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Byron's Satire of Deficiency in the 'Norman Abbey Banquet Scene' of *Don Juan*

Don Juan is a poem obsessed with the problem of finding balance, both artistic and moral, in a world governed by oppositions. In such a world, the classical notion of the *via media* seems to provide a much needed paradigm of human choice and action, positing, as it does, a middle ground or point of balance between opposites marked as extremes. Byron explicitly turns to ancient sententia, for instance, when he settles the issue of "over warm" versus "over chilly" passions, referring the reader to the classical dictum, "*medio tu tutissimus ibis*" ("you are safest in the middle path") (*DJ* vi.17). But in a manner typical of the poem, the classical citation raises more dust than it settles. Taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the quotation is mistakenly attributed to Horace (Byron likely had in mind the Horatian maxim, "virtue is a mean between vices, remote from both extremes"), and its corrupt Latin undercuts the very sentiment of the message.¹ That is, by adding an entirely superfluous if not incorrect pronoun, Byron indulges in excess even as he invokes a classical authority to pronounce against it: "the 'tu's too much, but let it stand; the verse / Requires it" (vi.18).

As the poet's wordplay on "tu"/"too" suggests, there are times, paradoxically, when too much is just enough—as in this case, when it makes his "English rhyme"—just as there are times when virtue is not safe, and balance is not the remotest, but the closest point between extremes. Virtue, for Byron, never follows a formula, classical or contemporary, and balance is never a matter of splitting the difference between too much and too little. Formulas fail and balance constantly eludes us because we experience the world in its mixed state, with its opposites so confused that vice can easily masquerade as virtue, and self-righteous moralizing, as moral wisdom. The role of the satirist,

then, is to expose and correct, by whatever means, the pretensions that vice has to virtue.

In the Norman Abbey banquet scene of Canto XV, Byron sets out to do this. He constructs a satire calculated to expose and correct the chief vice of English society: its lack of true individuality, passion, and taste. Exposing this vice, however, turns out to be a difficult task, complicated by the English penchant for confusing deficiencies with virtues, and specifically, acts of self-denial with heroic self-restraint. So Byron turns to a satire of deficiency in order to make his "epic satire," as he calls *Don Juan*, exactly that: an attack on the epic pretensions of the English. Correcting this deficiency, moreover, requires reversing the traditional moral wisdom of the *via media*; it requires, paradoxically, a healthy excess, represented by his Muse's honest appetite at the banquet, to restore the ongoing balance of opposition that Byron calls virtue when it appears in human action, and taste, when it expresses itself as a creative principle in the arts.

I

In the English Cantos *Don Juan* travels to England and Byron's satire returns home. As part of these cantos, the Banquet marks Juan's—as well as the reader's—introduction to English society. The hundred or so lines describing the feast lay before us a great deal more than just food, however. Byron promises to initiate us into the "mystery" of his own society:

Great things were now to be achieved at table
 With massy plate for armour, knives and forks
 For weapons; but what Muse since Homer's able
 (His feasts are not the worst part of his works)
 To draw up in array a single day-bill
 Of modern dinners, where more mystery lurks
 In soups or sauces or a sole ragout
 Than witches, bitches, or physicians brew? (xv.62)

Our mystic initiation takes us first to the epic. "Great things were now to be achieved at table." The first word, "great," and the passive construction, "were to be achieved," belong to the conventions of the epic: "great," because epic traditionally deals with men "greater" than they are, with "great" heroes, their journeys and their battles; and the passive voice, because it is essentially latinate, recalling the Roman epic, the *Aeneid*, or the latinisms of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, especially "And now great deeds / Had been achieved" (*PL* II, 722). Both, then, lead us to expect "great things," until, of course, we reach the last word

of the clause, "table." "Massy plates" become armor, "knives and forks," weapons. And as Byron inflates the heroic dimensions of the feast, he diminishes the epic until, finally, it takes on domestic proportions.

Byron puts the epic on the table so that ancients and moderns, Homer and he, can meet poet to poet, and raise the issue:

but what Muse since Homer's able
 (His feasts are not the worst part of his works)
 To draw up in array a single day-bill
 Of modern dinners[?]

