

‘Poetry turns all things to loveliness’:
The Counter-Aesthetics of Disgust in Shelley’s
Julian and Maddalo and Byron’s *Don Juan*

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The Romantic zeitgeist is polarised by the profound yearning for a prelapsarian state of organic unity and the distressed consciousness of its unattainability. In consequence, an aesthetic disgust can be detected in the literature of Romanticism generated by a concurrent mesmerisation and revulsion by the grossly corporeal world that humanity cannot transcend. This disgust, so subtly pervasive that it has been largely overlooked by commentators, is particularly prominent in the works of the ‘second generation’ Romantics, whose faith in the ability of the poetic imagination to extirpate or transmute flawed realities into their envisioned ideals was dampened by their escalating scepticism. Denise Gigante cogently argues that the manifest synaesthetic disgust in *Hyperion*, which Keats began working on in 1818, is ‘symptomatic of the greater philosophical and cultural sickening of the idealist subject of taste.’¹ Frankenstein’s Creature, unleashed upon the cultural imaginary by Mary Shelley in the same year, epitomises the ugly excrescences that threaten to demolish Romanticism’s precariously balanced architectonics of the beautiful and the sublime. This intolerably monstrous hodgepodge of individually beautiful parts allegorises contemporary anxieties about the unbridgeable disparity between a transcendental vision and its humanly imperfect execution. This paper aims to enrich current understandings of Romantic disgust by examining the dynamic dialogue about the sickeningly ugly and the monstrous that is sustained between Percy Shelley’s *Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation* and the first two cantos of Lord Byron’s *Don Juan*. Both pieces of work were composed during 1818–19, a period when the two

¹ Denise Gigante, ‘The Endgame of Taste: Keats, Sartre, Beckett,’ in *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism*, ed. Timothy Morton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.187.

friends were considerably influenced by each other's poetics and philosophies. *Julian and Maddalo* is suffused with a quintessentially Romantic despair that poetic language ultimately lacks the power to defamiliarise and re-beautify a stagnant and irredeemably defective world. In the comedic universe of *Don Juan*, Byron responds to Shelley's anxieties about the incorrigible entanglement of the ideal and the disgusting by exhibiting the creatively fruitful symbiosis that is fostered by mediating their antithetical aesthetics. My readings of the poems are underwritten by a central contention that paying closer attention to the permutations of aesthetic disgust in Romantic literature can offer new insights into the period's shifting conceptualisations of the role of the imagination and poetic language, which are entrusted with the onerous burdens of realising the idealistic aspirations of aesthetic perfectionism and human perfectibility.

Romanticising Disgust

Romantic writers inherited eighteenth-century aesthetic theories that defined the disgusting as the ugly excesses of reality that resist articulation, artistic representation and integration into the dualistic taxonomy of the beautiful and the sublime. Edmund Burke notes in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* that only the 'pleasing illusions' and 'superadded ideas' of art can 'cover the defects of our naked shivering nature.'² Immanuel Kant's oft-cited contention in *Critique of Judgment* is that, as an extreme form of ugliness and the absolute antithesis of the beautiful, the disgusting object 'alone is incapable of being represented conformably to nature without destroying all aesthetic delight.'³ Winfried Menninghaus insightfully demonstrates that Kant's aesthetic philosophy is nevertheless constructed upon the triad of the sublime, the beautiful and the disgusting.⁴ This triad undergirds much of the literature of the Romantic period during which, as Charles Armstrong reminds us, '[t]he nature of wholeness or

² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. Thomas H. D. Mahoney (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), p.87. Cited by Denise Gigante, 'Facing the Ugly: The Case of *Frankenstein*,' *ELH* 67, no. 2 (2000): 468.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 141.

⁴ Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust, The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 116.

unity is scrutinised with considerable urgency.⁵ In their works, Romantic writers aspired to bridge the dichotomous spheres of poetry and philosophy, feeling and thought, the natural and the supernatural, the phenomenal and noumenal, the Fancy and the Imagination. According to Christopher Stokes, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817) 'represents the grandest ambitions of Romanticism' because it aims to integrate the beautiful and the sublime into 'one absolute aesthetic category.'⁶ In *Biographia*, Coleridge emphasises it is the poetic imagination that holds 'the power of reducing multitude into unity of effect.'⁷ Nevertheless, Stokes astutely notes that even in Coleridge's ambitious manifesto, there is 'a counter-aesthetic based on discontinuity and negativity in the margins.'⁸ Encroaching upon every grand Romantic project, disgust is that incontrollable reflux which threatens to overturn the precarious formal unity imposed by 'superadded' aesthetic illusions.

Frankenstein encapsulates the Romantic paranoia that language is often utterly inadequate as a veil for humanity's 'naked shivering nature' and the means for ameliorating, let alone beautifying, the ugly realities of its postlapsarian condition. Gigante offers a compelling theory to account for why disgusting objects became such a locus of anxiety for Romantic idealism: 'If the aesthetic can be considered the only mode of transcendence left in a highly rational, empirical age, then the de-aestheticizing ugly comes fraught with all the horror of not just primal but final chaos, of apocalyptic destruction.'⁹ Frankenstein's Creature, as Gigante argues, 'symbolizes nothing but the unsymbolized: the repressed ugliness at the heart of an elaborate symbolic network that is threatened the moment he bursts on the scene, exposing to view his radically unscribed existence.'¹⁰ Despite his eloquence, the Monster cannot convey his intrinsic moral goodness and his indisputable humanity to his horror-struck viewers by overcoming their atavistic physiological recoil of revulsion towards his

⁵ Charles Armstrong, *Romantic Organicism: From Idealist Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 13

⁶ Christopher Stokes, *Coleridge, Language and the Sublime: From Transcendence to Finitude* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 13.

⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. George Watson (London: Everyman's Library, 1991), 176. All subsequent references to this edition are incorporated in the text, with the abbreviation 'BL'.

⁸ Stokes, *Coleridge, Language and the Sublime*, 159.

⁹ Gigante, 'Facing the Ugly,' 579–80.

¹⁰ Gigante, 'Facing the Ugly,' 567.

raw vitality and eliciting their imaginative sympathy. The doppelgangers of Frankenstein's Monster appear in various guises in Romantic literature, as contemporary writers interrogate the phantasmagoric threat of the disgusting. The ineffable, self-imperilling experience of disgust, which can only be communicated via the lame *topos* of inexpressibility, thus represents the supreme anathema of the Romantic imagination and marks the final insurmountable frontier of poetic expression itself.

Imperfect Transmutations of the Disgusting in *Julian and Maddalo*

Despite the humanism and utopianism of his polemical writings, Percy Shelley's personal correspondence is peppered with disgusted excoriations of the vulgar commoners. At Keswick, Shelley writes, 'tho the face of the country is lovely the *people* are detestable.'¹¹ He dismisses Irish commoners as 'one mass of animated filth'¹² and excoriated Italians as 'the most degraded disgusting & odious,' 'the deformity & degradation of humanity,' and 'filthy modern inhabitants.'¹³ Simon Haines explains that 'For much of his life Shelley saw most human beings as brutish and distasteful creatures of passion unless and until they were transformed in the light of an ideal or a doctrine.'¹⁴ Poetic language, Shelley tries to maintain, has the capacity to ennoble and revivify the sluggish masses. A *Defence of Poetry* echoes Coleridge's faith in imaginative language's harmonising power: Shelley claims that poetry is 'the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of *all things*'¹⁵ and that 'Poetry turns *all things* to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is *most deformed*... it subdues to union under its light yoke *all irreconcilable things*' (*D*, §41, emphasis added). Yet despite Shelley's adamant reiteration that 'all things' can be transformed by the poet's Midas touch, his own works are suffused with doubts about whether poetry's 'light yoke' is capable of subjugating the protean

¹¹ *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964) Vol. I, 223, original emphasis.

