History, Historicism, and Agency at Byron's Ismail

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HISTORY, HISTORICISM, AND AGENCY AT BYRON'S ISMAIL

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In *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*, James Chandler identifes Byron's project in *Don Juan* as a fundamentally historicist one, insofar as it demonstrates an interest in both "typicality" and explanation. "Typicality" names the ability of individual characters in literary works to "stand . . . for something larger and more meaningful than themselves, than their own isolated individual destinies," in other words to exist "as concrete individualities and yet at the same time maintain a relationship with some more general or collective human substance."[1] In *Don Juan*, the "typicality" of Byron's hero—the sense that Juan is shaped by the historical age in which he lives—is tied to the poem's desire to explain. According to Chandler, the relationship of *Don Juan* to explanation, a traditional function of the epic genre, "sometimes seems to verge on downright obsession"; consequently, Chandler argues, *Don Juan* consistently returns to, and in the process participates in the invention of, "the historical situation" as the determinative ground for explanation in the post-Revolutionary, post-Napoleonic world.[2] Byron's Romantic historicism is thus defned by the "[positing] of the question of agency in relation to the concept of the 'historical situation'—it employs narratives of action wherein motivation can be assigned a social 'scene' particularized in time and place."[3]

Historical explanation is a central concern of the Ismail cantos (7–8) of *Don Juan*, where Juan, as a member of the Russian forces under the direction of the infamous General Alexei Suvarov, participates in the bloody 1790 taking of the town from the Ottomans. Despite his epical and historical ambition in recounting the Siege of Ismail, Byron concedes the diffculty of explaining. For example, it is "by some strange chance" or "one of those odd turns of Fortune's tides" that Juan fnds himself in various circumstances during the siege; but soon, in the stanzas immediately following the invocation of "chance" and "Fortune," Byron makes admissions such as "I don't know how the thing occurred" or, in an aside, "The Gods know how. (I can't / Account for everything which may look bad / In history)."[4] In the

latter instance, Byron consigns causal knowledge to "the gods" while relieving himself of the pressure to "account for everything," including here the unheroic detail of Juan's "commandant" deserting his "corps," that makes up "history." In this sense, *Don Juan* engages another form of "history": a "history" that accounts for details that Byron's will not. Yet even with its alternative historical bent, Byron's epic resists the convention of offering defnitive historical explanations, as we see in its reticence to answer questions about what is perhaps its most urgent historico-political concern, posed here about two "villainous Cossacques" who are hunting an innocent child during the siege:

> And whom for this at last must we condemn?
> Their natures? or their sovereigns, who employ
> All arts to teach their subjects to destroy?
> (8.92)

with the two Cossacks standing for nearly all of the soldiers taking part in the Siege of Ismail, and with their violence in pursuing a noncombatant child standing for the bloodshed and destruction of the siege in general, this line of questioning speaks to the epic's broader concern with agency—or with how to understand individual agency in its historical context. That the violence of the Cossacks is to be "condemned" is without a doubt—but the cause of their violence is the poem's more penetrating question: is it simple human nature, or is it their historically-specifc political status as "subjects" of "sovereigns" that is responsible for their violence, and thus also for the imperialist violence of the Siege of Ismail itself?

Byron's leaving this question unanswered, at least explicitly, means that it is also an open question for our understanding of Juan, the epic's modern "hero." Indeed, the role of the circumstantial and the contextual is an abiding concern of scholarship on *Don Juan*. Jerome McGann builds upon Byron's invocation in *Childe Harold* (canto 4) of "Circumstance, that unspiritual god," to conceptualize the sense of individual agency—the will to have a discernible effect on the world—running repeatedly into larger, impersonal forces at almost every turn.[5] This enmeshing of the individual in the circumstantial informs *Don Juan*, where Byron makes it his poem's shaping spirit: "context," defned as the accumulated force of the overlapping and intersecting sets of circumstances, becomes a determinative and "functional reality" in the poem, McGann writes, and the "perceiving mind, or the individual-as-experiencing-reality, is only another element in the emergent form" of his contexts.[6] Yet Jerome Christensen offers an alternative reading

of Byronic agency centered on the idea of "strength" as the "capacity for consequential action" that possesses "a rightness that decides the occasion" rather than one that "fts the occasion" or is determined by it.[7] Christensen challenges McGann's "historicist standard" of context determining the individual by arguing that the Byronic agent, if he is suffciently "noble," "command[s] belief in [his] right to command," thus creating the context or circumstances by which he is regarded.[8]

But the representation of agency in the Siege of Ismail cantos does not readily adhere to either McGann's product-of-his-circumstances model of agency or Christensen's rhetorical strength model. Juan, whose defning acts in the Siege are frst simply surviving and second saving and protecting the orphan Leila from those villainous Cossacks, is not, as Chandler suggests, the historicist "'passive' or 'mediocre' hero, very much in line, in spite of his famous name, with such cipher-ish protagonists as young waverley and Ivanhoe" of walter Scott's novels.[9] And Juan is certainly neither entirely in the Nietszchean mold of Christensen's analysis, taking "radically creatural consequential action without regard to persons" and "commanding" authority when, at least at Ismail, he is under the command of the charismatic Suvarov.[10] Juan may exhibit "strength" when he saves Leila, contravening his violent context; yet at other moments Juan is described as completely subject to his immediate circumstances:

> He knew not where he was, nor greatly cared,
> For he was dizzy, busy, and his veins
> Filled as with lightning—for his Spirit shared
> The hour, as is the case with lively brains
> (8.33)

That both possibilities of agency—strong consequential action on the one hand and the loss of self-possession in "the hour" on the other—exist in the Siege of Ismail suggests that there is not one single form or model of agency that properly accounts for the relationship between an individual and his circumstances. In other words, existing narratives of agency fail to capture the "truth" of Ismail, for "truth, the grand desideratum" is the ethos of these cantos' explanatory ambitions: truth, Byron writes, "Of which, howe'er the Muse describes each act, / There should ne'ertheless a slight substratum" (7.81). The "truth" of agency is either some middle road between McGann's and Christensen's interpretations, or it is what we might call radical variability—the "fact" (Byron's word) that Juan can be utterly subject to "the hour" at one moment and then taking decidedly consequential action at the next

in saving Leila. In effect, Byron's epic dispenses with the pretense of possessing one single formula for determining and representing action, which, to Byron's historicism, means the relationship between individuals and their contexts. Indeed, the historiographical practice of applying a prefabricated model of agency and causality to actions and events is represented often in these cantos as politically dubious—and as precisely the kind of established history Byron's own aims to supplant.

In what follows I examine the relationship between agency and history in the Ismail cantos of *Don Juan*. The radical variability of agency in these cantos bespeaks a larger crisis of historical representation.[11] At times Byron is straightforward about this crisis: "But now the town is going to be attacked; / Great deeds are doing—how shall I relate 'em?" (7.81). Yet in its proximity to apostrophes to both "thou eternal Homer" (7.79, 80) on the one hand and "ye great bulletins of Bonaparte" (7.82) on the other, Byron's question of how to "relate" the Siege of Ismail frames the crisis through the existing media of war—of which Homer's epics and Napoleon's bulletins are only two examples of dramatically divergent approaches to rendering war, agency, and, in the case of the bulletins, contemporary European history. By choosing not to follow an established historiographical, journalistic, or literary model, Byron also chooses to distance his project from their traditional explanatory paradigms. In other words, Ismail cannot be explained through the tactics of Homer or of Napoleon's bulletins (just two of the many examples of war media Byron references). Despite the poem's engagement with the theory and practice of explanation, agency emerges as fundamentally, radically variable. As we shall see with Juan and even with General Suvarov, historical agency is reconstituted in the very resistance to the explanations and interpretations the offcial media of history seek to impose on it. Indeed, *Don Juan* leaves us not only with the sense that the relationship of an individual to her historical circumstances can never be adequately or fully explained, but also that history and historicism ought to orient themselves towards reimagining the possibilities of that relationship.