Byron's answer to his rhetorical question seems to be: no Muse has done justice to modern dinners, except his own. For what follows—namely, a dozen eight-lined stanzas of clever comic poetry, forming the most detailed menu ever put to verse—shows that his Muse, at least, is up to the challenge. Epic is indeed still possible, but in a very different—and Byron would add, a very much improved—form.

The form of Byron's epic remained a mystery for the first two cantos, even to the poet. "I *have* no plan—I *had* no plan; But I had or have materials," he wrote to his publisher, John Murray, in 1819.² But if Byron had materials he also had a purpose, a purpose which George Ridenour explains in his book, *The Style of 'Don Juan'*: "in his lesser way and from his essentially secular and predominantly rationalist point of view, Byron [was] attempting as radical a redefinition of epic and the epic hero as was Milton in *Paradise Lost*."³ The *definiens* of Byron's radical redefinition, however, seems to reveal his sophisticated ambivalence about the *definiendum*. In Canto I, 200, Byron takes great pride that his "poem's epic"; that it will be "divided in twelve books"; and that it treats subjects fit for the epic, matters such as "love and war," "a list of ships and captains and kings reigning." By stanza 202, however, he takes care to articulate the "one slight difference between / Me and my epic brethren gone before," namely, that his "story's actually true." At one time he speaks of his "epical pretensions" (i.209) and reminds us that he has kept his promise to write an epic, "if plain truth should prove no bar" (viii.138). At others, he spurns the epic convention of beginning a tale *in medias res*, compares epic catalogues to auctions, and epic poets to auctioneers—though, significantly, he does the latter only after he presents his own exhaustive catalogue, in this case, of portraits and paintings at Norman Abbey (xiii.68-72).⁴

Byron not only makes conflicting statements about, but also conflicting use of, epic and epic conventions. Much of *Don Juan* seems to

be directly patterned after the actions and characters of classical epics. In Canto I, we find obvious parallels between the tragic love of Dido and Aeneas and the ill-fated romance of Donna Julia and Juan; in Canto V and VI, between the Circe and Calypso episodes of the *Odyssey* and the seduction attempts of Gulbeyaz; and in Cantos VII and VIII, between the battles of the *Iliad* and the savage Russo-Turkish wars. Yet as Arthur Kahn points out in his article, "Byron's *Single Difference* with Homer and Virgil," each one of these parallels betrays, on closer inspection, a crucial point of divergence. Cantos I and II, for instance, deviate from "Virgil's heroic love tragedy" to reveal "the stuff of reality . . . marriage, enforced separation, scandal and exile"; Cantos V and VI, from simple seduction to show that "royalty and autocratic power are not to be admired or envied"; and Cantos VII and VIII, from the false heroic values of Homer and Virgil to "emphasize the essential humanity of all the participants in battle, regardless of rank or class." There is no "slight difference," then, between the classical epic and Byron's redefinition. As Kahn puts it: "Byron satirically counterpoised the insights gained from his own variegated experiences in what he would have called 'real' life against what he considered as the exaggeration, unreality (mere 'appearance') and over-simplification in the representation of life in Homer and Virgil."⁵

Thus when Byron calls his poem an "epic satire" (xiv.99), he does so in earnest, even though he yokes together literary forms traditionally thought to be incompatible. Beyond the obvious differences—that epic, for instance, treats serious, and satire laughable, matters—there are other, more profound oppositions. Epic unifies social conventions and nature into one vision; satire drives a wedge between the two. The first, then, is concerned with affirmation, with heroic action and moral purpose, and especially, the beauty of moral order; the second, with negation, with reaction and failed moral purpose, and especially, the grotesqueness of moral chaos. Yet these oppositions co-exist without cancelling each other, a feat made possible by "epic" functioning not merely as an adjective which describes the vast scale or comprehensive scope of Byron's satire, but as an objective genitive which renders the epic per se the object of his satire. *Don Juan*, then, is a satire of the epic.⁶ In particular, it satirizes all that is merely conventional and apparent. The epic, with its false heroic values, static cosmologies, uncritical social hierarchies, and fossilized conventions, provides satiric targets; and the Banquet scene, with its expansive catalogue of culinary dishes, provides a vehicle for just such a satire.

