

DON JUAN

Prose Preface

Written: Venice 1818 / 19

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THE PROSE PREFACE TO *DON JUAN*

edited by Peter Cochran

These documents were probably written late in 1818, before Byron began to realise the poem's potential, when he still thought of it as ending with the announcement of Juan's departure from Spain; perhaps before the addition of Canto I stanzas 2-5, which promise something more than another hundred-odd experimental stanzas in the *Beppo* manner.

Despite its unfitness to stand at the head of more than the early draft version of Canto I, the Prose Preface is a fascinating document, anticipating many of the poem's themes, and showing more of the political, poetical and personal animus that lies behind the Dedication.

There are two manuscripts, of which one is a false start, although neither is finished. Both are in the John Murray Archive / National Library of Scotland, to whom I am grateful. They are written on white laid paper, 85.2 x 126.2 cm (9½ x 14¼ ins) with, as watermark, a crowned lion or cat in the left-hand folium and "LV" in the right. This is the paper on which the fair copy of *Don Juan* Canto I is written, and at least sheets 16, 17 of the rough draft of Canto I, as well as sheets 2 to 8 of Canto II (see *MSYR Byron II*, xxviii-xxx). See n11 below for the suggestion that the note about Wordsworth's relationship with Lord Lonsdale, on the bottom of the first sheet of the fair copy, may have been written at the same time as this Preface.

The prose preface was first shown to Hobhouse by Charles Barry, Byron's banker at Genoa, at Byron's old house at Albaro, on October 3 1826. Hobhouse describes it as "A quiz on Wordsworth – [a] prose description of two travellers (he and I) at a venta in Portugal", and adds, "never saw it." He instructed Barry to burn several other compositions by Byron, but not, evidently, this one.

A possible "earliest date" for the Preface, the note on Lord Lonsdale, and the addition of the third "Dry-Bob" stanza 3 of the Dedication, to the first page of the fair copy, would be November 11 1818. Byron completed the fair copy on November 1, and November 11 was the date of the arrival in Venice of his solicitor John Hanson, who may have recounted to him the rumour which Southey was spreading, about him, Shelley, Mary Godwin, Claire Claremont, and the "League of Incest". November 11 is also the date of the letter to Hobhouse (BLJ VI 76) in which Byron first writes about the rumour. He may have been sufficiently incensed to feel that an additional sexual joke about Southey was called for, added stanza 3, then been inspired to draft the prose preface as well.

In the following transcriptions, <– – –> indicates an erasure by Byron, {– – –} an overlineation by Byron, and [– – –] an editorial addition to complete the sense of a phrase. It will be found that most of the overlineated additions add to the passage's animus against either Wordsworth or Southey.

FRAGMENT:

66)

In <the> some observations appended to a poem by Mr William Wordsworth – which I read a few days ago on my portmanteau (made by Mr. Eyre of Cockspur Street London) the reader is desired to suppose it to be recited by [“]the Captain of a Merchantman or small trading vessel – retired on a small annuity to a country town &c. &c.” I am prevented <by> {from} quoting further by the pertinacity with which the sheet adhered to the place where it had been pasted {so that I tore away the <leaf> {page} in

attempting to turn it – – – from such parts of the poetry as here and there <presented itself> had reserved itself from Mr. Eyre’s principal duty to his Customers – & presented <half its> one side of a sheet [to] the <proprietor> proprietor of the Valise – I <was> {was} enabled [to as]= certain that this poem is that which refers (as far as I could make it out) to the remorse of an unnatural mother for the destruction of an <unnatural> natural Child. – It begins with the description of <of> {a} thorn – represented as being so old – that it was difficult to conceive it’s ever having been young at all – and there is an accurate mensuration of a pond –

“I measured it from side to side
“Tis three feet long – & two feet wide. – – –

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Preface. –

In a note or preface (I forget which) by M^r. W. Wordsworth to a poem¹ – the Subject of which as far as it is intelligible is the remorse of an unnatural mother for the destruction of a natural child – the courteous Reader is desired to extend his {usual} courtesy so far as to suppose that the narrative is narrated by “the Captain of a Merchantman or small <bark> trading vessel lately retired upon a small annuity to some inland town – &^c. &^c.”² I quote from memory but conceive the above to be the sense – as far [as] there is Sense – {of the note or preface to} <of> the aforesaid poem – as far as it is a poem. – – The poem – or production – to which I allude is that which begins with – “There is a thorn – it is so old” – and then the Poet informs all who are willing to be informed – that it[s] age was such as to <pre> leave great difficulty in the conception of it’s ever having been young at all – which is as much as to say either that it was Coeval with the Creator of all things, or that it had been *born Old*, and was thus appropriately by antithesis devoted to the Commemoration of a child that died young. – – The pond near it is described <as being by> {according to} mensuration

