

Byron's "The Island": Dialogism of Genre and Gender

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Abstract: Often dubbed as a romance, a Polynesian fantasy, *The Island* is one of Byron's finest examples of Romantic dialogism, prefiguring the indeterminate nature of modern literature. However, Byron scholars have shied away from a serious reading of this poem due to its slippery and supposedly "un"-Byronic quality. Written concurrently with *Don Juan*, *The Island* enjoys much of Byron's poetic maturity and social concern with the liberal/radical individualism, represented by Christian Fletcher and anti-social existence of his fellow mutineers. The paper will argue that in this poem, the cultural, political, and gender/genre dialectics of binary oppositions are playfully deconstructed and that Byron, by overriding the femininity of the romance genre and transgressing the "politically correct" master narrative of the imperial discourse, anticipates in *The Island* Bakhtin's chronotope through the title of the poem, the overlapping of history and fiction; and the opposition between the narrative and the genre. Hoodwinked with the romance formal trappings and entangled with Byron's polyphonic voices critics have undervalued *The Island* as one of the mature poems of Byron, which actualizes Hume's fear of the romance genre's threat of subverting the power politics of gender/genre/race, in an attempt to project possibilities of a new social order.

The Island, Byron's last completed poem, has been an irksome, mischievous "intruder" into the poet's canon; an intruder which due to its disruptive message has been evaded or timidly approached by Byron's scholars. Written between Jan. 11 and Feb. 10, 1823, *The Island* is punctuated by the English Cantos XII and XIII of Byron's masterpiece *Don Juan*. This disruption may have been more warmly welcomed had its topic been more masculine and more patriarchally canonical and "politico-literarily correct". Critics seem to accept Byron's earlier break from *DJ* in 1820-1821 to revise his *Hints from Horace* because "the interruption of his epic could be seen as Byron forsaking the licentious Italian ottava rima for neo-classical closed couplets and dramatic unities" (Stabler 172). Thus when such a "masculine" task is undertaken, it is met, if not with great enthusiasm, at least with approbation.

Associating genre and rhyme with gender and poetic/moral prowess, *The Island*, though written in the mature period of Byron's poetic life, gets conflated with Byron's early *Oriental Tales* of 1812-14 and labeled as some kind of a misfit poem. Baffled by the contradictory voices, the double visions, the elusive political ideology and 'feminine' culture, mainstream critics tend to explain the poem as symptomatic of Byron's indeterminacy fostered by the

poet's inability to reconcile his aristocratic heritage and his liberal non-conformity to Western ethos of colonialism and civilization. The poem's predominantly feminine politics, which doesn't align with Byron's general attitude towards women and female readership or with his colossal masculine Byronic hero, have led to a lot of cursory readings of *The Island*. Whether in terms of the genre adopted or in the gender-role paradigms critics tend to converge on labeling the poem as flawed poetically, culturally, historically, and even morally.

Written in the mature period of his career and during Byron's increasing support for movements of independence against hegemony and colonialism, *The Island* is typical of Byron's 18th century literary heritage representing his attempt at re-valorizing the genre of Romance and its concomitant anti-patriarchal, anti-colonial discourse that reflects his age's cultural and political anxieties. Accordingly, this paper will argue that in its subversion of the genre /gender politics, *The Island* is as socially engaged as *Don Juan* and deserves to be one of Byron's canonical texts. The two main premises of this argument is that whether in form or content, Byron 're-covers' the role of romance in narrating the "nation" and that Byron's dialogic imagination is manifest in the contesting narratives of the poem. Juxtaposed with some of the major romance writers of the time such as Sir Walter Scott and Robert Southey, Byron's romance narrative not only distinguishes itself from the nationalist propagandist program of these poets, but also from the conservative patriarchal cultural stereotypes espoused by women romance writers such as Mary Russel Mitford. The first part of the paper will explore the subversive characteristics of the romance genre, the second will focus on the monological interpretations of the poem, and the third part will rectify these readings by highlighting the Bakhtinian dialogism of the poem which realigns *The Island* with other canonical works written by Byron at the same time (*Sardanapulus*, *Mazeppa*, *Don Juan*, etc...).

1. The Dialogic 'Perversities' of the Romance Genre

A typical definition of a romance narrative usually involves the exotic and the often idealized characters, scenes and themes. Having its beginning in the aristocratic courts of Germany and France of the mid 12th century, the staple subject matter is chivalric adventure, passionate love stories in utopian idealized contexts. However, one of the influential definitions of romance is put forward by Northrop Frye who describes the world of romance as one "in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended" (30) and as a "wish-fulfillment dream" wherein "the perennially childlike quality is marked by its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space" (186). Nevertheless, Frye adds that this mode of writing "has a socially paradoxical role. In every age the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance, where the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals and the villains the

threats to their ascendancy” in addition to a “genuinely ‘proletarian’ element” that is constantly asking for “new hopes and desires to feed on” (186). Thus despite its aristocratic posture, the romance “in values[,] as in setting . . . aims not at pure escapism or fantasy but at the conviction of reality. It is not satisfied with the trappings of realism but strives for the conviction that the world it projects has existed . . . or will be in some millennium to come” (Barron 4).

This paradoxical nature of the romance allowed many eighteenth and early nineteenth century writers to review medieval and renaissance romances and inscribe the national culture of England. The wide spread revival of the Medieval romance in the 18th century made of the romance “a central genre of British poetry” and which “indelibly altered Britain’s sense of its literary heritage” (Curran 129). Awed by the emotional appeal and cognizant of the subversive potential the genre has on his notion of social order, David Hume, one of the most influential philosophers and thinkers of the 18th century, discredits the genre’s epistemic value and refers to it with “tropes of infection and poison” and with “naïve readers” that turn out to be females whose “unruly imagination” allows them to fall under the spell of falsities of the genre (Tierney-Hynes). Hume offers history as an alternative to avert “the dangerous possibilities of romance reading,” identifying women as prone to believing in falsehoods and not truths (Tierney-Hynes). However, Hume’s fear of the “unruly imagination” is a half truth of the genre’s dangers. A more immediate threat posed by the romance is its ability at questioning and subverting what Frye calls “the natural order of things”. According to Tierney-Hynes “The real difficulty with romance then becomes apparent: the appetite for falsehood is only the appetite to recreate identity--women as beloved, men as actuated by love; what Hume in his youth called ‘a curious Reversement of the Order of Nature’--and must be suppressed, lest it become true.” Hume’s effeminizing of the genre and the wide spread of women readers and authors elicited a counter-reaction from many 19th century male poets who, fearing the emasculation of the nation’s culture, emphasized the masculinity of the poet and epistemology (Wordsworth’s poet is a ‘man speaking to men’).