II

Often dismissed as yet one more digression or as a Byronic excursion into the Roman satires on food and eating, the Norman Abbey Banquet scene in Canto XV of *Don Juan* has received only cursory critical attention.⁷ What little has been written about the banquet is characterized, like the poem itself, by an impulse to opposition. Take, for instance, the conflicting statements of two well-established critics, T. G. Steffan and George M. Ridenour. Steffan argues that in the banquet Byron was "intent on teasing us with his adroit versification of a cookbook and on heaping up an enormous amount of detail in fourteen stanzas to make his point about fastidious elegance, conspicuous waste, and the sodden dullness of gourmandizing"; and Ridenour, that "while the speaker is clearly amused, there is hardly any suggestion that he seriously disapproves of such goings-on in the house of an English peer. . . . [he] enjoys the meal—the dishes described are 'things I can't withstand or understand.'" ⁸

Steffan's description of the stanzas is accurate: Byron does tease us with his "adroit versification" and heap up an "enormous amount of detail." But Ridenour's attribution of poetic purpose hits closer to the mark: Byron enjoys "playing with the names" of the banquet dishes, just as he enjoys the poetics of the feast. Both critics, however, miss an important aspect of Byron's mission. He is not launching an extended attack on excess, nor abandoning his satiric quest. Instead, the poet is attempting a satire of deficiency; by revelling in the comic, communal nature of the feast, he enjoys what the English cannot. The banquet, then, is more an attack on the failure of his peers to find pleasure than on their inclination to abuse it.

On first inspection, however, the Banquet scene seems to be a literary cadenza, a satiric flourish that interrupts and embellishes the more important concern of these last cantos, namely Juan's impending love triangle. Seen this way, the banquet is a Byronic study of the Roman satires. Indeed, the scene closely resembles the verses of Horace and Juvenal, and the passage can be read as an attack of "fastidious elegance, conspicuous waste, and the sodden dullness of gourmandizing." A thousand years of satire seems to bear out Steffan's position: from the birth of satire, food and eating have been favorite topics of ridicule. Nothing lends itself to the laughter of censure more than the excesses of appetite. Nothing exposes the discrepancy between what people need and what they desire, and to

this degree, between civility and decadence, more than the delicacies and ornaments that adorn their table.

Horace knew this. In his second satire, he writes to his fellow countrymen:

The man who is pale and bloated from gluttony will never enjoy his oysters and wrasse and imported grouse. And yet you've a deep-rooted inclination, when a peacock is served, to caress your palate with it rather than a chicken. Your judgement is impaired by what doesn't count; the bird is hard to come by, it costs a packet, and its spreading tail is a colourful sight.⁹

Horace is concerned here, not only with the quantitative indulgence of appetite, but with its perverse fascination with the exotic. Bored with being mere gluttons and gourmands, men, he says, have "a deep-rooted inclination" to amuse themselves with frivolous rather than necessary, rare rather than nutritious. False desires corrupt taste. Hence peacock is preferred to chicken, even though the latter makes a better meal.

Juvenal, too, chastens men for such indulgences, though with a stick sharper and a tone shriller than Horace's:

Nowadays a rich man takes no pleasure in his dinner—his turbot and his venison have no taste, his unguents and his roses seem to smell rotten—unless the board slabs of his dinner-table rest upon a ramping, gaping leopard of solid ivory, made of the tusks sent to us by the swift-footed Moor or from the portal of Syene, or by the still dusky Indian—or perhaps shed by the monstrous beast in the Nabatean forest when too big and heavy for his head.¹⁰

If for Horace decadence is preferring peacock to chicken, for Juvenal it is preferring peacocks served on a table carved from solid ivory, but not just any ivory: it must have been collected by swift-footed Moors and dusky Indians. In this way Juvenal pushes his satire to its limit. The further humanity's embellishments distance food from its natural function, the more exaggerated, and consequently, the more decadent the desire becomes for that embellishment. And this is precisely what decadence means: desire wantonly outstripping need, and civilization, nature. There is no end to false refinement, since the corrupt imagination can always exaggerate need. As Juvenal might point out, there may well be someone who can digest venison only if the ivory for the table comes from the southside of the Nabatean forest, from a male beast fed exclusively on spring honey, and so on.

