Nature had not formed him for a Liberal peer, proper to move the Address in the House of Lords, to pay compliments to the energy and self-reliance of British middle-class liberalism, and to adapt his politics to suit it. Unfitted for such politics, he threw himself upon poetry as his organ.

Matthew Arnold, ‘Byron’

Arnold’s recourse to the argument from Nature here, the idea that some force greater than historical circumstances or personal choice can be held responsible for the fact that Byron was ‘unfitted for such politics’, is peculiarly un-Byronic in its manner of dealing with the historical world in which the poet’s life played itself out. The impulse to try to understand Byron’s poetry as a kind of politics by other means is, however, a good one, and it is by bringing together careful attention to the organ of choice, poetry, with an equal curiosity about cultural politics outside not only the House of Lords but the whole British system that the true measure of Byron as a defender of liberty may be taken. Unlike most other aristocratic intellectuals who enjoyed the privileges of English freedom in his day, Byron knew the ironic cost of his own liberty in the systematic subjugation of working-class and colonial peoples. Even before he was conclusively ‘unfitted’ for the House of Lords, Byron explored alternative outlets to the parliamentary system for his political impulses. In Chapter 3 I looked at his formal address on the Luddites, discussing the memorable and pregnant phrase ‘superfluous heads’, but to understand the relation of ‘Byron’ to liberty it will be necessary also to recall the street-ballad he wrote on behalf of the frame-breakers at the same time. In this early political
poem Byron mocks the celebrated British tradition of freedom by pronouncing 'Liberty' in ironic intonational quotation marks.

Men are more easily made than machinery –
Stockings fetch better prices than lives –
Gibbets on Sherwood will heighten the scenery,
Showing how Commerce, how Liberty thrives.¹

The sympathy Byron extended to the Luddites, founded in his awareness of the dialectical ironies of British Liberty, was not limited to them or to the other political constituencies with which we commonly associate it, such as the enslaved Greeks of the Turkish occupation or the Italian Carbonari. The missing links in the chain of interests necessary to understand Byron's political impact are the men and women who travelled the colonial world by ship.² In this final chapter I will re-identify and to a large extent literalize the importance of the ocean in Don Juan by asserting that shipping and international travel were not only the necessary material conditions of the poem's production, but also that the denizens of the sea, the members of the oceanic diaspora, were an important constituency for Byron's political message.³ In order to provide a new perspective on the historical significance of Byron's commitment to the cause of liberty I will look not only at how he forsook parliamentary politics for poetry, but also at how he forsook land for sea by adopting a transnational political identity at a time when the most influential British poets were determinedly nationalistic. In the following stanza from the original Dedication to Don Juan what is ordinarily read as a simple denigration of the provincialism of the Lakers sounds quite different if we grant the existence of an inverse, transnational, sea-going political identity and community.

You, Gentlemen! By dint of long seclusion
From better company have kept your own
At Keswick, and through still continued fusion
Of one another’s minds at last have grown
To deem as a most logical conclusion
That Poesy has wreaths for you alone;
There is a narrowness in such a notion
Which makes me wish you’d change your lakes for ocean.

(Dedication, st. 5)