(1)

BYRON ON DEATH

by

Christopher D. Campbell

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English.

Chapel Hill

1991

Approved by:

______________ Advisor

______________ Reader

______________ Reader

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No 0704-0188

1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)	2. REPORT DATE	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED
		XXXXXXXXXXX THESIS/DISSERTATION

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE

Byron on Death

5. FUNDING NUMBERS

6. AUTHOR(S)

Christopher D. Campbell, Captain

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)

AFIT Student Attending: University of North Carolina

8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER

AFIT/CI/CIA-91-053

9. SPONSORING MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)

AFIT/CI
Wright-Patterson AFB OH 45433-6583

10. SPONSORING MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER

11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

12a. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Approved for Public Release IAW 190-1
Distributed Unlimited
ERNEST A. HAYGOOD, 1st Lt, USAF
Executive Officer

12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE

13. ABSTRACT *(Maximum 200 words)*

14. SUBJECT TERMS

15. NUMBER OF PAGES
84

16. PRICE CODE

17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT

CHRISTOPHER D. CAMPBELL. Byron on Death
(Under the direction of Robert Galloway Kirkpatrick, Jr.)

ABSTRACT

Despite Byron's protestation that, "There is to me something so incomprehensible in death, that I can neither speak nor think on the subject" (to Hobhouse, August 10, 1811), Death is a pervasive theme in Byron's major works, as his beliefs regarding its meaning undergo distinct changes.

Although prior to 1815, he did not believe in the immortality of the soul, from 1815 onward, certainly after meeting Shelley in 1816, his work reflects a growing interest in the idea of continuity of identity in some form. In *Manfred*, the central question is, *What after Death?* In *Cain*, the question is, *Why must we die?* By 1821, Byron's *Detached Thoughts* clearly indicates confidence in the soul's immortality, although a "sweet uncertainty" about its ultimate meaning remains. This complexity--belief and uncertainty--is evident in his later work, especially *Sardanapalus* and *Don Juan*, and most closely approximates Byron's final attitude toward immortality.

A

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS v

Chapter

I. Introduction: Byron and Natural Supernaturalism 1

II. Alienation and Death in the Early "Byronic Hero" 8

III. *Manfred*: What After the Grave? 19

IV. *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth*: Why Life that Leads to Death? 39

V. *Sardanapalus*, *Don Juan*, and Later Works 57

VI. Conclusion: Sweet Uncertainty 73

WORKS CONSULTED 80

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BRP	*Byron and the Ruins of Paradise.* (Robert F. Gleckner)
CHP	*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*
DJ	*Don Juan*
DT	*Detached Thoughts*
ERTGB	*English Romanticism: The Grounds of Belief.* (John Clubbe and Ernest J. Lovell, Jr.)
FD	*Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development.* (Jerome J. McGann)
KSB	"Keats, Shelley, and Byron: A Guide to Their Literary Relations." (Frances Frame)
LJ	*Byron's Letters and Journals.* (Ed. Leslie A. Marchand)
LPBS	*The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley.* (Ed. Frederick L. Jones)
MCLB	Medwin's *Conversations of Lord Byron.* (Ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr.)
NS	*Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature.* (M. H. Abrams)
P	*Byron: A Portrait.* (Leslie A. Marchand)
PWB	*The Poetical Works of Byron.* (Ed. Robert F. Gleckner)
RLB	*My Recollections of Lord Byron.* (Teresa Guiccioli)

I.

Introduction: Byron and Natural Supernaturalism

On the cover of M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, Stuart M. Sperry, Jr. hails the book as "The finest modern study of the Romantic achievement, its origins and evolution both in theory and practice." The thesis of Abrams's study is that Wordsworth is the standard by which to judge the accomplishment of Romantic writers:

> Wordsworth . . . was the great and exemplary poet of the age, and his Prospectus stands as the manifesto of a central Romantic enterprise against which we can conveniently measure the consonance and divergences in the writings of his contemporaries. (14)

Having thus defined the standard for Romantic excellence, Abrams explores parallels between the development of Romantic literature (especially the works of Wordsworth, Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and Carlyle) and Romantic philosophical thought (as epitomized by the works of Schiller, Hegel, Schelling, and Fichte).

In the whole of his study, Abrams mentions Byron only once, in the Preface, and there it is to explain Byron's omission from the study that follows:

> Byron I omit altogether; not because I think him a lesser poet than the others but 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)

Abrams could and should have given more compelling reasons than this to omit Byron from a study that has as a central concern "the secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking" (12), a secularization to which Byron's satirical perspective might be seen as both a contributor and a symptom. Abrams's description of a key difference between Byron's approach to poetry and that of his contemporaries is correct as far as it goes. A common thread which binds Abrams's philosophers and poets does not extend to Byron:

> They represented themselves in the traditional persona of the philosopher-seer or the poet-prophet . . . and they set out, in various yet recognizably parallel ways, to reconstitute the grounds of hope and to announce the certainty, or at least the possibility, of a rebirth in which a renewed mankind will inhabit a renovated earth where he will find himself thoroughly at home. (12)

Byron did not share the certainty of these poets' visions, but was frank about his doubts concerning theirs as well as his own. Moreover, Byron was intensely critical of philosophical and metaphysical revelation that he believed based on cogitation alone, without the benefit of experience in the real world. Writing to Douglas Kinnaird (October 26, 1819) about the public reaction to the first two cantos of *Don Juan*, Byron complained that "the *Cant* is so much stronger than the *Cunt*--now a days,--that the benefit of experience in a man who had well weighed the worth of both monosyllables--must be lost to despairing posterity" (*LJ* 6:

232). The satirical perspective of which Abrams speaks is largely a result of this disdain for "Cant" and, as Abrams notes, is nowhere more visible than in *Don Juan*:

> If from great Nature's or our own abyss
> Of thought, we could but snatch a certainty,
> Perhaps mankind might find the path they miss--
> But then 'twould spoil much good philosophy.
> . . . . . .
> For me, I know nought; nothing I deny,
> Admit, reject, contemn; and what know *you*,
> Except perhaps that you were born to die?
> And both may after all turn out untrue.
> (14.1-4, 17-20)[1]

The last two lines of the passage above hint at a characteristic of Byron which Abrams does not point out but which is just as important as his satirical perspective for distinguishing Byron from the poets of Abrams's study. That characteristic is Byron's obsession with questions about the ultimate meaning of Death and why it is a necessary element of human existence. Death was an important subject with Byron as early as the Juvenalia, but there the ideas he expresses seldom display evidence of serious thought (see note, page 16). It is later, from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* I (1812) forward, that Byron's work begins to

---

[1] Citations of Byron's poetry will be from the Oxford edition of *The Complete Poetical Works*, edited by Jerome J. McGann, when possible. *Sardanapalus, Heaven and Earth, The Age of Bronze*, and *The Island* are not yet available in the Oxford edition. Citations from these works will be from the 1975 edition of *The Poetical Works of Byron*, edited by Robert F. Gleckner. Citations of *Cain* will be from the Oxford Authors *Byron*, edited by McGann. In conformity with modern practice, Arabic numerals will be used in all citations to indicate cantos, stanzas, acts, and scenes; however, Roman numerals will be retained when they occur as part of a title in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* or *Don Juan*.

reflect his own evolving conceptions of and speculations about the meaning and necessity of Death. The evolution of Byron's ideas about Death and the immortality of the soul as expressed in his poetry and prose form the central topic of the discussion which follows.

Byron's recurrent emphasis on questions regarding man's state after this life contrasts sharply with the poets and philosophers of Abrams's study:

> These writers . . . were all, in Keats's term, humanists. They posited the central importance and essential dignity of man . . . they set as the aim of man an abundant life in *this world*, in which he may give play to all his creative powers; they estimated poetry by the extent to which it contributes toward this aim. . . . (my emphasis, *NS* 429)

Perhaps the reason Byron's contemporaries were so intent on making a paradise of this world is that, as Abrams put it, "Before this life, and beneath it, and after it, is the dark" (*NS* 445). But Byron was not content to leave it at that. While the principal poets of *Natural Supernaturalism* were devoted to the exploration of a "secular theodicy" and the securing of happiness for man in this life, Byron was far more concerned with the next, indeed, with whether there even would be a next.[2]

---

[2] Rhonda Ray's unpublished dissertation, "The Last Things: Apocalypse and Eschatology in British Dark Romanticism" (Emory U. 1989), is a discussion of several Romantic authors' works with such topics as their central concern. Her discussion of *Manfred* and *Cain* is interesting but sometimes self-contradictory, and her conclusion that *Manfred* ends with its protagonist "uncertain whether death brings the promise of an immortality or annihilation" (113) differs from my own.

I do not mean to suggest that Death is Byron's sole concern. Byron also had ideas about what was necessary for man to achieve a form of paradise on Earth. *Sardanapalus* and *The Island* are evidence of this, as Jerome McGann points out in *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development*, but even in these works Death receives more than a modicum of attention. My point, again, is not that Death is Byron's exclusive concern, but it is one that he returns to again and again, in a way that no other Romantic poet does.

There is always some danger in assuming that the religious or philosophical stance of any poem is that of its author. McGann points out in *Fiery Dust* that an important premise of Arnold's criticism of Byron is that "the poetry does not reveal Byron the man, but the poetic personality into which he mythologized himself in his work" (25). McGann goes on, however, to point out that such an argument is irrelevant:

> it is useless to quibble about terms and say, after the manner of Heine on Rousseau, that the dramatic figure is not the historically "real Lord Byron." Perhaps this is true, but it does not matter, for the "got-up" Byron is all that is left. (27)

Whether McGann means by "got-up" the "fabricated" Byron or the "resurrected" Byron is unclear, but in either case, we really need not settle entirely for Arnold's or McGann's view. Poets often experiment with different philosophical outlooks in one or several poems, but, if a great body of work consistently reveals the same approach, this is usually

an indication not of a fictional "poetic personality" but of the leading tendency of the author's imagination. We may therefore examine the philosophy of Byron's poetry not simply because "the 'got-up' Byron is all that is left," but because Byron's work is the fullest representation of the metaphysical ponderings of the "real" Byron.

The whole of Byron's philosophy, however, is not the subject of this study. However, I propose to examine Byron's evolving conceptions of Death and immortality as central to any attempt to grasp his imagination as a whole. In the published summary of his thesis *Lord Byron: A Study of the Development of his Philosophy, with Special Emphasis upon the Dramas*, Frank Rainwater made a point when he observed that Byron shared an important prerogative with all men--the ability to change his mind:

> The real proof that Byron was a man of thought must rest upon a study of his works. And the approach to such a study should be governed by the principle that Byron's philosophy, like that of most other men, underwent a sequence of changes. What he said in 1823 will not always agree with what he had said in 1803, for the intervening years brought new influences, new ideas, new experiences, and a new pattern of thought. If this fact is not recognized, Byron's complete poems will, of course, always seem like a volume of inconsistences and irreconcilable beliefs. (5)

Unfortunately, this sage observation did not deter Rainwater from eventually concluding that Byron was a thorough Platonist--stanza 116 of *Don Juan* I, for example, notwithstanding. What I suggest as closer to the truth is that Byron's ever developing patterns of thought defy

conclusive labeling. He was no more a "complete" Platonist at the end than he was a "complete" Calvinist at the beginning. In Byron studies, *completeness* is both the ideal to aim for, and the fatal attraction to be avoided.

In 1811, Byron was confronted, in less than a month, with the deaths of his mother and two of his friends, John Wingfield and Charles Skinner Matthews. Shortly afterwards, in a letter to Hobhouse dated August 10, 1811, Byron said, "There is to me something so incomprehensible in death, that I can neither speak nor think on the subject" (qtd. in *P* 103). What I hope to show is that Byron not only overcame this imagined barrier, but that Death was for him something he could not resist thinking and writing about until the end.

II.

Alienation and Death in the Early "Byronic Hero"

Byron treats different subjects with different thoroughness in different works. Although his metaphysical reflections on Death find their fullest expression in *Manfred* (1817)[1] and *Cain* (1821), his earlier works, especially those that have come to be called Oriental Tales, contain the germinating ideas that come to fruition beginning in 1816. Here, again, useful comparisons can be made between Byron and the natural supernaturalists. In exploring the philosophical basis for natural supernaturalism, Abrams points out the prevailing tendency to view man's intellect itself as the root of all ill:

> Romantic thinkers regard philosophical reflection, the very act of taking thought (since it necessarily seeks understanding by the analytic division of one into many) as in itself, in Schelling's words, "a spiritual sickness of mankind . . . an evil." . . . Both the initial cause and the continuing manifestation of his evil and suffering, is the separation with which consciousness and reflection begins when "man sets himself in opposition to the outer world." . . . Man's self-consciousness thus alienates him from his world and also imposes on him the terrible burden of freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil. (181-82)

---

[1] Unless explicitly stated otherwise, all parenthetical dates following a title refer to the date of publication, as given in Norman Page's *A Byron Chronology*.

In terms of self-consciousness as spiritual sickness, Byron's speculation on the good or evil of intellect begins at least as early as the first canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, where a significant part of the motivation for Childe Harold's venturing forth into the world is his own alienation from the pleasures he himself had fostered:

> And now Childe Harold was sore sick at heart,
> And from his fellow bacchanals would flee;
> 'Tis said, at times the sullen tear would start,
> But Pride congeal'd the drop within his ee:
> Apart he stalk'd in joyless reverie,
> And from his native land resolv'd to go. . . .
> . . . . . .
> And none did love him--though to hall and bower
> He gather'd revellers from far and near,
> He knew them flatt'rers of the festal hour;
> The heartless parasites of present cheer. (1.46-51, 73-76)

Consciousness of alienation from human joys, not only in *Childe Harold*, but in the Oriental Tales as well, could be called the essential character trait of the Byronic hero.[2] Whereas the alienation which Abrams's natural supernaturalists address is a problem common to mankind and the solution they offer is a life-giving one, the Byronic hero asserts that his alienation is unique to him and--as in *Manfred* especially, but also in *The Corsair*, *Lara*, and elsewhere--the only solution he seeks is Oblivion, the erasure of his identity from past and future.

---

[2] The works usually characterized as Oriental Tales are: *The Giaour* (1813), *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814), *Lara* (1814), *The Siege of Corinth* (1816), *Parisina* (1816), *The Prisoner of Chillon* (1816), *Mazeppa* (1819), and *The Island* (1823).

