UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE

FILOSOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLISTIKY A AMERIKANISTIKY

LORD BYRON'S TRAGICOMIC MUSE: EXPLORING THE THEME OF STIGMATIZATION IN *MANFRED*, *CAIN* AND *HEAVEN and EARTH*

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Praha, září 2006

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a pouze na základě uvedených pramenů.

V Praze dne 3.9.2006

Děkuji vedoucímu práce, panu profesoru Procházkovi, za cenné podněty, rady a kritické připomínky a v neposlední řadě za podporu a trpělivost. Jsem rovněž zavázána katedře anglistiky na univerzitě v Bristolu (zejména Dr. Cheekovi, profesoru Webbovi a Dr. Archibaldové) – bez pramenů z tamní fakultní knihovny bych se stěží obešla.

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Abbreviations used in the text:

CHP *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

BLJ Leslie Marchand's edition of Lord Byron's letters and journals, see bibliography

The Unbearable Lightness of Being 'Byron'

Byronic

1. literature of Byron: relating to or characteristic of Lord Byron or his poetry
2. alluringly dark, mysterious and moody (used to describe a brooding and solitary man who seems capable of great passion and suffering)

OED

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim: for it would conduce to a juster estimation of actual poetry, good and bad. There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is expression of *significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done.

T.S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*

Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.

Oscar Wilde, *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*

The general public image of Lord Byron (in)famously amounts to a set of gilded platitudes - the Romantic sex-symbol, the lover of women, men, wine and freedom, the revolutionary suffering the premature death of a true hero - all adding up to constitute the notorious notion of a celebrity, anchored in the melodrama of an exotic life with a tragic end. In short, ever since the phenomenal success of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1812, the poet has been distilled into a rather appetizing cocktail of hyperbole, originating in the theretofore unprecedented cult of personality epitomized by sheer stylishness and daunting eroticism. Thus in the long run, as far as the laity is concerned, we inevitably see Lord Byron join the catalogue of ill-famed idols featuring the disparate likes of John Wilmot or James Dean.

Moreover, the scandalous momentum of the poet's life has continuously been pushing the oeuvre into a shameful shade, the consequence of which being that Byron's work is largely perceived as merely echoing, in fateful chimes, the biographical bane of incest, debauchery, intolerable cruelty in matrimony etcetera - the allegedly numerous moral trespasses eventually resulting in a dramatic fall from grace and exile. Stereotypes conjured out of the bog of Byron's life stifle the voices of the various lyrical subjects whenever they attempt to speak to us across the abyss of time - rather than appreciating the poetry *per se*, we are chasing away the spectres of the ever-haunted and nonchalantly bored aristocrat, the torn hero of the turbulent Romantic era and his hallmark Byronism full of conflicting desires and inclinations, the apostate never reconciled with the world, damned, yet worshipped. As far as the

Satanic dimension of Lord Byron is concerned, it seems a construct imposed upon the poet by his audience, both literary and lay. We shall return to this notion later and discuss its ramifications as far as the poetic oeuvre is concerned. Lord Byron is (mis)taken for a malleable icon[1]. However, beyond the grotesque array of carnival masks from Byron's life featuring the lewd libertine, the philanderer and the *philandros*, there is a brave other world of both the poet and his destined doppelgänger, the Byronic hero – it is essential to bear in mind that 'Byron is a public performer, declaiming on a public platform and always aware of his audience in a way the [other] Romantics seldom were.'[2]

In the context of the English literary canon (as opposed to the generally undisputed glory heaped on the poet on the continent), Byron's place remains ambiguous - critics and scholars have sought to contain him within paradigms spun of dichotomies of the Classical and the Romantic, vowing a vast spectrum of characteristics ranging all the way from the Satanic Byron (S.T. Coleridge, Robert Southey) to the Calvinist Byron (T.S. Eliot, Harold Bloom). It need not be pointed out that there are ample sources of ambiguity in the oeuvre of Lord Byron that have been provoking such disparaging views over two centuries of serious critical analysis, and the dialectic (or rather polarized plurivocity) is likely to continue *ad infinitum et absurdum.* Romantically speaking, it is rather reassuring that Byron will not be tamed and continues to subvert sophisticated systems and ingenious schemes construed of a myriad of seemingly handy -isms (Romanticism, Classicism, Satanism, Calvinism, Manichaeism, Atheism, Egotism, to name the principal few). With his renowned satirical tour de force, Lord Byron would have scorned the *-ism*-ridden critical

[1] As the oxymoron marks a substantial part of Byron's poetry and plays a crucial role, I resort to using it here

[2] Phelps, G.,'The Byronic Byron', in Jump, J.D., (ed.), *Byron: A Symposium* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1975), p.54

posterity as he did disdain his judgmental contemporaries:

> You are a Protestant - you protest against all religions. There is Taafe will traduce Dante till he becomes a Dantist. I am called a Manichaean: I may rather be called Any-chaean, or Anything-arian. How do you like my sect? [3].
>
> Some call me an Atheist, others a Manichaean,- a very bad and a hard-sounding name, that shocks the *illiterati* the more because they don't know what it means.[4]

After two hundred years of being refracted through the exquisite but deceptive lens of his sensational literary creation, the Byronic hero, there no longer exists a distinction between Byron the man, Byron the poet and Byron's literary characters (if ever there was any pertinent distinction). The problem of the tripartite personality seems to have always been there, a conspicuous by-product of the supernova explosion of Byron's fame. Hoisted by his own petard, complaining about the unfairness of the kind of philistine literary criticism which tends to mistake the protagonist for the author, Lord Byron writes in 1820:

> But here - my poetical sins are again visited upon me - supposing that the poem be mine. - If I depict a Corsair - a Misanthrope - a Libertine - a Chief of insurgents - or an Infidel - he is set down to the Author.[...] But of real circumstances I have availed myself plentifully both in the serious and in the ludicrous - they are to poetry - what landscape is to the painter -but my *figures* are not portraits.[5]

Naturally enough, Byron's tactics to divert the attention of the public from

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[3] Allegedly to Shelley, in Lovell, E.J., Jr (ed.), *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p.80

[4] Lovell, E.J., Jr (ed.), *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p.129

[5] 'Some Observations Upon an Article in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (March 15.th 1820)' in Nicholson, A., (ed.), *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose* (Oxford: Clarendon

himself are to disclaim his authorship, hoping his latest creation (in this case the first cantos of *Don Juan*) would then be regarded as a work of art in its own right, assessed without prejudice and biographical bias.

We should nevertheless pay attention to the peculiar wording at the opening of this extract: 'my poetical sins are again visited upon me' - theological overtones, especially those bearing negative meaning, constitute an insistent trait that recurs throughout Byron's writing, both private and public. How very much unlike the nonchalant blasphemy of 'Anything-arianism' recorded by Medwin. It is, however, important to emphasize the fact that religious tenor is typical precisely for Byron's apologetic and explanatory writings addressing the public. Byron's *apologia pro vita sua* presented in 'Some Observations upon an Article in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*' serve as a prime example of such mannered diction. The following passage is even more suggestive:

> I must here observe, and it is at once ludicrous and vexatious to be compelled so frequently to repeat the same thing - that my case as an Author is peculiarly hard in being everlastingly taken or mistaken for my own Protagonist.-- It is unjust and particular.--- I never heard that [...] Scott was identified with Roderick Dhu or with Balfour of Burleigh or that notwithstanding all the Magicians in Thalaba - any body has ever taken M.r Southey for a Conjuror.--- Whereas I have had some difficulty extricating me even from Manfred - who as Mr. Southey slily observes in one of his articles in the Quarterly - "Met the devil on the Jungfrau - and bullied him" - and I answer Mr. Southey - who has apparently in his political life not been so successful against the great Enemy, - that in this Manfred exactly followed the sacred precept -

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Press, 1991), p. 93

"Resist the Devil and he will flee from you." [6]

A regular reader of Byron, acquainted with the basics of the Byronic hero and the satirical exquisites of *Don Juan* might be quite perplexed by the excerpt above: why go out of one's way to prove that a grave religious basis supports the play, that Manfred obeys a 'sacred precept'? Why be so startlingly humourless and puritanical - deeming the devil the great Enemy, with a capital E, in the fashion of devout Protestants? Lord Byron wielding the sacred sword of the Scripture is indeed a rare phenomenon, one might think. Is it a disdainful parody? Strangely enough, it sounds rather like an earnest proclamation, utterly incongruous with the image of Byron implanted in our receptive minds by the traditionally oversimplified *satanic* criticism. What we are experiencing here is another instance of the already mentioned apologetic tone, enriched by Byron's searing repartee to Southey's mockery of the character of Manfred. Byron is quoting the Bible in order to conquer his critics on their own ground – he is consciously using their discourse, exhibiting his erudition and matchless wit. Literary disputes on the open platform of newspapers may be likened to jousting tournaments – with the media instead of horses, and jousting sticks replaced by battering argumentation – parading publicly the wit and the excellence of the competitors. In this case, as practically always, Byron managed to topple Southey off his hobby-horse.