¹² *Letters*, Vol. I, 277.

¹³ *Letters*, Vol. II, 67, 60, 69.

¹⁴ Simon Haines, *Shelley's Poetry: The Divided Self* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), 57.

¹⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry,' in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), §39, emphasis added. All subsequent references to this essay are incorporated in the text, with the abbreviation '*D*.'

phantasmagorias of what is ‘most deformed.’ The prototypical poet in Shelley’s *Alastor*, like Frankenstein, ‘made [his] bed / In charnels and on coffins’ and fraternised with ‘black death.’¹⁶ However, like the hubristic scientist, the poet fails to emerge from the world’s putrid underbelly with an aesthetically perfect creation that reconciles its sepulchral fragments and organic slime. Again and again, Romantic works depict how a confrontation with the disgust-eliciting reality exacerbates an individual’s incipient existential nausea, sullen solipsism or passive-aggressive antisocialism.

In *Julian and Maddalo*, Shelley self-reflexively modulates through various forms of poetic expression and registers, as he tries to strip away from this reality its ugly ‘film of familiarity’ (*BL*, 169; *D*, §41). Shelley’s idealism is fuelled by the conviction that the world’s inherent beauty is being obscured and distorted by these vulgar coverings, woven from the offcuts of unimaginative language and insipid thoughts. When he recalls the Venetian lagoons during sunset, the older Julian who is writing the poem briefly approximates Shelley’s ideal poet, one of those exceptional ‘hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration’ (*D*, §48). Julian’s lyric, overshadowed by the Maniac’s poetical medley, is reminiscent of Coleridge’s conversational poems in which an initially doubt-stricken speaker is propelled towards a climatic (re)union with his perfect complement, as soliloquy is superseded by colloquy. Coleridge claims that a poeticised sunset, imbued with ‘the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination,’ allows readers to experience vicariously this self-expanding state of organic unity and access the very ‘truth of nature’ (*BL*, 168). Julian’s lyric also exudes a nascent Wordsworthian faith in the spiritual nourishment available through a recollected experience of perfect reciprocity with nature. As Julian apostrophises the remembered Venetian setting sun, he validates his conjecture that an industrious Will can collaborate with the Imagination to make ‘the best of ill.’¹⁷ In this unadulterated mood of child-like wonder, Julian eschews the ‘[d]estructive egoism’¹⁸ of Shelley’s Alastorean Poet, who merely projects his emotions and desires onto his natural surroundings, peremptorily asserting to the

¹⁶ Percy Shelley, ‘Alastor,’ in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, (23–5).

¹⁷ Percy Shelley, ‘Julian and Maddalo,’ in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, (47). All subsequent references to this poem are incorporated in the text, with the abbreviation ‘*JM*.’

¹⁸ Jill Rubenstein, ‘Sound and Silence in Coleridge’s Conversation Poems,’ *English* 21 (1972), 54.

stream ‘Thou imagest my life.’¹⁹ Whereas such projections of the self only achieve an illusory organic unity, Julian experiences a holistic self-transcendence during both his actual experience and mental revisiting of the lagoons:

Meanwhile the sun paused ere it should alight,
 Over the horizon of the mountains;—Oh,
 How beautiful is sunset, when the glow
 Of Heaven descends upon a land like thee,
 Thou Paradise of exiles, Italy!
 Thy mountains, seas, and vineyards, and the towers
 Of cities they encircle!—it was ours
 To stand on thee, beholding it

(*JM*, 53–60).

Julian’s poetic imagination arrests the sun’s descent indefinitely: *holding* the beautiful scene still, he marvels that it ‘paused ere it should alight’ (*JM*, 53) and later reiterates that ‘the swift sun yet paused in his descent’ (*JM*, 75). His utter artistic control enables him to assert possessory rights over the entire remembered landscape. The tranquil reminiscence, ‘such glee was ours’ (*JM*, 30), crescendos into Julian’s confident proclamation, ‘it was *ours* / To stand on thee’ (*JM*, 59). The vague ‘it’ indicates the all-encompassing nature of Julian’s imaginative annexation, just as the ‘towers’/‘ours’ rhyme implies that Julian’s exultant proprietorial grasp extends to Venice’s civic architecture and rich cultural legacies. A harmonious equilibrium prevails, as sublime nature (‘mountains, seas’) and cultivated nature (‘vineyards’) ‘encircle’ the manmade towers. The friends are arrested in turn by the suspended sun’s nourishing radiance: ‘[a]s those who pause on some delightful way / Though bent on pleasant pilgrimage, we stood’ (*JM*, 63–4). The pleonastic ‘delightful way’ and ‘pleasant pilgrimage’ underline the contrast to the Byronic Child Harold’s sombre journey through Venice’s ‘dying Glory.’²⁰

But ultimately, Julian cannot sustain the self-assurance of the Coleridgean conversationalist, whose meditations progress smoothly ‘from prediction to projection to prescription.’²¹ Just as every representation of

¹⁹ Shelley, ‘Alastor,’ (505).

²⁰ Lord Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), (iv.6).

²¹ Keith G. Thomas, ‘Jane Austen and the Romantic Lyric: *Persuasion* and Coleridge’s Conversation Poems,’ *ELH* 54, no. 4 (1987): 914.

the beautiful ‘bears the traces of its emergence from this phantasmagoric body of disgust,’²² Julian’s euphoria begins subsiding when he tangentially observes that only ‘half the sky / Was roofed with clouds of rich emblazonry’ (*JM*, 70–1) and that the night’s pitchy monochrome lies on the other side of the celestial ‘rent’ (*JM*, 74). With no other warning than a typographical dash, ‘And then –’, Julian’s vision begins collapsing into an apocalyptic pandemonium as paradise is lost once again, ‘Dissolved into one lake of fire’ (*JM*, 80–1). The shift into the passive voice—‘were seen’ (*JM*, 81)—sets up a conspicuous contrast to the preceding present participles, ‘beholding’ and ‘looking’ (*JM*, 60, 65), which had seemed to promise the possibility of sustained poetic inspiration. Julian’s panegyric is abruptly terminated by the poem’s first direct speech, Maddalo’s urgent ‘Ere it fade...’ (*JM*, 85), which augments his own consciousness of the transience of the enchantment cast by a poetic vision. Before Julian can articulate his wonder at the beauteous panorama, Maddalo draws his attention to the madhouse, the ‘windowless, deformed and dreary pile’ (*JM*, 101) that ruptures the incandescent spectacle of the Venetian temples and palaces that only ‘*seem* / Like fabrics of enchantment piled to Heaven’ (*JM*, 92, emphasis added). Julian’s imaginative power sags: in a predominantly monosyllabic statement, he flatly reports that his suspended ‘broad sun sunk behind it’ (*JM*, 105). This ‘it’ hollowly echoes the ebullient ‘*it was ours*’: Julian is forced to concede that this monstrous protuberance is also humanity’s inheritance. The chiasmic alliterative pattern ‘b-s-s-b,’ aurally highlighted by the sibilance and assonance, replicates the solar eclipse caused by the gargantuan bulk that perennially stands ‘between us and the sun’ (*JM*, 98). After his gaze is redirected, Julian can no longer see the ‘waves of flame / Around the vaporous sun, from which there came / The inmost purple spirit of light’ (*JM*, 82–4). Instead, he despondently notes that ‘into the purple sea / The orange hues of heaven sunk silently’ (*JM*, 137–8). Rather than a magnificent arrangement of purple and orange into a mesmerising set of concentric circles, the two monochromatic hues become starkly segregated until one simply engulfs the other entirely. According to Gigante,

the ugly...disgusts because it ‘insists.’...[W]hat ‘insists’ is that which ‘stands’ in the way. The ugly is offensively obtrusive in standing between the subject and its representation of the

²² Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 49.

object. It stands in for itself, as it were, refusing to budge, and thus stripping the subject of imaginative capacity.²³

The madhouse constitutes what Gigante would call ‘an anti-transparency, an opacity or material abhorrence that leaks through representation to disorder the mind of the subject.’²⁴ Having existed since time immemorial, encrusted with the ‘uses vile’ of ‘age to age’ (*JM*, 100), it blocks the channels of Julian’s imagination and poetic expression. The striking use of present tense, ‘the madhouse stands’ (*JM*, 214), and the older Julian’s oblique observation that Venice’s ‘aspect’ remains ever ‘the same’ (*JM*, 585), emphasise that this insistently repulsive ‘material abhorrence’ can never be extirpated. Its dehumanised inmates’ non-verbal ‘Moans, shrieks and curses and blaspheming prayers’ (*JM*, 218) counterbalance Julian’s idealistic aphorisms and lyrical paean to the sublime sunset. Julian’s ensuing moroseness prevails until the poem’s conclusion when he reiterates his verdict that there is ‘little of transcendent worth’ (*JM*, 591) in this ‘cold world’ (*JM*, 617).

Julian and Maddalo’s conversation, generally considered as a poeticised rendition of Shelley and Byron’s own lengthy discussions in Venice during the summer of 1818, is even less reconcilable with the ideal mode of Romantic diction, the Coleridgean ‘ontological converse at the world’s margin or lip’²⁵ sustained by those nightingale-poets who ‘answer and provoke each other’s song.’²⁶ For this central dialogue, Shelley claims that he ‘employed a certain familiar style of language to express the actual way in which people talk with each other whom education and a certain refinement of sentiment have placed above the use of vulgar idioms.’²⁷ Shelley tries to differentiate his ‘familiar style’ not only from plebeian vulgarity but also from the type of unoriginal linguistic ‘familiarity’ he believed was ‘the agent of delusion.’²⁸ Nevertheless, the academic disquisition remains two-dimensional: Julian recalls that they ‘descanted’ (*JM*, 46) but unlike a ‘descant,’ a variation upon a theme, their rationalistic

²³ Gigante, ‘Facing The Ugly,’ 577.

²⁴ Gigante, ‘Facing The Ugly,’ 578.

²⁵ Peter Larkin, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Promising Losses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 181.

²⁶ Coleridge, ‘The Nightingale,’ in *The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach, (London: Penguin Books, 1997), (58).

²⁷ *Letters*, Vol. II, 108.

²⁸ Tony Howe, ‘Shelley and the Development of *Don Juan*,’ *Byron Journal* 35, no. 1 (2007): 29.

language and ideas are rather hackneyed. The metaphysical triumvirates of ‘God, freewill and destiny’ (*JM*, 42) and ‘love, beauty and truth’ (*JM*, 174) are mechanically invoked. These abstractions, as Simon Haines notes, ‘sit lumpishly in their places, unexplored and uncriticised.’²⁹ The aphorisms and axioms, such as Maddalo’s epigrammatic ‘if you can’t swim / Beware of Providence’ (*JM*, 117–8) and Julian’s doggerel truisms, ‘it is our will / That thus enchains us to permitted ill’ (*JM*, 170–1), similarly lack the power to restore to their lacklustre world its ‘sparkle and the dew drops’ (*BL*, 49). When Maddalo cynically analogises that the human soul is a ‘black and dreary bell’ which is ‘Hung in a heaven-illuminated tower’ (*JM*, 123–24), Julian responds with his counterclaim that Maddalo’s infant daughter has eyes that are the ‘Twin mirrors of Italian Heaven’ and the repositories of ‘such deep meaning’ (*JM*, 148–9). Julian himself is only half-convinced by his attempted conversion of the infant’s expressive eyes into metonyms for the ideal poem that embodies ‘the depth and height of the ideal world’ (*BL*, 49). He tries to bolster his argument by asseverating that ‘This lovely child, blithe, innocent and free’ (*JM*, 167) is proof that ‘we might be all / We dream of happy, high, majestic’ (*JM*, 172–3). However, the two tricolons only highlight the illogic of Julian’s analogy: the child is carefree precisely because she has yet to develop an adult’s pained consciousness of the unbridgeable schism between dream and reality. Gazing into such celestial ‘Twin mirrors’ seems to facilitate, as Jeremy Davies posits, ‘a revelation of the blind spots that the two of them share.’³⁰ However, Keith Thomas persuasively notes that ‘[t]he antistrophic to and fro does not issue into a dialectical synthesis’³¹ and instead of a harmonisation of the friends’ disparate philosophies, there is only ‘something closer to a paradoxical juxtaposition.’³² The victory of each friend in making his own ‘system refutation-tight / As far as words go’ (*JM*, 193–4) is pyrrhic. Their carefully perfected systems will be jeopardised by the Maniac’s outburst, ‘How vain / Are words!’ (*JM*, 472–3), and ultimately, their rather redundant argument will be simply ‘forgot’ (*JM*, 520). Shelley is critically appraising the deficiencies of the abstract, didactic mode of poetic expression modelled by the poem’s central conversation, which fails to effect that elusive transformation of ‘all things to loveliness.’

²⁹ Haines, *Shelley’s Poetry*, 133.

³⁰ Jeremy Davies, ‘The Shelleys and the Art of Suffering,’ *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34.2 (2011): 273.

³¹ Keith G. Thomas, ‘Jane Austen and the Romantic Lyric: *Persuasion* and Coleridge’s *Conversation Poems*,’ *ELH* 54, no. 4 (1987): 915.

³² Thomas, ‘Jane Austen and the Romantic Lyric,’ 915.

Whilst Shelley's ideal poem facilitates 'a going out of our own nature' and 'creates for us a being within our being' (*D*, § 13, §42), Julian's and Maddalo's common revelation is that the being within each of our beings is an incoherent Maniac, the half-repulsive, half-mesmerising madman who occupies the poem's dark heart. Like Mary Shelley's Monster, Percy's Maniac leads a 'radically unscripted existence' and resists his viewers' attempts to integrate his unaccountable nature into their supposedly 'refutation-tight' systems. 'Of the Maniac I can give no information,' the poem's Preface warns, and Julian affirms that the Maniac is indecipherable like 'some stubborn art' (*JM*, 571). Commentators concur that the paradigmatic elicitor of disgust is 'the fetid ooze of...life soup.'³³ The Maniac is spattered with 'ooze' and 'brackish spray' (*JM*, 275–77), mired in the same putrid and putrefying organic matter of those pullulating interstices between life and death from which Frankenstein had pilfered the miscellaneous parts of his Creature. The Maniac is thus also a coalescence of those perturbingly nondescript and protean 'irreconcilable things' that the poet must attempt to subject to his 'light yoke.' The Maniac can only be described negatively or euphemistically: Julian notes his 'hue too beautiful for health' (*JM*, 281) and the Maniac's lover's own face becomes distorted by a 'grimace of hate' when she wonders how the Maniac could 'address / *Such features* to love's work' (*JM*, 461–64, emphasis added). The Maniac concedes that her 'taunt' is 'true,' periphrastically explaining '(For indeed nature nor in form nor hue / Bestowed on me her choicest workmanship)' (*JM*, 465–6). The imperfectly sutured body parts of Frankenstein's Creature, according to Gigante, fail to 'inspire his viewer with the imaginative power necessary to unite his various anatomical components into the totality of a human being.'³⁴ The Maniac imagines tearing out his own grosser parts, his reviled 'nerves of manhood by their bleeding root' (*JM*, 425). Yet, masochistically fantasising about such a self-castration only exacerbates the Maniac's abjection: left with only a solitary 'nerve o'er which do creep / The else unfelt oppressions of this earth' (*JM*, 449–50), he is less akin to the polytonal Aeolian harp, the Romantic metonym of the Poet, than to the downtrodden 'instinctive worm' (*JM*, 412).

