

# Byron and the Problem with Memory Arts: Writing *Don Juan* for an Age of “Uncertain Paper”

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**I**N a curious passage from the first canto of his *Don Juan* (1819–24), George Gordon, Lord Byron describes Juan’s mother, the shrewd Donna Inez, as a woman whose memory needs no artificial aid:

Her memory was a mine: she knew by heart  
All Calderon and greater part of Lope,  
So that if any actor miss’d his part  
She could have served him for the prompter’s copy;  
For her Feinagle’s were an useless art,  
And he himself obliged to shut up shop—he  
Could never make a memory so fine as  
That which adorn’d the brain of Donna Inez.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), V, 12; Canto I, stanza 9. Further references to Byron’s works are to this edition. Hereafter *Don Juan* is cited parenthetically in the text by page, canto, and stanza number.

Though Byron is clearly satirizing Donna Inez's memory in this passage, his mention of "Feinagle" raises several questions. Who is "Feinagle," and what is his "art"? How does one "make" a person's memory and to what effect? Most editions of *Don Juan* have noted that Byron is referring to a memory system designed by Gregor von Feinaigle, outlined in a book titled *The New Art of Memory* (1812).<sup>2</sup> Readers might be tempted to stop there, inferring that Byron's invocation of Feinaigle is a localized reference to a bit of Romantic popular culture. Yet there is more to the significance of Feinaigle, both for *Don Juan* and for Romantic print culture, than first meets the eye. I view Feinaigle's work as a touchstone for an expanding set of Romantic-era mnemonic systems—variously called "arts of memory," "artificial memory," or "memoria technica"—that proliferated rapidly during the Regency, spiraling into what *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* would later decry as an "explosion of mnemonics."<sup>3</sup>

While most people think of memory arts as a classical or medieval practice that died out in the early modern period, new forms of artificial memory arose and flourished in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In other words, the Romantic era witnessed a strange, perceptible uptick in mnemonic interest. We can look, for example, at the publication history of Thomas Grey's *Memoria Technica: or, a New Method of Artificial Memory*. Grey's mnemonic treatise, which was first published in 1730, was one of the few texts about memory arts to arise in the eighteenth century—and it initially sold well—but, by the 1760s, sales languished. Then, in 1790, Grey's work suddenly acquired new interest. Between 1789 and 1830, at least ten new editions were published—more than had been published while Grey was alive. Further, while Grey's mnemonic work had been an anomaly on the eighteenth-century

<sup>2</sup> For example, the Variorum edition of *Don Juan* notes, "Gregor von Feinaigle (1765?-1819) lectured in England and Scotland in 1811" and supplies Moore's note to the text informing readers that Feinaigle lectured on "Mnemonics." See Willis W. Pratt, *Byron's "Don Juan," Volume IV: Notes on the Variorum Edition* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1957), p. 24, n. 11:5.

<sup>3</sup> [Henry Thompson], "Memory—Suggestions against the Encouragement of it," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 16 (1824), 139.

book market, between 1790 and 1840 more than thirty different memory systems were published—most going through multiple editions. Beginning in 1811, artificial memory practices were bolstered by a vibrant series of lectures and experiments that came to influence charity schools and other educational projects. By 1819, governesses were advertising their training in discrete mnemonic systems.<sup>4</sup> The terms “artificial memory” or “*memoria technica*” were seemingly everywhere in Romantic culture—and frequent references to the subject appear in various writings by canonical authors, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, Jane Austen, and, of course, Byron.<sup>5</sup>

While a diverse array of mnemonic systems took the Regency by storm, the system that Byron cites by name was one of the most influential. The work of “Gregor von Feinaigle” first became familiar to English audiences in 1811, when he gave a series of lectures on “Mnemonics and Methodics” in London.<sup>6</sup> What set Feinaigle apart was his sense of panache. To illustrate the merits of his system, he put on a series of demonstrations showcasing local charity school students who, under his tutelage, could now perform incredible feats of memorization. In the summer of 1811, for example, newspapers reported that Feinaigle appeared before the Royal Institution, where, “to the astonishment of all the spectators,” he presented a child who “could repeat [Oliver] Goldsmith’s Hermit, backward and forward, and state the stanza, the line and the order of any remarkable word required of him,” while another “little girl answered in questions in the chronology of the Roman

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the advertisement from *Saunders’s News-Letter*, Monday, 5 October 1818.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the proliferation of Romantic memory arts and their relationship to literature, see Grace Rexroth, “Wordsworth’s Poetic *Memoria Technica*: What ‘Tintern Abbey’ Remembers,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 60 (2021), 153–74.

<sup>6</sup> See the editor’s account of Feinaigle’s lecture tour in [John Millard], *The New Art of Memory, Founded Upon the Principles Taught by M. Gregor Von Feinaigle: To Which Is Prefixed, Some Account of the Principle Systems of Artificial Memory, From the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1812), pp. 237–39. See also A. E. Middleton [and G. S. Fellows], *Memory Systems New and Old . . . Enlarged, with Bibliography of Mnemonics, 1325–1888*, by G. S. Fellows, M.A. (New York: G. S. Fellows & Co. 1888), pp. 27–30.

Emperors.”<sup>7</sup> Such demonstrations increased attendance at Feinaigle’s lectures and workshops, and in 1812 John Millard, a former student of Feinaigle’s, published a book based on his system, titled *The New Art of Memory*—and this is where things get interesting. Millard’s book was published anonymously and misleadingly attributed to Feinaigle, even though Feinaigle himself had not been involved in its production. As a result, there are key differences between Feinaigle’s lectures and Millard’s book (some of which are highlighted by Millard himself) that offer us an interesting glimpse at the larger tensions and anxieties animating the resurgent fad for mnemonics during the Regency period.

One notable feature of Millard’s ambitious book is the fact that it provided a comprehensive overview not only of Feinaigle’s system but of the history of memory arts more broadly. In 1888, historian A. E. Middleton argued: “This work is probably the most complete ever issued in the English language upon this subject” (*Memory Systems New and Old*, p. 28). Middleton highlights the thoroughness of the print volume itself—the fact that it “extends to nearly 500 pages,” two hundred of which are “devoted to Feinaigle’s system, the remainder being occupied with details of other systems” including “long extracts from the older works on memory, in some instances reprinting them in their entirety” (*Memory Systems New and Old*, p. 28). Essentially, Millard’s book sought to immortalize Feinaigle’s system while also contextualizing it within the long history of memory arts, dating back to the Roman rhetoricians.

