

Lord Byron, Don Juan, Canto II

But for the present, gentle reader! and
Still gentler purchaser! the bard—that's I—
Must, with permission, shake you by the hand,
And so your humble servant, and good-b'ye!
1765 We meet again, if we should understand
Each other; and if not, I shall not try
Your patience further than by this short sample—
'Twere well if others follow'd my example.

1770 "Go, little book, from this my solitude!
I cast thee on the waters—go thy ways!
And if, as I believe, thy vein be good,
The world will find thee after many days."
When Southey's read, and Wordsworth understood,
I can't help putting in my claim to praise—
1775 The four first rhymes are Southey's every line:⁵
For God's sake, reader! take them not for mine.

From Canto the Second

* * *

[THE SHIPWRECK]

iambi pentameter

11

↓ Juan embark'd—the ship got under way,
The wind was fair, the water passing rough:
A devil of a sea rolls in that bay,
As I, who've cross'd it oft, know well enough;
85 And, standing upon deck, the dashing spray
Flies in one's face, and makes it weather-tough:
And there he stood to take, and take again,
His first—perhaps his last—farewell of Spain.

a
b
a
b
a
b
c
c

12

190 I can't but say it is an awkward sight
To see one's native land receding through
The growing waters; it unmans one quite,
Especially when life is rather new:
I recollect Great Britain's coast looks white,
But almost every other country's blue,
95 When gazing on them, mystified by distance,
We enter on our nautical existence.

* * *

5. The lines are part of the last stanza of Southey's "Epilogue to the Lay of the Laureate."

And Juan wept, and much he sigh'd and thought,
130 While his salt tears dropp'd into the salt sea,
"Sweets to the sweet" (I like so much to quote;
You must excuse this extract, 'tis where she,
The Queen of Denmark, for Ophelia brought
Flowers to the grave);² and, sobbing often, he
135 Reflected on his present situation,
And seriously resolved on reformation.

18

↓ "Farewell, my Spain! a long farewell!" he cried,
"Perhaps I may revisit thee no more,
But die, as many an exiled heart hath died,
140 Of its own thirst to see again thy shore:
Farewell, where Guadalquivir's waters glide!
Farewell, my mother! and, since all is o'er,
Farewell, too, dearest Julia!—(Here he drew
Her letter out again, and read it through.)

love letter

19

↓ "And, oh! if e'er I should forget, I swear—
But that's impossible, and cannot be—
Sooner shall this blue ocean melt to air,
Sooner shall earth resolve itself to sea,
Than I resign thine image, oh, my fair!
150 Or think of any thing excepting thee;
A mind diseased no remedy can physic
(Here the ship gave a lurch, and he grew sea-sick).

parental

20

↓ "Sooner shall heaven kiss earth (here he fell sicker),
Oh, Julia! what is every other woe?
155 (For God's sake let me have a glass of liquor,
Pedro, Battista, help me down below.)
Julia, my love! (you rascal, Pedro, quicker)—
Oh, Julia! (this curst vessel pitches so)—
Beloved Julia, hear me still beseeching!"
160 (Here he grew inarticulate with retching)

factor

separate

21

He felt that chilling heaviness of heart,
Or rather stomach, which, alas! attends,
Beyond the best apothecary's art,
The loss of love, the treachery of friends,

2. Hamlet 5.1.227.

165 Or death of those we dote on, when a part
Of us dies with them as each fond hope ends:
No doubt he would have been much more pathetic,
But the sea acted as a strong emetic.³

* * *

52

Then rose from sea to sky the wild farewell—
410 Then shriek'd the timid, and stood still the brave,—
Then some leap'd overboard with dreadful yell,
As eager to anticipate their grave;
And the sea yawn'd around her like a hell,
And down she suck'd with her the whirling wave,
415 Like one who grapples with his enemy,
And strives to strangle him before he die.

53

And first one universal shriek there rush'd,
Louder than the loud ocean, like a crash
Of echoing thunder; and then all was hush'd,
420 Save the wild wind and the remorseless dash
Of billows; but at intervals there gush'd,
Accompanied with a convulsive splash,
A solitary shriek, the bubbling cry
Of some strong swimmer in his agony.