This ontological connection between romance and utopian literature has devalued *The Island* both artistically and epistemologically. Romance heroes are anti-social due to their spatial and temporal exilic world that is detached from the ‘realism’ of everyday life problem. Hence, the liminal precariousness of the romance genre gets erroneously divested of its political, social, and cultural content, a content that is heavily charged with paradigms of national identity and empire building. However, the imbrications of romance with national identity and culture are evident in the deluge of romance narratives and commentaries at the turn of the 19th century. The “deeply nationalistic character” of the romance (Curran 129, Ford) attracted several 19th century British poets who used the genre to define the nation and its culture. Sir Walter Scott, Mary Russel Mitford, Robert Southey, and Lord Byron engaged in writing romances but for very different reasons. According to Curran, poets such as Southey, Scott and Byron

capitalized on it not only to feed the public hunger for the exotic and unfamiliar, but also to comment on the current affairs of the time. Curran further maintains that though Byron's romances participate in much of the formal characteristics of his contemporaries' romances, "Byron would never have had the instantaneous success he enjoyed had he merely dressed Scott's kilted warriors in Southey's kaftans. His power lies in exploiting the realism within romance, arousing fantasies that prove distasteful even as they entrance" (144). In contradistinction with Southey's obsession with "the glory of imperial rule by land and sea," Byron "attacks British imperialism by pointing to its effects upon the Pacific islanders whom Cook visited" (Fulford "Pacific Hell"). As for Scott, he saw romance as "simply fiction" that dramatizes the "enchantment of the present by the past" and where "the past [gets] domesticated in the present, reaffirming in the contemporary, demystified, and emphatically democratic frame the chivalric virtues of both the legendary periods it subsumes" (Curran 136-137). Though borrowed from Scott, Byron's romance shows "no stabilization of civilized values" and the female figures are the victims of tyrannical men (143). To further illustrate the distinction between Scott and Byron's treatment of the past, Dino Felluga states that, unlike Scott, Byron complicated the harmonizing function of romance by "unromantically discussing the present" and that he used the genre to

defamiliariz[e] the present and incit[e] revolution, thus completely recasting the ideological effect of the romance form. Byron's ideas held the potential for disruptive effects because he fused the temporal dynamics of the romance form to an all-encompassing satire of the present, thus countering Scott's fetishistic nostalgia with an insistent melancholia that sought to "disjoint" a reader's relationship to the status quo. (71).

Looked at from a political and cultural perspective, Felluga maintains that Byron's romance countered the "logic of fetish employed by Scott to reinvigorate the form" (74). Indeed it is this issue that rendered Byron's poetry threatening "to nineteenth century emerging social order" and was one of the main reasons for its marginalization (Felluga 71). For example, Scott's romance "recast itself as at once vigorous and unthreatening—nothing but a vestige, half forgotten, of barbaric violence" only to "disavow its own seriousness, thus 'skirting' the violent traumas that, in fact, impelled the maneuver in the first place." Byron, however, "by contrast, insistently returned to those traumas, refusing to see them dead and buried and it was this insistence that for a time threatened to disrupt Scott's carefully stage-managed romance of state" (74). Thus while Scott's "medieval temporal 'otherness' wards off the geographic and socioeconomic infractions and infections represented by the presence of colonies *outside* the nation-space, the infraction of bellicose foreign states *against* the nation-space, even the alienating urban landscapes spreading *within* the nation-

space,” Byron uses “these fantasy-frames not to idealize the present” but to question it:

[H]e employed it to imagine the present as itself always already lost, thus creating a space from which to question the values of a capitalist and imperialist status quo. Byron’s romance medievalism contributed not to a nostalgia for the past but a nostalgia for the present—an anticipation of decay that would inevitably fuel the “condition of England” paranoia of the rest of the century. It is almost as if Byron’s examination of the ruins of past empires forced him also to anthropologize England’s present. (75).

Although Felluga’s study of Byron’s romance is restricted to *CHP*, much of what he contends applies to *The Island*, which deals with one of the most traumatic experiences in English history, the Mutiny on the Bounty, to which Byron returns voicing the cultural and political anxieties of his nation.

2. The Monological Readings of *The Island*

Based rather loosely on the famous Mutiny on the HMS Bounty, Byron’s manipulation of the temporal and spatial determinants of a historical event recasts the mutiny as a romance narrative that has accrued ambiguous and elusive reading of *The Island*. Byron’s culpability in this prevailing mis-reading is tantamount. As early as 1806 Byron is puzzled by the genre’s challenges. In his poem “To Romance,” Byron speaks of romance’s lure to accept the true image of women and the poet’s attempt to de-enthrall himself from its feminine threats and from its potential to tell the “truth”. According to Labbe, “the poet casts Romance as a romantic seductress, a villainess whose attractions still remain strangely compelling (135). Thus, he bids adieu to romance as a genre that beguiles its true subversive intent of challenging the patriarchal literary construct of romance as an emasculating genre which distracts the male poet from his much more masculine tasks. He accuses it of being the “queen of childish joys,/Who lead’st along, in airy dance, /Thy votive train of girls and boys” (1-4). Worried about its impelling allure to which he has succumbed, he cuts off his allegiance to it by severing his enthrallment: “I break the fetters of my youth;/ No more I tread thy mystic round,/ But leave thy realms for those of truth” (6-8).

Nevertheless, this juvenile poem further foregrounds Byron’s awareness of the dialogic nature of romance which he finds difficult to bid it adieu: “And, yet, ’tis hard to quit the dreams,/Which haunt the unsuspecting soul,/ Where every nymph a goddess seems,/ Whose eyes through rays immortal roll;/ When Virgins seem no longer vain,/ And even Woman’s smiles are true” (9-12, 15-16). To Labbe, “although the speaker declares his intention to quit Romance in stanza 1, as early as stanza 2 he admits his difficulty, even as he offers his first critique of ‘her’ powers” (135). Professed in his early stages of poetic career prior, Byron’s attitude towards romance gets further complex when he writes to his

publisher of *The Island*, that "the most pamby portions of the Toobonai Islanders—will be the most agreeable to the enlightened public, though I shall sprinkle some *uncommon-place* here and there nevertheless" (*Letters*, VI, 164-65). Indeed in the same letter that the critics cite as evidence of Byron's vagueness regarding the poem, Byron says:

But I have two things to avoid—the first that of running foul of my own Corsair and style, so as to produce repetition and monotony—the other not to run counter to the reigning stupidity altogether, otherwise they will say that I am eulogizing Mutiny. This must produce tameness in some degree. But recollect that I am merely trying to write a poem a little above the usual run of periodical poesy, and I hope that it will at least be that. (*Letters*, VI 164, emphasis added)

Indeed, by 1823 Byron's political and cultural encounters in the East allowed Byron to rediscover the romance power in narrating the nation's history "a little above the usual run." But the paradoxical nature of the romance, "escapist" yet socially committed, "dreamy," yet politically engaged, "naïve," yet philosophically stimulating demands a re-examination of Byron's *The Island*, exonerating it from its cursory categorization as a doomed "womb poem".

Drawing on both Bligh's account and William Mariner's travel narrative in Tonga, Byron reconstructs the mutiny, yet with a very major change: the love relationship between "the blue-eyed" mutineer Torquil and the "dark-skinned" Neuha. In Mariner's account, the chief of the Tonga Island hides his beloved in a cave, thus saving her. In Byron's poem, this is inverted; it is the female native that saves her pirate lover. Surprised by the English ship, the mutineers fight and then flee to a rocky island where Christian Fletcher, the Byronic hero of the story, and his protégé Torquil, put a fierce fight. During the battle Neuha commands Torquil to dive into the water after her and thus is delivered to a cave under the water, already prepared with all domestic bliss by the resourceful Neuha. It is this 'perversity' of Torquil's surrender to the womblike, maternal grotto that has captured the critics fully armed with their procrustean analysis of this gender role confusion.