One might be tempted here to dwell on the details of the system itself and its implications for *Don Juan*.<sup>8</sup> However, it is

<sup>7</sup> [Anon.], “Mnemonics,” *The Parthenon; And Academian’s Magazine* 1 (1832–33), 208–9.

<sup>8</sup> This is precisely the track pursued by Stuart Peterfreund, who argues that Feinaigle “follows the tradition, dating back to Simonides, of spatializing memory,” but with a twist (Peterfreund, “Juan the Memorious: The Feinaiglian Narrative Dynamics of *Don Juan*,” *European Romantic Review*, 17 [2006], 403). Peterfreund notes that “Feinaigle’s spatializations involve implausible mini-narratives that heighten memorability,” and he suggests that “Byron also mobilizes implausibility in the service of making *Don Juan* memorable,” harnessing the techniques of artificial memory to enhance his poem (“Juan the Memorious,” p. 403). I tend to disagree with both Peterfreund’s assessment of how Feinaigle’s system works as well as his view of how *Don*

unlikely that Byron was engaged with the complexities of mnemonics. While Feinaigle's system was certainly employed in various capacities—by both individual readers and schools—the educated elite tended to see it as little more than an entertaining diversion. Even in *The Quarterly Review's* fairly positive account of the system, the reviewer notes: “There is a general disposition in the public to suspect some latent quackery even in the best parts of such systems; and it would be difficult to avert the scepticism of those, who are impatient of means, as well as of effect.”<sup>9</sup> Instead of focusing on the complexities of the system itself—its dry and repetitive rules—we should take seriously the way *The New Art of Memory* presents itself as a print object. The whole book, I argue, makes visible a larger unfolding drama of print culture, an anxious preoccupation with how to remember the products of an expanding print industry as well as a concern with the mediums of communication best able to facilitate memorability.

It is important that Millard transforms Feinaigle's lectures into print, while also contextualizing his system amid past memory arts. Millard's transformation of Feinaigle's system stands out because unlike memory arts of the past, which focused on memory for the purposes of oration, it offered itself to “Men of Reading” who wished “to *Retain* what they read with . . . Certainty or Exactness.”<sup>10</sup> The framing of Feinaigle's system in print attunes us to the way reading audiences were becoming more preoccupied with how to remember the printed page. As the print landscape of the Regency era changed and expanded, print acquired new force for mediating memory at the personal, cultural, and historical levels in ways that are

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*Juan* is in conversation with it. There is much more to Feinaigle's system and Byron's poem than a reliance on implausible mini-narratives.

<sup>9</sup> [Anon.], “Feinaigle and Grey's Artificial Memory” (rev. of *The New Art of Memory, Founded upon the Principles Taught by M. Gregor von Feinaigle*, and Richard Grey, *Memoria Technica, or Method of Artificial Memory*), *Quarterly Review*, 9 (1813), 125.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Grey, *Memoria Technica: or, a New Method of Artificial Memory* (London: Charles King, 1730), p. iii. For more on Medieval Renaissance arts, see Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); and Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008).

uniquely documented by the explosion of paper mnemonics.<sup>11</sup> In this essay, I argue that *Don Juan* responds to these dynamic changes—that Byron’s initial denigration of artificial memory systems can be interpreted as a key for unlocking a hidden language of memory that animates the poem. As with other topical references—whether to William Wordsworth’s poetry or Sir Humphry Davy’s lantern—this allusion to memory arts opens the poem onto key aspects of Byron’s world. In many ways, *Don Juan* is a poem *about* memory, and, in both its content and its form, it records for us some of modernity’s most central tensions related to acts of remembering, including the tangled interrelations between personal and public memory, the political significance of memorializing official histories and counterhistories, and the way literary memory can influence one’s actions in the world. In short, *Don Juan* dramatizes the problems of modern memory at the very moment when print culture was beginning to make these problems both more visible and more democratically accessible. Attuning ourselves to the debates of artificial memory can, I argue, enable us to better understand the social and political stakes of one of Byron’s most complex and significant literary works, while also helping us to understand the role that memory plays in navigating a politically tumultuous world.



One of the chief problems that Millard’s account of Feinaigle highlights is how print both shapes and challenges memory. In the preface to the first edition of *The New Art of Memory*, Feinaigle’s former student—the anonymous “editor” of the work—suggests somewhat ironically that

<sup>11</sup> Ian Donaldson argues that Byron’s concerns about print proliferation echo Alexander Pope’s concerns from a century earlier (see Donaldson, “The Destruction of the Book,” *Book History*, 1 [1998], 1–10). However, Kim Wheatley and Andrew Piper (among others) have worked to demonstrate that the proliferation and circulation of print in the Romantic period was materially different from past eras (see Kim Wheatley, “Introduction,” in *Romantic Periodicals and Print Culture*, ed. Wheatley (London: Frank Cass and Co., 2003), pp. 1–19; and Andrew Piper, *Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 2009)).

Feinaigle's system, designed to help readers remember print, was itself in need of a print supplement:

The Editor attended one course of lectures, and . . . took very copious notes. Finding, however, that the materials which he had thus collected, were so confused and disorderly, as to be nearly, if not wholly useless . . . he applied himself to draw up these lectures in a more intelligible form, *for his own use*; supplying, at length, the analogies and other illustrations to which the lecturer had very cursorily and distantly alluded. In this attempt, . . . the matter swelled itself nearly to the contents of the following pages.

Several of his friends who had attended the Lectures, were pleased to think that . . . the science, thus illustrated and explained, was much more intelligible than it was in its original state of communication.<sup>12</sup>

Here, as a means of justifying his book to the public, the editor creates an oddly cyclical relationship between print and memory in which books are framed as both the problem and the solution for a deficient memory. Students attended Feinaigle's lectures because they sought a system to help them remember printed material—from historical chronology to poetry to geography—yet the editor suggests that the very system meant to help readers remember print might itself benefit from print mediation.

*The Quarterly Review*, however, disagreed with the underlying assumptions of Millard's book, stating:

We have long been disposed to think that it would be impossible to convey in writing an adequate and practical explanation of the system of mnemonics arranged by Feinaigle. The present publication, which is illustrated by plates and diagrams, and is not deficient in merit, tends to confirm our opinion. ("Feinaigle and Grey's Artificial Memory," p. 127)

To the reviewer, the printed version of Feinaigle's system was not the elucidating tool it claimed to be; print materiality could not, in and of itself, solve the problems it had created. Such a concern gestures to the expansion of the Romantic print

<sup>12</sup> [Millard], preface to *The New Art of Memory*, p. vi.

landscape as a central feature in discussions about the utility of memory arts. Maria Edgeworth makes this clear in her own critique of artificial memory systems, which suggests that memory arts are problematic precisely because print itself can be considered an aid to memory:

The [modern] art of printing, by multiplying copies so as to put them within the easy reference of all classes of people, has lowered the value of . . . retentive memory. It is better to refer to the book itself, than to the man who has read the book. Knowledge is . . . safely stored up in the great common-place books of public libraries. A man of literature need not encumber his memory with whole passages from the authors he wants to quote; he need only mark down the page, and the words are safe.

