

Bubbles, Butterflies and Bores: Play and Boredom in *Don Juan*

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Abstract

Byron is oddly poised on the borders of the modern understanding of boredom. His own awareness of boredom and its intricate intertwining with light-hearted play seems to have been heightened during the writing of the English cantos of *Don Juan*, with the result that a ludic dialectic between play and boredom can be readily observed in these cantos. This essay seeks to sketch the contours of this paradoxical relationship by looking at three images that frequently appear towards the end of *Don Juan* – bubbles, butterflies and bores – arguing that Byron’s experience of boredom simultaneously threatens but also undergirds his most playful poetic modes.

Byron’s *Don Juan* is not the devious trickster of the traditional story – filling up personal emptiness with masks, play and erotic games – but a rather naïve and childlike ‘player’ through whom a widespread boredom eating at late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English society can be lucidly viewed. Indeed, a dialectic struggle between play and boredom becomes an especially prevalent theme in the English cantos of *Don Juan*, as Byron wrestles with his own complex relationship to high society.

Take, for example, the following:

Good company’s a chess-board – there are kings,
Queens, bishops, knights, rooks, pawns; the world’s a game;
Save that the puppets pull at their own strings;
Methinks gay Punch hath something of the same.
My Muse, the butterfly hath but her wings,
Not stings, and flits through ether without aim,
Alighting rarely: – were she but a hornet,
Perhaps there might be vices which would mourn it. (XIII, 89)

Four stanzas later Byron once more interrupts the narrative to reflect on society:

Society is smooth’d to that excess,
That manners hardly differ more than dress.

Our ridicules are kept in the back-ground –
Ridiculous enough, but also dull;
Professions too are no more to be found

Daniel Gabelman

Professional; and there is nought to cull
Of folly's fruit: for, though your fools abound,
They're barren and not worth the pains to pull.
Society is now one polish'd horde,
Form'd of two mighty tribes, the *Bores* and *Bored*. (XIII, 94, 95)

In both asides, Byron depicts high society by images first of play and lightness, then of boredom and monotony. How are such apparent contradictions to be understood? This essay will explore Byron's conception of the relationship between play and boredom in *Don Juan* by focusing on three images – bubbles, butterflies and bores.

We begin with bores. Byron's *Don Juan* occupies a peculiar, liminal place in the lexical history of 'boredom'. The words 'boredom' and 'boring' never appear in Byron's published work, letters or journals, or in the writings of any of his contemporaries. The first example of 'boredom' cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* comes surprisingly late, in *Bleak House* (1852).¹ Byron does obviously use 'bore' as a noun (and its closest variants 'bores' and 'bored'), but even this was a relatively new word in Byron's day. Francis Grose's 1785 *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* first defines a bore as 'a tedious, troublesome man or woman, one who bores the ears of his listeners with an uninteresting tale', and then goes on to say that 'bore' was 'a term much in fashion about the years 1780 and 1781', hinting that the word had its beginning in high society.² By the 1810s, however, 'bore' had yet to penetrate the public consciousness. Despite boredom being the novel's central motif, Maria Edgeworth's 1809 *Ennui* tellingly never uses 'bore' in this sense, and Jane Austen, publishing between 1811 and 1818, only uses the word four times in her six novels, even though her drawing rooms are littered with bores. In his poetry, Byron himself only uses 'bore' in this sense three times outside his great epic.³

Don Juan thus falls intriguingly between the word's mysterious creation in the late eighteenth century and its full development in the nineteenth. Given Byron's status as one of the first truly popular authors, it seems probable that his thirteen uses of 'bore' in *Don Juan* (seven in the culminating English cantos) played a significant role in bringing the word 'bore' and the concept of 'boredom' into the British imagination.⁴ However, the creation and evolution of the word 'bore' clearly reflects a growth in the experience of boredom more widely. In *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*, Patricia Spacks comments that 'if people felt bored before the late eighteenth century, they didn't know it'.⁵ She then suggests four reasons for a radical change in the collective consciousness in relation to boredom: the development of the concept of leisure (time and space 'empty' of immediate demands), the decline of Christianity (and the particular spiritual discipline and direction it gives to private time), an intensified concern with individual rights (a greater focus on the individual's entitlement to action or lack of action) and a greater interest in the inner life generally.⁶ Other sociological reasons for this change include, to name just a few: the Industrial Revolution (a greater availability of labour-saving domestic goods), the rise of the middle classes (with more 'leisure time' and available money) and a heightened sense of time itself