Up till the '90s much of the early studies of the poem rest on explicating it as a youthful romance in a south sea, a Melvillian setting of idyllic water (Knight 109). Often dubbed as a "Polynesian fantasy", in which Byron selectively appropriated Polynesian culture "for the sake of again representing a white man's dream of an earthly paradise" (Spence 48), a "broadside against Southey's colonialist politics" an "escapist poem par excellence," a Noble savage narrative wherein the colonial, patriarchal master narrative of masculinity and colonialism has gone wrong, the poem has not had its fair share of serious study and is shelved as mere romance quest journey in which the child/childe Byronic hero is rewarded by earning a "possession", or a gift, or even a prize.

In line with Knight's facile dismissal of the poem in the 50s as a "youthful romance," whereby "the hero is autobiographically Byronic" (109) critics of the 60s and 70s tend to give attention to the poem's dialectics of idyllic love, focusing on the Neuha-Toquil relationship from a patriarchal perspective. Given the generic qualities of the Romance, *The Island* is typically seen as a return to Eden, a terrestrial paradise whose marginality is emphasized by its remote undetected geographic location, hence suffering several perversities.

The first 'perversity' detected in the poem is its feminine qualities. The most denigrating comments on the poem's aquatic nature and its maternal connotation are those of Bernard Blackstone's in his much referred to study *Byron: A Survey*. Ignoring Byron's engagement in the Greek struggle of independence and his political maturity at the time of writing *The Island*, Blackstone sees the poem's, and his creator's, regression to the maternal Neuha, island and cave, as a reversal of Byron's "Pilgrim's progress . . . [where] the old goal of knowledge, essentially the Socratic self-knowledge, is abandoned" (265).

Although Blackstone considers the poem as Byron's "boldest intuition of a cosmic paradise to be met with in Romantic poetry" (*The Lost Travellers* 60), yet he finds Ocean paradises in Byron as "symptomatic of a failure of nerve, a regression from plain Christian feeling and thinking" (*The Lost Travellers* 60). Hence, *The Island* represents the "ultimate refuge and ultimate defeat: *womb poem is also a doom poem*" (*A Survey* 264, emphasis added). Oblivious of the political subversions of the poem, Blackstone nostalgically contextualizes it within Byron's "mourn of youth" (*A Survey* 185) and maintains that its inconsistencies are the result of the poet's personal life:

This is a late poem: and Byron has passed somewhat beyond his first romantic, naïve passion for the sea into a fuller understanding. . . there are negative pressures too; Byron was aging, more rapidly perhaps than his years suggest, and the lotus-eating dream—which island should he buy? Ithaca? One of the Cyclades?—had grown on him in recent years. The *Island* dramatizes a crisis in Byron's own life (*A Survey* 186-87).

Blackstone's prognosis for this crisis is, as expected, a pathological one, that of a terrified masculinity that rushes to integrate itself with the female principle symbolized by the womb-cave that saves Torquil the retribution of patriarchal authority (*The Lost Travellers* 185). Read from a biographical perspective,

Torquil is the boy, the innocent, who splits off from the older, responsible Christianity whose guilt is inevitably punished. (Byron seeks to have his cake and eat it). Revenge is taken by Byron-Christian on the Captain-Bligh/Captain-John ('Mad Jack') who is the initial author of all his woes; returning to the 'Mothers,' Byron returns to childhood, discarding adult values. (*A Survey* 264)

Supported by Byron's reference to female treachery in *CHP*, written more than 10 years prior to *The Island*, thus precluding any development in the poet's

worldview, Blackstone argues that the paradoxes of the poem are intended by Byron "to satisfy the audience who was adapted to caveats of perversity and devilishness of Byron's intellect" (*The Lost Travelers* 197).

A second perversity is the problematic nature of the narrative picked up by P.D. Fleck whose analysis of the poem, though more attentive to the poem's inherent contradictions, does not go much beyond the structural level. Intrigued by the inconsistencies of the work Fleck points to the deceptive simplicity of the plot which involves three different heroes: Bligh who is heroic, Fletcher who is tragic, and Torquil who is a romantic hero (164). Even the narrator seems puzzling for Fleck for the narrator doesn't maintain an altogether synoptic or consistent view of the events and adopts a comic style (the Ben Bunting appearance in Canto III and the button incident in Canto IV) which seems incongruent with any of the three perspectives of his heroes.

Fleck perceives a double vision in *The Island*: it holds in suspension passionate desire and a strong sense of reality (173) and concludes his structural analysis of the poem pointing out that "by the end of the poem what is left in suspension is the infant world of Torquil and the mature world of Bligh, the world we want and the world we must make our way in" (181). Although Fleck's reading is quite attentive to the sense of disruption, of the double vision, yet it doesn't take the poem beyond the realm of a mere Romantic dream whose impossibilities explain the detachment of the narrator. Moreover, very much like Blackstone, Fleck infantilizes Neuha's virtual paradise and considers it as a transitional one which we must outgrow to enter the mature world of Captain Bligh.

A more favourable reading of the poem's narrative voices or styles is offered by John Mckusick who re-evaluates the poem by focusing on its stylistic and linguistic politics. Mckusick interprets the "seemingly schizophrenic stylistics and politics of the island" as symptomatic of Byron's conflicting attitude towards revolutionary politics fostered by "Byron's pride in his family's naval heritage, as well as his instinctive allegiance to aristocratic values" and "his commitment to revolutionary thought [that] explains the benevolent image of Captain Bligh in Canto I and the escape of the younger mutineer" to realize "the revolutionary ideal of liberation through the power of love" (843-44). Hence the poem's poetic linguistic matrix has both the Miltonic conservative rhetoric to describe the disobedience of the sailors and an alternative anti-colonial language of an "absence of language" of "wordlessness" between Neuha and Torquil (849).

Nevertheless, Mckusick, like the other critics before him who are caught in the 'perversities' of the poem, attributes this "schizophrenic" style to the gender role transgression wherein "Neuha acquires the attributes of the aggressive, masculine, western steel [and] the more passive Torquil is threatened by loss of masculinity when Neuha borrows the knife to make fire [4: 144]" (850). More importantly and in line with other misogynistic and pathological readings of the poem, Mckusick sees Byron's use of the word 'tyrant' in 2: 352-

55 as representing "the masculine fear of engulfment by the devouring female operating as a threat to Torquil's sense of independent identity and purpose" (851). Restricting his argument to the linguistic texture, Mckusick concludes that Byron's indeterminacy between his allegiance to his aristocratic heritage and his profound alienation from the prevailing values of civilization precludes any resolution to the moral impasse of the poem.

