

BYRON'S VERSION OF RUSSIA

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(A revised version of a paper given to the London Byron Society)

By 1822 there could be no doubt left that Russia, of which Europe had slowly been becoming aware for two-and-a-half centuries, had finally joined the community of nations. The contribution she had made in the conflict with Napoleon had made everyone newly aware of her vastness, and of her power. Her recent double defeat of Turkey was regarded with more pleasure than her part in the still more recent partition of Poland. She was regarded with awe, but also with some fear and scepticism. Western Europe could only be grateful for the events of 1812; but the obscurantist terms in which the Holy Alliance chose to express itself - an Alliance dominated by Tsar Alexander, under the temporary influence of Madame Krüdner¹ - made even the Tory establishment of England decide to remain aloof; though the visit by the Tsar to London in 1816 had been marked by an ode from the Poet Laureate, Robert Southey.² Southey's enemy Byron, by 1822 self-exiled in Italy, found the plot of his poem *Don Juan* (just recommenced after a break enforced by his mistress, Teresa Guiccioli)³ suddenly moving towards Russia: and it is of his treatment of Russia that I wish to speak in this lecture. It will anticipate nothing in the lecture, and cause, I expect, no surprise, when I say that he treats Russia with the same mixture of misanthropy, facetiousness, and fascination that he treats Spain, Greece, Turkey, and England elsewhere in the epic.

In giving the lecture I am conscious of the fact that I know only a limited amount of Russian; but take comfort from the further fact that Byron, versatile linguist though he was, appears to have known still less. The only Russian word to appear in the text of the poem, leaving proper nouns aside, is *kibitka*, which is the name of a springless wooden carriage (Don Juan rides in one at IX, 30, 1: Byron probably found the word in William Coxe's 1792 *Travels*).⁴ But he appears to have known eight more. Here they are, as he published them:

CPW: *Lord Byron The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. McGann and Weller (Oxford 1980-92). BLJ: *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*, ed. Marchand (John Murray 1973-94). CMP: *Lord Byron The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Nicholson (Oxford 1991). As background to the lecture I have consulted *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* by Isabel de Madariaga (Weidenfeld and Nicholson 1981) *Catherine the Great Life and Legend* by John T. Alexander (Oxford 1989) *A Dictionary of Russian Literature* by W.E.Harkins (Allen and Unwin 1957) and *Handbook of Russian Literature*, ed. Victor Terras (Yale 1985).

1: Byron refers to Madame Krüdner in the unpublished prose preface to *Don Juan*: see CPW V, 82, 39. On July 29th 1823 Byron wrote to Douglas Kinnaird - who appears not to have liked the ottava rima satires - excusing the Russian Cantos on the utilitarian grounds that Russia was moving to the forefront of public consciousness and that people should be better informed about her: **“With regard to the D[on] J[uan]s - in addition to what I have stated within - I would add that as much rolls (in them) upon the White Bears of Muscovy - who do not at present dance to English Music - it is an appropriate moment to introduce them to the British public - in all their native intractability. - - Besides - they and the Turks form at present the farce after the Congress melodrame upon Spain. - Their names and qualities are become more familiar household words - than when the D[on] J[uan]s”** were written (BLJ X 92). Kinnaird was not convinced of the poetic value of the Cantos.

2: *Ode to His Imperial Majesty, Alexander the First, Emperor of all the Russias; The Poetical Works of Robert Southey* (1850) pp. 195-6.

3: See the analyses by Jerome McGann (CPW V 714) and Andrew Nicholson at *Lord Byron V* (Garland 1991) xv-xvii.

4: William Coxe is the *Archdeacon Coxe* at whose biography of Marlborough Byron glances at *Don Juan* III, 90, 6-8. For his description of a kibitka, see *Travels into Poland, Russia, Sweden and Denmark* (London 1792) pp. 229-30: *Our coach was so shattered by the bad roads; that we left it at Novgorod; and continued our journey in the common carriages of the country, called kibitkas. A kibitka is a small cart, capable of containing two persons abreast, while the driver sits upon the further extremity close to the horses' tails. It is about five feet in length, and the hinder half is covered with a*

Slava Bogu! Slava vam!
Kreporst vzala, i ya tam.⁵

This has been translated by a twentieth-century British historian, W.L.Bleuse, as

Glory to God! Glory to you!
The fortress is taken, and I'm there too.⁶

It occurs in Byron's note to the couplet of *Don Juan* VIII, Stanza 133, and purports to be the message sent in 1790 by General Suvorov, during the Second Turkish War, to inform the Russian Empress Catherine the Great that Ismail, the fortress on the Danube, has been added to the list of her possessions. In fact Byron is inaccurate; firstly, the verb in the second line should be "vzyata" (which would imply "the fortress is taken") rather than "vzala" (which would imply "the army has taken the fortress": Byron has "vzala" in his rough draft; this is transcribed "vzata" by Mary Shelley in her fair copy,⁷ and printed "vzata" by E.H.Coleridge in his 1903 edition).⁸ Secondly, Suvorov was actually said to have written the verse not in 1790 at the taking of Ismail, but in 1773, during the First Turkish War, at the taking of Turtukai in Bulgaria. His words were said on that occasion to have been:

Slava Bogu! Slava vam!
Turtukai vzyat, i ya tam.

Byron probably first read of Suvorov's jingle in William Tooke's *Life of Catherine II*,⁹ a translation and enlargement, published in 1800, of the *Vie de Catherine II* by J.H.Castèra. Tooke – who had, as Chaplain to the British factory at St. Petersburg, often been in Catherine's company – quotes and translates the words about Turtukai in a note to his third volume (giving "vzala" as the verb) and later translates what Suvorov is said really to have said about Ismail: "The haughty Ismail is at your feet".¹⁰ (Tooke's *View of the Russian Empire* is in the 1827 Sale Catalogue of Byron's library,¹¹ and Byron further lists Tooke's *Life of*

semicircular tilt, open in front like the top of a cradle, made with laths interwoven or covered with birch or beech-bark. There is not a piece of iron in the whole machine. It has no springs, and is fastened by means of wooden pins, ropes, and sticks, to the body of the carriage. The Russians, when they travel in these kibitkas, place a feather-bed in the bottom, admirably calculated to break the intolerable jolts and concussions occasioned by the uneven timber roads. With this precaution, a kibitka, though inferior in splendour, equals in comfort the most commodious vehicle. See also BLJ IV 161 and n, or CMP 87 and n.

5: CPW V 735.

6: W.L.Bleuse, *Suvoroff* (Constable 1920) p. 45. He is echoed by Philip Longworth, *The Art of Victory: The Life and Achievements of Generalissimo Suvorov* (Constable 1965) p. 79. Longworth is more sceptical about the "poem" than Bleuse.

7: I am grateful to Cathy Henderson of the Harry Ransom Centre at the University of Texas for the photocopy which enabled me to confirm this; also to John G Murray and Virginia Murray. The note occurs in the left-hand margin of page 30 of Mary's transcription of Canto VIII.

8: *Byron's Works: Poetry* VI p. 370.

9: William Tooke, *Life of Catherine II* (London 1800) III p. 278n. Castèra's *Histoire de Catherine II* was auctioned from Byron's library in 1827: see CMP 247. There is an analysis of the complex connection between these two lives – which remained standard even in Russia until the late nineteenth century – in *Castèra-Tooke: The First Western Biographers of Catherine II, Study Group on Eighteenth-Century Russia Newsletter*, No 10 (1982) pp. 50-62.

10: *Ibid* p. 282.

11: CMP 252.

Catherine II in his juvenile reading list).¹² In the couplet to Stanza 133, Byron had already paraphrased Suvorov's sentence, and commented on it:

“Glory to *God* and to the Empress!” (*Powers*
Eternal!! such names mingled!) “Ismail's ours.”