“I measured it from side to side
“Tis three feet long, & two feet wide.³ –

Let me {be} excused from being particular in the detail of such things as this is the Sort of writing which has superseded and degraded Pope in the eyes of the discerning British Public {and this man is the kind of Poet who} in the same manner that Joanna Southcote⁴ found <a few> {many} thousand people to take her Dropsy for God Almighty re=impregnated, has found some hundreds of persons to misbelieve in his insanities, and hold him out as a kind of poetical Emanuel Swedenborg. – or Richard Brothers – or Parson Tozer⁵ – half Enthusiast and half Impostor. – This rustic Gongora and {vulgar} Marini⁶ of his Country’s taste has long abandoned a mind capable of better things to the production of such <things> {trash} as may support <what> {the} reveries which he would reduce into a System of prosaic raving <and> that is to supersede all that has hitherto by the best and wisest {of our fathers has} been deemed poetry; – and <so far as

1: *The Thorn*, in *Lyrical Ballads*.

2: B.’s paraphrase is incomplete, but accurate in tone. He need not have gone back to *Lyrical Ballads* to get the quotation; it is in Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XVII.

3: *The Thorn*, end of verse 3. Cut from later editions; also quoted by Coleridge.

4: For Joanna Southcote see below, III 852n, or *TVOJ*, 28, 8.

5: Emmanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish mystic; Brothers, a self-proclaimed English Messiah, in an asylum from 1795 to 1806; Tozer, a follower of Joanna Southcott: all figures of suspect religious enthusiasm.

6: Gongora and Marini were respectively Spanish and Italian poets of the Baroque, famous for the poor taste of their imagery.

he has been enabled to succeed – he may th> {for his success – and what mountebank will not find proselytes} (<as did> <from> {from} Count Cagliostro <and> {to} Madame Krudner)⁷ – he may partly thank his absurdity – & partly his having lent his <mortal parts as a political parasite⁸ to the unmeasured> {more downright} <prose as being unmeasured,> {and unmeasured prose} to the aid of a {political} party which <rewards liberally> acknowledges it's <own> {real} weaknesses – though fenced with <every art of despotism> {the whole <arm> armour of <Power> artificial Power} and defended by all the <arts> {ingenuity} of purchased Talent, in liberally rewarding <amongst> {with praise & pay} even the meanest of it's advocates. – – Amongst these {last in self=degradation,} this Thraso of poetry – has long been a Gnatho in Politics⁹ – and may be met <at d> in print {at some booksellers and} <at> <most> at several trunkmakers,¹⁰ and <always> {in person} at dinner at Lord Lonsdale's¹¹ <or pending on> {<appended to the name of Sir George Beaumont¹² – whose friendship Bread & patronage he acknowledges in sonnet & dedication>. – –}

The Reader who has acquiesced in M^r. W. Wordsworth's supposition that his "Misery oh Misery"¹³ <h> is related by the "Captain of a small & c.", is requested to suppose by a like <power> {exertion} of Imagination – that the following epic Narrative is told by a Spanish Gentleman in a village in the Sierra Morena on the road between Monasterio & Seville¹⁴ – sitting at the door of a Posada¹⁵ with the Curate of the hamlet on his right hand a Segar in his mouth, a Jug of Malaga <or> {or perhaps} "right Sherris"¹⁶ before him on a small table containing the relics of an Olla Podrida¹⁷ – the time Sunset; – <the> <and> at some distance a groupe of {black eyed} peasantry {are} dancing <Bolero> to the sound<s> of the flute of a {Portugese} Servant belonging to two <English> {foreign} travellers who have {an hour ago dismounted from their horses} to spend the night <here i/>on their way to the Capital of Andalusia¹⁸ – – <they are supposed> – of these one is attending to the story – and the other <attending> {having sauntered further is}

7: Count Cagliostro was an eighteenth-century Italian charlatan who made much money from an elixir of eternal youth; Madame Krudner (Krüdener) was a mystic preacher who inspired Tsar Alexander I to found the Holy Alliance.

8: *parasite*: see Dedication, B.'s note to 46.