The Maniac's verse, predominated by his 'Reproaching' tone (*JM*, 289), is irreconcilable with Shelley's ideal poem, which is 'the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds' (*D*, §40). It neither chronicles those 'evanescent visitations of thought and

³³ William Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 18.

³⁴ Gigante, 'Facing The Ugly,' 570.

feeling...elevating and delightful beyond all expression' nor 'all that is best and most beautiful in the world' (*D*, §40). The tone of the Maniac's monologue becomes increasingly frenzied as he struggles to strip away the 'film of familiarity'—metonymically present in the poem as the obscuring 'veil' enwrapped around his 'pent mind' (*JM*, 383)—that impedes his ability to apprehend the beauty that allegedly underlies his misshapen surroundings. Julian initially insists that the Maniac's lugubrious 'sweet strains...charm the weight / From madmen's chains' (*JM*, 259–60). He is trying to prove his conjecture that the 'chains...which our spirit bind' are indeed '[b]rITTLE...as straw' (*JM*, 181–2). The Maniac's electrifying words can purportedly galvanise any listener who possesses the faintest 'touch / Of human nature' (*JM*, 518–9). Yet true poetry, as Coleridge posits, should be characterised by its 'untranslatableness in words of the same language without injury to the meaning' (*BL*, 263). Conversely, there is an indelible suggestion in the poem that the enigmatic ramblings of the Maniac are perhaps untranslatable because they are inherently meaningless. The Shelleyan Poet should ensure that the 'co-presence of the whole picture flash'd at once upon the eye,' thus scintillating his reader's soul by spreading a 'spirit of unity' (*BL*, 252; 173–4). The Maniac's disjointed speeches, typographically demarcated by rows of crosses, are more reminiscent of the jumbled 'pieces of a dissected map' or the clumsy stitching of Frankenstein's Creature: they require 'a retrogressive effort of mind to behold it as a whole' (*BL*, 252). The expository frames fail to elucidate them and they hardly constitute 'episodes to that great poem, which all poets...have built up since the beginning of the world' (*D*, §20). Although Julian claims to have reproduced the Maniac's speech verbatim—'I yet remember what he said / Distinctly' (*JM*, 298–99)—he is conscious that readers of his transliteration cannot share his rapturous reaction. The poetry that effuses from this 'Most wretched' specimen is, as Julian eventually concedes, 'lost in grief' and the 'words came each / Unmodulated, cold, expressionless' (*JM*, 290–92). The trinity of adjectives, clumped together using asyndeton, will be echoed in the Maniac's rapid-fire of egotistical complaints about his 'misery, disappointment and mistrust' (*JM*, 314) and 'pain and insult and unrest and terror' (*JM*, 327). His self-pitying grievances are almost as lifeless as Julian's and Maddalo's metaphysical tricolons. In any case, like Coleridge, Shelley is critical of the mode of poetic diction that simulates the spontaneous stream of unfiltered speech. Frederic Burwick contends that Coleridge's conversation poems indicate his understanding that '[i]n order to give meaning to sensation,

there must be industrious thought in the idleness of meditative reception.³⁵ Shelley also emphasises the active labour of composition: rather than mechanically transcribing and transmitting impressions like the single-nerved Maniac, the poet should radically respond to and transform his phenomenal world.

The Maniac articulates Shelley's inherent anxiety that words are commonly deployed as the implements of mutual torture or self-debasement, thus destabilising Julian's initial dewy-eyed assurance that words are the perfectibilian's instruments of self-betterment, social meliorism, and aesthetic beautification. Instead of transforming 'all things' into objects of aesthetic beauty, the Maniac's own language 'burns the brain / And eats into it...blotting all things fair / And wise and good which time had written there' (*JM*, 479–81). His monomaniacal repetition of the 'many a bare broad word' (*JM*, 432) uttered by his scornful Lady causes his life to become 'like a heavy chain' that 'Lengthens behind with many a link of pain!' (*JM*, 302–03). Her words 'sealedst' and 'cearedst' (*JM*, 432–33) into their minds the nebulous 'suppressed and hideous thought' (*JM*, 429) that had always adumbrated their love. The Lady herself 'would fain forget' the trite blandishments she had once uttered but 'they / Cling to her mind, and cannot pass away' (*JM*, 406–07). Her imprecations are also 'vain' in the sense that they fail to inflict the literal injury she had wished upon the Maniac. He conjectures that this is because 'they were ministered / One after one' (*JM*, 434–35) and advises her to 'Mix them up / Like self-destroying poisons in one cup' in order to 'make one blessing...—death' (*JM*, 435–7). Such an abuse of the power of words is a darkly ironic inversion of Coleridge's ideal poem's beauty, its 'multëity in unity.' The Maniac's own final words in direct speech concede the difficulty of creating such a potent linguistic concoction. He futilely tries to narrate his own death by switching to the present tense: 'quick and dark / The grave is yawning' (*JM*, 505–06) and by claiming that 'the air / Closes upon my accents' (*JM*, 508–09). Instead of the wished-for death, however, the Maniac simply falls into 'A heavy sleep' during which he continues to mutter 'some familiar name' (*JM*, 514–15). Although the Maniac insists,

I do but hide
Under these words like embers, every spark

³⁵ Frederick Burwick, 'Coleridge's Conversation Poems: Thinking the Thinker,' *Romanticism* 14, no. 2 (2008): 179.

Of that which has consumed me
(*JM*, 503–04),

the incendiary potential of his verse is dubious. Therefore, neither the mad poet, reduced to reiterating ‘some familiar name,’ nor his eavesdroppers, who deploy a ‘certain familiar style of language,’ is capable of ameliorating their common disgustful world through their words.

Julian sagaciously desists foraging for ‘An entrance to the caverns’ of the Maniac’s mind (*JM*, 573), intuiting that only ‘an unconnected man’ (*JM*, 547) has the leisure to dissect a Maniac’s ‘unconnected exclamations’ (*JM*, Preface). Whilst the psychoanalytical exercise could be for Julian’s ‘own good’ (*JM*, 572), just as conversing with the pessimistic Count Maddalo could ‘make me know myself’ (*JM*, 561), Julian renounces such solipsistic ventures. Shelley believed, as Haines reminds us, that the imagination was vital ‘for a fuller creative functioning of the whole self, individual and social, working through its senses and passions, not just its intellect or ‘reason.’³⁶ The Maniac, chronically afflicted with existential disgust, nurses a crippled imagination and a constitutional inability to experience the more sophisticated cognitive affects of wonder. Whereas the Venice of Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* was precariously suspended between a palace and a prison, Julian discovers during his sojourn that this ‘Paradise of exiles’ contains only a ‘wrecked palace’ *within* a madhouse (*JM*, 224). To linger in Venice is to acquiesce to the shackles of the past and to reiterate worn disputes on ‘a bare strand’ (*JM*, 3) or ‘a narrow space’ (*JM*, 12). Although one could write ‘Unseen, uninterrupted’ (*JM*, 554), Shelley’s paradise comprises of mutually-expanding conversations and his idealistic vision is vaster than the circumscribed sphere of light cast by Julian’s Venetian ‘little brazen lamp’ (*JM*, 553).