The note, which Byron offers as authentic, thus only relates to the text via a bluff designed to fool non-specialists; and as Tooke was a standard author on Russia for English-speaking readers, the poet seems to be flaunting his inaccuracy rather blatantly. The obvious question – “Did Byron not, then, care about accuracy when writing about Russia?” – is a very interesting one. Modern historians either deny that Suvorov wrote the words at all, or deny that he wrote them to Catherine. K.Osipov, in his 1947 Stalinist biography of the general (Suvorov was a great Stalinist hero) suggests that the general was punning on the name of a nearby settlement called Yatam;¹³ and when in 1949 Suvorov's documents came to be edited properly, the words emerged in bare prose, in a short note to his superior Field-Marshal Rumyantsev, as

Vashe siyatelstvo! My pabyedili. Slava bogu, slava vam.
[*Your Highness! We've won. Glory to God, Glory to you.*]¹⁴

These pedantries are to the point, for Byron – who had been to Spain, Greece and Turkey – never went to Russia, and relied for his facts on other writers, who seemed very convincing, but who themselves in fact relied on contemporary rumour and legend. His intention was in any case more mythical than journalistic, in relation to all the countries through which Juan travelled. My argument will be that he was extremely interested in Russia as an imaginary setting for *Don Juan*, described, as was usual with *Don Juan*, in what appeared to be journalistically-verifiable terms, and that he had indeed read about certain aspects of the country in more than enough detail for his purpose. However, the “verifiable” Russia with which he makes ostentatious play has, at points, to be edited in order to facilitate the creation of a different Russia, which fits more successfully into the imaginative and satirical scheme of *Don Juan*. Defensive jokes about the inaccuracy of gazettes, newspapers, and all accounts of history in verse and prose, abound in the Russian Cantos: Homer is hailed as a gazeteer (VII, 80, 4) and history itself called a “grand liar” (IX, 81, 4): the Derridian theme of the opening of the ninth Canto is the impossibility of our ever knowing anything. Nothing perpetrated by Byron in the way of manipulation of the facts (as we think we can observe them) should therefore surprise us.

I shall argue, firstly, that Byron was very interested in the blatancy of Russian imperialism – as embodied, especially, in Suvorov. A contemporary warning may be intended in the Russian Cantos, against the hypocritical way in which Tzar Alexander encouraged the Greek Revolution: in *The Age of Bronze*, Byron wrote, a few months later, and more explicitly:

Better still serve the haughty Mussulman,
Than swell the Cossaque's prowling Caravan;
Better still toil for Masters, than await,
The Slave of Slaves, before a Russian Gate –
Numbered by hordes, a human Capital,
A live Estate, existing but for thrall,
Lotted by thousands, as a meet reward

12: CMP 4.

13: K.Osipov, *Suvorov* (1947) p. 63n.

14: A.V.Suvorov: *Dokumenty*, ed. G.P.Meshcheryakov (Moscow 1949) I 614 and A.V.Suvorov: *Pisma*, ed. V.S.Lopatin (Moscow 1986) p. 27 and n1, p. 492; quoted I.I.Rostunov, *Generalissimus A.V.Suvorov* (Moscow 1989) p. 174.

For the first Courtier in the Czar's regard;
 While their immediate Owner never tastes
 His sleep, sans dreaming of Siberia's wastes;
 Better succumb even to their own despair,
 And drive the Camel – than purvey the Bear.¹⁵

Secondly, I shall argue that Byron was fascinated by the figure of Catherine the Great, as the best exemplification he could possibly ask for of the central theme of his poem: namely, female sexuality. (Listeners not familiar with *Don Juan* should know that it inverts the received myth, and shows its hero throughout as the prey to insatiable women). Thirdly, I shall look at what Byron knew (in translation) of Russian poetry, and ask what if anything he owed to it; and lastly, look at his treatment of Grigori Potemkin, the most important of Catherine's lovers, probably her secret husband, and subsequently her right-hand man in all affairs, amatory, military, and political.

The entire note to *Don Juan*, Canto VIII, Stanza 133, about the Russian General Suvorov, reads:

In the original Russian -
 Slava Bogu! Slava vam!
 Kreporst vzala, i ya tam.
 A kind of couplet; for he [Suvorov] was a poet.¹⁶

Nothing in Cantos VII or VIII seems at first glance to have prepared us for this assertion of oneness between sanguinary general and sceptical poet; until, perhaps, we remember this (it is Canto VII, Stanza 55):

Suwarrow ...

[Byron manipulates names fearlessly: he does not hesitate to spell the general's name "Souvaroff" if he wants to rhyme it with "lover of" (VII, 39, 7-8) or "Suwarrow" if he wants to rhyme it with "sorrow" (VII, 49, 7-8) with "tomorrow" and "harrow" (VII, 83, 2-4-6) or with "marrow" (VII, 8, 7-8)]

Suwarrow chiefly was on the alert,
 Surveying, drilling, ordering, jesting, pondering;
 For the Man was, we safely may assert,
 A thing to wonder at beyond most wondering;
 Hero, buffoon, half demon and half dirt,
 Praying, instructing, desolating, plundering;
 Now Mars, now Momus, and when bent to storm
 A Fortress, Harlequin in Uniform. –

Just as it is possible to identify a source for Byron's note on Suvorov's "poem", so it is possible to guess at likely points of inspiration here. My next two quotations are from the 1800

15: *The Age of Bronze*, 302-13.

16: CPW V 735. Suvorov really did express himself in verse, and it is not clear where Byron got his information from, or how seriously he took it. For another poem by Suvorov, written to Potemkin before Otchakhov in 1788, see Longworth, op. cit. p. 148. It was the general's habit to parody the achievements of his professional enemies – of whom he had many – in the style of Ossian, the Russian translation of which was dedicated to him (Longworth p. 180). For examples of his doggerel efforts, see Lopatin, op. cit., pp. 6 (in French) 8, 157, 190 (in French) 214, 220, 222, 224, 230, 261 (in French) 287 (to Derzhavin) 293, 349 (in German) 378-9, and 394. Potemkin, too, gained Catherine's favour in part through the fervour of his verses.

English translation of C.F.P.Masson's *Mémoires Secrets sur la Russie*, and from *Histoire du Feld-Maréchal Souvarof* by L.M.P. de Laverne:

A stranger, who has heard the name of Suvarof, wishes, on his arrival, to see this hero. An old man is pointed out, [Suvarov died in the year the translation was published] of a weather-beaten and shrivelled figure, who traverses the apartments of the palace, hopping on one foot, or is seen in the streets, followed by a troop of boys, to whom he throws apples, to make them scramble and fight, crying himself, "I am Suvarof! I am Suvarof!" If the stranger should fail to discover in this old madman the conqueror of the Turks and the Poles, he will at least, in his haggard and ferocious eyes, his foaming and horrid mouth, readily discern the butcher of the inhabitants of Prague [Praga, a suburb of Warsaw, attacked by Suvarov's troops in 1794]. Suvarof would be considered as the most ridiculous buffoon, if he had not shown himself the most barbarous warrior. He is a monster, with the body of an ape and the soul of a bull-dog. Attila, his countryman, and from whom he is perhaps descended, [Suvarov was in fact of Swedish descent] had neither his good fortune nor his ferocity. His gross and ridiculous manners have inspired his soldiers with the blindest confidence, which serves him instead of military talents, and has been the real cause of all his success.