Mere erudition does not in these days ensure permanent fame.<sup>13</sup>

For Edgeworth, books become an extension of one's memory—the age of printing has made “erudition” a defunct skill. She emphasizes the way that the proliferation of material books keeps words “safe,” storing them for future use. Yet Millard counters this claim by suggesting the limits of its practical utility—one cannot, after all, cart a physical library around everywhere.<sup>14</sup>

Byron in *Don Juan* also questions whether print objects, including his poem itself, provide the kind of sustainable memory archive that Edgeworth imagines. For example, after describing “Don Juan’s earliest scrape” in Canto I, Byron pauses to ruminate on the plan for his “epic” poem and to take up again the problematic uncertainty of heroic fame (*Don Juan*, pp. 72–73; I, 199, 200):

What is the end of fame? 'tis but to fill

A certain portion of uncertain paper:

.....  
For this men write, speak, preach, and heroes kill,

<sup>13</sup> Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Practical Education* (London: J. Johnson, 1798), pp. 555–56.

<sup>14</sup> See Millard, *The New Art of Memory*, p. 241.



And bards burn what they call their 'midnight taper,'  
 To have, when the original is dust,  
 A name, a wretched picture and worse bust.

(p. 79; I, 218)

As Andrew Stauffer notes, the last line of this stanza in Byron's manuscript initially read "A book—a damned bad picture—and a worse bust."<sup>15</sup> Byron's preoccupation with "fame" produced by "uncertain paper" highlights his anxiety about both the necessity and ephemerality of print material. Contrary to Edgeworth, Byron does not seem to have an abiding belief in the safety of print texts or an assurance that the ideas, historical facts, or stories we wish to preserve can be reliably retained by printed books alone. In fact, Byron again jokes about the unreliability of print in the second canto, when he speculates that, in a year, an aristocrat's "new portmanteau, / . . . may be lined with this my canto" (*Don Juan*, p. 94; II, 16). Yet, like Millard, Byron presents his own work in print to address the problem that print itself has caused. Like the mnemonists, Byron deploys the very medium (print) that he identifies as problematic and unstable as a corrective tool for those problems.

Feinaigle imagined his system aiding readers bombarded with an ever-growing archive of print materials. Byron, too, sees the stress placed on memory and history by the explosion of print culture. The first verse of the first canto of *Don Juan* draws attention to the unruly nature of Byron's print landscape. Byron asserts that he wants "a hero," but notes that it is

an uncommon want,  
 When every year and month sends forth a new one,  
 Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,  
 The age discovers he is not the true one.

(*Don Juan*, p. 9; I, 1)

In Byron's formulation, his age is saturated by transitory heroes—a problem both produced and exacerbated by the circulation of printed "gazettes." It is print itself—repeatedly creating and destroying military heroes—that frames Byron's

<sup>15</sup> Andrew M. Stauffer, "Byron, the Pyramids, and 'Uncertain Paper,'" *The Wordsworth Circle*, 36 (2005), 11.

desire for the “hero” he does not have. The poem thus begins with an appeal to literary or narrative permanence amid a sea of print ephemera.

Throughout *Don Juan*, we see that it is not just the memorability of military heroes (or lack thereof) that occupies Byron’s mind; his broader concern is that the increasingly prominent yet transient nature of print changes how readers engage with and remember poetry. Like Feinaigle, Byron does not seem to feel that the increased circulation of print has made words safe, and yet, contrary to Feinaigle, he refuses the idea that there are any easy answers to be found in memory arts. Indeed, the character who comes closest to becoming a “walking calculation” of exact but useless memory—Donna Inez—is lambasted chiefly for her inability to put her memory of what she has read to any practical use in raising Don Juan, whose primary fault is laughingly described as a failure of “education” (*Don Juan*, p. 13; I, 16; and p. 89; II, 1–2). In Canto I, for example, Byron satirizes the tropes of memorable chronology, stating that “Most epic poets plunge in ‘media res’”:

That is the usual method, but not mine—  
 My way is to begin with the beginning;  
 The regularity of my design  
 Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning.  
(pp. 10–11; I, 6–7)

This urge to “begin with the beginning” and create a regular design was a common feature of most memory arts. For example, in his *The Elements of Useful Knowledge* (1793), John Adams argues: “In the study of history, an *exact chronology* is like Ariadne’s *clue*, which guides us through the different windings of the *labyrinth*; and the mind being thus conducted, the ideas we obtain from reading are more distinct, and more easily fixed in the memory.”<sup>16</sup> Byron’s satiric attention to creating a systematized, linear narrative leads him to start his story with Don Juan’s family lineage, so that it looks, at the outset, exactly like a lesson in historical chronology. Rather than starting with the

<sup>16</sup> [John] Adams, *The Elements of Useful Knowledge*... (London: B. Law and Son, 1793), p. 94.

action of the poem, he begins the story by “Narrating somewhat of Don Juan’s father, / And also of his mother, if you’d rather” (p. 11; I, 7). Similarly, when the narrator describes Donna Julia’s beauty, he interrupts himself to tell the history of her “blood,” starting with “Her great great grandmamma” (p. 26; I, 56).

Yet the narrator’s seeming preoccupation with linear narrative form and family lineage—the tenets of artificial memory systems—is shown to be more farce than fact. Throughout the poem, Byron delights in narrative digression or the “sin” of wandering—an aspect of the poem that mirrors Don Juan’s own transgressive rambling. While the narrative initially seems to pander to prescribed forms of social and historical memory, it eventually subverts them, to remind us that life is not mere chronology to be memorized.

However, Byron’s satiric portrayal of the tenets of memory systems is not meant simply to minimize the problems with an expanding print landscape or the value of memory more broadly. Rather, Byron shows us that the way memory systems have chosen to diagnose the problem of print culture is inherently flawed. The chief problem with the expansion of print is not that it becomes harder to remember everything, but that it becomes harder to distinguish what *should* be remembered in the midst of it all. This is not just a problem for our individual, private memories, but for the public memory we call history.<sup>17</sup> What is remembered shapes who we are, where we believe we have been, and where we are going. It is not just an issue of whether Don Juan remembers Donna Julia when he falls in love with Haidee; it is a question of what we should remember as a culture, particularly a culture fighting key ideological battles such as those of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras.