* * * * * *

In the opening paragraph of the preface he wrote to cantos 6–8 upon resuming work on *Don Juan* in early 1822, Byron makes clear that his epic project is engaging not only real historical events but also real historical works:

> The details of the Siege of Ismail in two of the following cantos (i.e., the 7th and 8th) are taken from a French work entitled 'Histoire de la Nouvelle Russie.' Some of the incidents attributed to Don Juan really occurred, particularly the circumstance of his saving the infant, which was the actual case of the late Duc de Richelieu, then a young volunteer in the Russian service, and afterwards the founder and benefactor of Odessa, where his name and memory can never cease to be regarded with reverence. (*C,* 5:295)

The "French work" to which Byron refers is *Essai sur l'Histoire ancienne et moderne de la nouvelle Russie* by Marquis Gabriel de Castelnau, published in Paris in 1800, and identifed by McGann as possessing a "reactionary and monarchist" ideology.[12] In adhering to the "details" and "incidents" of the actual Siege, Byron offers his own cantos as a reinterpretation of Ismail: the same details, incidents, and circumstances, but through a mock-epic lens that is implicitly but constitutionally opposed to the narratives of Castelnau and his primary source, the aristocrat and mercenary Duc de Richelieu. Yet the very mention of Richelieu brings the issue of agency into the foreground of Byron's historical project, for the fundamental historiographical question of how to write individuals into historical narratives emerges as the most urgent political concern of the Siege of Ismail cantos. In other words, the question of who gets commemorated by history—of who gets remembered, and who gets the glory and fame that function as many soldiers' motivations in these cantos—depends upon the politics of the historian. At Byron's historical moment, how agency gets represented becomes a question of medium. Indeed, the historicism of the Ismail cantos—their concern with context and explanation—is defned by Byron's self-conscious meditation on the relationship of his mock-epic verse to various other media of war and history: Castelnau's *Essai*, the ancient epic poetry of Homer and Vergil, and the culture of the propagandistic war dispatch, which includes Napoleon's bulletins as well offcial government gazettes from London and Edinburgh.

Byron's admitted transposing of Richelieu's humane act from its actual agent to the fctional Juan conveys the political bent of this version of Ismail: it will challenge the standard historical accounts, which commemorate famous aristocratic mercenaries for the same political reasons that these accounts fail to render the actual human cost of war. Byron means that history does not record well the body count; consequently, Byron's version of the Siege will struggle to include the names of as many regular, non-aristocrat combatants as possible.[13] while an ideological historian like Castelnau will "pay his

court / To some distinguished strangers" such as "The Prince de Ligne and Langeron and Damas" (7.32), Byron runs into the problem, early in canto 7, of how to spell, and then how to rhyme Russian names in his English verse:

> The Russians now were ready to attack;
> But oh, ye Goddesses of war and glory!
> How shall I spell the name of each Cossacque
> who were immortal, could one tell their story?
> Alas! what to their memory can lack?
> Achilles' self was not more grim and gory
> Than thousands of this new and polished nation,
> whose names want nothing but—pronunciation.
>
> Still I'll record a few, if but to encrease
> Our euphony—There were Strongenoff and Strokonoff,
> Meknop, Serge Lwow, Arseniew of modern Greece,
> And Tschitsshakoff, and Roguenoff, and Chokenoff
> And others of twelve consonants a-piece;
> And more might be found out, if I could poke enough
> Into gazettes; but Fame (capricious strumpet),
> It seems, has got an ear as well as trumpet,
>
> And cannot tune those discords of narration,
> which may be names at Moscow, into rhyme;
> Yet there were several worth commemoration,
> As e'er was virgin of a nuptial chime;
> Soft words too ftted for the peroration
> Of Londonderry, drawling against time,
> Ending in 'ischskin,' 'ousckin,' 'iffskchy,' 'ouski,'
> Of whom we can insert but Rousamouski
>
> (7.14–16)

And the listing continues of Russian names with stereotypically un-English endings and discordantly numerous consonants: "Scherematoff and Chrematoff, koklophti, / koclobski, kourakin, and Mouskin Pouskin" (7.17).

Byron's initial gesture in this dissertation on ftting Russian names into English verse acknowledges the impossibility of what is probably the most just way of telling the story of Ismail, to "spell the name of each" soldier who participated (7.14). while "each" of the Russians is "worth" commemorating—as worthy as Achilles was, certainly—the arbitrary necessities of prosody and language interfere with the egalitarian possibility of their inclusion. The Russian names Byron fts in are there "to encrease / Our euphony"; they function as "discords of

narration." That the individual Russian names are euphonious and discordant suggests an essential tension between their very presence on the one hand—an undeniable historical fact—and any "narration" of the Siege of Ismail on the other. Indeed, the euphony of individual names stands for the broader discord they represent to politicized histories like Castelnau's—histories that elide the "thousands" who fght and die in favor of the famous foreigners who were present.

Even though Byron's version of the Siege will regrettably only "record a few" of the "thousands" of worthy names, he nonetheless tells us where to fnd the rest: the "gazettes," where Byron's narrator himself found them. Indeed, the narrator suggests he has not "poked enough / Into gazettes," meaning that the gazettes possess something admirable to the historian of Ismail. By "gazettes," Byron means primarily the *London Gazette*, one of the offcial newspapers of record of the British Government, where, among other things, dispatches from war and military commissions and promotions were published.[14] More generally, however, Byron intends to frame his version of the Siege against the periodical-propagandistic offcial accounts of war represented by the *Gazette* as well as by Napoleon's military "bulletins."[15] As the primary media of war in Byron's historical moment, the gazettes and bulletins become touchstones for the mock-epic's self-conscious meditations on its own status as a medium of history. Taken together, the gazettes and bulletins represent both the seemingly unavoidably politicization of history in their status as offcial, as well as, in their listing of medals and promotions, the quest for glory in war that motivates many of the combatants at Ismail.

One specifc feature of the gazettes and bulletins—and the offcial, ideological media of war they represent—especially engaged by Byron is the presence of an overabundance of individual names. In their printing of name after name, including of the dead and wounded, the bulletins and gazettes suffer from the opposite problem that Castelnau's history does: there are simply too many names to commemorate them all. The sheer volume of names an historian of Ismail could include conficts with the liberal desire to give each individual a just biographical listing:

> The rest were Jacks and Gills and wills and Bills;
> But when I've added that the elder Jack Smith
> was born in Cumberland among the hills,
> And that his father was an honest blacksmith,
> I've said all *I* know of a name that flls
> Three lines of the dispatch in taking 'Schmacksmith,'
> A village of Moldavia's waste, wherein
> He fell, immortal in a bulletin.

I wonder (although Mars no doubt's a god I
Praise) if a man's name in a *bulletin*
May make up for a *bullet in* his body?
(7.20–21)

Yet even the promise of glory, of being "immortal in a bulletin," is false, as Byron's rhetorical question suggests anagrammatically. Despite ancient claims to the contrary, a soldier's name in a bulletin—or any of the various media of history—does not "make up for" his death in combat. whatever glory might be achieved by an individual in one particular weekday's *London Gazette* is soon forgotten. Even "good Fame" won in the "modern battles" of contemporary European history is lost:

But here are men who fought in gallant actions
As gallantly as ever heroes fought,
But buried in the heap of such transactions
Their names are rarely found, nor often sought.
Thus even good Fame may suffer sad contractions,
And is extinguished sooner than she ought:
Of all our modern battles, I will bet
You can't repeat nine names from each *Gazette*.
(7.34)

Although the gazettes and bulletins do indeed convey some sense of the human cost of war in the printing of soldiers' names, those names, "rarely found nor often sought," will not alone suffce as "the true portrait of one battlefeld" (8.12) Byron aims to paint.[16] In acceptance of the functions specifc to each different type of media of war, Byron comes to imagine his version of the Siege not as supplanting but rather as existing alongside the *Gazette*, which, as a list of primarily unassimilated and easily forgettable names without detailed biographies or contexts, despite its offcial status, nonetheless persists as a record of human loss.[17] By canto 8 Byron gives in, as he simply cannot include all the names he might want to include: "And therefore we must give the greater number / To the *Gazette*, which doubtless fairly dealt / By the deceased" (8.18). The "doubtless fairly" is immediately doubted: "Thrice happy he whose name has been well spelt / In the dispatch: I knew a man whose loss / was printed *Grove*, although his name was Grose" (8.18).[18] Grudgingly, Byron comes to terms with the fact that most of the "thousands" of names will only appear, possibly misspelled, in the gazettes and bulletins of war, and not in his own cantos.