A third 'perversity' of *The Island* is explored by Tim Fulford, whose postcolonial reading of the poem seems, as well, beleaguered with the double vision, double language and double morality embedded in the South Seas romances. Pitted against Robert Southey's blatant and overtly colonial and prejudiced representation of the South Sea Islands, Fulford states that Byron's poem, "renews the attack [after *The Vision of Judgement*] on the Evangelical Christianity that was shaping British attitudes to the unfamiliar cultures of its empire" ("*Poetic Hells and Pacific Edens*"). However, very much like Mckusick, Fulford, while acknowledging the poem's radical subversion of British imperialism by the many examples he cites from the poem, he still sees Byron subject to his aristocratic and Byronic aspiration labeling the poem as a "colonial" and "erotic fantasy". To Fulford, Byron "frames Tahiti with his own identification of liberty with ancient Greece" and Neuha as

Byron's desire for an ideal woman, both sexual and innocent, who is active yet still deferential. For Byron, Neuha, like the South Sea nature she embodies, desires only to give pleasure to another. She is stereotyped as a minor nature-goddess keen to give herself to a Western man so as to redeem him from the guilt that stems from greater experience.

Accordingly, Neuha represents "an encounter with a redemptive female innocence [that] was a colonialist desire that Southey shared with Byron when imagining 'exotic' cultures" ("*Poetic Hells and Pacific Edens*").

Yet another 'perversity', the fourth, of the poem is Byron's manipulation of historical fact. To Fulford Byron conflated Toobonai with Tahiti in order "to avoid portraying the prostitution and promiscuity for which Tahiti had become notorious for" (*Poetic Hells and Pacific Edens*) and consequently achieve his erotic fantasy. Equally attentive to this historical "distortion" is Gordon Spence who takes Byron's dealing with his sources to task. According to Spence, although Byron had a reliable source, such as Lieutenant Bligh, "for the subsequent history of the mutineers, he wrote from a position of ignorance and made a startling departure from the facts" which render "his view of the relations between Europeans and Polynesians . . . too inexact" with the Aristotelian law of probability (42). Moreover, Byron, according to Spence, commits several errors in representing the geographical matrix of his narrative (Toobonai is not Tahiti), the social and the cultural practices of the Tonga culture (it is hierarchal and clothed), and the conduct of both the mutineers and the islanders when the British ship surprises them. All of these misrepresentation are, to Spence, intentional on Byron's part: he

sacrifices authenticity for the sake of a "romance of aristocratic birth" (46), for the purpose of "representing a white man's dream of an earthly paradise" and for "fantasy"—all necessary that "history should in this different genre [than in *DJ*] be subordinated to romance" (48). However, Spence's "regret" that Byron did not do his proper research work while writing the poem makes one wonder at the ever possibility of 'romance' to be 'historically' accurate.

A fifth 'perversity' that seems to trouble the readers of *The Island* is, unfortunately, forwarded by those who directly address Byron's political stance against imperialism and colonialism such as Makdissi and Leask. Both critics deal extensively with Romanticism as being fraught with contradictions and dilemmas that are the product of tensions inherent in nationalism and empire building. Makdisee, for example, identifies Byron's anxiety as "stemming from his participation in two projects: 1) viewing the East as the site or birthplace of Europe's great cultural heritage while 2) at the same time viewing the East as a site into which one could escape from modernity, a site from whose vantage point one could critique both modernity and Europe itself" (128). Thus, while Byron links the east to Europe diachronically, hence, perpetuating the Eurocentric vision of history, in which Europeans can claim to assimilate other peoples, cultures, and histories, he also separates it synchronically by associating it with anti-modernity in opposition to Modern Europe (127-28). According to Makdissi, Byron's participation in this dual project underwrites his "ambivalent early attitudes towards empire and empire building in the 'boundless east'" (134) and explains Byron's rather weak philhellenism of 1812 (136). Although this "weak philhellenism", as Makdissi says, "has little to do with notions of innate European superiority over Turks and Muslims, and even less to do with a broader European *mission civilisatrice* in Asia" (136), yet "the later Byron, the Byron of *Childe Harold* III and IV, destination is no longer the East, but Italy—the 'heart' of modern Europe" (137). Restricting his discussion to Byron's *CHP* and the *Oriental Tales*, Makdissi claims that "in the very process of producing an Oriental other, Byron has to produce an image of himself: a narrative persona of himself as a man, an Englishman, a European" (129).

Leask, on the other hand, explains the stereotyping of the East in Romantic poetry as the result of "anxiety" and not as Said contends as tropes for colonialism. Leask defines "anxiety" as that which has "registered a sense of the internal dislocation of metropolitan culture" and that which both resists and participates in the "imperial hegemonic program" (*British Romantic Writers and the East* 2-3). The symptoms of such anxiety Leask identifies in the prevalent 19th century representation of the Other as "an often oriental female who turns out to be an epischidion or wishful projection of the ego of the male protagonist" (*British Romantic Writers* 6), which is ironically a self-destructive paradigm in poets such as Shelley and De Quincey. That Byron does not commit himself totally to this imperial project of 'Othering', Leask presents an analysis

of one of the oriental tales, *The Corsair*, in which Byron suffers this Romantic anxiety only to resolve it and come to terms with it in *The Island*. However, the ambiguity regarding the fate of Gulnare and Conrad is, according to Leask, indicative of Byron's inability to deal with such an inversion of Western cultural and gender hierarchy (*Romantic Writings* 239).

Indeed both Leask and Makdisee's views seem to answer the queries raised earlier by the critics about the inconsistencies of the movement of the narrative (Blackstone), the paradoxical stance of the narrator (Fleck). Nevertheless, despite their cogent and brilliant analyses of Byron's anxiety, *The Island* does not get its fair share of discussion. While Makdissi limits his analysis to Byron's early poetry, i.e. till 1812, Leask, in his lengthy study of Romantic anxieties, deals with the poem rather briskly. In his introduction to the book, *The Island* seems anomalous to his thesis, referring to it as a "moment . . . in which the relations of power and desire are *actively* [not destructively], and *creatively, rethought against the grain of history*" (*British Romantic Writers* 10, emphasis added). However, although Leask points out that the oriental stereotype, "utterly deconstructed in the uncanny narrative of the Corsair", gets even more drastically exploded in *The Island*, where a *Brown woman saves a White man from a White man*, he gives the poem not more than 3 pages of a 53-page chapter on Byron. Unlike the other Eastern tales, to Leask, *The Island* is free of the "imperialist power relations" and, as he puts it, "is the occasion of one of Byron's deepest indictments of European colonialism" (64) manifested in the "diluted influence of Fletcher, the Byronic hero, and the volitional exile of Torquil, free of the mark of Cain and a low-born Hebridean who has the potential to fill a conventional heroic role." Yet, "in a reversal of the normal discourse of colonialism, Torquil is educated out of all such heroic aspirations by the simple values of the south seas islanders" (66). Although he concludes his analysis of the poem stating: "Along with the brilliant final cantos of *Don Juan*, the greatest achievement of the late Byron [*The Island*] is his poetic vision . . . liberated from the riven condition of the heroes and heroines of the Tales into a utopian place where violent dichotomies of culture, class, and gender are briefly suspended (67), the poem remains for Leask of a "pre-social" nature and of "fragile utopianism" (67).