Furthermore, it is important to note that Byron's ardent protests against being identified with his protagonists are 'part of the masquerade'. As McGann aptly observes: 'Because these figures are manipulated masks [...], the poetry lies exactly in the [...] dialectical play between corresponding apparitional forms: on one side the spectacular poet [...], on the other, the various fictional and historical selvings.' 'In

[6] op. cit., p. 90

Byronic masquerade, we have difficulty distinguishing figure from ground because the presumptive ground, 'the real Lord Byron', has become a figural form in the verse.'[7]

Clearly, there is more to Lord Byron than we are taught to expect. According to Gleckner's perspective, impressively presented in *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* (1967), profound existential questions pervade the whole of Byron's poetic canon:

> The most revealing commentary on the poems is the poetry itself, and particularly the evaluation therein of the poet as a crucial, central character, whose prophetic view of the past and of his own time develops gradually into the myth of man's eternal fall and damnation in the hell of human existence.[8]

This premise, though argued in an erudite manner throughout the book, seems too sombre to be suitable for the manifold whole of Byron's oeuvre; an attempt to encompass the irrefutable plentitude of themes and tones present in Byron's poetry within a single scheme of moribund philosophy is simply not convincing once we recall the tongue-in-cheek narrators of *Beppo* and *Don Juan*. Yet, it is a precious work of criticism aiming to trace and describe a persistent poetic voice that sounds throughout the whole of Byron's oeuvre and his life (preserved via his recorded conversations and, primarily, his letters), a 'prophetic'[9] voice that has been, according to Gleckner, for the most part denied, neglected or simply misunderstood. We can critically contemplate his argument that

> [w]hat has put us off is the fact that Byron's prophetic voice seldom

[7] McGann, J.J., 'Byron's Lyric Style', in Bone, D., (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Byron* (Cambridge: Cambridge Unviersity Press ,2004) ,p.216

[8] Gleckner, R.F., 'Introduction' in Gleckner, R.F., *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1967), p. xvi

[9] ' *prophetic* not in the meaner sense of prediction, but in the larger sense of a clear and untrammelled vision of the real. [...] For Byron *imagination* ... was rather the clear-eyed recognition of the nature of man and the world, and, perhaps, incidentally, of the God who created both.' Gleckner, op.cit., pp.300-

> sounds the same from poem to poem. By accepting varieties of tone as automatically indicative of variety of aim, it is plain that we have overlooked the fundamental sameness of the voice's message, befouling ourselves in silly arguments about whether he is a satiric poet or a romantic poet, a poseur or a man of sincere heart and good intent, an artist or a supremely clever dilettante.[10]

The 'fundamental sameness' of the message is an oversimplified notion. Byron's poetic personas and narrators represent a rich variety of contradictory notions – to impose a unifying 'label' of a 'voice of doom' upon the oeuvre means to deprive the Byronic ethos of its humour and to neglect entirely the mechanisms of ironic subversion that pervade it. Though problematic, Gleckner's contribution is important in that it admits Lord Byron into the Valhalla of 'serious' Romantic poets.

Despite the great expectations and efforts of the world's top astronomers, there has not yet been a single unified theory discovered explaining the universe in its entirety - in the world of literature, we can fain expect such a phenomenon ever to occur, precisely because a unified, ratified reading of any text is lethal to literary interpretation; the more theories roam the literary microcosm the better, while the opposite is deemed true as far as the physical cosmos is concerned. Considering the microcosm of Byron's works, the delightful (or nerve-wrecking, according to our attitude) entropy of various theories and approaches creates a prolific climate for further literary analysis and critical study. Thus it is essential, in my opinion, to contemplate the individual works of criticism, where each explains a certain aspect of Byron's oeuvre, collectively, being open to alternatives and contradictions, cherishing the variety of different perspectives that facilitates a richer view of the subject.

In my ancillary reading, the existential and eschatological undercurrents

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highlighted by Gleckner can be contemplated through the prism of *stigmatization*. Though a rather tricky term to use, the topos of 'being stigmatized' represents, in my opinion, a crucial aspect of Byron's literary work, growing out of his life experience. The seeds of stigmatization were endowed to Byron already at his birth, germinating ever since in a series of misfortunes and handicaps (both physical and social) that prevented him from being acknowledged as a full-fledged member of the genteel society. Bertrand Russell depicts Byron's troubled, unequal status as follows:

> In spite of his lineage and his title, he was made to feel himself socially not of the aristocratic society; [...] he was looked on with suspicion. Hence arose that particular blend of snobbery and rebellion that characterized him. If he could not be a gentleman in the modern style, he would be a bold baron in the style of his crusading ancestors, or perhaps in the more ferocious but even more romantic style of the Ghibbeline chiefs, cursed of God and Man as they trampled their way to splendid downfall. Medieval romances and histories were his etiquette books. [11]

Russell renders Byron as being ostracized socially for lacking the grace of noble birth, opting for a slightly infantile solution to his problems – an identification with the fictional heroes of romance whereby he could vent his frustrated desires, breaking all possible rules and bringing about his own 'splendid downfall'. Despite appearances, a Freudian reading of Byron and his work shall not be attempted here; it is far beyond the aim and scope of this study. We shall content ourselves with a note on the significance of Byron's sense of being singled out; a feeling that presumably gave birth to the Byronic hero, later helped to discard this guise and created in its stead the

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[10] Gleckner, op.cit., p.301

[11] Russell, B., 'Byron' in West, P., (ed.), *Byron: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p.33

tongue-in-cheek narrator of *Don Juan*. It is the self-same sense of standing apart (forcibly or deliberately) from the rest of mankind that can be perceived as stigmatization (inflicted by society or by Byron himself). Russell, however, pushes the case much too far, saying that Byron 'could feel himself the equal of the greatest sinners – the peer of Manfred, of Cain, almost Satan himself'. Unnecessarily reinforcing the diabolical stereotype, participating in the narrow-minded strand of the biographical-critical tradition, Russell makes the common error of mistaking the poet for Childe Harold or the haughty heroes of the Oriental tales, completely disregarding the idea of artistic license.