Yet Byron also hopes that something of the spirit of the gazettes imbues his version of the Siege of Ismail, and near the end of canto 7, as he prepares to narrate the siege itself in canto 8, Byron invokes both Homer on the one hand and the bulletins on the other, as he admits to a crisis of historical representation:

> Oh, thou eternal Homer! I have now
> To paint a siege, wherein more men were slain,
> with deadlier engines and a speedier blow,
> Than in thy Greek gazette of that campaign
> (7.80)

The source of the crisis of representation is both the dramatic bloodshed at Ismail—how fast it happens and with what instruments—as well as Ismail's status as actual history: "still we moderns equal you in blood; // If not in poetry, at least in fact" (7.80–81), Byron writes to Homer. where Byron views his own project as unequal to Homer's is in his epic predecessor's ability to "charm / All ears, though long; all ages, though so short, / By merely wielding with poetic arm, / Arms to which men never more will resort" (7.79). with "deadlier engines and a speedier blow" to render, Byron does not have confdence that he can "charm," or make violence palatable or even pleasurable, in the manner of Homer; rather, Byron must deal with "Bombs, drums, guns, bastions, batteries, bayonets, bullets, / Hard words, which stick in the soft Muses' gullets" (7.78)—in addition to all those Russian names, of course.

At this moment of historiographical crisis, identifying Homer's epic as a "Greek gazette" of Ilion suggests Byron wishes to borrow qualities from both types of war media. From Homer, Byron desires the ability to "charm": to make lines of English poetry from the "hard words" and Russian names of modern European warfare and, more broadly, to make poetry out of historical violence. From the gazettes and bulletins, Byron wants the power to convey the sheer volume of human loss and suffering. while the *London Gazette* or Napoleon's bulletins or even Caesar's war *Commentaries*—all referenced by Byron, and all politically dubious—would theoretically suffce as context for his own version of history, what Byron desires from their genre is the plain, unadorned list: "Oh, ye great bulletins of Bonaparte! / Oh, ye less grand long lists of killed and wounded!" (7.82). The crisis of representation faced by Byron's own epic-historical project is framed by, on the one hand, the potentially egalitarian idea of simply listing the name of each dead and wounded soldier, and, on the other, the

Homeric model of classical heroism that effectively glorifes war to make good poetry. Faced with the bloodshed of the real history of Ismail, Byron fnds the latter model of agency and history—that is, classical heroic agency—untenable. Nor will he print his own "less grand long list of dead and wounded." Rather, he will experiment with a middle path that draws on the "truth, the grand desideratum" (7.81), of each. Nevertheless, the historicism of Byron's Ismail cantos is grounded in the realization that they are not the only version of the Siege available and, what is more, that they are indeed enriched when contextualized by other narratives of agency and history.

* * * * * *

Byron engages directly with the complexities of representing historical agency in his memorable portrait of the Russian general who orchestrated the taking of Ismail, Alexei Suvarov. Suvarov, whose name is spelled frst "Suvaroff" and then "Suwarrow" by Byron, arrives on the scene after the battle has already begun, but his presence has immediate effect, as he orders the Russian forces to stop and regroup before launching what turns out to be a successful sacking of Ismail that claims the lives of forty thousand Turks. Possessing remarkable charisma, Suvarov takes on the role of a traditional agent of history in Byron's version of the Siege of Ismail: the taking of the town is attributed directly to the general's abilities and decisions. Yet the portrait of Suwarrow and his role in Byron's rendering of the Siege is detailed and complex, and the framework of historicism and agency allows for a new perspective on the place of the Russian general in these cantos.[19]

Indeed, if the Ismail cantos commemorate any individual other than Juan, it is Suvarov, whose odd presence and behavior at Ismail suggestively prefgure what Byron later articulates as "mobility" in canto 16 of *Don Juan*, a characteristic of certain types of persons, including and especially artists and actors, and even "heroes sometimes" (16.98). what Byron explores through Suvarov's proto-"mobility" is this troubling link between an agent of historical violence on the one hand in Suvarov and, on the other, Byron's self-conception as the historical poet, who admits to another kind of violence—the narrator says he is "about to batter / A town which did a famous siege endure" (7.8). But if there is a possible connection between the General and the poet, then Byron's epic project must come to terms with the agency of Suvarov both to understand itself and to frame its reimagining of modern heroic agency in the character of Juan.

Introduced as a "lover of / Battles" (7.39), Suvarov, his reputation as a successful general preceding him, arrives at the Russian camp to much fanfare. Immediately he commands the following of the multinational—that is, partly mercenary—force waiting to attack Ismail under the Russian fag:

> But to the tale;—great joy unto the camp!
> To Russian, Tartar, English, French, Cossacque,
> O'er whom Suwarrow shone like a gas lamp,
> Presaging a most luminous attack,
> Or like a wisp along the marsh so damp,
> which leads beholders on a boggy walk,
> He fitted to and fro a dancing Light,
> which all who saw it followed, wrong or right.
> (7.46)

Suvarov's power is compared the effect light has on those in the dark: frst he is "like a gas lamp," and then like a "wisp" in a dreary marsh. One the one hand, the general's presence is as distinctive and as unavoidable as the light of a lamp in the dark, but his physical presence, on the other, is described as "wisp-like," as "fitting" and "dancing" in a manner that somehow compels others to follow him, "wrong or right." Indeed, it is the power to lead "wrong or right," to inspire the blind subservience to and participation in the force of historical violence that defnes Byron's interest in the fgure of Suvarov:

> 'Tis thus the spirit of a single mind
> Makes that of multitudes take one direction,
> As roll the waters to the breathing wind,
> Or roams the herd beneath the bull's protection;
> Or as a little dog will lead the blind,
> Or a bell-wether form the fock's connection
> By tinkling sounds when they go forth to victual;
> Such is the sway of your great men o'er little.
> (7.48)

A "single mind" able to unite and lead "multitudes" could serve as the very model of classical heroic agency. Yet precisely how this happens remains unclear, as Byron offers four metaphors of the relationship between the "great" man Suvarov and the "little" men whom he rules. Each metaphor conveys a different sense of this relationship: frst the wind possesses agency, exerting force on the waters and creating waves; but then the "herd" seeks protection, the "blind" follow the dog, and the "fock" hears the bellwether—each metaphor thus locating

agency differently within the relationship of leader to lead. In other words, Byron seems to dismantle any pretense of actually explaining how Suvarov—and the traditional historical agents he stands for—is able to inspire the devoted following of his army. Rather, it is simply a fact of history that Suvarov compels his men to fght, and any one of Byron's metaphors might be analogous to the historical relationship between Suwarrow and his troops. Byron's own version of the Siege does not even settle on one, for to choose one would be to impose an interpretation on a relationship that is radically variable at its core, and thus understandable only in its resistance to traditional historical explanation.

Suvarov himself, "a little, odd, old man, / Stript to his shirt" (7.49), embodies the radical variability of agency and its resistance to straightforward historical explanation: if any one characteristic of Suvarov emerges as defning, it is his shape-shifting and virtually chameleonic presence at Ismail:

> Suwarrow chiefy was on the alert,
> Surveying, drilling, ordering, jesting, pondering;
> For the man was, we safely may assert,
> A thing to wonder at beyond most wondering;
> Hero, buffoon, half-demon and half-dirt,
> Praying, instructing, desolating, plundering;
> Now Mars, now Momus; and when bent to storm
> A fortress, a Harlequin in uniform.
>
> (7.55)

Allied to Suvarov's charisma and his ability to command the following of his army is his incitement of "wonder" in those who are near him; and the "wonder" Suvarov elicits suggests that he is diffcult to explain or analyze. The source of this "wonder" is the general's alacrity in shifting from one action to another—"surveying, drilling, ordering, jesting, pondering"—and from one identity to another—"hero, buffoon," "now Mars, now Momus." Is he a "hero" or is he a "buffoon"? Does he embody the god of war or Momus, the god of satire? Such questions remain unanswered in Byron's version of the Siege, as Suvarov remains impossible to pin down. Indeed, the jesting and buffoonery of Suvarov, along with the reference to *Commedia dell'arte* in this stanza, convey the sense that the General is as much in the mold of an actor as anything else.

