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The Byron Society

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The Byron Literary Association was founded in Greece by a group of students in 1868. From 1874 to 1880 it published five volumes of its journal, under the title *Byron*. Meanwhile in London there was a Byron Club (the Hellenic Philo-Byronians) in the early 1870s. Only in 1876, however, does a London newspaper record the foundation, on 22 January at the Temple Club, of the Byron Society. The visit to England of King George I of Greece in 1888, the centenary of Byron's birth, gave the Society added impetus. Its aim was to 'preserve the memory of the cause for which he lived and died in the hearts of his countrymen'. Between the two world wars there was a revival around 1924, the centenary of Byron's death. Canon Barber, then Vicar of Hucknall Torkard, founded a Byron Memorial Committee, on which Sir John Murray, Sir Harold Nicolson, Mrs Doris Langley More and others served. Mr Demetrios Caclamanos, when Greek Minister in London, and Sir Winston Churchill were also associated with honouring Byron's memory. The Society's activities had ceased by the outbreak of war in 1939. The Byron Society was re-founded in London on 22 January 1971. Two years later *The Byron Journal* was established and the series of annual cultural Tours of a Byron-linked country began, with Byron's Italy. The annual series of academic conferences, the International Byron Seminars, opened in Cambridge in 1974. The Society soon took root overseas, and at a meeting in Missolonghi in 1976 the International Council was set up, being a federation of independent National Committees or Byron Societies in many countries. Today the International Byron Societies are represented by National Committees, local Committees or Corresponding Members in over 40 countries. Applications for membership should be addressed either to the Honorary Director of the British Byron Society, the offices and address of which are given above, or to any National Committee of the International Byron Societies, as listed at the end of this Journal.

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Augusta has, Annabella believes, debased discourse so far as to render 'those professions of affection, and even of exclusive zeal for *my* welfare' unworthy of belief. The time for pretending that you, too, enjoy a bit of masking and irony, is over. Irony and masking are pretence, and pretence is lies, and lies are, like versifying – at least the kind of versifying in which Byron indulges – an 'abominable trade'.

He writes, for example, in *A Sketch from Private Life*:

> If like a viper to the heart she wind,
> And leave the venom there she did not find; –
> What marvel that this hag of hatred works
> Eternal evil latent as she lurks
> To make a Pandemonium where she dwells,
> And reign the Hecate of domestic Hells?[12]

The lines pretend to impugn her friend, Mrs Clermont; but Annabella would have no difficulty in reading the lines as her husband writing, by indirection, of himself.

Material from the Lovelace Papers is quoted by permission of Pollinger Ltd, and the Earl of Lytton.

1 Deposit Lovelace Bodleian (DLB) 38, 204.
2 DLB 79, 129.
3 Malcolm Elwin, *Lord Byron's Wife*, 351: this manuscript is not in the Lovelace Papers. It should be between 38, 203, and 38, 204.
4 DLB 88, 12.
5 DLB 88, 6.
6 DLB 80, 27–32: erasures omitted, punctuation tidied up.
7 DLB 80, 76.
8 B.L.Add.Mss. 31037 ff. 22–34.
9 DLB 30, 18.
10 DLB 39, 219.
11 DLB 79, 80–1.
12 *A Sketch from Private Life*, lines 49–54.

Byron's Cain: A Disqualified Champion of Justice

KAO SHE-RU

There is a story about a righteous man who offered to relieve Jesus of his strenuous duty at the confessional for one day. Jesus agreed but warned the righteous man against taking any action whatever he might hear. A rich man came first to confess his profligate life and left his fat purse behind at the confessional. A destitute man arrived after the rich man, spotted the purse and took it away, rejoicing at the thought that Jesus had promptly answered his prayer for sustenance. The rich man returned to the confessional, only to find his purse gone. He accused the only man he found at the confessional at that time of stealing. This innocent young man was wretched, for he was about to miss his ship, being thus detained for a crime he did not commit. Witnessing all this, the righteous man emerged from the other side of the confessional. He easily managed to help the rich man retrieve his purse from the poor man, and the innocent young man finally boarded the ship in time. The righteous man was happy with what he had done. But Jesus said in a gloomy tone, 'Haven't I told you to remain silent whatever you hear? Now see what you have done! The poor man is dying of hunger tonight and the young man will be drowned in a shipwreck. Both of them would have been saved but for your meddling. As for the rich man, he would have returned to his miserable wife with the money gone. But now he is going to waste all the recovered money on gambling, drinking, and visiting prostitutes in one night.'