Neo-Platonic Love, a Shelleyan synonym for poetry and the imagination, is tellingly characterised in the poem as pathetically feeble. The ‘love-devoted’ Maniac, who claims that he had not only learnt ‘to love / My nature’ (*JM*, 380–2) but also ‘loved even to my overthrow / Her’ (*JM*, 405), is tormented by this facile slippage of love into disgust, which is essentially ‘a state of alarm and emergency, an acute crisis of self-preservation in the face of an unassimilable otherness.’³⁷ Whereas his ‘moments’ of lonely yearning stretch out like ‘immortality’ (*JM*, 418–19),

³⁶ Haines, *Shelley’s Poetry*, 92.

³⁷ Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 1.

the Maniac and his Lady ‘disunite in horror’ after they had only ‘for a moment mingled’ (*JM*, 427–28). Their union occurs at the ‘nerves of manhood’ (*JM*, 425), underscoring the impossibility of segregating the ethereal from the corporeal. Although it is the Lady who articulates her revulsion and the wish that she ‘had ne'er endured / The deep pollution of my loathed embrace’ (*JM*, 421), the Maniac acknowledges that he had always been cognisant of the ‘suppressed and hideous thought / Which flits athwart our musings’ (*JM*, 429). Paradoxically, love becomes the ‘fuel / Of the mind’s hell’ (*JM*, 440–1) and is even antithetical to ‘truth’ (*JM*, 347) because it must assume a ‘mask of falsehood’ (*JM*, 308), one of those Burkean ‘pleasing illusions,’ in order to disguise its gross carnality and self-centredness. Maddalo’s daughter’s pithy summary of the Maniac’s experience of love, ‘They met—they parted’ (*JM*, 608), becomes syntactically inverted in Julian’s insistence that she divulge ‘The stamp of *why* they parted, *how* they met’ (*JM*, 610, original emphasis). The chiasmic formation, met-parted-parted-met, suggests that the Maniac and his Lady are bound in an interminable cycle of estrangement and reconciliation, mutual revulsion and rekindled yearning. It is a microcosmic enactment of Shelley’s own unresolved angst about the irremediable entanglement of the sublime, self-enlarging experience of love and the antisocial recoil of disgust.

Julian and Maddalo does not culminate on the *anagnorisis* or momentous epiphany of the Romantic lyric. During the poem’s final conversation, Julian’s cross-examination of Maddalo’s grown daughter is apathetically clinical. Instead of the revivifying horse ride with ‘a remembered friend’ that opens the poem, ‘Charged with light memories of remembered hours’ (*JM*, 31), the aged Julian is only left with ‘youth’s remembered tears’ (*JM*, 612). Certainly, Julian’s experience of absolute wholeness during the Venetian sunset, when he achieves the Shelleyan ideal of thinking ‘with the passions, from inside a whole self,’³⁸ is a utopian vision that makes *its* stand against the perennial eyesore of the madhouse and its menagerie of the broken specimens of humanity. But all the same, Shelley remains deeply troubled by these disgusting excrescences which resist integration into the beautifying aesthetics of his verse.

³⁸ Haines, *Shelley’s Poetry*, 243.

The Disgusting Conjunctions of *Don Juan*

Shelley, who considered *Don Juan* the great epic that embodied the spirit of their age, wrote admiringly to his friend, 'You unveil [and] present in its true deformity what is worst in human nature.'³⁹ Haines claims 'This was a new recognition: that disclosing the horrors of the 'self' could be as much the function of great poetry as imagining ideal beauty.'⁴⁰ However, as Christopher Hands reminds us, '*Don Juan* itself spans a range of differently nuanced responses to Shelley's mind.'⁴¹ Boldly mediating between the aesthetics and counter-aesthetics of the Kantian triad as well as wilfully defying Coleridge's prohibition against vacillating between 'anticlimax and hyperclimax' (*BL*, 27), Byron addresses Shelley's anxieties about the contamination of the ideal by the incontrovertibly disgusting. Byron is astutely cognisant that 'art thrives only on the continual generation of differences' and on 'conjunctions of the beautiful and the disgusting.'⁴² Accordingly, he strategically deploys aesthetic disgust in the rambunctiously inventive verse of *Don Juan* to dismantle the hegemonic sociocultural, moral, and ideological moulds he perceived were smothering the vitality of the cultural imaginary and thus impeding the Romantic quest for that elusive state of prelapsarian self-completion.

In *Don Juan*, Byron aims to deflect the existential disgust of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* that had created at the poem's heart a 'dreadful abyss'⁴³ by openly acknowledging 'the cosmos as a fleshly abyss.'⁴⁴ Whilst the licentiousness and amorality of the narrator and eponymous hero appeared monstrous to Byron's more prudish contemporaries, they also exposed the depravities that were putrefying beneath their society's deceptively placid surface. One of the central ironies of *Don Juan* is that the classic Lothario figure is a morally unblemished ingénue compared to the hypocrites and deviants that he encounters. Carolyn Korsmeyer contends that aesthetic disgust, by forcing readers to confront discomforting realities they would rather overlook, can be deployed

³⁹ *Letters*, Vol. II, 357–8.

⁴⁰ Haines, *Shelley's Poetry*, 89.

⁴¹ Christopher Hands, 'Byron's Conversation with Shelley,' *Essays in Criticism* 58.2 (2008): 148.

⁴² Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 401.

⁴³ Mark Storey, *The Problem of Poetry in the Romantic Period* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 164.

⁴⁴ Charles LaChance, 'Byron's Bad English,' *English* 50, no. 197 (2001):122.

rhetorically as ‘a tool of truth.’⁴⁵ The ‘literary gross-out,’ Korsmeyer posits, ‘can be a kind of self-exploration that teases the edges of our tolerance.’⁴⁶ The aesthetic strategy of the first canto of *Don Juan* is curiously analogous to that of Marquis de Sade’s libertinage fiction, of which Naomi Stekelenburg notes that

the portrayal of excessive corporeal transgressions that create an aesthetic of disgust serves as an entry point, a source of lubrication ...for dialogue between the characters about questions of morality. After the orgy, no topic is off limits and no idea is too ‘dangerous’.⁴⁷

After all, disgust is not only an atavistic and physiologically hardwired response but also a socially conditioned one. Byron interrogates the validity of social mores and the indoctrinations of conventional morality that tend to ossify hegemonic worldviews and prevent the emergence of more fulfilling paradigms of human interaction.

Throughout his mock-epic, Byron uses humour apotropically against the onset of existential nausea: rather than agonising over metaphysical complexities, he endeavours to laugh off the incorrigible grossness of the human condition. Byron’s verse contains vertiginous plunges from the heights of lyricism to banal and bawdy chatter, as sublimity is rapidly superseded by garrulity. As the narrator will clarify, ‘If I laugh at any mortal thing / ’Tis that I may not weep.’⁴⁸ Disgust has an uneasy affiliation with laughter. On one hand, as Menninghaus notes, ‘The sudden discharge of tension achieves in laughter, as in vomiting, an overcoming of disgust, a contact with the ‘object’ that does not lead to lasting contamination or defilement.’⁴⁹ Conversely, Linda Ben-Zvi points out that ‘once disgusting images are described... they remain so palpable that they cannot be

⁴⁵ Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 178.

⁴⁶ Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, 120.

⁴⁷ Naomi Stekelenburg, ‘Sade’s Constrained Libertinage: The Problem of Disgust,’ in *The Unacceptable*, ed. John Potts and John Scannell (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 178.

⁴⁸ Lord Byron, ‘Don Juan,’ in *The Major Works*, iv.25–6. All subsequent references to this poem are incorporated, with the abbreviation ‘DJ’.