As a "harlequin" actor at times and a "hero" at others, Suvarov predicts Byron's description of "mobility" in canto 16 of *Don Juan*, where Juan notices a peculiar quality in Lady Adeline Amundeville,

who is seemingly all things to all people: she is "occupied by fame" primarily, and "watching, witching, condescending / To the consumers of fsh, fowl, and game, / And dignity with courtesy so blending" (16.95). Juan notes the "expediency" of Lady Adeline's behavior, and he describes her as "playing her grand role" and moving about "as though it were dance" (16.96), the latter detail recalling Suvarov's "[fitting] to and fro a dancing light" in front of his army. This social and situational dexterity is what Byron terms "mobility" in the English cantos of his epic:

> So well she acted, all and every part
> By turns—with that vivacious versatility,
> which many people take for want of heart.
> They err—'tis merely what is called mobility,
> A thing of temperament and not of art,
> Though seeming so, from its supposed facility;
> And false—though true; for surely they're sincerest,
> who are acted on by what is nearest.
>
> This makes your actors, artists, romancers,
> Heroes sometimes, though seldom—sages never;
> But speakers, bards, diplomatists, and dancers,
> Little that's great, but much of what is clever;
> Most orators, but very few fnanciers
>
> (16.97–98)

In an 1824 note appended to stanza 97, Byron defnes "*mobilité*" as "an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions—and at the same time without *losing* the past," and then observes that though it may be "useful to the possessor," it is "a most painful and unhappy attribute" (*C*, 5:769). Individuals like Lady Adeline and General Suvarov—who are by no means identical—possess the ability to adapt to their immediate social and political circumstances; to charm and to please their company; and even to manipulate them in seeking personal ends. Mobility is a "vivacious versatility," a temperamental or natural social charisma rather than an artful or artifcial one; it is often mistaken for "want of heart," but to the discerning mind of Juan, it is in fact a product of sincerity, sincerity that looks to others like insincerity and is indeed felt by its possessor possibly to betoken a "lack of authenticity," according to McGann.[20] Hence the pain and unhappiness that accompany it, which Juan sees in the "look scarce perceptibly askance / Of weariness or scorn" in Lady Adeline" (16.96). It is this "look" of "weariness and scorn" that allows us to chart the development of Byron's idea of mobility from Suvarov in canto 7 to Lady Adeline in canto 16:

we do not receive a glimpse beneath Suvarov's shape-shifting, for the question of his sincerity or insincerity is a nonfactor in the representation of his historical agency. The general is defned entirely by his mobility; his insincerity is irrelevant.

Yet what brings together Suvarov and Lady Adeline is Byron's assertion that their characteristic mobility is also a central trait of "artists." McGann notes that while there is a traditional "connection of social mobility to the Romantic artist's ideal of spontaneity and sincerity," there is another, "negative dimension which Byron sees in the artist of mobility."[21] In McGann's analysis, there are two prime examples of poets of mobility in *Don Juan*: the frst is Robert Southey, whom Byron ridicules in his epic's "Dedication"; and the second, modeled on Southey, is the "sad trimmer" poet at Juan and Haidee's banquet in canto 3, who sings the haunting ballad "The Isles of Greece." As the contemporary poet of mobility par excellence, the "Bob Southey" of Byron's imagination, McGann suggests, is a "renegado" and a careerist, willing to write about anything in any style for any outlet. McGann argues that the deep source of Byron's vitriol towards his fellow poet is Southey's apostasy from his earlier republican politics; but to Byron this too, sadly, is further evidence that he is a poet of mobility, who is willing and able to alter his beliefs and ideals to suit his present context and audience—and to court praise and fame. But in the canting careers of Southey and the "sad trimmer" poet, McGann concludes, Byron also worries about his own body of work, which quietly parallels the poets he writes about in *Don Juan*. At stake is what, in the end, differentiates Byron from the sad trimmers of literary history, and allows him, in McGann's terminology, to "ventriloquize" the "The Isles of Greece" but not to own its themes without irony, which is to say, without that "look" of "weariness or scorn."[22]

Suvarov needs to be counted among the poets and artists from whom Byron wishes to differentiate himself. A portrait of the heroic general as artist emerges early on in canto 7: not only does Suvarov "fit" about like a "dancer," but Ismail itself is "formed like an amphitheatre" (7.23), as if awaiting its actors and its tragedy. Suvarov is both playwright and director in this drama, a practitioner, strikingly, of mimesis through what Byron calls the "mimic scenes" he constructs in order to train his army: "Also he dressed up, for the nonce, fascines / Like men with turbans, scimitars, and dirks, / And made them charge with bayonet these machines / By way of lesson against actual Turks" (7.53). In building educational "mimic scenes" of war, Suvarov is a double of Lord Byron the historical poet, who imagines scenes of war in his retelling of the

Siege of Ismail. And the specifc parallels between Byron and Suvarov continue: in one of his identities as "great philosopher," Suvarov holds forth on his belief that "human clay [is] but common dirt" (7.58), a view in accordance with Byron's narrator's statement at the start of canto 7 that he has been criticized for "holding up the nothingness of life" (7.6), a position he defends.

However, the most troubling aspect of this parallel is the apparent violence practiced by the poet of history. In other words, Byron is careful to compare the work of the historical poet to the work of the military general: at the end of canto 6, Byron's narrator tells us that he is about "to arrange / Another part of history" (6.120), and "arrange" historically means "draw up in ranks or line of battle," according to the *OED*, in addition to the more modern sense of adjusting and organizing. The narrator also claims that he is "about to batter / A town" that was once "beleaguered by both land and water / By Suvaroff or *anglice* Suwarrow" (7.8). Mentioning Suvarov by name twice in the stanza where he confesses to violence, the narrator "batters" Ismail just as the general had "beleaguered" it previously. while the empirical violence orchestrated by Suvarov is of course materially different from the "battering" and "arranging" done by the historical poet, what Byron means to convey by the parallel between the two fgures is that each shapes or alters history, and that the interpretive violence of the poet or historian is of the same family as the violence of the historical actor.[23] The poet commits violence both in that he cannot avoid celebrating war even if he writes about it with irony, and in that he cannot, despite his best efforts, commemorate the names and lives of all the soldiers who died at Ismail; thus they go to their deaths as anonymously as Suvarov had sent them off in the frst place.

Once the sacking of Ismail is complete, Suvarov sends word back to the prince in the form of a poem, thus solidifying the parallel between the general and the poet-narrator:

> Suwarrow now was conqueror—a match
> For Timour or for Zinghis in his trade.
> while mosques and streets, beneath his eyes, like thatch
> Blazed, and the cannon's roar was scarce allayed,
> with bloody hands he wrote his frst dispatch;
> And here exactly follows what he said:
> 'Glory to *God* and to the Empress!' (*Powers*
> *Eternal!! such names mingled!*) 'Ismail's ours.'
>
> (8.133)