Par ces plaisanteries de différens gens et les contes qu'il leur faisait, il amusait ses soldats, et se faisait adorer de ces hommes grossiers encore et enfans de la nature. Habile à saisir les nuances du caractère des nations, il ne se comporta pas avec les Autrichiens, comme il le faisait avec les Russes, et il aurait eu encore d'autres procédés qu'avec ces derniers s'il eût commandé des Français. Mais avec tous il aurait été familier, parce qu'il n'y a jamais d'inconvéniens et qu'il peut y avoir, au contraire, de précieux avantages à ce qu'un général communique avec ses soldats.¹⁷ –

As a description of the senile Suvarov, the first is probably unfair; as an explanation for his success, the second is probably very accurate: but Byron, always fascinated by people who, like himself, displayed extreme and apparently contradictory personality-traits, would not have bothered about fairness or accuracy. Anyone who successfully combined the bestial and the exalted, the buffoon and the genius, the ape and the bull-dog, or the lance-corporal and the field-marshal, or who could speak in voices apt equally for gross soldiers and enlightenment Empresses, for Russians, Austrians and Frenchmen, was an automatic candidate for portrayal in a Byron ottava rima poem.



Suvarov

Think of Donna Julia, the pious Catholic and the cradle-snatcher; of Lambro, the loving father and the brutal slave-dealer; of Gulbeyaz, the sublime Sultana and the frustrated sexual fantasiser. Suvarov, who planned his vast campaigns and drilled his raw recruits simultaneously, who massacred the populations of entire cities and then wrote poems about

17: C.F.P.Masson, *Mémoires Secrets sur la Russie* (1800 English translation entitled *Secret Memoirs of the Court of Petersburg*) pp. 318-319; and L.M.P. de Laverne, *Histoire du Feld-Maréchal Souvarof* (Paris 1809) p. 464. There is an interesting discussion of the Russian Cantos, contrasting Masson's attitude to Catherine with that of Tooke, in *The Russian Episode in Byron's 'Don Juan'* by Nina Diakonova, Ariel, 1972, pp. 50-7. Another excellent essay is *Power and Sex: The implication of role reversal in Catherine's Russia* by Katherine Kernberger (Byron Journal 1980, pp. 42-9).

having done so, is a logical development, and an apt denizen of the “versified Aurora Borealis” (VII, 2, 3) that is *Don Juan*. I shall have things to say, in this context, about Potemkin.

A polemical intention may be discerned in Byron’s portrayal of Suvorov. The last complete Russian Canto of *Don Juan*, the Ninth, opens with a passage addressed to Wellington. Wellington is, like Suvorov, the willing tool of tyrants – he is Castlereagh with several armies at his back. Just as Byron plays unscrupulous games with Suvorov’s name, so, crowns Byron, do the French with Wellington’s name, punning it into “Villainton” (IX, 1, 1). Wellington is invested by Byron with tags from *Macbeth*: he is “the best of cut-throats” and has “supped full of flattery” (IX, 4, 1 and IX, 5, 1). He is, in his avarice and ostentation, contrasted with Cincinnatus, with Epaminondas and with Washington (IX, 7, 3, IX, 8, 2 and IX, 8, 4) - three men who, in their simplicity of life, at least, all resemble Suvorov (just as they all resemble Daniel Boone, the other General whom Byron drags into Canto VIII). Even though the Russian general rides into camp with one pony, one guide, and one shirt, the entire army is at once eager to fight (Byron got his details here from Castelnau’s *Histoire de la Nouvelle Russie*);¹⁸ he exercises unbelievable Power, but despises Pomp (in VII, Stanza 74, Byron carefully capitalises the antithetical words); he is everything which Wellington is militarily, while clearly wishing to have nothing to do with what Wellington represents socially and materially. He is, in his undisguised and elemental barbarism, everything Wellington is really, but pretends – with an entire corps of Gazeteers assisting him – that he isn’t. There is no cant about Suvorov, or about his “poem” in celebration of rampant imperialism:

... mad Suwarrow’s rhymes, who threw
Into a Russian couplet rather dull
The whole Gazette of thousands whom he slew ...¹⁹

Suvorov’s verse, the product of raw and comprehensive experience, is more honest (and much shorter) than anything written by the hated English imperialist lackey, Robert Southey – a man who had never fired a gun in anger in his life; and thus Suvorov has Byron’s vote.

To turn from the General to his Empress. In addition to depicting the sexual appetites of his important heroines with a frankness greater than was customary in the early nineteenth century, Byron had placed in the margins of his Russian narrative several vignettes of past female rulers, and women of influence, who used their power in part to realise their “sensual phantasies” (V, 126, 8). Gulbeyaz attempts to do this in Canto V, by purchasing the poem’s hero – with the anti-climactic disappointment characteristic of Byron’s ottava rima plots. Other such peripheral women are Pasiphaë, mother of the Minotaur (II Stanzas 155-6) Ninon de L’Enclos, the French courtesan whose lovers were said to have included at least one of her own sons, and whose love-life lasted into her eighties (V, 98, 8) Potiphar’s wife and Lady Booby, would-be seducers of the Biblical Joseph and of Joseph Andrews (I, 186, 7 and V, 131, 2) Phaedra (V, 131, 3) and last but not least Semiramis (V Stanzas 60-1). Semiramis, the original Whore of Babylon, is severely reduced by Byron’s jesting from the enlightened civiliser, ruthless husband-slayer, passionate lover, and successful politician that legend tells us she was, into someone who is accused merely of “an improper friendship for her horse” (V, Stanza 51) - a tale for which Byron can adduce one source only, and that a doubtful one.

One current and pornographic story which circulated about Catherine attributed similar equestrian passions to her, too;²⁰ and although Byron never refers to them, he links Catherine,

18: Marquis Gabriel de Castelnau, *Essai sur l’Histoire Ancienne et Moderne de la Nouvelle Russie* (second Paris edition, 1827) II p. 205-6.

19: *Don Juan* IX, 60, 2-4.

20: See John Alexander, *Catherine the Great Life and Legend*, 332-5.

in a letter to Thomas Moore of April 23rd 1815,²¹ with Semiramis, as two women who had “seen enough” and “felt enough of life” to have written “a rare play”. It is the only reference to Catherine in all of his letters.

The sex drive of Woman was a thing of which Byron had more experience than all the rest of the English Romantic poets put together, and his sense of a prevalent hypocrisy among his female readership and acquaintance on the issue made him more than usually derisive as a result. How convenient, therefore, that Don Juan’s adventures should lead, with unanswerable geographical and historical logic, to the court of a woman who, uniquely in history, had not only not disguised her sexual promiscuity, but had formally institutionalised it. I quote, again, from the 1800 translation of the *Mémoires Secrets* of Masson:

Elizabeth of England, Mary of Scotland, Christina of Sweden, all the Empresses of Russia, and most women who have been their own mistresses, have had favourites or lovers. To consider this as a crime might be thought too rigid or ungallant. Catherine II. alone, however, availed herself of her power to exhibit to the world an example, of which there is to be found no model, by making the office of favourite a place at court, with an apartment, salary, honours, prerogatives, and, above all, its peculiar functions: and of all places there was not one, the duties of which were so scrupulously fulfilled: a short absence, a temporary sickness of the person by whom it was occupied, was sometimes sufficient to occasion his removal. Nor perhaps was there any post, [*Byron borrows this joke at X, 29, 8*] in which the Empress displayed more choice and discernment: I believe no instance occurred of its having been filled by a person incapable of it; and, except the interregnum between Lanskoï and Yermolof, it was never twenty-four hours vacant.²²

As with Suvorov and warfare, so with Catherine and sex: neither makes any attempt to disguise the truth with a wealth of hypocrisy: the kind of hypocrisy which had, for example, surrounded the “trial” of England’s Queen Caroline in 1821, and which had appeared to prompt Byron’s unnecessary joke about Semiramis and her horse. (The elaborate trappings with which the favourite’s position is surrounded functions, doubtless, as a different kind of hypocrisy.) Masson comments favourably on the benevolence Catherine showed to her ex-favourites, all of whom – even Grigori Orlov, who had betrayed her with a maid of honour – lived and flourished once their time was over:

Assuredly these are very extraordinary features, and very rare, in a woman, a lover, an empress. This great and generous conduct is far removed from that of an Elizabeth of England, who cut off the heads of her favourites and her rivals; and from that of a Christina of Sweden, who caused one of her lovers to be assassinated in her presence.²³

The Gallic admiration which Catherine gets from Masson, she does not always receive from Byron, who associates her at different points with Clytemnestra (IX, 80, 7), Mary Queen of Scots (X, 71, 6) and even with Messalina (X, 72, 5) and the Babylonian Harlot herself (X, 26, 7). For Byron, Catherine is initially

In Catherine’s reign, whom Glory yet adores
As Greatest of all Sovereigns and Whores. –

(Rhymes which Mary Shelley refused to copy.)

