's letter. The letter with its insistence on the singleness of Julia's love, now irrevocably lost, reminds us of Byron's sets of farewell verses to Mary Chaworth upon his leaving England in 1809. Yet the ***Lines to Mr. Hodgson Written on Board the Lisbon Packet,*** at the same time, though not then published, show Byron, the sufferer from love, in high spirits and surrounded by the seasick:

> "Hobhouse muttering fearful curses,
> As the hatchway down he rolls,
> Now his breakfast, now his verses,
> Vomits forth—and damns our souls.
> 'Here's a stanza
> On Braganza—
> Help!'—'A couplet?'—'No, a cup
> Of warm water—'
> 'What's the matter?'
> 'Zounds! my liver's coming up! . . .
>
> "But, since Life at most a jest is,
> As philosophers allow,
> Still to laugh by far the best is,
> Then laugh on—as I do now.
> Laugh at all things,
> Great and small things,
> Sick or well, at sea or shore. . . ."

If Parolini's anecdote and Byron's reminiscences are at the bottom of the Julia episode, it is a case of real life imitating art, for the plot is a commonplace of fabliau

and comedy. Analogues abound, wherein a young gallant, innocent like Juan, or a scheming gay blade, seduces the young and pious wife of a stupid old husband. Byron would have learned from Dunlop's *History of Fiction* the "genealogy" of this fabliau at least from the *novelle* of Franco Sacchetti, *ca.* 1400 (who imitated the *Decameron*), to Casti's *Novelle Amorose* (1804). Dunlop selects as a typical example to relate the French version entitled *La Culotte des Cordeliers*:[4]

> "It is there told, that a merchant's wife in Orleans had a clerk for a gallant. The husband came home one night unexpectedly. The clerk had time to escape, but left an essential article of dress behind him, which, on the following morning the husband put on by mistake. Before evening he remarked the change in his clothes, and on his return home reproached his wife with infidelity."

The wife gets out of her dilemma by providing that the clothing shall appear to have been a present from the Franciscans for the greater fertility of her husband. Dunlop says, "Of all these tales the origin may, perhaps, be a story in Apuleius, where a gallant is detected by the husband from having left his sandals."[5]

The *novella* of Casti mentioned by Dunlop in this series is *La Brache di San Griffone,* but Casti gives another version also in *I Calzoni Ricamati.* In this story, Giuditta, the wife of Master Piero of Amsterdam, yields to the love-making of Lord Boxton, who is touring Europe to discover whether there is any difference among the women of various countries. Her husband returns one night unexpectedly from a business trip and surprises them; Giuditta just has time to hide the milord under the sofa in the totally darkened room. She pretends to have the colic and sends Piero after some *acqua cattolica* at the chemist's. Piero dresses in the dark and hurries off full of concern for his wife's illness, but when he comes to pay for the medicine, he finds to his amazement that his money has turned into an English guinea, and that he has on a strange pair of richly embroidered breeches, with a watch and jeweled chain in the pocket. Advised by the chemist, he suppresses the obvious but dishonorable conclusion, and shames his wife into good behavior by his forbearance. "I have gained these rich spoils," he tells her, "and I shall take them from the closet every eight days in your honor."

Incidentally, still another of Casti's *novelle,* the fourth, entitled *La Diavolessa,* has been cited by many critics, E. H. Coleridge, Helene Richter, and R. D. Waller among them, as an analogue of ***Don Juan,*** Cantos I and II. Don Ignazio, a Spanish hidalgo, friend of Don Juan Tenorio and brought up with him in the same kind of education, pursues a brilliant career of scandalous amours in Seville, and at last runs away with his mistress Ermengilda. They are captured by pirates, their ship is wrecked, and Don Ignazio alone survives, cast up naked on the sandy beach. He gathers wreckage—"casks" and "biscuits"—to support himself; he finds a cave to live in, and then a hut; he becomes a penitent anchorite and is tempted by the Devil in many guises. Finally the Devil appears to him disguised as Ermengilda miraculously raised from the dead. Don Ignazio, forgetting his religious vows, marries with a common-law ceremony this Diavolessa. After a week, she whisks him off to Hell, where he rejoins his friend Don Juan.