Byron lingers over the fact that Suvarov is a poet, writing that "this Russ so witty / Could rhyme, like Nero, o'er a burning city" (8.134), and then adding that "He wrote this polar melody and set it / Duly accompanied by shrieks and groans" (8.135). In an 1823 footnote to stanza 133, Byron provides the original Russian of Suvarov's rhyme: "In the original Russian—'Slava bogu! slava vam! / krepost Vzala, y ïä tam.'—A kind of couplet; for he was a poet" (*C*, 5:735). Along with Suvarov the poet, Byron writes "witty" and "rhyming" verse about a burning city; along with Suvarov, Byron writes "couplets" that are "accompanied by shrieks and groans" in his rendering of the Siege of Ismail. Along with Suvarov, Byron is the poet, or maker, of history. By portraying Suwarrow as another poet whose interpretation of Ismail ("Ismail's ours") we either accept or do not accept as the fnal word, Byron sets up a contrast between his own epic-historical project on the one hand and, on the other, the kind of history Suvarov's status as "hero" stands for: the history of the victors and, with his "mingling" of "God" and the "Empress" in his verse, the kind of history written, like Castelnau's *Essai*, to serve the monarchs of Europe.[24]

with the anti-imperialist, anti-monarchist politics of Byron's epic project established, the question remains of what kind of historiography these politics might engender. From the outset, Byron seems to have accepted the historical fact that his version of Ismail can only exist alongside, rather than supplant, other versions of the Siege in the various other media of history: that Byron's own poetry—"(Powers / Eternal, such names mingled!)"—is intermingled with Suvarov's lines on Ismail is evidence of their unavoidable future coexistence as alternative interpretations of history, each with its own politics. In terms of historiography, Suvarov is identifed with what Byron calls "the gross": "Suwarrow, who but saw things in the gross, / Being much too gross to see them in detail" (7.77). Thinking in terms of "the gross" rather than "in detail" is what allows the general to "care . . . little for his army's loss" in order to ensure "that their efforts should at length prevail" (7.77). Suvarov, who "cares little" about the names and identities of the regular soldiers he sends to die, thus embodies directly the kind of history writing that opts to print the names of aristocrats and royalty over the names of the countless soldiers who are at least equally deserving, if not more so, of the commemoration offered by any medium of history. But as Byron has acknowledged, it would be impossible to print all of the names in any place other than the "less grand long list" of a gazette. Ironically, then, Byron's version of history not only includes a lament over the names of soldiers that do not

appear but also features those who function as "heroes" in traditional histories—namely, in this case, Suvarov, whose agency is a historical fact that will be supplemented, not replaced, by Byron's more modern hero at Ismail, Don Juan.

* * * * * *

Once the actual assault on Ismail has begun, the historiographical tension between "the gross" and "the details" emerges to defne Byron's attempt to differentiate his version of history from others. As canto 8 opens, Byron writes that "All was prepared—the fre, the sword, the men / To wield them in their terrible array" (8.2), and then returns to "the detail and the gross" to introduce his narrative of the Siege:

> History can only take things in the gross;
> But could we know them in detail, perchance
> In balancing the proft and the loss,
> war's merit it by no means might enhance,
> To waste so much gold for a little dross,
> As hath been done, mere conquest to advance.
> (8.3)

when looked at from the perspective of "the gross," which is the lens of standard historical accounts, war is palatable; but if known "in detail," war is, of course, undesirable. It is fair to say—and perhaps even a Byronic understatement—that Byron's aim in Canto 8 is to offer what he calls a "true portrait of one battlefeld" (8.12) that, in its fdelity to the human suffering and the political folly of imperialist war, seeks to reduce the imagined "merit" of such wars. wars of "conquest" are only viewed as "proftable" when viewed "in the gross": when seen, in other words, as Suvarov sees them, caring nothing for "details" and only thinking in terms of outcome, as refected in his pithy interpretation of the entire Siege—"Ismail's ours." Implicit in Byron's identifcation of "history" with Suvarov and with "the gross" is the idea that the version of the Siege in *Don Juan* will be oriented toward "the details" rather than "the gross." In this sense, "the gross," which Byron shortly will call "the general concern," means the grand, totalizing narratives of traditional history that cannot help but be ideological in their excisions and elisions of "the details" from the record; and "the details" refer to everything that usually gets left out: the dead and wounded who are not aristocrats or offcers, as well as events and circumstances that have little bearing on the fnal, recorded outcome of the war, for to think only in terms of outcome is, like Suvarov, to "be much too

gross." Byron's wager in these cantos is that if we know enough of "the details"—specifcally, if we know Juan's story—in addition to Suvarov's, then we will be able to reassess our investment in "the gross" of war.[25]

At frst, Byron presents the Siege in the manner of a traditional history. The Russian army is described in collective terms, as Suvarov's soldiers, in following his orders, lose any sense of individual identity:

> The army, like a lion from his den,
> Marched forth with nerve and sinews bent to slay,—
> A human Hydra, issuing from its fen
> To breathe destruction on its winding way,
> whose heads were heroes, which cut off in vain
> Immediately in others grew again.
>
> (8.2)

Suvarov's army is frst "like a lion" and then like a "human Hydra," an utterly unifed force to whom individual lives, or "heads," are meaningless insofar as they are by defnition easily replaceable. Couched within the Hydra metaphor is an offhand emasculation of the heroic ideal that, with its attendant promise of fame and glory, motivates many of the soldiers at Ismail: "heroes" here are as dispensable, as replaceable, and as anonymous as the heads of a Hydra. Taking his cues from "history in the gross," Byron describes the movements of "columns" of Russian forces in stanzas 7 and 8; and then, to reinforce the "grossness" of traditional histories' representations of war, brings the Ottomans into the picture via their "one enormous shout of 'Allah,'" which was "loud as even the roar / Of war's most mortal engines" (8.8). Just as it would be in a standard historical account of Ismail, the Siege consists of Hyrdra-headed columns of Russian forces invading the Allah-shouting Ottomans. Byron continues his extended allusion to established histories by sardonically naming the generals and nobles who appear in accounts such as Castelnau's: Arseniew, "that great son of Slaughter, / As brave as ever faced both bomb and ball" (8.9); The Prince de Ligne, "wounded in the knee" (8.10); Count Chapeau-Bras, "a ball between / His cap and head" (8.9); and General Markow, "his own leg broken" (8.11).

Byron confronts the historiographical fact that if he were to continue down the path of history "in the gross," he would not be able to tell Juan's story:

> But here I leave the general concern,
> To track our hero on his path of fame.
> He must his laurels separately earn;

For ffty thousand heroes, name by name,
Though all deserving equally to turn
A couplet, or an elegy to claim,
would form a lengthy lexicon of glory,
And what is worse still, a much longer story.
(8.17)

Detailing Juan's "path of fame" is simply incompatible with narrating "the general concern"; and that Juan is a "hero" indeed but not one of the "ffty thousand heroes" whose names will be left, as Byron tells us, "to the Gazette" (8.18) speaks to a fundamental difference between what those "ffty thousand" do at Ismail and what Juan does. Of course, Juan is a "hero" by virtue of having been Byron's subject for the preceding seven cantos of the mock epic—he is "our hero" to be sure, the "hero" whom Byron desires from the very frst line of *Don Juan*: "I want a hero, an uncommon want, / when every year and month sends forth a new one" (1.1).[26] Indeed, in the opening canto Juan emerges as the heroic alternative to "the military set" (1.3), which includes "Vernon, the butcher Cumberland, wolfe, Hawke, / Prince Ferdinand, Granby, Burgoyne, keppel, Howe" (1.2); "Buonaparte and Dumourier" (1.2); "Barnave, Brissot, Condorcet, Mirabeau, / Petion, Clootz, Danton, Marat, La Fayette" (1.3); and "Nelson" (1.4), among others. while Juan is originally presented in canto 1 as an alternative to the traditional military hero—which also informs the contemporary sense of heroism, as "military heroes are sent forth every year and month" Byron declares—it is not until Juan participates in a military event himself, the Siege of Ismail, that we are able discern more fully how he embodies a more modern idea of heroic agency. As the Siege comes to close with canto 8, it is one single humane action by Juan—saving an orphaned child—that comes to defne modern liberal heroism against the violence of history.