Equally attentive to the poem's indeterminacy, Franklin's and Oliver's readings remain skeptical of Byron's vision in *The Island*. Franklin's analysis of Neuha's liberational role in the poem is the first to give a positive interpretation of the poem's counter-narrative. In *The Island*, though Neuha's cave is symbol of femininity and echoes Homer's Circe's, it is "refuge and a source of power, hidden from the view of Northern rationalism" and unlike Circe's emasculation of masculine heroes, Byron's mutineers are transformed from "wild beasts" into men who, under the influence of the island's female principle, become "tamed" (93). Moreover, although Byron's characterization of Neuha "conforms to the stereotype of femininity by identifying women with the realm of feeling, he abandons even further the portrayal of the heroine as a pathetic victim whose weakness renders her tragic fate inevitable" (95). More of an initiator than a

follower of action, Neuha isn't "romantically contemplative or melancholy, but confident and joyous" (96), qualities that do not conflict with her sexual or "charitable" love (97). Along the same line, Franklin points out that the reference to Torquil's effeminizing on the island is not to be taken ironically as in the "drunken reveling of Haide's rule in *Don Juan*" because Neuha and the island do not transgress gender boundaries, hence gender roles, as Haide does in the absence of her father. Also we should not take the pleasure principle reigning in the island as similar to the "degenerate luxury stressed in Sardanapalus." To Franklin, Byron's epicurean principle derives from the "mythical ideal society of sentimentalism, projected by eighteenth-century moral philosophers" (94). Accordingly, Franklin highlights Byron's development of the romance heroine in his Neuha: "Originally a fragile slave murdered by an Oriental patriarch (Leila), she later loses her passivity to become the strong warrior/mistress (Gulnare, Kaled). Now Byron separates the heroine completely from a patriarchal society which condemns her sexuality . . . Neuha is the first heroine whose independence and active sexuality are in no conflict with her own society" (97-98).

Franklin's vindication of Byron's romance, however, is in line with many of the commentators on the poem (such as Leask, Makdissi, McKusick, Fulford, etc...) who take Byron's equivocal political views as the paradigm for his poetic creations. Summing up her analysis of Neuha, Franklin interprets Byron's return to an ideal womanhood of femininity in *Don Juan* in 1824, figured in the ideal English Aurora Raby, as indicative of Byron's "Janus-faced relativism towards femininity [which] is comparable to Byron's political dualism, in that he vested his zeal for ideal (republican) freedom in the national liberation of the Southern nations . . . but could not envisage the revolutionary breaking down of traditional class and patriarchal authority in England" (98).

In a recent comparative study of Scott and Byron's cultural encounters, Susan Oliver also reads the conclusion of the poem as a cultural impasse whose "ambiguities . . . add to the instability of Byron's vision" leading to "an endgame from which there is no way backwards *or* forwards" (200). The main reason for such a conclusion is Torquil's final destination: it is a cave and not a 'home' which indicates his alienating himself socially. Drawing on Bachelard's distinction between a house and a hut, Oliver remarks that the house "is a manifestation of our obsession with sociality, rank and identity. Its verticality requires, ideally, a cellar and an attic, symbolizing memories and ambitions" which are fulfilled in the case of Scott's "rebuilt castles [that] incorporate selected features from the past and from his characters experience" (199). In contrast, quoting Bachelard, Oliver points out that the hut is "so simple that it no longer belongs to our memories—which at times are too full of imagery—but to legend; it is a center of legend [which] becomes centralized solitude." Thus, Torquil, though lives, he has no future and "he ceases to be himself in order to become his own legend" (199).

3. Responding to the Perversities: The Dialogism of *The Island*

Enmeshed with Byron's confessional mode and overlooking his predilection to manipulate and deconstruct genres and persona (best evidenced in *Don Juan*) the above readings of *The Island* tend to be as cursory as the earlier readers of the poem in explaining the inherent tensions in the poem, which, to the above critics, tend to detract the value of the poem, hence its flawed nature. This erroneous assumption overlooks Byron's radical shift from his poetic creation of the Byronic hero to matters more political and social and dilute the Bakhtinian dialogism of the poem. The reasons that justify a Bakhtinian reading of the poem could be gleaned from two of the most influential authorities on Romanticism and on Byron. M.H. Abrams's reason for excluding Byron from *Naturalism Supernaturalism* is the very same reason that brings Byron and Bakhtin together. To Abrams, Byron jars with his main thesis in the book because "in his greatest work he speaks with an ironic counter-voice and deliberately opens a satirical perspective on the vatic stance of his Romantic contemporaries" (13). In his refutation of Bakhtin's charge of the monological nature of poetry, Michael Eskin points out that Bakhtin was in fact responding to certain poets of the "symbolist, futurist, and Russian formalists of the time who tried to claim a special, even divine, status for poetic language by means of which the poet alone inscribes or names the world around him" (384-385, Wesling 22). That Byron, like Bakhtin, rejects the 'godlike' quality of the poet is further expounded in McGann's *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* whose chapter on Byron brings us much closer to Bakhtin. Although he does not ignore the ironic and the lyrical aspects that conjoin Byron's work to many of his fellow poets, McGann describes *Don Juan*'s structure and movement with terms that seem to come out of Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel". In the course of his search for the poem's "truth", McGann repeatedly refers to the dialogical, and not dialectical, structure of *Don Juan*. Distinguishing between the "dialectical 'either/or'" and the "procedural rule of 'both/and'" found in *Don Juan*. He quotes stanza 87 from Canto xv

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

to illustrate the dialogism of the poem. That Byron doesn't offer an 'either/or' possibility but rather adds "a third too in a nook", McGann explains that

The latter, in its Byronic form, means that the terms of all contradictions are neither idealistically transcended nor nihilistically cancelled out. They simply remain in contradiction. The both/and rule means that the writing of

the poem must 'invariably' produce not simply the dialectic of 'Opinions two', but somewhere 'a third too in a nook', that third being, minimally, the awareness of the unresolved character of the original opposition. (56)

This distinction denotes that "in Byron's writing, contradiction is not dialectic, it is asymmetry" (60). One can clearly evince a Bakhtinian thought here. To Bakhtin, opposing ideas, or, as Byron puts it "Twin opposites," are not to be seen "as binary oppositions, but as asymmetric dualisms" (Holoquist 19) which bring about "differences that cannot be overcome" (20), for how can they be when the poet or any individual is living the ever-changing reality; "to be consistent" is to be "non-existent" or not alive. McGann puts it forcefully saying: "This contradiction operates because the 'process' of subjectivity is an existential and not a logical (or dialectical) process" (41).

Hence, McGann attributes the evasiveness of finding the truth or sincerity in Byron's *Don Juan* to the presence of so many different people in it, who, as it were, contribute to the writing of the poem: "Byron's poem . . . incorporated a large and diverse group of people into itself" whose presence "'in' Byron's poem [is] not simply because they are named or alluded to—not simply at the narratological level—but because Byron's work has called them out—has imagined them as presences at the rhetorical and dialogical level" (50). Once they are "imagined as presences" they participate in the composition of the poem. Whether it is the reviewers' or the publishers' comments on the cantos, or Hobhouse's marginal notes on the manuscripts, or Lady Byron's comments, or even Byron's own comments on the poem in his letters, their inclusion in the process of writing shows, in McGann's opinion, that "the act of writing has thoroughly materialized and socialized the field of the imagination's activity." In other words, by integrating these people's voices, ideas, ideologies, "we observe how poetry is like most human events—a dynamic interchange between various parties each of whom plays some part in the total transaction" (48). In Bakhtinian terms, we get to observe how Byron's creative imagination depends on its "sharedness" of and with the others, creating the multivocality and dialogism of the poem.

