A New Canto

There is no more evidence to link this work to Caroline Lamb than there is to link it to James and Horace Smith, who are at least named in it (see XX 8), and whose skill at pastiche and parody is well-attested. One small reference apart (XI 8), there’s nothing in it to suggest even that it’s a continuation of Don Juan. As far as I can tell it is first attributed to Lamb, on no evidence, by Margot Strickland, who places it, with neither introduction nor annotation, in an appendix,¹ and doesn’t otherwise mention it.

Those who claim A New Canto as the work of Lamb have to navigate their way around the following, from a letter she wrote to John Murray, on the appearance of Don Juan I and II in July 1819:

I think there is something fine both in the conception and execution of Mazeppa; there is also something pretty. The Don Juan is neither witty, nor in very good taste, and the Couplet about Romilly is infamous; there is not the Razor edge of satire to make it go down, and the levity of the style ill accords with the subject. To say the least of it, the whole is in very bad taste, and were Keane to act “Harliquin,” and Miss O’Neill “Polly Peachum,” it would not do them such irreparable harm as it will do Lord Byron. La-fontaine was indecent, it must be owned; but every line is an epigram, and, like Voltaire, the Comicality of his wit and the peculiarity of his Genius, in a language too far more refined than ours, excused in some manner his profligacy. But here it is not good enough to excuse anything. Most of the lines are weak, lengthy, and though to strangers it must appear incoherent nonsense, to those who penetrate further it will excite contempt and disgust. Thank you, however, for your kindness. I am alone and ill and have been entertained. I would gladly have the rest of the prose story² which, though absurd, is well written and interests me.³

Surface respectability never appealed to Caroline Lamb, though she was skilled enough in social polish to be able to say something disapproving in public while doing in private that of which in theory she disapproved. A New Canto may be another example of this two-facedness, fighting Byron with his own deadliest weapon.

³: LJ IV 366n.
Caroline was certainly very intelligent and wittily creative. The infatuated Edward Bulwer Lytton described her conversation as being full of “a wild originality”, which combined

… sudden contrasts from deep pathos to infantile drollery; now sentimental now shrewd. It sparkled with anecdotes of the great world, and of the eminent persons with whom she had been brought up, or been familiarly intimate; and, ten minutes after, it became gravely eloquent with religious enthusiasm, or shot off into metaphysical speculations – sometimes absurd, sometimes profound – generally suggestive and interesting. A creature of caprice, and impulse, and whim, her manner, her talk, and her character shifted their colours as rapidly as those of a cameleon.⁴

It sounds rather like any number of passages from *Don Juan*, and is not unlike the free-associationary humour to be found in *A New Canto*, published in 1819 “for William Wright” (as was *Canto III*, above). *A New Canto* has advocates as a work of Lamb’s in Duncan Wu⁵ and Paul Douglass.⁶ Douglass calls it “the apex of Caroline’s career as a mimic”.⁷

As for me, “I leave the question open, like all questions”; but am sceptical.

At twenty-seven stanzas with neither characters nor plot, *A New Canto* is far less ambitious than *Canto the Third*, or *Canto III*, but presents a London still more doomed and damned than the one in the first poem. There, a new Fire of London would (if it happened) be the work of malign radicals: here it really does happen, with God, Belial and Beëlzebub as the incendiaries. It may be embroidering a passage from *Manfred*, published three years earlier, in 1816, the Year Without a Summer – when Byron wrote *Darkness*:

First Destiny, *answering*: The City lies sleeping;

The Morn, to deplore it,

May dawn on it weeping.

Sullenly, slowly,

The black Plague flew o’er it –

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⁷: Ibid., p.220.
Thousands lie lowly;  
Tens of thousands shall perish –  
The living shall fly from  
The Sick they should cherish;  
But nothing can vanquish  
The touch that they die from;  
Sorrow and Anguish,  
And Evil and Dread,  
Envelope a Nation;  
The blest are the dead,  
Who see not the sight  
Of their own desolation. –  
This work of a Night,  
This wreck of a realm, this deed of my doing,  
For ages I’ve done, and shall still be renewing.

Enter the Second and Third Destinies.