The moral of this story, which resembles that of Thomas Parnell's 'The Hermit' and whose import would certainly have been familiar to Byron, is explicitly orthodox: God's inscrutable way is higher than man's way. Surprisingly but intriguingly, Wolf Z. Hirst attempts to draw a parallel orthodox moral from Byron's *Cain* in his fascinating article 'Byron's Lapse into Orthodoxy: An Unorthodox Reading of *Cain*'. Pointing out that Cain's indictments of God receive little and weak verbal refutation from the other characters in the play, Hirst argues persuasively that these indictments are powerfully invalidated by the ironic reversal at the end. Making light of Cain's defiant reply to the Angel and further accusation of God after the murder, Hirst compares Cain to Oedipus, a tragic hero who eventually recognises his previous blindness. Hirst observes in the ending an obedient Cain, though admitting that Cain's submission is half-hearted and maybe only temporary.[1]

Hirst's unorthodox interpretation of Byron's orthodoxy in his *Cain* directs my interest specifically to the ending of the play. For all the excellent reasoning of Hirst, however, I agree with David Eggenschwiler's argument in his 'Byron's *Cain* and the

Antimythological Myth' that 'The third act does not justify the ways of God to man; it does not make tyranny or vengeance palatable'.[2] In this essay, I would like to argue that Byron's Cain sticks to his obsession with justice according to his own standard till the end. He insists that the guilty should bear the punishment alone rather than seek absolution by bribing God with innocent blood, disregarding the possible cause or motivation of the sin. It is my contention that the tragic ending of the play actually verifies Cain's previous indictments of divine injustice rather than invalidating them. As Hirst himself acknowledges, 'Even as Byron's ennobled protagonist, a Cain cannot help damning himself for his actions, thus disqualifying himself as the vehicle for the justification of man's ways to his Creator'.[3] This act of damning and disqualifying himself is the corollary of Cain's obsession with his own standard of justice. He remains his own judge and refuses to appreciate God's grace.

The first of Cain's protests against divine injustice is that he 'must feed on [bitter fruits] for a fault not mine' (I.i.79). In this connection, Cain's defiance of the Angel is more than a mere relapse into his previous recalcitrance, as Hirst asserts; it is rather a significant reaffirmation of his former accusation that the punishment for the primal sin falls on both the guilty parents and innocent posterity alike. In addition to their common suffering on Earth and threat of death, the innocent posterity inherits evil from the guilty parents. After the murder, Cain is weighed down by Abel's death, but when confronted with the Angel's reproach of his stern and stubborn nature, Cain inveighs against the unjust heredity of evil. He claims,

> After the fall too soon was I begotten;
> Ere yet my mother's mind subsided from
> The serpent, and my sire still mourn'd for Eden.
> That which I am, I am; I did not seek
> For life, nor did I make myself.
> (III.i.506–10)

In this passage, Cain traces his fatal desire for knowledge back to Eve, whose mind still harboured the tempting serpent when he was conceived. From Adam, on the other hand, he inherits his mourning for Eden, which has moulded Cain's melancholic disposition. Although both Adam and Eve are tamed down with the passing of time, they have passed on these two characteristics to Cain. And it is exactly these two features in his character that have led Cain to the fratricide. Though deeply distressed at Abel's death, Cain places his charges against the couple of primal sinners, who have handed down their curse to their innocent posterity. If only Adam and Eve had borne their punishment alone! What is more, this line of rational analysis shows Cain that God, who planted the beautiful but fatal Tree of Knowledge in the centre of Paradise, is responsible for both the primal sin and Cain's murder. Judging only by the bitter fruit, Cain fails to discern God's so-called 'good will' in all these that the others presume.