In *The Giaour*, the hero (whose title proclaims him a Christian at odds with his Turkish culture, which, in turn, is alien to Byron's readers) says, "Shuddering I shrunk from Nature's face, / Where every hue that charmed before / The blackness of my bosom wore . . ." (1197-99). The pirate Conrad, "That man of loneliness and mystery" (1.173) of *The Corsair*, whose "gothic" name from *The Castle of Otranto* also links him to a vanished era, is cut off not only from law-abiding mankind, but from his own pirate band as well: "With these he mingles not but to command" (1.63). When Medora dies, "The only living thing he could not hate," Conrad is left, like the Giaour, estranged from nature: "The sun goes forth--but Conrad's day is dim; / And the night cometh--ne'er to pass from him" (3.628, 656-57), separating him even from humanity's "old dependency of day and night," to quote the affirming acceptance of contrariety in Wallace Stevens's phrase from "Sunday Morning."

The Romantic solution to the problem of man's self-conscious alienation from the world around him, his sense (to use the terms of Wordsworth's "Prospectus") that his mind ought to *fit* the external world, and *vice versa*, but does not do so "naturally," involved a challenge to create that unity, one which allowed for a sense of the self in partnership with nature, rather than as opposed to or separate from it; broadly speaking, the consummation of this partnership is expressed in *beauty*, which Coleridge defined as "multeity-in-unity" (Abrams, *NS* 186), and which

Wordsworth in the "Prospectus" described as "spousal verse," poetry which embodies the unity it is announcing. In the case of Hölderlin's *Hyperion*, which Abrams cites as an example of such a "union with nature as a bride," the answer is a more complete loss of self:

> To be one with all, that is the life of divinity, that is the heaven of mankind. To be one with all that lives, to return in blessed self-forgetfulness into the all of Nature, this is the peak of thoughts and joys . . . the place of eternal rest. (qtd. in Abrams, *NS* 346)

As Abrams notes, however, "for the mind, unaided, thus to confront the world and, by an act of imagination empowered by love and joy, to experience it as a sufficient paradise, is a demanding enterprise" (*NS* 458). Is it too demanding for the Byronic hero, or not demanding enough? Is the external world an object inadequate to *fit* (in consolation if not consummation) the dark abyss of the Byronic mind?

The alienation of the Byronic hero has deeper roots than self-consciousness alone. In the case of the Giaour, Conrad, Lara, and, ultimately, Manfred, alienation is not so much the result of having taken thought as it is of having taken action. The Byronic hero's separation is shaped not by present self-awareness, but by memory of catastrophe, an overwhelming, ever-present past. This different source of alienation demands a different solution, a more complete loss of self-consciousness: oblivion.

Although Byron's solution seems closer to that of Hölderlin than to that of Coleridge or Wordsworth, there

remains a crucial difference. According to Abrams, Hölderlin's ultimate goal is "an experiential paradise which is the produce of the common day" (*NS* 347), a goal which links him with Wordsworth. The Byronic hero seeks no paradise at all, only nothingness. The evils of this world and his personal past weigh so heavily on the heart of the Byronic hero that the idea of any memory by anyone of this ruined self carried beyond death would be a curse. Only total forgetfulness will suffice.

As far as I can determine, Childe Harold is the first Byronic hero to express this sentiment in his "unpremeditated lay," "To Inez," from canto 1 (1812):[3]

> And dost thou ask, what secret woe
> I bear, corroding joy and youth?
> . . . . . .
>
> It is that weariness which springs
> From all I meet, or hear, or see:
> . . . . . .
>
> It is that settled, ceaseless gloom
> The fabled Hebrew wanderer bore;
> That will not look beyond the tomb,
> But cannot hope for rest before.
>
> What Exile from himself can flee?
> To Zones, though more and more remote,
> Still, still pursues, where-e'er I be,
> The blight of life--the demon, Thought.
> (1.841-42, 849-50, 853-60)

Later, in 1813, the Giaour takes up the thread when he tells the priest of his Othello-like feelings:

---

[3] The lyric itself is dated January 25, 1810 (*FD* 98).

> I'd rather be the thing that crawls
> Most noxious o'er a dungeon's walls,[4]
> Than pass my dull, unvarying days,
> Condemn'd to meditate and gaze--
> Yet, lurks a wish within my breast
> For rest--but not to feel 'tis rest--
> Soon shall my fate that wish fulfil;
> And I shall sleep without the dream
> Of what I was, and would be still;
> . . . . . .
> Waste not thine orison--despair
> Is mightier than thy pious prayer;
> I would not, if I might, be blest,
> I want no paradise--but rest. (990-98, 1267-70)

The rest the Giaour seeks is Death, that dreamless sleep without a waking. McGann comments indirectly on this idea of Death in his discussion of the Giaour's motivation to avenge Leila, saying, "Revenging her death on Hassan is the Giaour's confession that he thought her subject to death and limitation--his unconscious admission that he does not trust the eternity of his own mind" (*FD* 159).

The narrator of *The Corsair* (1814) also displays a sense of the insufficiency of anything less than total forgetfulness, saying of Conrad after Medora's death:

> By those, who deepest feel, is ill exprest
> The indistinctness of the suffering breast;
> Where thousand thoughts begin to end in one,
> Which seeks from all the refuge found in
> none. . . . (3.6[illegible])

Later, in *Lara* (1814), Conrad reappears, albeit with a new name, and in canto 1, stanza 8, Byron gives us in a nutshell this hero's alienation from mankind and nature, his

[4] Compare these first two lines with *Othello* 3.3.270-71. Othello was a Moor in a Christian culture who suspected his wife of infidelity with a Christian and slew her. The Giaour was a Christian in a Turkish culture who had won the love of a Muslim's wife for which she was slain. So far as I know, this comparison has not heretofore been noted.

disdain for the natural supernatural solution, and his yearning for nonexistence:

> Woman--the field the ocean--all that gave
> Promise of gladness, peril of a grave,
> In turn he tried--he ransack'd all below,
> And found his [illegible]e in joy or woe,
> No tame, trite [illegible], for his feelings sought
> In that intenseness an escape from thought:
> The tempest of his heart in scorn had gazed
> On that the feebler elements hath rais'd;
> The rapture of his heart had look'd on high,
> And ask'd if greater dwelt beyond the sky:
> Chain'd to excess the slave of each extreme,
> How woke he from the wildness of that dream?
> Alas! he told not--but he did awake
> To curse the wither'd heart that would not break.
> (1.117-130)

Lara's scorn for the world of "the feebler elements" and his apparent lack of success in his search for something greater "beyond the sky" suggest that he finds external creation dolefully inadequate to "fit" his mind.

Although *The Bride of Abydos* (1813) also belongs to this early period, it differs from the tales discussed above in that the hero does not seek such self-forgetfulness. Selim has a secret past revealed to us in the course of the poem, but it does not haunt him. He feels no overwhelming guilt, and though he dies at the end, as does Zuleika, the effects of those deaths are viewed from this side of the veil. If there is anyone left in *The Bride of Abydos* to seek oblivion it is the Giaffir, who has caused the death of his only daughter by slaying Selim. Even in *The Bride of Abydos* the view of Death as grief-relieving Lethe receives some treatment. Zuleika does not live long enough after the death of Selim to desire her own exodus from life, but the

narrator's description of her good fortune in a quick death is an eloquent illustration of the life she escaped and, in effect, of the life of the Byronic hero:

> Peace to the broken heart--and virgin grave!
> Ah! happy! but of life to lose the worst,
> That grief--though deep--though fatal--was thy first!
> Thrice happy! ne'er to feel nor fear the force
> Of absence--shame--pride--hate--revenge--remorse!
> And, oh! that pang where more than Madness lies--
> The Worm that will not sleep--and never dies--
> Thought of the gloomy day and ghastly night,
> That dreads the darkness, and yet loathes the light--
> That winds around, and tears the quiv'ring heart--
> Ah! wherefore not consume it--and depart!
> (2.640-50)

These lines echo the thoughts of the Giaour about his own *Thel*-like "grave plot," when he says, "My memory now is but the tomb / Of joys long dead . . . better to have died with those / Than bear a life of lingering woes" (1000-03).[5] The last six lines above, from *The Bride of Abydos*, are an especially strong foretaste of the character that Byron will bring to life in *Manfred*.

In *Fiery Dust*, McGann comments on this valuable characteristic of Byron's early works:

> Byron's reputation has suffered more from his early tales than from anything else. . . . I do not believe that his early narratives deserve their reputation. Like Keats's *Endymion*, they are much inferior to the work that was to appear later. But we study such works mostly for the light they throw on other, more important poems,

---

[5] This attitude, that "the early grave / Which men weep over may be meant to save" (*DJ* 4.95-96) is one that Byron never fully discards. See *Don Juan* IV, stanzas 11-12 and 71, the death of Haidée. Cf. also *Alastor* and its epigraph from *The Excursion*, 1.500-02.

> or to elucidate signal ideas and stylistic tendencies in germinal form. . . . *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Corsair*, *Lara*, and *Parisina* all deal with the same general motifs that appear in *The Giaour*. Contrary to popular belief, however, the ideas and problems are by no means trivial. (162)

Byron's conception of Death as oblivion is dominant in his major early works and is an example of such a "signal idea."[6] The poet's earliest full expression of the *hope* that Death is nothingness (hinted at in "To Inez") may be found in the aptly titled poem "Euthanasia" (1812). Not only does the poem embody a clear conception of Death, more importantly, it reveals an attitude toward it that will become the hallmark of the Byronic hero:

> When Time, or soon or late, shall bring
> The dreamless sleep that lulls the dead,
> Oblivion! may thy languid wing
> Wave gently o'er my dying bed!
> . . . . . .
> Then lonely be my latest hour,
> Without regret, without a groan!
> For thousands Death hath ceas'd to lower,
> And pain been transient or unknown.
>
> 'Ay, but to die, and go', alas!
> Where all have gone, and all must go!
> To be the nothing that I was
> Ere born to life and living woe!

---

[6] Rainwater, in his study of Byron's philosophy, cites lines from "On the Death of a Young Lady," as "a clear statement of a belief that became permanent with Byron, the conviction that man is a compound of matter and soul, the former being subject to decay and death, the latter being immortal and eternal" (8). The poem was written when Byron was only fourteen years old, and its imagery and ideas are trite and clichéd. As Harold Stevens points out in his 1964 dissertation *Byron and the Bible*, "Byron expresses a morbid interest in death and the graveyard in the Juvenalia primarily with many statements but *little thought* about death and immortality" (my emphasis, 11). Before such faith in the soul's transcendence could become a permanent facet of the mature Byron, he had to pass through the stage reflected in his early popular works.

> Count o'er the joys thine hours have seen,
> Count o'er thy days from anguish free,
> And know, whatever thou hast been,
> 'Tis something better not to be. (1-4,25-36)

Without the benefit of Wordsworth's emphasis on the redemptive function of memory and the metaphysics of "spousal verse," the final stanza of "Euthanasia" clearly hails the oblivion of Death as something to be welcomed. This sentiment is echoed by the First Destiny in *Manfred*:

> The blest are the dead,
> Who see not the sight
> Of their own desolation. (2.3.48-50)

Robert Gleckner, in *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*, argues that Byron never fully escapes such despair. For the Byronic hero, even the uncertain immortality of *anamnesis*, recollection by the living, is a thing to be dreaded. It would be something better still *never to have been*.

The conception of and attitude toward Death clearly expressed in "Euthanasia" and evidenced in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the tales is espoused explicitly in a letter to Francis Hodgson, dated September 3, 1811:

> I will have nothing to do with your immortality; we are miserable enough in this life, without the absurdity of speculating upon another. If men are to live, why die at all? and if they die, why disturb the sweet and sound sleep that "knows no waking"? "Post mortem nihil est, ipsaque Mors nihil . . . quæris quo jaceas post obitum loco? Quo *non* Nata jacent". (*LJ* 2: 88-89)

As I argue below in discussing *Manfred*, Byron comes to doubt this view of Death (and later to reject it fully), but even when doubting it, Byron could still find it interesting. That even after *Manfred* Byron was still drawn

to this conception is evidenced by his June 7, 1819, letter to John Murray:

> Some of the epitaphs at Ferrara pleased me more than the more splendid monuments at Bologna--for instance--
>
> "Martini Luigi
> Implora pace."
>
> "Lucrezia Picini
> Implora eterna quiete."
>
> Can any thing be more full of pathos! those few words say all that can be said or sought--the dead had had enough of life--all they wanted was rest--and this they "*implore.*" there is all the helplessness--and humble hope and deathlike prayer that can arise from the Grave--"*implora pace.*" I hope, whoever may survive me . . . will see those two words and no more put over me[.] (*LJ* 6: 149)

The character of Manfred, as we will see, is this plea for eternal quiet brought to life.

III.

Manfred: What After the Grave?

Whatever the biographical basis for Byron's desire for amnesia for himself and his posterity, it was not new to him when he began *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* or the Oriental Tales. At least as early as 1806, he had briefly noted its attractions in the short poem "Remembrance:"

> 'Tis done!--I saw it in my dreams:
> No more with Hope the future beams;
> My days of happiness are few:
> Chill'd by misfortune's wintry blast,
> My dawn of life is overcast,
> Love, Hope, and Joy, alike adieu!--
> Would I could add Remembrance too!

Through 1814, Byron apparently assumed that Death would bring the sought-after forgetfulness, an assumption expressed in his letter to Hodgson of September 3, 1811 (see page 17), and also reflected widely in his poetry.

However, by 1815, a distinctly different view of Death begins to appear in the poetry, where speakers still hold on to a comforting ideal of an eternal and dreamless sleep but begin to doubt that the mind, the soul or "essence" of man, can ever be said to come to an end. The conflict between eternal sleep and endless consciousness is evident in "When Coldness Wraps This Suffering Clay," one of the *Hebrew Melodies* published in April, 1815. The poem begins with a clear statement of the mind's immortality:

When coldness wraps this suffering clay,
  Ah, whither strays the immortal mind?
It cannot die, it cannot stay,
  But leaves its darken'd dust behind. (1-4)

Of particular interest here is the conventional metaphor of the soul as the fire or light which animates clay, then leaves it "darken'd dust." The metaphor is echoed later by Manfred in Promethean terms when he claims spiritual equality with the Seven Spirits:

Slaves, scoff not at my will!
The mind, the spirit, the Promethean spark,
The lightning of my being, is as bright,
Pervading, and far-darting as your own,
And shall not yield to yours, though coop'd in
clay! (1.1.153-57)

The lyric from the *Hebrew Melodies* answers its own question ("whither strays the immortal mind?") with an affirmation of the immortality of the soul, but in a state that involves an *act* of amnesia which, apparently, never comes to an end, and which now involves *forgetting* that Death itself even erases one's name as well as self-consciousness:

Above or Love, Hope, Hate, or Fear,
  It lives all passionless and pure. . . .
. . . . . .
A nameless and eternal thing,
  Forgetting what it was to die. (25-26, 31-32)

Nameless implies a loss of identity, and in order to forget what it was to die, the soul must forget what it was to have lived. This is not oblivion, in Byron's earlier sense of it, but the distinction is too subtle or perhaps vague as yet to be explored in the kinds of experiments with the lyric that he was carrying out in *Hebrew Melodies*.

