BYRON AND NIETZSCHE:
NIHILISTIC SEMIOTICS OR TRUTHFUL FICTION?

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The three terms of this volume's theme—reality, fiction and madness—are drawn together in relation to Romantic writing by Ross Woodman in an influential essay entitled 'Wordsworth's Crazed Bedouin: *The Prelude* and the Fate of Madness'.[1] At the centre of this essay is a 'de-Manian' account of figurative language, which is radically sundered from exterior realities and associated with deception—a position that de Man traces back to Nietzsche.[2] As Woodman puts it: 'Every exertion of the imagination, no matter how slight, that moves the mind away from a "faithful copy" in the direction of the figurative is, in some sense, an act of deception'.[3] According to Woodman, on the basis of this apparently commonsensical premise—which leads him to speak about the 'nihilism that constitutes metaphor'—Wordsworth's descriptions of 'celestial light' and a 'visionary gleam' are figurative and therefore a 'spell', 'conjuration' or 'delusion'.[4] And for Woodman, if at any point 'the figural' is taken to be 'the actual', the result is not only blindness but madness.[5] What in general I wish to do in this chapter is to question whether this taken-for-granted opposition between fiction and reality is as straightforward or black and white as Woodman assumes, and to explore in relation to Byron's poetry the paradoxical counter-possibility that fiction may disclose, even as it diverges from, the real. In other words, I wish to posit the possibility of a third way between Woodman's 'either-or' alternatives, which recognizes—in Dante's phrasing—a

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[1] 'Wordsworth's Crazed Bedouin: *The Prelude* and the Fate of Madness', in *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 27:1 (1988), 3-29.

[2] See Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), chapter 5.

[3] 'Wordsworth's Crazed Bedouin', 14.

[4] Ibid., 6-8.

[5] Ibid., 8.

'truth that has the face of a lie' ('un ver c'ha faccia di menzogna').[6] There are two reasons for wanting to conduct this inquiry in relation to the poetry of Byron: on the one hand, because, especially in *Don Juan*, Byron is tormented by and gaily plays with but also countenances the possibility of more constructively traversing the gap between language and reality; and on the other hand, because we have been encouraged by critics such as Jerome McGann and Charles LaChance to read Byron as a proto-Nietzschean nihilist on account of his radical linguistic scepticism.[7] Against this latter view I would like to suggest, firstly, that one can accept the Nietzschean claim that there are no facts 'only interpretations',[8] and that language subsists in pursuit of an ever-escaping reality without this necessarily entailing the adoption of a nihilistic stance; and, secondly, that, in spite of its much vaunted influence upon Nietzsche, Byron's poetry appears to be closer to this less nihilistic position, which might be loosely characterized as a posture of 'hopeful fallibilism'.[9]

The chapter is made up of two principal parts: it begins with a contextualizing theoretical discussion of Nietzsche's semiotic nihilism; this is then contrasted in the following section with Byron's seemingly congruent views on fiction and reality. Broadly, what emerges from the comparison of these two thinkers is that Byron appears to be paradoxically both more sceptical and more trusting than Nietzsche, in that the former remains open to possibilities that the latter dogmatically closes off.

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[6] *Inferno*, XVI, 124.

[7] See McGann, *Byron and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 136, 168, 185; and LaChance, 'Naïve and Knowledgeable Nihilism in Byron's Gothic Verse', in *Papers on Language and Literature*, vol. 32 (1996), 339–68; 'Nihilism, Love, and Genre in *Don Juan*', in *Keats-Shelley Review*, vol. 11 (1997), 141-66; '*Don Juan*: "a problem, like all things"', in *Papers on Language and Literature*, vol. 34:3 (1998), 273-301; and 'Byron's Bad English', in *English* (2001) vol. 50: 197, 111-125.

[8] 'No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations'. *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1974), 267.

[9] The phrase is borrowed from Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 94.

I

NIHILISTIC SEMIOTICS

In the final chapter of Anne Mellor's *English Romantic Irony*—entitled 'A Conclusion in Which Nothing Is Concluded'—she offers an extended quotation from Nietzsche's *Will to Power*, which she says 'might well serve as an epigraph to [her] study of romantic irony',[10] the most masterful examples of which in English, she claims, are the mature works of Byron.[11] What the quotation from Nietzsche affirms is the eternal chaos of random flux that is, for him, the ultimate reality. Here is the first part of it:

> This world: a monster of energy, without beginning, without end; […] a firm, iron magnitude of force that does not grow bigger or smaller, that does not expend itself but only transforms itself; […] enclosed by 'nothingness' as by a boundary; […] a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back, with tremendous years of recurrence, with an ebb and a flood of its forms; out of the simplest forms striving toward the most complex, out of the stillest, most rigid, coldest forms striving toward the hottest, most turbulent, most self-contradictory, and then again returning home to the simple out of this abundance, out of the play of contradictions back to the joy of concord, still affirming itself in this uniformity of its courses and its years, blessing itself as that which must return eternally, as a becoming that knows no satiety, no disgust, no weariness: this, my Dionysian world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying, this mystery world of the twofold voluptuous delight, my 'beyond good and evil', without goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal […].[12]

This comparison with Nietzsche is of general relevance to Mellor's study—which she retrospectively describes as a book about 'the arbitrariness of the universe'—because, she avers, the romantic ironist shares with the existentialist 'an ontological vision of the universe as chaotic and incomprehensible'.[13] Such comparisons are common in Byron studies, and are of course given added force by Nietzsche's own admiration for the poet, whom he referred to as 'mein englischer Lieblingsdichter'.[14] But how cogent are they?

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[10] Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 185.
[11] Ibid., 31.
[12] *The Will to Power*, 550.
[13] *English Romantic Irony*, 185 and 183.
[14] Letter to Franziska and Elisabeth Nietzsche, December 1862, in *Nietzsche Briefwechsel: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, I, 1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1975), 228.

And do they clarify or distort the poet's stance—assuming that he has one—on fiction and reality? To answer such questions, it will be helpful to remind ourselves of Nietzsche's views on the matter.

Wiping away the Horizon

Perhaps the best route into this labyrinthine topic is by way of Nietzsche's first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, which appeared in 1872, a few months before he completed his *Manfred-Meditation*, a duet for piano he described a 'counter-overture' to Schumann's *Manfred*, and eleven years after writing the essay 'Ueber die dramatischen Dichtungen Byrons', a short study of Byron's dramatic works (Nietzsche also composed settings for two of Byron's *Hebrew Melodies*, 'Sonne des Schlaflosen' and 'O weint um sie' in 1865 and 1866, as well as an undated piece for piano entitled *Skizze zu Byron's 'Foscari'*).[15] At the heart of *The Birth of Tragedy*—if it could be said to have a heart—is the now-familiar opposition, which is somewhat re-conceived in Nietzsche's later writings, between the Greek deities Apollo and Dionysus, and the drives or cosmic principles with which they are aligned. Thus, on the one hand, the Apollonian sphere is associated with clarity, daylight, order, restraint, individuated forms and rationality, whilst on the other hand, the Dionysian sphere—which, as William Desmond observes, involves 'a mingling of darkness and festivity'[16]—is associated with chaos, nighttime, intoxication, excess, unbridled energy and irrationality.[17] The opposition between these two forces—which, according to Nietzsche, 'exist side by side, mostly in open conflict'[18]—doesn't simply provide the philosopher with the foundations for a theory of art; it is also, for Nietzsche,

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[15] For a general introductory account of Byron's influence on Nietzsche, see David S. Thatcher, 'Nietzsche and Byron', in *Nietzsche-Studien*, vol. 3 (1974), 130-151.