In another article entitled 'Byron's Revisionary Struggle with the Bible', Wolf Hirst questions why after all his revolutionary revision of the biblical story Byron still chooses to return to the original fratricidal ending.[4] There is, of course, the Romantic

respect for the Bible to take into account. Or we may assert, as Hirst does, that Byron fails in his struggle with biblical authority in this instance. Nevertheless, this dramatic design of Byron's can also be read as an ingenious reinforcement of the deterministic ambience in Cain's life. According to Cain's own perception, the evil seed has been planted in his mind since his conception. However hard he struggles, it is destined to grow, blossom and bear bitter fruits. Byron's design echoes this tragic fatalism. However different his Cain is from the biblical sinner in personality, however noble and gentle he is, the ending has already been written and resists any revision.

The second of Cain's protests against divine injustice is that God demands sacrifices of 'the harmless for the guilty' (III.i.87). Instead of the jealousy motif in the Bible, Byron foregrounds this problematic issue, which lies at the core of Christianity, and renders it the motivation of Cain's outburst of violent rage. The murder of Abel has long been recognised as the gravest irony of Cain's previous self-righteousness; the safeguard of the innocent ends up shedding innocent blood himself. Byron, however, complicates the possibility of interpretation by deliberately drawing an analogy between the death of Abel and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. As Lucifer earlier on prophesies, God will perhaps 'make'

> One day a Son unto himself – as he
> Gave you a father – and if he so doth
> Mark me! – that Son will be a Sacrifice.
> (I.i.163–66)

The Christ-like submissive and forgiving image of the dying Abel invites the interpretation that his murder is as preordained as the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Cain becomes, in his uncontrollable frenzy, God's sacred executioner and carries out the blood sacrifice that God himself demands. God's will is indeed inscrutable and beyond human power to change, but Byron questions whether God's will is always good.

Cain's composed acceptance of his exile is not an expression of his converted submission or reconciliation with God, either. It is, on the contrary, a breach with God, an ultimate departure from the arbitrary Law of God. Cain's tragic anagnorisis is the realisation of the paradox that he will never regain Paradise without accepting the tyrannical reign of God, whereas under God's tyranny he will never regain Paradise. Cain's exile, consequently, is more or less self-imposed. It marks, for one thing, Cain's eventual renunciation of his already disinherited Paradise, which he has grudged to let go of. According to his own conception of justice, he is now disqualified not only from his just heritage but also from the right of lamenting over its loss. For another, his acceptance of his final exile reveals his insistence on being his own judge. Though retaining the murder scene, Byron cleverly transfers the cowardly intercession of the biblical Cain to his sympathetic twin sister Adah, which is pivotal in undermining the 'tragic reversal' that Hirst suggests. Byron's Cain, as a result of this revision, remains adamant about his own ethical principles. He does not care whatever punishment may fall upon him, whether it is exile or death. He would kill himself in exchange for Abel's

life, if God would permit it. In fact, he welcomes the death penalty and does not appreciate the protection of the mark that the Angel sets on his brow. As he once condemns his sinful parents, 'they sinn'd, then *let them* die!', he now condemns himself, 'let me die!' (III.i.499). The Angel's (or rather God's) protection (or rather prohibition) of Cain from dying exhibits at one level the divine benevolence, but this is again unjust according to Cain's law of an eye for an eye.