It is this literary tradition—the Roman satire of excess—that often shapes critical responses to the banquet scene. Such critics need only turn to stanza sixty-three and point to the catalogue of dishes to substantiate their claims:

There was a goodly *soupe à la bonne femme*,
 Though God knows whence it came from; there was too
 A turbot for relief of those who cram,
 Relieved with *dindon à la Perigueux*;
 There also was (The sinner that I am!
 How shall I get this gourmand stanza through?)
Soupe à la Beauveau, whose relief was dory,
 Relieved itself by pork for greater glory. (xv.63)

The inventory of excess—“*soupe à la bonne femme*,” “turbot,” “*dindon à la Perigueux*,” “*soupe à la Beauveau*,” “dory,” and a list that includes, over the space of ten stanzas or so, twenty other culinary extravagances—the reference to “cram,” the pun on the word “relieve,” the offhand remark, “though God knows whence it came,” all seem to place this stanza, as well as the entire banquet scene, alongside the satires of Horace and Juvenal.

Byron, however, intends the juxtaposition, not to reinforce the similarities, but to mark out clearly the differences between his satire and those of the Romans, just as he insists vehemently on the “single difference” between his epic and those of Homer and Virgil. First, the offhand remark about the “goodly *soupe à la bonne femme*” is less an attack on eating than a punning on its French name. In a poem obsessed with the question of “good women,” the phrase is more a comment on the opposite sex, good or otherwise, than on the dish. The pun on “relieve,” too, is more innocent in its playfulness than vindictive in its satire. “Relieve,” in one sense means to alleviate pain, such as hunger pangs; in another, to set free from duty by replacing one soldier with another; in another, it denotes a small dish served between major courses in a meal; and in yet another, to urinate or defecate. The first meaning refers to appetite; the second, to warfare; the third, to banqueting; the fourth, to post-banquet bodily functions. The combination of these continues to relate the martial elements of the epic to the banquet, and within the banquet, of the high, decorous aspects of dining to lower, bodily ones, but there is little here that is censorious. Even the word “cram,” perhaps the most overtly judgmental word, is mitigated by other considerations. First, “cramb[e]” is a kind of word game in which players forfeit a turn if they repeat a word; and second, Byron’s parenthetical remark, “sinner that I am! / How shall I get this

stanza through?," shows the poet trying to stuff his stanza with words in the same way "those who cram" play with language or stuff themselves with food. Poetry and food, poet and gourmand are being tentatively connected, a connection that Byron clarifies later.¹¹

As Ridenour points out, "if Byron has any very grim denunciatory purposes in mind he makes very little of his opportunity."¹² In lines such as "entremets to piddle with at hand, / Gently to lull down the subsiding soul," the poet could have easily amplified the allusions to Pope's *Dunciad*, excoriating the banqueters for their mindless indulgence. But Byron doesn't; his language moves in other directions. Even his puns—where the reader might expect the sharpest criticism—add little satiric commentary to the scene. A series of *double entendres*—the play on "cookery," "dish," "dress," and "*petit puits d'amour*"—is clever, perhaps even coy, but remains for the most part a playful commentary on the Aurora-Juan-Adeline love triangle.

Byron's pun on "gout," however, appears at first glance to be censorious:

Taste or the gout, pronounce it as inclines
Your stomach. Ere you dine, the French will do,
But after, there are sometimes certain signs
Which prove plain English the truer of the two.
Hast ever had the gout? I have not had it,
But I may have, and you too, reader, dread it. (xv.72)

In this stanza, Byron plays with the French meaning of "gout," namely, "taste," and the English meaning, "a disease of the joints caused by too much good living, and especially too much rich food." The pun presents a perfect opportunity to link tasting with disease, taste with corruption, and to make a moral judgment about the hazards of gourmandizing. But Byron doesn't. He finishes the stanza with this rather anticlimactic couplet: "Hast ever had the gout? I have not had it, / But I may have, and you too, reader, dread it." Whatever satiric potential the pun may have had is dissipated by the curious question to the reader and the even more curious qualification about the poet's medical history. Because these lines concern the reader and poet—two factions not normally included in the satiric line of fire—they are hard to read as simple satiric vituperation.