[16] *Art, Origins, Otherness: Between Philosophy and Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 166.

[17] In a rather brutal epistolary response to Nietzsche's *Manfred-Meditation*, the composer and conductor Hans von Bülow remarked: 'I could not discover any trace of the Apollonian elements, and as for the Dionysian, to be frank, I was reminded more of the morning after a bacchanalian orgy than of the orgy itself'. 24 July 1872, in *Nietzsche Briefwechsel*, II, 3 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978), 51 [my translation].

[18] *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 14.

a way of explaining how we see—or misperceive—the world and a key to the ultimate nature of reality. This is because, as Nietzsche develops the opposition—in ways that are clearly influenced by Schopenhauer's distinction between the indirect 'representations' of the world and our direct encounter of its essence as 'will'—the sphere of Apollo is associated with the world of appearances or 'lovely semblance', whereas the sphere of Dionysius is associated with 'that which truly exists'.[19] In contrast to what we might expect, however, it is the world of our everyday 'waking' vision that corresponds to and constitutes the Apollonian realm of illusory appearances, and it is only in moments of ecstasy, intoxication and dreaming that we are vouchsafed glimpses of the reality they veil.[20] But what, for Nietzsche, is the nature of this reality?

Although it might at first seem in affirming the existence of an ultimate reality that is both veiled and obscurely revealed by the realm of appearances that Nietzsche is aligning himself with a Platonic tradition, it is in fact the 'weeping' vision of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus to whom Nietzsche's conception of reality in indebted. Indeed, Nietzsche's philosophy is in certain respects radically opposed to a Platonic vision, in that it claims the ultimate reality is not otherworldly ideal forms but, rather, the flux of this-worldly life. More specifically, what Nietzsche affirms in accord with Heraclitus—and in contradistinction to the idealism of Plato—is that 'becoming' and not 'being' is the ultimate reality, since for Nietzsche what lies behind the mirage of Apollonian appearances is the eternal stream of random forces. (It is this vision of eternal and chaotic flux that Mellor invokes as the retrospective epigraph to *English Romantic Irony*.) This 'Heraclitian' vision of eternal fluctuation, which for Nietzsche

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[19] Ibid., 15.

[20] Whilst one might profitably compare Nietzsche's dual perspective with the 'twilight' vision of Keats's speaker in 'Ode to a Nightingale', as for example Mark Sandy has done (see *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005)), Nietzsche is rather more settled in his views about the nature of reality than Keats's speaker; for what is tentatively posited as a possibility in the latter's concluding questions—namely, that our quotidian consciousness is a form of sleep and that it is in the ekstasis of Dionysian reverie that we awake and the essence of things is disclosed—is the taken-for-granted metaphysical assumption underlying the former's paradigm.

constitutes the ultimate reality, helps us to clarify his corollary conception of Apollonian illusion; for if 'becoming' and not 'being' is what 'truly exists', the reifying tendencies of language and logic—and by extension quotidian consciousness too—will falsify even as they seek to represent the real. It is important to recognize how radical Nietzsche's critique is in this respect, which has in its sights the entire tradition of western metaphysics, science and rationality as such, which he refers to as 'the false coinage of four millennia'.[21]

In crude outline, what Nietzsche vehemently objected to was the conception of reason as a sort of objective 'immaculate perception',[22] which was capable of providing access to 'that which is'. Instead, in Nietzsche's view, reason and the corollary 'rope ladder of logic' construct and keep us in a 'thoroughly artificial' and 'falsified world'.[23] This is because, as Nietzsche argues with extraordinary percipience, classical logic and the conceptual categories upon which reason traditionally depends (subject, object, being, substance etc.) superimpose onto the flux of raw becoming that is reality an artificial schema with which it has no intrinsic connection. Thus logic refashions the world after its own image and seduces us into believing that its boundaries are 'the boundaries of things'; whereas logic, as Nietzsche strenuously insists, applies only to 'fictitious entities that we have created'.[24] Likewise language—whose metaphoricity or radical alterity to exterior realities we are inclined to forget[25]—doesn't neutrally mirror stable and individuated phenomena that pre-exist as such in reality; rather, it *produces* the

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[21] *Ecce Homo*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1979), 92. Nietzsche's metonymy for these antinomies of the Dionysian is 'Socratism' or the 'theoretical man', whom he accuses of wishing to 'change everything into something rational, logical and thinkable'. See Eugen Fink, *Nietzsche's Philosophy*, trans. Goetz Richter (London: Continuum, 2003), 21.

[22] *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 146.

[23] *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Washington: Regency Gateway, 1962), 69; *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), 25.

[24] *The Will to Power*, 280.

[25] 'Truths are illusions we have forgotten are illusions, worn-out metaphors now impotent to stir the senses, coins which have lost their faces and are considered now metal rather than currency' ('On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense', in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (New Jersey: Humanities Press International Inc., 1979), 81).

stabilities to which it refers. To put this another way: since language is 'other than the thing itself', and ascribes a stability to things that only 'are' in a state of becoming, it posits entities that do not exist. As Nietzsche has it: 'The human intellect has […] exported its erroneous propositions into reality' and reason has falsified the evidence of our senses.[26] So, instead of providing us with access to the way things are, reason, logic and 'daylight' consciousness, for Nietzsche, *obscure* from us the nature of things. He writes: 'we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we talk of trees, colours, snow, and flowers; and yet we posses nothing but metaphors for things— metaphors which might correspond in no way to the original entities'.[27] (I shall return to the door that is left ajar by this 'might' in the following section, where I consider the dogmatic character of Nietzsche's conclusions.) Religion also, obviously, for Nietzsche, obscures the nature of that which is, in its fabrication of what he refers to as 'imaginary causes'—such as 'God', 'soul' and 'spirit' etc.—and a corollary set of 'imaginary effects'—such as 'sin', 'redemption' and 'grace' etc.[28] Most potently, though, it is in positing a superordinate reality, beyond the chaos of the material realm, which serves as a metaphysical anesthetic as well as a '*moral-optical* illusion', that religion—and especially Christianity—devalues and entices us to turn away from 'the only world there is'.[29]

In Nietzsche's view, the distortions of reality by logic and reason are purposive and born of physiological necessity;[30] they are, that is, the 'expedient falsifications' of the will-to-power, which colours and structures our perception of reality—filtering data according to our needs and adjusting 'the world for utilitarian ends'.[31] (On these grounds, Nietzsche rejects the conception of 'disinterested' reason too; indeed, for him, to the

