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Stopping at the Half-way House:
The Theme of Aging in Byron's *Don Juan*

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According to the organic theory of Romanticism, every part of a poem not only contributes to the beauty of the poem, but is meaningful in and of itself. In Byron's poem *Don Juan*, the narrator's digressions are meaningful for this reason. According to Adams, in his *Context of Poetry*,¹ the essence of *Don Juan* is its digressions, that "the poem's totality is the dancing movement of its own thought within the boundaries of its own form." The poem would not be the same, would not have the same effect without the narrator taking his liberties with his digressions. Were his mind not allowed to wander, the poem would not be able to boast of its dual romantic and satiric nature. The digressions further serve to influence the reader, with each digression coordinated to significant moments in the story, thereby bringing attention to certain aspects of the narrative as well as to the character of Juan himself.

The digressions also betray to the reader the narrator's own impression of Juan, both by delineating what the narrator associates with Juan and his story, and by showing how the narrator wishes to color Juan's appearance. Because Adams argues under the assumption that the narrator does indeed represent Byron, he makes the case that the digressions take the work beyond a mere satiric reflection of nature and man and enters the realm of the romantic by holding the mirror up to Byron himself, offering him as the typical in which the satire is based. For our purposes, through the character of the narrator, he becomes the archetype for the Old Man. Adams goes on to dub Byron "the deity of the poem's universe." In this case, the digressions, which stand for Byron's own thoughts and words, take priority over the story, as it is the word of *Don Juan's* god. That the digressions carry more weight is also evident with the knowledge that almost

¹ Adams, Hazard. *The Contexts of Poetry*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1963. 111, 115-17, 192-3.

anything in the narrative triggers a digression, and that those digressions cover a breadth of topics. Adams then puts forth that the function of the story is to create a picture of the narrator. I would go further to say that not only is the function of Juan to describe Byron, but that Byron's comments contribute to an understanding of Juan's character. They are foils, enjoying a mutual relationship of revelation. Even if the narrator were only a persona, Adams' argument still makes the case for the importance of the digressions as well as for the relationship between Juan and the narrator.

As the story of *Don Juan* is largely one of coming-of-age, digressions pertaining to youth, aging, and middle age are especially important. When the narrator speaks as an old man of youth lost and the process by which he has aged, his attitudes towards that youth are almost subconsciously transferred to Juan, himself a youth who will one day go through middle age and become aged himself. These digressions work the same way on the readership (themselves largely an "old" population), and they become old spectators looking on at the character of Juan, who comes to represent for them the youth they have lost. Put briefly, when the narrator speaks in these digressions, he implies that what he no longer is, one can expect Juan to be; and that what he is now, one can expect Juan to become.

This duality of time within one work can be understood with a consideration of what Adams deems "the literary cosmos," described as follows: there is space, which is circular, typified by a quest; and there is time, which is cyclical, typified by the passage through the life of an individual. The concept of time is the important one here, as in it lies the nature of aging. Adams goes on to classify each realm into two extremes: innocence, as represented by Eden, and experience, as represented by Nature. These extremes are those of all human life, as a person descends from one to another then begins a "quest for the new paradise made desirable by the

knowledge gained in experience.” So, in *Don Juan*, Juan is traveling from innocence to experience, going from youth to age as he approaches thirty. The narrator constantly reminds us of this as he contrasts youth and age and emphasizes the inevitability of both losing youth and reaching age, of losing the joys of youth and gaining the knowledge of age. This journey is reflected in other aspects of the narrative, for example, the characterizations of the women he loves. In the extant fragment, however, only the aforementioned descent is represented, and the narrator himself shows no sign of desiring and/or questing for a new paradise. Rather, he regrets the fact of age and sighs for youth.

Also encapsulated in this theory are those areas of the cosmos particular to various moods of literature. The romantic features innocence; the tragic, the fall into experience; the satiric, experience; and the comic, the ascent into a “higher imaginative world.” As Byron is both romantic and satiric, he focuses on the interplay of innocence and experience. However, he deals only in the facts. He is not concerned so much of the tragedy of falling; to him it is a necessity. As to the “comic”, at least so far as the happy-ending comedy is concerned, there is no sign, provided the narrator’s present is Juan’s future. As the narrator does not want to ascend to any higher world, neither will Juan. Rather, the two worlds remain distinct. Youth, the world of innocence, is characterized by its feeling of intense criticism of the world, by a sense of invincibility, by freshness and newness, by a tendency to color things as more lovely than they really are, by a sense of egocentrism, and by ambition, passion, and rhyme. Age, on the other hand, is experience and is characterized by a knowledge of mortality, by a loss of any rose-colored glasses, by the quitting of physical vice, by a righted perception of the world, and by a loss of ambition and hope. No wonder, then, that the narrator for the most part yearns for a time in which he can no longer live.

For Lord Byron, the knowledge that he must one day grow old was always on his mind. Some say he was rather obsessed with the idea. Citing letters and journals, Itsuyo Higashinaka² highlights this obsession in Byron's later years on the continent. Even at twenty-eight he was ever aware of his appearance and particular as to his age. In the spirit of the Italian carnival, he seized every moment's pleasure, aware that life is short.³ In a letter written early in 1818, having turned thirty, Byron explains that that age is "the barrier of any real or fierce delight in the passions".⁴ He considered himself an old man at thirty, had always thought he would be, and surprisingly enough he became one. Friends noticed a decline in the care of his appearance, as did he, and he became content to pursue only one lover. In a letter late in 1819, he admits, "At thirty I feel there is no more to look forward to."⁵ As far as he was concerned, life was over, and indeed he soon entered into a period of nostalgia and regret that he had not lived a more productive life.⁶ Thus he died an old man in spirit if not in reality, bemoaning a lost and wasted youth, not looking forward to nor expecting a long life ahead of him.

It is no wonder, then, that this obsession with youth and aging play a central role in his major work of that period. First published when Byron was already thirty-one years of age, *Don Juan* relies on the narration of an old man. Throughout the work Byron's own thoughts on his old age come through in the digressions of the narrator, pitting the narrator's age against Juan's youth. This perspective of the old on the young colors the way the story is told. What develops, then, is a treatise on aging, chronicling how it is that the young lose their youth. By virtue of Byron's obsession (which actually began early in his youth⁷) and of its incorporation in *Don*

² Higashinaka, Itsuyo. "Byron's Sense of Ageing." *The Byron Journal* 7 (1979):48-59.