The compressed simplicity and bareness of Casti's stories, however, convey none of the illusion of real life to be found in Byron's. Byron has borrowed, too, from richer versions of the Apuleian fabliau. He may have known it in romantic guise in C. P. Duclos's *Histoire de Madame de Luz,* in which he would also have read the history of his reputed French ancestor the Marechal de Biron. He undoubtedly knew it with all its trimmings of hypocrisy in Machiavelli's *Mandragola.* The heroine of that comedy, Lucrezia, is like Donna Julia in character—pious, easily led, capable of self-deception, femininely whimsical. Her mother, Sostrata, though a simpler character than Donna Inez, shares her complete hypocrisy and her function as half-conscious go-between. Regnard's play, *The Divorce,* is similar, especially in the tirades of the young wife feigning injured innocence to her irritating lord and master. The whole tradition of the fabliau from Boccaccio to Casti was in Byron's mind as he wrote, and the scene of climax that November night in Donna Julia's bedroom is improved by all that Byron had learned from English, French, and Italian comedy.

2

It seems unlikely that Casti's *La Diavolessa* played any important part in Byron's account of Don Juan's voyage and shipwreck. Aside from the fact that disaster at sea and the rescue of the hero by a simple maiden whom he proceeds to seduce were conventional features of the Don Juan legend, Byron's other models would have suggested their inclusion. Tempest and shipwreck have been conventional subjects of the epic since the *Odyssey.* Greek romance made the most of this convention, and picaresque romance in its turn did not neglect its advantages. The supreme example of shipwreck in *Robinson Crusoe* only gave a new impetus of realism and actuality to this favorite episode. The *Monthly Magazine,* as E. H. Coleridge notes in his edition of ***Don Juan,*** very soon brought out a complete analysis of Byron's indebtedness to Sir G. Dalzell's *Shipwrecks and Disasters at Sea,* 1812, a very remarkable collection of firsthand accounts of wrecks. Coleridge adds to the

documentation of Canto II the hints that Byron used from "his grand-dad's narrative," from Bligh's *Mutiny on the Bounty,* from Hartford's *Remarkable Shipwrecks,* 1813, and from the *Memoirs of Cardinal de Retz.*

Byron told Trelawney, when they were fitting out the *Bolivar,* that Trelawney would "find him nothing but a land-lubber. I hardly know the stem from the stern, and don't know the name or use of a single rope or sail. . . . All the sea-terms I use are from authority, and they cost me toil and trouble to look them out."[6] The realism resulting from this painful research was too strong for the British stomach. Byron's public objected to the juxtaposition of the terrible and the ridiculous in such unveiled terms. Even Shelley, in the midst of his enthusiastic comments on the first two cantos, felt a little repelled:

> "What a strange and terrible storm is that at sea," he wrote to Byron, "and the two fathers, how true, yet how strong a contrast! Dante hardly exceeds it. . . . The love letter, and the account of its being written, is altogether a masterpiece of portraiture. . . . I cannot say I equally approve of the service to which this letter was appropriated; or that I altogether think the bitter mockery of our common nature, of which this is one of the expressions, quite worthy of your genius."[7]

To us, who have been dulled by all too frequent repetitions in our daily newspapers of this story of wreck and disaster at sea, the objections of the public seem incomprehensible. They were prompted by that sentimentality which demanded prettiness and sublimity in poetry and refused ugliness and the grotesque, no matter how true to life. Such things belonged in prose, in the picaresque novel for instance, like *Roderick Random,* where we find in brief a wreck, decorated with rum and religion, somewhat similar to that of the "Trinidada."

