Western University

From the Selected Works of Steven Bruhm

2007

Byron and the Choreography of Queer Desire

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PALGRAVE ADVANCES

byron studies

editor
jane stabler

Oddities abound here. First, the Preface suggests that the entire epic narrative of *Don Juan* can best be understood as a structured opposition between storytelling and dance, as if dance, the particular art form named and minutely imagined by the speaker, were somehow the type of expression most counter to or separated from narrative. The foreign travellers divide themselves: one listens to the story being told by the Spanish gentleman and one leaves the site of storytelling to watch the dancing girl. That separation is confirmed in the next paragraph when, the speaker tells us, 'Our friend the story-teller—at some distance with a small elderly audience—is supposed to tell his story without being much moved by the musical hilarity at the other end of the village green' (83). That the dance is all-engrossing to the more errant traveller, who seems to care not one whit for the Spanish gentleman's story, is itself replicated in the detail of the French prisoner: this unfortunate soul is able to forget 'a sabre cut [on his forehead] received in the recent skirmish' and instead lose himself in the rhythm of the fandango and in the erotic beauty of the peasant girl dancing before him. Dancing becomes a metaphor for the erotic fascinations that pervade *Don Juan*, fascinations that frequently stymie the narrator in the epic. But the precision of the detail regarding the dance—right down to the mention of the fandango, a Spanish dance form that found one of its first stage expressions in Angiolini and Gluck's 1761 ballet, *Don Juan* (Craine 2002, 173)—suggests that there might be something about dance per se that removes it from general metaphor and makes meaning in its particularity. Dance, it would seem, registers for Byron an extremely eloquent performance of erotics, yet one whose eloquence is opposed to that of epic narrative, or perhaps any verbal utterance.

The second noteworthy oddity of this Preface contradicts the first, or at least contradicts our efforts to see in the Preface a serious and significant effort to fashion a poetics within or against the art of dance. The intensely elaborate narrative/dance template by which the speaker would have us read *Don Juan* is, we must remember, a parody. The speaker sets up his opposition thus: 'The Reader who has acquiesced in Mr W. Wordsworth's supposition that his "Misery, oh Misery" [in 'The Thorn'] is related by the "Captain of a small &c.", is requested to suppose by a like exertion of Imagination that the following epic narrative is told by a Spanish gentleman...' (CPW V, 82). And then, '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 as far as to conceive that the Dedication [of *Don Juan*] to Mr Southey, and several stanzas of the poem itself, are interpolated by the English

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In the Preface to Cantos I and II of *Don Juan*, Byron invents a complex and parodic narrative structure through which he asks his readers to visualize the story he is about to tell. The Preface opens with a slap at Wordsworth's 'unintelligible' note to his equally unintelligible poem 'The Thorn', where Wordsworth suggests that his poem's narrator is "the captain of a merchantman or small trading vessel". Byron then one-ups his rival: he requests of his own reader a 'like exertion of imagination' to suppose that *Don Juan* will be narrated by a 'Spanish gentleman in a village in the Sierra Morena' or, if we prefer, an English gentleman who has spent time in Spain and thus knows the language well. From here, Byron complicates the scene of storytelling with precise detail:

at some distance a groupe of black-eyed peasantry are dancing to the sound of the flute of a Portuguese servant belonging to two foreign travellers who have an hour ago dismounted from their horses to spend the night on their way to the capital of Andalusia;—of these, one is attending to the story and the other, having sauntered further, is watching the beautiful movements of a tall peasant girl whose whole soul is in her eyes and her heart in the dance, of which she is the magnet to ten thousand feelings that vibrate with her own. (CPW V, 83)

Nor is this foreign traveller the only observer of the dance: two French prisoners vie with each other to catch sight of her, one of whom, the speaker of the Preface tells us, becomes part of that 'magnet to ten thousand feelings'. Despite the wounds he sustained in battle, 'his eyes sparkle in unison and his fingers beat time against the bars of his prison to the sound of the Fandango, which is fleeting before him' (83).

editor' (84). The narrative frame is undercut at every turn here, since it – both in Wordsworth and in *Don Juan* – presupposes an impossible act of imagination, one that appears ridiculous or unintelligible to a reader of Byron's sensibilities. And so, while the imagined or 'supposed' scene of the dancing girl counterposed with the storyteller is the generative node of understanding *Don Juan*, that supposed scene is satirically undermined by its metonymic relation to Wordsworth's meretricious poetry and Robert Southey's meretricious politics. Thus, my second oddity: the narrative splitting that will mark the Byronic narrator throughout *Don Juan*, the narrative splitting between erotic indulgence and narrative proficiency, is both crucial to appreciating Byron's poetic pleasures in the poem and impossible to imagine or sustain. By casting his narrator outside the erotic action of the poem, Byron both establishes a solitary, aggressively self-contained speaker and aligns that speaker with Wordsworth and Southey, the former providing the paradigm for an imagined narrator, the latter representing the separation of sexuality from poetic output, a separation that culminates in the famous 'dry Bob' remark of the 'Dedication'. The Preface has set us up for the dance but refuses to allow us to take a single step without tripping.