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Nora argues that the bifurcation of memory and history is a modern problem. Nora imagines some earlier time when memory and history were concepts too imbricated in daily life to be distinct. Yet, within modernity, history “conquers” and “eradicates” memory. Byron’s use of these terms is not as distinct as Nora’s. Memory and history often blend together; at various moments in *Don Juan* Byron seems to conflate personal memory, history, and literary narrative. See Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7–24.

Though *Don Juan* is a mock-epic poem that is often flip-pant and irreverent, Byron claims it is also singularly and seriously concerned with recording certain “facts” of history. In doing so, it dramatizes part of the debate about mnemonics; that there are some things that *must* be remembered and cannot be left, as Edgeworth would have it, to be stored by print alone. Byron weaves history into his poem so that at certain points the two projects become indistinguishable. At the end of Canto VI, for example, Byron writes that he must “arrange another part of history” in the next canto and notes that “The Muse will take a little touch at warfare” (*Don Juan*, p. 335; VI, 120). In this formulation, Byron’s poetic muse is deliberately linked to the writing of history. Indeed, Byron argues, “’tis the part / Of a true poet to escape from fiction / Whene’er he can” (p. 391; VIII, 86). Such allusions prove to be more than just superficial framing mechanisms, especially when considering the war cantos, which literally become a form of versified history, taken, almost word for word in some cases, from the Marquis Gabriel de Castelnau’s *Essai sur l’Histoire ancienne et moderne de la Nouvelle Russie* (1820). At such moments, Byron seems to position himself alongside historians—as if his poem were an extension of other forms of printed history. Further, there are times when Byron seems to suggest that there is very little difference between printed accounts of “history” and other forms of literary and artistic production. At the end of Canto I, Byron writes:

I appeal  
 To history, tradition, and to facts,  
 To newspapers, whose truth all know and feel,  
 To plays in five, and operas in three acts;  
 All these confirm my statement a good deal.

(p. 74; I, 203)

In this joking formulation, there is no substantial difference between the truth of “history” or “newspapers” and the truth of plays and operas. What unites them is the urgency and importance of what is communicated and what should be remembered.

To this point, there are other moments when Byron seems eager to correct “history”—to critique its distorted simplicity. In Canto VIII, he writes:

History can only take things in the gross;  
 But could we know them in detail, perchance  
 In balancing the profit and the loss,  
 War’s merit it by no means might enhance.  
(*Don Juan*, p. 365; VIII, 3)

Here Byron chastises the way that “history”—and, of course, history as chronological outline of mnemonic systems—tends to become problematically reductive, warping the formation of our ideas and values. Such observations are furthered throughout the war cantos and become especially important to the way that Byron contends with the casualties of war and the illusory ideal of “fame.” He offers his poem as a challenge to that history—a way of reeducating a populace in need of a new history lesson. For example, while criticizing the Duke of Wellington and the memorialization of the Battle of Waterloo, Byron writes:

... the unflattering Muse deigns to inscribe  
 Truths that you will not read in the Gazettes,  
 But which ’tis time to teach the hireling tribe  
 Who fatten on their Country’s gore, and debts,  
*Must* be recited.  
(p. 411; IX, 10; emphasis in original)

Here Byron invokes the way that children learn history by rote—by reciting—and offers his poem as a corrective tool to England’s “hireling tribe.” In these moments, he highlights the power that poetic literary narrative holds over supposedly objective prose. Through the poem, we come to question how history is recorded, learned, and narrativized because Byron seems conscious of how both the material and the generic workings of his poem stand in relation to the production of “history” in printed newspapers, gazettes, and scholarly books—and he offers his poem as an alternative.

Of course, scholars have long considered Byron’s attention to the problems of history—especially in *Don Juan*. For example, in “*Don Juan*” in *Context* (1976), Jerome McGann offered

a nuanced consideration of the evolution of Byron as a poet leading up to the publication of *Don Juan*. McGann was particularly interested in tracing the literary influences on the poem—Byron’s relationship to John Milton, for instance, and his challenge to the traditions of classical rhetoric.<sup>18</sup> Here history is first and foremost literary history. Similarly, in *Byron, Poetics and History* (2002), Jane Stabler tackled *Don Juan*’s ottava rime and argued that an attention to poetic form can offer us a means of reexamining “the poem’s relationship with its reader at particular historical moments”; in a sense, Stabler is interested in the history of Byron’s poetic response to his moment, but particularly to his readers.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, James Chandler’s *England in 1819* (1998) considered *Don Juan* within the larger cultural shift in temporal self-consciousness that, Chandler argued, gave rise to our contemporary notion of historicism itself. Chandler suggests that in *Don Juan*, Byron, like Walter Scott, created a new form of contemporaneity—a means of engaging with the history of his moment as “the spirit of the age.”<sup>20</sup> While each of these studies offer us a different way of thinking about Byron’s relationship to history (and indeed, what the term “history” itself means), they do not consider how “history” was being refashioned as a *practice* of memory within Romanticism’s changing print landscape. I see this refashioning as an essential context for understanding the work of Byron’s poem. Further, beyond making the problems of print and memory visible, I would argue that Byron’s goal is to find in history the narrative levers to transform the present into a better future—to show the true utility of readerly memory.

For Byron, some history must be remembered to bring about change—why else would he charge the “hireling tribe” to recite the truths he will tell them? Yet he does not suggest that all history should necessarily be remembered for all time. When he imagines future generations of readers, Byron writes:

<sup>18</sup> See Jerome J. McGann, “*Don Juan*” in *Context* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976).

<sup>19</sup> Jane Stabler, *Byron, Poetics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> See James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 179–82.

You hardly will believe such things were true  
 As now occur, I thought that I would pen you 'em;  
 But may their very memory perish too!—  
 Yet if perchance remembered, still disdain you 'em.  
 (*Don Juan*, p. 406; VIII, 136)

Here Byron's hope is that the memory of certain parts of history will fade when that history is no longer needed to influence the present. In this formulation, history must be remembered—by the individual and by the nation—until its use-value has expired. The relationship between memory and history is thus both imperative and inconstant. In this way, Byron shows us that the way memory systems have chosen to diagnose the problem of “remembering” is flawed. The chief problem with the expansion of print is not that it becomes harder to remember everything, but that it becomes harder to distinguish what should be remembered and to what end.