For the remainder of canto 8, Byron "tracks" Juan through the bloodshed of the siege. After "leaving the general concern," Byron spends several stanzas describing how the violence of Ismail affects Juan: frst, we fnd him, along with his British buddy Johnson, "fghting thoughtlessly enough to win, / To their *two* selves, *one* whole bright bulletin" (8.19). Having previously made the anagrammatic pun connecting a war "bulletin" to a "bullet in" a soldier, Byron conveys here the precariousness of Juan's and Johnson's situation: the line between glory—a bulletin on the one hand, and, on the other, death—a bullet in both of them—is thinner than they "thoughtlessly" realize; and, rather than their fate resting in their own hands, it is utterly up

to "some strange chance, which oft divides / warrior from warrior in their grim career" (8.27). Juan is an effective soldier despite this being his frst combat experience. Byron suggests that it would be normal for Juan to have deserted, given both his inexperience and Ismail's shocking violence. "Indeed he could not" (8.22), Byron writes, alluding to something in Juan's constitution that forecloses upon the possibility of his running way. Byron then attempts to communicate the source of Juan's mental strength:

> But Juan was quite 'a broth of a boy,'
> A thing of impulse and a child of song;
> Now swimming in the sentiment of joy,
> Or the *sensation* (if that phrase seem wrong)
> And afterwards, if he must needs destroy,
> In such good company as always throng
> To battles, sieges, and that kind of pleasure,
> No less delighted to employ his leisure;
>
> But always without malice; if he warr'd
> Or loved, it was with what we call 'the best
> Intentions,' which form all mankind's *trump card*,
> To be produced when brought up to the test.
> The statesman, hero, harlot, lawyer—ward
> Off each attack, when people are in quest
> Of their designs, by saying they *meant well*.
> 'Tis pity 'that such meaning should pave Hell.'
>
> (8.24–25)

By turning frst to the "Old Erse or Irish" (8.23) expression "a broth of a boy," Byron displays reluctance to say just what it is about Juan that prevents him from deserting and allows him in fact to thrive during the Siege: to employ a colloquialism is to evade explanaining. Yet identifying Juan as a "thing of impulse" and then a "child of song," or even describing him as "swimming in the sentiment of joy" while participating in the Siege, does not do any better in explaining his actions. while "child of song" and "thing of impulse," along with "joy" and "pleasure," allude obliquely to wordsworth's poetry of nature, the constellation of "impulse," "thing," "sentiment" and "sensation" refers to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British philosophy of mind, reaching back perhaps to Lockean empiricism, but certainly with Hartleyean associationism frmly in mind. Given the "comic pedantry" that McGann identifes in Byron's parenthetical correction of "sentiment" with "sensation," Byron's framing of Juan's "broth-like" composition with philosophies of mind from Locke to Hartley to wordsworth

suggests that none of them actually provides an adequate explanatory mechanism for Juan's agency (*C*, 5:732). The predication of "And afterwards" conveys this, as if Juan is a Lockean "thing of impulse" at one moment and a wordsworthian "child of song" at another, but then "afterwards" he "delights" in the violence of Ismail. In other words, while empiricism and associationism maybe be useful at times in understanding human action, there is always an "afterwards"—a time when predictive and explanatory schemes do not help in understanding agency. The Siege of Ismail is one of those times.

The sense that Juan is a willing, though at times certainly "thoughtless," participant in the Siege of Ismail—killing and maiming, without a doubt—is tempered by an important qualifcation: that he does so "always without malice." what is more, he partakes of both love and war "with what we call 'the best / Intentions,' which form all mankind's *trump card*." Although Byron acknowledges that "such meaning should pave hell" (8.25), he also offers a partial brief in defense of "those ancient good intentions, which once shaved / And smoothed the brimstone of that street of hell / which bears the greatest likeness to Pall Mall" (8.26). what troubles Byron at this moment in history is not "the numbers good intent hath saved," but "the mass who go below without" (8.26) the "best / Intentions" possessed by Juan. Yet Juan's "intentions," despite being a defning characteristic, are never elucidated during the Siege: we do not know anything of his "best / Intentions" other than the fact that he operates "without malice." while Juan's compassion will emerge when he saves Leila, it is virtually impossible to detail his "best / Intentions" during the Siege and to specify precisely what informs his actions—actions which we must admit add up to a militarily successful tour at Ismail. we are told he is "a fne young lad" (8.29) but not what "fne" means; we are also told twice that he proceeds "like an ass" (8.29; 30). Moreover, we learn that Juan "fought / He knew not why," suggesting both his lack of knowledge of the political cause he is fghting for and his lack of self-knowledge about his motivation and self-interest at Ismail. Indeed, as the intensity of the battle increases, Juan "follows his honour and his nose":

> Perceiving nor commander nor commanded
> And left at large, like a young heir, to make
> His way to—and where he knew not— single handed;
> As travellers follow over bog and brake
> An 'Ignis fatuus,' or as sailors, stranded,
> Unto the nearest hut themselves betake;
> So Juan, following his honour and his nose,
> Rushed where the thickest fre announced most foes.

He knew not where he was, nor greatly cared,
For he was dizzy, busy, and his veins
Filled as with lightning—for his Spirit shared
The hour, as is the case with lively brains;
And where the hottest fre was seen and heard,
And the loud cannon pealed his hoarsest strains,
He rushed, while Earth and Air were sadly shaken
By thy humane discovery, Friar Bacon!

(8.32–33)

Byron's descriptions of how and why Juan does what he does at Ismail continue to vex any attempt to discern a causal motive or apply an explanatory scheme to the relationship of agent to circumstances. The best Byron can do is to suggest that Juan is merely "following his honour and his nose" in "rushing"—a verb used in stanzas 32, 33, and 34—towards the "hottest fre" and "most foes." Of course, to follow one's nose is both to make a decision based on feeling and simply to continue straight ahead. Agency is radically variable and potentially unknowable, for Juan is immediately without a commander; he is left fatherless "like a young heir"; he is a "traveller" with an unknown destination; he is potentially led astray by the will-o'-the-wisp; he does not "know" nor "care" about his geographical location; he is "dizzy" and "busy"—and due to his being one of those "lively brains," he "shares the hour." The "hour" is defned profoundly by violence, and thus Juan's guiding "honour" is both "honour" in the sense of glory in war and "honour" in the sense of the values that fght against the quest for glory, for as Juan crosses "the walls of Ismail as if nurst / Amid such scenes," Byron gives voice to the seemingly contradictory forces working within his hero: "The thirst / Of Glory, which so pierces through and through one, / Pervaded him—although a generous creature, / As warm in heart as feminine in feature" (8.52). Juan's "warm heart" and "generous" disposition prove no match for the violence of the "hour" in which his spirit shares; in other words, his immediate circumstances seem to overwhelm his constitution, which could be labeled "warm" or "generous" or even "feminine" at times—though not at Ismail. Oddly, Juan fnds that "it was Elysium to be there" (8.53), and, "compelled by fate, or wave, or wind, / Or near relations, who are much the same" (8.54), he partakes wholeheartedly of the Siege, despite being "fung here by Fate, or Circumstance" (8.54). Twice Byron counters the implication of "fate" as a causal factor by adding alternatives: "fate, or wave, or wind, / Or near relations"; and then "Fate, or Circumstance." Causality remains indeterminate, and

thus agency does as well, if we do not know whether it is "fate" or "circumstance" that affects Juan at Ismail.

On this account, the alternative reading of agency would be to locate it in something internal to Juan rather than in external forces such as "fate" or "circumstance." However, despite Juan's admirable qualities—his best intentions, his warm heart, and his generous disposition—he is overcome by the violence in which he finds himself wrapped up at Ismail and, as Byron suggests, takes part in the "cruelty" that surrounds him: "At a distance / He hated cruelty, as all men hate / Blood, until heated—and even then his own / At times would curdle o'er some heavy groan" (8.55). when his "blood" gets "heated," Juan no longer "hates cruelty"; he thus practices cruelty even while his own "blood curdles" at the pain and suffering of others—portions of it indeed inflicted by Juan—at Ismail. Byron does not offer an explanation for Juan's shift from hating cruelty to taking part in it, other than the phrase "at a distance": in other words, it seems as though one's feelings change depending one's proximity to action. In contemplating cruelty in the abstract Juan "hates" it; but amidst the violence of Ismail, Juan cannot help but violate the principles of action he once held, albeit from afar.