⁴⁹ Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 10–11.

dispelled into nothing by a laugh or the punchline of a joke.⁵⁰ To protect his verse from becoming petrified by the searing palpability of disgusting images and associations, Byron ingeniously deploys the rhetorical trope of aposiopesis. Instead of ‘sublime *unspeakability*,’ the aposiopetic pauses mock the hypocritical reader’s professions of innocence and ‘jokingly encourage the reader to conjure up a variety of *unmentionable* experiences.’⁵¹ These include those ‘unutterable things’ that torment the adolescent Juan as he wanders through the woods in his pitiable state of uncomprehending arousal (*DJ*, i.714). Byron reminds readers of their own postlapsarian knowingness: they cannot escape admitting that they are fully capable of filling in the textual lacunae. For instance, instead of providing a *résumé* of his hero’s ancestral lineage in conformity with the epic tradition, the narrator wryly depicts the hero’s conception via a litany of euphemisms and *double entendres*:

A better cavalier ne’er mounted horse,
Or, being mounted, e’er got down again,
Than Jose, who *begot* our hero, who
Begot—but that’s *to come*—Well, to *renew*:
(*DJ*, i.69–72).

Whilst feigning to bowdlerise his verse, the lexical chain ‘mounted,’ ‘begot’ (both words are repeated with gusto), culminating upon the roughly synonymous and suggestive phrases ‘to come’ and ‘to renew,’ viscerally demarcate the stages of Juan’s literal genesis. The farcical pretence of purifying his text for prurient readers only elongates the salacious episode, which adumbrates the following sardonically hyperbolic descriptions of Donna Inez’s status as a paragon of womanhood, ‘perfect past all parallel’ (*DJ*, i.129). The narrator warns those who wish to extirpate from his verse the ‘grosser parts’ (*DJ*, i.347) by reminding them that the censorship of the ‘nauseous epigrams of Martial’ (*DJ*, i.344) had the counterintuitive effect of ensuring that they still ‘stand forth marshall’d in a handsome troop,’ ‘standing staring altogether’ (*DJ*, i.354, 359). Such disgusting compendiums *insist* on being heard: in fact, paradoxically, they are preserved during the very process of censorship.

⁵⁰ Linda Ben-Zvi, ‘Beckett and Disgust: The Body as ‘Laughing Matter,’’ *Modernism/modernity* 18, no. 4 (2011): 686.

⁵¹ Andrew Elfenbein, ‘Byron: Gender and Sexuality’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. Drummond Bone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 70, emphasis added.

Byron carefully avoids the systematising impulse of the Bildungsroman, which charts the perfection of its protagonist into a rational and self-contained modern citizen after his youthful idiosyncrasies and passions are disciplined by various social institutions and apparatuses. Michael O'Neill contends that Juan encapsulates an 'unWordsworthian haphazardness'⁵² and Tom Mole similarly notes that he remains 'non-developmental and contradictory.'⁵³ Byron's narrator emphasises that Juan is an indescribable 'phenomenon, one knows not what, / And wonderful beyond all wondrous measure' (*DJ*, i.157–8). Whereas Shelley's Julian despairs at the scarcity of marvellous phenomena in his 'cold world,' Byron shows that even a flawed Everyman—'A little curly-headed, good for nothing' (*DJ*, i.193)—is a repository of immeasurable, heart-warming wonder. Florence Vatan argues that 'Disgust is an emotional mode often associated with amorphousness, coalescence, adherence, and self-dissolution.'⁵⁴ *Don Juan* insists that inhabiting the protean chaos of a post-idealist world is not a repulsive experience. Nevertheless, Juan does gradually mature after being exiled from the stifling confines of his society: the 'mischief-making monkey' (*DJ*, i.194) prevents the occurrence of 'more mischief' when he becomes the guardian of the 'spirit-room' of his sinking ship, the beleaguered ark of the human race (*DJ*, ii.273–5).

The capricious volatility and adaptability of Byron's hero is replicated not only in the narratorial voice but also in the form of *Don Juan*. Whilst *Childe Harold's* Spenserian stanzas impose formal unity and control through their disciplined triple rhymes and Alexandrine clincher, *Don Juan's* couplets often farcically topple the precarious sobriety of the preceding sestets. Although the narrator initially contracts to deliver 'regularity of...design' (*DJ*, i.51), he expressly reneges this promise by capitalising upon a poetic licence to include 'some irregularity... / In the design' (*DJ*, i.957–8). The 'artful artlessness'⁵⁵ of the *ottava rima* ensures that the verse is not propelled forward mechanically, but rather, to recall Coleridge's description of the perfect poem, 'by the pleasureable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself' (*BL*, 173). Mark Storey argues that Byron's 'only object seems to be to stimulate himself

⁵² Michael O'Neill, 'The Fixed and the Fluid: Identity in Byron and Shelley,' *Byron Journal* 36, no. 2 (2008): 111.

⁵³ Tom Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (Basingstroke and New York: Palgrave, 2007), 137.

⁵⁴ Florence Vatan, 'The Lure of Disgust: Musil and Kolnai,' *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 88, no. 1 (2013): 47.

⁵⁵ David Ellis, 'Byron's Sense of Humour,' *Romanticism* 17, no. 1 (2011): 111.

and his readers for the moment—to keep both alive, to drive away *ennui*, to substitute a feverish and irritable state of excitement for listless indolence or even calm enjoyment.⁵⁶ *Ennui* is the existential nausea that afflicts the over-stimulated individual and it constitutes ‘a special sort of satiated disgust.’⁵⁷ ‘Endless variation and foreplay,’ as the eighteenth-century aestheticians established, ‘alone prevents an immanent transformation of the beautiful into a vomitive.’⁵⁸ Ironically, Byron’s narrator’s sustained flirtation with subject matter conventionally considered repulsive inoculates his verse from suddenly collapsing, like Julian’s poetic vision, after an unexpected revelation that a disgusting substratum always undergirds the beautiful exterior.

Sharing Shelley’s revulsion of pre-masticated words and hackneyed sentiments, Byron aims to write ‘honest, simple verse’ (*DJ*, Dedication, 130). However, the blithely garrulous narrator’s contention that ‘obscure’ language is ‘not pure’ (*DJ*, i.102) overturns Romantic valorisations of poetry that is unnecessarily opaque or ‘untranslatable.’ The narrator regularly interrupts his story with self-reflexive literary criticism, such as when he parenthetically congratulates himself, ‘(This old song and new simile holds good)’ (*DJ*, Dedication, 9) or when he denigrates certain common similes as ‘trite and stupid’ (*DJ*, i.440). This snide criticism of over-circulated language reaches a comical peak when Juan’s platitudinous vows of eternal constancy to his first lover, Julia, are unceremoniously deflated by the parenthesised descriptions of his literal seasickness. The couplet that begins with Juan’s invocation, ‘Beloved Julia, hear me still beseeching!’ is bathetically matched with ‘(Here he grew inarticulate with reaching)’ (*DJ*, ii.159–60). The narrator approvingly observes that ‘the sea acted as a strong emetic,’ preventing Juan from becoming ‘more pathetic’ (*DJ*, ii.67–8). ‘Excessive sweetness is a key inducer of satiated disgust and nausea,’⁵⁹ as Vatan argues, and during Juan’s voyage out from his stifling society at the start of the second canto, he is purged of his rote-learned lexicon’s saccharine sentiments and ‘arbitrary marks of thought.’ Juan’s tutors, under the superintendence of his dictatorial mother, had collaborated ‘to destroy / His natural spirit’ and ‘not in vain they toil’d’ (*DJ*, i.396–7). The once ‘charming child’ had become preternaturally ‘sage, and still, and steady,’ an alliterative trinity that echoes Byron’s other sympathetic descriptions of the constraints enforced upon humanity’s ‘helpless clay,’

⁵⁶ Storey, *The Problem of Poetry in the Romantic Period*, 163.