However, at other points his opinion – which sways somewhat, perhaps helped by fresh readings of Tooke and of Masson – is more sympathetic. (For an irredeemably antipathetic reaction to Catherine, see Coleridge, *Ode to the Departing Year*, Part III). The convention

21: BLJ IV 288. Both Moore and Prothero (VI 295) have “Joukoffsky”, not “Kutoffski”: how, as the letter is lost and only exists in Moore, Marchand’s text can differ, is not clear.

22: Masson, op. cit., I pp. 137-8.

23: Ibid, I 141.

whereby a respectable woman could have at least one lover at a time without scandal was, after all, familiar to him from his affairs in Venice, and he can, when not being offensive, see much advantage in Catherine's system:

And Catherine (we must say thus much for Catherine)
 Though bold and bloody, was the kind of thing
 Whose temporary Passion was quite flattering,
 Because each lover looked a sort of king,
 Made up upon an amatory pattern;
 A royal husband in all save the *ring*,
 Which, being the damn'dest part of Matrimony,
 Seemed taking out the sting to leave the Honey.²⁴

In this analysis Catherine (modern historians suggest that she may have been married – to Potemkin)²⁵ was as truly enlightened in sexual matters as she claimed to be in political and cultural ones. Her manner of changing lovers was only an acknowledgement of a fact of human nature, English society's refusal to acknowledge which was a major motive in the writing of *Don Juan*. When Juan's mother, Donna Inez – a version of Lady Byron – hears about her son's relationship with the Empress, her reaction is, characteristically, to ignore what's really going on:

“She could not too much much give her approbation
 “Unto an Empress who preferred young Men,
 “Whose Age – and what was better still, whose nation,
 “And Climate – stopped all Scandal now and then,
 “At home it might have given her some vexation
 “But where Thermometers sunk down to ten –
 “Or five – or one – or zero – She could never
 Believe that Virtue thawed before the River.

Oh for a *forty Parson-power* to chaunt
 Thy praise, Hypocrisy!!²⁶

It will by now be seen that Byron's interest in Russia was in great part polemical. He was not interested in Catherine as a patroness of letters, or as a would-be legal or social Enlightenment reformer; he may deprecate the praise lavished on her by his idol Voltaire (IX, 23, 6) but he never refers to Alexander Radishchev, still less to Emelyan Pugachev; he speaks well for the Turkish defenders of Ismail, but never mentions the partition of Poland (this he reserves for *The Age of Bronze*: see lines 158-70). He displays little interest in the people, except in so far as they suffer *en masse* at the hands of their despots. The historical individuals Suvorov and Catherine are useful instruments with which to embarrass and annoy his English readership; they are Russian paradigms (it is a flattering idea) of frankness and openness over questions, which English cant habitually swept under the carpet. That his trusted sources sensationalised the facts – we no longer necessarily think, for instance, that “Miss Protasoff” (“l'Epreuveuse”) performed the task she is given at IX, Stanza 84,²⁷ – makes little difference to the overall success of the concept.

24: *Don Juan*, IX, Stanza 70.

25: See Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Prince of Princes, The Life of Potemkin* (Phoenix Press 2001) pp. 136-7; or George Soloveytkhik, *Potemkin: A Picture of Catherine's Russia* (Percival Marshall 1949) pp. 68-9. See also Alexander, op. cit., p. 204.

26: X, Stanza 33 *et. seq.*

27: *Ibid.*, pp. 215 and 333.

In the very idea of Russian frankness²⁸ lay more material for his poem. The following passage – central in many ways to *Don Juan*, though playing with a passage from Horace²⁹ – is occasioned by thoughts of Catherine and the motives of the men who do her fighting for her. It refers to the female organ of generation:



Catherine and friend

Oh thou “tetrissima Causa” of all “belli” –
 Thou Gate of Life and Death - thou Nondescript!
 Whence is our Exit and our Entrance; well I
 May pause in pondering how all Souls are dipt
 In thy perennial Fountain; how Man *fell*, I
 Know not, since Knowledge saw her branches stript
 Of her first fruit; but how he *falls* and rises
Since, thou hast settled beyond all surmises. –

Some call thee the “*worst Cause of War*”, but I
 Maintain thou art the *best*; for after all,

28: The idea of frank Russian sensuality is a new concession from Byron, who had previously denied the possibility of love in freezing conditions. Here is *The Giaour*, 1099-1102:

“The cold in clime are cold in blood,
 Their love can scarce deserve the name;
 But mine is like the lava flood
 That boils in Aetna’s breast of flame.

At *Don Juan* I Stanza 64 Byron speaks playfully, but says the same:

Happy the Nations of the moral North!
 Where all is Virtue, and the Winter Season
 Sends Sin without a rag on shivering forth
 (’Twas Snow that brought St. Francis back to reason)
 Where Juries cast up what a wife is worth
 By laying whate’er sum in Mulct they please on
 The lover, who must pay a handsome price,
 Because it is a marketable Vice.

29: *Satires*, I iii 107-8: nam fuit ante Helenam cunus taeterrima belli / causa ... (*Before Helen arrived a cunt was the most dreadful cause of war ...*)

From thee we come, to thee we go - and why
 To get at thee not batter down a wall,
 Or waste a World? since no-one can deny
 Thou dost replenish Worlds both great and small;
 With, or without thee, all things at a Stand
 Are, or would be, thou Sea of Life's dry Land!

Catherine, who was the grand Epitome
 Of that Great Cause of War, or Peace, or what
 You please (it causes all the things which be,
 So you may take your choice of this or that);
 Catherine, I say, was very glad to see
 The handsome herald on whose Plumage sat
 Victory, and, pausing as she saw him kneel
 With his dispatch, forgot to break the Seal.³⁰

Commentators who draw parallels between Catherine and, for instance, Ariosto's Alcina,³¹ or Tasso's Armida, seem to me to miss Byron's implicit criticism of the earlier epics; for the enchantresses of the Italian poems function, as do Dido in the *Aeneid*, or Circe in the *Odyssey*, by frustrating the heroes' military destinies, where Catherine only takes lovers who are powerful militarily, with a view to encouraging them to continue being so. Sex and warfare are intimately linked by Byron's equation; and his suggestion (at VI, Stanza 95) that Catherine and the Sultan of Constantinople would save everybody a lot of trouble if they just got into bed together, is not as facetious as it seems. One of the most strongly antipathetic passages from Masson's *Secret Memoirs of the Court of St Petersburg* may lie behind his thought in such sections:

At her palace of Tauris, [*in fact built by Catherine for Potemkin, but taken over by her after his death*] she constantly dined with the two pictures of the sacking of Otchakof and Ismaël before her eyes, in which Cazanova has represented, with a most hideous accuracy, the blood flowing in streams, the limbs torn from the bodies and still palpitating, the demoniac furies of the murderers, and the convulsive agonies of the murdered. It was upon these scenes of horror that her attention and imagination were fixed, while Gasparini and Mandini displayed their vocal powers, or Sarti conducted a concert in her presence.³²

Juan's instantly-accepted servitude in such an eternal cause is one of the most striking phases in his fall – which the epic charts surreptitiously from very early on in Canto I. The self-love and vanity which allows him to become publicly, what his pride would not allow him to be with Gulbeyaz privately – a glorious toy-boy – brings him in my next quotation to a depth which, charted against one of Byron's most deeply-imagined icons of degradation, comes as a shock (though his participation in the battle for Ismail should have prepared us for it):

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;
 Perhaps he longed, in bitter frosts, for climes
 In which the Neva's Ice would cease to live
 Before May-Day; perhaps, despite his Duty,
 In Royalty's Vast Arms he sighed for Beauty.³³

30: *Don Juan* IX, Stanzas 55-7.