At myriad points in *Don Juan*, Byron asks the reader to consider how their memory of history might shape their actions in the present. With this in mind, the “Dedication” to *Don Juan* takes on new significance because it structures the content of the poem and frames the problems of memory in clearer terms. It begins with a critique of the Lake School poets, and specifically Robert Southey, who was then poet laureate.<sup>21</sup> By highlighting Southey at the outset, Byron underscores the relationship between the production of poetry and historical memory; for, as poet laureate, Southey is responsible for commemorating and memorializing the history of the nation in verse, but, according to Byron, Southey is getting it wrong. Byron's opening lines—“Bob Southey! You're a poet—poet Laureate, / And representative of all the race”—evinces a kind of sardonic rage (*Don Juan*, p. 3; Dedication, 1). Following Leigh Hunt's and William Hazlitt's examples, Byron

<sup>21</sup> Of course, when Byron agreed to publish the first two cantos of *Don Juan* anonymously in 1819, he initially withheld the Dedication from publication, but it still illuminates Byron's chief concerns.

denigrates Southey from the outset by reducing his name to “Bob.”<sup>22</sup> Byron marks Southey in common, pedestrian terms and then juxtaposes this degraded caricature with the office of “poet Laureate,” which technically makes Southey “representative of all the race.” Byron’s use of the term “race” here suggests that Southey’s work is meant to signify both the best of English poets and the record of the English “race” more broadly.<sup>23</sup> However, by the end of the Dedication, it also becomes clear that Byron is satirizing the way Southey is emblematic of the broader tradition of poet laureates—a fact made clear with repeated references to Southey’s predecessor, Henry James Pye. Byron jokes, for example, that Southey and the other “Lakers” are “Like ‘four and twenty blackbirds in a pie,’ / ‘A dainty dish to set before the King,’ / Or Regent, who admires such kind of food,” insinuating that their work reflects both the formal and the political faults of the former poet laureate, who was tasked with memorializing the history of the nation in verse (p. 3; Dedication, 1–2).

The Dedication ends with the claim, “Europe has slaves, allies, kings, armies still, / And Southey lives to sing them very ill” (*Don Juan*, p. 8; Dedication, 16). By suggesting that Southey “sings” the state of Europe, Byron satirizes the way the office of poet laureate apes the tradition of Greek epic for manipulative, political ends. He implies that if the historical record of English civilization hinged on its national poetic orator (as, perhaps, ancient Greek or Roman exploits did), England is doomed to suffer false, canting records at the hands of Southey. This sentiment persists throughout *Don Juan*. In Canto X, Byron writes:

The gentle Juan flourished, though at times  
 He felt like other plants called Sensitive,  
 Which shrink from touch, as monarchs do from rhymes,  
 Save such as Southey can afford to give.

(p. 448; X, 37)

<sup>22</sup> See Paul Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 135–37.

<sup>23</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* highlights the malleability of the term “race” in the Romantic period. As a noun, it could be used to signify “the line or succession of people holding an office” like that of the poet laureate (see *OED*, “race n.6,” definition I.6.c).



Here Byron overtly alludes to Southey's work as representing a falsely idealized monarchical history. As a corrective, Byron initially invokes Milton, suggesting that Milton would abhor what they have made of his legacy in the present: "He did not loathe the sire to laud the son, / But closed the tyrant-hater he begun"; "Would *he* adore a sultan? *he* obey / The intellectual eunuch Castlereagh?" (p. 6; Dedication, 10–11). *Don Juan* thus forces us, from the outset, to consider what is at stake in the work of poetry. It asks us to interrogate critically a poem's capacity to produce a form of historical memory with lasting consequences. As Byron put it in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1808–12), though "SOUTHEY'S Epics cram the creaking shelves," and "The loaded Press beneath her labour groans, / And Printer's devils shake their weary bones," this explosion does not ensure that the history we need is being preserved.<sup>24</sup> According to Byron, what we really need is a better kind of poetry.

It is perhaps for this reason that Byron repeatedly insists on the veracity of *Don Juan*. Toward the end of Canto I, Byron asserts: "There's only one slight difference between / Me and my epic brethren gone before / ... / ... this story's actually true" (*Don Juan*, pp. 73–74; I, 202). While Byron's satiric epic is tongue-in-cheek about many of its claims, there is much to suggest that he took this one seriously. Many of the fictionalized episodes in *Don Juan* are forged from real life. In a letter to John Cam Hobhouse, Byron wrote of Canto I:

the *Julian* adventure detailed was none of mine—but one of an acquaintance of mine—(Parolini by name) which happened some years ago at Bassano with the Prefect's wife when he was a boy—and was the Subject of a long cause ending in a divorce or separation of the parties during the Italian Vice-royalty.<sup>25</sup>

Byron thus insists on the veracity of this section of the poem's plot, and it is perhaps why, after describing Juan's first

<sup>24</sup> Lord Byron, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers: A Satire in The Complete Poetical Works*, I, 233, ll. 127, 125–26; emphasis in original.

<sup>25</sup> Lord Byron, letter to John Cam Hobhouse, 25 January 1819, in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1973–82), VI, 96.

seductive encounter with Donna Julia, Byron claims that his “poetic skill / For want of facts would all be thrown away” (*Don Juan*, p. 47; I, 121). Byron is also careful to record the sources he uses when writing about things or places he has not experienced. When describing the harem in Canto VI, for example, the Variorum edition notes that “[Thomas] Moore gives Aubry de la Motraye’s *Voyages* (1727) as a source for Byron’s description of Gulbeyaz’s apartment” (Pratt, *Byron’s “Don Juan,” Vol-ume IV: Notes on the Variorum Edition*, p. 152). In short, there is a strange documentary quality to *Don Juan* that Byron extends in the language of the actual poem through his overt insistence that much of the poem’s fictional escapades stem from “facts” or “truth”—from things that really happened.

Byron’s reliance on factual integrity in *Don Juan* reaches its zenith in the seventh and eighth cantos (the war cantos), which painstakingly detail the Siege of Ismail, which took place in December 1790 during the Russo-Turkish War of 1787–91. In Canto VII, when accounting for his depiction of the siege, Byron declares that his narration is rooted in fact, claiming, “fact is truth, the grand desideratum! / Of which, howe’er the Muse describes each act, / There should be ne’ertheless a slight substratum” (*Don Juan*, p. 361; VII, 81). Byron contends that poetry generally, and *Don Juan* more specifically, *must* contain truth—that it must adhere to the facts of history. Later, he even argues that there should be no difference between poetry and prose when it comes to historical precision:

But then the fact’s a fact—and ’tis the part  
 Of a true poet to escape from fiction  
 Whene’er he can; for there is little art  
 In leaving verse more free from the restriction  
 Of truth than prose, unless to suit the mart  
 For what is sometimes called poetic diction,  
 And that outrageous appetite for lies  
 Which Satan angles with, for souls, like flies.