To McGann the poem is not a "'virtual' reality"; on the contrary, it is "a particular deed in language—indeed, a series of particular deeds" (63). This foregrounding of the role of language in its various historical and social contexts, leads McGann to conclude that *Don Juan*, "What is 'true' in the poem, therefore, *depends on contexts and circumstances*. The concept of truth itself is revealed as open to change. What does not change, I think, is the structure in which knowledge and truth are pursued and . . . defined. This structure is dialogical—not an internal colloquy but a *communicative exchange*" (63, emphasis added). That McGann's thesis claims that most of Byron's work adopts this "dialogical" structure, it's only natural to pursue its Bakhtinian paradigms in *The Island* that was written concurrently with *Don Juan* manifest

in three main characteristics of the poem: its title; the overlapping of history and fiction; and the opposition between the narrative and the genre.

The first dialogic instance of *The Island* is the title itself. Pregnant with gendered, cultural and political connotations, the island as a term and a literary trope has been interpreted in many a context best summed up by Beatty:

Islands can be prisons, paradises, uninhabited wastes, paradigms of social organisation, emblems of independent will and of its constriction, of power and its loss, of sexual freedom as fulfilment or slavery or of its denial altogether. They come in isolation or in clusters. For an Ancient Greek, they are normal living spaces—an Ithaca or a Lesbos—but also imprisoning paradises (Calypso’s isle) or centres of deception and entrapment (Circe’s isle). They can be emblems of sophistication (Minoan Crete) or of uncivilised primitivism (Cyclops). For the Hebrew world, they barely exist and do not signify at all¹. In the New Testament, they become places of rescue for the shipwrecked (St Paul’s Malta) or places of imprisonment as conducive to visions (Patmos) as Tasso’s prison cell. For the early Christian world they become privileged monastic hideaways equivalent to the desert inhabited by communities or isolated hermits (‘Inhabiting Island’ 90-91).

Embodying all these possibilities, the island becomes a virtual chrontope for Byron to weave and unweave different political upheavals that rocked Europe from the French Revolution and its aftermath, the failure of the liberal progressive leaders in the British parliament, the failure of his attempts at social reform (the Frame-breakers case), the rising insurgencies in Italy against the Austrians and the Greek uprising against Turkish occupation. Amid the din of all these revolutionary narratives and their aborted objectives, Byron takes time out of the many poetic projects he was engaged in and envisions a society that encapsulates all these socio-political programs of a new way of life. In other words, and at the risk of simplifying the complexity of the poem, *The Island* could be seen in many ways as Byron’s moment of juxtaposing the basic contestations embedded in these historical events. Hence the island is a matrix of not only the mutiny on the *Bounty*, but also the ‘mutiny’ of different groups seeking freedom against the hegemony of one form of rule or another.

Moreover, the title of the poem *The Island; or Christian and His Comrades* is inherently dialogic as it doesn’t cohere with the course of the narrative: Christian Fletcher is not the real hero of the poem and his comrades are mere supporting actors and Fletcher’s Byronic heroism is supplanted by Torquil. However, the attention should be directed at a more important ambiguity in the title. In his analysis of Bakhtin’s intertextuality as a “hallmark” of the novel, Holquist refers to the title of Mary Shelley’s novel’s *Frankenstein, Or the Modern Prometheus*: “The two titles accurately nominate the poles of the opposition that shapes the novel”: the proper name of Victor Frankenstein, with its singularity as representing the Romantic artist, will be constantly “subverted” by another hero of another text that predates him. Yet each other’s claim to their uniqueness cements the “sharedness” between the two and at the same time their

opposition (91). In much the same way, Byron's title for the poem enacts a sharedness and opposition. While the "the island" is a generic name that is defined spatially or geographically, the subtitle, "Or Christian and His Comrades," is specific and temporally bound by figures who represent agents in a historical event. This contestation between the island and its inhabitants (the locals or native and the 'invaders') makes one wonder at who is the real hero of the poem: is it the island or those who live on it or those who belong to it? In an interesting study of Byron's islands, Beatty distinguishes between islands that are 'homes' and islands that are an imaginary construct for the people who are on it. For example, to Beatty, Byron's island in *The Island* is a home to Neuha and adopted by Torquil, while to the mutineers it is seen as a temporary refuge, especially for Fletcher. That the natives survive and the 'guests' die imply that only those who think of the island as a home, as a social community, will regain paradise and benefit from its life-giving plentitude ("*Inhabiting Island*" 104).

Accordingly, it seems that for the poem to cohere with its title the two components, the spatial and the temporal, must intersect to give meaning to each other: the island without its inhabitants is a wasteland and the inhabitants without the island are mere abstractions. However, what disrupts this intersection is *Don Juan's* "Twin opposites" countered with a 'third too in a nook' which, in *The Island*, is embodied in the story of Torquil/Neuha, whose narrative adds yet another dimension to the poem's problematic title. Though unnamed in the title, Neuha and Torquil are the real heroes of the poem who offer yet another social community that contests Fletcher's and his comrades'. While Fletcher's Byronic posturing distances him from the island and its possibilities and his comrades' Lotus-Eaters' existence renders them more as parasites of this land of cornucopia, Torquil's social commitment makes him join the native Neuha to form a new social unit that may or may not stand the test of time. Hosting such an intricate web of different societal models (the loner, the lotus eater, and the social), the island welcomes yet another discordant one: the skeptical, represented by the narrator. The narrator's voice charged with all kinds of ideologies shifting allegiances here and there, expressing itself, as in *Don Juan*, in whatever form or tone it wants—satirical, ironic, sentimental, lyrical, theatrical, and even whimsical—contests all the above mentioned models. These narratorial performative roles, incongruent with the very serious historical trauma of the Mutiny, represent first and foremost the island itself: a Bakhtinian chronotope where narratives are tied and untied combining the here and now with the there and then (Holoquist 112). It's our perception of our role in the context of where we live that really defines us and the society we want. Thus, the island as an imaginary space in historical time becomes the matrix not only of virtual "paradigms of social organizations" (Beatty, "*Inhabiting Island*" 99), but also a symphony of competing voices heard only by well-attuned ears.