It is the sense of *being stigmatized* that haunts the halo of the Byronic trinity - the trials and tribulations of the man incorporated into 'the lava of the imagination'[12] by the poet and translated, with the vividness and originality of a volcanic eruption, onto the protagonist. This concept of the creative process is, needless to say, limited and schematic and does by no means attempt to subsume the mystery of literary genesis - it merely sketches a possible facet of the problematic whole. The therapeutic dimension of writing, suggested by Byron's rendering of *poiesis* as a way of maintaining sanity[13], draws an impertinent parallel to the genius of 20th century poetry and literary criticism, T.S. Eliot, should we choose to believe that *The Waste Land* was a product of a cathartic creative process. Impertinence aside, T.S. Eliot offers an insightful (if slightly 'Harold-ridden') analysis of Byron relevant to the issue of the psychology of stigmatization:

> His sense of damnation was also mitigated by a touch of unreality: to a

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[12] '[Poetry] is the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake. They say poets never or rarely go mad...but are generally so near it that I cannot help thinking rhyme is so far useful in anticipating and preventing the disorder.', Lord Byron 10th Nov. 1813, in *Letters and Journals*, III, p.405, quoted in Abrams, M.H., *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p.139

[13] 'It comes over me in a kind of rage every now and then... and then, if I don't write to empty my mind, I go mad.', Lord Byron 2nd Jan. 1821, in *Letters and Journals*, V, p.215, quoted in

> man so occupied with himself and with the figure he was cutting nothing outside could be altogether real. It is therefore impossible to make out of his diabolism anything coherent or rational. He was able to have it both ways, it seems; and to think of himself both as an individual isolated and superior to other men because of his own crimes, and as a naturally good and generous nature distorted by the crimes committed against it by others.[14]

Stigmatization, as far as Eliot's reading of Byron is concerned, bears the semblance of the mythical Janus - it is, on one hand, an act of self-recrimination, an outcry of *mea culpa* symptomatically mixed with unseasonable pride and a sense of unnatural superiority, fulfilling the 'diabolical' stereotype of *Manfred*; on the other hand, balancing out the equation of culpability, there is a wronged, oppressed entity, a victim. The fact that the description meant for the poet smoothly matches a pertinent description of a Byronic hero only anticipates one of Eliot's concluding points:

> [Byron] was an actor who devoted immense trouble to *becoming* a role that he adopted; his superficiality was something that he created for himself. It is difficult, in considering Byron's poetry, not to be drawn into an analysis of the man: but much more attention has already been devoted to the man than to the poetry, and I prefer, within the limits of such an essay as this, to keep the latter in the foreground.[15]

Being allegedly faithful to his 'laudable aim' of 'divert[ing] interest from the poet to the poetry'[16], Eliot nevertheless does slide back into the traditional tracks of Byroniana, conflating freely the poet's life and his protagonists. There is yet another crucial point at stake here - the question of the largely self-conjured Byronic myth, the

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Abrams, M.H., *ibid.*

[14] Eliot, T.S., 'Byron' , in Abrams, M.H., (ed.), *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.263

[15] Eliot, T.S., *op. cit.*, p.273

dynamism of what I (for want of propriety) continue to call the *Byronic trinity.* Anachronistically speaking, is this an instance of Wilde's marvelously surreal maxim stating that life imitates art come true? Is Lord Byron enacting the Byronic hero? Eliot's essay certainly allows for this interpretation, revealing Byron as a talented man who greatly indulged in appearances, role-playing and masquerades - 'an actor who devoted immense trouble to *becoming* a role that he adopted'.

Acting *per se* was a famous 'flirtation of the Romantic age.'[17] Beside the obvious enjoyment of juggling with one's identity, Lord Byron's experiments yield a series of grave ramifications. Edward Bostetter analyses the situation that followed the 'hypnotic appeal' of *Childe Harold* in this manner:

> It was inevitable that one so aware of the hypocrisies and self-deceptions of society, so perversely driven to parade his own honesty and to test the mores of society to their breaking point, would sooner or later bring the world crashing about his ears. [...] It was within his own social group, of course, that the adulation became fatal. To look and to act the part of his hero was easy for Byron; he wanted to and society was determined that he should. Soon there was no chance of escape. From acting the role he turned to living it, and he began to move through an increasingly dangerous series of affairs and social relationships. [...] He did everything he could, at least in words, to force society to turn on him in self-righteous hypocrisy and expel him, ... not fully conscious of his motives, ... intend[ing] to taunt ... society... just to the breaking point and no further. [...] It was one thing to have anticipated in imagination the fate he had asked for; it was quite a different thing to experience it. He had been lulled into a

[16] as postulated in the seminal essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1927)
[17] Lewis, R. 'Introduction' to Hogg, J., *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (London: Everyman's Library,

contemptuous sense of security by the apparent willingness of society to accept his rebellious heroes. [...] The moment of exile was the moment in which Byron became one with his heroes.[18]

According to Bostetter, Lord Byron becomes consumed by his own creation, the Byronic hero, his life in that period not only imitating his art, but being possessed by it; 'from acting the role he turned to living it'. Bostetter is too radical, however, in claiming that Byron looses himself in the spacious Technicolor dream-coat of the Byronic hero at the moment of exile. It seems much more plausible to argue that Byron created a construct for public use, a kind of 'Byronic' persona to wear. 'Because circumstances, destiny, or his own will (and it is notoriously difficult to disentangle them) had cast him for a public role, as Romantic mouthpiece, scapegoat and ultimately martyr'[19], Byron employs 18th century mannerisms to enact his public self.[20] His poetry is 'very much 'acted' poetry, with his speaking voice, or, rather, voices, [...] thrown this way and that, almost like those of a ventriloquist.'[21]

On his departure from England in 1816, Byron is stigmatized by rumour and injurious labels. Four years later, in an article published in self-defence and justification, he muses upon the critical point of his life in the following manner:

> The Man who is exiled by a faction has the consolation of thinking that he is a Martyr, he is upheld by hope and by the dignity of his cause real or imaginary, - he who withdraws from the pressure of debt may indulge in the thought that time and prudence will retrieve his circumstances - he who is condemned by the law has a term to his

1992), p.xviii

[18] Bostetter, E.J., 'Byron' in *The Romantic Ventriloquists* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), pp.272-275

[19] Phelps, G., op.cit., pp.53-4; Phelps argues that 'much of what has been condemned as posturing [...] derived from [Byron's] attempt to utilize the Augustan rhetorical tradition in its more baroque manifestations.'

[20] McGann postulates an intriguing thesis in his essay 'Byron's Lyric Style', aligning Byron with Baudelaire and the 'rhetorics of Dandyism'.

banishment - or a dream of it's abbreviation - or it may be the knowledge or the belief of some injustice of the law or of it's administration in his own particular; - but he who is outlawed by general opinion without the intervention of hostile politics,- illegal judgement, - or embarrassed circumstances, - whether he be innocent or guilty must undergo all the bitterness of Exile without hope - without pride - without alleviation. / This case was mine.[22]

The citation above presents a catalogue of different kinds of exile. Accentuating his particular case, drawing the rhetorically structured account in an almost sermonic tone to a climax of self-pity, Byron seeks to incite the gentler feelings of his audience, as if claiming their sympathy and understanding. On the other hand, he manages to avow his exceptionality and, standing apart in a guise of the Byronic hero, he regards himself as the most wretched of all possible exiles, hopeless and humiliated by a thing so ephemeral and hypocritical as 'general opinion'.