(p. 391; VIII, 86)

Here Byron overtly claims that the work of a “true poet” is to write with the factual integrity one might expect of prose, subtly alluding to the importance of poetry for a nation’s

documented history. To that end, the war cantos literally become a form of versified history, taken (as previously noted) almost word for word in some cases, from Castelnau's *Essai sur l'Histoire ancienne et moderne de la Nouvelle Russie*. Throughout Canto VII, 26 out of 87 stanzas—a full 106 lines of poetry—reference or explicitly reproduce Castelnau's work. In Canto VIII, 35 out of 141 stanzas reference Castelnau. In transforming Castelnau's prose to verse, Byron changes very little of its substance; in most cases, his verse communicates the same information in the same order that Castelnau provides.<sup>26</sup>

When we consider this strict adherence to historical detail, the project of *Don Juan* in the war cantos seems to align with the work of print mnemonics to the extent that Byron appears keen to teach his readers about the facts of history in a way that renders them memorable. Yet Byron's project differs from mnemonics in key ways, and it is in the war cantos that the stakes of Byron's fastidiousness become most apparent. We might return to that moment in Canto VIII when Byron claims that "History can only take things in the gross" (*Don Juan*, p. 365; VIII, 3). There Byron chastises the way that "history" tends to become problematically reductive; events are reduced either to chronological dates (the way that artificial memory systems account for history) or they are reduced to problematic ideals (such as Wordsworth's and Southey's responses to the Battle of Waterloo that champion England's glory). Byron recognizes that, for a nation to foster patriotism in the midst of war, it may need to present an abstract or idealized version of its military exploits, but he is unwilling to allow his poetry to participate in that noble lie. Instead, Byron attempts to provide an alternative history in *Don Juan* and to correct the reductive mistakes made by writers in other forms of print culture. He takes great care to record the facts of violence at the Siege of Ismail because he believes that these details reveal the horrific absurdity of war and will prevent his readers from idealizing or perpetuating memorial glory. For Byron, it is the idealized abstraction of history that leads to bad poetry—to poetry that offers reductive

<sup>26</sup> For side-by-side readings of Byron and Castelnau, see Elizabeth French Boyd, *Byron's "Don Juan": A Critical Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

political cant—but it can be countered by a better, truer form of poetry. In this way Byron also reveals how his poetry might surpass artificial memory systems. It asks readers to do more than simply remember history: it asks them to critically consider the ideological work of remembering—how we distinguish what to remember and to what effect. Our personal memories, if we learn from Byron, provide a point of resistance to the memorialization of a canting history.

In this way, the details of the war cantos become a way of attuning Byron's readers to memorable truths that both depend upon and surpass the details of his story. His keen attention to historical detail does not necessarily mean that Byron believes the Siege of Ismail to be the most important battle of his era or the facts themselves to be of supreme significance. Indeed, if the point of the war cantos were about teaching readers to memorize the minutiae of a significant battle, then the more obvious choice for Byron's attention might have been the Battle of Waterloo (though this battle does not fit with the poem's prescribed timeline). In practical terms, the Siege of Ismail—though notable for its excessive casualties—has almost nothing to do with Britain's key military history and political interests. It was a battle fought by two nations that hover on the margins of mainland Europe. Yet this is, perhaps, exactly why it fits Byron's purposes. Byron knows the dangers that attend attempts to record the "truth" about England's recent wars—especially when it comes to the Battle of Waterloo. He alludes to this problem satirically in Canto VII, when describing the French volunteers who joined the Russian cause:

Then there were Frenchmen, gallant, young and gay:  
 But I'm too great a patriot to record  
 Their Gallic names upon a glorious day;  
 I'd rather tell ten lies than say a word  
 Of truth;—such truths are treason; they betray  
 Their country; and as traitors are abhorred  
 Who name the French in English, save to shew  
 How Peace should make John Bull the Frenchman's foe.

(*Don Juan*, p. 343; VII, 22)

While the phrase “such truths are treason” might seem slightly hyperbolic, Byron writes in the wake of the imprisonment of journalists such as the Hunt brothers and his own publisher’s squeamishness about printing *Don Juan*. Indeed, it is partly because of John Murray’s desire to censor Byron’s more provocative material that the war cantos themselves would be printed by John Hunt.

As Truman Steffan notes, when Byron resumed composition of *Don Juan*, he wanted to recover the “Wellington stanzas” that he had initially “lopped . . . off the third canto in 1819” and that were overtly critical of Wellington’s supposed victories, especially Waterloo.<sup>27</sup> Yet Byron also felt the danger of recovering such incendiary material for publication. He wrote to Thomas Moore: “If [the Wellington stanzas] have fallen into Murray’s hands, he and the Tories will suppress them, as those lines rate that hero at his real value.”<sup>28</sup> Of course, Byron had previously written about the Battle of Waterloo in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812–18). Yet Byron’s correspondence during the creation of *Don Juan* attunes us to the growing censorship around this topic. So, rather than again confronting a battle that would be clearly emblematic of England’s military history, but that could also cause legal troubles for his printer and publisher, Byron chose to tackle the problems of his age indirectly through the Siege of Ismail. One benefit of doing so is that it allows him to talk about war—the problems with valorizing memorial “glory” and eliding the costs of military triumph—without exciting his readers’ ingrained emotional responses to recent struggles or their nationalist pride. However, the battle is not so far removed from recent history as to be completely obscure. The Siege of Ismail occurred in December 1790, during the early years of the French Revolution, and thus gestures to the origin of England’s entrance into the Revolutionary and then Napoleonic Wars, culminating in the Battle of Waterloo.

<sup>27</sup> Truman Guy Steffan, *Byron’s “Don Juan,” Volume I: The Making of a Masterpiece* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1957), p. 47.

<sup>28</sup> Lord Byron, letter to Thomas Moore, 12 July 1822, in *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, IX, 183.