⁵⁷ Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 120.

⁵⁸ Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 29.

⁵⁹ Vatan, ‘The Lure of Disgust,’ 33.

which will ‘keep baking, broiling, burning on’ (*DJ*, i.500), causing its ‘natural spirit’ to become increasingly more ‘cabin’d, cribbb’d, confined.’⁶⁰ In short, Juan’s ‘nautical existence’ (*DJ*, ii. 96)—Byron’s version of the ‘radically unscripted’ life—emancipates him from the linguistic artifice that clog ‘this naughty world of ours’ (*DJ*, i.137).

Compared to the boisterous first canto, the mood of the second canto—roughly split between a gruelling cannibalism episode and a bucolic island idyll—is strikingly subdued. The antithetical sequences demonstrate that the quiescent optimism sustaining Byron’s flexuous verse can easily withstand the revelation that human nature’s carnal appetites and its aspirational yearnings are incongruously intertwined. Unlike Julian and Maddalo, Byron’s narrator does not abandon himself to a defeatist cynicism. The narrator endeavours to minimise the revulsion evoked by the mariners’ cannibalism, a paradigmatic disgust-eliciting and tabooed act. The narrator shifts into using the first-person pronoun—‘our intent’ and ‘we never meant’ (*DJ*, ii.252, 254)—to affirm his complete sympathy with the burgeoning desperation of the stranded sailors who, as he reiterates, possessed ‘but one oar’ (*DJ*, ii.381, 482, 551, 557). The paronomasia on ‘or’ sombrely conveys the Scylla and the Charybdis between which humanity must sail, furnished with a fallacious choice between committing repulsive, self-polluting acts of mutual devouring and the equally unpalatable alternative of certain death. Unable to survive their guilt after perpetrating this dehumanising act of self-preservation, Juan’s companions discover belatedly that they had committed ‘a species of self-slaughter’ (*DJ*, ii.815) and the most zealous perpetrators ‘with hyaena-laughter, died despairing’ (*DJ*, ii.632). The narrator is equally chilled by the ‘one universal shriek’ as the majority of sailors perish (*DJ*, ii.417) and the subsequent ‘solitary shriek’ and ‘bubbling cry / Of some strong swimmer in his agony’ (*DJ*, ii.423–4). Nevertheless, Byron’s faith in human resilience in the face of such gruelling adversity is indestructible. Juan, who had abstained from partaking of the sacrificial victim, is saved by the single remaining oar, which floats him from the horrors of the oceanic deep to the bucolic sanctuary of Haidée’s island. The ‘oar’/‘or’ pun thus also encapsulates the irrepressible optimism that suffuses Byron’s capacious verse: there is always another alternative, a possibility for salvation even in a chaotic world presided over by that unfathomable, whimsically malignant, supreme power that ‘delights to torture us’ (*JM*, 320).

⁶⁰ Byron, ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage,’ (iv.127).

The Greek maiden Haidée's island—apparently 'without a trace of man' (*DJ*, ii.824)—is a haven isolated from the hyper-aggressive machismo of the external world. Here, Juan will be revived by the maternal ministrations of Haidée and the sequence of present participles describing Haidée's actions—'bending close,' 'chafing,' 'answering,' 'bathing,' and 'lifting him' (*DJ*, ii.897–913)—re-enact Juan's revivification on a syntactical level, counterbalancing the 'Tearing, and grinning, howling, screeching, swearing / ...despairing' of the open sea (*DJ*, ii.631–32). Juan's return to a state of organic unity, an essential prelude to his spiritual renaissance, is conveyed by the maternal dimension of his bond with Haidée. The narrator relates how 'like an infant Juan sweetly slept' (*DJ*, ii.1139), 'Hush'd as the babe upon its mother's breast' (*DJ*, ii.1178) and 'Soft as the callow cygnet in its nest' (*DJ*, ii.1182) as the anxiously vigilant Haidée 'watch'd him like a mother' (*DJ*, ii.1258). The mother's abject body, Julia Kristeva claims, is the disgusting object *par excellence* for every grown child, who is torn between a subconscious yearning for its prenatal wholeness and a simultaneous horror that the desired reunion with the maternal body would entail the utter dissolution of its own selfhood.⁶¹ By using similes—'like an infant,' 'as the babe,' 'like a mother'—Byron emphasises that the prelapsarian wholeness Juan experiences is qualitatively different from such regressive self-annihilating fusions.

Juan and Haidée eventually achieve that elusive state of perfect synchronicity, as language itself becomes redundant and each lover's potentially disgust-eliciting 'unassimilable otherness' is mollified. Juan's rejuvenating sojourn on Haidée's island contradicts Charles LaChance's claim that Byron's 'anti-ideality soils everything but gritty realities of violence, sex and drugs.'⁶² As William Miller observes,

Disgust...paints the world in a particular way, a distinctly misanthropic and melancholic way. But disgust is also a necessary partner in the positive: love...would make little sense without disgust being there to overcome.⁶³

The classic 'Byronic' posture of misanthropy, melancholy and a disgusted weariness with the world, as popularised by *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, is completely quashed during this section of *Don Juan*. Byron thus responds

⁶¹ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁶² LaChance, 'Bad English,' 119.

⁶³ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 18.

to Shelley's struggle to insulate his ideal of organic unity from an antithetical nihilistic vision. As Storey remarks, 'Shelley laments the very union he has worked towards. To be one is, in these terms, to be nothing: far from being complementary, they are identical. To merge thus is to die.'⁶⁴ Stokes similarly argues that for Shelley, 'Being may revert to nothingness, as all-ness threatens to absorb everything into a single, undifferentiated, stagnant perception.'⁶⁵ The resurgent aesthetic disgust in Shelley's poetry is thus generated by the nightmarish possibility that the pined-for organic perfection actually entails a process of self-annihilation during which the questing subject is divested of his intrinsic heterogeneity and reduced to the repulsive amorphousness of an undifferentiated non-entity. Tony Howe compellingly argues that 'Juan and Haidée seem to begin where Julian and Maddalo end, in a place where words are divisive and thus inadequate. Without pain and pessimism, however, they bypass language and become one.'⁶⁶ Juan and Haidée are able to communicate by means of 'nods, and signs, / And smiles, and sparkles of the speaking eye' (*DJ*, ii.1289–90). For Juan, Haidée's foreign tongue is inexplicably enchanting:

And her voice was the warble of a bird,
 So soft, so sweet, so delicately clear,
 That finer, simpler music ne'er was heard;
 The sort of sound we echo with a tear,
 Without knowing why—
 (*DJ*, ii.1203–07).

Haidée's prosaic entreaties for Juan to rest and fortify himself with the meal she has prepared for him acquire the sublimity of the nightingale's song. The narrator adds that 'Juan learn'd his alpha beta better / From Haidée's glance than any graven letter' (*DJ*, ii.1303–4). After his maritime misadventures purged him of the cloying phrases of sentimentalism, Juan acquires a new lexicon under Haidée's patient tutelage. Juan outstrips the superficial pedantry of his own mother, whose own Greek is limited to 'the alphabet,' perhaps to its first two letters, alpha beta (*DJ*, i.97–8). Similarly, the illiterate Haidée

read (the only book she could) the lines
 Of his fair face, and found, by sympathy,

⁶⁴ Storey, *The Problem of Poetry in the Romantic Period*, 105

⁶⁵ Stokes, *Coleridge, Language and the Sublime*, 13.

⁶⁶ Howe, 'Shelley and the Development of *Don Juan*,' 33.