Once we venture to explore the topos of stigmatization throughout the oeuvre, we find ourselves going around in a vicious circle - the irredeemably disappointed man, his construct of a dejected poet imprinting a stigma of shame and disillusionment onto a protagonist, the protagonist then becoming a devious doppelgänger of both the poet and any prospective protagonist the poet might conceive of in the future, forever conceptualizing the union of the fictional with the biographical - the exquisite blur of the Byronic trinity. Unraveling such a tangled web of influence would make even Harold Bloom a little anxious, I dare say. Lord Byron is forced to wear the mark of Manfred[23], having first deliberately sported the mask of

[21] Phelps, G., op.cit. ,p.64

[22] 'Some Observations Upon an Article in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine (March 15.th 1820)' in Nicholson, A., (ed.), *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 94

[23] And that of the narrator of the third and fourth cantos of *Childe Harold.*

Childe Harold of the first two cantos. With every new protagonist the chain of Byronic being grows and transcends boundaries of fiction, an endless digression on poetic identity and the meaning of art, history and life.[24] It is the dynamism of 'Byron's quasi-legendary stature [...] which he constructs with great imaginative deliberateness'.[25]

[24] 'Byron's attitude towards the relationship of literature and life, objective and artistic truth, was even more tormented and ambiguous than that of the other Romantics.' Barton, A., '*A Light to Lesson Ages*: Byron's Political Plays' in Jump, J.D. (ed.), *Byron: A Symposium* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975), p.159

A Brief Review of Byroniana Concerning the Plays

The main concern of my thesis in relation to the unifying theme of *being stigmatized* are the poetic or 'speculative'[26] dramas of Lord Byron: *Manfred* (1817), *Cain* (1821) and *Heaven and Earth* (1823). Though the collective term 'speculative'[27] might seem a trifle vague, Marchand's introductory comments are nonetheless valuable:

> Each [of the plays] is in some way connected with [Byron's] contemplation of the mysteries beyond the known and the knowable, with the inability of man's mind to reach out beyond the "clay-cold bonds" of its fleshly habitation, and with the capacity of the mind to compensate for that limitation. Each demonstrates, with varying success, the dual thesis, already suggested in Childe Harold, of the spirit's inevitable slavery to the limited human condition, and the defiant Promethean invincibility of the mind and will. Although all of these grew directly out of personal emotional quandaries, their speculative interest lifts them above the mere sensational Gothic drama of the supernatural, for they touch the human situation at vital points.[28]

The compact description above highlights some crucial aspects of these plays, in Marchand's simplistic view directly proportional to Byron's 'personal emotional quandaries' – man's unquenchable thirst for knowledge, an untamed desire to reach beyond reality, a frustration caused by carnal existence which irredeemably limits the ambitions of the soul, the mind being an instrument of transcendence. I shall expand upon the topic of stigmatization and its employment in the dramas in the following

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[25] McGann, 'Byron's Lyric Style', p.211

[26] Marchand, L.A., *Byron's Poetry: A Critical Introduction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p.75

[27] Byron used the term 'speculative' when describing *Cain.*

[28] *ibid.*

chapter.

With the exception of *Manfred* (and very rarely *Cain*)[29], the mainstream of Byroniana has for a long time[30] rendered these literary feats inferior; they have been viewed as instances of stylistic 'sloppiness'[31] and vagueness of meaning. My quest is not a daring vindication of these plays based on defying already existing criticism. Rather, it is an attempt to delve deeper into the ambivalent substance of these dramatic pieces (dramatic as to not only genre, but also theme and style, the quality of the verse being somewhat unstable and the choice and employment of themes nigh heretic), trying to explore this disconcerting territory of Byron's oeuvre.

The critical posterity of the 20th century is rather dramatically divided when it comes to the plays, covering a whole spectrum of responses from animosity and scorn via virtual negligence to uncompromised praise. As Richard Lansdown rightly observes, 'some middle ground remains to be explored where Byron's dramas are concerned.'[32] Samuel. C. Chew's monograph *The Dramas of Lord Byron* (1915) became a milestone of last century Byron criticism, influencing many renowned critics in their depreciative handling of the plays – the main disapproval postulated by Chew is Byron's 'lack of purely technical training'[33], resulting in formal deficiencies as to traditional norms of plot development (namely climaxes, which are often atypically placed or nonexistent). Chew further notes that

> Byron's dramas ... express a revolt from contemporary fashions; they are concerned with the effect of situation on character rather than with the course of external incident; they are the work of a man who was

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Knihovna anglistiky FF
nám. J. Palacha 2, Praha 1, 116 38

[29] 'Most people of culture have read *Manfred* and *Cain*; Byron's other plays are now almost unknown to that portion of the 'general public' that reads poetry at all.' – opening line of Chew's curt preface to his book *The Dramas of Lord Byron* (1915); in my opinion, this is valid even today, as far as the 'general public' is concerned.
[30] Covering a period from original publication to circa 1970s.
[31] In unison with Swinburne's devastating critique
[32] Lansdown, R., 'Introduction' in *Byron's Historical Dramas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p.2

poet first and dramatist afterwards, they show a lack of technical equipment;[34]

Paul West in his essay exposes the flaws of Byron's plays in a manner almost indistinguishable from Chew's[35]:

> Byron, as ever, is more interested in emotions than in ideas, in attitudes rather than motives, in flourish rather than steady observation, in similitude rather than analysis.[36]

Jerome J. McGann, in his exquisite work *Fiery Dust* (1968), blames the nigh unanimous tendency in criticism on Chew.[37] In the excerpt below, taken from the concluding paragraph of the crucial chapter entitled 'Technique', we can see why Chew's standpoint has been regarded as mainly condemning:

> In a moment of discouragement Byron wrote (LJ. V, 218), 'Many people think my talent 'essentially undramatic', and I am not at all clear that they are not right.' To a great extent they *were* [Chew's italics] right; the merits of his dramas are not those which belong exclusively or even chiefly to dramatic literature. Had the same amount of care and energy been expended in work native to his genius – imagine ten more cantos of *Don Juan*! – the world had been the gainer. But Byron chose otherwise; and there is much worth and wisdom in the result of his choice, worth and wisdom preserved to us though they are through a medium foreign to his genius and faulty in technique.[38]

Influential as Chew's comments no doubt were, it has to be said that he can

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[33] Chew, S.C., *The Dramas of Lord Byron*, p.30
[34] Chew, S.C., ibid.
[35] 'The partial failure of his dramatic exercises is due largely to lack of purely technical training. [...] The action is halted through long dialogues and soliloquies while the niceties of motive are discussed. Almost always the interest of the poet is obviously in the sentiments more than in the plot.' Chew, S.C., op.cit., p.30
[36] West, P. ,op.cit., p.50
[37] 'Professor Chew's observations would not be especially relevant, perhaps, were it not that nearly all subsequent and even contemporary critics have followed his lead in criticising the plays.', McGann, J.J.

hardly be held responsible for other critics' selective reading of his study. Even in the comment above - though being principally critical of Byron, supporting his argument by the poet's own words, and lamenting the waste of Byron's talents on matter as unrewarding as the plays – there is an amending tone that voices Chew's respect of Byron's choice to employ his poetic gift in drama ('there is much worth and wisdom in the result of his choice'). Nevertheless, the vision of 'ten more cantos of *Don Juan*' is to Chew (and many others) infinitely more enticing than the thorny wilderness of the plays. He perceives the 'absolute lack of humour' as 'one of the great defects of romantic drama'[39]. Considering that the romantic authors opted for tragedy, we can hardly wonder at its absence. By and large, Chew's appraisal is for the most part balanced, seeking not to condemn but to objectively analyse the plays, though he be repeating his critique as to their technical flaws ever so frequently. The preface and conclusion of the book speak for themselves:

> [The dramas] are not absorbingly entertaining, but they are provocative of thought. Knowledge of them is essential, moreover, to the appreciation of Byron's entire achievement.[40]
>
> [Byron's plays] offer a serious consideration and reflection of life, of man in relation to his fellows, to nature, and to the mystery that is before him and behind and that wraps him round. ... [They] shed light upon Byron's life and character, upon his non-dramatic work, upon the contemporary drama English and foreign.[41]

There are other fairly recent critics, however, that are utterly dismissive of Byron's dramatic works. Theodore Redpath, in the preface to his voluminous book

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Fiery Dust (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p.205
[38] Chew, S.C., op. cit., p.58-59
[39] Chew, S.C., op. cit., p.29
[40] Chew, S.C., op.cit. 'Preface'
[41] Chew, S.C., op.cit., p.164

which includes a compilation of a comprehensive survey of Byron criticism written by Byron's contemporaries, *The Young Romantics and Critical Opinion 1807–1824* (1973), writes:

> My plan has also involved omitting all but the barest reference to Byron's dramatic works. These works were, however, regarded generally as failures even in Byron's lifetime, and I see no good reason to draw attention to them which would be better bestowed elsewhere.[42]

Generalizing and trivializing comments as the citation above are harmful, because they may influence negatively any future assessment of Byron's plays. It is simply fallacious to say that *all* of Byron's plays were regarded as failures in his lifetime; *Werner*, though generally regarded today as the most derivative and least worthwhile, enjoyed (in Macready's 'considerably cut and modified'[43] version) a long-lasting success, 'keeping the stage until nearly the end of the [19th] century'[44] and was staged almost as enthusiastically in America[45]. On the other hand, to take the opinion of Byron's contemporaries for granted is a mistake – Byron had great expectations for the works that were not appreciated in his lifetime. As he had hoped, *Don Juan* did prove a success in the test of time; the plays have been waiting for a general critical recognition until the 1980s. The quest for appraising the dramas in a way devoid of prejudices and judgmental attitudes is badly jeopardized by haphazard comments such as Redpath's.