Having entertained the idea of an immortality with which he had told Hodgson earlier he would have "nothing to do," Byron must explore the problem of the continuation of being after the end of existence: *What after Death?* In "When Coldness Wraps This Suffering Clay," the answer seemed to be the simple negation of personal identity in whatever state immortality might be. By 1816, Byron's poetry reflects more complex possibilities. The fragment which begins, "Could I remount the river of my years" (written at Diodati, July, 1816), asks explicitly, "What is this death?" (7), and goes on to present a range of hypotheses, all, significantly, in the form of a complex unanswered question in heroic couplets:

> [Is Death]--a quiet of the heart--
> The whole of that of which we are a part--
> . . . . . .
> The underearth inhabitants--are they
> But mingled millions decomposed to clay--
> The ashes of a thousand Ages spread
> Wherever Man has trodden or shall tread--
> Or do they in their silent cities dwell
> Each in his incommunicative cell--
> Or have they their own language--and a sense
> Of breathless being--darkened and intense--
> As midnight in her solitude--Oh Earth!
> Where are the past--and wherefore had they birth?
> The dead are thy inheritors--and we
> But bubbles on thy surface:-- and the key
> Of thy profundity is in the grave,
> The portal of thy universal cave--
> Where I would walk in Spirit--and behold
> Our elements resolved to things untold,
> And fathom hidden wonders--and explore
> The essence of great bosoms now no more. (7-8, 23-40)

Byron affirms little at this point, but he is opening his mind, and the closing address to Earth distills to its

essence the nature of Byron's curiosity on this point and contains another 'pothesis that Byron is about to explore through the character of Manfred.

Between Byron's early speculations on Death and those expressed in *Manfred*, however, there stands the philosophic anomaly that is *Childe Harold* III (1816). On May 27, 1816, on the shore of Lake Geneva, Byron met Percy Bysshe Shelley for the first time, beginning what Leslie Marchand appropriately calls "one of the most famous friendships in literary history" (*P* 240):

> From this time forward, Byron spent more and more time with the Shelley ménage. . . . Out of these evenings, with the stimulus of the sky and the water and the discussions with Shelley, who, himself an ethereal presence, opened up wide vistas in Byron's mind, came new stanzas for *Childe Harold*. Under the spell of Shelley's eloquence, Byron absorbed something of the Wordsworthian pantheistic feeling. No one made Wordsworth's philosophy more appealing to Byron than did Shelley; . . . . (*P* 240-41)

E. H. Coleridge makes much the same observation in a note in his edition of Byron's poetry. "At this stage in his poetic growth," says Coleridge, "in part converted by Shelley, in part by Wordsworth as preached by Shelley, Byron, so to speak, 'got religion,' went over for a while to the Church of the mystics" (qtd. in *FD* 306).[1]

[1] Coleridge appends this note to stanza 6 of *Childe Harold* III. McGann points out that manuscript evidence shows this is too early for Shelley's influence to have begun; however, Coleridge's statement recognizes an impact that goes beyond any particular poem or stanza. For a discussion of Shelley's influence on the poem, see Charles E. Robinson, *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight*, pages 17ff.

A detailed analysis of all that Byron's conception of the immortal soul in *Childe Harold* III owes to "Tintern Abbey," "The Prospectus," "Intimations of Immortality," and other works by Wordsworth is beyond the scope of this study. It is clear, however, that from stanza 68 forward (all of which McGann asserts Byron composed no earlier than May 26, 1816), the poem displays a markedly different perspective from anything that has come before, and it is a perspective more akin to what Abrams calls natural supernaturalism than anything by Byron before *or* after. The attempt to fit the speaker's mind to external nature is clearly the poet's aim, even though it is, appropriately, a *questionable* aim:

> I live not in myself, but I become
> Portion of that around me; and to me,
> High mountains are a feeling, but the hum
> Of human cities torture: I can see
> Nothing to loathe in nature, save to be
> A link reluctant in a fleshly chain,
> Class'd among creatures, when the soul can flee,
> And with the sky, the peak, the heaving plain
> Of ocean, or the stars, mingle, and not in vain.
> . . . . . .
>
> And when, at length, the mind shall be all free
> From what it hates in this degraded form,
> Reft of its carnal life . . .
> shall I not
> Feel all I see, less dazzling, but more warm?
> The bodiless thought? the Spirit of each spot?
> Of which, even now, I share at times the immortal lot?
>
> Are not the mountains, waves, and skies, a part
> Of me and of my soul, as I of them?
> (680-88, 698-700, 703-08)

Byron goes on to say that this "feeling infinite, so felt / In solitude, where we are *least* alone; / . . . 'twould

disarm / The spectre Death, had he substantial power to harm" (842-43, 849-50).

The overwhelmingly Wordsworthian echo in these passages can hardly be due to anything other than Shelley's influence. Medwin relates the intensity of the onslaught Byron faced in Byron's own words: "Shelley, when I was in Switzerland, used to dose me with Wordsworth physic even to nausea; and I do remember then reading some things of his with pleasure" (*MCLB* 194).[2] Shelley left Switzerland for England on August 29, 1816, taking with him the manuscript of *Childe Harold* III, *The Prisoner of Chillon*, and "other shorter poems" (*P* 250). Shelley's departure also removed the immediate source of Wordsworthian modes of thought from Byron's daily routine and from his poetry, ending, for Byron, what David V. Erdman terms "an inevitably transient state of mind" (314).

Byron began *Manfred* sometime in September, 1816 (Page 49), and what McGann calls the "pacific state of being" (*FD* 119) that characterizes the latter half of *Childe Harold* III stands in sharp contrast to the despair-filled opening of Byron's new poem and is testimony to what Shelley's departure meant in terms of Byron's philosophy.[3]

---

[2] For a discussion of Byron's reaction to this "dose of Wordsworth physic," especially as it emerged in *CHP* III-IV, see Paul Fry's essay, "The Absent Dead: Wordsworth, Byron, and the Epitaph."

[3] *Manfred* is not, however, without its own clear debts to Wordsworth, in both imagery and philosophy, as pointed out in several notes to the discussion which follows.

It is no coincidence that 1816, the period of Byron's most intense metaphysical reflections on Death to date, also represents the time of greatest personal trial. Leslie Marchand, in *Byron: A Portrait*, sees a direct correlation between Byron's personal life and the composition of *Manfred*:

> All the unhappiness, the sense of guilt, the frustrations, and the dismal broodings which had grown out of his reflection during the summer on his relations with Augusta, his marriage, and the separation found relief in a poetic drama that had been conceived in the high Alps and now burned for expression. (252-53)

Manfred combined in its title character all the guilt, alienation, and longing for forgetfulness for which the protagonists of the outlaw narratives and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* had been merely warm-ups. There are at least two instances of material from the earlier works reappearing in expanded and only slightly altered forms in the drama. The first is the setting of the act 1, scene 1, "Manfred alone--Scene, a Gothic gallery--Time, Midnight," and its conclusion with Manfred senseless on the floor. This first scene is an expansion of the action of stanzas 12 and 13 of canto 1 of *Lara*. The other distinct parallel is between Childe Harold and Manfred. There is, in fact, a close similarity between the narrator's description of Childe Harold in canto 3 and Manfred's description of himself to the Witch of the Alps. Harold is defined by his narrator in 1816 in terms that are more intellectually "satanic" than those of the picaresque melancholiac of *Childe Harold* I-II:

> But soon he knew himself the most unfit
> Of men to herd with Man; with whom he held
> Little in common; untaught to submit
> His thoughts to others, though his soul was quell'd
> In youth by his own thoughts; still uncompell'd,
> He would not yield dominion of his mind
> To spirits against whom his own rebell'd;
> Proud though in desolation; which could find
> A life within itself, to breathe without mankind.
>
> Where rose the mountains, there to him were friends;
> Where roll'd the ocean, thereon was his home. . . . (3.100-10)

Manfred defines himself with a similar but more intense emphasis on a mind isolated from human kind but now "fitted" to Nature as a sublime landscape emptied of any other identity:

> From my youth upwards
> My spirit walk'd not with the souls of men,
> Nor look'd upon the earth with human eyes;
> The thirst of their ambition was not mine,
> The aim of their existence was not mine;
> My joys, my griefs, my passions, and my powers,
> Made me a stranger; though I wore the form,
> I had no sympathy with breathing flesh,
> Nor midst the creatures of clay that girded me
> Was there but one who----but of her anon.
> I said, with men, and with the thoughts of men,
> I held but slight communion; but instead,
> My joy was in the Wilderness, to breathe
> The difficult air of the iced mountain's top,
> Where the birds dare not build, nor insect's wing
> Flit o'er the herbless granite; or to plunge
> Into the torrent, and to roll along
> On the swift whirl of the new breaking wave
> Of river-stream, or ocean, in their flow.
> (2.2.50-68)

Both passages in effect describe the same identity, each expressing not only the same feelings of alienation from other men, but also kinship with identical elements of nature presented in the same sequence: air, earth, water. Add to those typically Byronic characteristics a power of

intellect inspired by Goethe's *Faust*, and you have the completion of the set. The "immortal mind" is the fiery particle which is as ambiguous in its identity as the nature of the light (wave? particle?) of the element that provides the vehicle of the metaphor. Therefore, it is appropriate that act 1, scene 1 of *Manfred* begins with an image of a lamp to be replenished and concludes with a star to be defined.

As pointed out earlier, other than in the short poem "Euthanasia," Byron's treatment of the problem of Death prior to 1815 has been largely sporadic, and we have extrapolated his ideas from his numerous narratives. With *Manfred*, such is no longer the case. *Manfred*, however, does not begin as a quest for the ultimate meaning of Death.

In the beginning, Manfred summons the "spirits of the unbounded Universe" with a specific request in mind: "Forgetfulness. . . . Oblivion, self-oblivion" (1.1.136, 144). The answer Manfred receives from the spirits is that what he seeks, "is not in our essence, in our skill; / But--thou mayst die" (1.1.147-48). Manfred's reply to this, "Will death bestow it on me?" (1.1.148) reveals an uncertainty absent from any previous Byronic hero, just as the drama lacks the problematic role of the primary narrators found in the earlier outlaw narratives. At this point, the object of Manfred's quest has not changed, but the emphasis is beginning to shift. The Spirits' reply to

Manfred's new question is a statement, which, even if true, does not answer Manfred's question:

> We are immortal, and do not forget;
> We are eternal; and to us the past
> Is, as the future, present. Art thou answered?
> (1.1.149-51)

Manfred only complicates the issue further by responding with an assertion of essential equality with the Spirits he has summoned and by again demanding an answer. This time the response elicited from the Spirits may be viewed as either a further evasion or as a deeper truth:

> We answer as we answered; our reply
> Is even in thine own words. . . .
> If, as thou say'st, thine essence be as ours,
> We have replied in telling thee, the thing
> Mortals call death hath nought to do with us.
> (1.1.159-63)

That Manfred recognizes both possibilities, evasion or truth, is shown by his answer: "I then have call'd ye from your realms in vain; / Ye cannot, or ye will not, aid me" (1.1.164-65). Either no truth is possible (they cannot tell him because they are unintelligible) or there is a deeper truth involved in himself in relation to them--what they *will* is identical to his *will*.

If Manfred's spirit is essentially the same as those he has summoned, they are only as innocent of the meaning of Death as he is willing or able to be. The Spirits have done what Byron's earlier short poems on this subject did, they have suggested possibilities for interpretation without affirming the priority of any.

Manfred's quest now becomes the definition of an ultimately satisfying interpretation of the meaning of Death. He tells the Witch of the Alps in act 2 that he has rejected any simple answers, and he tells her this in a sentence which is correspondingly not simple in diction, grammar, or syntax:

> Forgetfulness
> I sought in all, save where 'tis to be found,
> And that I have to learn--my sciences,
> My long pursued and super-human art,
> Is mortal here--I dwell in my despair--
> And live--and live for ever. (2.2.145-50)

Manfred's curious use of "mortal" to describe his art renders the meaning of his words ambiguous. Is Manfred's art mortal in the sense that it is subject to Death, and, in fact, dies short of providing him the forgetfulness he seeks? Or is it mortal in the sense that it is deadly. If the truth is infinite (dependant, in part, on the will), then it is never static, but "dies" with new revelation. Thus his present knowledge might provide him with the oblivion he desires, but only at the cost of his infinite "Life" to come. What then is wisdom? Folly? If he believes that Death would bring the sought-after "self-oblivion," if he believes that knowledge of Death is also mortal and subject to change, then his art may be mortal in a third sense: it entangles him in what Albert Camus defined as "*the* modern philosophical problem," that of suicide.

After his encounter with the Spirits, Manfred clearly gives suicide some consideration in act 2 where he is "rescued" by the Chamois Hunter, but fear of Death is fear of the unknown, and Manfred's soliloquy in act 2, after the Witch of the Alps departs, is testimony to the power of that fear:

> We are the fools of time and terror: Days
> Steal on us and steal from us; yet we live,
> Loathing our life, and dreading still to die.
> In all the days of this detested yoke--
> This heaving burthen, this accursed breath--
> This vital weight upon the struggling heart,
> Which sinks with sorrow, or beats quick with pain,
> Or joy that ends in agony or faintness--
> In all the days of past and future, for
> In life there is no present, we can number
> How few--how less than few--wherein the soul
> Forbears to pant for death, and yet draws back
> As from a stream in winter, though the chill
> Be but a moment's. (2.2.164-77)

The thought echoed here is that of the last stanza of "Euthanasia," but without the certitude that Death is nothingness. Manfred's last hope, Death, is still an unknown, but that is about to change:

> I have one resource
> Still in my science--I can call the dead,
> And ask them what it is we dread to be:
> The sternest answer can but be the Grave,
> And that is nothing--if they answer not--
> The buried Prophet answered to the Hag
> Of Endor. . . . (2.2.177-83)

The most significant lines above are 180-81, and especially the phrase, "if they answer not." Manfred seems to mean that the Grave is nothing (Death is Oblivion) if the dead answer not, but Manfred seems to expect an answer, because he goes on to list several instances of the dead's speaking

to the living. Manfred's "nothing" is obviously something complex because it involves self-refuting testimony: its proof lies within a sacred text (something, 1 Sam. 28:7ff) about a buried prophet (Samuel, something again) who can be "quoted" in this soliloquy in a modern text (*Manfred*, something else) in which Manfred is about to act like the Witch of Endor and summon Astarte (a prophet?) who will *answer*, but *not* with the answer he anticipated ("Manfred!"). It may be that what has appeared to be Manfred's most desperate hope (Oblivion) is related to his greatest fear and the source of his guilt over Astarte's death.