The second dialogic aspect of the poem is Byron's manipulation of historical facts that has troubled critics such as Fulford and Spence is not "from a position of ignorance" (Spence 42) to produce a "romance of aristocratic birth"

(46) dramatizing “a white man’s dream of an earthly paradise” (48) and to “create an idyllic island-refuge for romantic love” (Fulford “*Poetic Hells...*”). Byron knew his facts very well and drawing on both Bligh’s account and on William Mariner’s travel narrative in Tonga, and more in line with “building upon Aristotle’s dictum of describing ‘what can happen’ rather than specifically what did happen” (Watkins 107), Byron reconstructs the mutiny dialogically: we hear two historically competing narratives of the mutiny from the past undermined by a fictional one in the present. Bligh’s expulsion and exile from his ship is sympathetically rendered. Our first encounter of Bligh is that he’s a “gallant Chief” whose “dreams were of Old England’s welcome shore,/ Of toils rewarded, and of dangers o’er; / His name was added to the glorious roll / Of those who search the storm-surrounded Pole” (Canto I, stanza 1). Fearless and defiant against the mutineers, Bligh dares them to do “their worst”, which ends up with expelling him from the ship with a handful of crewmen with him. At the same time, the rigid and authoritative rule of Bligh on board the Mutiny demands of Byron to ‘re-count’ the event from the point of view of the mutineers, whose vessel now is a “moral wreck.” These mutineers are “Men without country, who, too long estranged,/ Had found no native home, or found it changed,” opt for the “sunny isles” of that represent a new society where there’s “no master save one’s mood” (Canto One, stanza VII). With the island as a garden where all steps may roam, it becomes a free space for more “steps”, for more voices, national, liberal, Neuha’s and the narrator’s, to be heard in contestation of the earlier ones. Neuha’s voice/narrative co-exists with the others as yet another vision of societal conventions.

The historical and geographical liminality of the poem not only accords with the inherent nature of the romance (both ideal and real), but also with Byron’s project of inverting the cultural and political paradigms of the patriarchal colonial master-narrative. Byron uses Bligh’s account for more than one reason. First, according to Bligh, the reason for the mutiny was “the attractions of life with women of Tahiti rather than oppression aboard ship” (Franklin 91) which deflects his responsibility as a commander, showing Bligh’s ‘perversion’ of proper masculine military behaviour based on justice and morality. Second, Bligh’s account allows Byron to critique the European cultural/colonial stereotyping of what is not Northern/European. The initial reason for the sea journey was to get bread fruit to feed and maintain the colonies, a task that was of utmost importance to the British throne and to which Bligh dedicated himself more than to the moral well-being of his crew. Moreover, Byron appropriates Bligh’s reason for the mutiny to present “a vision of how sexual relationships could be different in a non-European cultural situation”, a vision which “constitutes the real revolutionary agenda of the poem” (Franklin 91). In addition, Bligh’s account is used by Byron as symptomatic of European exotic and erotic view of the Non-European/Non-Northerner. What is interesting in this context is that Byron inverts this paradigm when he privileges Neuha’s exoticization of the European as if she is the center, the norm, and the ‘I’ while the European sailors are the ‘marginal’, the ‘exotic’

and the 'other'. As Oliver puts it, "conceptions of 'strangeness' are configured as the prerogative of the islanders rather than of the sailors" who, in a short time, "have sufficiently integrated themselves into the culture of the islands that they, too, have come to regard Europe as strange" (197). The integration is almost complete as they, like the islanders, view the oncoming ship as strange.

This integration, though, ends up being rather brief. That Byron had this plan clear in his mind is evident in his double appropriation of his second source, the Mariner's account. First, instead of sticking to recorded facts that the love relationship is between two of the same culture Byron presents it as cross-cultural when he matches a European, Torquil, with an islander, Neuha in an ideal love. Second, instead of maintaining the gender roles of Mariner's account where the Chief of the Tonga Islands rescues his beloved by hiding her in a secret cave, Byron empowers the female over the male when Neuha saves Torquil and leads him to her paradisaal cave. Thus, one can easily say that Byron's manipulation of the available sources was not due to laziness in doing proper research work nor "for the sake of romance of aristocratic birth" as Spence claims. In his influential article, "Byron and the Limits of Fiction", Beatty delineates a major characteristic of Byron's fusion of myth and history as "[the] tantalizing juxtaposition of factual and symbolic detail which, here and elsewhere in Byron, is the poetry of the scene . . . the island is placed in a *deliberately mythical setting* of song, dance, and festivity where 'from the sepulcher we'll gather flowers' [II.21]" (14-15). Beatty adds, unlike Keats who "never allowed myth to use him", Byron

projects his self, his imaginings, and his historical/factual recall into verse so that these may appear as what they are and what he believed them to be, versions of archetypal stories, beyond his complete manipulation, which soothe, outrage, baffle, and clarify. In such a continuum, Byronic heroes, historical mutineers, paradisaal islands and South Seas' topography exist as sharply defined yet interchangeable. We could never find a privileged point of reference which would enable us to read off where the fiction begins and ends. And yet Byron's island [is] impossible to classify as fiction or fact (16).

The third Bakhtinian dialogism of *The Island* is its genre/gender politics. Based on Byron's journals and letters, Watkins claims that "his poetry after 1820 was written entirely within a context of revolutionary politics and social analysis. Refusing to play any longer the Byronic role that had made him popular, he devoted himself instead to a life that combined careful study, artistic production, and political involvement" (96). Watkin's socio-political reading of Byron's later work undermines the above critics who insist on presenting a Byron who was "seeking '[t]he glorification of a heroic death [to justify] a more dubious life'" and deflates the argument of those who contend that "Byron's aristocratic hauteur prevented him from embracing a truly progressive political

position” (98). According to Watkins, after 1820 and due to Byron’s growing distrust in the current liberal individualism propagated at the time under the guise of radicalism and his witnessing of political, cultural, social, and economic distresses of early 19th century (128) Byron’s imaginative focus shifted to interest in “social amelioration” (102). However, this interest in ‘social revolution’ did not take its full shape till Byron experienced first-hand the cultural and political insurgencies he encountered in Europe made him rethink the ideologies that underwrite the society he was depicting in works such as the *Oriental Tales* (102-03). Thus, Byron “continually experimented with poetic ideas and methods rather than resting with a fixed and clearly defined form. He moved easily from historical drama to metaphysical drama, from energetic satire to sentimental narrative (for instance, *The Island*), clouding the common principles he felt to be at the center of each” (103-04). Concurrent with these changes, Watkins remarks Byron’s refusal to be restricted to “conventional representationalism” of stage requirements, which while he claims to adopt Aristotelian poetics, he conflates them with those of others (107).

While Watkins’ above reading argument will be instrumental in my Bakhtinian reading of *The Island’s* uniqueness in Byron’s poetic forms, Watkins’s interpretations of works such as *Cain*, *Werner*, and *Sardanapalus*, as evidence of Byron’s departure from the theme of love to that of criminality are also pertinent to the current reading of *The Island*, neglected by Watkins. Watkins expounds that Byron’s approach to the topic of crime “avoids reducing crime to an easy or pat explanation, but rather explores his subject from various and sometimes quite opposite perspectives, frequently concluding that guilt and innocence exist alongside one another in a single character” (107) and that these crimes are not only due to personal choices but tend to be “socially determined” (107), taking an example *Saradanapalus* “in which [Byron] depicts individuals who knowingly and firmly reject both their specific social roles and the culture that has assigned them these roles”(108). What follows will show that much of the dramatic dynamics of *The Island* are generated by the same politically, intellectually, and poetically mature poet of *Don Juan* and the other works written after 1820.