My purpose in this sustained rumination on the Preface to Cantos I and II of *Don Juan* is to present the major terms by which I want to consider a quality of observation and expression in Byron that I see as queer – if not genitally homosexual, then certainly inspiring a mode of observation, expression, and embodiment that will become, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, unmistakably affiliated with the homosexual.¹ I want to push into some of the later cantos of *Don Juan* as well as into Byron's earlier poem 'Waltz: An Apostrophic Hymn' the concerns that Byron sets up in the Preface – concerns regarding the intersection of dance observation, storytelling, and parody. Put more precisely, I want to consider the ways in which Byron imagines the (usually, but not exclusively) female dancer as a nodal point in an otherwise markedly male homosocial continuum, the kind of continuum that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has theorized in her books, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). For as Sedgwick has pointed out, the word 'homosocial' is both a social scientific term meant to denote 'social bonds between persons of the same sex', distinguishing itself from *homosexual* relations, but which also describes a mandatorily erotic relation between men, and thus 'hypothesize[s] the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual' (Sedgwick 1985, 1). That Byron's Preface should multiply the singular male imagined by Wordsworth into at least three (if not five)

males is important, I think: Byron's males exhibit erotic engagements that range from storytelling, which is separate from the erotic world of dance, to a total captivation by the erotics of dance, whether that be by the solitary observer (Byron's foreign traveller) or the male watcher in proximity to and competing with another male (the wounded French soldier in the prison). And that such a pointed multiplication of male subjectivities should be conducted under the banner of parody suggests a complex matrix of homages and disavowals, connections and disconnections at the site of dance. If, as I have been suggesting, the Preface divides the narrator's perceptive 'I' into distanced storyteller and dance aficionado as a way of cordoning off sexuality from narration, it simultaneously suggests a kind of erotic plethora – both heterosexual and homosocial/sexual – in the moment of dance observation. It is this erotic plethora, I want to suggest, that constitutes Byron's thoughts on dance, the queer resonances that spill into them, and ultimately the rhetorics of impossibility and loss that attend the male subject as he sets himself the task of narrating the very erotics that dance might deploy.

In a letter of 7 May 1813, Byron wrote to Lady Melbourne that 'I have an invitation to a *city* or rather *citizen's* ball where I wish to see the young people unmuzzled – & as Hobhouse is going—who is a Cynic after my own heart—I shall be regaled with his observations—which may be safely made as we are both spectators—I *can't* dance—& he *won't*' (BLJ III, 46–7). This detail, another example of men watching dancing in Byron's *oeuvre*, suggests what has been rather a commonplace in thinking about Byron and dance, a commonplace Lady Caroline Lamb was one of the first to articulate: that Byron's lameness made him extremely impatient with and dismissive of dance as a physical activity in which he could not participate.² But what's more important for my purposes here is the way the Byron and Hobhouse of this passage constitute an 1813 prototype for the Victorian bachelor as Eve Sedgwick defines him. For Sedgwick, the Victorian bachelor is the domesticated urbanite's answer to the kind of male homosexual panic experienced by the Gothic hero of the previous literary era. This figure, she writes,

personifies the most deflationary tonal contrast to the eschatological harrowings and epistemological doublings of the paranoid Gothic. Where the Gothic hero had been solipsistic, the bachelor hero is selfish. Where the Gothic hero had raged, the bachelor hero bitches. Where the Gothic hero had been suicidally inclined, the bachelor hero is a hypochondriac. The Gothic hero ranges from euphoria to

despondency; the bachelor hero, from the eupheptic to the dyspeptic. (Sedgwick 1990, 189)

While readers of *Manfred*, *Cain*, or *The Corsair* will have no trouble aligning Byron's heroes with Sedgwick's definition of the Gothic, they will also see the speaker of *Don Juan* as something closer to the domesticated Victorian bachelor, with his petty cattiness, his hypochondriasis, his wry detachment. Wry detachment, but also *sexual* detachment. As Sedgwick writes, 'the disruptive and self-ignorant potential for violence in the Gothic hero is replaced in the bachelor hero by physical timidity and, often, by a high value on introspection and by (at least partial) self-knowledge' (190); consequently, the Victorian bachelor often presents himself as having no commerce with genital sexuality. And while such a representation hardly characterizes Byron in general, it does describe Byron at the dance. Hence his attendance *at* – but refusal to participate *in* – the citizen's ball where he and Hobhouse will indulge their cynicism about the young and unmuzzled, will regale each other with observations from a safe distance, and will not dance. Andrew Elfenbein has argued that Byron left a legacy of homosexual relations on which self-selected Victorian authors could capitalize in order to align themselves with Byron's cult (Elfenbein 1995, 207); but he also left a legacy of a less genital but more discursively bitchy queerness that we can trace throughout the Victorian period in the dance *aficionado* and opera buff (Thackeray's speaker in 'De Juventute', the bachelor heroes of *Dorian Gray* or *Trilby*), all the way up to contemporary queer (auto)biography (Michael Moon on Maria Montez, Kevin Kopelson on Nijinski, Wayne Koestenbaum on anyone in a pretty dress) – not excluding my personal favourites, Waldorf and Statler, the exquisitely mean old queens who sat in their box during *The Muppet Show* and carped at the quality of the performances. It is this quality of bitchery, of distanced men feeling eupheptic or dyspeptic before a scene of dance, that I want now to consider more closely in Byron, with an eye to discussing how the mechanics of dance intersect with a pronounced queer pleasure in commentary and observation.