Usually, some distance separates writers from what they are satirizing, and, similarly, the reader from what is being satirized. Byron, however, has already broken this rule, frequently. He refers to his "gourmand stanza," calls himself a "sinner," dreads the gout, and, in stanza sixty-four, confesses:

But I must crowd all into one grand mess
 Or mass, for should I stretch into detail,
 My Muse would run much more into excess
 Than when some squeamish people deem her frail.
 But though a *bonne-vivante*, I must confess
 Her stomach's not her peccant part. This tale
 However doth require some slight refection
 Just to relieve her spirits from dejection. (xv.64)

Already worried about getting his gourmand stanza through, Byron is afraid that he will not be able to “crowd all into one grand mess,” with mess meaning both “a quantity of food for a meal or dish” and “a disorderly or confused collection or mass of things.” And he is worried, not because his satire will suffer if he omits anything, but because he enjoys the feast, and wants to relish every detail. He confesses that his Muse, the principle of his poetic inspiration, is given to excess on these occasions. She is quite a *bonne vivante*, and in spite of Byron's protestations otherwise—“I must confess / Her stomach's not her peccant part”—she is very like those who cram, and hence she requires, like the banqueters, some slight refection.

Put simply, the poet's Muse joins in the feast, and by implication, so does the poet. And he does so with great esprit. His play on words, his revelling in the nomenclature of cooking, his fun with rhymes—“true is” / “puits,” “à l'Allemande” / “salpicon,” “Ammon / ham on,” to cite a few—his playful *double entendres*, his self-professed approval of and participation in the banquet, all point more towards the feeling of community and the splendid feasts of comedy than the alienating, vicious indulgence of the Roman satires of excess. Byron himself says as much in stanza seventy-one:

Alas, I must leave undescribed the *gibier*,
 The *salmi*, the *consommé*, the *purée*,
 All which I use to make my rhymes run glibber
 Than could roast beef in our rough John Bull way.
 I must not introduce even a spare rib here;
 Bubble and squeak would spoil my liquid lay.
 But I have dined and must forego, alas,
 The chaste description even of a *bécasse*. (xv.71)

He admits that the sound of exotic French dishes pleases him, that they spice his rhymes in a way that roast beef and spare ribs, the standard fare of the English language, cannot. But what is even more interesting is Byron's use of *occupatio*. This rhetorical device allows him to tell us what supposedly he doesn't have time to tell. He laments the fact that he cannot go on to describe the *gibier*, *salmi*, *consommé*, *purée*, but in

the process of doing so, enumerates them for us. This is no satirist's ploy of lampooning excess. It is instead the lament of a poet who enjoys words, enjoys playing with language.

The reason for Byron's joy is found in the last half of stanza sixty-nine:

Who would suppose from Adam's simple ration
That cookery could have called forth such resources
As form a science and a nomenclature
From out the commonest demands of nature? (xv.69)

After the Fall, man was left to his own devices, his own skills and prowess, to bend and shape nature to his will. From out of the commonest demands of nature, therefore, come civilization, science, nomenclature, and from nomenclature, from Adam's naming each thing in creation, comes poetry. Poetry, like cooking, is something that "Art refines / From Nature." This banquet is to cooking, then, what Byron's stanzas are to poetry. They are a delight, a celebration of human ingenuity and resource.

III

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is probably the progenitor of the classical concept of the *via media*. In this treatise, Aristotle argues that virtue is a mean or middle, and that vice falls on one side or the other, as either an excess or a deficiency. Because people generally tend to err on the side of excess on some occasions and deficiency on others, one extreme often appears to be more virtuous than vicious.¹³ Take for example the chief vice of excess, self-indulgence in bodily pleasures. Compared with its opposite vice, namely, boorish insensibility or abstinence, self-indulgence appears far more contrary to the virtue of temperance. This is because people tend to excess rather than deficiency in matters of pleasure. Boorishness, in fact, is often confused with temperance, though, as Aristotle points out, the first is a deficiency, and hence a vice, and the second, a proper balance of pleasures.

To correct the one extreme, says Aristotle, people must compensate by erring in the other:

But we must consider the things towards which we
ourselves also are easily carried away; for some of
us tend to one thing, some to another; and this will
be recognizable from the pleasure and the pain we feel.
We must drag ourselves away to the contrary extreme;
for we shall get into the intermediate state by

drawing well away from error as people do in
straightening sticks that are bent.¹⁴

In other words, if we are excessive in our pleasures, we must strive for abstinence—if insensible, for indulgence—in order to achieve virtue.