It is much more valuable to write about the plays in an informed, unbiased manner, however verbally economic the statement is:

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[42] Redpath, T., 'Preface' in *The Young Romantics and Critical Opinion 1807–1824: Poetry of Byron, Shelley, and Keats as seen by their contemporary critics* (London: George G. Harrap&Co. Ltd., 1973), p.7

[43] Howell, M.J., *Byron Tonight: A Poet's Plays on the Nineteenth Century Stage* (Windlesham, Surrey: Springwood Books, 1982), p.146

[44] Howell, M.J., ibid.

[45] Howell, M.J., op.cit., p.159

> Although *Manfred*, a dramatic poem which approximated to a familiar Gothic mode, developing attitudes already made popular by *Childe Harold* and the verse tales, was praised and on the whole comprehended in its own time, Byron's seven other plays – with the significant exception of *Werner* – proved thorny and baffling from the start.[46]

The 'baffling thorniness' of Byron's plays described by Barton, especially of the biblical dramas and the fragmentary *The Deformed Transformed*, is a major obstacle even today, not to mention the theatre managers of Byron's time. The plays that were produced in the 19th century (*Sardanapalus, Manfred, Marino Faliero, The Two Foscari* and *Werner*) were often subject to interpolation and were staged only after significant makeovers complying to the 'bathetic taste'[47] of the Victorian public. A crucial question arises as to whether the attempts to stage Byron's plays have been at all justified. The polemics is open, even though the vast majority of critics claim that his dramatic output is indeed 'mental theatre', never intended for the stage, but rather intellectually structured, best fitted to be read; in other words the apex of the typically Romantic genre of closet drama. The major predicament of the Romantic dramatists is generally summed up in the critique that

> no one...was able to transform their particular talents and interests from the one medium (poetry) to the other (drama). T.S Eliot, in his essay 'Poetry and Drama', suggested that *a writer who has worked for years, and achieved some success, in writing other kinds of verse, has to approach the writing of a verse play in a different frame of mind from that to which he had been accustomed in his previous work.* [italics mine] ... Byron, more than any of his English poetic contemporaries, undertook the change of approach that Eliot speaks of – with more

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[46] Barton, A., op.cit., p.138
[47] L.A. Marchand's comment quoted in Howell, M.J., op. cit., p.146

> success than Eliot himself, it might be argued. Byron was more interested in writing plays than in seeing those plays produced on stage.[48]

According to most critics, Byron invariably writes his dramas 'for the reader in his library, who must recreate the poem in his imagination'[49]. Hence the plays are seen as relying 'upon the drama of language as opera relies upon music'[50], rather than maintaining their dramatic tension through elaborate plot development and structural composition, which obliterates the justification of producing theatrical performances in order to achieve a fulfilment of their purpose. Traditionally, the more complimentary of Byron's critics scan his plays through the prism of poetry rather than drama, the ambiguity of genre shedding, in their opinion, a more favourable light on the works:

> Because Byron's closet dramas were difficult to produce theatrically, and (with the exception of *Werner*) achieved no lasting success, their production throughout the nineteenth century indicates the desperation of the managers' search for material. But when we consider them as poetry, as their author intended, we may properly appreciate their merits. Despite some inconsistencies of motive, perplexing characterization, and occasional absurdities of situation, Byron's philosophical dramas frequently demonstrate the poet at his best, but they are rarely given appropriate critical attention.[51]

What Margaret Howell regards as weaknesses or flaws of these plays might be taken

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[48] Lansdown, R. *Byron's Historical Dramas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p.228. For a detailed study of Byron's attitude to the theatre and the polemics as to his intentions and ambitions as a playwright see David V. Erdman's essay 'Byron's Stage Fright: the History of his Ambition and Fear of Writing for the Stage' in Gleckner & Beatty (eds.) *The Plays of Lord Byron: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997)
[49] Howell, M.J., 'Epilogue' in op.cit., p.169
[50] Howell, M.J., 'Epilogue', in op. cit., p.170
[51] Howell, M.J., 'Prologue' in op. cit., p.8

for a rather extravagant case of early modernity in drama – the various 'inconsistencies' and 'absurdities' do seem quite valuable once we recall Beckett or Stoppard, for instance. *The Deformed Transformed* especially so, being in my opinion a glorious instance of the post-modern, sticking out, inexplicable and rare, from the midst of the universally melodramatic trash of early 19th century theatre, wittily mocking its fashionable pomp and gaudiness; a 'marvelous fragment'[52].

Other critics daringly see Byron's plays in the wider canon of modern 20th century theatre. Anne Barton claims that Byron, as opposed to the other English Romantics, managed to 'create a continuity between his own plays and the great past of the English theatre.'[53] She even proceeds to a comparison of Byron and Brecht as to their respective approaches to the traditional dramatic genre, analyzing the differences and putting across some striking similarities:

> Byron [like Brecht], was concerned to minimize plot and the excessive importance of the ending, to regard each scene as an independent unit, to replace suggestion with argument, and honour reason over emotion for its own sake. Like Brecht, he wanted his audience to think, not to be transported out of itself into a world of day-dreams and somnambulist repose.[54]

Barton argues that Byron 'even understood about alienation'[55], deliberately depicting the characters in all their 'strangeness' and 'incomprehensibility'. It is invigorating to see Byron being regarded as an eligible dramatist in the context of our time. The posterity of the 'anti-Aristotelian, epic theatre' of Brecht, the experimental, rough staging techniques, allows a more perceptive understanding of Byron's plays.

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[52] Barton, A., '*A Light to Lesson Ages*: Byron's Political Plays', in Jump, J.D. (ed.), Byron: A Symposium (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975)
[53] Barton, A., op. cit., p. 160
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

Their 'simplicity and dramatic atmosphere'[56] establishes the fact that 'unlike the other Romantics, Byron could use the great English dramatic tradition without being overwhelmed by it.'[57] According to George Steiner, the dramas 'are of the first interest to anyone concerned with the idea of tragedy in modern literature'[58]. Steiner goes on to say that Byron was, 'like Aeschylus and Goethe', 'prepared to take grave risks, introducing to the theatre religious and philosophical themes.' 'He was the first major English poet since Milton to conceive of Biblical drama.'