The Three:  
Our hands contain the hearts of men –  
Our footsteps are their graves –  
We only give to take again  
The Spirits of our Slaves. –

The greater part of A New Canto is indeed an apocalyptic vision of London at Doomsday (III, 1). In this London, hypocrisy in morals goes hand in hand with hypocrisy in literary standards:

Their morals lax, and literary rigour,  
Their prim cesuras, and their gendered rhymes,—  
Mine never could abide their statutes critical,  
They’d call them neutral or hermaphroditical. (XIX)

As is only right, no-one, from St Paul’s to Smithfield, escape the conflagration (IV-V). There are blessed spirits in London, though the poem’s way of describing them is convoluted and ambiguous (XXIV). Byron’s poetry (“My verses—mine, and all beside, / Wild, foolish tales of Italy and Spain”: XXV 1-2) is but the carbuncle on the surface, indicating the corruption within.

A New Canto is, in its packed energy, the most effective of the three 1819 Don Juan pastiches printed here.

Paul Douglass quotes an 1823 letter in which Lamb asks Murray for a copy of the poem. In this scenario, she is asking for something which she

8: Manfred, II iii, 34-56.
must possess already, which Douglass interprets as a characteristic trick. But “the misery of never quench’d desire” was a subject with which Caroline Lamb was indeed too familiar, and A New Canto is a shout of hatred at the city in which she had suffered it most.

In ventriloquising her version of Byron, Caroline (if it is she) does not neglect his wit and poetic energy, but stresses as well a nihilistic exhibitionism which was probably a quality which, while their brief relationship lasted, they shared.

A NEW CANTO

I.
I’M sick of fame— I’m gorged with it— so full
I almost could regret the happier hour
When northern oracles proclaimed me dull,¹⁰
Grieving my Lord should so mistake his power—
E’en they, who now my consequence would lull,
And vaunt they hail’d and nurs’d the opening flower,
Vile cheats! he knew not, impudent Reviewer,
Clear spring of Helicon from common sewer.

II.
’Tis said, they killed the gentle soul’d Montgomery¹¹—
I’ll swear, they did not shed for him a tear!
He had not spirit to revenge their mummery,
Nor lordly purse to print and persevere:¹²
I measured stings with ’em¹³—a method summary—

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10: Refers to Henry Brougham’s review of Hours of Idleness (though Byron thought it was by Francis Jeffrey) in the Edinburgh of January 1808, which started, “The poesy of this young lord belongs to the class which neither gods nor men are said to permit”. He was quoting Horace’s Ars Poetica, 372-3: “Mediocribus esse poetis / non homines, non di, non concessere columnae ...” (Neither men nor gods nor booksellers can tolerate mediocre poetry).
11: James Montgomery (1771-1854) Scots poet, was not killed, but fined and jailed twice, in 1795 and 1796, for publishing allegedly seditious verse; see English Bards and Scotch Reviewers 417-25.
12: Byron himself paid for the printing of Hours of Idleness and the three following volumes of juvenilia.
13: That is, wrote English Bards and Scotch Reviewers.
Not that I doubt their penitence sincere;
And I’ve a fancy running in my head
They’ll like; or so by some it will be said.

III.
When doomsday comes, St Paul’s will be on fire—
  I should not wonder if we live to see it—
Of us, proof pickles, Heaven must rather tire,
  And want a reckoning—if so, so be it—
Only about the Cupola, or higher,
  If there’s a place unoccupied, give me it—
To catch, before I touch my sinner’s salary,
The first grand cackle in the whispering gallery.

IV.
The ball comes tumbling with a lively crash,
  And splits the pavement up, and shakes the shops,
Teeth chatter, china dances, spreads the flash,
  The omnium falls, the Bank of England stops;
Loyal and radical, discreet and rash,
  Each on his knees in tribulation flops;
The Regent raves (Moore chuckling at his pain)
And sends about for ministers in vain.