Where T. G. Steffan understands the banquet scene to exaggerate the excesses of English society, I think the scene addresses, and to some degree, redresses, a deficiency. Byron describes the meal but not its eating; consumption is virtually ignored. “The glasses jingled and the palates tingled / The diners of celebrity dined well” (xv.70)—this is the only direct reference to eating. Surely if the poet wanted to expose “gourmandizing,” he would have done better to draw portraits of gluttony: fat-bellied lords living it up or lascivious ladies provocatively devouring their dishes. But in Byron’s opinion the English cannot openly and honestly enjoy the pleasures surrounding them, so much so, that their entire life can be reduced to a single word: “boredom.” Byron uses this word and the French equivalent, “ennui,” many times in these cantos. In England, he says, “there’s little left but to be bored or bore” (xiv.18), and because a man is his pleasures, the English, lacking an appreciation of these pleasures, lack individuality. There is an uncommon commonness that makes each Englishman look just like the other:

Although it seems both prominent and pleasant,
There is a sameness in its gems and ermine,
A dull and family likeness through all ages,
Of no great promise for poetic pages. (xiv.15)

English society *seems* prominent and pleasant, but is permeated by a “sameness,” by a “dull and family likeness,” by a lack of “great promise” for—and this is interesting—“poetic pages.” The English are uniform, which renders them incapable of enjoying the culinary pleasures of the banquet, and equally, of enjoying poetry.

Byron often comments in these cantos on how English society cannot take a jest, on how the clergy have brought “pious labels” down upon his head, and, in the dedication to *Don Juan*, how the public has made Southey, a milksop poet, poet-laureate of England. The banquet scene, therefore, epitomizes the poet’s struggle with society. Byron equates the pleasures of food with those of poetry, the gourmet with the tasteful poet, and the banquet itself with his own stanzas. By failing to enjoy one, the English naturally fail to enjoy the other.

Byron has a good reason for trivializing the epic. As Aristotle says, we tend more naturally to pleasures, so that a deficient enjoyment ap-

pears more like virtue than self-indulgence. By making men greater than they are, by showing their virtues in perfection, epic reflects exactly what the English want to see in themselves—namely, their boorishness as virtue, their boredom as self-control. We are told, for instance, that “Poor Lord Augustus Fitz-Plantagenet,” “took / But small concern about the when or where / Or what his consort did” (xiv. 45); and twenty-four stanzas later, that Lord Henry, “a cold, good, honourable man, / Proud of his birth and proud of everything” (70) kissed Lady Adeline “less like a young wife than an aged sister” (69). Aristocratic duty and epic pretence, it seems, smothers passion: the Duke and Lord Henry lack “that indefinable *je ne sais quoi*” (72); lack, indeed, “a something all-sufficient for the heart,” a deficiency which leaves their wives desiring “to fill up that same vacant part” (74), presumably with other, more passionate men. At the Banquet, Juan is the meal, and if the women are hungry, that is testament to their husbands’ failure of passion and appetite, encouraged by their false heroic detachment.

That the English upper-classes do see themselves this way is clear:

Sometimes indeed like soldiers off parade,
 They break their ranks and gladly leave the drill,
 But then the roll-call draws them back afraid,
 And they must be or seem what they were. Still
 Doubtless it is a brilliant masquerade,
 But when of the first sight you have had your fill,
 It palls; at least it did so upon me,
 This paradise of pleasure and ennui. (xiv.17)

The military allusions—soldiers, parade, ranks drill, roll-call—bring to mind the epic, its great battles and heroes. But these so-called warriors are “afraid,” and whatever claims to greatness they once had, whatever they themselves once *were*, all this is now an illusion, a “brilliant masquerade.” As a satirist, Byron wants this audience to see themselves as they are, not as they wish to be. He wants to strip the varnish from their faults, to rid them of their delusions of epic grandeur:

With much to excite, there’s little to exalt,
 Nothing that speaks to all men and all times,
 A sort of varnish over every fault,
 A kind of commonplace even in their crimes,
 Factitious passions, wit without much salt,
 A want of that true nature which sublines
 What’e’r it shows with truth, a smooth monotony
 Of character, in those at least who have got any. (xiv.16)

England lacks all the true requirements of epic: "there's little to exalt," everything is "commonplace," there is nothing universal, "nothing that speaks to all men and all time," and, most importantly, there is "a want of that true nature which sublimates / Whate'er it shows with Truth." Remembering that for Byron, "truth" is the "single difference" between his epic, as he conceives it, and those of Homer and Virgil, this charge of falsity must be taken seriously. English society, he is saying, lacks enjoyment and pleasure, lacks truth and individuality, a poverty which diminishes the sublime, the exalted, and the universal to the familiar and the parochial.