The answer eloquent, where soul shines
 And darts in one quick glance a long reply;
 And thus in every look she saw exprest
 A world of words, and things at which she guess'd
 (*DJ*, ii.1291– 6).

The first part of the quoted sentence is broken into small syntactical units by the parenthesised interpolations and the enjambment, emulating the half-hesitant but reciprocal processes of mutual decoding. Vows between the lovers would be superfluous when the heart of each 'beat *here*' (*DJ*, ii1616, original emphasis). 'Here,' doubly underscored by the italics and the iambic stress recalls a similarly memorable deictic in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* when the narrator relates how his imagination had once caressed the temperamental ocean into submission, enabling him to experience an absolute oneness with its sublime bulk, 'as I do *here*.'⁶⁷ The Byronic 'here' typically celebrates, according to Michael O'Neill, 'the locus of present composition...a virtual space where the authorial self fully encounters itself in and as a process of becoming.'⁶⁸ Byron suggests that during these ephemeral, rhapsodic moments of poetic inspiration both poet and reader can experience a redemptive primal wholeness and he intuits that perhaps, 'There woos no home, nor hope, nor life, save what is here.'⁶⁹

Although *Don Juan's* narrator polemically quips that 'perfection is / Insipid in this naughty world of ours' (*DJ*, i.137–8), claims to be bored by 'peace, and innocence, and bliss' (*DJ*, i.141), and denigrates Platonic idealism and the neo-Platonism of Shelleyan 'air-balloons' (*DJ*, i.734), the germination of the second canto's renascent idealism is nevertheless traceable to this irreverent first canto. Although the narrator laments that he himself no longer possesses the 'freshness of the heart' that 'out of all the lovely things we see / Extracts emotions beautiful and new / Hived in our bosoms like the bag o' the bee' (*DJ*, i.1706–09), he directly appeals to his less world-weary readers and exhorts that it is 'in thy power / To double even the sweetness of a flower' (*DJ*, i.1710–12). Piqued by Shelley's flagging idealism, Byron demonstrates in his second canto how these 'beautiful and new' feelings, habitually obscured by society's films of familiarity and its masks of falsehood, can be harvested and processed into antidotes for the onset of existential disgust. Byron extends his earlier apian and floral metaphors in his description of how Juan and Haidée

⁶⁷ Byron, 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage,' (iv.184).

⁶⁸ O'Neill, 'Identity in Byron and Shelley,' 110.

⁶⁹ Byron, 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage,' (iv.105).

felt allured,
 As if their souls and lips each other beckon'd,
 Which, being join'd, like swarming bees they clung—
 Their hearts the flowers from whence the honey sprung
 (*DJ*, ii.1493–96).

Juan becomes the antithesis of his mother, 'An all-in-all-sufficient self-director' (*DJ*, i.115): he always needs companionship and society in order to feel complete. The laconicism of the narrator's concluding couplet, 'a kiss's strength ... must be reckon'd by its length' (*DJ*, ii.1487–88) cannot fully deflate the sincere nostalgia underpinning the preceding sestet: with *its* length lending it strength, it overrides the facetious appendage. The polysyndeton and repetition ('long,' 'kiss') elongate the moment of an unspoiled organic unity that constitutes a self-transcending 'Enlargement of existence' (*DJ*, ii.1378). The lovers' felicity infuses the ambience of the island:

the rounded
 Red sun sinks down behind the azure hill,
 Which then seems as if the whole earth it bounded,
 Circling all nature, hush'd, and dim, and still,
 With the far mountain-crescent half surrounded
 On one side, and the deep sea calm and chill
 Upon the other, and the rosy sky,
 With one star sparkling through it like an eye
 (*DJ*, ii.1457–64).

The accumulation of images of a nurturing encirclement ('rounded,' 'bounded,' 'circling,' 'surrounded'), enhanced by the balanced phrases ('On one side,' 'Upon the other') and the language that connotes organic unity ('whole,' 'all'), collectively convey the harmonious equilibrium that pervades throughout Byron's crepuscular Edenic vision. The sky, with its 'floating glow / Spread like a rosy ocean, vast and bright' (*DJ*, ii.1473–4), reflects the sea that is suffused with celestial radiance. The natural world is no longer a monstrous superpower that cannibalises a beleaguered humanity but instead, a prelapsarian 'Paradise of exiles' that has no need—yet—of the prisons and madhouses of a decadent civilisation.

Conclusion

Julian and Maddalo and *Don Juan* encapsulate the spirit of an age bewildered after decades of social turbulence, protracted warfare and the seismic aftershocks of the recent Battle of Waterloo, which had been a pivotal ‘moment of life-threatening fragility, the point where dreams of national perfection teeter on the edge of impossibility.’⁷⁰ This paper has examined how ‘second generation’ Romantic writers deploy the counter-aesthetics of disgust to interrogate and destabilise the orderly aesthetic binary of the beautiful and the sublime, as they endeavour to articulate and possibly redress contemporary anxieties about the limitations of poetic expression. Shelley’s subliminal self-doubts, arising from his diminished faith in the harmonising power of the Poet’s imagination, occasionally burgeon into more perturbing forms of self-disgust, which overturn even his most exuberant and idealistic affirmations. In *Julian and Maddalo*, Shelley’s attempt to assemble into a holistic composition his poem’s various sections, each characterised by its own idiosyncratic tone and mode of poetic diction, is more reminiscent of Frankenstein’s ill-fated anatomical artistry than Coleridge’s ideal of ‘multëity in unity.’ Whilst Shelley’s heroic couplets provide a sturdy skeletal framework, the suturing together of the disparate parts—Julian’s expository narrative, his homage to the Coleridgean conversation poem, the friends’ academic disquisition, the Maniac’s effusive monologue, and the dispirited epilogue—is hardly beautifully seamless. As Menninghaus remarks, ‘

If the skin-surface’s uninterrupted line is the law of the beautiful body, then the anti-illusional disruption of the textual body of art is the schema of romantic irony.⁷¹

Through these self-reflexively ironic disjunctures, Shelley foregrounds the disgusting residues that resist the beautifying alchemy of poetic language and the contagious scepticism that can never be fully expunged or etherealised by the poet’s perfectionist imagination. This quintessentially Romantic posture of despair, triggered by a revelation of human imperfectability, is mollified by the comedic vision of *Don Juan*, which revels in the artistic and ideological freedom furnished by ‘anti-illusional disruption.’ Whereas Shelley’s ambitiously visionary poetry falters when he perceives that the Poet is actually a madman who mechanically utters

⁷⁰ Philip Shaw, *Waterloo and the Romantic Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 4.

⁷¹ Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 139.

‘unconnected exclamations,’ Byron’s ludic verse, which oscillates between bawdy loquacity and sublime lyricism, is suffused with a Coleridgean conviction that ‘No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.’⁷² Paradoxically, Byron’s blunt acknowledgment of the contiguity of the disgusting and the ideal enables him to indefinitely deflect the crippling onset of the existential queasiness that afflicted contemporary poets, including the Shelleys. Yet significantly, Anne Elliot, the heroine of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*, also written in 1818, cannot extract from her cornucopia of memorised poetical quotations a single passage that is purely about ‘the images of youth and hope, and spring, all gone together.’⁷³ As Shelley’s and Byron’s poems evince, despite the perturbing interlacing of the ugly with the beautiful and the sublime, the autumnal despondency and incipient disgust that undergirds the Romantic work are always counterbalanced by an indestructible faith in the inevitable return of spring.

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⁷² Coleridge, ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,’ in *The Complete Poems*, (78).

⁷³ Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. Gillian Beer, (England: Penguin Classics, 1998), 79.