³ Itsuyo, 48-49.

⁴ Itsuyo, 50.

⁵ Itsuyo, 50-53.

⁶ Itsuyo, 54.

⁷ See Ronald Schroeder's article "Byron's Sense of Time and Age before 1810" in *The Byron Journal* 11 (1983): 4-19.

Juan through a thinly veiled narrator, *Don Juan* becomes a coming-of-age story in which every theme and motif contributes to an explanation of the aging process. Just as a sturdy rope is made of many threads, so does this process consist of many developments, all evolving on their own, but coming together towards one end. For purposes of example, one thread will be examined here.

At the start of Canto VI, the narrator speaks of ambition in youth by example of the story of Anthony and Cleopatra. He allows that, were they younger, he could excuse Anthony's rash actions, because the young consider such responsibilities as "wealth, kingdoms, worlds" to be sport (6.3). In relating to a youth squandering worlds, the narrator admits to giving up what world he possessed as a youth—his heart. He states here the importance of the heart in youth. Though he had "no great plenty of worlds to lose," he gave "what was worth a world" for the sake of love (6.5). At once, the heart stakes a double importance both as medium and motive. He closes the stanza with another recurring sentiment, that youth, characterized by "those pure feelings", once gone is gone forever. This illustration encapsulates much of what the narrator associates with his lost youth. To the young man, love is everything. Accordingly, Juan's loves will be the strand examined here, more precisely, those instances in which Juan actively loves with body *and* emotion, and thus progresses in a non-platonic emotional education, only one facet of the aging process.

Sic Transit Gloria Mundi:
A Byronic Look at Youth and Aging

The first and longest digression pertaining to youth comes at the end of Canto I, beginning with stanza 213 and eventually dwindling to a close in stanza 220. From the beginning, the narrator speaks as a man reaching thirty, later established as the year in which a

man becomes middle-aged and begins the aging process. He characterizes his lack of youthfulness with gray hair and speaks of perhaps dyeing it. In an earlier draft, however, he is contemplating wearing a style of wig fashionable in the previous century. He would have chosen to emphasize his feeling of being old-fashioned and obsolete by embracing an outmoded fashion. Yet, Byron changes the lines to speak of dyeing the hair, indicating a preference for hiding the age rather than exaggerating it, a preference for clinging to the youth slipping away.

He goes on to express his feeling of being old beyond his years. He feels he has “squandered [his] whole summer while ‘twas May” (213.5), that of all the youth allotted to him in his life, he has wasted it, leaving him with perhaps an outward appearance of youth, of “summer,” but without the internal vigor crucial to that state of youthfulness. In short, he has “spent” his life (213.7). As far as he is concerned, he is done living. Youth is life; age is death, or at least not life compared to that had in youth. Here, youth is “the spirit to retort” and having a “soul invincible” (213.6,8). It is characterized by a rebellious and critical spirit, ready to take on the world with impunity. In youth, the soul is invincible; nothing can conquer it. In age, however, one grasps that he is mortal, that the soul is not, in fact, invincible; it is rather susceptible to temptation and vice, and perhaps was all along, the youthful man unaware.

Ignorance is, indeed, bliss, but for the thirty-year-old, a bliss never again to be had. He bemoans his fate: “No more—no more—oh never more on me...” (214.1). He repeats this lamentation twice more in the following stanzas, each with a slightly different consideration. Here, he goes on to speak of “the freshness of the heart” found only in youth, the freshness “like dew,” new and of the morning, gracing the green plants full of life (214.2). That freshness enables the young to see things as lovely and draw from them “emotions beautiful and new” (4). Youth is about newness and the beauty that newness casts. But youth is more about the heart. He

informs the heart that it was not created out of these beautiful things, but that it was the creator: "Alas, 'twas not in them, but in thy power/ To double even the sweetness of a flower" (7-8). That the heart creates is crucial. Then, the "lovely things we see" (3) are not quite so lovely in reality, but only so because they are filtered through a youthful heart. Again, youth is ignorant to the true state of things, but in its blissful state sees all things as better than they really are.

Before continuing, notice the deft move on the part of the narrator/author, transitioning the state of lost youth from a personal concern to a general concern, then back to a personal yet universal state. In line one, he uses the first-person pronoun "me." Two lines later, he associates it with the second-person pronoun "we," though not the rhyming word, close enough for the connection to be made. All of a sudden, the reader is brought in to share in this lament for lost youth and is invited to relate himself to the narrator. Later, in line 6, the third-person pronoun "thou" is used, referring not to the reader but to the heart. Perhaps, then, the "we" does not include the reader, but rather refers to the heart as well, in which case the heart plays an active role in perceiving the outside world. In any event, the reader has already been led to feel a kinship with the narrator, if only for an instant, but it is an instant that will leave its trace for the duration of the poem.

In stanza 215, the narrator continues his lament to youth passed, paralleling the opening statement from the previous paragraph. However, as that line ended with the personal pronoun "me," this line ends speaking to "my heart." As the narrator progresses through his digression, he moves away from an egocentrism of first-person pronouns, just as he focuses less on the joys of youth and more on the sorrows of age. This loss of egocentrism is shown further as he continues to speak to his heart. He defines it as that which was in youth his "whole world," his "universe," his "all in all" (215.2,3). Now, however, it is "a thing apart" (3). In his age, with an expanded

worldview, he realizes there are other forces at work to influence him, that other things exist than his heart and the lovely images it produces. He bemoans the fact that the “the illusion’s gone forever” (5), yet in the same breath acknowledges that his focus on his heart was indeed an illusion and not reality. However, as a consequence of doffing the rose-colored glasses, his heart has become “insensible” (6); whether that means it is imperceptible or it is unfeeling, its power for beautifying is nonetheless diminished. In his middle age, the narrator realizes that his heart has given way to his head, garnering in the place of romanticism “a deal of judgment” (7), as unexpected and improbable as that characteristic is. Also intimated in the passage here is a loss of finality in his statements. Whereas his statements on youth are strong and unequivocal, in age, the heart is “insensible, I trust” (6), implying that he is not sure of the status of his heart. He has lost that sense of invincibility and infallibility so prominent in youth.