31: CPW V 737.

32: Masson, op. cit., I 109-10.

33: *Don Juan*, X, Stanza 37

Just as “shuffling Southey, that incarnate lie” (X, 13, 2) serves the Hanoverians, the Bourbons, the Hohenzollerns and the Romanovs in verse, and just as Suvorov serves Catherine the Great on the field, so Juan serves her in bed. The epic’s hero has sunk to the level of its dedicatee (“Bob Southey! You’re a poet – poet Laureat, / And representative of all the race” – Dedication, 1, 12). Southey the poetic prostitute, and Juan the courtly prostitute, make a glum pairing. There is a relevant stanza in Giambattista Casti’s important satire *Il Poema Tartaro*, which Byron almost certainly knew well, and which is based on the poet’s experience at Catherine’s court. In it the big-nosed Irish hero, Tommaso Scardassale, has become the favourite of the Empress Cattuna (Catherine) and she showers him with caresses. Casti politely stresses the impossibility of comparing Cattuna to Armida:

E mostrando il desir avido e caldo
 Nei tremoli occhi, nell’accessa faccia,
 Con trasporto allor fallace e baldo
 Licenziosamente il bacía e abbraccia.
 Egli in postura tal pareva Rinaldo
 Quando giacea d’ Armida in fra le braccia;
 E somigliato Armida avrebbe anch’ ella
 S’ era men grassa e vecchia, e un po più bella.

[And revealing her eager and warm desire, in her trembling eyes and her shining face, and with bold and erring abandon she lustfully kisses and embraces him. In posture he seemed like Rinaldo when he lay in Armida’s arms, and she would even have resembled Armida, had she been less fat and old and a little more beautiful.]³⁴

Mention of Southey’s place in Byron’s bestiary brings me to my last section, namely, what Byron knew of the condition of Russian poetry at the time he wrote the Russian Cantos (that is, in 1822). The answer is, perhaps a surprising amount – even if only in translation.

John Bowring, born in 1792, had, by the age of nineteen, become acquainted with French, Italian, Spanish, Portugese, German and Dutch. Subsequently he got to know Swedish, Danish, Serbian, Polish, Bohemian, Magyar, Chinese – and Russian. On his return from his first visit to Russia in 1820, he published the first volume of *Specimens of the Russian Poets*, the first-ever such anthology. It contains translations of poems – the selection is very well-informed – by Derzhàvin, Bàtiushkov, Lomonòsov, Zhukòvsky, Karàmsin, Dmìtriev, Krilòv, Khemnitser, Bobròv, Bogdanòvich, Davìdov, Koslòv, and Nelidinsky-Melitzky, as well as a small selection of national songs. These were done not from the originals, for Bowring’s Russian was not good enough, but from English and German prose renditions by his friend Friedrich Adelung; their periphrastic qualities were criticised then, as now; but they read very fluently, and in his biographical sketches at the end Bowring shows himself to have been acquainted personally with several of his subjects.³⁵ In his *Autobiographical Recollections* (published after his death) he writes about the book:

34: Casti, *Il Poema Tartaro*, IV lxxi. Whether or not Byron read *Il Poema Tartaro*, and if he did, the extent to which he borrowed from it, seems a question still usefully to be discussed.

35: Bowring’s dilettante work in making the English public aware of East European poetry was a by-product of his universalising Utilitarianism, and as such was much mocked, particularly by the few experts then available to judge it. An amusing sketch in *The Metropolitan Magazine* for February 1833 has him called out urgently in the middle of the night to translate the noises being made by a starving dog. The most thorough and authoritative twentieth-century examination of Bowring’s Anthologies is in Russian: *Russko-Angliiskie Literaturnye Svyazi*, ed. Berdnikov et. al., Moscow 1982, pp. 187-246. The following articles are in English: A.P. Coleman: *John Bowring and the Poetry of the Slavs, Proceedings of the American Phillosophical Society* 1941, pp. 431-59; Antony Cross: *Karamzin in English, Canadian Slavic Studies* 1969, pp. 716-27; Antony Cross: *Early English Specimens of the Russian*

At St. Petersburg I acquired a knowledge of the Russian language sufficient to enable me to give the first specimens ever presented in English to the public. The first volume was successful. The second I wrote while in Boulogne Prison, and forwarded a copy to the Emperor Alexander, who sent me a large amethyst surrounded with diamonds.

Alexander, though idolized by his people, was a weak, vain, and impressionable man ...³⁶

(Bowring spent two weeks in solitary confinement in Boulogne Prison on a charge of spying for the Portugese against the Bourbons.) In his *Recollections* he writes further of the satirical poet Krilòv, who

... amused me very much ... he seemed to eschew clean linen, and looked as if he thought the washing process an intolerable intervention.³⁷

Krilòv gave Bowring his fable *The Ass and the Nightingale* – which the Englishman translates – in manuscript.³⁸ Of Karamsin, the historian, Bowring writes, in his *Recollections*:

It was his object to flatter the Emperor, and to draw brilliant pictures of the progress, position, and futurity of his native country.³⁹

It has been argued⁴⁰ that part of Karamsin's success in his *History* – an Italian translation of the inaccurate French translation of which Byron possessed⁴¹ – lies in the influence on him of Scott.

Byron and Bowring never met, but Byron knew the *Specimens*, in great part because their translator subsequently became co-secretary of the London Greek Committee, through whose agency and persuasion he made his final, fatal journey to Greece. (Bowring also, among other things, edited Bentham – he was a passionate Utilitarian – founded the Anti-Corn-Law League, reorganized the fiscal systems of several countries in Western Europe, and became Governor of Hong Kong.) On December 27th 1823 Byron wrote to Moore, from Cephalonia:

If any thing in the way of fever, fatigue, famine, or otherwise, should cut short the middle age of a brother warbler, – like Garcilasso de la Vega, Kleist, Korner, Kutoffski (a Russian nightingale – see Bowring's *Anthology*). or Thersander, or, – or somebody else – but never mind – I pray you remember me in your "smiles and wine".⁴²

We are, as so often, at the mercy of Byron's memory, or of his spelling, or of both. "Kutoffski" does not exist; and Vasily Andreyevich Zhukovsky, the poet referred to, did not die until 1852. He is represented in Bowring's first volume by four poems, which seem in the English version to be rather watery: *The Mariner*, *Aeolus' Harp* (a version of Ossian, which Bowring annotates with parallel passages) and two poems which Bowring calls *Song*, and *Romance*. Why Byron selected him as the "nightingale" is mysterious – unless his motive was

Poets, Canadian-American Slavic Studies 1975, pp. 447-62; E.A. Osborne: *Early Translations from the Russian*, *The Bookman*, 1932, pp. 216-19. I am grateful to Professor Cross for help here.

36: *Autobiographical Recollections of Sir John Bowring with a brief Memoir* by Lewis B. Bowring (London 1877) pp. 123-24.

37: *Ibid* p. 122.

38: Bowring, *Specimens of the Russian Poets* (1821) p. 131n.

39: Bowring, *Autobiographical Recollections*, p. 122.