In all of Byron's extended passages on the dance, he filters scenes of erotic engagement and plenitude through a distanced narrator-observer, the Sedgwickian bachelor figure whose performances at the scene are intellectual and critical rather than choreographic and embodied.³ Nowhere is this clearer than in Canto XII of *Don Juan* where Juan and the narrator arrive at the Regency Ball and, like the two foreign travellers of the Preface, immediately split up, depending on their willingness to participate in the dance. While Juan quickly moves onto the dance floor

(more on this later), the Byronic flâneur/narrator prefers to 'win a corner, / ... Where he may fix himself, like small "Jack Horner"', / And let the Babel run round as it may, / And look on as a mourner, or a scorner, / Or an approver, or a mere spectator, / Yawning a little as the night grows later' (*Don Juan* XI, 69, 2–8). The image of the dance observer as 'a mourner, or a scorner' had been established earlier, in Canto III, when the piratical father Lambro returns to his island after a long absence to find his village engaged in merry-making. 'Seeing a troop of his domestics dancing / Like dervises, who turn as on a pivot, he / Perceived it was the Pyrrhic dance so martial, / To which the Levantines are very partial' (*Don Juan* III, 29, 5–8). In this spectacle of dancing, marked by a plenitude of sound, colour, and movement, he finds 'a group of Grecian girls, / ... Link'd hand in hand, and dancing' – a 'virgin throng' that 'would set ten poets raving' (III, 30, 1–8). Lambro too will rave, but not poetically. He perceives dancing bodies juxtaposed with food and drink, making of them sensual commodities to be consumed by everyone but the patriarch himself, and soon learns that this is the celebration to mark the end of mourning for him after his supposed death. While the narrator deems this Dionysian celebration of life an 'innocent diversion / For the imagination or the senses, / ... All pretty pastimes in which no offense is' (III, 35, 1–4), for Lambro, it induces anger and melancholy. It is 'A thing to human feelings the most trying, / And harder for the heart to overcome, / ... To find our hearthstone turn'd into a tomb, / And round its once warm precincts palely lying / The ashes of our hopes' (III, 51, 2–7). If dance in *Don Juan* – and in Byron's *oeuvre* generally – signals a world of eroticism and fullness of bodily pleasure, it also signals the degree to which the observer is separate from that world. While Juan is off having sex with Lambro's daughter Haidée, Lambro feels the loss of all the privileges and potencies that attend a paterfamilias. In a chain of metonymic associations, dance transmogrifies the condition of patriarchal power into one of absence and loss.

Or so it does in a conventionally 'straight' reading of Byron, with all his attendant abjections and sadnesses. But as I have been suggesting, Byron rarely reads dance – and men within dance – straight. In the earliest sustained discussion of dance in Byron's work, his 1812 'Waltz: An Apostrophic Hymn', Byron deploys the kind of satire I noted in the Preface to make distinct points about politics – both national and sexual – with the kind of queer bitchery we saw when he and Hobhouse went to the dance. Narrated by one Horace Hornem, Esq., 'a country gentleman of a midland county' (*CPW* III, 22), 'Waltz' depicts the arrival of Hornem and his family in London for the season where they attend a ball given by

the Countess of Waltzaway. Here he finds a new dance recently imported from the Rhine, and while he apostrophizes on its charms, we are also told that he (like Byron) can't actually perform the dance: 'Now that I know what it [the waltz] is, I like it of all things, and so does Mrs. H; though I have broken my shins, and four times overturned Mrs. Hornem's maid in practising the preliminary steps in a morning' (23). Now overturning the maid may be part of the goal, but barking the shins is not, and so Hornem decides he will stop attempting to dance and will write about it instead: 'having a turn for rhyme, tastily displayed in some election ballads and songs, ... I sate down, and with the aid of W.F. Esq. [that is, William Fitzgerald] and a few hints from Dr. B[usby].... I composed the following Hymn' (23). That Hymn – or rather, mock-hymn – locates Byron's cutting satire within a naively obtuse and distanced observer of the dance, a storyteller who will meditate on the meanings of the waltz's semiotics in order to praise (and for Byron to condemn) its implications.