Early accounts of the Siege of Ismail may also give us further insight into Byron's choice. *The New Annual Register for 1791*, for example, condemned the Russians in no uncertain terms. It claimed that the Russian campaign was marked by "blood and cruelty," noting that while "the capture did not cost the Russians less than 10,000 men," they killed "upwards of 30,000 men," including a large number of "defenceless inhabitants" of the city.<sup>29</sup> The *New Annual Register's* final conclusion is that "the conduct of the conquerors was more that of a horde of cannibals than of a civilized people" ("British and Foreign History," p. 126). With this in mind, because Byron aligns English soldiers—and Juan himself—with the Russian campaign, the siege potentially allows him to also critique England's stance as a "conqueror" and to implicate the English in Russian barbarity. Writing about the Siege of Ismail thus allows Byron to offer distanced criticism of England's triumphs.

Further, Byron makes it clear that his condemnation of the Siege of Ismail addresses the costs of the Battle of Waterloo and the poets who have helped to commemorate it as a victory. When describing the movement of General Suwarrow's Russian troops into battle, Byron notes that "lives began to fall" as thickly as "leaves," but suggests that other poets treat such casualties as inevitable: "'Carnage' (so Wordsworth tells you) 'is God's daughter'" (*Don Juan*, p. 367; VIII, 9). The line that Byron alludes to here is from Wordsworth's "Thanksgiving Ode," a poem written for the day of Thanksgiving—18 January 1816—appointed to commemorate the victory at the Battle of Waterloo and the end of the Napoleonic war years. In the poem, Wordsworth describes the various ways that God controls natural elements to silence God's (and England's) enemies. This list includes God's control of tornados and volcanos, concluding:

<sup>29</sup> [Anon.], "British and Foreign History," *The New Annual Register, or General Repository of History, Politics, and Literature, for the Year 1791*, (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1792), pp. 125–26. See also [William Preston], "Argument," in *The Siege of Ismail: or, A Prospect of War. An Historical Tragedy. With a Preface, Argument and Explanatory Notes* (Dublin: Graisberry and Campbell, 1794), [p. 5].

But thy most dreaded instrument,  
 In working out a pure intent,  
 Is Man—arrayed for mutual slaughter,—  
 Yea, Carnage is thy daughter!<sup>30</sup>

This stanza becomes a kind of crescendo in Wordsworth's poem, a work meant to emphasize both the glory of God and the glory of England. Like Percy Bysshe Shelley in *Peter Bell the Third* (1819), Byron alludes to Wordsworth's line to subvert it, signaling to his audience that his account of the Siege of Ismail is also very much about the problematic commemoration of the Battle of Waterloo.<sup>31</sup>

Byron also mentions Waterloo more overtly; when describing Juan's entry into Ismail, for example, Byron refuses to claim that Juan was the first to enter the city, because doing so would elicit as deadly a quarrel as asserting that Wellington lost the Battle of Waterloo (though, he suggests, both assertions are true):

Among the first,—I will not say the *first*,  
 For such precedence upon such occasions  
 Will oftentimes make deadly quarrels burst  
 Out between friends as well as allied nations:  
 The Briton must be bold who really durst  
 Put to such trial John Bull's partial patience,  
 As say that Wellington at Waterloo  
 Was beaten—though the Prussians say so too.

(*Don Juan*, p. 379; VIII, 48)

This moment, like many others in *Don Juan*, appears to be a digressive aside that takes the reader away from the action of the poem. Yet this moment of digression actually *frames* the poetic action; through it, Byron forces his readers to link Juan's entry into Ismail with the Battle of Waterloo and Wellington's supposed victory. The carnage of Ismail is overlaid by the

<sup>30</sup> William Wordsworth, *Thanksgiving Ode, January 18, 1816. With Other Short Pieces Chiefly Referring to Recent Public Events* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1816), p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> See Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Peter Bell the Third*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, Second Edition, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2002), p. 361, ll. 636–37.

carnage of Waterloo in such a way that Byron forces his readers to keep their own history in mind as they read of Juan climbing the walls of Ismail. Later, at the beginning of Canto IX, Byron overtly invokes the figure of Wellington as both national hero and villain, writing: “Oh, Wellington! (or Vilainton’—for Fame / Sounds the heroic syllables both ways . . .)” (p. 409; IX, 1). Byron repeatedly contests the “victories” of Wellington, asking, “What is your fame? . . . / . . . / Go, hear it in your famished Country’s cries! / Behold the World! and curse your victories!” (p. 411; IX, 9). Thus, while the war cantos are ostensibly about Ismail, Byron repeatedly brings his readers back to the present, forcing them to hold their own military history in tension with the plot of *Don Juan*. Clearly, one reason he wants his readers to remember history is to use the past to understand the present.

To this end, Byron is not satisfied with merely evaluating the horrors of war but further implies that print acts of commemoration such as Wordsworth’s—what Wordsworth chooses to memorialize and help others remember in print—are akin to the savage actions of Suwarrow. For it is the general who first sits down “With bloody hands” to write the “first dispatch” about the battle to his sovereign. Suwarrow’s message is short; it reads “‘Glory to *God* and to the Empress!’ (*Powers / Eternal!! such names mingled!*) ‘Ismail’s ours’” (*Don Juan*, p. 403; VIII, 133). Considering Byron’s satiric invocation of Wordsworth’s “Thanksgiving Ode” at the beginning of the canto, Suwarrow’s message to his sovereign of pious military “glory” sounds eerily similar to Wordsworth’s account of England’s victories. Further, Byron uses this moment to fashion a critique of memorial glory and reveal the other work that poetry might accomplish:

He [Suwarrow] wrote this Polar melody, and set it,  
 Duly accompanied by shrieks and groans,  
 Which few will sing, I trust, but none forget it—  
 For I will teach, if possible, the stones  
 To rise against Earth’s tyrants. Never let it  
 Be said that we still truckle unto thrones;—  
 But ye—our children’s children! think how we  
 Showed *what things were* before the world was free!  
(*Don Juan*, p. 406; VIII, 135)



There are several things happening at once in this stanza. First, Byron calls Suwarrow's dispatch a "Polar melody," which recalls the opening to Canto VII—the moment when Byron invokes "Love" and "Glory" as "lovely light[s]" that are more "transcendant" and "fleeting" than any "meteor in the Polar sky" (p. 337; VII, 1). This moment offers an "unriddl[ing]" of memorial glory (p. 365; VIII, 1), for the very word "glory" is penned by Suwarrow's bloody hands and "accompanied by shrieks and groans," so that it becomes impossible to consider the ideal or "lovely light" of glory without its accompanying violence.