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[26] *Human all too Human*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 16.
[27] 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense', 82-3.
[28] *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1968), 137.
[29] Ibid., 49.
[30] 'We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we can live—by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith nobody now could endure life' (*The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 177).
[31] *The Will to Power*, 314.

contrary, reason's forging of an artificial world—positing stabilities and boundaries where they don't exist—is an evolutionary strategy, engendered by the will-to-power, which is vital to the functioning and preservation of the species.) Hence, there is an analogy in Nietzsche's philosophy between the ultimate 'Dionysian' nature of reality, with its flux of becoming without 'being' or *telos*, behind the mirage of Apollonian forms, and the seething interior reality of the self, which behind the orderings of conscious experience is constituted by the agonistic emergence of its drives, which subsist in a state of anarchic becoming.[32] (Nietzsche's philosophy in this respect clearly prefigures Freud's account of the unconscious.) For this reason, Nietzsche rejects the conception of a unified self—which would falsify this constitutive condition of becoming—in place of which he posits 'the subject as multiplicity',[33] the correlative of which is a perspectival epistemology; for if consciousness, as Nietzsche contends, is covertly determined by the will-to-power, and if the drives that constitute this exist in a chaos of conflictual becoming, then our experience of reality will be similarly unsettled and a transient, subjective reflection of our drives. (It is clearly a short step from the protean pluralities of Nietzsche's subject to the nomadically diffused and retroactively projected 'assemblages' of Deleuze.) It is on account of this perspectival epistemology, which views the self as an abysmally warring plurality, along with the parallel 'Dionysian' conception of reality, as an eternal flux of chaotic becoming, that Nietzsche can venture some of his most notorious and extravagant claims: there are no facts 'only interpretations'[34] or 'What can be thought of must certainly be a fiction'[35]—since, for Nietzsche, consciousness is a self-stymying mode of engagement, and there is no stability or singularity either to the

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[32] 'A single individual contains within him a vast confusion of contradictory valuations and consequently contradictory drives. […] Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm' (ibid., 149; 267).
[33] Ibid., 270.
[34] *Op. cit.*
[35] *The Will to Power*, 291.

perceiving subject or to the ultimate nature of the real. A lucid summary of this aspect of Nietzsche's thought has been provided by Eugen Fink:

> Nietzsche's thesis is this: in truth there are no things, there are no substances, there is no 'being'. There is only the wavering flood of life, only the stream of becoming and the incessant up and down of its waves. Nothing endures, stays and persists and all is in flux. But our cognition forges its reality and changes the flow falsely into the being of enduring things which endure in the change and which persist during the change of their states. The 'thing' or the substance is a fiction. It is a structure created by the will to power which violates the reality. It arrests, forges and grasps becoming and subjects it to the concept. It subsequently forgets this act of violence to the point where it believes to have grasped reality itself in the created concepts of substance and causality. Man believes in the things but none exists. He believes in being, but being is his own creation and his own net of concepts which he casts repeatedly into the stream of becoming.[36]

Before drawing some conclusions from this philosophical excursus and considering their relevance to Byron's practice, a brief word about Nietzsche's habit of self-contradiction is in order—partly since it raises certain obvious objections, but also, more importantly, because it appears to play a role in his critique of 'Socratism'. In what sense is this so?

Thinking against Thinking

Whilst various commentators, such as Walter Kaufmann and Ted Sadler, have attempted to 'straighten out' Nietzsche's habit of self-contradiction—by arguing in different ways that the contradiction is only apparent[37]—a more compelling account of the matter has been recently put forward by David Deane, in light of poststructuralist re-readings of Nietzsche.[38] In contrast to Kaufmann and Sadler, Deane doesn't attempt to play down or 'resolve' the glaring and pervasive contradictions in Nietzsche's work; instead, he argues that they are a performatively constituted attempt to subvert the logical premises of the philosophical enterprise, which the philosopher must utilize in order to articulate his

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[36] *Nietzsche's Philosophy*, 148.
[37] Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1950); Sadler, *Nietzsche: Truth and Redemption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
[38] *Nietzsche and Theology: Nietzschean Thought in Christological Anthropology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

protest against them. As Adorno observes—who, like Nietzsche, saw the need for the critique of reason to be *performed* as well as argumentatively advanced—a thinker must stand 'inside and outside' things, engaging in both immanent and transcendent criticism.[39] The most prominent of Nietzsche's contradictory positions relates to his statements on the subject of truth, for—in his usual demure fashion—he asserts as a truth that there is in fact no such thing as truth. According to Deane, what we can see in Nietzsche's contradictory stance on truth is, in the first place, a subversive flouting of the firmest of philosophy's foundational principles—namely, the law of non-contradiction (which, we might note, Heraclitus disputed, contending that the same thing can be both X and not-X[40])—as a way of performatively calling into question the adequacy of logical reasoning as a means of describing the nature of the real. As Nietzsche points out in *The Will to Power*, the 'conceptual ban on contradiction' only applies to 'fictional entities' within the artificial realm of logic; it doesn't proceed from and is therefore alien to the 'actual world'.[41] This is a vital point to grasp, since the reign of logic—as an arbiter of the thinkable or true—often goes unquestioned. Indeed, there is a tendency to assume that a violation of logic—such as the law of non-contradiction—necessarily constitutes a divergence from the truth. Yet, if, as Nietzsche forcibly contends, logic is an artificial second-order construct that is superimposed upon a reality with which it has no innate connection, then a transgression of logic may at times be paradoxically necessary in order to be *faithful* to reality. In the second place, we can also discern in Nietzsche's practice of self-contradiction the performative refusal of a stable or unified conception of the self. The purpose of this is, once again, to challenge the taken-for-granted premises of the philosophical enterprise, by unsystematically adopting a plurality of perspectives as a way of resisting systematization and protesting against 'systematic' thinking as such. As

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[39] *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jepfcott (New York: Verso, 1978), 91.
[40] The refusal to admit the impossibility of contraries is attributed to Heraclitus by Aristotle in *Topics*, VIII, 5 and *Physics*, I, 2.
[41] *The Will to Power*, 280.

Nietzsche writes in *Twilight of the Idols*: 'I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity'.[42] At the same time, however, his practice of self-contradiction is a way of performatively reinforcing at the level of style his perspectival epistemology and conception of the subject as a multiplicity or conflictually fluctuating assemblage of drives. What can we conclude, then, about Nietzsche's attitude towards reality and fiction?