As Gary Dyer has cogently argued, this poem is founded upon a paradox that makes no sense for the seasoned reader of Byron. On the one hand, the poem is a scathing critique of the Prince Regent's love of waltzing, his ability not only to succumb to its fashion but to recreate that fashion in England, and the perfidious political opportunism such fashion-mongering affords the turncoats who courted him (Dyer 2005, 4ff). Hornem seems to be one of the Prince Regent's fans, and accordingly praises the waltz, emphasizing its *newness*: 'Blest was the time Waltz chose for her débüt; / The Court, the R—t, like herself were new' (ll. 161–2). But behind this praise we can hear the more cynical Byron who recognizes that not much has changed:

New face for friends, for foes some new rewards,

New ornaments for black—and royal guards...

New mistresses—no—old—and yet 'tis true,

Though they be *old*, the *thing* is something new. (ll. 163–72)

The poem's thinly veiled scorn for the Prince of Wales and his Hanoverian allegiances perfectly accords with Byron's own Whig politics. While the ballroom scene, this 'something new', recycles old friends, old politics, and old mistresses, it also bespeaks a sense of profound *loss*: the loss of Whig ideals as the Prince Regent rewarded the 'blackguards' who had supported his father, George III; the loss of an English poetic and dramatic voice to 'Ten plays—and forty tales of Kotzebue's' imported from Germany (l. 72); the loss of Irish jigs and Scotch reels of which Byron was very fond.⁴ Indeed, for all its newness, the waltz produces in the speaker

a sense of Byronic melancholy similar to that of *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*: 'Morals and minuets... /...all have had their days' (ll. 182–3).

What's strange to find in a Byron poem, though, is that these lost morals are sexual as well as political. In the address to the Publisher, Hornem indicates that he is going to the Countess's Ball 'expecting to see a country-dance, or, at most, cotillions, reels, and all the old paces to the newest tunes. But judge of my surprise, on arriving, to see poor dear Mrs. Hornem with her arms half round the loins of a huge hussar-looking gentleman I never set eyes on before, and his, to say truth, rather more than half round her waist, turning round, and round, and round...' (CPW III, 23). Hornem's good-natured surprise notwithstanding, the poem suggests that women get caught up in the erotic movements of the waltz until 'Her mind with these is gone, and with it go / The little left behind it to bestow' (ll. 246–7).⁵ Thus, the other part of the contradiction that Gary Dyer has noted: the loss of any sense of female constancy and self-restraint. The erotically engaging waltz fosters adultery and sexual freedom, a sense of license that also falls under satirical dismissal, as if Byron were adopting a Puritan high road in his poem (Dyer 2005, 3). Indeed, the dismissal of waltzing as sexually licentious seems to align the poet with the moralizing cant of his day. In 1810, for example, a correspondent signing herself 'A Lady of Distinction' offered the following evaluation of the waltz:

with regard to the lately-introduced German waltz, I cannot speak ... favorably. I must agree with Goethe, when writing of the national dance of this country, 'that none but husbands and wives can with any propriety be partners in the waltz'.

There is something in the close approximation of persons, in the attitudes, and in the motion, which ill agrees with the delicacy of woman, should she be placed in such a situation with any other man than the most intimate connexion she can have in life. Indeed, I have often heard men of no very over-strained feeling say, 'that there are very few women in the world with whom they could bear to dance the german waltz'. (Lady 1813, 154)⁶

Such conduct advice was not at all uncommon. According to Jane Desmond, 'the waltz was regarded as too sexually dangerous for "respectable" women in North America and Europe when it was first introduced in the nineteenth century. The combination of intoxicating fast whirling and a "close" embrace was thought to be enough to make women take leave of their senses. Some advice books for women even

claimed waltzing could lead to prostitution' (Desmond 1997, 32). For Dyer's reading of 'Waltz', though, it's not simply the close embracing that's key to the poem's satire, but rather the taking leave of the senses, a threat which could be seen not only in women but in men like the Prince Regent, whose sexual appetites often led him by the nose (Dyer 2005, 11). In this reading of the poem, then, waltzing becomes a scathing critique of the way mindlessness in hetero-sexed appetite can have scandalous political consequences.

While Dyer is certainly right to suggest the poem's condemnation of a *thoughtless* sexuality embodied in the waltz (we'll see this later in *Don Juan*), we can also take farther the complicated sexual engagements in the poem itself. Ultimately, we can make sense of its shifting grounds by closely reading the final stanza, where Horace turns his inability to dance, and Byron his satirical persona, to a particularly queer end. Having let the satirical mask slip enough to condemn the waltz's superficiality outright, Byron then has Horace rally:

Voluptuous Waltz! and dare I thus blaspheme?

Thy bard forgot thy praises were his theme.

