



Lesley Thulin // In his 17-canto opus *Don Juan* (1819-24), Lord Byron adapts the epic form to modernity. The Horatian epigraph, “*Difficile est proprie communia dicere*,” announces that he will speak of common things, presaging the poem’s engagement with the ordinary. Byron takes up family conflict, courtship, and ritualized reading, for instance, and rejects the epic’s convention of beginning *in medias res*. Working within the constraints of *ottava rima*, Byron uses colloquial diction to tell the famously hero-less story of Don Juan, “A little curly-headed, good-for-nothing, / And mischief-making monkey from his birth” (Byron 1 st.25 1-2). Despite the text’s prevailing chattiness, however, one stanza stands out as particularly illegible, not to mention unutterable. It reads:

But here is one prescription out of many:

‘*Sodae-sulphat. ʒ. vi. ʒ. s. mannae optim.*

Aq. fervent. F.ʒ. ifs. ʒij. tinct. sennae

Haustus.’ (And here the surgeon came and cupped him.)

‘*R. pulv. com. gr. iij. ipecacuanhae*”

(With more beside, if Juan had not stopped 'em).

'Bolus potassae sulphuret. sumendus,

Et haustus ter in die capiendus' (10 st.41).

The stanza appears after Juan falls ill and describes the ordinary situation of medical treatment. In an admittedly less ordinary context, Juan finds himself at the court of Catherine the Great, one of the many women who pursue him romantically, where her physician takes his pulse. The doctor observes a symptom—Juan's fever—but he cannot offer a definitive diagnosis, prompting the court's concern: "...the whole court was extremely troubled, / The Sovereign shocked, and all his medicines doubled" (10 st.39 7-8). Rhyming "troubled" and "doubled," Byron suggests the conjunction of the medical practitioner's fear of disease and over-prescription—a practice to which the skeptical Juan objects. As the speaker wryly observes in the first line following this stanza, "This is the way physicians mend or end us" (10 st.42 1).

Scholars chalk up Byron's excessive use of Latinate abbreviations to satire, albeit of different objects. For Peter Cochran, the mere translation of the doctor's professionalized "mumbo-jumbo" constitutes the joke: the prescription calls for "a violent emetic and an equally violent purgative – both upward and downward evacuation" (Cochran 56). Although he does not dwell on this stanza, Cochran suggests that Byron parodies medical jargon's unintelligibility by combining it with bathetic physical humor.

Shifting the satirical target from the medical to the aesthetic, Andrew Elfenbein reads this stanza as an instance of the "mock sublime" insofar as it "yokes incommunicability to technicity" (Elfenbein 130). Drawing a parallel between the sublime's pretense to ineffability and the stanza's unintelligibility, Elfenbein views the satirical object as the "insider jargon" of Romantic aesthetics (130). In order to make sense of the sublime, he argues, the reader requires access to specialized knowledge.

Elfenbein persuasively reads the stanza as a revaluation of the sublime, but because the topic is outside of his study's purview, he does not elaborate on the relationship Byron establishes between medicine and aesthetics. Although the stanza's humor relies on the apparent incongruity of the medical and the aesthetic, Byron suggests a compatibility borne out of tension. Relegating Juan to parentheses in an onslaught of medical jargon, Byron formally subsumes Juan—and the only immediately readable part of the stanza—to medical discourse. When Juan is cupped, the surgeon not only bleeds him, but parentheses contain him. Despite the speaker's narration of Juan's attempt to prevent the surgeon from administering sodium sulfate and ipecac, the medical register persists for two more lines, suggesting the surgeon's triumph in his struggle with Juan.

While Cochran and Elfenbein's readings are compelling, they stipulate the text's hostility toward medicine. But the text is equivocal. As Steven Bruhm argues, ambivalence saturates this incident, as Juan moves from refusing medical care to submitting to the doctor's orders. In attempting to reject excessive treatment, Juan asserts his bodily sovereignty, even if it means enduring pain. However, Juan concedes to the remedies, as well as the temporary violence of induced evacuation,

to cure his underlying illness. For Bruhm, Juan's resignation of his autonomy to the physician is "potentially liberating" in that it enables Juan's recovery (Bruhm 400).

Taking Bruhm's point, I read the seemingly stultifying integration of medical discourse into the epic as aesthetically (re)generative. Although Juan's treatment entails a temporary loss of agency, the emetic hits the "reset" button on the narrative, allowing it to continue, rather than end in Juan's death. Of course, the medicalization of this moment evokes an apparent deflation of the sublime: Juan's consumption of various medicines induces an artificial aesthetic experience that itself occasions human waste, or the anti-aesthetic. While Byron lowers the sublime into medical and scatological realms, he underscores aesthetic experience's material contingency: the body can both disrupt aesthetic experience and serve as its conduit.

Featured Image: Lord Byron, replica by Thomas Phillips
oil on canvas, circa 1835, based on a work of 1813. (NPG 142).

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