Taking into consideration the narrator’s voice that renders Bligh’s, the mutineers’ represented by Christian Fletcher, and the “third nook” of Torquil/Neuha’s narrative, the poem’s polyphonic voices are inextricably related to the genre’s versatile nature of accommodating multiple voices representing different versions of social conventions. These polyphonic voices not only subvert contemporary cultural representation of island narratives, but also contests different voices, both masculine and feminine. By infusing "masculine" history of a Byronic rebellion against tyrannical patriarchal authority such as that of the Mutiny into the "feminine" romance between a protégé of Europe and a gender-free black woman Byron transforms the romance narrative into a Bakhtinian chronotope where moral and ethical values are contextualized historically. At the heart of *The Island* is not a mere love story between Torquil and Neuha; it is about crime. In his analysis of *Saradanapalus*, *Cain*, and

Werner, contemporaneous with *The Island*, Watkins argues that Byron, having shed his previous idealization and utopianism, “had come to understand social organization—including its notions of art and genius—in the full light of ideology and class struggle” and that “[b]y 1821 he could state firmly in his letters and in his Ravenna Journal his belief that eventual revolution was unavoidable; and it is evident that he understood both the harsh realities and the certain consequences of radical political and social change” without the facile utopianism of the (97). More importantly, Byron’s disagreement with the liberal politicians at the time was not with their progressive ideas, rather with their strategies: “while the radicals were concerned mainly or wholly with political change, Byron saw the larger need for a full social revolution” (99). A proof of Byron’s shifting political allegiance from liberal individualism to social integration is his realization in poems such as *The Prisoner of Chillon* and *The Lament of Tasso* that “individualism must be defined in social terms if it is to mean anything”(101). The criminal act of the ‘double’ mutiny occurs in the poem in terms of both content and form. With respect to the former, both Bligh and the mutineers are guilty—Bligh for adopting the harsh authority sanctioned by the imperial patriarchal politics of colonialism and conservative culture and society and the mutineers for rejecting their assigned social roles without being able to adopt another one. Yet at the same time they are both innocent attested by Byron’s dialogic structure of ethical responsibility in the poem. Though highly unacceptable, the paradise ‘regained’ by the mutineers is lost again with their inability to come up with an alternative society. The radical individualism, represented by Fletcher, whose Byronic posturing is almost theatrically rendered, precludes any social interaction. Beatty’s analysis of Byron’s island in the poem can be of help: “Males in the poem are attracted to island life in the same thrust of desire that orientates them to women (I, 27-8) but all the named males in the poem cannot fully become islanders” (“*Inhabiting Island*”102). The mutineers are on the island but not of it. They seek it as a temporary refuge and not as a chance to build a new society that is more equitable than the one they deserted. Their lack of social commitment is in itself an ethical and moral ‘crime.’ Moreover, it’s with Fletcher and his comrades that the romance is enacted: they perceive their adventure as an escape from reality, from any social responsibility. It’s worth noting that all the romance imagery of escape to a world of romance is clear in Byron’s description of the mutineers’ reaction to their new situation:

The wish-- which ages have not yet subdued
 In man-- to have no master save his mood
 The earth, whose mine was on its face, unsold,
 The glowing sun and produce all its gold;
 The Freedom which can call each grot a home;
 The general garden, where all steps may roam,
 Where Nature owns a nation as her child,
 Exulting in the enjoyment of the wild; (Canto I, 10)

It's to them that the island becomes a pastoral setting, free for one to do whatever one wants, a place where

.... save their conscience, none accuse;
 Where all partake the earth without dispute,
 And bread itself is gathered as a fruit;
 Where none contest the fields, the woods, the streams
 The goldless Age, where Gold disturbs no dreams,
 Inhabits or inhabited the shore (Canto I, 1)

It is the mutineers, and not Byron, who cast the island as an idyllic setting where individualism reigns free. That this 'moral crime' is in a way culturally determined is made clear by Torquil, who, though one of them, he opts for a society with Neuha. Unlike the others, Torquil is not preconditioned by the patriarchal connotations of the island/woman, nor is he a Byronic hero insulated by his masculine ego. He, like Neuha, is a child of an island and "nourished amidst Nature's native scenes" (Canto II, 12). More importantly, Torquil's leap of faith, his courage to plunge into a new interiority other than one's self, as Beatty puts it, is juxtaposed with Fletcher's plunge to his death onto the rocks that refract his subjectivity and literally smash it:

.... then, like a serpent, coiled
 His wounded, weary form, to where the steep
 Looked desperate as himself along the deep;
 Cast one glance back, and clenched his hand, and shook
 His last rage 'gainst the earth which he forsook;
 Then plunged: the rock below received like glass
 His body crushed into one gory mass (Canto IV, 12)

To Beatty, "The rock, we are told, 'received him' but does so 'like glass' (IV, 341). That is to say, it does not receive him at all. Neuha's rock receives and replenishes the warm, tired, hungry, desiring body of Torquil but Christian's chosen rock is wholly impermeable to the body which it shatters into unrecognisable pieces" (*Inhabiting Island* 104). One of the main reasons for Byron's shattering Fletcher's Byronic Corsair type of subjectivity is very much related to his aversion to "eulogizing the mutiny." In both cases, Fletcher and his comrades refuse to create a new society on the island. Their insularities render them more of parasites in this land of opportunities and plentitude. Disappointed with the failure of the failure of British liberalism in effecting any change in the society, Byron was contemplating a "full social revolution" (Watkins 99). And who is better than the British culture-free Neuha and Torquil to shock the apathy of British politics and culture.

Thus, Watkins' contextualizing Byron's post-1820 works in the poet's acute social awareness of the inextricable relation between the individual and the society and his experimentation in poetic forms to embody his new social vision further aligns *The Island* with Bakhtin's foregrounding of the novel in its socio-politico-ethical discourse. As a typical Bakhtinian discourse, *The Island* refuses

to give a single answer. On the contrary, it raises multiple questions, each of which is as legitimate as the other: Is Bligh guilty? Are Fletcher and his comrades guilty? And if there's guilt, a word repeated several times in the poem, what is the real crime? Is it Bligh's inconsiderate treatment of his crew? Is it the crew's rejection of their society's assigned role of 'civilizing' the island? Is it Fletcher's Byronic individualism punished by his theatrical death? Is it Torquil's abandoning his comrades by running away with Neuha? Is it the narrator's equivocal stance towards his multi-narratives? Or is it Byron's dialogism in re-telling of the Bounty mutiny in a mutinous romance narrative. Byron subverts the prevailing politico-cultural paradigms embedded in much colonial island narratives. By changing, adding, and manipulating certain parts of the factual story of the Mutiny and by presenting it in the garb of a 'mutinous' romance narrative with a female black heroine at its center, Byron re-projects his country's anxieties with the fantasies of empire building encouraged and supported by contemporary romance. The poem's complete surrender to the female principle, be it in the poetic genre adopted or in the inversion of the imperial narrative discourse wherein the colonized, the native, the "other", or the maternal gains the upper hand has rendered this poem a very problematic one to many an astute critic. In *The Island* Byron, this aristocratic *flâneur* not only gives voice to Spivak's "subaltern", he also "offers the strongest indictment against British imperialism"(Leask 64) and liberal individualism. Thus hoodwinked with the romance formal trappings and entangled with Byron's polyphonic voices critics have undervalued *The Island* as one of the mature poems of Byron, which actualizes Hume's fear of the romance genre's threat of subverting the power politics of gender/genre/race in an attempt to project possibilities of a new social order.

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