Simplifying things considerably, my suggestion would be this. For Nietzsche, there are no facts 'only interpretations'. This is because, on the one hand, the ultimate and only reality—which he establishes by way of a mystically intuited 'self-legitimating subjective declaration'[43]—is an exuberant chaos of arbitrary becoming, which is fixed and falsified by the conceptual categories of classical logic; and, on the other hand, because the subject is similarly composed of an abyssal flux of competing drives that furtively condition our experience of the world, which results in a radically 'pluralized' self and a shifting perspectival vision. (Characteristically attempting to eat his cake and have it, Nietzsche in both cases identifies the ultimate nature of reality, whilst claiming that this reality is obscured from view by a corner around which we cannot peer.) Fiction, for Nietzsche, is thus primarily associated with the 'Socratic' modalities of logic and reason as well as the quotidian consciousness they foster. Religion, again, is an analogous case, since in Nietzsche's view, none of the things of which it speaks—God, heaven, sin etc.—has any corresponding reality. They belong, instead, to a world that has been '*lyingly added*' to that which is.[44] The problem with these 'un-Dionysian' tendencies—which, although they are connivances of the will-to-power, tame the chaotic flux of the real and so, as a utilitarian expedient, are an evolutionary benefit to the species—is that they lead us to

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[42] *Twilight of the Idols*, 35. For an alternative reading of this matter, see John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[43] Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 61.

[44] *Twilight of the Idols*, 36.

superimpose *onto* reality the blueprint for a set of fictitious entities, which camouflages as it purports to *describe* reality. (This dichotomized vision is qualified slightly by Nietzsche's view of art, which—at some points in his thinking at least, under the influence of Schopenhauer and Wagner—allows that music and classical Greek tragedy may disclose something of reality's abyssal becoming.)

In short, what Nietzsche's philosophy seeks to do is to expose the underlying, unwelcome reality—namely, the will-to-power and the Dionysian lava of becoming—that is obscured by the very conceptual apparatus with which we attempt to 'make sense of' the world. Typically, he advances this critique in a prophetic and evangelical fashion—presenting himself both as 'dynamite' and a physician of the soul—seeking fundamentally to alter our ways of thinking and living, which in Nietzsche's view are radically out of kilter with reality. At the same time, though, he enacts this critique at the level of style, reinforcing his protest against traditional philosophical procedures and their tendency to proscribe the nature of the real, by stylistically resisting systematization and performatively establishing a plural and self-contradictory subject. The positive reasons that motivate this extraordinarily sweeping critique have been adroitly summarized by Fink as follows:

> Nietzsche admits that he despises the system. […] He is rather committed to the proposition that the enigmatic character of reality cannot be captured in a system and that life is always more puzzling, perplexing, ambiguous and mysterious than any human would know.[45]

How relevant are these views to Byron's poetry? Nietzsche, as we know, found something of the 'azure isolation' of the superman[46] in Byron's works and claimed an

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[45] *Nietzsche's Philosophy*, 135.

[46] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.2, trans., H. Knight et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 241.

intimate kinship with Manfred: 'I have found all these abysses in myself', he wrote.[47] But

how consonant are their views on reality and fiction?

II
THE TRUTH IN MASQUERADE

Clearly, this is an enormous topic and I can only hope in a cursory fashion to highlight

certain aspects of it here. For reasons of space, my comments will be largely confined to

Don Juan, since the poem contains Byron's most sustained and thoughtful exploration of

the relationship between fiction and reality. Let us consider a well-known passage on the

subject.

    Also observe, that, like the great Lord Coke
       (See Littleton), whene'er I have express'd
    Opinions two, which at first sight may look
       Twin opposites, the second is the best.
    Perhaps I have a third, too, in a nook,
       Or none at all—which seems a sorry jest:
    But if a writer should be quite consistent,
    How could he possibly show things existent?

    If people contradict themselves, can I
       Help contradicting them, and every body,
    Even my veracious self?—But that's a lie:
       I never did so, never will—how should I?
    He who doubts all things nothing can deny:
       Truth's fountains may be clear—her streams are muddy,
    And cut through such canals of contradiction,
    That she must often navigate o'er fiction.

    Apologue, fable, poesy, and parable,
       Are false, but may be render'd also true,
    By those who sow them in a land that's arable.
       'Tis wonderful what fable will not do!
    'Tis said it makes reality more bearable:
       But what's reality? Who has its clue?
    Philosophy? No: she too much rejects.
    Religion? *Yes*; but which of all her sects?

    Some millions must be wrong, that's pretty clear;
       Perhaps it may turn out that all were right.

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[47] *Ecce Homo*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 91.

> God help us! Since we have need on our career
>   To keep our holy beacons always bright,
> 'Tis time that some new prophet should appear,
>   Or *old* indulge man with a second sight.
> Opinions wear out in some thousand years,
> Without a small refreshment from the spheres. (XV, 87-90)

Perhaps the most salient parallel with Nietzsche's thought to emerge in these stanzas is the wonderfully neat encapsulation of the poet's opposition to systematization: 'if a writer should be consistent, / How could he possibly show things existent?' In this, Byron appears like Nietzsche to allude to an incommensurability between our customary communicative forms and the realities to which they aspire to refer. This is, he suggests, in accord with Nietzsche, because the former involves—and bestows upon its objects—a stability, coherence or something else of its own that betrays what it seeks to represent. This sense of a fugitive, ineffable reality that eludes our pursuit like a will-o'-the wisp is extended by Byron to the subject as well:

> If people contradict themselves, can I
>   Help contradicting them, and every body,
> Even my veracious self?—But that's a lie:
>   I never did so, never will—how should I?
> He who doubts all things nothing can deny […].

Reading these lines feels a little like chasing one's hat in the wind, but what it seems to claiming—in answer to the rhetorical question 'how should I?'—is that it's impossible for the speaker to contradict himself since that self, in its sceptically constituted openness, cannot be identified with any single perspective. Yet the difficulty it gives us in keeping up with its logic appears to be part of the meaning too; for, again, as we found in the writings of Nietzsche, there is a performative dimension to the point being made. In Byron's case, the lines won't allow us to settle—and thus refuse to offer us any finality of sense or perspective—as they repeatedly and comically overthrow their own claims ('the second is best. / Perhaps I have a third […] / Or none at all'). Like a child refusing to

put on its coat, the lines twist and squirm, syntactically turning against themselves with their 'but's and 'yet's, which register a sense of something else left out, a contrary perspective that's also true, an imported surplus or straying of speech, which the speaker doesn't return to and correct, but seeks to adjust in going forward, like a kind of linear palimpsest. Indeed, the poet's writing has a 'nomadic' quality, in that it serially establishes provisional settlements—as if to say, 'This isn't quite it, but it will do for now'. (The implied corollary of Byron's objection to being 'quite consistent'—which he laments carries us *away* from correspondence—is that in order to represent 'things existent', the writer must be mobile, multiple or self-contradictory.) Typically, however, it isn't a vagrancy that effaces its past; rather, it is a sort of 'apophatic' mobility, which sets its assertions retrospectively 'under erasure' and seeks—like the 'impossible' geometries of orthodox icons, which turn too many faces towards the viewer—to expose its object from divergent perspectives and capture dimensions that cannot be simultaneously seen.[48] A couple of further examples may help.