Bubbles, Butterflies and Bores: Play and Boredom in *Don Juan*

due to the proliferation of clocks and regimented schedules. Here, too, Byron stands in the borderlands of boredom between the Enlightenment and the Victorian period.

Byron not only reflects an 'in-between' social consciousness of boredom, but also uses liminality as a primary descriptor of boredom:

Of all the barbarous Middle Ages, that
Which is the most barbarous is the middle age
Of man; it is – I really scarce know what;
But when we hover between fool and sage,
And don't know justly what we would be at, –
[...]
Too old for youth, – too young, at thirty-five,
To herd with boys, or hoard with good threescore, –
I wonder people should be left alive;
But since they are, that epoch is a bore:
Love lingers still, although 'twere late to wive;
And as for other love, the illusion's o'er. (XII, 1, 2)

Middle age is a weightless hovering between the two more distinct epochs, youth and old age. Romantic passion has ebbed but not abated, while a love of wisdom has not fully taken root. This indeterminate place is a 'bore' because it lacks compelling interest.

At the end of Canto XIII, six stanzas after saying that society is formed by 'the *Bores* and *Bored*', Byron again describes middle age as a time without motivating passion:

The gentlemen got up betimes to shoot,
Or hunt; the young, because they liked the sport –
The first thing boys like, after play and fruit:
The middle-aged, to make the day more short;
For *ennui* is a growth of English root,
Though nameless in our language: – we retort
The fact for words, and let the French translate
That awful yawn which sleep can not abate. (XIII, 101)

Punning wittily on 'root' as both etymological origin and organic growth, Byron claims that, despite the association of the word with French aristocrats, *ennui* actually had its source in England. Like the word 'boredom' itself, the distinction now frequently made between 'boredom' as middle-class humdrum and *ennui* as aristocratic emptiness is post-Byron – Byron himself uses both words exclusively to describe high society.⁷ For Byron, upper-class English bores, preceding French lexicology, invented *ennui*, turning play and sport, once enjoyable for themselves, into ways of merely making 'the day more short'. But why should boredom make one want to shorten the day?

In answer, we might suggest that one of the primary effects of boredom is simply a heightened awareness of time. A bored person stripped of distractions experiences time as a heavy burden, a yawning empty chasm between two meaningful moments. However, Pascal, the first thinker in the modern era to describe boredom (*ennui*), says that if you 'take away [a person's] distractions you will see them wither from boredom'

Daniel Gabelman

because ‘they feel their [own] hollowness without understanding it, because it is indeed depressing to be in a state of unbearable sadness as soon as you are reduced to contemplating yourself, and without distraction from doing so’.⁸ People are driven to ‘kill time’, in Pascal’s view, in order to escape from the painful experience of thinking about themselves. ‘We are not looking’, says Pascal, for a ‘soft, peaceful existence which allows us to think about our unfortunate condition [...] but the bustle which distracts and amuses us’. For this reason, ‘we prefer the hunt to the kill’.⁹

In a letter to the Earl of Blessington, Byron similarly describes English *ennui* through hunting:

The most singular thing is – how [Count D’Orsay] should have penetrated *not* the *fact* – but the *mystery* of the English Ennui at two and twenty. [...] But he ought also to have been in the Country during the hunting season with ‘a select party of distinguished guests’ as the papers term it. – He ought to have seen the Gentlemen after dinner – (on the hunting days) and the soiree ensuing thereupon – and the women looking as if they have had [*sic*] hunted – or rather been hunted – too. And I could have wished that he had been at a dinner in town – which I recollect at Lord Cowper’s – small but select – and composed of the most amusing people. The desert was hardly on the table – when out of 12 of the masculine gender – I counted five asleep. [...] Alas! Our dearly beloved countrymen have only discovered that they are tired and not that they are tiresome.¹⁰