Only a few lines later, Manfred speculates on what Death has meant for Astarte:

> If I had never lived, that which I love
> Had still been living; had I never loved,
> That which I love would still be beautiful--
> Happy and giving happiness. What is she?
> What is she now?--a sufferer for my sins--
> A thing I dare not think upon--or nothing.
> (2.2.193-98)

Manfred's greatest guilt stems from the fact that he continues to live, while Astarte has died. He is tortured by ignorance of what that means for her; tortured by the possibility that his inability to *know* means that she is nothing now, and tortured by the possibility of her eternal punishment. McGann's observation about the root of the Giaour's need to avenge Leila's death on Hassan (see page 13 above) needs only a slight change to be equally applicable to Manfred. Manfred's overwhelming guilt about Astarte's death may be his "confession that he thought her subject to

death and limitation--his unconscious admission that he does not trust the eternity of his own mind" (*FD* 159). If so, the appearance of the Phantom of Astarte two scenes later dispels that lack of trust.

The Phantom of Astarte's appearance by itself answers one of Manfred's most important questions: Astarte is not "nothing." The Grave is not Oblivion.[4] Of Manfred's remaining questions--Does she loath him? Does she suffer punishment for their sin? Will he die? Is he forgiven? Will they meet again? Does she love him?--Astarte herself answers only one unequivocally: "Manfred! To-morrow ends thine earthly ills" (2.4.152). Beyond this one prophetic statement, the speech of the Spirit of Astarte consists of thrice saying Manfred's name, and thrice, "Farewell!" There is a balance here between Astarte's summoning of Manfred and her dismissal of him, but she ends, significantly, with a summons.

Whether Astarte forgives or condemns Manfred is open to interpretation. Whichever is the case, Astarte's appearance and the circumstances surrounding it, together with her words, give Manfred a peace the next day which he has lacked before:

---

[4] Lest the reader think the Phantom of Astarte "a madness and a mockery" (1.1.189) as the Seventh Spirit insinuates in act 1, scene 1, Byron gives us hints that the apparition is who it appears to be in Manfred's own certainty that "it is thy voice!" (2.4.151) and in the final stage direction which refers to "The *Spirit* of Astarte" (my emphasis).

> There is a calm upon me--
> Inexplicable stillness! which till now
> Did not belong to what I knew of life. (3.1.6-8)

Whatever Manfred's part in Astarte's death, he has not made her "nothing," for she has appeared and spoken to him. Nor has he made her a sufferer for his sins, for her silence when commanded to speak by Arimanes (the Zoroastrian principal of evil) causes Nemesis to say, "She is not of our order, but belongs / To the other powers" (2.4.115-16).

What remains is for Manfred to define the state of his own spirit's future existence. Byron's Abbot provides the necessary foil to whom Manfred eloquently expresses Byron's disdain for the traditional Christian conception of the hereafter:

> Old man! there is no power in holy men,
> Nor charm in prayer--nor purifying form
> Of penitence--nor outward look--nor fast--
> Nor agony--nor, greater than all these,
> The innate tortures of that deep despair,
> Which is remorse without the fear of hell,
> But all in all sufficient to itself
> Would make a hell of heaven--can exorcise
> From out the unbounded spirit, the quick sense
> Of its own sins, wrongs, sufferance, and revenge
> Upon itself; there is no future pang
> Can deal that justice on the self-condemn'd
> He deals on his own soul. (3.1.66-78)[5]

This same sentiment is reiterated and expanded in Manfred's final scorning of the Demons who have come to claim his soul:

> Thou hast no power upon me, *that* I feel;
> Thou never shalt possess me, *that* I know:
> What I have done is done; I bear within
> A torture which could nothing gain from thine:

---

[5] Cf. lines 31-40 of Wordsworth's "Prospectus" to *The Excursion*.

> The mind which is immortal makes itself
> Requital for its good or evil thoughts--
> Is its own origin of ill and end--
> And its own place and time--its innate sense,
> When stripp'd of this mortality, derives
> No colour from the fleeting things without,
> But is absorb'd in sufferance or in joy,
> Born from the knowledge of its own desert.[6]
> *Thou* didst not tempt me, and thou couldst not tempt me;
> I have not been thy dupe, nor am thy prey--
> But was my own destroyer, and will be
> My own hereafter. (3.4.125-40)

Now confident of what Death means, Manfred can say to the Abbot, "Old man! 'tis not so difficult to die" (3.4.151), thus ending his life on an infinitive that expands Manfred's revelation to include all mortals in all times.

The drama has served at least two purposes. Not only has it proven, as Marchand observes, "the most effective relief for [Byron's] guilt and despair" (*P* 254), it has also clarified the development of Byron's ideas on Death and immortality to date. Initially on a desperate quest for eternal forgetfulness inspired by guilt born of ignorance of Death's ultimate meaning, Manfred (and perhaps Byron) has found peace in assurance of the mind's immortality and a hereafter in which sufferance or joy is self-determined.

This concentration on Death, indeed an entire drama in which questions about the ultimate meaning of Death form the main action, again emphasizes an important contrast between Byron and the poets of natural supernaturalism. As Abrams explains, Life is their central concern:

---

[6] Cf. Manfred's assertion of the mind's self-determined hereafter with lines 19-22 of Wordsworth's "Prospectus."

> The ground-concept is life. Life is itself the highest good, the residence and measure of other goods, and the generator of the controlling categories of Romantic thought. . . . And the norm of life is joy--by which is meant not that joy is the standard state of man, but that joy is what man is born for: it is the sign that an individual, in the free exercise of all his faculties, is completely alive; it is the necessary condition for a full community of life and love; and it is both the precondition and the end of the highest art. . . . Life is the premise and paradigm for what is most innovative and distinctive in Romantic thinkers. (*NS* 431)

Clearly, this does not describe the underlying philosophy of *Manfred* or anything Byron has written prior to 1816.

Manfred is illustrative of another significant difference between Byron and the poets of Abrams's study: Byron's right-angled view of life's progress. In a section of *Natural Supernaturalism* entitled "Philosophical system and literary plot," Abrams discusses the effect on Romantic literary plots of the German Romantic philosophical conception of life as a circuitous journey with its end as its beginning:

> Behind many Romantic versions of the internal circuitous quest we can recognize the chief prototype of the circular variant of the . . . parable of the Prodigal Son interpreted as the type of the journey of all mankind out of and back toward its original home; and in Romantic as in Christian literature, this parable is frequently conflated with the apocalyptic marriage that signalized the restoration of Eden in the Book of Revelation. Accordingly, the yearning for fulfillment is sometimes expressed as . . . the desire for a female figure who turns out to be the beloved we have left behind. . . . (194)

The passage above is important both in how it does and how it does not apply to *Manfred*. Manfred's life traces no smooth circle. Rather, it seems to have more in common with

"the Christian pattern of history" which Abrams describes as "right-angled" (*NS* 35). That is, "the key events are abrupt, cataclysmic, and make a drastic, even an absolute, difference" (*NS* 36). The events which shape the action of *Manfred* are the result of one right angle, perhaps two, and they move toward a conclusion which is another. Speculation and curiosity about the nature and meaning of those cataclysms is what *Manfred* is *about*. The first right angle of *Manfred* mentioned in the text is not specifically explained, but we gather from what comes later in the drama that it was the death of Astarte. Manfred first mentions a catastrophe in his soliloquy in the opening scene, but refuses to name what he fears to comprehend:

> Good, or evil, life,
> Powers, passions, all I see in other beings,
> Have been to me as rain unto the sands,
> Since that all-nameless hour. (1.1.21-24)

Later, we receive a clue to the nature of the event Manfred fears to name when, speaking to the Witch of the Alps about his life since Astarte's death, Manfred introduces the catalog of his miseries with, "Daughter of Air! I tell thee, since that hour--" (2.2.127). Between the two quotations above is the speech of the Seventh Spirit to Manfred, in which the Spirit also refers to an unexplained but catastrophic moment in time:

> Space bosom'd not a lovelier star.
> The hour arrived--and it became
> A wandering mass of shapeless flame,

A pathless comet, and a curse,
The menace of the universe. . . . (1.1.115-19)[7]

Whether the hour intended was the death of Astarte or the birth of Manfred, it is still a cataclysmic event. The drama's final cataclysm is Manfred's death.

Manfred does, however, share one characteristic with the paradigm Abrams describes: the figure of Astarte.[8] Manfred's yearning for death is, in a sense, a yearning for that female figure which he has both left behind and sent ahead.[9] Astarte's death is a paradox, but not in the same way that the Romantic circuitous journey is a paradox. Manfred has left Astarte behind in this life at the right angle in which she departed it, but Astarte has gone ahead of Manfred around that corner which he has yet to turn at his death. Like the female figure in the Romantic version

[7] Manfred refers to this star as the "birth-place" of the power which makes his third attempt to summon the Spirits in act 1, scene 1 successful. For a clue to the source of this imagery and that power, see lines 58-61 of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (1807).

[8] Most interpretations of *Manfred* conjecture that Astarte is Manfred's sister. This is usually based on Manuel's hints at a blood kinship in act 3, scene 3, and on an equating of Manfred's guilt over Astarte with Byron's guilt over his relationship with his half sister Augusta. Furthermore, there seems to be a more than coincidental correspondence between the imagery and structure of Manfred's scene with the Witch of the Alps and Wordsworth's address to his sister in lines 114-59 of "Tintern Abbey" (1798). See especially 2.2.13-14 in *Manfred* and lines 118-19 in "Tintern Abbey." In both works, the first line ends in "lights" or "light" and is followed by "eyes" in the fourth syllable of the next line. I am not aware of this last correspondence having been pointed out heretofore.

[9] Abrams cites as particularly illustrative of this circuitous "educational journey in quest of a feminine other" the romances of Novalis (*NS* 245ff).

of the apocalyptic marriage, Astarte is both the beloved left behind and the sought after fulfillment.[10] Manfred's desire for reunion with Astarte is made clear both in act 1 and during Manfred's speech to her Phantom in act 2.

Manfred's final dismissal of the Spirits in act 3 (see page 33 above) and his expression of a confidence in some form of identity that transcends Death is a significant change from the concept of Death as Oblivion in which earlier Byronic hero's placed such faith. Although Byron's poetry and prose indicate that he was headed toward belief in the transcendent essence of man before his acquaintance with Shelley in the summer of 1816,[11] there can be little doubt that the friendship that developed during that summer hastened Byron's philosophic development along that path. Shelley's own ideas, and more importantly, those of Wordsworth introduced through Shelley's agency, found their way into Byron's thought and poetry in a profound way that was reflected immediately in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III, and in more subtle but still significant aspects of *Manfred*.

---

[10] For a different but fuller treatment of the figure of the beloved as fulfillment in the works of Byron, the reader is referred to McGann's chapter "An Olden Tale of Love," in *Fiery Dust*.

[11] McGann sees evidence of such development in early portions of *Childe Harold* III, especially stanzas 5-6, from which he concludes, "that Byron must have come to Lake Geneva in a state of mind that was already more than just susceptible to Shelley's enthusiasms and ideas" (*FD* 306).

IV.

Cain and *Heaven and Earth*: Why Life that Leads to Death?

Cain is second only to *Manfred* as the work in which Byron most ponders the question of Death. Gleckner concentrates on the play's portrayal of Lucifer's and Cain's rebellion against authority, which Gleckner calls its "glorification of revolt" (*PWB* 478), but that is only part of what the drama concerns. If there is luster in the revolt of Cain and Lucifer, it is of an unhappy kind, and to portray the misery of a situation seems anything but to glorify it. Lucifer may glory in his own rebellion, but Cain only seems unable to subdue his intellect to a point where he can believe that what appears clearly evil is really good.

Although it does not seem to have been noticed before, the organizing theme of the play is not the first murder or fratricide, but simply the first human death of any sort whatsoever. If Byron meant to emphasize the murderous aspect of Cain's deed, he would have made Cain's slaying of Abel more clearly intentional. It is anything but that. Byron's portrayal of Abel's murder is a departure from the conventional interpretation of it. In the biblical account, Cain is clearly angry that his sacrifice is not accepted.

God chides Cain for his anger, then follows the account of the murder:

> And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. (Genesis 4:8)

Genesis clearly invites the interpretation that the murder was intentional and caused by Cain's jealousy of Abel.[1] Byron's *Cain* is less unequivocal. In Byron's account, it is not so much jealousy of Abel's favor with the Lord that motivates Cain's actions as it is anger at a God who could take pleasure in blood sacrifice:

> Thy burnt flesh-off'ring prospers better; see
> How heav'n licks up the flames when thick with blood! . . .
> I will build no more altars,
> Nor suffer any.
> *Abel (rising).* Cain! what meanest thou?
> *Cain.* To cast down yon vile flatt'rer of the clouds,
> The smoky harbinger of thy dull pray'rs--
> Thine altar, with its blood of lambs and kids,
> Which fed on milk, to be destroy'd in blood.
> *Abel (opposing him).* Thou shalt not:--add not impious works to impious
> Words! let that altar stand--'tis hallow'd now
> By the immortal pleasure of Jehovah,
> In his acceptance of the victims.
> *Cain.* *His!*
> *His pleasure!* what was his high pleasure in
> The fumes of scorching flesh and smoking blood,
> To the pain of the bleating mothers which
> Still yearn for their dead offspring? or the pangs
> Of the sad ignorant victims underneath
> Thy pious knife? Give way! this bloody record
> Shall not stand in the sun, to shame creation!
> (3.1.284-85, 288-304)

---

[1] W. A. Criswell typifies received opinion when he writes of Genesis 4:8, "The text is abundantly clear that this first murder came immediately in the wake of jealousy and by the hand of a stubborn man committed to his own selfish way" (*Criswell Study Bible* 11n).