What I mean in saying that Byron's poetry has an 'apophatic' quality is that it attempts to describe things by saying what they are not or paradoxically by *staging the failure* of description—like the cognate trope of paralipsis ('I shan't say anything about the attention he has been lavishing on the port'), in which one slyly performs something in claiming to refrain from it. Take, for example, the following stanza from *Childe Harold* III:

> Could I embody and unbosom now
> That which is most within me,—could I wreak
> My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw

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[48] One might perhaps note a preliminary distinction between Byron and Nietzsche in terms of their divergent conceptions of 'mobility'; for whereas Byron prefers to conceive of this sort of comportment as a moving on 'without *losing* the past' (note to *Don Juan*, XVI, 97), Nietzsche seems to identify with an 'annihilating' conception. Speaking of the character of European nihilism, he observes: 'the abundance of disparate impressions greater than ever: cosmopolitanism in foods, literatures, newspapers, forms, tastes, even landscapes. The tempo of this influx *prestissimo*; the impressions erase each other; one instinctively resists taking in anything, taking anything deeply, to "digest" anything […]' (*The Will to Power*, 47).

> Soul—heart—mind—passions—feelings—strong or weak—
> All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
> Bear, know, feel—and yet breathe—into *one* word,
> And that one word were Lightning, I would speak;
> But as it is, I live and die unheard,
> With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword. (92)

Here, the speaker's subjunctive lamenting of his inarticulacy involves a sort of disingenuously performative optative, in that the importunate stammering of its attempt to express what he *would* have said—which movingly wrings out that painfully proliferating list of objects, and which in its strained intensity seems to forget that it's a subjunctive—does communicate *some* idea of what is 'most within', in declaring that he won't speak about it.

To take another, slightly less dramatic example: Byron says of the women in the harem in Canto VI of *Don Juan* that they are 'Like water-lilies floating down a rill' (33), but then he corrects himself and adds, '(Or rather lake, for rills do not run slowly)'; though the correction alone doesn't capture it either, as lakes don't really 'run' at all; and the corrected phrase isn't devoid of significance. Thus, evoking the movement seems to require both the saying and *unsaying* together, so that signification doesn't take place 'punctually' at the level of the phrase, but rather dialectically *between* the phrases. Furthermore, this 'apophatic' strategy is performatively reinforced in the closing couplet, as the mosaic rhyme ('not run slowly' / 'melancholy') coerces us into a rhythmically regimented reading that imitates and gives us some sort of analogous experience of the movement it describes.

In these examples, Byron's writing, like Nietzsche's, appears to bear witness to 'the enigmatic character of reality' that cannot be captured in any logical or 'consistent' system, and which requires subversive, self-contradictory strategies—and a willingness to make language itself stammer—in order to represent 'things existent'. But in adopting such strategies, which suggest something other than the 'tiger's spring' is involved in the

poet's attempt to capture a likeness, Byron's writing seems also to evince a sense of hopeful wagering that its approximations may be efficacious—that the 'tints' of words, as he writes elsewhere in *Don Juan*, 'May serve perhaps as outlines or slight hints' (VI, 109).

Returning to the poet's ruminations on the subject of truth and fiction: what we can additionally see in these foregoing lines is the emergence of an involuted self-reflexivity or a sort of 'ingrowing' textuality, as the poem becomes the focus of its own meditations ('Even my veracious self?—But that's a lie'). Yet, rather than suspending the poet's reflections on the problem of showing 'things existent', the involuted fold of its self-reflexivity stages a discreet unsettling of the conventional opposition between truth and fiction—which Nietzsche also persistently sets about dismantling—in suggesting that it is possible at once to be both lying and veracious, as in consecutive clauses the speaker seems as it were to stand on both sides of the fence, which anticipates the even more radical claim in the stanza's conclusion that one must at times lie to tell the truth (a possibility that is unentertained in Ross Woodman's discussion of the subject).

Open and Closed World Structures

There are also, however, in Byron's stanzas certain divergences from Nietzsche's views—most intriguingly in relation to 'truth' and 'reality'. First of all, in stanza 88, whilst Byron's description of the way the muddy streams of truth 'cut through […] canals of contradiction' implies a proto-Nietzschean imposition of artificial conceptual systems upon an incommensurable reality, the fact that the poet is prepared to speak—albeit in a loosely mythological way—about the fountains of truth appears to suggest a rather different conception of ultimate realities. (One might additionally tease the two authors apart in this respect by highlighting Byron's attachment to 'fact', as expertly elucidated by

Ann Barton, for example.[49]) What's more, although these emanating streams are 'muddy', implying our access to such truth is obscure, Byron nevertheless asserts that truth navigates her way 'o'er fiction', once again suggesting—*pace* Woodman—that the two are not exclusively opposed.[50]

Byron's assertion that fiction may lead us towards or mediate the truth—which he is prepared to affirm even though he is aware that it may serve a consolatory function—is illustrated in the following stanza, which refers to 'Apologue, fable, poesy and parable', all of which he acknowledges 'Are false'; and yet, he insists, 'may be rendered also true'. What's especially interesting about this is that Byron's phrasing— 'may be rendered also true'—suggests a conception of truth that is not simply a matter of immediately perceptible correspondence or even correspondence to what presently exists (as Ernst Bloch points out, a utopian ideal is 'not refuted by its non-being'[51]). Instead, the

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[49] 'Byron and the Mythology of Fact', reprinted in *Byron's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Alice Levine (New York: Norton, 2010), 812-28.

[50] We find another sustained meditation on the relationship between fiction and reality in *Childe Harold* IV, 5-7. In these stanzas, the poet acknowledges that the 'beings of the mind' are 'not of clay' and appears thereby to draw a clear line between the imaginary and the real. However, he immediately complicates this distinction in three key ways. Firstly, he suggests that these imaginary presences—which he subsequently refers to as 'spirits'—are not simply fictional or opposed to the real, as they are a kind of surrogate vision, standing in for and apparently disclosing something of a reality that is withheld from us in our mortal state: 'that which Fate / Prohibits to dull life, in this our state / Of mortal bondage, by these spirits supplied'. Secondly, the poet suggests that in spite of their imaginary status, these 'beings' are nonetheless capable of having real affects, for they 'multiply in us a brighter ray / And more beloved existence'. In other words, even if these imagined presences offer us a kind of 'refuge' from 'dull life', this isn't necessarily a matter of pure escapism—in the pejorative sense of experience cordoned off from the real—since they have the power to transfigure us and expand our horizons. And thirdly, the poet goes on to draw a further distinction between two different sorts of visionary experience, both of which are opposed to 'waking Reason': on the one hand, the foregoing 'beings of the mind', which he identifies with a 'fairy-land'; and on the other, a mode of vision that he seems unable to name or define exactly, but which he insists is more powerful and significant than the former: 'there are things whose strong reality / Outshines our fairy-land; in shape and hues / More beautiful than our fantastic sky, / And the strange constellations which the Muse / O'er her wild universe is skilful to diffuse'. Whilst the poet leaves the status of these latter visions undecided ('They came like Truth—and disappeared like dreams'), it seems clear that for Byron—in contrast to Woodman—fiction is open to and not simplistically opposed to the real.