40: See J.L. Black, *Nicholas Karamsin and Russian Society in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto 1975) p. 173; or the same writer's contribution to *Essays on Karamsin* (The Hague / Paris 1975) p. 147.

41: CMP 249; Karamsin told Bowring that he had found two hundred errors in the first volume of the French translation alone. See *Specimens I*, p. xviii.

42: BLJ XI 84-5.

to humbug Moore, which is not unlikely. (He would have been upset to hear that his “nightingale” was to become tutor to Tsar Alexander II; Zhukovsky also translated *The Prisoner of Chillon*; but refused to translate any more of Byron’s works)

Pushkin was little known in 1820; had fate decreed otherwise, had Pushkin written earlier, or Bowring travelled later and Byron lived longer, the English poet might have been thunder-struck at seeing his own influence so clearly present in Russian verse, via English versions of *A Prisoner in the Caucasus*, or *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*. In Pushkin’s novel *The Captain’s Daughter* (in which the portrait of Catherine the Great differs markedly, and unavoidably, from Byron’s) the influence of Scott is again extremely clear.

Pushkin – to digress – had admired the early Cantos of *Don Juan*. He had, in *To the Sea*, provided a moving epitaph on Byron, and had even had a mass said for him at his death. But he took some time to obtain and read the Russian Cantos,⁴³ and when he did, seems not to have liked them. They almost certainly offended his patriotism. On May 27th 1826 he had written to his friend Vyazemsky,

Of course I despise my fatherland from head to foot. But it makes me angry when a foreigner feels the same.⁴⁴

Pushkin was the first, and so far as I know the only critic, to point out some of the local Russian errors in *Don Juan*. A kibitka, he writes in a notebook in 1827,⁴⁵ does not jolt in winter (see *Eugene Onegin*, V 2 and 25 for poetic evidence) and as Ismail was taken in deep frost, its streets were dirt-free, thereby contradicting Byron’s assertion at, I suppose, VIII, 13, 5, where he writes of “the roll in dust” (the battle took place in December, a fact acknowledged by Byron only glancingly, at VIII 73, 7, 128, 5-6 and 129, 6). Pushkin had his own attitude to Russian expansionism, and his poem *To the Slanders of Russia*, written after the Polish rebellion of 1831, contains a reference which can easily be read as a riposte to *Don Juan* VII and VIII:

Vy grozny na slovakh - paprobuitye na dyele!
Il stary bagatyr, pakoyny na pastyele,
Nye v silakh zavintits svoy Ismailsky shtyk?

[*You menace us with words – just try to act! Is the old Russian hero, now resting on his bed, not strong enough to screw on his Ismailian bayonet?*]⁴⁶

43: See *Pushkin on Literature*, sel., tr. and ed. Tatiana Wolff, rev. Bayley (hereinafter Wolff: Stanford 1986). On June 24/25th 1824 he writes to Prince P.A. Vyazemsky: *The first two Cantos of Don Juan are superior to the rest. His poetry was perceptibly changing. Everything about him was back to front: there was nothing gradual about his development, he suddenly ripened and matured – sang and fell silent, and he never recaptured his early notes. We no longer heard Byron after the fourth Canto of Childe Harold; some other poet was writing, with great human talent.* (Wolff 91-2). To A.A. Bestuzhev he writes on March 24th 1825: *You compare the first chapter [of Eugene Onegin] with Don Juan. Nobody esteems D.J. more than I do (the first five cantos, I haven’t read the rest) but it has nothing in common with Onegin.* (Wolff 138). On 22nd/23rd April 1825 he orders *Don Juan (canto 6 and following)* (Wolff 142). In the second half of November 1825 he confesses to Prince Vyazemsky *What a marvel Don Juan is! I only know the first five cantos ...* (Wolff 162). Finally, in 1827, he seems to have caught up with Cantos VI-VIII, and makes the criticisms in his notebook which I quote above.

44: Letter to Vyazemsky, 27th May 1826, quoted Bayley, *Pushkin*, Cambridge 1971 pp. 135 and 140. See *Pushkin’s Letters*, tr. J.T. Shaw (Indiana / Pennsylvania 1963) I 311.

45: Wolff 211.

46: See *Pushkin*, ed. and tr. John Fennell (Penguin 1964) pp. 69-71. The reference to *ismailckii shtyk* is at Stanza 4 line 3. In a letter to Elizaveta Mikhailovna Khitrov of September / October 1831 Pushkin corrects a French translation of the phrase. See *Pushkin’s Letters*, II 530 and 576n.

When Pushkin wrote his own *Don Juan*, in *The Stone Guest*, it was to be a less unconventional version of the legend than Byron's; and Byron was probably insufficiently fond of women to depict female sexuality as affectionately and amusingly as Pushkin did in, for example, *The Gavriliad*. In this extremely erotic poem, unpublished in Russia until after 1917, the Virgin Mary rapidly forfeits her claim to the title, by consecutive carnal encounters with the Archangel Gabriel, Satan, with herself, and finally with God the Father (disguised, Zeus-like, as a dove). I do not think that Byron would have found it funny; and I do not find anywhere in his verse so whole-hearted an acknowledgement that women are more perfectly women as a consequence of sexual experience. For him, the gap between what they professed and what they did was too gross for anything other than satire. The sequence in *Onegin* (VII, 21-4) in which Tatyana explores Onegin's library, and, via a reading of his marginalia, comes to realise what an empty Byronic posturer he is, might have upset the English poet as much as *Don Juan* VII and VIII probably upset Pushkin.

To return to Bowring: we cannot tell when Byron obtained a copy of the *Anthology*, or indeed to which of the two volumes he is referring in his letter to Moore. He may be referring to the second, which contains a translation of Zhukovsky's most famous poem, *A Minstrel in the Russian Camp*, and would thus give him more reason to think highly of the poet; but the second volume came out in 1823.

On March 30th 1824 – three weeks before he died – Byron wrote a letter to Bowring from Missolonghi, about the negotiation of the first loan from the London Greek Committee. He added, as part of his postscript (some bits of the manuscript are torn off with the seal):

I have only recently received your translation – from which I promise myself great pleasure – the Russians are greatly obliged to you – but I did not know that you so greatly admired their Czar – their poetry – at least in your version – will be [tear] than [tear] princes.⁴⁷

Bowring had dedicated his second volume to Tsar Alexander, but had cunningly signed his dedication “Boulogne Prison, October 20, 1822”; an awkwardness the Emperor decided, evidently, to overlook. We do not know how much of the new volume Byron read amid the chaos and bitterness of Missolonghi; perhaps none at all.

The most ambitious translation in Bowring's first volume may be that of Gavril Derzhavin's *The Waterfall*, written in 1791 to mark the death of Potemkin. In the previous year, Derzhavin (widely regarded as the greatest of eighteenth-century Russian poets: he has a place on Catherine's St. Petersburg statue, along with Potemkin, Suvorov, and others – see also *Onegin*, VIII, 2) had composed a poem on, of all themes, *The Seizure of Ismail*. This praised, as a matter of course, both Potemkin and Catherine, for having inspired such a mighty feat of arms. Derzhavin, like most men of ability in Russia, worked within the circles of the court; both ex-favourite (perhaps secret husband) and Empress had been impressed, and the poet's career had prospered. When Potemkin died, Derzhavin returned to the theme of Ismail, this time in a more sombre vein. Here is Bowring's version of Stanzas 60 to 64 of *The Waterfall*:

When the red morn breaks trembling o'er the dew,
And through the woods the wild winds whistle shrill;
When the dark Danube wears a bloody hue -
Then is the name oft heard of Ismahil,
And oft a gloomy voice is echoed then,
Through the twilight, “Say what means the Saracen?”

He trembles, and his eye is dimmed with fear,
The arms he dreads are sparkling in the sun,

47: BLJ XI 147.