By stanza 216 he is ready to transition fully into middle-age and beyond. He states definitively those things he “must” no longer do (4), as well as those he should commence. With youth gone, “[his] days of love are over” (1), for love is the realm of the young. As later stated in Canto XIII, until thirty “no man...should perceive there’s a plain woman” (13.3.7-8). However, once that magic age is reached, the illusion fades and a man is free to see women as they really are. When one is aged, all women are forbid him, it seems, be they maid, wife, or widow. Love is for the young, to make of them fools and bring them to a state of “credulous hope” (5). In middle-age, with his expanded and righted worldview, he can no longer be taken in by a gullibility, a readiness to believe. He has lost his naivety and must not seek to retrieve it. Neither can he seek to mimic it out of the bottom of a bottle of claret (or as in a previous draft, wine or brandy). He declares, “I must not lead the life I did do” (4). He does not say “cannot” or “do no longer want to” but “must not,” as if to say he has no choice in the matter. Once youth is gone, it

is gone. Perhaps, too, a sense of morality has set in. In the last line, the narrator completes the explanation of the transition out of youth into age: young gives way to old, heart gives way to head, love gives way to avarice, that “good old-gentlemanly vice” (7).

Stanzas 217 to 220 portray a narrator trying to rationalize the aging process, putting youth and its beliefs in a harsh negative light. In 217, youth is a time for ambition, but Ambition has become, for the narrator, an ineffectual idol, “broken/ before the shrines of Sorrow and of Pleasure” (1-2). It is weak, incapable of surviving such strong emotions and tendencies, which take precedence among the narrator’s influences now that he is aged. Sorrow and Pleasure have supplanted his idol and become the gods against which he has no power. To say that one no longer needs to reflect on them implies an unwillingness to talk about them, and, also likely, pain. He says that he has declared to himself the truth: “Time is, Time was, Time’s past” (6). To complete the allusion to *Friar Bacon*, he would have replied to himself “My life, my fame, my glory, all are past...the turrets of thy hope are ruin’d down.” Youth was not only the time for ambition, but also for this chance for fame and glory, as well as any hope of achieving them. At thirty he has reached the point of no return and must settle in to what he has already become. In this jaded state, youth becomes defined as “a chymic treasure” (6), during which one wastes his life obsessing with passion and rhyme. All this work, this idealism turns out to be for naught, as this chymic treasure turns out not to be gold after all; “the illusion’s gone forever” (215.5).

In 218 and 219, he reassures himself. After all, he asks, what is fame and hope? They are both empty and to no real end. Fame, he says, is “to have, when the original is dust, A name, a wretched picture, and worst bust” (218.7-8). He tries to make the loss of fame and hope easier to bear, thus soothing the bitterness at realizing that his youth and all that it entails are gone. In 220,

he comforts himself with the thought that everyone is mortal, no one's youth stays, and in a last pitch for peace, that one should be thankful for what he has.

Interestingly enough, in a previous draft, stanza 217 ended with the sentiment that it is the person that destroys Time for himself. He says, "A chymic treasure/ Is that same Time so common yet so precious/ Of which we are lavish first and then rapacious." He would have implied that Time is the illusion, that what we waste in youth and hoard in age is not so worthy as one would think. It is but alchemist's gold, shining with a false glitter. Yet, in changing the lines, he likewise changes that aspect of life that is the falsehood. Youth, then, is that "glittering" (7) thing proven an imposter, and youth is to blame, not ourselves. Man becomes a passive recipient to the order of things, free to waste his time according to his own whim, with the full knowledge that he can do nothing to slow or quicken the aging process. In the alteration, the misperceptions of youth and the resulting jadedness of age is part and parcel of the human existence, and unavoidable for every man.

Beyond this first digression, several other digressions arise in which the subject is further dealt with. The narrative itself also addresses the issue on at least one occasion. Within these passages, the narrator continues to vacillate between a pining for lost youth and a bemoaning of adulthood.

* * *

The next lengthy digression on this topic occurs in Canto X, beginning in the end of stanza 5 and focusing on the differences of youth and age, describing the nature of the transition process. Enjoyment, a feature of youth, is characterized as a bird, a creature of flight eager to leave the nest of its childhood. In youth, its wings are clipped and it is forced to remain with a person through the tools of youth, vigor, and beauty. This restraint, though, is temporary, and the

wings of the bird grow again and enjoyment leaves the nest, abandoning the boy aging into a man. The bird of youth now gone, the narrator turns his attention to old men who yearn for the days of their youth to come again. This old man is “hoary now and with a withering breast and palsied fancy” (6.5-6). He has aged both without and within, his emotions and spirit as decrepit as his hair and skin. The heart, once an entire universe of experience, now is withered, containing nothing like the power to create beauty it once had. Imagination is palsied, rendered paralyzed and powerless, confined to the boundary of “its dimmed eye’s sphere” (6.7). It cannot see beyond real sight into possibility. While an earlier draft had the phrase reading “its curtailed sphere,” the change implies that the palsy of fancy is the result of a natural process, not a limitation placed from without. Again, aging occurs out of a passivity towards the workings of nature.

Despite his apparent setbacks, the old man looks back to his “young years and loves” (6.4) and regrets that he has given up youthful sighs for the coughs of the elderly. Indeed, the narrator reminds us that, as part of the natural process of aging, “sighs subside and tears...shrink” (7.1). Emphasizing the appropriateness of this phenomenon, he compares it to the river Arno, which shrinks in size in the summer as part of the evolution of the seasons. For the aged, this reduction is shameful compared to the “wintry brink” of the sighs and tears of youth (7.3). However, though these sensations are more plentiful in youth, they are also more dangerous, threatening damaging floods, “inundations deep and yellow” (7.4). Perhaps it is a blessing to have them abated. The narrator introduces another natural metaphor as he compares grief to a field in which boys search for joy. Grief, says the narrator, never lies fallow and has “its plows but change their boys” (7.7); it rotates the generations, turning more and more boys into saddened men.