9: Thraso is a braggart soldier and Gnatho a parasite in *The Eunuch*, a comedy by Terence.

10: Failed poetry often ended up as the lining of trunks – one of B.'s most frequently-favoured jokes.

11: Lord Lonsdale was Wordsworth's patron, who got him his job in the Excise. See Dedication, 46n. The following note is across the bottoms of sides 2 and 3 of Sheet 1 of the fair copy of *Don Juan I*: "Wordsworth's place may be in the customs – it is – I think in that or the excise – besides another at Lord Lonsdale's table – where this poetical Charlatan & political parasite licks up the crumbs with abandoned alacrity, the converted Jacobin having long subsided into the clownish Sycophant – <and despised retainer of the> of the worst prejudices of Aristocracy."

12: Sir George Beaumont was another friend and patron of Wordsworth.

13: A recurrent line in *The Thorn*.

14: The picture recollects B.'s journey across Spain with Hobhouse in 1809; on Monday July 24 1809 they stayed the night at Monasterio, and the Preface contains several echoes of Hobhouse's diary entry for the day: *To Monasterio (three leagues) with two mules and four horses – a barren plain, except the entrance into the town, where are hills covered with trees and a spot looking like a park – overtook two French prisoners and a Spanish spy going to be hanged at Seville – seventy years old. Arrived at seven o'clock. Saw 2,000 patriot troops, of a decent appearance. Got a tolerable lodging at a currier's house, where we had boiled chickens, as usual. Large woman bolted into the room and began to dance when Sanguinetti played his flute to a fandango tune.* (edited from BL.Add.Mss. 56527 12r.-v.)

15: A *Posada* is an inn.

16: For "right Sherris" (that is, sherry) see Shakespeare, *Henry IV* 2, IV iii, 85-122, where it is extravagantly praised by Falstaff. The association between *Don Juan* and Falstaff's brand of wit, genial depravity and yarn-spinning is one which B. would be happy for us to make. See I 996 and n, and notes to sts. 136-87.

17: An *Olla Podrida* is a kind of stew.

18: That is, Seville.

watching the beautiful <im> movements of a {tall} peasant Girl whose whole Soul is in her eyes & her heart in the dance¹⁹ <which she> of which she is the Magnet <to the feelings that vibrate round her> {to ten thousand feelings that vibrate} <round her whose every gesture inspires a corresponding emotion> {with her Own}. – – – – = <At a little distance> {Not far off a} <groupe> {knot} of French prisoners²⁰ are contending with each other at the grated <wind> lattice of their temporary confinement – for a view of the <festive> twilight festival – the two foremost {are} a couple of hussars, one of whom has a bandage on his forehead yet stained with the blood of a Sabre cut <in a> {received in the} recent skirmish which deprived him of his <{lawless} freedom> lawless freedom; – his eyes sparkle <with pleasure> in unison and his <fingl> fingers beat time against the bars of his prison to the {sound of the} Fandango which is fleeting before him. – – – Our friend the Story=teller²¹ – at some distance with a small {elderly} audience is supposed to tell his story without being much moved by the <hil> musical hilarity <in his en> at the other end of the village Green. – The Reader is further requested to suppose him (to account for his knowledge of English –)– either an Englishman settled in Spain – or a Spaniard who had travelled in England – perhaps one of the Liberals who have subsequently been so liberally rewarded by Ferdinand of grateful memory – for his restoration.²² – Having supposed as much of this as the utter impossibility of such a supposition will admit – the reader is requested to extend his supposed power of supposing so far as to conceive that the dedication <of> to M^r. Southey – & several stanzas of the poem itself are interpolated by the English Editor.²³ – He may also imagine <that the> {various} causes for the tenor of the dedication. It may be presumed to {be} the production of a present Whig who after being bred a transubstantial Tory – apostatized in an unguarded moment – & incensed at having got nothing by the exchange has in utter envy of the better success of the Author of Walter Tyler²⁴ – vented his <renegado> {renegado} rancour on that immaculate person <of> {for} whose {future} immortality & {present} purity we have the best authority in his own {repeated} assurances, – <not only by name to various pamphlets but without a name in the> or it may be supposed the work of a rival poet obscured <by> if not by the present {ready} popularity of Mr. Southey – <which <<xxxx>> such as it is was has been more owing to his contributions <<some>> to the Quarterly Review²⁵ and the influence of that Journal – than to his poetical and moral which will be greatly surprised to fin> yet by the Postobits²⁶ <which he has> {he has granted} upon Posterity {& usurious self=applause} in which he has anticipated with some profusion perhaps the opinion of future ages who are always more enlightened than Contemporaries – <in> more especially in the eyes of those whose <have a greater opinion of the> {figure in their own times has been} disproportioned to their deserts. – What M^r. Southey's deserts are – no one knows better than Mr. Southey

19: Compare below, III st. 30 and ll.774-8: but compare also *CHP I*, sts. 54-9.

