

“‘Twas nature gnaw’d them to this resolution”: Desire, Market and the Natural World in Byron’s Don Juan

Lord Byron, having himself passed through the little deification of celebrity, was something of an expert on desire. Almost alone amongst the major Romantics, he came to understand this most basic force in human experience not only as mediated and mimetic, but as increasingly a function of a new kind of market whose commanding value was apparent autonomy from the market. Those whom Byron defied adored him, those whose petty gratifications he evaded in spectacular suffering emulated him, those to whose desires he declared himself indifferent desired him---as few cultural figures have ever been desired. In his early poetry the natural scene, at least in his privileged experiences of it, acted as an ally against other people, a source of his difference, a replacement for, rather than the object of, mediated desire. But *Don Juan* (1819-23) and other mature poems recognized what this principle might imply in universal application. The natural world is the only “external mediator”, the ultimate model of heedless alterity, the sublime indifference to which all aspire. *Don Juan* is Byron’s great poem of market life, of life without authority, either to be exerted or victimized by---of the world, indeed, without sacred center. At the center of the poem, instead, is his depiction of nature in the famous shipwreck and cannibalism episode of Canto II.