And forty thousand Moslems dying there,
 Are the proud trophies of the northern one.
 Their shades, like frighted spectres, glide before,
 And the Russ stands in streams of human gore.

He trembles, and looks upwards, but the skies
 Are covered with portentous omens dire;
 Dark visions of the sea of Tavrid rise,
 And the land shakes with heaven's excited ire:
 Ochakov pours anew her sanguine flood,
 And terror seems to freeze that tide of blood.

As through the fluid brightness of the sea,
 Beneath the walking sunny canopy,
 The tenants of the wave glide joyfully;
 So o'er the Leman's face our squadrons fly,
 Their swell'd sails bursting with the wind, they tell
 How proud the ambition of the Russ can swell.

Ours is unutterable triumph now,
 Theirs fears and apprehensions: on the tomb
 That shields their heroes, thorns and mosses grow;
 Laurels and roses o'er our heroes bloom.
 Our glory-girded mausoleums stand
 O'er conquerors of the ocean and the land.⁴⁸

Bowring apologises in his second volume for such passages as this: "I have done violence to my feelings" he writes in his introduction, "by translating many of the military and warlike productions of the Russian poets: but they will not be without their use."⁴⁹ What he means by "use" is not clear; but it is possible that Byron – in whose writings we find no references to Ismail prior to 1822 – may have had his creative interest in that event awakened by reading Bowring's version of Derzhavin's poem.

If Byron does intend a commentary on the Russian poet's imperialist apologia, it would be in keeping with his method elsewhere. The closest parallel is his translation and versification of many passages in the Marquis de Castelnau's *Histoire de la Nouvelle Russie*, his indebtedness to which, for his description of the siege, he acknowledges in the Introduction to Cantos VI, VII and VIII (this is the first time in the publication of the poem that a source had been acknowledged by Byron from the outset). Castelnau's work is in part a justification for Potemkin's annexation of the Crimea, and Byron's ironic gestures of deference towards him (see VII, Stanza 32, VIII, 78, 2, or VIII, 104, 6-7) should alert us to the fact that the poet harbours no ideological good-will towards his source. Just as he "appropriates" four lines from Southey's pro-monarchist *The Lay of the Laureate* as the opening of the last Stanza in *Don Juan's* first Canto, as a means of making Southey look stupid, so he "appropriates" Castelnau's pro-expansionist chronicle, taking a proud statement of Russian militarism (written by a Frenchman) and gives it a violently anti-militaristic twist. Not just an anti-Russian twist, however: remember that – according to Byron – among the attackers on Ismail

... were several Englishmen of pith,
 Sixteen called Thomson, and nineteen named Smith.⁵⁰

48: Bowring, *Specimens I* pp. 36-7. The Russian will be found at the edition of *Derzhavin* ed. D.D Blagogo and V.A.Zapadova (Moscow 1957) pp. 188-9.

49: Bowring, *Specimens II* p. xi.

50: *Don Juan*, VII, 18, 7-8.

The fact is otherwise unrecorded. No source refers to the presence of English mercenaries among the Russian forces attacking Ismail, apart from the one “English naval officer” at VIII, 80, 7, whom Byron takes from Castelnau. The eighteenth-century Russian army had only peasant conscripts in its ranks, and Jack Smith, the son of the Cumberland blacksmith, whom Byron asserts to have died, immortal in a bulletin, at Schmacksmith (VII, Stanza 20) would have had no place there. No foreign mercenaries served other than officers, and London forbade the recruitment even of English naval mercenaries from the outset of the Second Turkish War in 1789.⁵¹ There were far more English mercenaries in the Turkish army – with government help and encouragement; the joke is all part of Byron’s defiant polemic.

In *The Waterfall* Derzhavin laments grievously the death of Potemkin (whom he had known well, and with whom he had enjoyed a variable relationship,⁵² and who, according to Castelnau, had invaded the Crimea “... résolut de placer une couronne de plus sur la tête de sa souveraine”).⁵³ Here is Bowring’s translation of Stanzas 54 to 58:

His was a kingdom full of light: a throne
Of more than regal glory was his seat:
A rosy-silver steed conveyed him on –
A splendour-glancing phaeton at his feet!
Proudest of all the proud equestrians he –
He fell: – in death’s dull, dark obscurity.

O! what is human glory, human pride?
What are man’s triumphs when they brightest seem?
What art thou, mighty one! though deified?
Methusalem’s long pilgrimage, a dream;
Our age is but a shade, our life a tale,
A vacant fancy, or a passing gale,

Or nothing! ’Tis a heavy, hollow ball,
Suspended on a slender, subtle hair,
And filled with storm-winds, thunders, passions, all
Struggling within in furious tumult there.
Strange mystery! man’s gentlest breath can shake it,
And the light zephyrs are enough to break it.

But a few hours, or moments, and beneath
Empires are buried in a night of gloom:
The very elements are leagued with death,
A breath sends giants to their lonely tomb.
Where is the mighty one? He is not found,
His dust lies trampled in the noiseless ground!

The dust of heroes? No! Their glories rise
Triumphal upwards, spreading living light
And pure imperishable memories
Through ages of forgetfulness and night:
Flowers shining on time’s wintry mountain-side;

51: See de Madariaga, op cit., pp. 400-1. A biography of Suvorov by Frederick Anthing, translated into English from the German in 1799, and reviewed in the *Anti-Jacobin* for October, refers (p. 147) to “1,000 Arnauts” (Albanian mercenaries) as being present among the besiegers. The most famous English mercenary in Russian service during the eighteenth century was the Scots Admiral Greig.

52: See Clardy, op. cit., pp. 72-3 and 127.

53: Castelnau, *Histoire ... de la Nouvelle Russie* II 154.

Potemkin could not die – he has not died!⁵⁴

It is possible that Byron had taken note of Derzhavin (who, as mediated through the sensibility of John Bowring, sounds like a more cheerful version of *Childe Harold*) for in Canto VII (Stanzas 36 and 37) he too treats of Potemkin's career and death, though - in the way we are examining – from quite a different perspective: and he had an authentic, historically-verifiable source, too, for his bathetic rendition. Here, from the third volume of the *Life of Catherine II*, is William Tooke's description of the death, and eating habits, of Grigori Potemkin:

As soon as the empress had intelligence that he was sick, she sent off to him two of the most experienced physicians at Petersburg. He disdained their advice, and would follow no regimen. He carried even his intemperance to an uncommon height[;] his ordinary breakfast was the greater part of a smoke-dried goose from Hamburgh, slices of hung-beef or ham, drinking with it a prodigious quantity of wine and Dantzic-liqueurs, and afterwards dining with equal voracity. He never controlled his appetites in any kind of gratification. He frequently had his favourite sterlet-soup, [*a sterlet is a small sturgeon*] at seasons when that fish is so enormously dear, that this soup alone, which might be considered only as the overture to his dinner, stood him in three hundred rubles ...
... With this sort of diet it is no wonder that he perceived his distemper to be daily gaining ground[;] he thought, however, to get well by moving from Yassy. Accordingly he resolved to set out for Nicolayef, a town which he had built at the confluence of the Ingul with the Bogue. Scarcely had he gone three leagues of his journey when he found himself much worse. He alighted from his carriage in the midst of the highway, threw himself on the grass, and died under a tree, in the arms of the Countess Branicka, his favourite niece.⁵⁵

There is no room in Derzhavin's *The Waterfall* for any talk of death by indigestion. Next, accommodating the concept readily, and much besides, is Byron's version of Potemkin's death:

There was a Man, if that he was a Man,
Not that his Manhood could be called in question,
For had he not been Hercules, his Span
Had been as short in youth as Indigestion
Made his last illness, when, all worn and wan,
He died beneath a tree, as much unblest on
The soil of the Green province he had wasted,
As e'er was Locust on the land it blasted.