* * *

56

Juan got into the long-boat, and there
Contrived to help Pedrillo⁴ to a place;
It seem'd as if they had exchanged their care,
For Juan wore the magisterial face
445 Which courage gives, while poor Pedrillo's pair
Of eyes were crying for their owner's case:
Battista, though (a name call'd shortly Tita)
Was lost by getting at some aqua-vita.⁵

brandy

57

Pedro, his valet, too, he tried to save,
450 But the same cause, conducive to his loss,
Left him so drunk, he jump'd into the wave
As o'er the cutter's edge he tried to cross,

3. In stanzas 22–51 (here omitted) the ship, bound for Leghorn in Italy, runs into a violent storm and is battered into a helpless, sinking

wreck.
4. Juan's tutor.

And so he found a wine-and-watery grave;
They could not rescue him although so close,
455 Because the sea ran higher every minute,
And for the boat—the crew kept crowding in it.

* * *

66

'Tis thus with people in an open boat,
They live upon the love of life, and bear
More than can be believed, or even thought,
And stand like rocks the tempest's wear and tear;
525 And hardship still has been the sailor's lot,
Since Noah's ark went cruising here and there;
She had a curious crew as well as cargo,
Like the first old Greek privateer, the Argo.⁵

67

But man is a carnivorous production,
530 And must have meals, at least one meal a day;
He cannot live, like woodcocks, upon suction,⁶
But, like the shark and tiger, must have prey;
Although his anatomical construction
Bears vegetables, in a grumbling way,
535 Your labouring people think beyond all question,
Beef, veal, and mutton, better for digestion.

68

And thus it was with this our hapless crew,
For on the third day there came on a calm,
And though at first their strength it might renew,
540 And lying on their weariness like balm,
Lull'd them like turtles sleeping on the blue
Of ocean, when they woke they felt a qualm,
And fell all ravenously on their provision,
Instead of hoarding it with due precision.

* * *

72

The seventh day,⁷ and no wind—the burning sun
570 Blister'd and scorch'd, and, stagnant on the sea,
They lay like carcasses; and hope was none,

5. In the Greek myth the *Argo* is the ship on which Jason set out in quest of the Golden Fleece. Byron ironically calls it a "privateer" (a private ship licensed by a government in wartime to attack and pillage enemy vessels).

6. Woodcocks probe the turf with their long flexible bills, seeming to suck air as they feed.
7. On the fourth day the crew had killed and eaten Juan's pet spaniel. Byron based the episode of cannibalism that follows on various historical

save in the breeze that came not; savagely
They glared upon each other—all was done,
Water, and wine, and food,—and you might see
575 The longings of the cannibal arise
(Although they spoke not) in their wolfish eyes.

73

mainly
lots
for
sacrifice ||
At length one whisper'd his companion, who
Whisper'd another, and thus it went round,
And then into a hoarser murmur grew,
580 An ominous, and wild, and desperate sound;
And when his comrade's thought each sufferer knew,
'Twas but his own, suppress'd till now, he found:
And out they spoke of lots for flesh and blood,
And who should die to be his fellow's food.

74

585 But ere they came to this, they that day shared
Some leathern caps, and what remain'd of shoes;
And then they look'd around them, and despair'd,
And none to be the sacrifice would choose;
420 At length the lots were torn up, and prepared,
590 But of materials that much shock the Muse—
Having no paper, for the want of better,
They took by force from Juan Julia's letter.

75

The lots were made, and mark'd, and mix'd, and handed,
In silent horror, and their distribution
595 Lull'd even the savage hunger which demanded,
Like the Promethean vulture,⁸ this pollution;
None in particular had sought or plann'd it,
'Twas nature gnaw'd them to this resolution,
By which none were permitted to be neuter—
600 And the lot fell on Juan's luckless tutor.

76

He but requested to be bled to death:
The surgeon had his instruments, and bled
Pedrillo, and so gently ebb'd his breath,
You hardly could perceive when he was dead.
605 He died as born, a Catholic in faith,
Like most in the belief in which they're bred,

accounts of disasters at sea, including his grandfather Admiral Byron's 1768 narrative of his misadventure off the coast of Patagonia.

8. Because Prometheus had stolen fire from

heaven to give to humans, Zeus punished him by chaining him to a mountain peak, where an eagle fed on his ever-renewing liver.