Several more lines of opposition ensue before Cain strikes Abel "with a brand, on the temples, which he snatches from the altar. Abel faints from the blow, and the ensuing lines that Byron puts in the mouth of Cain clearly are not consistent with an act of jealousy-motivated, premeditated murder:

> Abel! I pray thee, mock me not! I smote
> Too fiercely, but not fatally. Ah, why
> Wouldst thou oppose me? This is mockery;
> And only done to daunt me:--'twas a blow--
> And but a blow. Stir--stir--nay, only stir!
> (3.1.327-31.)

There is little here of the cold-blooded murderer from Genesis. If anything, Cain feels too great a compassion for all living things. He feels the universality of Death to be nothing more than universal oppression, and we have seen him chafe at it during his tour of Hades when Lucifer reminds him that "death to all things" is among the fruits of the forbidden tree:

> *Cain.* But animals--
> Did they too eat of it, that they must die?
> *Lucifer.* Your Maker told ye, *they* were made for you,
> As you for him.--You would not have their doom
> Superior to your own? Had Adam not
> Fallen, all had stood. (2.2.152-57)

This is part of the injustice against which Cain is rebelling when he attempts to tear down Abel's altar.

One could argue that murder is murder, premeditated or not, but that would be ignoring the subtle yet absolutely crucial differences between the biblical account and Byron's. In Byron's drama, Cain is confused and shocked and

remorseful for the death of Abel. There is none of that in Genesis. Byron's Cain is every bit as grieved by the death of his brother as Adam, Eve, and his sisters are. The point of this critical change in the story is to shift the emphasis away from Cain's act and toward its result: the death of Abel--what Cain reminds us at the conclusion of the drama is "The first grave yet dug for mortality" (3.1.541).[2]

Looking at *Cain* from this point of view, one can see that the dominant theme is not of revolt, but Death. The most significant event of the first act is Cain's questioning of Lucifer, and the central subject of that interrogation is Death. The second act consists of Lucifer's taking Cain on a tour of the realms of Death. Finally, the climax of the concluding act is the death of Abel.

From the first scene of the play--the family's offering a sacrifice--we see that Cain is the lone overtly joyless member of the protofamily. Why? Because he is obsessed with Death. Cain's refusal to pray aloud, less than thirty

---

[2] Throughout his drama, Byron takes great liberties with the biblical account of this story, but he keeps it within a Christian framework, avoiding borrowing from other mythologies. For instance, Byron ignores Greek mythology and Dante when he has Lucifer answer Adah's question as to whether Cain will return to her:

> Ay, woman! he alone
> Of mortals from that place (the first and last
> Who shall return, save ONE)--shall come back to
> thee . . . . (1.1.540-42)

lines into the drama, immediately reveals the vein of his thoughts:

> *Adam.* But thou, my eldest-born, art silent still.
> *Cain.* 'Tis better I should be so.
> *Adam.* Wherefore so?
> *Cain.* I have nought to ask.
> *Adam.* Nor aught to thank for?
> *Cain.* No.
> *Adam.* Dost thou not live?
> *Cain.* Must I not die?
> *Eve.* Alas!
> The fruit of our forbidden tree begins
> To fall. (1.1.26-31)

It is equally significant that the first word spoken to Cain by Lucifer (who claims to know Cain's thoughts) stresses the very aspect of Cain's being that is most on Cain's mind: "Mortal!" (1.1.98). Cain and the other humans know only that Death is inevitable, beyond that, they are equally ignorant, of what it is, of what it means, of what comes after. But only Cain is obsessed with it.

An important aspect of their ignorance is that they have no notion of the immortality of the soul. It is Lucifer who first exposes Cain to this idea:

> *Lucifer.* I know the thoughts
> Of dust, and feel for it, and with you.
> *Cain.* How!
> You know my thoughts?
> *Lucifer.* They are the thoughts of all
> Worthy of thought;--'tis your immortal part
> Which speaks within you.
> *Cain.* What immortal part?
> This has not been reveal'd: the tree of life
> Was withheld from us by my father's folly,
> While that of knowledge, by my mother's haste,
> Was pluck'd too soon; and all the fruit is death!
> *Lucifer.* They have deceived thee; thou shalt live.
> *Cain.* I live,
> But live to die: and, living, see no thing

> To make death hateful, save an innate clinging,
> A loathsome and yet all-invincible
> Instinct of life, which I abhor, as I
> Despise myself, yet cannot overcome--
> And so I live. Would I had never lived![3]
> *Lucifer.* Thou livest, and must live for ever:
> think not
> The earth, which is thine outward cov'ring, is
> Existence--it will cease, and thou wilt be
> No less than thou art now. (1.1.100-19)

Cain's attitude in this conversation toward life which must end in Death, and Lucifer's insistence on the undying nature of the soul are both repeated early in act 2, during Cain's tour of the Abyss of Space:

> *Cain.* Spirit! I
> Know nought of death, save as a dreadful thing
> Of which I have heard my parents speak, as of
> A hideous heritage I owe to them
> No less than life; a heritage not happy,
> If I may judge till now. But, spirit! if
> It be, as thou hast said (and I within
> Feel the prophetic torture of its truth),
> Here let me die: for to give birth to those
> Who can but suffer many years, and die,
> Methinks is merely propagating death,
> And multiplying murder.
> *Lucifer.* Thou canst not
> *All* die--there is what must survive.
> *Cain.* The Other
> Spake not of this unto my father, when
> He shut him forth from Paradise, with death
> Written upon his forehead. . . .
> Thou hast said, I must be
> Immortal in despite of me. I knew not
> This until lately--but since it must be,
> Let me, or happy or unhappy, learn
> To anticipate my immortality. (2.1.60-75, 90-94)

Having thus whetted Cain's curiosity, Lucifer draws him on toward further revelation, asking him, "Thou seekest to behold death, and dead things?" (2.1.191). Cain responds:

---

[3] Cf. "Euthanasia," lines 29-36; *Manfred*, 2.2.164-77; and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III, lines 683-88, 698-700; quoted above on pages 16, 30, and 23 respectively.

> I seek it not; but as I know there are
> Such, and that my sire's sin makes him and me,
> And all that we inherit, liable
> To such, I would behold at once, what I
> Must one day see perforce. (2.1.192-96)

Here, in brief, is the impatient curiosity which is Cain's curse. He would rather *never* see the realms of Death, but as Lucifer has made it clear that he must inhabit them eventually, *yesterday* could not be soon enough to see them. Cain is the mental analogue to the physical paradox posed by the question, "What happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object?" In Cain's case, the question may be phrased, "What happens when insatiable curiosity meets an unknowable inevitability?" Lucifer expects Cain's answer, for Cain has already revealed both his thirst to know and his utter ignorance of Death in act 1:

> But thou canst not
> Speak aught of knowledge which I would not know,
> And do not thirst to know, and bear a mind
> To know.
> *Lucifer.* And heart to look on?
> *Cain.* Be it proved.
> *Lucifer.* Dar'st thou to look on Death?
> *Cain.* He has not yet
> Been seen.
> *Lucifer.* But must be undergone.
> *Cain.* My father
> Says he is something dreadful, and my mother
> Weeps when he's named; and Abel lifts his eyes
> To heaven, and Zillah casts hers to the earth,
> And sighs a prayer; and Adah looks on me,
> And speaks not.
> *Lucifer.* And thou?
> *Cain.* Thoughts unspeakable
> Crowd in my breast to burning, when I hear
> Of this almighty Death, who is, it seems,
> Inevitable. Could I wrestle with him? . . .
> *Lucifer.* It has no shape; but will absorb all
> things
> That bear the form of earth-born being.

Cain. Ah!
I thought it was a being: who could do
Such evil things to beings save a being?
Lucifer. Ask the Destroyer.
Cain. Who?
Lucifer. The Maker--call him
Which name thou wilt; he makes but to destroy.
Cain. I knew not that, yet thought it, since I heard
Of death: although I know not what it is,
Yet it seems horrible. . . .
What is death? I fear,
I feel, it is a dreadful thing; but what,
I cannot compass: 'tis denounced against us,
Both them who sinn'd and sinn'd not, as an ill--
What ill?
Lucifer. To be resolved into the earth.
Cain. But shall I know it?
Lucifer. As I know not death,
I cannot answer. (1.1.246-59, 262-70, 284-90)

The importance of this last statement cannot be over-emphasized. Lucifer's admission that he knows not Death echoes that of the Spirits in *Manfred* and should cast a shadow of strong suspicion over everything else he says to Cain. Cain says of Death, "I scarcely know what it is, / And yet I fear it--fear I know not what!" To which Lucifer, who has just said that he knows not Death, responds, "And I, who know all things, fear nothing: see / What is true knowledge" (1.1.298-301). Recall also that Lucifer says, not once but twice, to Adah at the end of act 1, that he will return Cain within an hour. He does not. Adah tells Cain at the beginning of act 3 that it has been, "Two hours since ye departed: two *long* hours / To *me* . . ." (3.1.54-55).

Adah's role in the drama is an important one. Her own attitude serves as a foil for Cain's. If one sees the theme of the play as the glorification of revolt, then the

important difference between unhappy Cain and contented Adah will be viewed in terms of his refusal to bow down in submission to God and her joyful praises. Equally important, however, is the difference in their attitudes toward Death. Cain's allowance of the inevitable unknown to poison his life is evident in his conversation with Adah in act 1:

> Thy beauty and thy love--my love and joy,
> The rapturous moment and the placid hour,
> All we love in our children and each other,
> But lead them and ourselves through many years
> Of sin and pain--or few, but still of sorrow,
> Intercheck'd with an instant of brief pleasure,
> To Death--the unknown! Methinks the tree of knowledge
> Hath not fulfill'd its promise:--if they sinn'd,
> At least they ought to have known all things that are
> Of knowledge--and the mystery of death.
> What do they know?--that they are miserable?
> What need of snakes and fruits to teach us that? (1.1.451-62)

Adah is not tortured with Cain's insatiable need to know, least of all about a subject unknowable:

> I am not wretched, Cain, and if thou
> Wert happy----
> *Cain.* Be thou happy then alone--
> I will have nought to do with happiness,
> Which humbles me and mine.
> *Adah.* Alone I could not,
> Nor *would* be happy: but with those around us,
> I think I could be so, despite of death,
> Which, as I know it not, I dread not, though
> It seems an awful shadow--if I may
> Judge from what I have heard. (1.1.463-70)

Cain, in the short passage above, returns to his distaste for humility as the root of his dissatisfaction, but Adah, with the perception of a wife, restores the focus to what

she, and we the readers, can detect to be Cain's obsession: Death.

If Cain suppresses the true cause of his unhappiness early in the play, he makes no effort to do so in act 2, or after he has slain Abel. During his tour of Hades, Cain exclaims:

> Cursed be
> He who invented life that leads to death!
> Or the dull mass of life, that being life
> Could not retain, but needs must forfeit it--
> Even for the innocent! (2.2.18-22)

And later, when Zillah cries, "Father!--Eve!-- / Adah!--come hither! Death is in the world!" (3.1.369-70), Cain, alone, ponders his role in this cataclysmic event:

> And who hath brought him there?--I--who abhor
> The name of Death so deeply, that the thought
> Empoison'd all my life, before I knew
> His aspect--I have led him here, and giv'n
> My brother to his cold and still embrace,
> As if he would not have asserted his
> Inexorable claim without my aid. (3.1.371-77)

The personification of Death in the passage above echoes Cain's earlier admission to Lucifer that he had thought Death was a being and makes clear how little Lucifer's tutelage has done to relieve Cain's ignorance. Cain has seen both the Abyss of Space and Hades, but it has added little to his knowledge of Death. Now faced with the lifeless body of his brother, Cain's confusion is that of mankind. Through Cain, Byron illustrates that even faith in a transcendent soul (for we have no reason to believe that Cain doubts Lucifer's assurances of the soul's immortality) does little to relieve the mystery of Death itself:

> His eyes are open! then he is not dead!
> Death is like sleep; and sleep shuts down our
> lids.
> His lips, too, are apart; why then he breathes!
> And yet I feel it not.--His heart!--his heart!--
> Let me see, doth it beat,--methinks----No!--
> no! . . . .
> But he can not be dead!--Is silence death?
> No; he will wake: then let me watch by him.
> Life cannot be so slight, as to be quench'd
> Thus quickly! (3.1.337-41, 349-52)

Likewise, Cain's final long address to his dead brother reinforces the truth that Death is as mysterious now as it was before the encounter with Lucifer, and it reminds the reader, once again, that this is not the murderous Cain of Genesis, but a character of Byron's own creation:

> Oh! thou dead
> And everlasting witness! whose unsinking
> Blood darkens earth and heaven! what thou *now* art,
> I know not! but if *thou* see'st what *I* am,
> I think thou wilt forgive him, whom his God
> Can ne'er forgive, nor his own soul.--Farewell!

Jerome McGann sees Byron's next drama, *Heaven and Earth* (written in October 1821) as a necessary companion to *Cain*:

> Together they represent Byron's most coordinated attempt to dramatize the fundamental cosmic premises of man's situation on earth and his relation to the gods.
>
> That the two plays were closely associated in Byron's mind seems clear. For example, *Cain* tells the beginning and *Heaven and Earth* the end of a doomed race. . . . the focal problem in *Cain* is the limits of human knowledge just as the focal problem in *Heaven and Earth* is the limits of love. (*FD* 245)

McGann s analysis is *almost* right, for Byron's focus is simply not as narrow as McGann suggests. To paraphrase Abrams's distinction quoted earlier, Death--not life--is the ground-concept here, the theme that unites these two plays. The climactic action of *Cain* is the very first human death,

and *Heaven and Earth* ends with Death imminent for all life outside of Noah's ark. The Cainite race is not doomed alone. There is no indication in Genesis that Noah is the last of the Sethites (the race sired by Cain's second brother, Seth). In fact, chapter 5 of Genesis makes it clear that Seth's line multiplied prodigiously. The deluge had far more significance than "the end of a doomed race." It was the end of all but a small specimen of life on earth.