Despite an intimate acquaintance with boredom, a full consciousness of its cause and implications had yet to dawn on the English. Dated 5 April 1823 (just days after Byron completed Canto XV of *Don Juan*), this letter is strikingly similar to the hunting and dining scenes at Norman Abbey. Whilst Juan enjoys the hunt and performs well due to an excess of natural energy (XIV, 32–35), he still wonders ‘if men ever hunted *twice*’ (XIV, 35). In both letter and poem, the bored middle-age gentlemen hunt not for the meat, the prize or the fun, but merely as a kind of ‘bustle’ that ‘amuses’ them and distracts them from *ennui*.

Early in Canto XIII the Byronic narrator also highlights boredom as one impetus for his continued writing: ‘In youth I wrote, because my mind was full, / and now because I feel it growing dull’ (XIII, 10). Thirty-five when Cantos XII and XIII were published in 1823, Byron vicariously places himself in the ‘middle age of man’ category and borrows from his earlier assertions about the prevalence of boredom in this epoch. Writing in middle age has become, like hunting, a means of staving off dullness, a major symptom of boredom. He then defends this approach against potential criticism:

But ‘why then publish?’ – There are no rewards
Of fame or profit, when the world grows weary.
I ask in turn, – why do you play at cards?
Why drink? Why read? – to make some hour less dreary.
It occupies me to turn back regards
On what I’ve seen or ponder’d, sad or cheery. (XIV, 11)

Whereas in youth Byron wrote to say something significant, now he writes just to pass the time, to distract himself from the boredom threatening to make his hours dreary.

The next stanza confirms the role of boredom in Byron's writing:

I think that were I *certain* of success,
I hardly could compose another line:
[...]
This feeling 'tis not easy to express,
And yet 'tis not affected, I opine.
In play, there are two pleasures for your choosing –
The one is winning, and the other losing. (XIV, 12)

The goal of writing poetry, in other words, is not to express something in particular or achieve greater fame and fortune (at least not directly) but to be stimulated by the struggle – to use Pascal's terms, Byron prefers 'the hunt to the kill'. Such statements by the Byronic narrator are somewhat ironic and need to be qualified with Byron's many other statements about why he writes. Nevertheless, Byron did greatly suffer from boredom at times and desired to escape it. He famously wrote to Annabella Milbanke in 1813:

The great object of life is Sensation – to feel that we exist – even though in pain – it is this 'craving void' which drives us to Gaming – to Battle – to Travel – to intemperate but keenly felt pursuits of every description whose principal attraction is the agitation inseparable from their accomplishment.¹¹

In a journal entry from 1821 Byron ponders the causes of this condition:

What is the reason that I have been all my lifetime, more or less *ennuyé*? [...] I presume that it is constitutional, as well as the waking in low spirits which I have invariably done for many years. Temperance and exercise, which I have practised at times, and for a long time vigorously and violently, made little or no difference. Violent passions did.¹²

Michael Raposa observes in *Boredom and the Religious Imagination* that boredom 'is an experience of the emptiness that lurks at the heart of human existence, an emptiness into which each moment fades, into which all finite things pass away'.¹³ Byron would seem to agree, at least in the case of his own experience, presuming that, for him, boredom was 'constitutional'. The 'agitation' of writing poetry, 'inseparable from' its 'accomplishment', was, among other things, a distraction from this 'emptiness' lurking 'at the heart' of his 'experience'.

The idea of boredom as the sign of some sort of 'constitutional' emptiness predates the modern concept of boredom (and *ennui*), notably in the mystic tradition (as seen, for example, in the 'nothingness' talked about in St John of the Cross) but more significantly in the hermetic tradition where *acedia* or 'the noonday demon' was listed by Evagrius Ponticus – the fourth-century monk, theologian and 'Desert Father' – as the eighth deadly sin and the last to be overcome.¹⁴ To quote Evagrius: *acedia* 'makes it appear that the sun moves slowly or not at all'; it is 'the oppressiveness of solitude', 'laziness' and 'untimely drowsiness'.¹⁵

Byron seems to have felt this kind of weariness most strongly in the midst of English high society.¹⁶ Referring to the aristocracy, Byron describes 'this world' (XIV, 15) with

Daniel Gabelman

words such as ‘sameness’, ‘dull’, ‘varnish’ and ‘smooth monotony’, concluding in Canto XIV:

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*.