And first a little crucifix he kiss'd,
And then held out his jugular and wrist.

77

610 The surgeon, as there was no other fee,
Had his first choice of morsels for his pains;
But being thirstiest at the moment, he
Prefer'd a draught from the fast-flowing veins:
Part was divided, part thrown in the sea,
And such things as the entrails and the brains
615 Regaled two sharks, who follow'd o'er the billow—
The sailors ate the rest of poor Pedrillo.

78

The sailors ate him, all save three or four,
Who were not quite so fond of animal food;
To these was added Juan, who, before
620 Refusing his own spaniel, hardly could
Feel now his appetite increased much more;
'Twas not to be expected that he should,
Even in extremity of their disaster,
Dine with them on his pastor and his master.

79

625 'Twas better that he did not; for, in fact,
The consequence was awful in the extreme;
For they, who were most ravenous in the act,
Went raging mad—Lord! how they did blaspheme!
And foam and roll, with strange convulsions rack'd,
630 Drinking salt-water like a mountain-stream,
Tearing, and grinning, howling, screeching, swearing,
And, with hyaena-laughter, died despairing.

* * *

103

As they drew nigh the land, which now was seen
Unequal in its aspect here and there,
620 They felt the freshness of its growing green,
That waved in forest-tops, and smooth'd the air,
And fell upon their glazed eyes like a screen
From glistening waves, and skies so hot and bare—
Lovely seem'd any object that should sweep
Away the vast, salt, dread, eternal deep.

104

825 The shore look'd wild, without a trace of man,
And girt by formidable waves; but they

were mad for land, and thus their course they ran,
Though right ahead the roaring breakers lay:
A reef between them also now began
830 To show its boiling surf and bounding spray,
But finding no place for their landing better,
They ran the boat for shore,—and overset her.

105

But in his native stream, the Guadalquivir,
Juan to lave^o his youthful limbs was wont;
835 And having learnt to swim in that sweet river,
Had often turn'd the art to some account:
A better swimmer you could scarce see ever,
He could, perhaps, have pass'd the Hellespont,
As once (a feat on which ourselves we prided)
840 Leander, Mr. Ekenhead, and I did.⁹

106

So here, though faint, emaciated, and stark,
He buoy'd his boyish limbs, and strove to ply
With the quick wave, and gain, ere it was dark,
The beach which lay before him, high and dry:
845 The greatest danger here was from a shark,
That carried off his neighbour by the thigh;
As for the other two, they could not swim,
So nobody arrived on shore but him.

107

Nor yet had he arrived but for the oar,
850 Which, providentially for him, was wash'd
Just as his feeble arms could strike no more,
And the hard wave o'erwhelm'd him as 'twas dash'd
Within his grasp; he clung to it, and sore
The waters beat while he thereto was lash'd;
855 At last, with swimming, wading, scrambling, he
Roll'd on the beach, half senseless, from the sea:

108

There, breathless, with his digging nails he clung
Fast to the sand, lest the returning wave,
From whose reluctant roar his life he wrung,
860 Should suck him back to her insatiate grave:
And there he lay, full length, where he was flung,
Before the entrance of a cliff-worn cave,
With just enough of life to feel its pain,
And deem that it was saved, perhaps, in vain.

9. Like Leander in the myth, Byron and Lieutenant Ekenhead had swum the Hellespont, on May 3, 1810. See "Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos" (p. 616).

865 With slow and staggering effort he arose,
But sunk again upon his bleeding knee
And quivering hand; and then he look'd for those
Who long had been his mates upon the sea;
But none of them appear'd to share his woes,
870 Save one, a corpse from out the famish'd three,
Who died two days before, and now had found
An unknown barren beach for burial ground.

110

And as he gazed, his dizzy brain spun fast,
And down he sunk; and as he sunk, the sand
875 Swam round and round, and all his senses pass'd:
He fell upon his side, and his stretch'd hand
Droop'd dripping on the oar (their jury-mast),¹
And, like a wither'd lily, on the land
His slender frame and pallid aspect lay,
880 As fair a thing as e'er was form'd of clay.