Ever since the 1980s, these works have been taken out of the neglected drawer of Byron's oeuvre and more time has been devoted to an equitable analysis of the dramas on a larger scale throughout the Byron academic circles. I wish to conclude this review of Byron criticism with a pertinent quotation from Lansdown's apt introduction to the plays:

> If we could convince ourselves that...in [the dramas] and only in them was Byron able to find room to express ideas and to discover impulses of no less importance than those which inhabit *Don Juan* – then some of our problems in reading the plays, and therefore some of our reservations as far as their artistic success is concerned, might recede.[59]

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[56] Lansdown, R., op. cit., p.229
[57] Barton, A., op. cit., p.155
[58] Steiner, G., *The Death of Tragedy* (London, 1961), p.201-2, quoted in Lansdown, R., op. cit., p.1
[59] Lansdown, R., 'Introduction' in op. cit., p. 4

When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,

I all alone beweep my outcast state,

And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries

And look upon myself and curse my fate[1]

Being stigmatized

The opening quatrain of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 29* could well be used to evoke some major traits of sentiment and mood recurring throughout the poet's work written during the early years of his exile – the key words are of course 'disgrace', 'men's eyes', 'all alone', 'my outcast state', 'deaf heaven', 'bootless cries', 'curse my fate', evoking ostracism, isolation and melancholy. If biographical reading of Byron's poetry has heretofore been hard to avoid, the formalist task of focusing unconditionally on the work of art and duly disregarding the author becomes seemingly impossible from 1816 onwards[2]. 'The on-going sequence of persecution poems dating from Byron's departure from scandalized England, in which Byron's protagonists are also versions [my emphasis] of his troubled self, prophesying their own vindication in posterity'[3], does reverberate the predicaments of the poet at that time. However, Byron's 'lyric style is Romanticism's dark angel'[4] – the poet employs the Romantic lyric by exposing and subverting its artifice[5]. If we assume that the ultimate Romantic mode, sincerity, is for Byron 'a convention, an artifice of style'[6],

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[1]Shakespeare, W., 'Sonnet 29', ll.1-4

[2] For McGann, the biographical interest 'represents a desire to have the textual scene validated by an extra-textual measure of truth – the emergence into critical or readerly view of 'the real Lord Byron' – that truth, famously, remains elusive.' In McGann, 'Byron's Lyric Poetry', in Bone, D., (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Byron* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.213-14

[3] Cheeke, S., *Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.91

[4] Lord Byron is the 'dark angel of Romanticism' (J.J.McGann's phrase, in 'Byron's Lyric Poetry', p.223) in the sense that he both epitomizes and keeps a distance from the romantic movement – he has a 'secondary and critical' 'relation to his Romanticism' J.J.McGann, op.cit., p.214

[5] 'Byron's lyric style is, in effect, a satire on itself and its cultural capital.', McGan.n, op.cit., p.216

[6] McGann, op.cit., p.216

we have to become conscious of the fact that the 'suffering poet' is also one of the guises Byron wears and therefore it is not altogether plausible to claim that the Byronic protagonists are direct reflections of the poet's personal quandaries, as the majority of his contemporaries presumed, together with quite a tailback of critics since.

The topos of stigmatization is in my opinion one that pervades the whole of Byron's oeuvre, resurfacing also in his letters and journals; but since '[his] is not a weeping Muse'[7], it is not always easy to discern the plaintive voice amidst the fireworks of tongue-in-cheek witticisms[8] - the universe of Byron's poetry is not all that of *Darkness*. 'Stigmatization' can be considered either as a thematic prop utilized in the mock-gloomy, 'Mr. Cypress' part of the 'Byronic masquerade' or as a crucial aspect of Byron's work that helps to facilitate an ironic portrayal of man and this world. In my interpretation, the problem of 'being stigmatized' which is greatly emphasized in the exile writings and plays an essential role in the dramas, originating in Byron's personal experience, yet elaborately contrived to ultimately serve the purpose of exposing the limitations and tragic absurdity of the 'truth-seeking' quest of the Byronic hero, is, schematically speaking, three-fold:

1) The stigma of ostracism inflicted from the outside, escalating the feeling of being branded and wronged – of being a scapegoat. This sense of fundamental injustice is counterbalanced by a kind of self-stigmatization, remorse for indeterminate past sins – the stigma of the troubled consciousness.[9]

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[7] *Don Juan* II, xvi

[8] I agree on this particular point with Gleckner who is convinced that 'Byron's comic and non-comic visions are, at the bottom, always the same vision.'; *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*, p.319 (footnote). I cannot, however, subscribe to one of his main premises, namely that Byron's comic element is 'but a mask for the prophetic voice of doom, which underlies the whole [of his work]', op.cit., p.305. I would rather claim that the 'prophetic voice of doom' is a mask.

[9] There is also the stigma of physical deformity which, though playing indisputably a crucial role in Byron's personal psychological development, is of little consequence for the purpose of literary analysis of the poet's work; the sole exception in my study (and indeed elsewhere, excepting Freudian

The final paragraph of the 'Alpine Journal' of September 1816 is a case in point[10]:

> But in all this – the recollections of bitterness – & more especially of recent & more home desolation – which must accompany me through life – have preyed upon me here – and neither the music of the Shepherd – the crashing of the Avalanche – nor the torrent – the mountain – the Glacier – the Forest – nor the Cloud – have for one moment – lightened the weight upon my heart – nor enabled me to lose my own wretched identity in the majesty & the power and the Glory – around – above - & beneath me.[11]

Here we can choose to see the deep effect of the scorching memories of scandalised England that Byron, without question, felt keenly, rendering any attempt of aesthetic or moral transcendence impossible, notwithstanding the sublime Nature of the Alps; there is no consolation for Byron, the 'Alpine therapy' has failed to distract his troubled conscience from its demons. Or we can propose that the 'Alpine' passage marks the failure / futility of the Romantic ideal of the healing, purifying power of Nature. The beginning of Canto III of *Childe Harold* offers an interesting parallel to this mood of desperation and failure – the dark autonomy of 'the soul's haunted cell'[12]:

> I have thought
>
> Too long and darkly, till my brain became,
>
> In its own eddy boiling and o'erwrought,
>
> A whirling gulf of phantasy and flame (*CHP* III, vii)

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approaches to Byron) is the fragmentary drama *The Deformed Transformed* featuring a hunchback protagonist – a fact that invites at least a brief comment.

[10] I opted for passages from Byron's letters and journals addressing the problem of stigmatization (striking the pose of *Childe Harold* ?), or the thematically relevant passages of *Childe Harold* rather than quoting the dramas which will be analysed in detail in the following chapters, in the hope of providing a larger view of the spectrum of his writings.

[11] *BLJ*, V, p.104-5, quoted in Cheeke, S., op.cit., p.90, with a due note 'This of course is to be like Manfred himself.'

[12] *CHP*, III, v

2) The stigma of mortality – on the one hand the shame of belonging to an imperfect lot which is doomed to metaphorically hang forever suspended between 'Heaven' (or the aspirations of the soul) and 'Earth' (or the inhibiting human factor), being 'half dust, half deity', enacting at best the Promethean dynamics of suffering and defiance, on the other hand the trap of the eternally repeated Fall, where an individual's sins follow the irrefutable pattern of doom[13] - entwined with the stigma of the relentless absurdity of human history twisted in the vicious circle of war and destruction, the 'bloody chaos' of recorded time invoked in *The Prophecy of Dante*. Connected to this is what some critics deem Byron's personal sense of taking on the fate of all humankind[14] - or rather his employment of the metaphor of the Fall of man in the poetry:

> [F]or Byron the human condition consists of a whole series of expulsions from Eden[15] as man's high aspirations and ideals continually and inevitably crumble into the welter of a chaotic and indifferent universe, itself subject to continual acts of creation and destruction.[16]

3) Intimately related to this is the stigma of insignificance of human existence in relation to the wide cosmos. Cuvier's theory of cyclic cosmic cataclysms[17] influenced Byron immensely[18] – hence the recurring theme of creation and destruction forever

[13] '[Despite his strong Calvinist streak], he agreed with Scott, when the latter suggested that Byron's conversion to Catholicism would not be surprising: and indeed *Childe Harold, Prometheus, Manfred, Cain, Sardanapalus,* all have the sense of sin as a central point. Byron felt the constant presence of sin and evil as Shelley, for instance, never did.', Parker, D. *Byron and his World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1968), p.94

[14] 'Byron's increasing sense of his own fate subsuming that of all men'. This, according to Gleckner, is only 'expressed through the public-private voice of the poems, not the private-public confessions of the letters.' Gleckner, p.307

[15] 'In *Don Juan,* Byron creates a vision of the loss of Paradise and the tribulations of a fallen world of experience.' Bloom, H., op.cit., p.251

[16] Phelps, G. , 'The Byronic Byron', p.67; this argument is in concordance with Gleckner.