In the next stanza, the narrator goes on to describe youth more fully. He begins by explaining that the coughs of age often come before the sighs of youth are fully departed, that age is so certain and youth so fleeting that the one does not even wait for the completion of the other. However, the young are determined to love till the end; as long as the youthful glow remains on their cheek, they continue to “blaze, love, hope, die” (8.8), even if the ephemeral surges of emotion are for nothing. Even if that youthful glow proves to be “hectic and brief as summer’s day nigh done” (8.6). For this, the young are happy, at least from the point of view of the aged man. Even if one’s youth is fleeting, why should he “scorn the month of June, because December...must come” (9.4-6); why waste his youth dwelling on the inevitability of age. The young should enjoy their youth while it lasts, should “court the ray” of summer so as to “hoard up warmth against a wintry day” (9.6-7), providing him with memories he can turn to in his old age.

Digressing again later in Canto X, in stanza 27, the narrator returns to the problem of the transition from youth to age, placing it in the context of Dante’s “obscure wood.” It is a period described as horrid, hateful, and rude; an equinox and a halfway house past which drive “life’s sad post-horses o’er the dreary frontier of age” (27.7). The wise travelers, he says, do not stop at this station, but take a path around it, only giving a single tear to the youth they leave behind them. Not all travelers, though, are wise. In a previous draft, rather than say middle age is a hut “whence wise travelers drive with circumspection” (27.6), the narrator instead says, “where we travelers bait with dim reflection.” With the understanding that the narrator, as well as the audience, longs to reflect on youth past, the halfway house of middle age becomes a place where old men are miserable, desiring to relive the sighs of youth in place of the coughs he now endures. Later, the narrator grows weary of describing this dismal state, no longer desiring to

reflect, or even think. The thought of youth and aging, however, will not leave him. It clings to him “as a whelp clings to its teat,” as “kelp holds by the rock,” and as “a lover’s kiss drains its first draught of lips” (28.3-7). The narrator, as described in these analogies, sustains the memories of youth as if he birthed them, and remains obsessed with the innocent passion of first love. The image of kelp on a rock is evocative of the seaside Haidee scene, an affair in which the lines between innocence and maturity are blurred. The narrator, in having the thought of youth cling to him, is at once mature and innocent, old and young. He is himself battling with the hold that such an “obscure” middle age has on him.

Canto XII continues that negative description of the struggle the middle-aged endures. It is the “most barbarous” (1.2) of all the middle ages, that of man, when he “hover[s] between fool and sage” (1.4), neither young nor old but somewhere in-between. He is for the time an outcast, too old for youth and too young for age, confused as to the course he should take. He is in the act of transitioning, his hair “grows” gray (1.8), and can only wait for the change to reach completion. In middle age one begins to realize that love is no longer an option: physically, he is too old to take a wife, and romantically, he knows that such love is but an illusion. He also comes to see that even money is a fleeting pleasure, which “gleams only through the dawn of its creation” (2.8). It is a time when confusion is at its peak, when the romanticism and imagination of youth can no longer explain the world, and the knowledge that comes with age is still out of reach.

After all the attention he has paid to youth and middle age, in Canto XIII the narrator turns to describe the life of the old. After one has emerged from middle age, “that serene and somewhat dull epoch,” and has turned “that awkward corner,” he becomes old. His world becomes quiet and his passions dullen through indifference. He is free now to deliver criticism

and praise as he sees fit, for now he can see things for what they are and has wisdom working in his favor. Even so, the old must move on from their youth and leave it for the young, as “the figure and the face hint that ‘tis time to give the younger peace” (4.7-8). He goes on to inform those reluctant to age that “they have passed life’s equinoctial line” (5.4) and must look to the pleasures allotted them. They have claret and Madeira “to irrigate the dryness of decline” (5.6), and politics to take up their time. They have the responsibilities of religion, war, taxes, economy and leadership. And as they no longer have the capacity for love, “that mere hallucination” (6.6) so delightful in their youth, they can look to hate to replace it, to “the joys of mutual hate to keep them warm” (6.5). And hate only because it lasts longer and can be enjoyed at leisure, as opposed to the hasty nature of love. In Canto XIV the narrator disapproves of those “*ci-devant jeunes hommes*” (18.7) who refuse to grow up. Granted, after the activities of youth so pleasurable, he admits “there’s little left but to be bored or bore” (18.6). But such a situation does not call for a clinging to the past. He almost seems to pity those men “who stem the stream, nor leave the world which leaveth them” (18.7-8). Youth, as a phase of life, is by definition temporary, and man must transition into adulthood, however unfair he might think it.

Later in Canto XII the narrator finds cause to lament that situation of youth when its pleasures are denied to the young. Juan in England experiences the busy social life of a young noble, a life full of responsibility undue for youth. Such men are described as “handsome but wasted, rich without a sou” (75.2); their “vigor in a thousand arms is dissipated” (75.3). They are but tools in the senate, they are almost obligated to spend their money, and after they have “voted, dined, drank, gamed, and whored” (75.7), they die, leaving behind an unfulfilling life. Such is not the image of youth idealized by the narrator. Such is not the youth that prepares one

for knowledge and an acceptance of mortality. The youth that is so pleasing but fleeting is the proper form youth must take. Is it not fitting that a young man be matured too quickly. Byron himself experienced such a life of the “young noble”; as he describes it, “My own master at an age when I most required a guide, and left to the dominion of my passions when they were the strongest, with a fortune anticipated before I came into possession of it, and a constitution impaired by early excesses...with a joyless indifference to a world that was all before me.” Such is the consequence of growing up too soon—the mystery and pleasure in the world is left un-enjoyed.