Byron's own epigraph to *Heaven and Earth* from Genesis 6--"And it came to pass . . . that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose"--suggests that the theme of the drama will be what Marchand calls "the love of angels for daughters of earth" (*P* 365).[4] That is clearly *one* theme of *Heaven and Earth*, but it is not the dominant theme. Of the play's 1194 lines, less than 400 deal explicitly with such love, while over 500 (nearly half of the total lines of the play) deal with the impending cataclysmic death of all. Similarly, the words *dead*, *death*, *die*, or *dying* occur 45

---

[4] Interpretations of the biblical text disagree as to whether "the sons of God" refers to angels or to godly mortals. Byron covers both possibilities by giving Anah and Aholibamah mortal suitors *and* angelic lovers. As in *Cain*, Byron has taken liberties with the biblical account, for, in Genesis 7, Noah's sons' wives, including Japhet's, do enter the ark.

times in the text of the poem, nearly equal to the 47 occurrences of forms of the verb *love*.[5]

McGann's second thread of association between the two plays (their "focal problems") is equally dependant for the definition of its terms on both plays' emphasis on Death. McGann defines the focal problem of *Cain* as the limits of human knowledge and that of *Heaven and Earth* as the limits of love (one must assume that McGann means both human and angelic love). What McGann does not point out is that in both dramas it is Death which defines those limits. Human knowledge cannot render Death less frightening and mysterious, and human love cannot render it less unavoidable. McGann might say "neither human nor angelic love," but one cannot draw that conclusion from *Heaven and Earth*.

McGann seems to me to misinterpret *Heaven and Earth* when he says, "the errant Seraphim choose to give up immortality rather than their love for the earth and its beautiful creatures" (263). McGann must surmise this to be the meaning of both Raphael's threat to the Seraphim to leave earth at once, "Or stay, / And lose eternity by that delay!" (813-14) and his response when both Seraphim refuse to return to heaven with him:

---

[5] This data is extracted from Young's *Concordance*. It is unfortunate but understandable that this work (painstakingly compiled before computers had greatly simplified such tasks) contains no Tables of Incidence.

> Then from this hour,
> Shorn as ye are of all celestial power,
> And aliens from your God,
> Farewell! (986-89)

As inviting as it may be to infer that Raphael means the Seraphim are now mortal, such an interpretation is contradicted by the dialogue and action which follow. There is at least equal textual evidence to support the supposition that Anah and Aholibamah are somehow spared the death decreed to all. As the waters rise, Azaziel promises Anah safety beneath his wings and says, "A brighter world than this, where thou shalt breathe / Ethereal life, will we explore: / These darken'd clouds are not the only skies" (1085-87). The final direction regarding the foursome states simply, "Azaziel and Samiasa fly off, and disappear with Anah and Aholibamah" (following line 1087).[6]

Anah's human suitor, Japhet, represents in *Heaven and Earth* the same questioning of God's justice that Cain did in the preceding drama, albeit with a softer voice. When the Chorus of Spirits prophesies that Time will restore the world to a state as corrupt as that which the flood is intended to cleanse, Japhet interrupts them with a hope that eventually, "The eternal will / Shall deign to expound this dream / Of good and evil" (459-61). Japhet will not be the one to "look the Omnipotent tyrant in / His everlasting

---

[6] McGann was not the first to adopt the interpretation that all four perish. Rainwater also asserts, "Anah and Aholibamah, women who aspire to the love of celestial beings, and in doing so defy the decrees of the material God, are destroyed" (23).

face, and tell him, that / His evil is not good!" (*Cain* 1.1.138-40). Still the question of the death of the innocent is as important in *Heaven and Earth* as in *Cain*. As the waters rise at the end of the later drama, a mother pleading to Japhet to save her child asks the inevitable question:

> Why was he born?
> What hath he done--
> My unwean'd son--
> To move Jehovah's wrath or scorn?
> What is there in this milk of mine, that death
> Should stir all heaven and earth up to destroy
> My boy,
> And roll the waters o'er his placid breath?
> (1101-08)

This seems to be the central question of both *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth*: *Why must we die?* In *Cain*, Lucifer's answer that "Had Adam not / Fallen, all had stood" (2.2.156-57) is no more adequate than that of the mortal in *Heaven and Earth* who cries, "He gave me life--he taketh but / The breath which is his own" (1153-54).

This last point of view--that of the mortal who unquestioningly praises the divine will, whatever it may be (lines 1148-1169)--is the antithesis of the stance taken by Byron's protagonists in all three of his most metaphysical dramas. It is directly opposed to the philosophy preached by Lucifer in his final words to Cain:

> *One good* gift has the fatal apple given--
> Your *reason*:--let it not be over-sway'd
> By tyrannous threats to force you into faith
> 'Gainst all external sense and inward feeling:
> Think and endure,--and form an inner world
> In your own bosom--where the outward fails;

> So shall you nearer be the spiritual
> Nature, and war triumphant with your own.

Here is the philosophy of revolt which Gleckner says Byron glorifies. But, as pointed out before, all that Lucifer says must be suspect. One need only consider the problematic examples of Lucifer, Cain, and Manfred to see that reason as such may not be a sufficiently good gift. Certainly logic alone is an insufficient guide for experiencing the dynamics of any aesthetic structure. What, for example, is Byron's aim in transposing problems first explored in narrative verse (Spenserian stanzas, as well as less formal patterns of rhyme) into *dramatic*, mostly blank verse?

In his essay, "The Reassertion of Biblical Views in European Romanticism," W. Z. Hirst points out the necessity of taking the dramatic action into account when searching for Byron's ultimate goals:

> The classic irony of [*Cain*'s] tone and structure reminds us of *Oedipus Rex*, for example, which suggests that man's limited reason is an inadequate guide in a world ruled by inscrutable power. *Cain* is thus closer to Milton's justification of God's ways to men than to an impious vindication of man's rebellion against a malignant deity, though the latter view has been widely accepted over Byron's own repeated objections. . . . The logically irrefutable arguments against God made in the name of absolute justice cease to have dramatic validity if voiced by a spokesman who sheds the blood of his innocent brother. (74-75)

Recall two passages from Abrams's study quoted earlier (pages 35 and 8 respectively) in which he asserts that for the poets of natural supernaturalism, "Life is itself the

highest good. . . . And the norm of life is joy," and that they view the root of all evil as "the very act of taking thought." While the words of Lucifer seem to argue against these ideas, the very fact that they are *Lucifer's* words reminds us that they are likely false. That the three of Byron's characters who most clearly live by Lucifer's philosophy are miserable seems perhaps to align Byron more closely with the prevailing Romantic views than Abrams realizes.

That *Cain* and *Manfred* were more closely linked in Byron's mind than has been previously appreciated is clear not only from their complimentary explorations of the mystery of Death (in *Manfred* the question is *What after Death?*) but also from the similarity of the protagonists as well. Just as textual evidence leads us to conclude that Manfred the character is a more fully developed version of Childe Harold, so are there links to suggest a similar relationship between Manfred and Cain, especially in the curses levelled at each. The curse of the Incantation in *Manfred* denies Manfred either sleep or death, but dooms him to the paradox of a wish for what he most fears:

> Nor to slumber, nor to die,
> Shall be in thy destiny;
> Though thy death shall still seem near
> To thy wish, but as a fear. . . . (1.1.254-57)

The same elements reappear in *Cain*, but they are made more awful by their nature as a mother's curse on a son:

> May his dreams be of his victim!
> His waking a continual dread of death! . . .

> May he live in the pangs which others die with!
> And death itself wax something worse than death
> To him who first acquainted him with man!
> (3.1.430-31, 435-37)

Likewise, in *Cain*, Adam's refusal to curse, "I curse him not: his spirit be his curse" (3.1.449), is a curse, and one which echoes the words of the Incantation in *Manfred*:

> by thy brotherhood of Cain,
> I call upon thee! and compel
> Thyself to be thy proper Hell! (1.1.249-51)

Together, *Manfred* and *Cain* represent Byron's fullest expression of his own ponderings on the mystery of Death and the misery that accompanies such an obsession. There is evidence, however, in the works composed between the two above and in those that followed the latter, that Byron began to view it as folly "to be a mortal / And seek the things beyond mortality" (*Manfred* 2.4.158-59). The skepticism that pervades *Don Juan* and is basic to the protagonist of *Sardanapalus* is accompanied by an outspoken desire to avoid metaphysical speculations and a comic derision of those persons who claim certainty where such subjects are concerned.

V.

Sardanapalus, Don Juan, and Later Works

Between the publication of *Manfred* (June, 1817) and the writing of *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth* (July-October, 1821) Byron completed at least nine other major works, among which were the first five cantos of *Don Juan* (I-II July, 1819; III-V August, 1821) and Byron's third drama, *Sardanapalus* (written January-May, published December, 1821). I have discussed the two later metaphysical dramas out of their chronological sequence in the Byron canon because they represent the last full length works in which Byron's contemplations of Death form a, if not the, central theme. In fact, *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth* take such significant liberties with the accounts in Genesis that one can hardly argue that Byron's intent was to dramatize the biblical text. Instead, in these two dramas, poetry seems to be serving the function Byron himself had allotted it in 1813 after composing *The Bride of Abydos*: it is the "lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earth-quake" (letter to Murray, November 28?, 1813, *LJ* 3: 177). In *English Romanticism: The Grounds of Belief*, John Clubbe and Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. observe that Byron "invented himself (and other characters) time and again in his poems or his letters" (96). Cain is not Byron, nor is Japhet, nor was

Manfred, but each of these created characters, like the others that populate Byron's works, share characteristics with the real Byron. They are vents for aspects of the poet's own personality that must have an outlet in order to relieve the pressure of his own thoughts. Cain is not Byron, but his curiosity and its principal object are the poet's. Japhet is not Byron, but his chafing at apparent divine injustice, like Cain's before him, is a projection of the author's own attitude.

Byron's geologic metaphor--lava under pressure--is a useful one. Indeed, his own development follows a pattern not entirely unlike that of Earth. Following the violent Precambrian turbulence of thought in his own early works and life, Byron eventually settles down into a sort of Cenozoic stability (like that of Earth which fosters the dawn of man) which engenders the production of what most critics consider his finest work, *Don Juan*. That the poet himself was aware of the changing forces driving his composition is perhaps too self-deprecatingly acknowledged in canto 14 of *Don Juan* (December, 1823), when he says, "In youth I wrote, because my mind was full, / And now because I feel it growing dull" (79-80). Marchand reports that as early as September, 1822, Byron told Hobhouse that "he found he had less feeling than usually in his younger days" (*P* 387). Few of us would accept that it is a "dull" mind which produces the poem that drew from Shelley the comment that "every word of it is pregnant with immortality" (letter to Peacock, August 10,

1821, *LPBS* 2: 330). Byron's mind was far from dull, but it does appear to have become more settled. One could even argue that, with *Manfred*, Byron had resolved the metaphysical issue that was most pressing to him at the time: is or is not the soul immortal?

Such an assertion is supported by the observation that following *Manfred*, and until the composition of *Cain*, Death becomes an incidental subject in Byron's works. In *Marino Faliero* (April 1821) and *The Two Foscari* (December, 1821), the concept of Death as expressed by Faliero, by both Foscari and by Marina is firmly grounded in traditional Catholicism. In *Mazeppa* (June, 1819) and in *Don Juan* (not just the first five cantos, but the entire work) Death is treated realistically; that is, whenever Death seems the subject of the narration it is viewed from this side of the "ebon portal."[1] The many ways in which men face Death, the many forms in which it arrives, and the terrible waste of life in wars for glory are open to discussion and form a significant portion of the narrative in *Don Juan* (such are the shipwreck scenes and the siege of Ismail), but there is little attempt to see what lies beyond Death or to ponder its ultimate necessity.

Even more important than Death's sidelining as a theme is the attitude that Byron seems to adopt toward

---

[1] In every printing prior to McGann's Oxford edition, line 36 of the fragment beginning "Could I remount . . ." (see page 21 above) has referred to the grave as, "The ebon portal of thy peopled cave. . . ."

metaphysical subjects in general after 1817. Byron almost seems to have worn himself out on the subject. A skepticism surfaces that was not a characteristic of Byron's earlier works. In *Don Juan* I, Byron initiates a pattern that will be continued throughout the entire work: he approaches contemplation of Death, only to back away with an assertion of its inscrutability, saying, "we die, you know--and then---- / What then?--I do not know, no more do you-- / And so good night" (1064-66). Even when the narrator seems about to make an assertion about our future state, he qualifies it with a disclaimer of uncertainty, as in canto 2 when he says, "Juan slept like a top, or like the dead, / Who sleep at last, perhaps, (God only knows)" (1066-67).[2]

One might tend to discount the seriousness of this new skepticism because of the almost comic tone of the above lines and the "satirical perspective" which seems almost inseparable from the *ottava rima* stanza that Byron first made use of with *Beppo* (completed by October 1817); however, the attitude those lines reflect found an entirely serious and perhaps more eloquent vehicle for its expression in Byron's drama, *Sardanapalus*. Just as Manfred was a projection of the poet, and as Cain and Japhet would come to be, Sardanapalus represents an attitude toward Death that Byron may have wished could be his own.

---

[2] To follow this pattern throughout *Don Juan*, see the following cantos and lines: 4.1-40; 5.257-312; 6.169-76, 497-504; 7.1-56; 8.908-12; 9.105-68, 185-208; 10.153-60; 11.1-48; 14.1-64; 15.689-744, 785-92; 17.33-80.

Psychologically, Sardanapalus is the most well-adjusted of any of Byron's heroes. He is not overwhelmed by guilt for past deeds, nor by incessant curiosity about what lies beyond Death. His attitude is one of healthy resignation to the inevitable rather than despairing dread of it. Addressing Myrrha's chiding for his seeming lack of concern over Salemenes's warning of the brewing insurrection, Sardanapalus tells her that, "we lose / Ten thousand precious moments in vain words, / And vainer fears" (1.2.679-81). Although the immediate subject is the coming revolt, Sardanapalus's words also reveal his attitude toward the unanswerable questions of man's future identity.