"With much to excite, there's little to exalt." Byron has shown us how little there is to exalt in English society by trivializing the epic—one half his strategy. To show us how much there is to excite, he marshals the other half—revelling in the details of the banquet. The satire of deficiency can operate in two ways: first, it can exaggerate the deficiency, making it appear ridiculous; second, it can redress the imbalance, as Aristotle argues, by erring in the other extreme, in this case, excess. Byron chooses the second. He revels in the banquet because the English cannot, enjoys the details of the dishes because they do not. And his word plays, *double entendres*, catalogues, rhymes, and participation in the banquet, both by himself and his Muse, are meant to emphasize, by their excess, the deficiency of the diners. For Byron, poetry is like a sumptuous meal, something that relieves boredom, that "makes some hour less dreary":

And such a straw, borne on by human breath,
Is poesy, according as the mind glows—
A paper kite, which flies 'twixt life and death,
A shadow which the onward soul behind throws.
And mine's a bubble not blown up for praise,
But just to play with, as an infant plays. (xiv.8)

Notice that his poetry is not for praise, not for the garlands of poetic victory—as are the epic laurels of Southey, for instance—but for his own amusement, and I suspect, for society's correction. Poetry is a bubble, something to play with, as an infant plays.

If asked, Byron would probably have characterized the English as the only nation to slide into decadence without passing through pleasure. The chief tone of the banquet scene, then, is not satiric, though the epic, and particularly its serious, pretentious facade, is being satirized. In these cantos, the epic is the enemy of pleasure, of infant play; it represents "system," self-satisfied complacency, everything in fact that the English are vainly in love with. Gourmandizing, on the

other hand, is hardly at issue. Quite the contrary: by revelling in the banquet, and consequently, in the poetry itself, Byron emphasizes by contrast the boorishness of the English. By steering the scene away from the satire of excess, preferring instead to expand on and join in the feast, Byron enjoys in verse what the English fail to enjoy in life.

These observations serve to complement and extend Ridenour's comments about the poetic nature of the banquet:

It is the sophistication of the speaker rather than moral indignation at the bill of fare at Norman Abbey that is most at issue here. The point is not a trivial one if the "moral" of *Don Juan* is to be sought in the suave ambivalences of attitude manifested by the speaker.¹⁵

Part of the "sophistication of the speaker," it seems to me, resides precisely in Byron's adept control of tone, manifested by his careful balancing of oppositions. The banquet scene invokes the Roman satiric traditions of food and eating only to reverse their usual function: rather than attacking indulgence, the scene posits a corrective excess, one designed to restore pleasure, poetry, and true (as opposed to false) epic grandeur to English society. Moreover, the poet's "suave ambivalences of attitude" reflect an inner balance, one that allows him to embrace rather than shun self-opposition while pursuing his satire of deficiency. This self-opposition reveals itself not only in his conflicting opinions about and uses of classical epic, but, equally, in the conflicting claims about his satire. At points he says that "I mean to show things really as they are, / Not as they ought to be" (*DJ* x.84); at others, that "My Muse, the butterfly hath but her wings, / Nor stings, but flits through ether without aim" (xii.40).¹⁶ Even his attitudes towards food—seen to be overwhelmingly positive at the banquet—are sometimes ambivalent. After his poetic feast, for instance, Byron reflects on "simple olives, best allies of wine" and on the happy occasions when he feasted on such fare out-of-doors, "the grass my tablecloth" contrasting rather sharply with the luxuriant complexity of the banquet hall inside Norman Abbey.

Byron's "suave ambivalences" about the epic, satire, and food—all present in the banquet scene—should not surprise us. After all, Byron says at the beginning of the English Cantos: "I was born for opposition" (xv. 22). And what was true of the poet, then, in 1823 when he penned this line, certainly has remained true of his poem ever since. The morality of *Don Juan* resides not in a message but in an action, an action directed at the reader and the follies of this world. The poem achieves its moral action, its balance, by juxtaposing different, often

conflicting claims, styles, and genres, a strategy designed to challenge the preconceptions and thwart predictions, even those of the most self-satisfied, self-congratulatory readership. In this way, the poem transforms opposition into a principle of poetic integrity, and uncertainty, into a method of poetic creation.¹⁷ As the conflicting claims of Steffan and Ridenour show, *Don Juan* was born *for* and *of* opposition: it works against the simple reconciliation of its own antitheses, since, for the poet, the smoothing over of intellectual distinctions belies the false virtues of systematic, "epic" thought, and the assuaging of emotions, the cheapness of easy feeling.