When we have made our love, and gamed our gaming,
Drest, voted, shone, and, may be, something more;
With dandies dined; heard senators declaiming;
Seen beauties brought to market by the score;
Sad rakes to sadder husbands chastely taming;
There’s little left but to be bored or bore. (17–18)

In ‘this world’, the plethora of pleasures only highlights the hollowness of the world. The more pleasure one partakes in, the more conscious of emptiness one becomes, as each successive pleasure proves also to be ephemeral. Perhaps this is why, while writing the English cantos in Genoa, Byron lived an ascetic life. Leslie Marchand notes how that winter he had a ‘skeleton-thinness’, was ‘disconsolate and melancholy’, wore ‘outmoded’ clothes due to recently developed ‘penurious habits’, and was ‘content to spend evenings at his desk’.¹⁷ An unnamed visiting friend said people would be shocked to see the poet living like a monk in the Theban desert. Responding to this, Byron said ‘they wouldn’t be surprised if they knew that I’m not giving up pleasures but only boredom’.¹⁸

Yet Byron linked boredom to more than just his own ‘constitutional’ emptiness and the hollowness of one particular social world and its ‘pleasures’. Experiencing and thinking about boredom, he also learnt the same lesson as the ancient Preacher of Ecclesiastes:

And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; [...] Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all *was* vanity and vexation of spirit. (Ecclesiastes 2. 10–11)

In this extreme state of detachment from the world, boredom becomes an awareness of the vanity of all being (in the older sense of ‘vanity’ as emptiness), an acknowledgment of the finitude of all that is created and can be experienced, a feeling that mere pleasure only intensifies.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Byron was particularly fond of Ecclesiastes (as was Pascal), citing this biblical authority, for example, to defend his approach to writing *Don Juan* in Canto VII:

Ecclesiastes said, that all is Vanity –
Most modern preachers say the same, or show it
By their examples of true Christianity;
In short, all know, or very soon may know it;

Bubbles, Butterflies and Bores: Play and Boredom in *Don Juan*

And in this scene of all-confessed inanity,
By saint, by sage, by preacher, and by poet,
Must I restrain me, through the fear of strife,
From holding up the Nothingness of life? (VII, 6)

The odd thing to observe here is that Byron's profound knowledge of the 'Nothingness of life' is used to justify his comic and playful style of writing. It is not just the threat of boredom that motivates Byron to write in order to divert himself from his own painful experience of it. The possibility that revelations about existence are to be gained through boredom also undergirds his play. To understand better how this can be so, I want to turn now to those two carefree entities – bubbles and butterflies.

Most people perceive boredom negatively – as a feeling to be overcome or eschewed at all costs – and there is ample evidence that Byron often felt this way. But boredom can also be viewed positively – as promoting a healthy non-attachment to the things of this world. This is the religious attitude espoused by Ecclesiastes and Christianity more generally – Evagrius, for example, says that *acedia* can be transformed into 'a state of peace and ineffable joy', into the condition of *apatheia* in which the soul is no longer controlled by the passions of this world.¹⁹ Byron praises a similar quality in Aurora Raby when he calls her 'indifferent' (XV, 77, 83). Aurora is more concerned with 'the worlds beyond this world's perplexing waste' (XVI, 48), and she looks on the 'baubles which charm most people' (XV, 53) without being affected.²⁰ Auden observes of *Don Juan* generally that 'to enjoy it fully, the reader must be in a mood of distaste for everything which is to any degree a bore, that is, for all forms of passionate attachment'.²¹

Bubbles, which become a favourite image of Byron's in the English cantos, popping up five times, are used to illustrate this principle of non-attachment:

Amidst the court a Gothic fountain play'd,
Symmetrical, but deck'd with carvings quaint –
Strange faces, like to men in masquerade,
And here perhaps a monster, there a Saint:
The spring gush'd through grim mouths, of granite made,
And sparkled into basins, where it spent
Its little torrent in a thousand bubbles,
Like man's vain glory, and his vainer troubles. (XIII, 65)

A playful aspect is lent to the fountain by the movement of the water, which is 'spent' or transferred into a thousand bubbles that then carry on this ludic motion. Bubbles are like human existence in as far as both are associated with vanity, and the image of bubbles here encourages the reader to hold both glory and troubles lightly. The notion of vanity in this case does not elicit a despairing or hopeless assertion about the meaninglessness of life but argues for a carefree and playful approach to living.

Canto XV is bookended with comparisons of human life to bubbles. After stating that 'all present life is but an interjection' in the opening stanza, Byron adds:

But, more or less, the whole's a syncope,
Or a singultus – emblems of Emotion,

Daniel Gabelman

The grand Antithesis to great Eunnui,
Wherewith we break our bubbles on the ocean,
That Watery Outline of Eternity,
Or miniature at least, as is my notion,
Which ministers unto the soul's delight,
In seeing matters which are out of sight. (XV, 2)

And to complete the evanescent *inclusio*, he writes:

Between two worlds life hovers like a star,
'Twixt night and morn, upon the horizon's verge:
How little do we know that which we are!
How less what we may be! The eternal surge
Of time and tide rolls on, and bears afar
Our bubbles; as the old burst, new emerge. (XV, 99)

In both stanzas the fragility and ephemerality of human existence is shown in the breaking or bursting of bubbles. But this is not the only connotation. In the latter example the ambiguity of our experience is also accentuated, and there is an emphasis on our 'in between' state – between this and another possible world. Bubbles are air trapped inside water such that they are fully at home neither in the air nor in the water. However, the combination of the two elements produces something that moves freely within both water and air. Indeed, as Byron shows in both stanzas, bubbles are frequently found 'in between' water and air, as froth upon waves.

These floating bubbles share the quality of liminality with the aforementioned 'middle age of man', when 'we hover between fool and sage'. The middle-aged bores that Byron depicts, however, are the opposite of light and playful bubbles. His favourite words for them are 'polish'd' and 'smooth', as in 'polish'd horde', 'smooth'd to that excess', 'polish'd breed' and 'polish'd, smooth and cold'. We get the impression that they are immobile rocks, an impression that is confirmed when Byron calls them 'stiff as stones' (XIII, 95, 110). Unlike the 'bored', 'bores' are still passionately attached to the things of this world; they are full and heavy, rendered inert by their inability to let go of cares and concerns. In contrast to the emptiness of the bored, the fullness of bores precludes the possibility that they might participate in any form of new life.

Emptiness, on the other hand, can provide the space in which new life – new thoughts, desires, impulses – can assert itself. Byron was keenly aware of this truth in relation to the erotic:

in Love such Idleness has been
An accessory, as I have cause to guess.
Hard labour's an indifferent go-between;
Your men of business are not apt to express
Much passion. (XIV, 76)

The empty time and space provided by 'idleness' enables the lover to recognise and respond to primal desires when they arise. Due to the emptiness of their interior,

bubbles are similarly responsive, mobile and free to go wherever they are driven. These qualities also make bubbles an ideal picture of playfulness. As H. G. Gadamer observes, what is important in play 'is to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end'; 'play is the occurrence of the movement as such'.²² Bubbles, then, unite vanity, emptiness, responsiveness and playfulness in a single image – one which Byron utilises in Canto XIV to describe his own poetic activity:

You know, or don't know, that great Bacon saith,
 'Fling up a straw, 'twill show the way the wind blows';
 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)

Poetry is like those children's playthings – kites and bubbles, for example – that are delightful because of their movement, their ability to levitate and defy gravity and be carried by the lightest of breezes. These playthings have no external purpose but are engaged with purely for the enjoyment they bring. Byron's poetic play, in other words, has resonances with the wise play of creation as described in the eighth chapter of the book of Proverbs (as translated in the *New Jerusalem Bible*): 'I was beside the master craftsman, delighting him day after day, ever at play in his presence, at play everywhere on his earth, delighting to be with the children of men' (8. 30–31).²³ Byron is suggesting that, for him, poetry provides a fecund space where anything and everything is given room to flourish, and merely for the sake of delight.