If soliloquy is intended to reveal a character's deepest personal attitudes and ideas, then Sardanapalus's attitude toward Death is nowhere more fully revealed than in his remarks (*solus*) after Salemenes departs bearing the king's signet:

> Must I consume my life--this little life--
> In guarding against all may make it less?
> It is not worth so much! It were to die
> Before my hour, to live in dread of death,
> Tracing revolt; suspecting all about me,
> Because they are near; and all who are remote,
> Because they are far. But if it should be so--
> If they should sweep me off from earth and empire,
> Why, what is earth or empire of the earth?
> I have loved, and lived, and multiplied my image;
> To die is no less natural than those
> Acts of this clay! (1.2.438-449)

Death is accepted as a natural part of life. One might initially tend to discount Sardanapalus's attitude as simply that of a shallow hedonist, one of Mazeppa's "sons of

pleasure, / They who have revell'd beyond measure / In beauty, wassail, wine, and treasure," and whom Mazeppa observes, "Die calm, or calmer, oft than he / Whose heritage was misery" (736-40). Sardanapalus is more, however, than the dissipated hedonist of *Mazeppa* who welcomes Death because he has exhausted the pleasures of this life.[3] Chided by Salemenes for his perceived failure to expand the bounds and glory of the empire through wars of conquest, Sardanapalus's reply reveals not so much a self-centered dedication to pleasure that leaves no time for military forays, as a view of the human situation founded on rational and compassionate appreciation for the suffering of his fellow man:

> I leave such things to conquerors; enough
> For me, if I can make my subjects feel
> The weight of human misery less, and glide
> Ungroaning to the tomb. . . .
> . . . . . .
> I hate all pain,
> Given or received; we have enough within us,
> The meanest vassal as the loftiest monarch,
> Not to add to each other's natural burthen
> Of mortal misery, but rather lessen,
> By mild reciprocal alleviation,
> The fatal penalties imposed on life. . . .
> (1.2.309-12, 395-401)

---

[3] As Gleckner notes, "Byron's Sardanapalus . . . is in many ways his finest portrait of the essential (and admirable) human, quite contrary to his main source" (*PWB* 1024). The source Gleckner refers to is Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliothecae Historicae* (also Shelley's source for "Ozymandias") which records that Sardanapalus "ordered two verses to be put upon his tomb, signifying that he carried away with him all he had eaten, and all the pleasures he had enjoyed, but left everything else behind him--*an epitaph*, says Aristotle, *fit for a hog*" (*PWB* 1023).

There is more in Sardanapalus's words than just an enlightened concern for his subjects. There is also an avowal that he too knows misery, for in his day, Sardanapalus was "the loftiest monarch." It is this identification with mankind in general which gives Sardanapalus a respect for life unappreciated by his glory-seeking satraps.[4] Furthermore, it is his admitted uncertainty about what lies beyond this life that adds to his distaste for killing and causes him to explain his hesitancy to give his signet to Salemenes by saying, "I will trust no man with unlimited lives. / When we take those from others, we nor know / What we have taken, nor the thing we give" (1.2.340-42).

Sardanapalus begins the drama uncertain of the soul's fate after Death, and he finishes it with that uncertainty intact as evidenced by his speech to the departed spirit of Salemenes which he qualifies with "if the spirit / Within us lives beyond" (5.1.159-60). Myrrha makes the strongest assertion of any rationally based concept of the hereafter when she posits the mind's future existence as an ethereal entity:

> If there be indeed
> A shore where mind survives, 't will be as mind,
> All unincorporate: or if there flits
> A shadow of this cumbrous clog of clay,
> Which stalks, methinks, between our souls and

---

[4] Unlike Byron's compassionate protagonist, the historical Sardanapalus, when he believed defeat imminent, "burnt himself, his eunuchs, his women, and his treasures" (*PWB* 1024).

heaven,
And fetters us to earth--at least the phantom,
Whate'er it have to fear, will not fear death.
(4.1.56-62)

Even Myrrha's conception, however, is qualified by its opening "if."

Sardanapalus is not a drama about Death in the way that *Manfred* was and that *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth* will be, but it is a dramatic illustration of an attitude that pervades *Don Juan* and one which Byron himself might have welcomed. That attitude is nowhere more poignantly expressed than in Sardanapalus's retort to the soldier/priest Beleses when Beleses asserts that the king's ancestors are gods and that they dwell with the stars:

I dispense with
The worship of dead men; feeling that I
Am mortal, and believing that the race
From whence I sprung are--what I see them--ashes.
. . . . . .
Whether [the stars] may be
Gods, as some say, or the abodes of gods,
As others hold, or simply lamps of night,
Worlds, or the lights of worlds, I know nor care not.
There's something sweet in my uncertainty
I would not change for your Chaldean lore;
Besides, I know of these all clay can know
Of aught above it, or below it--nothing.
I see their brilliancy and feel their beauty--
When they shine on my grave I shall know neither.
Bel. For *neither*, sire, say *better*.
Sar. I will wait,
If it so please you, pontiff, for that knowledge.
(2.1.239-42, 259-70)

It is Sardanapalus's equanimity about a subject so inevitable and unknowable that I suggest Byron envied, and I believe that *Don Juan* is evidence of his striving to incorporate such an attitude about impenetrable mystery into

the character of his persona, the poem's first-person speaker.

Why then, does Byron turn from a drama like *Sardanapalus* to one like *Cain* less than two months later? The answer is that the same force which compelled his mind to metaphysical subjects in the summer of 1816 (the produce of which was *Childe Harold* III and *Manfred*) was at work again in the summer of 1821. That force was, again, Percy Bysshe Shelley, who shared Byron's friendship in Italy, from August, 1821, until Shelley's death in July, 1822.

Byron began *Cain* July 16, 1821, just three weeks before Shelley's arrival in Ravenna. Although the subject of the drama had been determined before Shelley arrived, its treatment may not have been decided until somewhat later. That Shelley's impact on the finished work was profound seems safe to assume when one considers the distinctly unmetaphysical turn that Byron's poetry had begun to take.[5] Even in Byron's own day, the unorthodox treatment of his biblical hero was attributed outright by many to the influence of Shelley. Shelley and Byron were both sensitive to this.[6] It would be a mistake, however, to infer from any

---

[5] See Elenor Frances Frame, "Keats, Shelley, and Byron: A Guide to Their Literary Relations," quotation entry numbers 427, 428, 434, and 463 for material relevant to Shelley's participatory influence on *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth*. See also Robinson's discussion beginning on page 195 of *Shelley and Byron*.

[6] See Byron's conversation with Trelawny (*KSB* #581) and Shelley's letter to Horace Smith, April 11, 1822 (*KSB* #636).

of this that Byron's unorthodox religious views were solely the product of his relationship with Shelley. Byron's poetical satire on conventional Christianity was too frequent, both before and after his associations with Shelley, for this to have been the case. Even Cain's chafing against the apparent evil and suffering allowed by a omnipotent God is foreshadowed in the dialogue between Sardanapalus and Myrrha:

> *Sar.* Could I convert
> My realm to one wide shelter for the wretched,
> I'd do it.
> *Myr.* Thou'rt no god, then, not to be
> Able to work a will so good and general
> As thy wish would imply.
> *Sar.* And your gods, then,
> Who can and do not?
> *Myr.* Do not speak of that,
> Lest we provoke them.
> *Sar.* True, they love not censure
> Better than mortals. (3.1.41-48)

Further hints that *Cain* was already germinating in Byron's mind can be seen in *Don Juan* IV (completed in November, 1819) which opens with a passage that also displays Byron's growing skepticism about man's ability to know all the truths of his being:

> Like Lucifer when hurl'd from heaven for sinning;
> Our sin the same, and hard as his to mend,
> Being pride, which leads the mind to soar too far,
> Till our own weakness shows us what we are.
>
> But Time, which brings all beings to their level,
> And sharp Adversity, will teach at last
> Man,--and, as we would hope,--perhaps the devil,
> That neither of th intellects are vast. . . .
> (5-12)

Finally, that Death was still a topic of consideration in Byron's mind is clearly seen in the stanzas 33-39 of *Don*

Juan V (completed in December, 1820)[7] which Byron based on his own experience in Ravenna, in December 1820. Parts of these same stanzas are reworked to become the ponderings of Cain over his brother's body in the later drama (see page 49 above). Byron draws those stanzas of *Don Juan* to a close, however, saying, "But let me quit the theme; as such things claim / Perhaps even more attention than is due / From me" (300-302). That closing bit of self-reprobation is more evidence of Byron's growing tendency to avoid the abyss of metaphysical contemplation.

Whatever the effect Shelley did or did not have on the final version of *Cain*, there can be little doubt that his mere presence forced Byron to ponder metaphysical questions that he might otherwise have avoided. Marchand notes in his biography of Byron that Shelley had little interest in conversation of anything but a metaphysical nature. For instance, Shelley enjoyed the weekly dinners and conversations that Byron organized for his male friends in Pisa in late 1821, but that when the conversation turned "from literature and philosophical subjects to worldly matters . . . he generally withdrew" (*P* 360). The two poets were nearly opposites in this respect. Clubbe and Lovell have observed that, "Byron was not a visionary and he was not an intellectual. Serious ideas of complexity located on

[7] These stanzas and Byron's accompanying note suggest that Norman Page must be in error in *A Byron Chronology* when he asserts that canto V of *Don Juan* was completed by November 27, 1820.

the frontiers of knowledge did not constitute the area of existence that most passionately interested him" (*ERTGB* 94). Byron was probably more aware of this difference in their personalities than Shelley was. Byron's "chameleon nature,"[8] his own personification of the "mobilité" he ascribed to Adeline in *Don Juan* XVI, allowed Shelley to think of him as a "spirit of an angel in the mortal paradise of a decaying body" (letter to Gisborne, January 12, 1822, *LPBS* 2: 376). Thomas Medwin recalled that during pistol firing one day, Byron quipped, "Shelley is a much better shot than I am, but he is thinking of metaphysics rather than of firing" (*MCLB* 15). Teresa Guiccioli recorded that, "Shelley . . . did not despair of succeeding in making Byron some day give up what he termed his philosophical errors, and his persistency earned him the appellation of 'serpent' which Byron gave him in jest" (*RLB* 178).

It may be that Shelley's interruption of Byron's struggle toward the equanimity of Sardanapalus bore more resemblance to Lucifer's cunning prodding of Cain than has been realized. It is certainly true, however, that after writing *Heaven and Earth* in October, 1821, Byron turned again to less metaphysical subject matter and away from contemplation of the ultimate meaning of Death. Although

---

[8] I borrow this term from Clubbe and Lovell, who borrow it from Lady Blessington. See their excellent discussion of this aspect of Byron's personality beginning on page 108 of *ERTGB*.

The Deformed Transformed (probably composed in early 1822)[9] is arguably metaphysical in content, it is not overtly concerned with the meaning of Death, and it has been consistently the least esteemed of all of Byron's dramas. Shelley himself told Byron that he liked it "least of anything I ever saw of yours" (*MCLB* 153).

That Byron returned to more worldly themes after *Heaven and Earth* may be due in part to his seeing less of Shelley. Marchand notes that as a result of Byron's treatment of Claire early in 1822, "Shelley had an increasing desire to withdraw from any intimacy with Byron" (*P* 368-69).

Whatever the reasons, after *Cain*, Byron makes little attempt in his poetry to see around the corner that has been turned by Astarte and Manfred and Abel. When the subject of Death comes up in a drama, such as *Werner*, it is treated in a more or less conventional manner and receives some incidental comment but little hypothetical speculation. When the same subject is addressed in Byron's later poetry, such as *The Age of Bronze* (written December-January, 1822-23) or *The Island* (completed by March 1823), it is always qualified by an "if," as in Byron's contemplations of the death of Napoleon in the earlier poem:

> How, if that soaring spirit still retain
> A conscious twilight of his blazing reign,

---

[9] Thomas Medwin claims to have been present when Byron first presented the MS to Shelley (between Nov. 20, 1821 and Mar. 8, 1822), but E. H. Coleridge dates the composition between Apr. 20 and July 8, 1822 (*KSB* #503). Page does not mention the drama in his chronology until November 1822.

> How must he smile, on looking down, to see
> The little that he was and sought to be! (87-92)

The subject here is the fleeting nature and insignificance of fame and glory; the treatment of Death is incidental and qualified. The same treatment is given posthumous glorification in Byron's treatment of Napoleon's obsequies with, again, the same qualifying "if." Byron writes, "Small care hath he of what his tomb consists; / Nought if he sleeps--nor more if he exists" (117-18).

In *The Island*, Byron's last major work aside from *Don Juan*, and, significantly, his last major work in heroic couplets (perhaps a stylistic indicator or assertion of Augustan certitude about the need for balance), one finds the same ridiculing attitude toward those who claim certainty in religion or philosophy. While McGann is correct in observing that "*The Island* is unique among Byron's works in the way it lays out an unequivocal program for the possession of the earthly paradise" (*FD* 198), the poem's narrator still maintains a skeptical attitude toward knowledge of the hereafter. When Christian dies, Byron takes a jab at priests and all others who claim that *their* truth is *the* Truth, and who would damn others for not sharing their certitude:

> The rest was nothing--save a life misspent,
> And soul--but who shall answer where it went?
> 'T is ours to bear, not judge the dead; and they
> Who doom to hell, themselves are on the way,
> Unless these bullies of eternal pains
> Are pardon'd their bad hearts for their worse
> brains. (4.351-56)

The last line is a reminder of how rationally objectionable Byron found so much of orthodox Christian doctrine. Cain, Japhet, and Byron all balk at the damnation of the innocent non-believers. The same holds true in stanza 23 of *Don Juan* VI where the opening curse of the Athanasian Creed is the target of Byron's biting wit.

Aside from the numerous instances of asserted incertitude noted above (see note, page 60), Byron faces the specter of Death head-on only once more. Like the narrative description of the commandant's assassination in *Don Juan* V, there can be little doubt that the stanzas of *Don Juan* IX which begin with "Death laughs" had their inspiration in actual events. *Don Juan* IX was the first canto Byron began afresh following the drowning, disinterment and cremation of Shelley and Williams. Marchand quotes Trelawny's account of Byron's reaction to the decomposing body of Williams, which Byron identified by its teeth:

> Lord B. looking at it said--"Are we to resemble that?--why it might be the carcase of a sheep for all I can see"--and pointing to the black handkerchief--said "an old rag retains its form longer than a dead body--what a nauseous and degrading sight!" (qtd. in *P* 384)

Byron's reaction to this experience found outlet in *Don Juan* IX and the narrator's gruesome description of Death. "Mark!" he says, "how its lipless mouth grins without breath!" (9.88).

Even these stanzas, however, only address Death's aspect as seen by those still living. Byron had long before

made his last attempt "to seek the things beyond mortality." Only a few lines later, the narrator returns to the dubious comfort of Sardanapalus's skepticism, saying, "There's no such thing as certainty, that's plain / As any of Mortality's Conditions" (9.133-34). This was where Byron's philosophical attitude settled, and with Shelley--Byron's main impetus to deeper reflection--now gone, this was where it rested.

VI.