Yet as soon as we begin to think that the shocking violence of the Siege has completely overcome our hero Juan—that his thirst for glory has been aroused to the point of no return, and that the circumstances might indeed determine his agency at Ismail—Byron allows Juan "one good action in the midst of crimes"—in the midst, that is, of his own crimes and as well as others'. The "one good action" is Juan's saving the life of Leila, whom he happened upon among a scene that "made the good heart droop / And shudder": "thousands of slaughtered men" and "a yet warm group / Of murdered women" (8.91). Juan's rescuing of this "female child of ten years," who is "as beautiful as May" (8.91), from the pursuit of "two villainous Cossacques" (8.92) is introduced wearily as "refreshing":

> And one good action in the midst of crimes
> Is 'quite refreshing,' in the affected phrase
> Of these ambrosial, Pharisaic times,
> with all their pretty milk-and-water ways,
> And may serve therefore to bedew these rhymes,
> A little scorched at present with the blaze
> Of conquest and its consequences, which
> Make epic poesy so rare and rich.
>
> (8.90)

Byron carefully introduces a distinction between the "one good action" on the one hand and, on the other, the "crimes" of his historical "rhymes." In short, the "one good action" does not fit, as Byron's cantos are "scorched" with the usual stuff of "epic poesy"—"conquest and its consequences." As we have seen, even Juan, whose story Byron needed to "leave the general concern" in order to "track," has become enfolded in the historical violence of the Siege. It takes this "one good action" to break him away from the grand temporal narrative of the Siege, the narrative that "makes epic poesy so rare and rich." In other words, a "good action" of the kind Byron is about to relate would not be recorded by the "rare and rich" epic tradition, given its irrelevance to the story of who wins and who loses at Ismail. Not on the radar of Suvarov's "gross" view of history, Juan's "good action" is thus by definition one of the "details" of war the knowledge of which, Byron has suggested, might allow us to rethink "war's merit."

As we have seen, this moment in the Siege speaks directly to the issues of agency and explanation: "two villainous Cossacques" chase the unarmed, frightened child through heaps of bodies, intent on killing her, and Byron asks, "whom for this at last must we condemn? / Their natures? Or their sovereigns, who employ / All arts to teach their subjects to destroy?" (8.92). These questions remain unanswered in the case of the Cossacks, but they can be recast for Juan's "one good action" of saving Leila from her would-be murderers: to what or whom do we attribute Juan's action? His nature? Or his context? while the answer is certainly not his context, since we have seen how being at Ismail has driven Juan to participate fully in the slaughter, for the same reason neither is the answer solely his "nature," in the sense that Juan possesses something the violence of Ismail cannot corrupt.

Byron does not provide a preconceived motive for Juan's action. Rather, despite his heated blood and his thirst for glory, it takes only a "glimpse" of the "sad sight" of the child's pursuit to spur Juan into action:

> when Juan caught a glimpse of this sad sight,
> I shall not say exactly what he *said*,
> Because it might not solace 'ears polite;'
> But what he *did* was to lay on their backs,
> The readiest way of reasoning with Cossacques.
> (8.93)

Of all the things he witnesses at Ismail, including the heaps of bodies he must march over—and even the wounded Ottoman soldier who,

while lying on the ground, was biting the heels of the Russians who tried to walk past him—it is the Cossacks' pursuit of the child that Juan fnds "sad." Something about the possibility of violence against a helpless child incites Juan, who reacts with an impolite outburst and protective violence. with Leila safe, Juan's feelings about her and about the situation jump quickly from one place to another, both confrming that he acted not from a fxed, inviolable, or discernible "nature" and suggesting that his agency should be construed as utterly variable, as a mixture, in this case, of "pain," "pleasure," "hope," "fear," "joy," and "dread":

> Just at this instant, while their eyes were fxed
> Upon each other, with dilated glance,
> In Juan's look, pain, pleasure, hope, fear, mixed
> with joy to save, and dread of some mischance
> Unto his protégée; while hers, transfxed
> with infant terrors, glared as from a trance,
> A pure transparent, pale, yet radiant face,
> Like to a lighted alabaster vase;—
>
> (8.96)

After saving Leila from the murderous Cossacks, Juan insists upon keeping her safe, and in making his case to—and indeed in commanding the assent of—his partner Johnson, he reveals more about how we might understand his actions in their context. Johnson wants to bring Juan to the fnal battle with the "old Pasha," where a "St. George's collar" might be won, but Juan declares of Leila that he "must not leave / Her life to chance" (8.99). In other words, Juan views his actions as a reproof of "chance."[27] Of course, "chance" at Ismail means certain death; hence the opposite of "chance" is "safety," which Juan requires for his protégée before joining Johnson and seeking glory: "'I saved her—must not leave / Her life to chance; but point me out some nook / Of safety, where she less may shrink and grieve'" (8.98), Juan tells Johnson. Johnson, however, lacks the ethical certainty of Juan at this juncture: "Johnson took / A glance around—and shrugged—and twitched his sleeve / And black silk neckcloth—and replied, 'You're right; / Poor thing! what's to be done? I'm puzzled quite.'" (8.99). Johnson's puzzlement over "what's to be done" stands in stark contrast to Juan's decisiveness: Juan is "immoveable" (8.102) over the ethical fact that the child must remain safe.

Eventually Juan does attempt to provide a reason for his steadfastness, though it does not convince Johnson:

Said Juan—'whatsoever is to be
Done, I'll not quit her till she seems secure
Of present life a good deal more than we.'—
Quoth Johnson—'*Neither* will I quite ensure;
But at the least *you* may die gloriously.'—
Juan replied—'At least I will endure
whate'er is to be borne—but not resign
This child, who is parentless and therefore mine.'
(8.100)

Not convinced by Juan's appeal to the ethical imperative to take custody of an orphan if you fnd one, Johnson reduces Juan's agency to a straightforward choice between two alternatives: "now choose / Between your fame and feelings, pride and pity" (8.101). Johnson implies that to stay with the child and attempt to ensure her safety would be to act from one's "feelings" and out of "pity," whereas to leave her to "chance"—meaning certain death, in this case—is to act from "pride" and to seek "glory." while Johnson's interpretation might seem too simple, it nonetheless speaks to a crucial, central thread in the representation of Juan's agency in these cantos: the belief, namely, that the springs of Juan's actions in their particular contexts, and thus that human agency in general, can be traced to discernible, knowable motives—that agency can, in short, be explained. Concerning his own behavior, Juan's position is different, but it overlaps with Johnson's in a signifcant way it: that it is possible to explain human action. Indeed, Juan attempts to explain his action by offering to Johnson what comes across as an ethical maxim—the "child…is parentless and therefore mine."

In other words, Juan and Johnson each have their own interpretation of Juan's actions, Juan offering ethical reasoning and Johnson claiming Juan is acting from feelings of pity. Rather than competing with each other, the two explanations exist side by side in these stanzas, as Byron does not indicate which of them is closer to the truth. Juan believes he possesses an ethical responsibility to the child; Johnson, however, not only disagrees with Juan but implies that Juan does not even know his own feelings. In short, any attempt to explain Juan's "good action" through the standard interpretive paradigms—ethical norms on Juan's part and self-interest on Johnson's—gets confounded by Byron's refusal the give credence to one possibility over the other. Just as Suvarov's insincerity (or his sincerity) does not matter to the fact of his historical agency, neither does Juan's motive, nor his ethical precepts nor his "feelings," matter to our conception of his alternative, more modern embodiment of historical agency in Byron's poem.

Indeed, Juan's agency at Ismail is defned by its very resistance to any attempts to explain it or to impose an interpretation on it, and it achieves this resistant form through its radical variability: submission to circumstance at one moment and contravention of circumstance at the next—and, consequently, all of the gradations in between. To think of agency as only one of those two prefabricated possibilities is to descend into the political dubiousness of the various media that shape our understanding of war: the false heroism of ancient epics, the monarchist and militarist bias of established historians, and the empty glory of the gazettes and the bulletins. Each medium possesses its own codifed interpretive scheme that gets applied to the raw historical facts of wars and sieges—the dead and the wounded, the peoples and nations, the generals and the soldiers—and elides, excises, or exaggerates in a manner that serves its ultimate end. None of those ends is sympathetic to Byron's stated aim in the Siege of Ismail cantos, which, for his contemporary as well as his future readers, is to "just ponder what a pious pastime war is" (8.124).