An element of vanity is also clearly present in this stanza, evidenced by the references to 'straw', 'wind', 'breath' and 'death'. 'Death' and 'breath', interestingly, are rhymed twelve times in *Don Juan*,²⁴ partly because there are so few rhymes for these words, but also precisely because of Byron's concern with the dynamics of boredom. The Hebrew word from Ecclesiastes translated by the King James Bible as 'vanity' is *hebbhel*, which in other places is translated variously as 'breath' and 'wind', and is also the proper name for 'Abel' in Genesis 4. Death (as the ultimate emptiness) is integral to an experience of vanity, and likewise of boredom, but, more positively, so is breath. 'Life [is] a mere affair of breath' (IX, 16), says Byron, but, as he well knew, Genesis asserts that it is precisely because God 'breathed into his nostrils the breath of life' that 'man became a living soul' (2. 7). Breath also goes between a person and his environment and is a means of communicating emotion. 'All present life is but an Interjection', begins Canto XV of *Don Juan*: 'An "Oh!" or "Ah!" of joy or misery, / Or a "Ha! ha!" or "Bah!" – a yawn, or "Pooh!"'. There is, then, a sense in which breath is the intermediary between body and spirit – the bearer of emotions. The spirit expresses itself bodily through breath. And breath is as available to play as it is to seriousness.

Breath can fill and form bubbles too, or give those same bubbles the momentum with which to float through the air – 'breath' here becomes 'wind'. Yet once breath has

formed the bubble, its destination (as well as its longevity) is unknown. As with human life, there is always uncertainty with bubbles, and, as Byron observes in the opening stanza of Canto XIV: 'if [...] we could but snatch a certainty / Perhaps mankind might find the path they miss'. Uncertainty, though, can be interpreted variously as a reason for worry and concern or as a further opportunity for a playful responsiveness to whatever happens. Roger Callois says that the 'uncertainty principle' is essential to play in that play's 'course cannot be determined' and so 'some latitude for innovations is left to the player's initiative'.²⁵ Earthly existence may be defined by volatility, but fear and pessimism are not the only possible responses. Similarly, there is more than one possible response to boredom. We can see it as a kind of death to be avoided, certainly, but also as a bubble of detachment from worldly concerns that, like uncertainty, offers an opportunity for radical, playful responsiveness to everything life might present us with.

Volatility (literally 'winged-ness') not only characterises bubbles but also the creature that we have already seen Byron use to depict his muse: the butterfly. As opposed to the task-orientated bee or the belligerent wasp, the butterfly appears aimless and carefree. Its movement is light and ethereal. As an image of Byron's poetry, this contrasts strongly with the many descriptions of *Don Juan* as destructive satire. Byron is likely being ironic here – he knew his poem was not so innocent – but the irony only serves to highlight the play. It frustrates a monolithic view of Byron and his work. The butterfly 'alights rarely', suggesting that continual motion is the most important element of Byron's 'muse' – and not purposeful motion but rather something more akin to Gadamer's 'to-and-fro movement'. So, while *Don Juan* certainly involves social satire, this does not become the poem's final end or resting place. Instead, the poem perpetuates its own play: as Byron entreats his muse, 'if you cannot fly, yet flutter' (XV, 27). Such mobility is embodied by the fitting style and form of *Don Juan*. James Soderholm points out that 'Byron is in every sense the raciest of the romantic poets, a fact nicely demonstrated by the sheer velocity of his ottava rima verse'.²⁶ His use of 'the art of digression', Soderholm continues, 'is itself strangely parallel both to the truancies in gravitational fields – the ellipses and other errant movements of celestial bodies – and to the transgressive, counter-gravitational pull of true wit, which is light, lighthearted, hyperbolic, and ironic'.²⁷ *Don Juan* in particular is rarely, if ever, straight forward, taking rather the fluttering, flitting movement of the playful butterfly as its model. And the poem's playful, digressive style is directly related to Byron's response to boredom.