20: The presence of French p.o.w.s places the story-telling towards the end of the Peninsular War (1809-14). See Hobhouse's diary entry, quoted in n14 above.

21: The storyteller: for B.'s references to this supposed person, see I 181-92, sts. 51-3, ll.521, 537, 543-4, and so on. It is easy to confuse the voice of the supposed narrator with that of the poet.

22: Overtly ironic. Ferdinand VII of Spain was the grossest of the absolutists restored by Wellington in 1814 and by Castlereagh at Vienna.

23: For the real writer to pose transparently as the editor of another man's work was very common. Pope's *The Dunciad*, Fielding's *Journey from this World to the Next* and Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (later version) are examples. B. is here facetious at the expense of the convention; but part of the effect of Canto I does depend on the reader experiencing such a confusion.

24: *Wat* (not *Walter*) *Tyler* was a revolutionary tragedy about the Peasants' Revolt, written by Southey in 1794, forgotten by him, and then pirated in 1817, by which time he was an arch-conservative.

25: *The Quarterly Review* was a Tory journal, published by John Murray, B.'s own publisher. See Dedication, B.'s note to st. 12; also I 1687.

26: For *postobits*, see I 824 and 1000.

– all his later writings have <been> displayed the writhing of a {weakly} human creature conscious of <his> {owing it's²⁷ worldly elevation to it's} own debasement {(like a man who has made a fortune by the Slave=trade, or the {{retired}} keeper of a Gaming <or other> {house} or Brothel) and struggling convulsively to deceive others without the power of lying to himself. – But to resume – the dedication may be further supposed to be produced by some<person>{one} who may have a <personal> cause of aversion from the said Southey – for some personal reason – perhaps a gross calumny²⁸ invented or circulated by this Pantisocratic²⁹ apostle of Apostacy³⁰ – who</se> is sometimes {as} unguarded in his assertions <and lib ill bred> {as atrocious} in <his> his conjectures and feeds <his> the cravings of his wretched Vanity disappointed in it's nobler hopes – & reduced to prey upon such {snatches of} fame as his contributions to the Quarterly Review – and the consequent praise with which a powerful Journal repays <the lowest of it> it's assistants can afford him – by the abuse of <whatever> {whosoever} may be more consistent – or more successful than himself, – and the provincial gang of scribblers gathered round him.³¹ – – <Amongst these last – Coleridge³² is not the least notorious & were it not for>

27: For the reduction of the enemy's gender from male to neuter, see Dedication, sts. 12-16.

28: The *gross calumny* was that B., Shelley, Mary Shelley and Clare Clairmont had while in Switzerland in 1816 lived in a "League of Incest": see BLJ VI 76, VI 83, and VII 202.

29: *Pantisocracy* was the utopian community which the youthful Southey and Coleridge had planned in the 1790s to set up in America. B. always maintained (erroneously) that it involved spouse-sharing principles. See below, III sts. 93-5 and notes.

30: B. had known and been friendly with Coleridge, so, even though he was convinced that Coleridge was also responsible for spreading the "Incest" tale (see BLJ VI 83) the start of the passage critical of him is cut. But see Dedication 13-16, I 728, and below, III 837-40.

31: There are several echoes of this abusive passage in Southey's later writing about B., even though Southey could not in theory have known it. For example, he writes in the Preface to *A Vision of Judgement* of "men who, hating that revealed religion which all their efforts and bravadoes, they are unable entirely to disbelieve ..." (see passage before 26n above) and in a letter to *The Courier* of January 11 1822, he said, "I have never manufactured furniture for the brothel ..." Coincidence may operate here; but Southey visited Murray's when in London, and on November 24 1818 (BLJ VI 83) B. gave Murray *carte blanche* to tell Southey exactly what he thought of him: "tell him what I say from me, and everyone else you please."

32: Coleridge was in B.'s eyes the only one of the Lakers with talent. Perhaps it was his unwillingness to insult Coleridge, too, which made him cease writing.