Terpsichore forgive!—at every ball,

My wife *now* waltzes—and my daughters *shall*;

My son (or stop—'tis needless to enquire—

These little accidents should ne'er transpire;

Some ages hence our genealogic tree

Will wear as green a bough for him as me)

Waltzing shall rear, to make our name amends,

Grandsons for me—in heirs to all his friends. (ll. 248–57)

Not unlike Byron himself, Horace watches others dance because, as he has already disarmingly told us, he is very bad at it himself. And that both wife and daughters should be waltzing confirms for Horace and for us that he risks wearing the horns of cuckoldry that his last name implies. After all, when he arrived at the ball expecting to find innocent country dances, he instead found his wife pressed into the loins of another gentleman. Moreover, his dancing 'son' appears not to be his at all, but the product of a 'little accident' that should have never transpired. Despite his name, Horace seems more horned than horning. But in a curious way, Horace also has the power to bestow the horns of cuckoldry on others, if only by proxy. Any anxiety the poem registers regarding sexual license in the waltz is calmed by the illegitimate son's imagined sexual reproduction, the successful injection of doubly illegitimate grandsons into the lines

of patrilineage belonging to the Hornems' more 'potent' male friends. And it is the sexual vigours of the waltz that will allow Horace's son to effect this injection. Thus, with the rise of the son on whom Horace's poetic and sexual hopes rest, we see Hornem cathect another man – a man who is and is not a bough of his own genealogic tree – indulging himself in the fantasies of this other man's sexual wealth and political power. The way Hornem puts it at the end of the poem, this sexual potency imagined and enacted *through another man* (his bastard son) is his personal revenge on his own fellows. This should remind us of the lynchpin of Eve Sedgwick's argument about the homosocial: men use sexual reproduction with women as a way to conduct precariously sexualized relations of camaraderie and competition with other men. 'Waltz shall rear' in two senses here: the dance 'sexually reproduces' (thus 'rearing' children) and it 'rises up in anger' or 'attacks' (to import the specifically German etymology of the word 'rearing'). Moreover, this is Sedgwick with a vengeance, since the erotic paradigm in 'Waltz' involves not just two men but many, choreographed by a man through another man and on to multiple men. By exploiting the sexual explicitness of the waltz and having his son fuck women, Horace will fuck the other men who may be fucking him. Here Byron brings together the curious strands by which I opened this chapter – the homosocial-cum-queer imagination and the parodic voice woven together at the scene of dance. Horace is distinctly *outside* the waltz, yet his very position as self-denigrated outsider allows him the bitchy, satirical pleasures of engagement with men, men whose debts to the heteronormative and paternal system he can both exploit and bastardize.

In tracing the overdeterminations of gender and sexual fantasy in 'Waltz: An Apostrophic Hymn', I want to anatomize the dance *aficionado* as we see him appear in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In our contemporary critical imagination, this dance critic is a distinctly *gay* figure, an arbiter of grace and beauty, who fetishizes the female dancer because he wants to *be* that female dancer – elegant, beautiful, feminine. To the degree that it's accurate, this image of the male dance observer's transgendered identification begins in the Romantic period. Writing in the context of ballet criticism, dance scholar and theorist Felicia McCarren puts the case this way: 'The ballet public of the 1840s was constituted by a preponderantly male mixture of ... those who had entrée backstage, in the *coulisses* of the [Paris] Opéra, and those who wished they had. The competitive adoration of the dancer, tempered by misogynistic undercurrents, is apparent in tandem with a *dandyesque* homosexual identification with her' (McCarren 1998, 71). What's

ultimately at stake here, McCarren says, is visual power: 'The visual experience of the dandy at the Opéra, shaped by concerns of power and pleasure, emphasized uninterrupted viewing and visual possession of the dancing image in conjunction with the homosocial atmosphere of the loges' (83). While McCarren is writing here of the Paris Opéra and the world of the ballet, much the same can be said for the world of the social dance, such as that of the waltz in the ballrooms of London. I don't want to ignore the practical differences between stage ballet and social dance, but it is worth noting that the early nineteenth century had not codified the distinction between the 'high' art of ballet and the 'lower' or less academically interesting world of the dance floor. In fact, given that nineteenth-century ballerinas were often likened to syphilitic prostitutes and that the coveted backstage of the Opéra was a place to procure a sexual patron for the evening, the perceived difference between the balletic stage and the thoroughly base music hall was really more a matter of degree than of kind. Within this highly sexualized field, then, the queer reader wants to know: how did the homosocial, dandy-esque gaze of the newly emergent dance critic see the dancing *male* body? If Mrs Hormen's attitude directs her husband's gaze to 'the loins of a huge hussar-looking gentleman,' what exactly does Horace see when he looks at those loins?

The first answer to my question is: nothing. Ostensibly, if the nineteenth-century dance critic had his way, he would not have seen the male body at all. During the decades from the late eighteenth century to the 1840s, stage dance underwent a startling transformation. Whereas the ballets of the 1780s starred male performers who often performed female roles *en travesti*, the Romantic period in dance systematically banished the male from the stage – or at least reduced him from principal performer to the role of a scaffold on which to hang the prima ballerina's virtuosio performances. Here, for example, is dance critic Jules Janin writing on 24 August 1832:

we are hardly partisans of what are called the grands danseurs. The grand danseur seems to us so sad, so heavy! ... He corresponds to nothing, he represents nothing, he is nothing. Talk to us of a pretty dancing girl, who deploys at ease the grace of her face, the elegance of her figure, who shows us all the treasures of her beauty in such a fleeting way; thank God I understand that marvellously well.... But a man, a horrible ugly man, as ugly as you and I, a vile empty rabbit, who jumps around without knowing why, a creature expressly made for carrying a musket, a sabre, and wearing a uniform! for this to

dance as a woman would do, is impossible! (Janin 1840, 3, quoted in McCarren, 85)