[51] *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 3, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 1202.

poet appears to be proposing that there are figurative or fictional uses of language that require interpretation or even translation in order to bring out their correspondence.[52]

Alternatively, however, the poet's construction might equally suggest a sort of 'anachronic' referentiality; which is to say, a correspondence with something that is yet to be, the *possibility* of which is brought into view by the figurative vision, which may then be actualized by the reader's decision to appropriate, inhabit or live out what is 'subjunctively' proposed in the text. (Paul Ricoeur argues that poetic discourse as well as Scripture can transfigure the experience of the reader in this way—re-describing reality in order to enlarge our sense of the possible and opening up a 'luminous clearing' in which we can try out new ways of looking at and dwelling in the world.[53]) According to this model of affective significance, the text—be it apologue, fable, poesy or parable—posits a world that is flagrantly non-congruent with the present reality; yet it ventures this leap beyond the real not as a recreational escapist sojourn but as a contestation of the given order, which seeks to liberate the imagination and disclose new ways of being in the world, which may be brought about 'in front of' the text—and retroactively 'rendered true'—by the actions of the reader.[54] The relevance of this 'anachronic' model of referentiality—according to which the signifier 'prophetically' precedes and elicits the signified—appears to be corroborated by the poet's ensuing specification that 'false' stories may be rendered true 'By those who sow them in a land that's arable', which implies that their truth in some sense depends on their subsequent reception and the fruit they bear.

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[52] This 'allegorical' model of referentiality—which speaks of one thing by means of another, in full awareness of the ontological gap involved—is of course a traditional method of exegesis and composition, even though it is silently left aside in Woodman's account. For a good discussion of such traditions—which have been somewhat occluded in Romantic studies by Paul de Man's tendentious reconception of the practice—see Jon Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

[53] See, for example, 'Imagination in Discourse and Action', *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

[54] For the sake of clarity, I have here only presented one half of Ricoeur's argument in his reflections on ideology and utopia. The other half—which acknowledges the possibility of a pathological version of this non-congruence with reality—is set out in his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986).

There is in any case a more straightforward defence of ways of speaking that are 'false' and yet 'true' against Woodman's curiously absolutist stance; for do we not routinely and with some success resort to forms of figurative speech in various situations for the simple reason that it is the best or only language available? An obvious example would be speech about the divine, which by its very nature exceeds all finite predications and is other than the means we have for describing it.[55] Yet this is the case in other, more quotidian contexts too, such as speech about wine. For example, if a connoisseur says of a particular wine that it is 'creamy', 'chewy', has 'Romanesque legs' or a 'barnyardy nose', he or she is manifestly using metaphorical language and moving the mind in a figurative direction. But surely it would be wrong to conclude that this was an act of deception. To the contrary, is it not the case that the connoisseur uses such 'borrowed' or catachrestic language in order to be as *precise* as possible and in the hope of communicating the qualities of things that have no 'indigenous' language of their own?

Be that as it may, if Byron's claim that fiction can mediate truth—in spite of channeling it through 'canals of contradiction'—appears to diverge from Nietzsche's views, his contention in the following stanza signals an even more decisive difference:

> But what's reality? Who has its clue?
> Philosophy? No: she too much rejects.
> Religion? *Yes*; but which of all her sects?

'Religion? *Yes*'—this is not something that Nietzsche seems likely to say. Of course, there is a 'but' that immediately follows, yet this doesn't gainsay the affirmation; and whilst Byron, in other moods, could denounce religion, his affirmative stance—which is

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[55] See Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

corroborated elsewhere—indicates, at least, *an openness* to the truth of religious claims that Nietzsche, more dogmatically, rules out of court.[56]

In pointing this out, I'm not trying to establish that Byron was a religious thinker; after all, it isn't saying very much to demonstrate that someone is more religious than Nietzsche. (It is nevertheless worth noting that the poet does—in our ungainly contemporary parlance—self-identify as religious a few lines later, stating 'I was bred a moderate Presbyterian' and describing himself as 'a temperate theologian'.) The point of importance is, rather, that here we have another indication that Byron appears to be more willing than Nietzsche to trust a conceptual or metaphysical system to provide us with a 'clue' to the nature of reality. It is necessary to keep this in perspective, though, since Byron is prepared to defy or move beyond reason, just as he is prepared to trust it, as he makes clear at the start of the following canto, in which he defends a belief in ghosts:

> And what is strangest upon this strange head,
>   Is, that whatever bar the reason rears
> 'Gainst such belief, there's something stronger still
> In its behalf, let those deny who will. (*DJ*, VI, 33)

Here again we can see that for Byron, as for Nietzsche, there is a mysterious plenitude to life that cannot be caught in the net of reason. And yet, Byron is also—in contrast to Nietzsche—prepared to trust that it may convey *something* about the nature of reality; that it may, even though it is an artificial construct, and as such a sort of wagering on

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[56] One might broadly distinguish between Byron and Nietzsche with regard to the religious in terms of what Charles Taylor calls 'open' and 'closed' world structures, where the latter corresponds to a de-transcendentalized conception of the real as an unsundered and beyondless immanence, whilst the former correlates with a 'porous' conception of reality, which is to say one that is open to the possibility of something that transcends the material. (See *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).) Thus, whereas Nietzsche's writings presuppose and promote a 'closed world structure', the world that is envisioned in Byron's poetry—for all its scepticism—appears to evince an 'open' structure. (For a more detailed consideration of this issue, see 'Byron and the Post-Secular: Quia Impossibile', in *The Byron Journal*, vol. 43:2 (2015).)

transcendence,[57] obscurely disclose *something* of 'that which is', and not simply be a falsification of the real. And it is, I suggest, this more radically dilated openness—which signals a sort of 'post-critical' trust—that makes Byron less dogmatic and more reflexively sceptical than Nietzsche. As the poet has it: 'He who doubts all things nothing can deny' (*DJ*, XV, 88).