The prose documentation of Byron's shipwreck, like the Parolini episode, was merely an extension and corroboration of Byron's own experience, for one of the events in his first visit to Greece which made a deep impression on him was the near-disaster at sea that he and Hobhouse underwent in trying to sail from Prevesa to Patras in a Turkish ship of war. Hobhouse gives his account of this experience in his *Journey Through Albania,*[8] and Byron wrote a characteristically amusing description of it to his mother:

> "Two days ago I was nearly lost in a Turkish ship of war, owing to the ignorance of the captain and crew, though the storm was not violent. Fletcher yelled after his wife, the Greeks called on all the saints, the Mussulmans on Alla; the captain burst into tears and ran below decks telling us to call on God; the sails were split, the main-yard shivered, the wind blowing fresh, the night setting in, and all our chance was to make Corfu . . . or (as Fletcher pathetically termed it) 'a watery grave.' I did what I could to console Fletcher, but finding him incorrigible, wrapped myself up in my Albanian capote (an immense cloak), and lay down on deck to wait the worst. I have learnt to philosophise in my travels; and if I had not, complaint was useless. Luckily the wind abated, and only drove us on the coast of Suli. . . ."[9]

As Moore put it, Byron remembered the emotions he had felt on this occasion, though the circumstances and details of his poetic narrative might be imaginary or borrowed from other sources than his own experience.

But he had good poetic authority, as well as prose documentation, for his shipwreck. Probably William Falconer's *The Shipwreck,* 1762, predominated in Byron's mind as he wrote. This poem, one of the first publications of the Murray press, had been long a favorite with Byron. An 1804 edition of it by Clarke appears in the 1816 Sale Catalogue, and Byron mentions it in his notes to ***Childe Harold,*** Canto II, as one of the reasons why Cape Colonna is especially interesting to the English traveler, for it is the site of that famous wreck.[10] Two years after he wrote ***Don Juan,*** Canto II, he referred to it again at some length in his argument with Bowles over the "invariable principles of poetry."[11]

Superficially, Falconer's story of the storm and the shipwreck bears little resemblance to the ***Don Juan*** story. There is an exiled lover, Palemon, who gains the shore only to die after committing his sad tale of an unrelenting parent and an orphaned sweetheart to the charge of the Byronic hero, Arion. The scene is the Grecian archipelago, and there is much congenial talk of the ancient glories of Greece and its modern enslavement to the Turks. But the reasons for this poem's hold on Byron's imagination are shown in his comments on it in the Bowles controversy, revealing how it satisfied his predilections for human nature and action, for realism and authenticity:

> "Is the sea itself [he wrote] a more attractive, a more moral, a more poetical subject, with or without a vessel, breaking its vast but fatiguing monotony? Is a storm more poetical without a ship? or, in the poem of *The Shipwreck,* is it the storm or the ship which most interests? both *much* undoubtedly; but without the vessel, what should we care for the tempest? It would sink into mere descriptive poetry. . . .
>
> "In what does the infinite superiority of Falconer's *Shipwreck* over all other shipwrecks consist? In his admirable application of the terms of his art; in a poet-sailor's description of the sailor's fate. These *very terms,* by his application, make the strength and reality of his poem."

An authentic narrative of a great and losing struggle between man and inanimate nature, delivered in a high-pitched emotional key, was exactly the sort of thing to appeal to Byron's mind. Biased as he was in supposing that a piling up of facts was the same thing as the truth,

he fell into the same error of taste—though not to such an abysmal extent—as Falconer, by using painstaking realism in the technical details. Falconer's *Shipwreck* was applauded, in spite of its boring factualness, but Byron's was not, and the reason for its failure with the public was its hard-boiled manner. A sustained high emotional tone was not the pitch for ***Don Juan,*** but a humorous middle tone, varied by abrupt changes to the sublime.

Ariosto's shipwreck, a famous passage in the *Orlando Furioso,* described entirely in his high heroic strain, must also have been in Byron's mind, for his shipwreck matches Ariosto's in many details and fully equals it when he chooses to raise the tone. Byron had some thoughts at this time of translating Ariosto, but left the task to his friend W. S. Rose, who was already engaged upon it. Perhaps Rose's translation was to some extent influenced by Byron's poem—I am not expert enough in Ariosto or Italian to decide; but it is interesting to compare their markedly similar descriptions of the wreck.