V.
The roaring streamers flap, red flakes are shot
  This way and that, the town is a volcano—
And yells are heard, like those provoked by Lot,
  Some, of the Smithfield sort, and some soprano;
Some holy water seek, the font is hot,

14: Natural candidates for damnation.
15: The dome of St. Paul’s.
16: The ball supporting the cross on the top of St Paul’s.
17: The aggregate amount of the parcels of different stocks, offered by the government for each £100 in raising loans. Equivalent to today’s FTSE share index or Dow Jones average.
18: As the world crumbles, the Prince Regent goes mad, and Thomas Moore, Byron’s satirical Irish friend, writes verse to celebrate his doing so.
19: See Genesis 19.
20: Some in the rough working-class tones of Smithfield meat-market, others feminine and refined.
And fizzing in a tea-kettle piano.
Now bring your magistrates, with yeomen back’d,\(^{21}\)
Bawls Belial,\(^{22}\) “and read the Riot-act!”—

VI.
The Peak of Derbyshire\(^{23}\) goes to and fro;
Like drunken sot the Monument\(^{24}\) is reeling;
Now fierce and fiercer comes the furious glow,
The planets, like a juggler’s ball, are wheeling:
I am a graceless poet, as you know,
Yet would not wish to wound a proper feeling,
Nor hint you’d hear, from saints in agitation,
The *lapsus linguæ*\(^{25}\) of an execration.

VII.
Mark yon bright beauty, in her tragic airs,
How her clear white the mighty smother tinges!
Delicious chaos! that such beauty bares!—
And now those eyes stretch out their silken fringes,\(^{26}\)
Staring bewildered—and anon she\(^{27}\) tears
Her raven tresses ere the wide flame singes—
Oh! would she feel as I could do, and cherish
One wild forgetful rapture, ere all perish!—

VIII.
Who would be vain? Fair maids and ugly men
Together rush, the dainty and the shabby,
(No gallantry will soothe ye, ladies, then)
High dames, the wandering beggar and her *babby*,
In motley agony, a desperate train,

\(^{21}\): Refers to the Peterloo Massacre (August 16th 1819).
\(^{22}\): In *Paradise Lost* Beëlzebub (see below, 1.85n) is Satan’s *bold Compeer and nearest Mate* (I 127, 192), whereas Belial is singled out by Milton as one than whom *a Spirit more lewd / Fell not from Heaven* (I 490-1).
\(^{23}\): Refers to Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, where Caroline had been almost annually from the time she was three until she was married, then somewhat less often (– thanks to Paul Douglass for this note).
\(^{24}\): The tower marking where the Great Fire of London started; erected 1671-7.
\(^{25}\): “Slip of the tongue”.
\(^{26}\): Compare *The Tempest*, I i 408: “The fringed curtains of thine eye advance …”
\(^{27}\): “The mother”: Chaos; “Great Anarch” of *The Dunciad*, penultimate line.
Flocking to holy places like the Abbey,\(^{28}\)
Till the black volumes,\(^{29}\) closing o’er them, scowl,
Muffling for ever curse, and shriek, and howl.

**IX.**
A woman then may rail, nor would I stint her;  
Her griefs, poor soul, are past redress in law—
And if this matter happen in the winter,
There’ll be at Petersburg a sudden thaw,
And Alexander’s\(^{30}\) palace, every splinter
Burn, Christmas-like and merry, though the jaw
Of its imperial master take to trembling,
As when the French were quartered in the Kremlin.\(^{31}\)

**X.**
Rare doings in the North! as trickle down
Primeval snows, and the white bears swash and caper,
And Bernadotte,\(^{32}\) that swaggerer of renown,
To Bonaparte again might hold a taper,
Aye, truckle to him, cap in hand or crown,
To save his distance from the sturdy vapour.
Napoleon, too, will he look blank and paly?
He hung the citizens of Moscow gaily—

**XI.**
He made a gallant youth his darkling prey,
Nor e’er would massacre or murder mince,
And yet I fear, on this important day
To see the hero pitifully wince:
Go, yield him up to Belzebub,\(^{33}\) and say,
Pray treat him like a gentleman and prince.
I doubt him thorough-bred, he’s not a true one,

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\(^{28}\): Westminster Abbey.
\(^{29}\): Those containing the names of the damned. Compare *The Vision of Judgement*, 3, 4: “the Recording Angel’s black bureau”.
\(^{30}\): Alexander I (1777-1825) Tsar of Russia.
\(^{31}\): During the brief occupation of 1812. The Russians themselves burned Moscow, forcing the French out.
\(^{32}\): Jean Baptiste Jules Bernadotte (1763-1844) French general who became King Charles XIV of Sweden.
\(^{33}\): See l.40n above.
A bloodhound spaniel-crossed and no Don Juan.