[17] Baron Cuvier (1769-1832) , *Recherches sur les ossements fossiles de quadrupedes* (1812) and *Discours sur les revolutions de la surface du globe* (1813)

[18] Byron mentions this in his preface to *Cain*: 'The reader will perceive that the author has partly adopted in this poem the notion of Cuvier, that the world had been destroyed several times before the creation of man.' He goes into some detail as to the geological evidence for this theory. In *Don Juan,*

entwined and the concept of the perpetual degeneration of creation[19]. In a letter to William Gifford in June 1813, Byron reveals his views on this subject: 'It was the comparative insignificance of ourselves and *our world,* when placed in competition with the mighty whole, of which it is an atom, that first led me to imagine that our pretensions to eternity might be overrated.'[20]

> [Byron] realised that an infinite universe of innumerable worlds meant the end of traditional concepts, became meaningless and in turn made human life meaningless and insignificant in any terms available to the human mind, and deprived human activity, either of the individual or of the race, of ultimate purpose or end except oblivion.[21]

'What haunts Byron is the specter of meaninglessness, of pointless absurdity'[22]; that is, until he, first in *Beppo* and then in *Don Juan,* finds a vehicle for a full-blown satirical portrayal of the wretchedness and the tragic ridiculousness of the *theatrum mundi*[23]: 'Imagination drops her pinion / And the sad truth which hovers o'er my desk / Turns what was once romantic to burlesque.'[24]

As to the topos of stigmatization, the three above-mentioned concepts do not work on their own, but are incorporated into a larger picture where Byron's satirical Muse reigns, undermining the bleak *Weltanchaunung*, creating ambiguity and tension. 'Admire – exult – despise – laugh – weep, – for here / There is such matter for all

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Canto IX, stanzas xxxvii – xl, Byron imagines the time when 'this world shall be former', again naming Cuvier, this time in the very text.

[19] 'Darkness' is a case in point, conceptualising the transitoriness and mutability of existence, featuring the utter destruction of human values and existence together with the ultimate destruction of the entire universe - a fine, deeply unsettling metaphor reflecting the theoretical concepts of modern astronomy.

[20] Quoted in Bostetter, E., *The Romantic Ventriloquists*, p.261

[21] Bostetter, E., op.cit., p.260

[22] Bloom, H., op.cit., p.258

[23] For a detailed analysis of Byron's deconstruction of the traditional didactic concept of the *theatrum mundi*, see Procházka, M., 'History and Roman Ruins in Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*', in *Litteraria Pragensia*, 7.14 (Prague: Charles University Press, 1997), pp.54-68

[24] *Don Juan*, IV, iii-iv

feeling: - Man! / Thou pendulum betwixt a smile and tear'[25] - Byron's cosmic vision is far from being only a 'desperate paradox' of the 'assertion of heroic defiance as the one positive dynamic left to mankind'[26]; it offers a kind of post-modern consolation in revealing that the potential of a 'fragmented and meaningless universe' 'lies in its very meaninglessness.'[27] Let us briefly examine the dynamics of ambiguity that are at work as far as the three imaginary thematic circles of the topos of stigmatization are concerned. Firstly, exile (or indeed self-exile) may in Byron also be a positive state, not only that of dejection. Exile may stand for freedom or become a means of establishing an alternative community[28]. With a good deal of defiance, Byron ponders the state of exile as follows:

> [...] I recollect [that] Madame de Stael said to me in Switzerland -- "You should not have warred with the World - it will not do - it is too strong always for any individual - I myself once tried it in early life - but it will not do."-- I perfectly acquiesce in the truth of this remark,- but the World had done me the honour to begin the war; and assuredly if peace is only to be obtained by courting and paying tribute to it, I am not qualified to obtain it's countenance.--I thought in the Words of Campbell
>
> "Then wed thee to an exiled lot
>
> And if the World hath loved thee not
>
> It's absence may be borne."[29]

Striking a Byronic pose, Byron calls to mind 'the almost hysterical defiance of authority and asertion of self'[30] that characterizes his literary heroes. Yet, beside 'the

[25] *CHP* IV, cix
[26] Phelps, G., op.cit., p.71
[27] Gleckner, op.cit., p.312
[28] As in *The Island*, with Neuha and Torquil left to enjoy 'such happy days / as only the yet infant world displays.'
[29] 'Some Observations upon an Article in *Blackwood's Magazine*';the Campbell quotation is from 'Lines on Leaving a Scene In Bavaria', stanza 17, ll.5-7; A. Nicholson's notes in *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, p.97

horror and frustration' and the 'frantic search for some inviolable and indestructible element within the self'[31], as in the quasi-confessional mode of *Childe Harold* and *Manfred*, there is also, most importantly, humour. In the new year of 1817, Byron writes to his friend Thomas Moore:

> I was half mad during the time of its composition [Canto III of *CHP*], between metaphysics, mountains, lakes, love unextinguishable, thoughts unutterable, and the nightmare of my own delinquencies. I should, many a good day, have blown my brains out, but for the recollection that it would have given pleasure to my mother-in-law; and, even *then*, if I could have been certain to haunt her.[32]

Secondly, despite his scepticism, '[Byron] placed himself on the side of [man]'[33]. As in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, where the idea that 'man is a rope tied between the beast and the *Űbermensch*[34], an epitome of 'transition and destruction', can be seen as a positive quality, 'being human' is not merely an ordeal in Byron. Byron's Cain eventually prefers his human state to Lucifer's realm of the absolute mind because the latter lacks the capacity for emotion[35]. The characteristic clash between the great Romantic expectations and the flawed nature of man is delightfully evoked in Byron's tragicomical epigram: 'Man is born *passionate* of body but with an innate though secret tendency to the love of Good in his Mainspring of Mind. But God help us all! It is at present a sad jar of atoms!'[36]

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[30] Bostetter, E., op.cit., p.260
[31] ibid.
[32] *BLJ*, V, p.165, quoted in Cheeke, S., op.cit., p.89
[33] Phelps, G., p.71
[34] The concept of the *Űbermensch* subsumes for Nietzsche the man who is aware of the fact that all idealism is fake, who accepts that he is a part of the Earth, who does not refuse his bodily existence but takes pleasure in life – all in all the man who is capable of this 'tragic wisdom'. My translation from the Czech; Stőrig, H.J., Malé dějiny filosofie (Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2000), p.405
[35] Act II, Sc.II: Lucifer: I pity thee who lovest what must perish. / Cain: And I thee who lov'st nothing.
[36] 'Detached Thoughts', *BLJ* IX, p.26

Finally, there is the intimate association to the modernist ethos – the idea that '[Byronic heroes] are prototypes of modern man, wandering exiled and lost in an anarchic universe.'[37], deeming Lord Byron a kind of 'pilgrim of modernity'.

> Byron was also expressing that aspect of Romanticism which stretches back to the Renaissance, to a time when modern man first stepped out of the lost Eden of a secure and unquestioned faith in a merciful God and began his long and lonely pilgrimage into the wilderness of a world 'out of joint' and apparently emptied of transcendental hope. The pilgrimage is, of course, by no means over, and from this point of view Childe Harold and the other Byronic heroes are timeless pilgrims, universal symbols of loss and disorientation.[38]

It should be said that the concept of modernity in Byron does not necessarily need to be connected with meaninglessness – the nomadic inclinations of the later cantos of *Don Juan* combine the relics of irony with the novel element of humour.[39]

As to Byron's poetry *per se*, it 'constructs an artifice of the living poet himself, 'Byron' *in propria persona*', thus creating an intrinsic tension of being 'suspended between belief and disbelief'[40] - an ironic reflection of the state of man who 'hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest, / In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;'. Lord Byron's Man is '[t]he glory, jest, and riddle of the world!'[41], reflecting the wisdom and the wit of Alexander Pope, Byron's favourite poet.