Indeed, the whole stylistic shift from *Childe Harold*, *Manfred* and earlier tragic works to *Don Juan*, *Beppo* and other comic works could be seen as a changing response to the experience of boredom. Rather than perceiving boredom as a terrifying and oppressive glimpse of the vanity of being, as in, for example, parts of *Childe Harold*, in *Don Juan* Byron interprets the experience of boredom and its revelations positively. Boredom here is a space for creativity, a stimulus for activity and an opportunity to respond to whatever life throws up with open, light-hearted, responsive playfulness. This aligns the poem with a certain kind of religious doctrine, according to which creation emerges

out of nothingness, is the time and place where wisdom ‘plays before God’ (Proverbs 8. 30–31) and is a constant reminder of human dependence and volatility. Jean Paul Richter once commented that ‘boredom is the mother liquor’ not just of ‘all vices’ but all ‘virtues’ too.²⁸ Surely few people have known this truth better than Byron.

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- 1 The *OED* does not show the word’s origin. Dickens himself had used the word previously in a letter of 22 July 1844. Nevertheless, it is post-Byron.
- 2 Francis Grose, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London: printed for S. Hooper, 1785). The *OED* cites the first usage as 1768.
- 3 See: *The Blues*, I, 154, II, 107; *Vision of Judgment*, 703. The word appears more regularly in Byron’s letters and journals, however.
- 4 See: I, 116; I, 202; IV, 109; VI, 12; X, 86; XI, 41; XII, 2; XIII, 78; XIII, 95; XIII, 109; XIV, 18. The line ‘two mighty tribes, the Bores and the Bored’ clearly contains within it the image of a domain of bores and might have first suggested ‘boredom’.
- 5 Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 14.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 7 See Reinhard Clifford Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).
- 8 Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. by Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 16.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 10 Letter of 5 April 1823, in *BLJ*, X, pp. 139–40.
- 11 Letter of 6 September 1813, in *BLJ*, III, p. 109.
- 12 ‘Ravenna Journal’, entry for 6 January 1821, in *BLJ*, VIII, p. 15.
- 13 Michael Raposa, *Boredom and the Religious Imagination* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 60. For a full discussion of this theme throughout Byron’s works see Mary Hurst, ‘Byron and the Catholic Persuasion’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Liverpool, 2005), pp. 78–144.
- 14 See Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide*, pp. 39–51.
- 15 Evagrius of Pontus, *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, trans. by Robert E. Sinkewicz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 99, 64.
- 16 Unlike other Romantics, however, he also seems to have had intimations of ‘nothingness’ in the midst of sublime nature: see *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III, 95–97.
- 17 Leslie Marchand, *Byron: A Biography*, 3 vols (London: John Murray, 1957), III, pp. 1052, 1055, 1059.
- 18 Teresa Guiccioli, *Life of Byron in Italy*, trans. by Michael Rees, ed. by Peter Cochran (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), p. 516.
- 19 *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, p. 9.
- 20 See Bernard Beatty, *Byron’s Don Juan* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 137–57.
- 21 W. H. Auden, *The Dyer’s Hand* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 387.
- 22 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd, rev. edn (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 104.
- 23 Instead of ‘at play’ here the Authorized Version has ‘rejoicing’, which is a slight sanitisation of the Hebrew *sachaq* – ‘to laugh, play, mock’.
- 24 See: II, 76; II, 113; II, 143; III, 66; IV, 42; V, 36; VII, 87; VIII, 40; IX, 16; XIV, 4; XIV 8; XVI, 121.

Daniel Gabelman

- 25 Roger Callois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. by Meyer Barash (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 9.
- 26 James Soderholm, 'Wordsworth's *Gravitas* and the Unbearable Lightness of Byron', in Martin Procházka (ed.), *Byron: East and West* (Prague: Univerzita Karlova, 2000), pp. 215–27 (p. 219).
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Quoted in Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide*, p. 44.

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