Conclusion: Sweet Uncertainty

What, then, was Byron's final resting place on the question of Death, its ultimate meaning with regard to personal identity and a hereafter? There can be little doubt that Byron believed in the immortality of the soul in some form. In his journal *Detached Thoughts* (begun October 15, 1821), Byron not only wrote of such with certainty, but also explained the line of reasoning which led him to that conclusion:

> Of the immortality of the Soul, it appears to me that there can be little doubt, if we attend for a moment to the action of Mind. It is in perpetual activity. I used to doubt of it, but reflection has taught me better. . . . The Stoics, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, call the present state 'a Soul which drags a Carcase:' a heavy chain, to be sure; but all chains, being material, may be shaken off. . . .
>
> Matter is eternal, always changing, but reproduced, and, as far as we can comprehend Eternity, Eternal; and why not *Mind?* (*DT* #96 and #97)

This is the attitude one also infers from the poetic speculations in Byron's works. Manfred comes to this conclusion, and one of Lucifer's principal tasks in *Cain* is to bring that knowledge to mortals. Byron's choice of agent for such a revelation is indicative of the conflict the poet continued to experience between the immortality that the head suggests must be so (as in the journal entry above) and

the eternal sleep that the heart longs for (as in Byron's admiration of the epitaphs at Ferrara, see page 18).

As for why Death is necessary, or exactly *what* it leads to, Byron is less assertive, both in his journal (see below, page 77) and in his poetry. This, however, has not stopped students of Byron from inferring certainty from his works. *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth* are the most frequent objects of such misinterpretation. Gleckner, for instance, asserts that, "Byron's clear intent in [*Cain*], it seems to me, is to show that the only final good is death and the ultimate evil, life" (*BRP* 325). However, the fullest treatment of Byron's conception of the meaning of Death to appear in recent criticism has been that of Jerome McGann in *Fiery Dust*.

In a chapter titled, "Contentious Worlds," McGann analyzes Byron's philosophy as a belief in the necessity of a series of falls--a series of imperatives--of which Death is "the fourth great imperative" (268). McGann recognizes this as "the crucial event as far as *Cain* is concerned" (268), and even recognizes that "the play ends without offering any systematic solution to the problems [involved with life, thought, love, and especially death] mainly because the key idea--death--remains mysterious and terrifying" (268). Up to this point, McGann is correct in his interpretation of *Cain*. But the uncertainty of Byron's drama does not dissuade McGann from attributing to Byron certainty in his speculations about Death.

McGann views Byron as seeing Death as a great positive, "a profound and deeply to be reverenced gift . . . eternal rest" (273), without which "life itself, is not fulfilled" and as a result of which "beings born for death, like Cain and Adah, are the moral superiors of both Lucifer and Jehovah" (269). However, this evaluation of Byron's ideas about Death is based largely on misinterpretation of both *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth*. The first of McGann's premises above is based on what we have already seen (see discussion, pages 51ff) is an interpretation of the end of *Heaven and Earth* that, although possible, is by no means obvious or conclusive. "The example of Samiasa and Azaziel," says McGann, "indicates that spirit is not fully capable until it has perished in life, until it has opted for mortality" (269). The second premise above, the moral superiority of mortality, McGann bases on the argument that only man can die. McGann excludes plants and animals from death as easily as he does the immortal spirits:

> The animal and vegetable orders are caught in endless cycles of reproduction and hence are not subject to death. Only man will die, and it is this extreme mystery which establishes his divinity conclusively. Death also "leads to the highest knowledge," as Lucifer tentatively suggests, for when man becomes aware that death is for him a personal event his whole understanding of life must be altered. Once again, the animal and vegetable orders lack this higher knowledge, and so do the beings of every spiritual order. Death puts man beyond all three orders in both state of being and knowledge. (270)

There is much in McGann's statement that a close reading of Byron's dramas either will not support or

directly contradicts. The idea that death does not extend below man in the chain of being, for example, is directly contradicted by the conversation of Cain and Lucifer:

> *Cain.* But animals--
> Did they too eat of it, that they must die?
> *Lucifer.* Your Maker told ye, *they* were made for you,
> As you for him.--You would not have their doom
> Superior to you own? Had Adam not
> Fallen, all had stood. (2.2.152-57)

Likewise, the often repeated phrase, "All die," in *Heaven and Earth* is explicitly extended beyond man in the Chorus of Spirits' proclamation of the deluge to come:

> Where even the brutes, in their despair,
> Shall cease to prey on man and on each other,
> And the striped tiger shall lie down to die
> Beside the lamb, as though he were his brother. . . . (442-45)

Man is beyond the animal and vegetable orders, but it is his *reason*, not Death, which puts him there. If the preceding statement seems dependent on the Elizabethan conception of the Great Chain of Being, I will point out that such a hierarchy is also implied in Lucifer's final address on reason at the end of act 2 (see page 53).

McGann also argues against himself in attributing to Byron a positive assertion that death "leads to the highest knowledge," while acknowledging that even Lucifer (his source for this idea) only "tentatively suggests" it. In his own earlier analysis of *Cain*, McGann himself points out the "deficiencies" of Lucifer as a source of information:

> In the first place he does not always tell the truth. . . . He tells Cain that he knows all things [1.1.300] but he himself elsewhere

> confesses that this is not so. "I know not death," he says just before his boast about omniscience [1.1.289]. (255)

To make such an observation and then to elevate the suggestion of Lucifer to the level of Byron's absolute belief is to build on sinking sand. McGann, however, either does not see or chooses to ignore the contradictions between the philosophy of Byron as he has constructed it and the works he draws on to do so. "All of these ideas are prevalent in Byron's work," says McGann, "especially during the *Don Juan* years" (270).

What is truly prevalent in Byron's later works is the skepticism we have discussed as being basic to the character of Sardanapalus and recurrent throughout *Don Juan*. The same "Detached Thought" that contains Byron's clearest expression of certitude on the question of the soul's immortality also reveals his uncertainty about its ultimate definition and his doubtfulness that man can ever know in this life the "something definite" (*Cain* 2.2.413) to which death leads:

> How far our future life will be *individual*, or, rather, how far it will at all resemble our *present* existence, is another question. . . .
>
> A *material* resurrection seems strange, and even absurd, except for purposes of punishment; and all punishment, which is to *revenge* rather than *correct*, must be *morally wrong*. And *when* the *World is at an end*, what moral or warning purpose *can* eternal tortures answer? Human passions have probably disfigured the divine doctrines here, but the whole thing is inscrutable. (*DT* #96)

The operative phrase is the final one, "the whole thing is inscrutable." I believe this represents Byron's final attitude toward Death, but Byron was many years and many,

many lines of poetry in reaching this view. Even after he had written the journal entry above, Byron still found his pen straying back into reconsideration of the "inscrutable problem." In *Don Juan* XV (written in March, 1823) he openly acknowledged the problem of being drawn toward a subject he would rather avoid:

> But here again, why will I thus entangle
> Myself with metaphysics? None can hate
> So much as I do any kind of wrangle;
> And yet, such is my folly, or my fate,
> I always knock my head against some angle
> About the present, past, or future state. . . .
> (721-26)

The challenge, it seems, for the student of Byron, is not to ascribe to the poet a certitude that he himself never possessed about the answers to metaphysical questions. Probably nothing would be more offensive to the man who so sharply satirized the constricting systems of so many different philosophies and religions than to find himself accused of proffering one of his own. Let us allow "the grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme" (*DJ* 11.440) the "something sweet in [his] uncertainty" (*Sardanapalus* 2.1.263), and if we cannot be content to wait for that knowledge that comes with Death, we should at least seek elsewhere to find it. Agreeing to do so, however, by no means makes Byron less of a Romantic than his contemporaries. Clubbe and Lovell make this point very well, and they chide Abrams for leaving Byron out of *Natural Supernaturalism* by using Abrams's own terms to argue their case:

> to the extent that 'central Romantic ideas and forms of imagination were', as Abrams asserts, 'secularized versions of traditional theological concepts, imagery, and design', Byron, it may be argued, was the most purely Romantic of them all. (*ERTGB* 98)

From alienation and isolation to questions about the nature of "mind" itself, the topics which attracted Byron's speculation were much the same as those addressed by others of his era, but Byron's approach to them was marked by an openness and tolerance that few other men, poets or not, have ever matched. One must wonder, however, why uncertainty about his--or any one's--ultimate identity is *sweet*. The answer is that certitude implies finitude--completeness implies an end. For Byron--as for all thinking men--it is uncertainty that sweetens life enough to make it bearable. As Mazeppa observes, uncertainty allows even the wretch to hope that tomorrow will be "the first / Of days no more deplored or curst" (755-56).

WORKS CONSULTED

Abrams, M. H. *The Mirror and The Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953.

---. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: Norton, 1971.

Bassett, Sharon. "*Marius* and the Varieties of Stoic Will: 'Can the Will Itself Be an Organ of Knowledge, of Vision?'" *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920* 27 (1984): 52-62.

Blackstone, Bernard. *Byron: A Survey*. London: Longman, 1975.

Buxton, John. *Byron and Shelley: The History of a Friendship*. New York: Harcourt, 1968.

Byron, George Gordon. *Byron's Letters and Journals*. Ed. Leslie A. Marchand. 12 vols. Cambridge: Belknap, 1973-1982.

---. *Cain*. *Byron*. The Oxford Authors. Ed. Jerome J. McGann. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986. 881-938.

---. *The Complete Poetical Works*. Ed. Jerome J. McGann. 5 vols. to date. Oxford: Clarendon, 1980- .

---. *The Poetical Works of Byron*. Ed. Robert F. Gleckner. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975.

---. *Detached Thoughts*. *The Ravenna Journal*. 1928. Folcroft: Folcroft, 1974.

Cameron, Kenneth Neill. *Shelley and his Circle: 1773-1822.* 8 vols. to date. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1961- .

Clarke, Isabel C. *Shelley and Byron: A Tragic Friendship.* New York: Haskell, 1971.

Cline, C. L. *Byron, Shelley and their Pisan Circle.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1952.

Clubbe, John. "George Gordon, Lord Byron." *The English Romantic Poets: A Review of Research and Criticism.* Ed. Frank Jordan. New York: MLA, 1985. 465-592.

Clubbe, John, and Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. *English Romanticism: The Grounds of Belief.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 1983.

Corr, Thomas J. "Byronic Ambiguity in *Cain*." *The McNeese Review* 27 (1980-81): 25-35.

Criswell, W. A., ed. *The Criswell Study Bible: Authorized King James Version.* Nashville: Nelson, 1979.

Davis, Philip. "'I leave the thing a problem, like all things': On trying to catch up with Byron." *Byron and the Limits of Fiction.* Ed. Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey. Totowa: Barnes, 1988. 242-84.

Eisl, Maria Emanuela. "Lord Byron and His Religious Pronouncements in *Cain, Don Juan,* and *A Vision of Judgment.*" *Romantic Reassessment.* Ed. James Hogg. Salzburg Studies in English Literature 87:3. Salzburg: U Salzburg, 1981. 26-62.

Erdman, David V. "Lord Byron." Cameron 3: 282-323.

Fairchild, Hoxie Neale. "Byron." *1780-1830, Romantic Faith.* Vol. 3 of *Religious Trends in English Poetry.* New York: Columbia UP, 1949. 388-451. 6 vols. 1939-68.

Frame, Elenor Frances. "Keats, Shelley, and Byron: A Guide to Their Literary Relations." 2 vols. Thesis. U of North Carolina, 1990.

Fry, Paul H. "The Absent Dead: Wordsworth, Byron, and the Epitaph." *Studies in Romanticism* 17 (1978): 413-33.

Gleckner, Robert F. *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1967.

Goslee, Nancy M. "Pure Stream From A Troubled Source." *The Byron Journal* 10 (1982): 20-36.

Guiccioli, Teresa. *My Recollections of Lord Byron; and Those of Eye-Witnesses of His Life.* Trans. Hubert E. H. Jerningham. 2 vols. London: Bentley, 1869.

Hall, Jean. "The Evolution of the Surface Self: Byron's Poetic Career." *Keats-Shelley Journal* 36 (1987): 134-57.

Hirst, W. Z. "The Reassertion of Biblical Views in European Romanticism." *Biblical Patterns in Modern Literature.* Ed. David H. Hirsch and Nehama Aschkenasy. Chico: Scholars, 1984. 73-83.

Knight, G. Wilson. *Lord Byron: Christian Virtues.* London: Routledge, 1952.

Looper, Travis. *Byron and the Bible: A Compendium of Biblical Usage in the Poetry of Lord Byron.* Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1978.

Lovell, Ernest J., Jr. *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron.* New York: Macmillan, 1954.

Manning, Peter J. *Byron and His Fictions.* Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1978.

Marchand, Leslie A. *Byron: A Portrait.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970.

Marjarum, Edward Wayne. *Byron as Skeptic and Believer.* Princeton Studies in English 16. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1938

McGann, Jerome J. *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1968.

McVeigh, Daniel M. "Manfred's Curse." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 22 (1982): 601-12.

---. "'In Caines Cynne': Byron and the Mark of Cain." *Modern Language Quarterly* 43 (1982): 337-51.

Medwin, Thomas. *Conversations of Lord Byron.* 1824. Ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966.

Page, Norman. *A Byron Chronology.* London: Macmillan, 1988.

Perkins, David, ed. *English Romantic Writers.* New York: Harcourt, 1967.

Proffitt, Edward. "Byron's Laughter: *Don Juan* and the Hegelian Dialectic." *The Byron Journal* 11 (1983): 40-46.

Rainwater, Frank. *Lord Byron: A Study of the Development of His Philosophy, with Special Emphasis upon the Dramas.* Nashville: Joint University Libraries, 1949.

Ray, Rhonda Johnson. "The Last Things: Apocalypse and Eschatology in British Dark Romanticism." Diss. Emory U. 1989.

Robinson, Charles E. *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight.* Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1976.

Rutherford, Andrew. *Byron: A Critical Study.* Stanford: Stanford UP, 1961.

Shakespeare, William. *Othello. The Riverside Shakespeare.* Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Boston: Houghton, 1974. 1203-40.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley.* Ed. Frederick L. Jones. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1964.

Stevens, Harold Ray. *Byron and the Bible: A Study of Poetic and Philosophic Development.* Diss. U of Pennsylvania, 1964. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1965.

Thorslev, Peter L., Jr. *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes.* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1962.

Watkins, Daniel P. "Politics and Religion in Byron's *Heaven and Earth.*" *The Byron Journal* 11 (1983): 30-39.

Young, Ione Dodson, ed. *A Concordance to the Poetry of Byron.* 4 vols. Austin: Pemberton, 1965.