Therefore, Cain's law is harsher to himself as a sinner than God's law. This is why Cain calmly accepts his fate, while Adah begs the Angel for divine mercy. Although recognising God's manipulation, or so-called 'God's good will', behind the crime, Cain takes responsibility for the heartrending fratricide, and disqualifies himself from the role of champion of justice as his due punishment. This tragic ending does not annul his previous incriminations of God, but it certainly is a more bitter penalty than death or exile. Cain's renunciation of his heroic role as a champion of justice is more a self-imposed punishment than a submission as a result of disillusionment. In this connection, Cain is indeed 'a direct descendant of Faliero', as Peter Manning claims in his *Byron and His Fictions*.[5] Both Cain and the octogenarian Doge share a common ethical standard of right and wrong, of good and evil. Despite being voluntarily involved in the conspiracy against the patricians, Marino Faliero denominates the intrigue as 'treason' and 'black deeds'. He calls himself the 'guiltiest accomplice' of the plebeian rebels, although he cherishes the hope that 'the consequence will sanctify the deed' (III.i.56ff). He declares to his new ally Israel Bertuccio,

> If we should fail employing bloody means
> And secret plot, although to a good end,
> Still we are traitors [...].
> (III.i.76–78)

Neither Cain nor Faliero succeeds in their defence of justice by means of violence, but we may well infer from 'The Giaour' that both would be burdened with a sense of guilt even if they did succeed. Cain's remorse will be even greater than Faliero's, since it is not his original intention to fight injustice with force.

Lucifer's previous assertion that 'I have a victor – true; but no superior' (II.ii.429) finds an echo in Cain's defiant attitude in the face of the Angel. Being the loser, Cain allows God to 'reign over' him; he accepts his failure and his deserved penalty, but still God is no superior to him in terms of morality in his estimation. Even towards the end of the play, he still refuses to pay homage to God before he sets off for a new domain. Instead, he dedicates the corpse of Abel to the Earth; he says,

> [...] Oh, earth! Oh, earth!
> For all the fruits thou hast render'd to me, I
> Give thee back this. – Now for the wilderness.
> (III.i.542–44)

Presenting Cain as an honourable fighter, Byron exposes the unfairness of the game in which this tragic hero is forced to participate. Here I would like to venture on a simile

from the sphere of the ancient gladiatorial game, a motif that is repeatedly referred to in Byron's works, though sometimes only in passing. Anachronistic though it might seem, Cain is a gladiator who is allowed no weapon and who is restricted by a set of arbitrary regulations drawn up by his all-powerful opponent. What's worse, his opponent never shows up, not even to claim his trophy at the end. He is a Prometheus who is bound even before his rebellion and who is denied any direct encounter with Zeus.

David Eggenschwiler professes that in Byron's *Cain*, 'protest itself has been shown to be an incomplete way of living'.[6] Cain's protest is a melancholy clinging to a grave loss that happened before his birth. The barred Paradise symbolises a void in Cain's life, which is a signifier of multiple meanings; the theme of my topic, 'justice', is only one among them. Just as Cain loiters often around the lost Paradise to get a glimpse of it, he refuses to abandon his own conception of justice in exchange for divine arbitrary benevolence. In his dramatization and revision of the biblical story, Byron denies his hero any possibility of a good life whether he hangs on to the lost love-object or lets go. Paradoxically, hanging on to the lost love-object sharpens Cain's sense of the loss, and it is exactly his clinging to lost justice that forces him to let go of this ideal of his at the end. Sadly to say, having integrated himself with the lost love-object, the Byronic hero forfeits his identity the moment he renounces it.

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1 Wolf Z. Hirst, 'Byron's Lapse into Orthodoxy: An Unorthodox Reading of *Cain*', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 29 (1980), 151–72.
2 David Eggenschwiler, 'Byron's *Cain* and the Antimythological Myth', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 37 (1976), 324–38 (p. 337).
3 Hirst, 'Byron's Lapse', p. 171.
4 Wolf Z. Hirst, 'Byron's Revisionary Struggle with the Bible', in *Byron, the Bible, and Religion: Essays from the Twelfth International Byron Seminar*, ed. Wolf Z. Hirst (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1991), pp. 77–100.
5 Peter J. Manning, *Byron and His Fictions* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1978), p. 147.
6 Eggenschwiler, p. 337.