[JUAN AND HAIDEE]

111

How long in his damp trance young Juan lay
He knew not, for the earth was gone for him,
And Time had nothing more of night nor day
For his congealing blood, and senses dim;
885 And how this heavy faintness pass'd away
He knew not, till each painful pulse and limb,
And tingling vein, seem'd throbbing back to life,
For Death, though vanquish'd, still retired with strife.

112

His eyes he open'd, shut, again unclosed,
890 For all was doubt and dizziness; he thought
He still was in the boat, and had but dozed,
And felt again with his despair o'erwrought,
And wish'd it death in which he had reposed.
And then once more his feelings back were brought,
895 And slowly by his swimming eyes was seen
A lovely female face of seventeen.

113

'Twas bending close o'er his, and the small mouth
Seem'd almost prying into his for breath;
And chafing him, the soft warm hand of youth

1. A mast put up in the place of one that has been carried away or broken.

900 Recall'd his answering spirits back from death;
And, bathing his chill temples, tried to soothe
Each pulse to animation, till beneath
Its gentle touch and trembling care, a sigh
To these kind efforts made a low reply.

114

905 Then was the cordial pour'd, and mantle flung
Around his scarce-clad limbs; and the fair arm
Raised higher the faint head which o'er it hung;
And her transparent cheek, all pure and warm,
Pillow'd his death-like forehead; then she wrung
910 His dewy curls, long drench'd by every storm;
And watch'd with eagerness each throb that drew
A sigh from his heaved bosom—and hers, too.

115

And lifting him with care into the cave,
The gentle girl, and her attendant,—one
915 Young, yet her elder, and of brow less grave,
And more robust of figure,—then begun
To kindle fire, and as the new flames gave
Light to the rocks that roof'd them, which the sun
Had never seen, the maid, or whatsoever
920 She was, appear'd distinct, and tall, and fair.

116

Her brow was overhung with coins of gold,
That sparkled o'er the auburn of her hair,
Her clustering hair, whose longer locks were roll'd
In braids behind, and though her stature were
925 Even of the highest for a female mould,
They nearly reach'd her heel; and in her air
There was a something which bespoke command,
As one who was a lady in the land.

117

Her hair, I said, was auburn; but her eyes
930 Were black as death, their lashes the same hue,
Of downcast length, in whose silk shadow lies
Deepest attraction, for when to the view
Forth from its raven fringe the full glance flies,
Ne'er with such force the swiftest arrow flew;
935 'Tis as the snake late coil'd, who pours his length,
And hurls at once his venom and his strength.

* * *

And these two tended him, and cheer'd him both
With food and raiment, and those soft attentions,
Which are—as I must own—of female growth,
980 And have ten thousand delicate inventions:
They made a most superior mess of broth,
A thing which poesy but seldom mentions,
But the best dish that e'er was cook'd since Homer's
Achilles order'd dinner for new comers.²

124

I'll tell you who they were, this female pair,
985 Lest they should seem princesses in disguise;
Besides, I hate all mystery, and that air
Of clap-trap, which your recent poets prize;
And so, in short, the girls they really were
990 They shall appear before your curious eyes,
Mistress and maid; the first was only daughter
Of an old man, who lived upon the water.

125

A fisherman he had been in his youth,
And still a sort of fisherman was he;
995 But other speculations were, in sooth,
Added to his connection with the sea,
Perhaps not so respectable, in truth:
A little smuggling, and some piracy,
Left him, at last, the sole of many masters
1000 Of an ill-gotten million of piastres.³

126

A fisher, therefore, was he,—though of men,
Like Peter the Apostle,⁴—and he fish'd
For wandering merchant-vessels, now and then,
And sometimes caught as many as he wish'd;
1005 The cargoes he confiscated, and gain
He sought in the slave-market too, and dish'd
Full many a morsel for that Turkish trade,
By which, no doubt, a good deal may be made.

127

1010 He was a Greek, and on his isle had built
(One of the wild and smaller Cyclades)⁵

2. A reference to the lavish feast with which Achilles entertained Ajax, Phoenix, and Ulysses (*Iliad* 9.193ff.).

3. Near Eastern coins.

4. Christ's words to Peter and Andrew, both fishermen: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (*Matthew* 4.19).

5. A group of islands in the Aegean Sea.

Adam design
by Milton