XII.
Death-watches now, in every baking wall, tick
Faster and faster, till they tick no more,
And Norway’s copper-mines about the Baltic
Swell, heave, and rumble with their boiling ore,
Like some gripped giant’s motion\textsuperscript{34} peristaltic,\textsuperscript{35}
Then burst, and to the sea vast gutters pour;
And as the waters with the fire-stream curl,
Zooks! what a whizzing, roaring, sweltering whirl!

XIII.
Lo! the great deep laid bare, tremendous yawning,
Its scalding waves retiring from the shore,
Affrighted whales on dry land sudden spawning,
And small fish fry where fish ne’er fried before.
No Christian eye shall see another dawning—
The Turkish infidel may now restore
His wives to liberty, and ere to Hell he go,
Roll in the bottom of the Archipelago!\textsuperscript{36}

XIV.
And now, ye coward sinners (I’m a bold one,
Scorning all here, nor caring for hereafter,
A radical, a stubborn, and an old one)
Behold! each riding on a burning rafter,
The devils (in my arms I long to fold one)
Splitting their blue and brazen sides with laughter,
Play at snapdragon, in their merry fits,
O’er some conventicle for hypocrites.

XV.
Ay, serve the skulkers, with their looks so meek,
As they’ve, no doubt, served lobsters in their time,
(Poor \textit{blacks}! no Wilberforce\textsuperscript{37} for them can speak,
Pleading their colour is their only crime.)

\textsuperscript{34}: Refers to bowel-movements; see \textit{The Age of Bronze}, l.506.
\textsuperscript{35}: In a wave-like rhythm: the kind of word to be found in rhyming dictionaries.
\textsuperscript{36}: The islands of the Aegean.
\textsuperscript{37}: William Wilberforce (1759-1833) first among the anti-slavery campaigners.
Trundle them all to bubble and to squeak—

No doubt they shut their ears against my rhyme,
Yet sneak, rank elders, fearful of denials,
To pick Susannahs up in Seven-Dials.

XVI.
Brave fiends! for usurers and misers melt
And make a hell broth of their cursed gold:
On all who mock at want they never felt,
On all whose consciences are bought and sold,
E’en as on me, be stern damnation dealt,
And lawyers, damn them all—the blood runs cold,
That man should deal with misery, and mock it,
And filch an only shilling from its pocket.

XVII.
Ay, damn them all, a deep damnation wait
On all such callous, crooked, hopeless souls!
Ne’er mince the matter to discriminate,
But let the devil strike them from the Rolls:
’Twill cheer their clients to behold their fate,
And round their bonfires dance in merry shoals.
Some poor men’s tales I’ve heard upon my journies,
Would make a bishop long to roast attornies.

XVIII.
Perhaps the thing may take another turn,
And one sharp shock may split the world in two,
And I in Italy, you soon may learn,

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38: Bubble and squeak: a vulgar but savory kind of omnium gatherum dinner of fried scraps, the scrapings of the cupboard (John Bee, Slang: A Dictionary of the Turf, 1823); an apt metaphor for Hell.
39: See next note.
40: Heroine of the Apocryphal Book of Susannah, whose innocence is proved when two lustful elders accuse her of wantonness but are themselves condemned to die when their evidence contradicts itself.
41: Rough area of London between Soho and Covent Garden (themselves rough enough); few Susannahs found here would be innocent.
42: Compare Macbeth, I vii 20: “… the deep damnation of his taking-off”. Also Beppo, 32, 6: Dreading the deep damnation of his “Bah!”
43: Bishops and attorneys normally going hand-in-glove.
44: Byron was in Italy from October 1816 to July 1823.
On t’other half am reeling far from you.
No doubt ’twould split, where first it ought to burn,
Across some city, that its sins should rue,
Some wicked capital, for instance, Paris,
And stop the melodrames from Mr Harris.  

XIX.

Save London, none is wickeder, or bigger;  
An odious place, too, in these modern times,
Small incomes, runaways, and swindlers eager
To fleece and dash; and then their quacks and mimes,
Their morals lax, and literary rigour,
Their prim cesuras, and their gendered rhymes,—  
Mine never could abide their statutes critical,
They’d call them neutral or hermaphroditical.

XX.

True, their poor Play-wrights (truth, I speak with pain)
Yield ours a picking, and I beg their pardon—
’Tis needless—down must come poor Drury Lane,
And, scarcely less poor, down come Covent Garden:
If we must blaze, no squabbles will remain
That Actors’ hearts against each other harden—
Committees, creditors, all wrapped up in flames,
That leave no joke for Horace Smith or James.