Nihilistic Moderation

A version of this more open, reflexively sceptical form of nihilism has been espoused by the contemporary Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, in relation to his notion of '*pensiero debole*' or 'weak thought'.[58] Obviously, there isn't space to go into much detail here, but very generally what Vattimo means by 'weak thought' is a stance, a style or philosophical outlook that repudiates 'strong' claims to truth, on the basis of an ontological and epistemological anti-foundationalism, but which views such 'weakening' of our sense of reality as the basis for a positive form of nihilism. More precisely, Vattimo's notion of 'weak thought'—which is founded on but diverges from the philosophy of Nietzsche— is a 'postmodern transformation of nihilism'[59] and a post-metaphysical reaction to a fundamentalist tendency in secular as well as religious traditions to lay claim to an ultimate, objective or conclusive vantage, 'outside' interpretation, with respect to the real. For Vattimo, such strident claims to truth involve a metaphysical violence, which he defines as 'the peremptory affirmation by an authority that forbids further interrogation, breaks down dialogue, and imposes silence'.[60] By contrast, 'weak thought' emphasizes the provisional and mediated or always-already interpreted character of our knowledge of reality, and seeks to mitigate metaphysical violence 'by reducing all truth-claims to the

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[57] George Steiner, *Real Presences* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 4.
[58] See, for example, 'Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought', *Weak Thought*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, trans. Peter Carravetta (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012).
[59] Ashley Woodward, *Nihilism in Postmodernity: Lyotard, Baudrillard, Vattimo* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 2009), 9.
[60] Vattimo, 'Hermeneutics and Democracy', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 23.4 (1997), 5.

level of competing interpretations'.[61] So, for example, whilst 'weak thought' would contest dogmatic claims to religious truth—insofar as they purport to have access to an unmediated vantage upon the real—it would equally contest imperious secular denunciations of religion that likewise presume to speak in an objective or conclusive fashion about the ultimate nature of 'that which is'. Thus, one of the things we are witnessing in postmodernity—if that is where we are—is a shift away from the 'reductive' nihilism of Nietzsche (who tellingly employs a metaphor of chemical decomposition to explain how notions of truth are ultimately reducible to a will-to-power[62]) to a more open or 'porous' construal of nihilism, which radically weakens the status of our truth-claims, but in doing so dilates the parameters of the thinkable: 'He who doubts all things nothing can deny'. One might, therefore, from the perspective of a *postmodern* nihilism, associated with 'weak thought', call into question certain aspects of Nietzsche's stance.[63]

Perhaps the most glaring problem with Nietzsche's brand of nihilism concerns the non-inevitability of his conclusions. There are two correlative aspects to this: the first relates to the prejudicial insistence upon an *infinitizing* of abysmal becoming; the second pertains to what is excluded as a result of this manoeuvre. At the root of both problems is the lack—or insufficient assimilation—of reflexive critique in Nietzsche's account of knowledge, which—for all its vaunted scepticism—is, paradoxically, not sceptical enough. For if, as Nietzsche repeatedly asserts, we cannot know the ultimate nature of 'what is'—which some of his more rigorously cagey formulations (such as the earlier '*might* correspond in no way') concede—we cannot know that we *don't* in some sense know it, and cannot on this basis categorically insist that our intimations are a 'tissue of

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[61] Woodward, *Nihilism in Postmodernity*, 212.

[62] *Human, All Too Human*, § 1.

[63] This contemporary tendency is corroborated by the work of the speculative realist Quentin Meillassoux, who deplores the development but acknowledges that the radical scepticism of postmodern thought has opened the way for a return of the religious. See *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), especially chapter 2.

erring'[64] or that trusting our faculties will result in delusion.[65] This also means that we are not licensed to insist that the abysmal becoming of the material order (which is speculatively posited as an ultimate reality) continues into infinity. And yet this is precisely what Nietzsche does, as in the following passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> The hermit […] assuming that every philosopher was first of all a hermit […] will doubt whether a philosopher could *possibly* have 'ultimate and real' opinions, whether behind every one of his caves there is not, must not be, another deeper cave—a more comprehensive, stranger, richer world beyond the surface, an abysmally deep ground behind every ground, under every attempt to furnish 'grounds'. Every philosophy is a foregrounded philosophy—that is the hermit's judgment: 'There is something arbitrary in his stopping here to look back and look around, in his not digging deeper here but laying his spade aside; there is something suspicious about it'.[66]

There is indeed something suspicious here—as there is no reason why the abysmally receding caves or grounds behind grounds must go on forever; there is, according to Nietzsche's own arguments, no reason why they might not *at some point* end or gave way to something else. (It will be recalled that Gerard Manley Hopkins sees no necessary incompatibility between the Heraclitian flux of becoming and a Christian faith in the Resurrection.[67]) Thus, there is, in Nietzsche's words, 'something arbitrary' about his own insistence upon this conclusion—which is itself a sort of 'stopping', even though its vision is abysmally extended—as it infinitizes an avowedly limited perception, beyond the finite horizons of our knowing.

The correlative problem of what this excludes should also be apparent by now; namely, if we cannot know what ultimately is—either within ourselves or the exterior

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[64] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*, trans. John Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 169.

[65] Nietzsche does, to be sure, acknowledge that 'a critique of the faculty of knowledge is senseless', since one would first of all have to know 'what *being* is, in order to decide whether this or that is real', and such transcendental knowledge is not, he recognizes, available to us (*Will to Power*, 269). However, this reflexive scepticism doesn't keep him from absolutizing his claims or presuming to speak from a transcendental vantage. What's more, as a result of the programmatically unsystematised character of his writing, such qualifications tend to be ambiguously detached from his dogmatically propounded vision.

[66] *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), 229.

[67] See 'That Nature Is a Heraclitian Fire and the Comfort of the Resurrection'.

world—then this opens the door to all sorts of religious and metaphysical possibilities, which are unentertained in Nietzsche's philosophy. Indeed, to the contrary, these alternative possibilities are emphatically rejected, not on the basis of argument or evidence (how could one establish that there isn't a 'beyond'?) but rather on the basis of sheer preference and conjecture. Which isn't to say that his nihilistic conclusions *cannot* be true; but it is to question the *status* of their claim to truth. In sum, it seems to me impossible to know, on the authority of Nietzsche's own reasoning, whether or not there is anything 'more' beyond the chaotic flux of becoming—which surely leaves room for religious hope as well as nihilistic despair.

Two other problems of relevance to our concerns are worth alluding to briefly here. Firstly, the crude psychological reductionism of Nietzsche's argument about the consolatory illusions of what Byron calls 'worlds beyond this world's perplexing waste'[68] is equally open to conclusions that are diametrically opposed to his own. In essence, Nietzsche argues that religious notions of an ideal realm are an invention of those who are too weak or cowardly to face reality. 'Who are the only people motivated to *lie their way out of* reality?' he asks in *The Antichrist*; to which he answers, 'People who *suffer* from it'.[69] On account of the fact that such beliefs are consoling and protect those who hold them from unpalatable realities, he therefore assumes that they *must* be untrue. (For Byron, by contrast, as we noted earlier, the fact that a belief may be consoling is not, as such, an argument against it.) One might query the logic of Nietzsche's argument by asking: what if the idea of divine judgment and punishment is a terrifying thought that imposes on us all sorts of obligations in this life, which becomes harder, less secure and more mysterious as a result, would the atheist's consoling belief that there is nothing beyond the abysmal flux of matter therefore also, necessarily, be an illusion? The question is perhaps less hypothetical than it might seem, as Nietzsche appears to take

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[68] *DJ*, XVI, 48.
[69] *The Antichrist*, 13.

some sort of comfort from the assumed certainty of his nihilistic stance—since from this perspective there is no need to suffer the uncertainty of hope—which may help to explain his compulsion to posit a darkness behind any intimations of light and to nudge what is undoubtedly a possibility into an omnisciently established certainty.