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NOTES

[1] James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 255.

[2] Chandler, 359.

[3] Chandler, 37.

[4] George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan*, in *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–93), 7 vol., *Vol. V: Don Juan*, canto 8, stanzas 27, 28, and 31. Hereafter *Complete Poetical Works* is abbreviated *C* and cited parenthetically by volume and page number. Hereafter *Don Juan* is cited parenthetically by canto and stanza number.

[5] Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *canto* 4, stanza 125 (*C*, 2:166).

[6] McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976), 114–115.

[7] Jerome Christensen, *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993), xviii. For a provocative reading of Christensen, see Bo Earle, "Byronic Measures: Enacting Lordship in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Marino Faliero*," *ELH* 75 (2008): 1–26.

[8] Christensen, xvii–xviii.

[9] Chandler, 378. Chandler is quoting Alexander welsh's *The Hero of the Waverley Novels* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963).

[10] Christensen, xv–xvi.

[11] My notion of the radical variability of agency draws on Michael G. Cooke's articulation of Byron's "realistic humanisim" – that is, the sense that Juan's "heroism, if it is to come about, must come from a personal and moral act of his nature rather than from an aesthetic defnition of character established by genre or authorial fat" ("Byron's *Don Juan*: The Obsession and Self-Discipline of Spontaneity," *Studies in Romanticism* 14 [1975]: 292). In Cooke's argument, Juan's agential unpredictability "strips us of all forms

of assurance, from the generic to the linguistic to the religious," and is consonant with Byron's self-conception as "the consummate Chameleon poet" (289). For an opposing argument that the self-possession of deliberative action is the telos of *Don Juan* (and is achieved in Juan's saving of Leila at Ismail), see A. B. England, "Byron's *Don Juan* and the Quest for Deliberate Action," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 47 (1998): 33–62.

[12] McGann, "The Book of Byron and the Book of a world," in *The Beauty of Infections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 289. For side-by-side readings of Byron and Castelnau, see Elizabeth French Boyd, *Byron's Don Juan: A Critical Study* (London: Routledge and kegan Paul, 1958); P. G. Vassallo, "Casti's *Animali Parlanti*, the Italian Epic and *Don Juan*: The Poetry of Politics," in *Byron: Poetry and Politics: Seventh International Byron Symposium, Salzburg, 1980*, ed. Erwin A. Stürzl and James Hogg (Salzburg: Institue Für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1981), 166–203; and Peter Cochran, "Byron and Castelnau's *History of New Russia*," *Keats-Shelley Review* 8 (1993–94): 48–70. On the possibility that Byron knew Russian history beyond what he read in Castelnau, see David walker, "'People's Ancestors Are History's Game": Byron's *Don Juan* and Russian History," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 36.2 (2003): 149–164.

[13] In a letter to Thomas Moore, Byron writes of "those butchers in large business, your mercenary soldiery" as the target of "much of sarcasm" in his Ismail cantos (Byron to Moore, 8 August 1822, in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vol. [Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1973–94], 9:191).

[14] On the *London Gazette*, see P. M. Handover, *A History of the Gazette 1665–1965* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Offce, 1965); for the broader context of the history of newspapers in Britain, see Dennis Griffths, *Fleet Street: Five Hundred Years of the Press* (London: The British Library, 2006), esp. 1–23, 47–72. On the relationship of the *Gazette* to war reports, and on its practice of publishing "extraordinary" issues pertaining to war, see Joseph J. Matthews, *Reporting the Wars* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1957), 13.

[15] On how Napoleon's bulletins – "best described as news letters from the Emperor when he was in the feld with the army" – demonstrate an "almost unparalleled intuitive understanding of the techniques of propaganda," see Matthews, *17, 12*. For a recent collation (and translation into English) of Napoleon's bulletins, see *Imperial Glory: The Bulletins of Napoleon's Grande Armée 1805–1814*, ed. and trans. J. David Markham (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2003).

[16] Andrew M. Stauffer notes that Byron mentions "the gazettes" in canto 1 as the source of a modern fame and heroism that is dependent on "paper," and thus not only materially fragile but also susceptible to getting "buried" beneath "the profusion of texts," literary and periodical, that characterizes Romantic-era print culture ("Byron, the Pyramids, and 'Uncertain Paper,'" *The Wordsworth Circle* 36 [2005]: 12, see also 11–15). Along the same lines, Tom Mole examines the "depth and ambivalence of [Byron's] antagonism" toward periodicals, especially the culture of reviews, and its centrality to his divided self-conception as an artist ("'A Suffcient Tincture of Literature': Byron e il paradigma dei peridici," in *Byron e il Segno Plurale: Tracce del sel, Percorsi di Scrittura*, ed. Diego Sagli [Bologna: Bononia Univ. Press, 2011], 125–143, 127); Translation drawn from English typescript provided by Mole.

[17] The entire archive of the *London Gazette* (along with the *Edinburgh Gazette* and *Belfast Gazette*) is being digitized and made available; see http://www.london gazette.co.uk /about/ archive.

[18] Byron's note to this detail reads as follows: "A fact: see the waterloo Gazettes. I recollect remarking at the time to a friend: —'*There is fame!* a man is killed, his name is Grose, and they print it Grove.' I was at college with the deceased, who was a very amiable and clever man, and his society in great request for his wit, gaiety, and 'chansons à boire'" (*C*, 5:732).

[19] On Byron's inability to resist admiring certain aspects of Suvarov, see Truman Guy Steffan, *Byron's Don Juan: The Making of a Masterpiece*, in *Byron's Don Juan: A Varorium Edition*, ed. Truman Guy Steffan and willis w. Pratt, 4 vol. (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1957), 1:229–230; for a disagreement with Steffan, see Helen Gardner, "Don Juan," in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism,* 2nd edition, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975 [1958]), 303–312; on Suvarov as a "fellow realist" whom Byron "fnds himself admiring," see Andrew Rutherford, *Byron: A Critical Study* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1961), esp. 173–176; on a Suvarov whose "barbarity [Byron] mocks into insignifcance," see Peter J. Manning, *Byron and His Fictions* (Detroit: wayne State Univ. Press, 1978), 244–247; for the portrait of Suvarov as a critique of the Alliance of European monarchies following the Napoleonic wars, see Philip w. Martin, *Byron: A Poet before his Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 213–217.

[20] McGann, "The Book of Byron and the Book of a world," 273–274.

[21] McGann, "The Book of Byron and the Book of a world," 274.

[22] McGann, "The Book of Byron and the Book of a world," 285.

[23] Simon Bainbridge notes that "here Byron uses the metaphor of siege warfare not to present his poetic militancy but to image the power of his own poetic performance in the war cantos, suggesting it is just as spectacular and devastating in its own terms as the assault on Ismail" ("'Of war and taking towns': Byron's siege poems," in *Romantic Wars: Studies in Culture and Confict, 1793–1822*, ed. Philip Shaw [Burlington: Ashgate, 2000], 171, see also 161–184).

[24] Bainbridge (182) points out the self-consciousness of Byron's quoting Suvarov's poetry.

[25] Bainbridge also stresses the relationship between Suvarov and "this history in the 'gross'" (181–182).

[26] Hadley J. Mozer connects the famous frst line of canto 1 to the tradition of "the want ad" in British newspapers, thus placing it in a broader periodical culture that includes "the gazettes," whose lists of "celebrated military men" were sometimes reprinted in other (that is, non-offcial) papers, including *The Morning Chronicle* and *The Morning Post* ("'I wANT a hero': Advertising for an Epic Hero in *Don Juan*," *Studies in Romanticism* 44 [2005]: 246). As Mozer writes: "If Byron 'wants' a hero, all he needs to do is pick up a paper" (246).

[27] On the language of chance and risk in these cantos, see Jane Stabler, *Byron, Poetics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 121–135.