While not a digression, a discussion on age occurs in Canto V, that is, during the scene of Juan at the slave trade. He meets there “a man of thirty” (10.6), and at once this new friend comes to stand for the aged, where Juan is the young. This new character is described in stanza 11 as having “an open brow a little marked with care” attributed to “thought or toil or study” (5, 4). He also faces the prospect of slavery with “such sang-froid” (7), as if he is indifferent to his fate. To him, it is “no worse than any other scrape, a thing of course” (12.7-8). In contrast, to Juan, a “mere lad”, the prospect of slavery is “a doom which had o’erthrown even men” (12.1, 3-4). And note—Juan is not considered to be a man. In thus describing the nameless old man and contrasting him to Juan, the narrator is able to describe the state of age all men will enter, perhaps even Juan himself. Here, the aged knows that fortune changes. He knows that “men are the sport of circumstance, when the circumstances seem the sport of men” (17.7-8). They are not invincible as they once thought themselves to be, nor do they have the control of their lives they thought they had. Through the mouth of this aged stranger, the aged advises the young: “But droop not; fortune at your time of life...will hardly leave you...for any length of days in such a

pickle” (17.1-4). The young will come to realize that fortune can turn for the worse, but they should also see that a changing fortune means that it will also change for the better.

In later stanzas, Juan inquires after the man’s calmness, to which the man replies with a reiteration of the narrator’s earlier description of the aging process. He sees youth as a state of hopefulness, skies full of rainbows. Time, however, “strips our illusions of their hue” (21.6) and brings to light so many mistakes made in youth yet left unseen. They are seen and shed one by one, making the growth a gradual process, much like the molting process of the snake (a phallic image, appropriately enough). Though new skin may still appear beneath the old, the process still leads one to an understanding of mortality, as one realizes that “this skin must go the way too of all flesh” (22.3). The previous concerns of youth—love and ambition—and the sentiments that replace them—avarice and vengeance—combine to become a “deadly mesh” of “glittering lime-twigs,” a trap in which to lure and ensnare small birds, thus trapping them in a middle-age, “where still we flutter on for pence or praise” (22.5,7,8). The aging youth begins to shift its purpose from love to greed, be it in the acquisition of wealth or glory. One of the few consolations given to the aging youth is that, “by setting things in their right point of view, knowledge at least is gained” (23.5-6). Juan can look forward to a life that will be, while void of rainbows, nonetheless full of knowledge, no matter how bitter the learning process may be.

Following this scene is a genuine digression, beginning with the story of the commandant’s murder, evolving into a reflection on death and mortality, that is, what it is about mortality that the aging man must learn. Firstly, death is beyond our control. As the narrator tells the story, he describes his pleas to the dead man to speak and wake: “‘Speak!’ but he spoke not. ‘Wake!’ but still he slept” (36.2). Secondly, death does not make sense, often striking when least expected. This man had fought wars and countless battles, “the foremost in the charge or in the

sally” and now is “butchered in a civic alley” (37.7,8), denied the heroes death he should have earned. Thirdly, there is nothing to be gained from death. The narrator stood with the body; he says, “I gazed...To try if I could wrench aught out of death which should confirm or shake or make a faith; But it was all a mystery” (38.6-39.1). The death was to no purpose and as such cannot reveal any order or understanding of the ways of God or the universe. Lastly, it emphasizes the futility of life. He questions the purpose of blood, if it will only be shed, and wonders why humans should find death to perplexing, “we, whose minds comprehend all things” (39.8). This last statement of human arrogance shows that the narrator at the time of the event was not yet a man. He was just beginning to understand that men are mortal, and that no other reason is necessary to explain why a death occurs. This digression emphasizes how important to the aging process it is that one abandons his concept of invincibility. One must realize not only that men are mortal, but also that they are not meant to understand everything. Some things exist in this world that are beyond both man’s control and his understanding.

As to Juan’s manifestation of these varied criteria, one must keep in mind the poem’s earlier assertion that age is so certain and youth so fleeting, the one does not wait for the completion of the other. By the end of the poem, Juan exhibits traits of both, still hovering between the young fool and the older sage. Of the young, he is innocent, if only naïve throughout the work, still believing in ghost stories in the last canto. Though sexually knowledgeable, he is always portrayed as the victim, though willing, or the sincere lover, never as an aggressor. Also, he still feels the passion such as only the young can feel, not losing the intensity of emotion he has for Julia, Haidée, and even Aurora. And at Ismail he exhibits that youthful sense of invincibility. Ismail, however, is something of a turning point, as he here begins to show signs of

age beyond that mere criterion experience, one he all too clearly has from the start. First and foremost, he experiences mortality on a large scale, as any battle can be expected to deliver. Also, in the discovery and adoption of Leila, he begins to lose his egocentrism and cares for a person outside of himself. Lastly, when he meets and is fascinated by Aurora, he shows that he is on his way to a righted perception of the world, as Aurora is a woman unlike any he has met and demands a different mode of behavior.

In the terms of Bernard Beatty, Juan, as a fallen human being, is cast from a limited Eden to an unlimited exile. However, as a wanderer always seeking a resting place, Juan is always ready to cross the border between Eden and the fallen state, though he must always feel its consequences. As his relationship to Aurora demonstrates, he is by the end of the work still on the cusp of wandering youth and settled age, though he is closer to his goal, as Aurora represents such an existence at the gate of Eden, uniting love and knowledge.⁸

Amor Vincit Omnia: Juan's Emotional Education

In the course of the poem, Juan only loves, or at least shows some kind of active interest in, four women: Julia, Haidée, Leila, and Aurora. The fact that Juan plays an independent, active role in the forming of these relationships means that these women hold significance in the development of Juan's character, and the nature of these relationships refine that role to his emotional and interpersonal maturity. It is in the way they are characterized that these women mark his status in that development. Julia and Haidée are his emotional mothers, Julia giving birth to him and Haidée raising him out of infancy. The episodes with Leila show how far he has matured, as well as how far he still has to go, with Aurora serving as what would be the final test

⁸ Beatty, Bernard. "Fiction's Limit and Eden's Door." *Critical Essays on Lord Byron*. Robert Gleckner, ed. New York: G.K. Hall. 1991. 206-223.

of his emotional and relational development, in which a passing grade would make him ready for adulthood in the social world.

As Julia has the honor of being Juan's first love and love affair, she carries with it the duty of introducing Juan into the world of male-female non-platonic relationships. She is, in this sense, his mother, which Byron's characterization of her does not fail to emphasize. Julia, at the time of the affair, is twenty-three years old, seven years senior to Juan's sixteen. Not only is she an older woman, but she is a very close friend of his biological mother, and married to his mother's lover. She is already privy to all the knowledge Juan needs, and indeed will impart to him those things he does not know and will explain to him those things he does not understand.