This was Potemkin – a great thing in days
When Homicide and Harlotry made great;
If Stars and Titles could entail praise,
His Glory might half-equal his Estate;
This fellow, being six foot high, could raise
A kind of phantasy proportionate
In the then Sovereign of the Russian people,
Who measured men, as you would do a Steeple.⁵⁶

54: Bowring, *Specimens*, I pp. 34-5. The Russian will be found at the 1957 Moscow edition of Derzhavin, pp. 187-8.

55: Tooke, *Life of Catherine II*, pp. 322-4. In Casti's *Poema Tartaro*, Toto-Toctabei, the Potemkin figure, is exiled to a desert island where, appropriately, he dies of starvation.

56: *Don Juan*, VII, Stanzas 36-37.



Potemkin

Byron capitalises “Indigestion” in Mary Shelley’s manuscript,⁵⁷ although it is lower-cased in all printed versions, as if implying editorial disbelief. The “real” Potemkin (he was as unreal a personality as any history offers) was the victim of a fever epidemic raging at Jassy; his refusal to diet adequately is, however, attested, as is his refusal to take quinine, and the fact that he was syphilitic. But Byron is not interested in the “real” Potemkin: neither the statesman, nor the founder of cities, nor the conqueror of the Crimea, nor the reorganiser of the Russian Army, nor the founder of the Black Sea Fleet.

The two stanzas act as a kind of microcosm for the poem: what is man? ask the first two lines: is it merely a species? Is it to be distinguished from beasts? Is sexual potency really its measuring-rod? Is it heroic, like Hercules? Hercules came to the most bathetic of ends – killed by a present given him by his wife: and this particular man – Potemkin – comes to one even more bathetic, killed by the excess which he has been indulging recklessly all his life, as if there are no such things as consequences. “He died beneath a tree”: is it the cross? or just a representative of the indifferent “Moldavian wastes” which he created, an “unblest” locust, blindly devouring a “green province” as just as he devoured his mammoth breakfasts? Potemkin is, like Suvorov, at once a hero and a horror, Herculean and parasitical, a homicide and a harlot-master. “Stars and titles” do not, we protest, “entail long praise”, and even if they could, his “estate” is so gargantuan that no Glory could ever equal it fully. He has been created from Catherine’s “phantasy”, just as Juan was from Gulbeyaz’s, just as Juan soon will be from Catherine’s, and just as they all have from Byron’s: he is a “six-foot” walking phallus, treated as a holy emblem, and possessing the power to kill tens of thousands of people with a few words. William Tooke had known Potemkin, and described him, in words with which Byron had been familiar from his schooldays.⁵⁸

When first beheld, he had something savage in his appearance, which exhibited an extraordinary mixture of rude and cultivated nature. His look was animated, lively, and piercing: his countenance, fine, pliant, and lofty, bespoke the head of a Richelieu or a Mazarin on the robust shoulders of a savage. Prone to taciturnity, and eager to listen, his silence was the silence of thought and reflection. Active, indefatigable, turbulent, bold, and discreet, with a capacity more comprehensive than just, he was capable of undertaking and atchieving the most dangerous and desperate enterprizes. He paid little attention to the opinion of a world which he despised; and his passions acknowledged neither restraint nor limit, because his heart was destitute of morality and devoid of principle. His mind was a composition of raw genius, boundless ambition, a thirst for independence, a love of sway, and of all noble and of all low passions. He was a wolf holden by a single chain, but that chain was in the hand of Catherine.⁵⁹

This passage is perfectly Byronic – until the last sentence. It could be a description of Conrad, or of the Giaour; except that Byron is, in *Don Juan*, giving him the treatment ottava rima reserves for such characters – as it does, in *The Vision of Judgement*, for Sathan, who

⁵⁷: John Murray Archive. The stanza is on page 9 of Mary’s fair copy of Canto VII.

⁵⁸: CMP 4.

⁵⁹: Tooke, *Life of Catherine II*, pp. 325-6.

enters full of unanswerable power and hauteur, and ends by having silently to decline Robert Southey's offer of a ghosted autobiography. Neither Conrad, Lara, nor the Giaour ever suffer from indigestion.

Don Juan continues, after the (anticipated) death of Potemkin:

While things were in abeyance, Ribas sent
 A Courier to the Prince, and he succeeded
 In ordering matters after his own bent;
 I cannot tell the way in which he pleaded,
 But shortly he had cause to be content;
 In the mean time the batteries proceeded –
 And fourscore Cannon on the Danube's border
 Were briskly fired, and answered, in due order.

But on the thirteenth, when already part
 Of the troops reimarked the siege to raise,
 A Courier on the Spur inspired new heart
 Into all panthers for Newspaper praise,
 As well as Dilettanti in War's Art,
 By his dispatches, couched in pithy phrase,
 Announcing the appointment of that lover of
 Battles, to the command, Field Marshal Souvaroff. –

The letter of the Prince to the same Marshal
 Was worthy of a Spartan, had the cause
 Been one to which a good heart could be partial –
 Defence of Freedom – Country – or of Laws –
 But as it was mere lust of Power, to o'erarch all
 With its proud brow, it merits slight applause,
 Save for its Style, which said all in a trice:
 "You will take Ismail at whatever price."⁶⁰ –

Byron's satire widens here to embrace much more than Russian imperialism, much more even than imperialism in general. The ghastly intention behind Potemkin's order to Suvorov, translated by Byron from the supposedly accurate Castelnau ("Vous prendrez Ismaël à quel prix que ce soit")⁶¹ would be analysed by the poet as a symptom of the phenomenon he had identified in *Childe Harold* (IV, 97, 9) as the second fall of man, whereby, having fallen once with Satan's assistance, Man then falls again, with a thoroughness for which Satan is not prepared, and which he never anticipated:

"Let there be light!" said God! and there was light!
 "Let there be blood!" says Man – and there's a Sea!
 The Fiat of this spoilt Child of the Night
 (For Day ne'er saw his merits) could decree

60: *Don Juan*, VII, Stanzas 38-40.

61: Castelnau, *Histoire ... de la Nouvelle Russie* II 205. Tooke provided Byron with what he understood to be the background to the order: *Ismail still held out. Prince Potemkin had been besieging this place for seven months, and now began to grow impatient that he had not yet reduced it. Living in his camp like one of those ancient satraps, whom he alone in our days has equalled, perhaps surpassed, in luxury, he was surrounded by a crowd of courtiers and women, who employed every effort to amuse him. One of these women [note: Madame de Witt] pretending to read the decrees of fate in the arrangement of a pack of cards, predicted that he would take the town at the end of three weeks. Prince Potemkin answered, smiling, that he had a method of divination far more infallible. At that instant he sent his orders to Suvarof to take Ismail within three days.* – Tooke, *Life of Catherine II*, III p. 282.

More evil in an hour, than thirty bright
 Summers could renovate, though they should be
 Lovely as those which ripened Eden's fruit;
 For War cuts up not only branch, but root. –⁶²

According to historians other than those Byron appears to have read, once Potemkin had made the gesture of demanding the citadel be taken at any price, he changed his mind, and showed himself sufficiently uncertain about attacking it as to give Suvorov absolute freedom of choice as to whether he did so or not.⁶³ But this does not make much difference to the weight of Byron's essential satirical – or theological – point. In the recent history of Russia, Byron found material sufficiently weighty to embody his deepest ideas about men, women, politics, war, and evil; it is really a paradoxical compliment.

62: *Don Juan*, VII, Stanza 41.

63: In his 1799 biography of Suvorov, Anthing gives Potemkin as writing in a dispatch, "That if he [Suvorov] were not certain of success, it were better not to risk the assault" (English translation p. 142). I do not think that Byron knew this book. See also de Madariaga, *op. cit.*, p. 415, and Soloveytchik, *op. cit.*, p. 199.