So too Théophile Gautier, impresario extraordinaire of the Romantic ballet and creator of one of its first and greatest works, *Giselle*: 'Really there is nothing worse than a man displaying his red neck, his great muscular arms, his legs with beefy calves, and his whole heavy virile frame shaken by jumps and pirouettes' (Gautier 1899, quoted in McCarren, 87). The point here is not whether men can dance, it's how they *look* while doing so. According to Ramsay Burt, it was not the activity of male dancing but the spectacle it created that was 'nervously dismissed' in the Romantic ballet (Burt 1995, 13). Not surprisingly, by the 1840s stage gender had changed so much that male roles in ballets were characteristically performed by women *en travesti*, the effect of the all-female cast being much more pleasing to the spectatorial eye than the lumps and bumps of the male physique. Women made better men than men.

Given this historically curious move to drive men off the stage and out of the public eye, let's return one last time to Byron's 'Waltz' to consider exactly what type of male body we are seeing there. The beefy calves and virile frame that Gautier would have removed from the public view are also, of course, the hussar-looking gentleman's loins that Horace Hornem's wife is clutching. For that matter, hussars are the poem's exhibit A of masculine clumsiness and physical inelegance: for the feminine Waltz is the 'nimble nymph ... to whom the young hussar, / The whiskered votary of Waltz and war— / His night devotes, despite of spur and boots, / A sight unmatched since Orpheus and his brutes' (ll. 15–18). Such brutes include not only the 'clumsy cits [who] attempt to bounce, / And cockneys [who] practice what they can't pronounce' (ll. 157–8), but also the Regent himself, who offers a rather unattractive 'princely paunch' to his lady's touch (l. 195). If Horace Hornem has read his Sedgwick and wants to sexually infiltrate these men through the homosocial/homosexual prowess of his son, he's also read his Gautier and Janin, and would prefer these rather unattractive bodies not be seen at all. We don't know how the hussar dances, but we do know that he doesn't look good doing it.

Which is all well and good for dismissing clumsy cits and paunchy princes, but what if you're the seductively attractive Don Juan and your observer is the endlessly fascinated narrator of your life story? The description of Juan dancing in Canto XIV of *Don Juan* is remarkable for its differences from male dance in 'Waltz':

Chaste were his steps, each kept within due bound,

And elegance was sprinkled o'er his figure;

Like swift Camilla, he scarce skimm'd the ground

And rather held in than put forth his vigour;

And then he had an ear for music's sound,

Which might defy a Crotchet Critic's rigour.

Such classic *pas*—sans flaws—set off our hero,

He glanced/ like a personified Bolero... (*Don Juan* XIV, 39)

On the surface of it, Byron's compliments on Juan's dancing are backhanded: Juan is a good dancer because he's not British, he's foreign, and 'all foreigners excel / The serious Angles in the eloquence / Of pantomime' (XIV, 38, 1–3). Unlike the calculating British person, 'He danced without theatrical pretence, / Not like the ballet-master in the van / Of his drill'd nymphs' (38, 6–8), which is to say he danced 'With emphasis, and also with good sense' (38, 4). Moreover, Juan is presumably a good dancer because he's male. The waltz, we are told elsewhere, may be 'The only dance which teaches girls to think' (XI, 68, 3), because it forces them to keep an eye out for the possible marital connections and assignments they might make on the dance floor – not to mention the ones they should avoid. Not so Juan: he

Must steer with care through all that glittering sea

Of gems and plumes, and pearls and silks, to where

He deems it is his proper place to be;

Dissolving in the waltz to some soft air,

Or prouder prancing with mercurial skill.... (XI, 70, 3–7)

And finally, Juan is a good dancer because, unlike his author's countrymen and women, he recognizes no separation from the dance. His classic *pas*, sans flaw, sets him off (no little Byronism there!), but sets him off to *be* the dance: his is dancing, a personified bolero, an ontology rather than a mere performer of choreography. Like Yeats who can't tell the dancer from the dance, the Byronic dancer (un)becomes what he performs.