Julia knows all the reasons why the affair should not come into being. She struggles to suppress her attraction with the consideration of all of honor, virtue, pride, and religion (1.75). For so many reasons she denies herself her desires. Even while she allows herself concessions, she maintains a limit, allowing for herself, finally, "love then, but love within its proper limits" (1.81). And though she in the end succumbs, her last breath is one recognizing the affair's nature and thus requisite impropriety: "and whispering, 'I will ne'er consent'—consented" (1.117).

Juan, on the other hand, is "tormented by a wound he could not know" (1.87). He has not had the life experience to know what is happening to him; no one expects him to at sixteen. But this affair, this interest from Julia he finds himself reciprocating, introduces his mind to the world at large, indeed, to the cosmos. Abandoning the house and its walls, he enters nature, his first taste of the experience of the adult world, and contemplates:

He thought about himself and the whole earth,
Of man the wonderful and of the stars
And how the deuce they ever could have birth,
And then he thought of earthquakes and of wars,
How many miles the moon might have in girth,
Of air balloons and of the many bars

To perfect knowledge of the boundless skies.
And then he thought of Donna Julia's eyes. (1.92)

With the advent of love he begins his journey towards age, including into his view of nature those human contributions of war and the slightly less serious air balloon. This frivolous thought is followed by one of seriousness, the unattainable nature of perfect knowledge. His thoughts might be deep and metaphysical, but they are scattered and unrefined. After all, he closes his metaphysical musings with a tangent on Donna Julia's eyes. Though now a part of nature and the real world of impending adulthood, it is yet impending and he has much education to receive.

Juan's birth goes through its own period of gestation. The final product might yet be unseen, but the signs enough are there: "There were sighs, the deeper for suppression,/And stolen glances, sweeter for the theft,/And burning blushes, though for no transgression,/Tremblings when met and restlessness when left" (1.74). Perhaps one can say the labor of Juan's birth begins in the bower on that June night, the point of no return. In this episode, Julia's hand is the watch sign by which the reader can measure the progression towards the affair proper. Apparently distracted by her thoughts, Julia's hand "on Juan's carelessly was thrown" (1.109). Having been so concerned with her thoughts and actions in the past concerning her attraction to Juan, one hardly believes that Julia honestly confused her hand with his. This is no "mistake," and if careless, it only is so in light of the duties she is struggling so hard to not neglect. Even so, her hand "by degrees/ Gently but palpably confirmed its grasp" (1.111), as if the labor pains are ever-so-slightly increasing. Juan then timidly kisses her hand, not knowing what he should or should not do, and in the next instant, they sit "half embraced" and all is lost.

Five months later, it is time for Juan's birth, prematurely triggered by the trauma of Don Alphonso's discovery. The imagery here is blatant, with Juan hiding under the bedclothes, between "that pretty pair," Julia's legs. As soon as is possible, he emerges from his hiding place

and resumes his flirtations with Julia. As her maid is quick to point out, Alphonso will return and Juan must hide. She laments the fact that he is not “a stout cavalier/ Of twenty-five or thirty” (1.172) but a mere child. Though he may have now been fully initiated into the world of love and loving, he is no adept.

That he is in fact just a child in the world of love is emphasized in the ensuing battle with Don Alphonso. Signifying through phallic imagery the different levels of maturity they represent, the fight pitches Alphonso’s sword to Juan’s unarmed hands. Though Juan disarms Alphonso, and proves to be Julia’s preferred lover, he is still a novice. He has not learned to master swordplay and does not even have a sword of his own. The narrator even states that it is better Juan does not pick up and attempt to wield the fallen sword, as he would have killed Don Alphonso, “his temper” (that is his libido) “not being under great command” (1.185).

Juan manages to survive his birth, escaping into the world naked as a newborn, but leaves behind him an all but dead mother. Julia is removed to a convent, where a life of sorrow and shame awaits her. Love, she says, is all a woman has to live for, and with Juan gone, she has nothing left. She is as good as dead, sending Juan off into the world, cutting her hold on him, and blessing him with the words, “You will proceed in beauty and in pride,/ Beloved and loving many” (1.195). What more could a mother wish for her son.

Juan, for his part, is something of an ungrateful son. Aboard ship, ready to face the world to which he has just been introduced, the thought of pledging undying love to Julia makes him sick. And it is seasickness, the narrator says, that is the utter death of love (2.23). In his pledge to love Julia, he swears, “Sooner shall this blue ocean melt to air,/ Sooner shall earth resolve itself to sea,/ Than I resign thine image, oh my fair!” (2.19), only to have earth, sea, and sky tossed just so in a shipwreck a few stanzas later.

The characterization of Haidée, Juan's next love, parallels in many ways that of Julia, creating her to be a second mother to Juan, one meant to nurse and nurture him out of infancy into an experience of true love. Though younger than Juan by a year or so, Haidée immediately plays the superior role. Where Julia is well-experienced in the arts of love, Haidée is quite innocent, but she still has something for Juan to learn. Language creates a barrier between them, though they do not let it hinder the growth of their love. She begins to teach Juan Greek, and he proves a quick study. But even beyond verbal language, she teaches him "a language there,/ And all the burning tongues of passion teach" (2.189). Here is an education something finer than what Julia taught Juan through flirtation and action. Haidée instructs in compassion and genuine love.

Again, Haidée is innocent; she does not wrestle with the conflicted interests of propriety and desire. Their love is pure, and that is all they need to validate it. Indeed, rather than commit any kind of adultery, they marry in the presence of the universe. Their love, indeed, has no limits; they seal their love on a wide expanse of shore upon a boundless sea. Juan and Julia, on the other hand, were confined to a bower in a cultivated garden, likely with walls to keep them in. From the start their love was limited. In the solitude of the beach at sunset, Juan and Haidée proclaim their love and consummate their "marriage." After all, the episode abounds with imagery describing the two as one, joined and inseparable.