NOTES

1. As T. G. Steffan points out in his note to this passage, the quotation, without the extra *tu*, comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* II 136, and that "the Horatian maxim he may have had in mind is in Horace's *Epistle* I 18.9: *Virtus est medium vitiorum et utrimque reductum.*" *Lord Byron: Don Juan*, ed. T. G. Steffan, E. Steffan, and W. W. Pratt (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 649. Unless otherwise stated, all references to Byron's *Don Juan* are cited from this edition.
2. *The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals*, ed. Rowland E. Prothero (London: 1898-1901) IV, 342-43.
3. George M. Ridenour, *The Style of 'Don Juan'* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1960), 92.
4. For extended discussions of Byron's redefinition of the classical epic see Ridenour's chapter, "My Poem's Epic" in *The Style of 'Don Juan'*; Brian Wilkie's chapter, "Byron and the Epic of Negation" in *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965).
5. Arthur D. Kahn, "Byron's *Single Difference* with Homer and Virgil: The Redefinition of the Epic in *Don Juan*," *Arcadia* 5 (1970), 143-161.
6. Alvin Kernan makes a similar observation about Byron's satiric target:

On the whole, the epic is invoked only for the purposes of mockery. And while Byron occasionally uses the mock-epic technique as Pope and Dryden did to provide a standard of life and manners against which the shabbiness of the present can be measured, he ordinarily realizes a tendency always latent in the mock-epic to mock not only the unheroic present but the pretentiousness of the epic form itself.

- "Don Juan: The Perspective of Satire," in *The Plot of Satire* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1965); rpt. in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1970), 353.
7. A recent work that specifically treats Byron's concept of art, appetite, and morality is Mark Storey's *Byron and the Eye of Appetite* (London: Macmillan, 1986). Storey makes no mention, however, of the banquet scene in his treatment of *Don Juan*.
 8. Truman Guy Steffan, *Byron's "Don Juan": The Making of a Masterpiece* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1957), I, 264; Ridenour, 37.
 9. Horace (Horatius Flaccus, Quintus), *The Satires of Horace and Persius*, trans. Niall Rudd (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) II. ii. 21-26.
 10. Juvenal, *Juvenal and Persius*, trans. G. G. Ramsay (London: Heinemann, 1940) XI, 120-127.
 11. For an interesting biographical note on Byron's preoccupation with food and obesity, see Gilbert Hight's essay, "The Poet and his Vulture," in *A Clerk of Oxenford* (New York: Oxford UP, 1954); rpt. in *Byron: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Paul West (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

12. Ridenour, 37.
13. Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941) II. 8. 1109a-14ff.
14. Aristotle, 1109bff.
15. Ridenour, 36.
16. In *Byron: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), Andrew Rutherford uses these lines about Byron's muse to argue that

the satire is . . . curiously unstable, based as it is not on any firm belief or principle, but on Byron's fluctuating feelings, partly critical and hostile, partly tolerant and sympathetic towards English aristocratic life: as a reformed rake, but not a repentant one, he obviously found it difficult to decide on any definite satiric attitude. (201)

I would want to challenge Rutherford's claims. Byron's satire is unstable, not because he lacks a "definite satiric attitude," but because "stability" itself—the status quo in politics, poetry, and life—is the very object of his satire.

17. Jerome McGann makes Byron's self-opposition a major theme in his book, *Don Juan in Context* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976). In Chapter Six, "Don Juan: Form," for instance, he relates the notion of inconsistency to Byron's search for artistic and moral truth: "The notorious lack of form in *Don Juan*, then, is in one respect a repeated attempt to draw distinctions. Byron wants to show what things are by placing them in contexts where differences are brought out by making the parts stand free and clear of each other. Meanings and observations are literally particularized; separations act to clarify the reality of context, of things standing in relation to other things" (114).