Rogero and his seven kings set sail from Marseilles for North Africa, but

> "Upon the darkening of the day, the wind
> Displays its fickle and perfidious kind."

Through the stormy night, the pilot, the sailors, and all on board struggle at various nautical tasks to steady the ungovernable vessel. Nothing avails; fallen on her beam ends, split and leaking at every seam, the ship is about to founder. "Meanwhile, his soul to Heaven each recommends."

> "A fierce assault and cruel coil doth keep
> Upon all sides that wintry tempest fell.
> Now to their sight so high the billows leap,
> It seems that these to heaven above would swell;
> Now, plunging with the wave, they sink so deep,
> That they appear to spy the gulf of hell.
> Small hope there is or none: with faltering breath
> They gaze upon inevitable death.
>
> "On a dispiteous sea, that livelong night,
> They drifted, as the wind in fury blew.
> The furious wind that with the dawning light
> Should have abated, gathered force anew."

The ship breaks up piecemeal, rudder, sails, and mast are carried away, and they drive on helplessly toward a bare rock:

> "All to their private aims alone attend,
> And only to preserve their life have care.
> Who quickest can, into the skiff descend,
> But in a thought so overcrowded are,
> Through those so many who invade the boat,
> That, gunwale-deep, she scarce remains afloat.
>
> "Rogero, on beholding master, mate,
> And men abandoning the ship with speed,
> In doublet, as he is, sans mail and plate,
> Hopes in the skiff, a refuge in that need:
> But finds her overcharged with such a weight,
> And afterwards so many more succeed,
> That the o'erwhelming waves the pinnace drown,
> And she with all her wretched freight goes down;
>
> "Goes down, and, foundering, drags with her whoe'er
> Leaving the larger bark, on her relies.
> Then doleful shrieks are heard, 'mid sob and tear,
> Calling for succour on unpitying skies:
> But for short space that shrilling cry they rear;
> For, swoln with rage and scorn, the waters rise,
> And in a moment wholly stop the vent
> Whence issues that sad clamour and lament."[12]

Byron's story of shipwreck, also located in the Gulf of Lyons, carries on for many stanzas in conversational humorous style, full of circumstantial details, but as the climax of the actual wreck approaches, the tone rises and grows solemn:

> "'T was twilight, and the sunless day went down
> Over the waste of waters; like a veil,
> Which, if withdrawn, would but disclose the frown
> Of one whose hate is masked but to assail.
> Thus to their hopeless eyes the night was shown,
> And grimly darkled o'er the faces pale,
> And the dim desolate deep: twelve days had Fear
> Been their familiar, and now Death was here. . . .
>
> "Then rose from sea to sky the wild farewell—
> Then shrieked the timid, and stood still the brave,—
> Then some leaped overboard with dreadful yell,
> As eager to anticipate their grave;
> And the sea yawned around her like a hell,
> And down she sucked with her the whirling wave,
> Like one who grapples with his enemy,
> And strives to strangle him before he die.
>
> "And first one universal shriek there rushed,
> Louder than the loud Ocean, like a crash
> Of echoing thunder; and then all was hushed,
> Save the wild wind, and the remorseless dash
> Of billows; but at intervals there gushed,
> Accompanied by a convulsive splash,
> A solitary shriek, the bubbling cry
> Of some strong swimmer in his agony."

But even in the midst of these often quoted stanzas, Byron has inserted two in his customary voice, describing the last half-hysterical efforts of the ship's company to save themselves. The ship, having been lightened of every object that would float, at last

> "gave a heel, and then a lurch to port,
> And, going down head foremost—sunk, in short."

These lines epitomize the prosaic, tough realism with which he elected to relate a scene hallowed by romance.