She also serves as his savior and protector. She finds him on the beach, naked as a newborn, naked as when he escaped from Julia's room, and takes him back to her cave. This cave is dark; its walls have never seen the light of day. It is virginal, as is Haidée, and the fire she lights in that cave is the fire of her love and passion, likewise never before seen in the cave. Moreover, she makes a bed for Juan of fur and pelts. In effect, Haidée takes him back into the womb to be born again.

This birth will be of a purer love than that of Julia. It will be unadulterated and will signify not only a new birth for Juan, but also a new creation, a new world. Once in the cave, Haidée awakens Juan with a kiss, the breath of life; she becomes his mother and creator. She also shares in this new world, playing the role of Eve to his Adam, sharing the risk they take of eternal damnation (2.193). They are again referred to as Adam and Eve, finding when they are together another Eden (4.10), but, as the reader soon discovers, only insofar as they are soon to be expelled. The narrator laments that this new world they were to create is not a reality, for they truly belong in a world apart:

They should have lived together deep in woods,
Unseen as sings the nightingale. They were
Unfit to mix in these thick solitudes
Called social, haunts of hate and vice and care. (4.28)

That Haidée dies pregnant only emphasizes the futility of their love as an entity not meant for the common world. All the creative power of their love was for naught: “In vain the dews of heaven descend above/ The bleeding flower and blasted fruit of love” (4.70).

Also as with Julia, Juan and Haidée are victim to an untimely discovery. Yet innocence again takes the foreground as, where Julia might have slept, Haidée actually does. The differences in the discovery scenes, however, pertain most to Juan, as they show how much he has grown through this experience of true love. Where he hid from Alphonso, he jumps up to face Lambro. Where he relied on Julia to lie for him, he eagerly stands to defend Haidée. And where he fought then unarmed, he here immediately arms himself with a sword, ready to defend himself and his role in Haidée’s life. He is still, however, the inferior, as Lambro meets his sword with a gun, a phallic image boasting power and force over skill. Though Juan might have learned how to wield his sword, he still lacks the power to put behind it.

When Juan leaves, he again leaves behind a dead mother, only now the death is literal. Haidée suffers a coma-like state, then a frenzy as she forgets and remembers the shame and sorrow she is obliged to feel. However, Haidée is an entity not meant for this world. She is the creator of a failed new world, not meant to suffer shame and sorrow, and so must die. A piece of that new world will live on, though, in the person of Juan. His love of Haidée has left him forever changed, keeping him from indulging in the passions of Gulbaez, and becoming a standard by which the other woman he comes to love, Aurora, is measured.

In an article on the Haidée episode, Anne Barton⁹ states that the love of Juan and Haidée “can only be ephemeral.”¹⁰ Time is destructive to their love, and though their love merits them an existence eternal as “classical demi-gods,” they are subject to the physicality of the world they are in. For this reason Byron deems best for them an early death—they should not have to suffer the plight of growing old. And yet, they are not in a world that would support them. Juan, in slavery, is shackled to the real world, and Haidée dies in spirit *and* in body.¹¹ However, this relationship is not to be Juan’s be all and end all. By its very nature, it must evaporate into the reality by which it is surrounded. It does, though, also by its nature, give Juan a first look into the spiritual side of love. These two creations, at the hands of Julia and at the hands of Haidée, expose Juan to love physical and spiritual, respectively. They prepare him for Aurora, in whom he can potentially find both loves incorporated, or perhaps go beyond them to an experience of the ideal.

The next love on Juan’s list, that he chooses to love, is Leila, a girl of ten he rescues from the battleground of Ismail. By this time he has faced the slave trade, Gulbaez’s advances, and Dudu’s nocturnal habits. He has escaped certain death at the hands of the Gulbaez, only to find

⁹ Barton, Anne. “*Don Juan* Reconsidered: The Haidée Episode.” *The Byron Journal* 15 (1987): 11-20.

¹⁰ Barton, 12.

¹¹ Barton, 13.

himself fighting in a battle in which he has no part. This battle, however, allows him to display his prowess with the blade, and he is quite improved from when we first saw him fight for Julia. Many men fall at his hands, and he proves to have the skill and stamina of a man. It is at this point that he finds Leila, a girl for whom he must now act as guardian. After proving himself a man at Ismail, it is fitting that he have a child and prove his adulthood. He comes to have a genuine care for her, as any parent should, making "a vow to shield her, which he kept" (8.141). He takes her in as his protégée, as the only reward he needs for the battle, a human life saved.

However, though he succeeds in being her protector, the nature of his interest in her is dubious. The narrator admits that though there is no danger now in their relationship, it is such that is undefined, "nor brother, father, sister, daughter love" (10.53), so anything might happen in the future. After all, their ages differ the same number of years as between Juan and Julia, if not fewer, and that relationship began innocently enough. Nor is this danger one-sided, as Leila shows herself to be rapt with him. He is the only Christian she will tolerate, and even when he found her she looked on him "transfixed."

Juan, mature enough to be a parent, is also mature enough to know that he is not ready. He is moral, with only Platonic feelings for his ward, but alas, such feelings are forgotten. In England, he agrees with the ladies, that, "howe'er our friend Don Juan might command/ Himself for five, four, three, or two years' space," Leila would be better off in the care of an older woman, beyond the reach of Juan's emotions should the time ever come. In caring for Leila he makes a grand step towards adult maturity in interpersonal and love relationships, but at the same time knows his education is not yet complete. His libido is such at this point that he might not be able to control it.

The last of Juan's loves is Aurora Raby. For the first time, Juan meets a woman in society who sparks his interest, not vice versa. Her coldness towards him captivates him, as he looks for every sign of softening, to the extent of noticing nothing else. She is in Juan's education a turning point, the final lesson, if you will. All of his loves has led to this, for she will teach him what love truly is, making him then ready to enter the world as a man capable of love in the highest sense.

Aurora is described as "a certain fair and fairy one" (15.43). She is at once unique and unreal. She is young, has yet to blossom into womanhood, but she has a depth of soul that well makes up for what she lacks in age. Like Haidée, she is separated from the world, "apart from the surrounding world and strong/ In its own strength, most strange in one so young" (15.47). But she goes beyond Haidée; she is the angel to Haidée's Eve, "as if she sat by Eden's door/ And grieved for those who could return no more" (15.45). That is, she is the angel that grieves for the destruction of Juan and Haidée's love.