The other misgiving I wish to raise here has to do with the presumption of absolute non-correspondence underpinning Nietzsche's insistence that language, logic and quotidian consciousness inevitably falsify the real. One of the often overlooked problems with this is that Nietzsche, like Paul de Man after him (who based a critique of the Romantic enterprise on this unquestioned assumption), presupposes—and doesn't somehow neutrally 'read off'—this radical separation of mind and matter, and the attenuated conception of selfhood that comes with it. Again, this doesn't mean that it cannot be so; though it is a long way from being *necessarily* so. What if, as alternative traditions maintain, our apparent separation from other things in nature is grounded in an ontologically prior continuity, as envisaged for example in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*?

> All is concenter'd in a life intense,
> Where not a beam, not air, nor leaf is lost
> But hath a part of being, and a sense
> Of that which is of all Creator and defence. (III, 89)

Needless to say, Byron couldn't always or unequivocally endorse this sort of vision; however, he was—in contrast to Nietzsche—prepared to accept it as a *possibility*. In short, the problem with this aspect of Nietzsche's thinking is that his argument about language's inevitable falsification of the real is predicated upon a contestable anterior presupposition about the nature of reality. So where does this leave us?

There are two points I wish to draw from the foregoing discussion, before venturing a few more general conclusions: firstly, Byron's characteristic stance, at least in *Don Juan*—whose radically self-reflexive doubt paradoxically engenders an openness to

trust—seems closer to Vattimo's postmodern model of 'hospitable' nihilism than Nietzsche's more dogmatically pessimistic stance.[70] The second point is that if, as Byron suggests, fiction isn't necessarily opposed to reality, and may, in certain circumstances, even be required in order to represent it, we cannot simply dismiss—after the manner of Ross Woodman—Byron's equivalents of 'celestial light' or a 'visionary gleam' as an illusion. Instead, we should at least countenance the possibility that his 'enchanted' visions of a numinous landscape or a material realm that appears to be open to that which is beyond it—as envisaged, for example, in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Manfred* and *Don Juan*—may disclose or orient us towards 'what is', even though as a sort of catachrestic expedient they employ figurative language in an effort to evoke that which *of its nature* exceeds the finite. To put this last point in somewhat more graspable terms: what I am suggesting is that, if one is seeking to represent a vision of the natural order suffused with intimations of something beyond it, it may be necessary for the artist to add something to or even 'distort' nature in order paradoxically to represent it as it is.[71]

CONCLUSION

What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to call into question the taken-for-granted opposition between fiction and reality, as exemplified in the work of Ross Woodman. In contrast to his 'either-or' oppositional model, and based on alternatives that are ventured in *Don Juan*, I have argued that fiction may disclose or orient us towards 'that which is' but also, more paradoxically, that there are certain realities that can only be disclosed, even as they distorted, by means of fiction. In teasing out Byron's views on the matter, I have compared his reflections on 'truthful fiction' with the more dogmatically nihilistic stance of Nietzsche, with whom the poet is frequently aligned. In doing so, I have

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[70] In this I diverge from the views of Charles LaChance, who reads *Don Juan* as a 'fixedly nihilistic' poem ('Byron's Bad English', 124).

[71] This matter is considered in more detail in *Romantic Enchantment: Fantasy, Theology and Affect* (London Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

focused in particular on the manner of *Don Juan*, which might—following the poet's proposal—be characterized as sort of linguistic sketching.[72] (This impression is created by a number of the poem's most prominent stylistic features—such as the narrator's practice of piling up similes, his habit of etceterization, his flagrant violation of grammatical conventions, his copious dashing and his 'gothic' syntax.) Although a detailed discussion isn't possible here, what I suggest we can see in the poet's sketching is an acknowledgement of the gap between language and reality but also a sense of hopeful reaching, of language *in pursuit* of something, hastily or idly trying to capture its likeness 'exactly as it goes'.[73]

The purpose of the comparison with Nietzsche was to clarify the contours of the Byron's thinking and to challenge the commonplace but insufficiently qualified alignment of the two writers. What emerged from the comparison is that the two authors—who are both 'dauntless' unmaskers, incorrigible dashers and advocates of a sort of thoughtful levity or philosophizing with 'light feet'[74]—coincide in their detestation of 'systems' and the sense that 'this unriddled wonder, the world'[75] is more multiple and mysterious than language can convey. For this reason, Byron, like Nietzsche, evidently believes that in attempting to represent 'that which is' one must at times violate the laws of logic and make language stammer. What also emerged from the comparison, though, is that whilst

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[72] 'I sketch your world exactly as it goes' (*DJ*, VIII, 89).

[73] Philip Davis has written insightfully about Byron's sketching, which he relates to Ruskin's defence of artistic obscurity: 'Why can't they say it straighter?—says the puritan in Ruskin. But then he says, as it were: Trust them, the Truth closes up so fast when you are near it, they have to go in fast and leave traces of obscurity behind them in their wake' ('"I leave the thing a problem, like all things": On Trying to Catch up with Byron', in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, ed. Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), 270). What Davis is suggesting, I take it, is that by virtue of its rapidity the sketch may catch something that the more finished or polished work may lose. If this is so, and the sketch is a sort of stylistic expedient that enables a fidelity to a fleeting vision, its hasty and approximate gestures would cease necessarily to betoken a want of technique and may instead be the price one has to pay for capturing 'things existent'. Richard Sha has also written instructively about the visual and verbal sketch in British Romanticism, but somewhat surprisingly ignores *Don Juan*. See *The Visual and Verbal Sketch in British Romanticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

[74] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *passim*.

[75] *DJ*, XI, 3.

both authors are 'congenial with abyss'[76] and appear to converge in their sceptical stance on the ultimately unknowable nature of reality, Nietzsche (with certain complex qualifications) dogmatically rules out the possibility of representing the real—which, for him, is ineluctably falsified by language and the conceptual structures of everyday consciousness—whereas Byron, albeit in a sceptical fashion, is prepared to countenance the possibility that language and our everyday consciousness of the world might mediate *something* of that which really is. In this, I have suggested, Byron is paradoxically more faithful to Nietzsche's sceptical reasoning than Nietzsche is himself; since if we cannot know the nature of the real, how do we know that we *do not* know it? There are of course acknowledgements of this sort of awareness in Nietzsche's work, but they do little to qualify his refusal to entertain the possibility—which scepticism itself keeps open—that there might be something beyond, and obliquely disclosed by, the world's chaotic becoming. Byron, by contrast, is prepared acknowledge that radical scepticism paradoxically legitimizes a sort of faith ('I doubt that doubt itself is doubting', he notes in *Don Juan*[77]); and for this reason, I have suggested that Byron is closer to Vattimo's more 'hospitable' postmodern conception of nihilism than Nietzsche's dogmatically pessimistic model. The somewhat surprising upshot of which is that Byron turns out to be more sceptical than Nietzsche, because paradoxically he is more daringly prepared 'to take things upon trust'.[78]

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[76] Byron, *The Lament of Tasso*, IX, 25.
[77] IX, 17.
[78] *DJ*, XVI, 6.