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45: Thomas Harris (d.1820) was the manager of Covent Garden. If the world split, he’d no longer be able to import French plays to compensate for the paucity of British ones.
47: Balancing point in the middle of a French line of verse.
48: Rhymes were either masculine or feminine, and you could not, in rhyming theory, mix the genders, though Byron did so constantly.
49: The Theatre Royal Drury Lane and the Covent Garden Theatre were the only two London theatres allowed to put on plays all the year round.
50: James and Horace Smith (1775-1839, 1779-1849) joint authors of the Rejected Addresses: expert parodists, writing in different authors’ styles about the re-opening of the Drury Lane Theatre, which burnt down in 1809.
XXI.

_In rebus modus est:_ 51 whene’er I write
I mean to rhapsodize, and nothing more—
If some poor nervous souls my Muse affright,
I might a strain of consolation pour,—
Talk of the spotless spirits, snowy white,
Which, newly clad, refreshing graves restore,
And silvery wreaths of glory round them curl’d,
Serenely rise above the blazing world.

XXII.

Free, bursting from his mound of lively green,
Wing’d light as zephyr of the rosy morn, 170
The poor man smiling on the proud is seen, 52
With something of a mild, forgiving scorn—
The marbled, proud one, haply with the mean,
Sole on his prayer of intercession borne:
Upward in peal harmonious they move,
Soft as the midnight tide of hallow’d love.

XXIII.

The rich humane, who with their common clay
Divided graciously, distinguished few;
Good Christians, who had slept their wrongs away,
In peace with this life, and the next in view;
Strugglers with tyrant passion and its prey,
Love’s single-hearted victims, sacred, true,
Who, when dishonour’s path alone could save,
Bore a pure pang to an untimely grave—

XXIV.

Blest they, who wear the vital spirit out,
Even thus, degrading not the holy fire,
Nor bear a prostituted sense about,
The misery of never quench’d desire,
Still quench’d, still kindling, every thought devout
Lost in the changeful torment—portion dire!— 190

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51: “There is a moderation in all things”; perhaps with a pun on “rebus”, a riddle in which a name is conveyed by a picture, therefore with the alternative meaning, “The usual way is to write in riddles”.

Return we to our heaven, our fire and smoke,
Though now you may begin to take the joke!

XXV.
What joke?—My verses—mine, and all beside,
Wild, foolish tales of Italy and Spain,
The gushing shrieks, the bubbling squeaks, the bride 195
Of nature, blue-eyed, black-eyed, and her swain.
Kissing in grottoes, near the moonlit tide,
Though to all men of common sense 'tis plain,
Except for rampant and amphibious brute,
Such damp and drizzly places would not suit. 57

XXVI.
Mad world! for fame we rant, call names, and fight—
I scorn it heartily, yet love to dazzle it,
Dark intellects by day, as shops by night,
All with a bright, new speculative gas lit,
Wars the blue vapour with the oil-fed light,
Hot sputter Blackwood, Jeffrey, Giffard, Hazlitt—
The Muse runs madder, and, as mine may tell,
Like a loose comet, mingles Heaven and Hell.

XXVII.
You shall have more of her another time,
Since gulled you will be with our flights poetic,
Our eight, and ten, and twenty feet sublime,
Our maudlin, hey-down-derrified pathetic:
For my part, though I’m doom’d to write in rhyme,

53: “heaven” is monosyllabic – “heav’n”.
54: Of Byron’s poems, Parisina alone is set in Italy and only Lara and Don Juan I are set in Spain.
55: Compare joke in 1.117.
56: See Don Juan, II, 201, 1: Haidee was Nature’s bride ...
57: Can refer only to the love-scenes between Juan and Haidee in Canto II.
59: Frances Jeffrey (1773-1850) editor of the Whig Edinburgh Review.
60: William Gifford (1756-1826) editor of the Tory Quarterly Review; Byron’s “literary father”.
To read it would be worse than an emetic—
But something must be done to cure the spleen,
And keep my name in capitals, like Kean.\textsuperscript{62}

THE END


\textsuperscript{62}: Edmund Kean (c.1789-1833) famous actor, admired by Byron.