It is her coldness, perhaps, and her lonely nature that makes her inferior to Haidée in Juan's eyes.

Juan knew nought of such a character,
 High, yet resembling not his lost Haidée;
 Yet each was radiant in her proper sphere.
 The island girl, bred up by the lone sea,
 More warm, as lovely, and not less sincere,
 Was Nature's all. Aurora could not be
 Nor would be thus. The difference in them
 Was such as lies between a flower and a gem. (15.58)

The flower of Haidée lives, its softness can be felt and its perfume smelt. Aurora's gem, though beautiful and costly, is yet cold to the touch; though it sparkles, it does not yield to a caress. Aurora is an angel, a celestial being, she is above human reach. She is for Juan not a lover like Haidée; she is an ideal.

Juan's loves have led him, have prepared him to know love in this idealized state. Julia introduced him to the setting of love, of its physical nature, from infatuation to consummation, and of the raptures love can cause, in the heart and mind as well as in the bedroom. With Haidée he experienced also these raptures, but knew them in the light of a pure spirituality and an innocent love. And in Leila he saw such a refined love's potential for compassion, as well as caught a glimpse of an unrefined love's danger. Haidée and Leila actually prefigure Aurora as a type. The narrator says of Haidée, "the sun smiled on her with his first flame,/ And young Aurora kissed her lips with dew,/ Taking her for a sister" (2.142). And of Leila: "like a day-dawn she was young and pure" (12.41). Aurora's otherworldliness and cold inapproachability only show further her role as an ideal for Juan to know and perhaps one day understand. Though no living Eve or flower, she shows the true nature of love to be purer than Eve and more lasting than a flower. As an angel it does not sin, and as a gem it does not perish.

As Bernard Beatty points out¹², though Adeline describes Aurora as "prim, silent, and cold," she is warmed by the cosmos, by a union with the "vast, distant sources of all natural life and warmth." She becomes silent and still as a consequence of this blessed state.¹³ And blessed it is. She becomes for Juan a kind of universal mother, teaching transcendence to perfect the passion, romance, and compassion he has heretofore received. After all, her status is such that cannot be satirized, cannot even be placed among traditional romantic heroines or English socialites. She shows an intelligent star-like radiance joined with humility and sadness.¹⁴ His last mother before manhood, we can imagine, Aurora stands as perhaps Juan's last chance for understanding—of the nature of love and of the respect such love deserves.

¹² Beatty, Bernard. *Byron's Don Juan*. London: Croom Helm, 1985.

¹³ Beatty, 138.

¹⁴ Beatty, 140, 142.

This portion of education is the hardest for Juan; for this understanding Juan must work, a task none the easier for all the attracted women at every turn. But Juan is learning. Though he is left restless, perplexed, and compromised, though he does not philosophize but only sighs, her influence is catching. He is becoming sensitive to the spiritual, transcendent realm, fearing ghosts as real, and further sharing in Aurora's purity, a commodity he had been all too clearly at risk of losing.

And certainly Aurora had renewed
In him some feelings he had lately lost
Or hardened...

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,
The moments when we gather from a glance
More joy from all future pride or praise,
Which kindle manhood, but can ne'er entrance
The heart in an existence of its own,
Of which another's bosom is the zone. (16.107-8)

Indeed, Juan in the presence of Aurora is once again in the realm of love, the likes of which he knew with Haidée. He goes to bed a despondent lover, not sleeping with the poppies but sighing with the willow. Yet, unlike Haidée, Aurora gives Juan a sense of other worlds, brings him away from the egocentrism of youth into the presence of the spiritual and divine. He goes to bed despondent, but also "full of sentiments, sublime as billows,/ Heaving between this world and worlds beyond" (16.110). One can only hope that, were it not for the interruption of Fitz-Fulke and her "hard but glowing bust" (16.121) to shock Juan into the reality of this world, he would have continued on Aurora's path to a young, pure, angelic understanding of love and knowledge.

* * *

Returning to the issue of the ascent in *Don Juan*, there are several things to consider in order to decide if indeed there will be an ascent at all. First, there is the narrator. If he is Juan and

Juan is he, then all signs point to a Juan unascended, content to satisfy himself with a little olla podrida, a little music, and a friendly ear to listen to his story. The narrator does settle into the idea of old age, but only as a matter of course. He accepts the fate that is dealt him, seeing age as a hell and not as a means to return to Eden. Adams says that “to achieve the limit of desire is to descend very near to the limit of repugnance around the cycle.”¹⁵ In other words, one cannot know the perfect heights without first traversing the perfect depths, or at least nearly experiencing it. To get to “heaven” one must go through “hell.” If that hell be age, to the narrator it is not worth it. Better to cling to youth in a haze of nostalgia than to move on past that halfway house.

Perhaps that hell, though, is marriage. Beatty points out that marriage is an option, often hinted at as Juan approaches and experiences England. Even, he says, a marriage with Aurora.¹⁶ After all, being so long in a society one is bound to pick up its habits, and what better habit for such as Juan than to enter into a marriage state created, at least in England, solely for the purposes of facilitating adultery. For one so capable of a purer love, such marriage would be a hell indeed.

And yet, a marriage with Aurora seems unlikely. Youth and innocence aside, she is of another world. She is stationary, motionless in order to commune with the cosmos. And, she is the most important mother Juan has in this education. As we have seen, entanglements with mother-figures only lead to separation and death, and the added shock of bringing an otherworldly creature into our reality creates madness. No, Juan cannot taint the nature of Aurora by taking her off her pedestal, her throne. All he can do is learn from her, imitate her, and be sent

¹⁵ Adams, 193.

¹⁶ Beatty, *BDJ*, 180.

off into the world, her mobile counterpart, to “proceed in beauty and in pride,/ Beloved and loving many” (1.195).

This, then, is the sign of the ascent to come. Whatever hell Juan endures, he will travel on where his narrator could not. Whatever his future, Juan is now armed, through Aurora, with at least an intimation of where it is he is to go, of how he might get the key to bring him back to Eden.

And yet, this is only one strand of Juan’s life and of the poem that is his story, with many other strands to be considered.