And in this (un)becoming, sex and gender matter. As with the other scenes of dance I've been discussing, Juan's performance is a *chaîné* of paradoxes: he must 'steer with care' at the same time that he 'dissolves'; his natural, anti-theatrical theatricality must avoid the gendered rigidity of the ballet master and his drilled nymphs, at the same time that it embraces both mastery and effeminacy; he must be purposefully rigorous about restraining his masculinity, *holding in* rather than *putting forth* his

vigour. Only in this masculine assertion of antimasculinity can he be chaste and elegant, like Virgil and Alexander Pope's Camilla or like a ballerina skimming the ground. This strangely liminal ontology is what allows him to 'dissolve' in the waltz – as it was feared women would do as the incessant spinning around made them lose their sense and self-control – or 'prouder prance', shooting his masculinity over the top like Mick Jagger, Bette Midler, or any other self-assured drag queen. As a dancer, Juan transgresses the typical image of the male, with all his lumps and bumps, and instead choreographs a type of male performance that, while gesturing to eighteenth-century codes of elegance and breeding, self-consciously maps a new, *unself-conscious* performance of femininity. Queerly, Juan seems closer to the ballerina *en travesti* here than to any conventionally imagined 'grand danseur'. It's little wonder, then, that we should hear the narrator complain of being nonplussed, of being unable sufficiently to narrate this effect: 'The *'tout ensemble'* of [Juan's] movements wore a / Grace of the soft Ideal, seldom shown, / And ne'er to be described; for to the dolour / Of bards and prozers, words are void of colour' (XIV, 40, 5–8).

While Juan's dancing may display 'a grace ... seldom shown and ne'er to be described', the narrator does a pretty good job of describing it. Indeed, it is in the description of Juan dancing – of Juan as a *male dancer* – that we leave the satiric or parodic world of dance commentary that Byron has consistently shown throughout his discussion on dance. Juan, we are told, 'had an ear for music's sound, / Which might defy a Crotchet Critic's rigour', but it's precisely the relationship between Juan and his 'crotchet critic' that is the ultimate subject of this passage. The double-speak of parody that dismissed Wordsworth and Southey in the Preface, and that undermined Horace Hornem's authority in 'Waltz', here gives way to a different kind of double-speak, one based in homage and adoration rather than dismissal. 'Crotchet' is, of course, a pun: Byron is using the word in its musical significance meaning a quarter note, thus suggesting Juan's perfection in his musical rhythm; but he's also using it in the sense of perverse and unfounded crankiness, the crotchiness of bachelors as they carp from the wings. Juan's elegance and grace disarms the queer bitch's critique and fosters in him an admiration for this moving, dancing male body, one that deviates from the anti-danseur fashion developing in the 1820s. Or, significantly, that plays into it perfectly: the only male dancer that Théophile Gautier had any praise for, one Jules Perrot, was acceptable to the dance stage only because he was effeminate, a close approximation of the ballerinas of the day. A close approximation, but he still had that pesky bulge to give the game away. What made Perrot

remarkable to Gautier is that he was effeminate *as a man*; his masculinity was crucial in determining his greatness. And the same is true of Juan: he may be adorable for holding in his masculinity and dissolving, but he's also adorable for pride and prancing. If he has the lumps and bumps of a male physique like a hussar, that's all to the good, because these lumps reveal that this is a *man* who can dance. And it's the lumps and bumps that pervade the choreographic imagination as men are being driven from the stage. After all, the waltz was scandalous ultimately because it was the first social dance to turn partners from their positions side by side to face each other, where hips and loins met, and where the observer could no longer see but could not help but image the pubic areas of each of the partners. If the dance critic/narrator of *Don Juan* can image our boy dissolving, I think we know why. When it comes to this queer critical observer, Juan puts the 'crotch' back in 'crotchet'.

Finally, this claim that words cannot describe Juan's dancing is not a simple modesty trope deployed by the narrator to satirize himself; rather, the very inability to speak or write Juan's dancing is gendered and sexualized in an important way. We may remember that the 'virgin throng' of dancers on Lambro's island in Canto III were able to 'set ten poets raving' (III, 30, 6), but Juan's 'grace' affords no such *ekphrasis*: 'words are void of colour' (XIV, 40, 8). This pronounced silence may be Byron's gesture to that perfidious word not to be uttered among Christians, the love that dare not speak its name, the continually conjured, continually erased designation of the homoerotic sodomite (see Sedgwick 1985, 94–6 and 1990, 74). It may be, but I doubt it. Byron is talking about the culturally sanctioned activity of dance, the performance that glues together the fragments of high social life. Descriptions of balls permeate *Don Juan*; they are not unspeakable in any material sense. Perhaps Byron's pronounced silence is expressing the highly recognized separation in the early nineteenth century between dancing and language, where writers on dance were increasingly feeling the impossibility of recording such a slippery, ephemeral, and corporeal art as dance.⁸ This too seems unlikely. When it comes to women dancing, Byron does not hesitate to declare their representability in language. 'Ten poets rave'. There is something about the homoeros of a man dancing and a man watching that belies description while taking us beyond the (paranoid?) desire to drive men off the stage altogether.