Further, Byron reveals that part of his aim in detailing the battle—in "sing[ing]" the parts of history that even the poet laureate Southey cannot adequately account for—is to teach his readers what to remember; he trusts that while few will "sing" this story, none will *forget* it. He draws attention to the importance of remembering the details of the Siege of Ismail by linking the memory of such events with political action, claiming that he will "teach . . . the stones / To rise against Earth's tyrants." In this formulation, memory is not just a process of passive recall but a form of political awakening such that "forget[ting]" becomes akin to political passivity. Byron again reveals the stakes of readerly memory within an anxious culture of mnemonic systems and the proliferation of print. The way one must grapple with an expanding print culture is not to attempt to remember everything, but to learn to remember the right things, because readerly memory—what we choose to remember in and through print—contains revolutionary potential. In this way, poetry—specifically Byron's poetry—becomes a way of navigating print proliferation by helping readers not only to attend to the details of what they should remember, but *why*—a crucial explication of the period's fad for mnemonic systems.

The stanza in Canto VIII ends with an invocation to future generations, with the claim, "think how we / Showed *what things were* before the world was free!" Encased in these lines is much of Byron's overarching ambition and fear about words that become "things." It echoes an earlier moment from Canto III, in which Byron wrote:

But words are things, and a small drop of ink,  
 Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces  
 That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think;  
 'Tis strange, the shortest letter which man uses  
 Instead of speech, may form a lasting link  
 Of ages; to what straits old Time reduces  
 Frail man, when paper—even a rag like this,  
 Survives himself, his tomb, and all that's his.

(*Don Juan*, pp. 192–93; III, 88)

In both passages, Byron moves from present to future, from the immediacy of making “thousands, perhaps millions, think” to a future in which the thingness of words—their material existence, here in print—has outlived the beating lives and memories that gave rise to them. This transition is not simply about the nature of time but about the experience of reading texts through time—the way that texts sustain different generations of readerly memory and to what end. Similarly, Byron’s attempt to show “*what things were*” in the war cantos highlights print poetry’s fragility as well as its potential to endure through time—its capacity to spur political action in the present while simultaneously becoming a historical record that is protective of the future. In this way, it is not just that Byron is trying to describe and unmask the events of history, but that he is trying to reveal the very purpose of history-making and the work of print poetry itself.

It is a goal that Byron has long pursued, as evinced in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* where, of course, he had already addressed “this place of skulls, / The grave of France, the deadly Waterloo!”<sup>32</sup> At the moment when Harold strives to find a way to encase everything about his experience—“Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak”—in print (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, p. 112; III, 97). Byron writes that if the narrator could enclose “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” (*Childe Harold’s*

<sup>32</sup> Lord Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, A Romaunt*, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, II, 83; Canto III, stanza 18. Hereafter *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* is cited parenthetically in the text by page, canto, and stanza number.

*Pilgrimage*, p. 112; III, 97). However, in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron has not yet found a way to transform words into things—he has not found the word that is “Lightning”—and so he submits himself to “live and die unheard, / With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword” (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, p. 112; III, 98).

*Don Juan* moves further. After completing the first two cantos of *Don Juan*, Byron wrote to Douglas Kinnard, exclaiming: “is it not good English? . . . is it not *life*, is it not *the thing*?”<sup>33</sup> Taken in the larger context of the poem, the “thingness” of *Don Juan* seems to be not only its novelty, but also its capacity to become lightning—its ability to “teach . . . the stones / To rise against Earth’s tyrants.” Perhaps this is why, upon finishing the war cantos, Byron wrote of them in a letter to Moore, “it is necessary, in the present clash of philosophy and tyranny, to throw away the scabbard. I know it is against fearful odds; but the battle must be fought; and it will be eventually for the good of mankind, whatever it may be for the individual who risks himself.”<sup>34</sup> In *Don Juan*, Byron unsheathes his sword in order, as he puts it in Canto IX, to wage war: “And I will war, at least in words (and—should / My chance so happen—deeds) with all who war / With Thought” (*Don Juan*, p. 416; IX, 24).

To the extent that Byron is able to hold to the claim that his epic records a version of history that is “actually true,” and therefore capable of inciting positive political action in the present, *Don Juan* seems to become the unsheathed sword that Byron yearns for in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Yet some aspect of the success of *Don Juan* might also hinge on Byron’s growing awareness of the role of print poetry in the battle for readerly memory. For one of the most obvious ways that words become things is when they become printed books. Yet this can become a double-edged sword, as Henry Thompson in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* demonstrates through his claim that the saturation of the print market can make readers feel that there is “nothing in the world worth remembering” (“Memory—

<sup>33</sup> Lord Byron, letter to Douglas Kinnard, 26 October 1818 [1819], in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, VI, 232.

<sup>34</sup> Lord Byron, letter to Thomas Moore, 8 August 1822, in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, IX, 191.

Suggestions against the Encouragement of it,” p. 136). Byron shows us otherwise, reminding us that poetry can and should make memorable exactly those key, subversive facts and historical moments that are obscured by the flood of cant in print. It is good poetry—and not mechanistic memory systems—that can help us remember what has been lost, including memory systems such as Feinaigle’s that have faded from our view. In its own way, then, *Don Juan* becomes a kind of uneasy Romantic memory palace animated by a modern anxiety about how to read and recall what the powers-that-be would have us forget.

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ABSTRACT

Grace Rexroth, “Byron and the Problem with Memory Arts: Writing *Don Juan* for an Age of ‘Uncertain Paper’” (pp. 1–28)

In the first canto of *Don Juan* (1819–24), George Gordon, Lord Byron describes Juan’s mother as a woman whose memory needs no artificial aid: “Her memory was a mine. . . . For her Feinaigle’s were an useless art.” The mention of “Feinaigle” is a reference to a memory system designed by Gregor von Feinaigle, outlined in a book titled *The New Art of Memory* (1812). While the reference might appear insignificant, I argue that concerns about memory and mnemonic arts actually animate Byron’s poem. I view Feinaigle as a touchstone for a set of memory practices that proliferated into what *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* would later decry as an “explosion of mnemonics.” As the print landscape of the Regency era rapidly expanded, such systems promised to help readers deal with the resulting information overload by helping them to remember everything they read. Set within this context, *Don Juan* seems to respond to the same anxieties that animated the fad for mnemonics. However, rather than attempting to help readers remember everything, Byron foregrounds the question of what should be remembered and why—especially when it comes to memorializing war. In this way, *Don Juan* becomes an alternative Romantic memory palace animated by a cultural anxiety about how to read and recall what the powers-that-be would have us forget.

Keywords: George Gordon, Lord Byron; *Don Juan*; memory; war; Romantic print culture