That something can be explained by Byron's queer revision of Jules Janin and his claim that the male dancer 'corresponds to nothing, he represents nothing, he is nothing'. To correspond to nothing, to represent nothing, is to suggest metonymically and antithetically a whole range of

some things, a swath of possibilities for choreographic and corporeal erotics that cannot be conscripted in advance. The male dancer refuses to signify a conventional masculinity, a conventional sexuality, a conventional relationship between the dancing spectacle and his/her crotchet critic. (And it was this refusal and unconventionality that kept men relatively unimportant in nineteenth-century stage dance until Nijinsky ... but that's another queer story.) In performing this refusal, the male dancer produces with his critical male observer a visual field governed by the ten thousand magnetic pulls we saw in my opening quotation. In Byron's *oeuvre*, this magnetism is established by a separation between he who dances and he who writes. For in the final analysis, we must remember that Juan has never written poetry because 'His duties warlike, loving or official, / His steady application as a dancer / Had kept him from the brink of Hippocrene' (XI, 51, 5–7). His observer/critic, the Jack Horner, sits in a corner and watches the dance, claiming he is unable or unwilling to do it himself. When it comes to dancing Byron may situate himself as the dyspeptic bachelor in the box, but his captivated and shameless consumption of the male dancer has its own erotic poetics, poetics that are as articulate as dancing itself.

notes

1. Here I part from earlier work, including my own, that seeks to find and theorize same-sex genital contact in Byron's life and then read the implications of the contact in his work. See in particular Louis Crompton's *Byron and Greek Love*, Jerome Christensen's *Lord Byron's Strength* (especially chapter 3), and chapter 1 of my *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic*. In "One Half What I Should Say": Byron's Gay Narrator in *Don Juan*, Jonathan David Gross comes closer to my own interests later in this essay when I consider the erotics of the relationship between Juan and his narrator. While I'm interested in tracing a different phenomenon in Byron's discursive strategies, and while I'm uncomfortable with Gross's ahistorical use of the word 'gay', I think Gross's argument can be read nicely with mine in identifying Byron's peculiarly disruptive sexual strategies.
2. Frances Wilson, in the notes to her edition of Lamb's novel *Glenarvon*, writes that 'While the *Morning Post* called Lamb a "correct and animated waltzer", Lamb claimed that due to Byron's limp: "he had made me swear I was never to waltz"' (Lamb 1995, 369 n. 70). Wilson is quoting Elizabeth Jenkins's 1932 biography of Lamb (Jenkins 1932, 149).
3. In *Reflecting Narcissus* I consider the conflation of the homoerotic voyeur with the bitchy critic in Byron's play, *The Deformed Transformed*.
4. In 1816, when Byron was travelling through Switzerland with John Cam Hobhouse, he records a scene in a public house in Brientz: 'The whole town of Brientz were apparently gathered together in the rooms below—pretty music—& excellent Waltzing—none but peasants—the dancing much better

than in England—the English can't Waltz—never could—nor ever will. One man with his pipe in his mouth—but danced as well as the others—some other dances in pairs—and in fours—and very good' (BLJ V, 103).

Byron didn't hate the dance, he just hated the way the *British* – and British Society – danced. Foreigners of the lower classes, he tells us, can do it much better, because they have no self-consciousness. These foreign others dance with gusto, perceiving no separation between themselves and their movement, or between themselves and the other dancers in the democratic corps.

5. Indeed, as Gary Dyer has written of 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers', no less than 'Satan deems waltzing too carnal even for his demons' (Dyer 2002, 6). And Byron's catalogue of pedigrees of debutants affords us another example of his bemoaning the dance as a collapse of distinction that breeds stupidity: 'Some waltz; some draw; some fathom the abyss / Of metaphysics, others are content / With music, the most moderate shine as wits, / While others have a genius turned for fits' (*Don Juan* XII, 52, 5–8).

Apart from its shots at Lady Byron and Lady Caroline Lamb, what's most notable about this catalogue is the way it is flanked by the waltz and the throwing of fits, two highly choreographed modes of women's irrational expression. It is this combination that Felicia McCarren (1998) takes up as she analyzes the conjoining of nineteenth-century dance with theories of women's madness.

6. This extreme suspicion of waltz's licentiousness was short-lived. By 1816 Thomas Wilson could observe that 'Waltzing, notwithstanding all the opposition it more extensive practice has had to encounter, is now generally considered so *chaste*, in comparison with Country Dancing, Cotillions, or any other species of Dancing, that truth looses [sic] not a jot of its veracity when it is affirmed, that, in most parties, where Dancing is resorted to as an amusement, Waltzing is more frequently substituted for Country Dancing, than the *latter* is for the *former*' (Wilson 1816, 154).

7. To 'glance' is to move, spring, and turn quickly or obliquely, as in a Spanish dance.

8. According to dance historian Susan Leigh Foster, 'By the late 1820s dance, although it remained joyously light, also became identified with loss. Its ephemerality impressed viewers as much as its buoyancy. This transient quality of dancing – the fact that it disappeared as rapidly as it presented itself – had never concerned late-eighteenth-century choreographers.... Now, in the wake of melodrama's functionalist distinction between speech and gesture, with a burgeoning capitalist economy through which all the arts began to circulate, and with the intensified masculinization of public space, dance took on a new role in relation to other arts. It alone lacked the capability to inscribe itself. It alone endured only in one's memory' (Foster 1996, 197).

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