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[37] Phelps, G., p.75
[38] Phelps, G., 'The Byronic Byron', in Jump, J.D., (ed.), *Byron: A Symposium*, p.74
[39] Procházka, M., op.cit. ,pp.117-8
[40] McGann, op.cit., p.214
[41] Pope, A., *Essay on Man*, Epistle II, ll.9-10 and 18.

Manfred: A Dramatic Poem[2]

Dramatis Personae

MANFRED
CHAMOIS HUNTER
ABBOT OF ST. MAURICE
MANUEL
HERMAN

WITCH OF THE ALPS
ARIMANES
NEMESIS
THE DESTINIES
SPIRITS, &c.

The Scene of the Drama is amongst the Higher Alps – partly in the castle of Manfred, and partly in the Mountains.

Schematically speaking, *Manfred* can be read as an ode to the vitality, resistance and intellectual potential of human spirit, while at the same time, (B)ironically enough, questioning and undermining this ideal[3]. The sceptical realization of the eponymous hero that in the end, there are no crutches to be found either in the spiritual or the physical world capable of relieving his misery makes the 'dramatic poem' an elegy on the loneliness and helplessness of the human condition in general[4]. Written circa simultaneously with the third canto of *Childe Harold*, *Manfred* represents a most interesting accentuation of both Byron's style and 'philosophy' or *Weltanschaunung* in the period following his fateful departure from England. Considering poems like *The Dream*, *Darkness*, *The Prisoner of Chillon* or *Prometheus*, all of which were written in 1816, together with the letters from that

[1] *CHP III*, III. 'In my youth's summer I did sing of One, / The wandering outlaw of his own dark mind'; referring of course to Childe Harold of the first and second cantos, the double genitive can be read both as an outlaw who possesses a dark mind or as an outlaw possessed by his own dark mind, as one who is outlawed by his own dark mind. – anticipating 'the soul's haunted cell' (*CHP III*, V.)
[2] Published 1817
[3] This perfunctory simplification neglects the profound depths of the conflict between the discourse of archetypal magic and modern science that characterizes Byron's handling of the Faustian myth.
[4] The 'sad unallied existence' of humanity, the mythological hero Prometheus being 'a symbol and a sign / To Mortals of their fate and force'; from *Prometheus*

period and the 'Alpine Journal' he was keeping for Augusta while on an expedition with Hobhouse in the Bernese Oberland[5], we can argue that Byron was deeply engaged in self-inspection, trying to come to terms with the painful events of the separation and to grasp the full implications of his newly acquired exile. The one question characterizing Byron's writing of this time is that of the autonomy of the mind – in other words, to what extent 'is the 'spirit' of mental resistance free and self-sufficient'[6] (a dynamism of existential doubt which pervades both Canto III and IV of *Childe Harold*, as well as steering the dramatic action of the 'metaphysical' dramas *Manfred*, *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth*).

> If there is a hell upon earth, it is to be found in a melancholy man's mind.
>
> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

In the opening scene, Manfred is sitting alone in the 'gothic gallery' of his castle at midnight[7], leading a nocturnal soliloquy which sets the dismal, mysterious mood of the drama we are about to experience (I shall quote at some length, in order to do justice to the finesse of Byron's blank verse):

> The lamp must be replenish'd, but even then
> It will not burn so long as I must watch:
> My slumbers – if I slumber – are not sleep,
> But a continuance of enduring thought,
> Which then I can resist not: in my heart
> There is a vigil, and these eyes but close
> To look within; and yet I live, and bear

[5] September 18th-28th 1816, in Cheeke, S., *Byron and Place* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.86
[6] Cheeke, S., op.cit., p.84

The aspect and the form of breathing men. (my emphasis)

Considering merely the grammar, we clearly see that Manfred's opening speech is full of negatives and imperatives, signifying limitations and impossibility of action; the metaphysical deadlock Manfred finds himself in is interwoven in the very diction.

Manfred has reached a state of 'total intellectual awareness, but this does not involve emotional response.'[8] This is also the first hint at the tragic failure of the enlightenment project that has been Manfred's life and the devastating moral therein – the quest for knowledge does not yield meaning or satisfaction, but merely grief:

Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most

Must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth,

The Tree of Knowledge in not that of Life.[9]

Manfred's accursed state is revealed in the following lines – the mysterious momentum of the hero's culpability is hinted at:

-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.[10] I have no dread,

And feel the curse to have no natural fear (my emphasis)

He conjures seven spirits representing the elements and assorted powers of the universe, seeking self-oblivion, wishing to forget the mysterious crime he had

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[7] A 'stage direction' that Harold Bloom considers indispensable and symptomatic (of the Byronic hero or gothic drama?): 'The opening scene is as it must be', in *The Visionary Company*, p.243

[8] Mashall, W.M., op.cit., p.98

[9] 'The hero's complaint in *Manfred* that "The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life" (1.1.12) admittedly gives the work a certain scriptural flavor, but, more important, it is enlisted in the service of a complex dramatic policy which transforms a potential Gothic villain into a metaphysical rebel.' Hirst, W.Z., 'Revisionary Struggle', in Hirst, W.Z., (ed.), *Byron, the Bible and Religion* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991), p.81

[10] The horror of Manfred's unknown crime is later reflected in the song of the Seventh Spirit, of 'the star which rules [his] destiny', highlighting the hero's affiliation to macrocosmic order: 'Space bosom'd not a lovelier star' till '[t]he hour arrived – and it became / A wandering mass of shapeless flame, / A pathless comet, and a curse, / The menace of the universe'. (my emphasis)

committed (causing the death of Astarte, his beloved (and) sister, as we are to discover much later). The spirits scorn Manfred's mortality, but are tamed by the immense magic powers of his 'mind' and 'spirit, the Promethean spark / the lightning of [his] being'. Alternatively, it can be argued that Manfred is immersed in a self-conjured reality, all the spiritual characters being projections of his troubled psyche, hence there is no real conflict or opposition; the avowal of 'the Promethean spark' would then be bathetic. The spirits offer Manfred '[k]ingdom, and sway, and strength, and length of days'[11], which he scornfully rejects[12] – a crucial departure from the Faust story[13]. The mightiest of them, the spirit of his doomed star, assumes the likeness of Astarte; Manfred tries to embrace her and falls senseless when she disappears, whereupon a dreadful curse is chanted over him[14]:

> [...]
>
> Though thy slumber may be deep,
>
> Yet thy spirit shall not sleep;
>
> There are shades which will not vanish,
>
> There are thoughts thou canst not banish.

Invoking the exacerbating power of the unconscious, the curse condemns Manfred to the never-ending trial of bad conscience, the torture of sleeplessness and 'enduring

[11] *Manfred*, Act I, Sc.1, p.382

[12] 'Accursed! what have I to do with days? / They are too long already.', *Manfred*, Act I, Sc.1, ibid.

[13] 'What matters is [Byron's] insistence that his own Faust could not possibly make a compact with the Devil, that at the end he would brush away the agents of Hell like so many blue-bottles and walk into the next world, tormented and self-destroyed, but a free spirit. Wild and wooly and self-indulgent though it is, as Byron well knew, *Manfred* nevertheless achieves a powerful effect by defeating certain expectations generated by the Faust legend in all its earlier forms.' Barton, A., op. cit., p.155; the question remains whether Manfred is a 'free spirit' after his death – a contradictory reading of the ending suggests that his defiance is merely a declaration of freedom, his death marking the ultimate failure of that imagined freedom [Procházka, M. on *Manfred* in Procházka, M., and Hrbata, Z., *Romanticism and Romanticisms: Concepts, Currents, Contexts* (Praha: Karolinum, 2005), p.45]

[14] Interestingly, the curse or 'Incantation' was first published in 1816 in a volume with *The Prisoner of Chillon and Other Poems*, composed originally as a bitter reproach to Lady Byron, venting Byron's frustration and indignant anger at the infamous separation.

thought'[15]. In addition, he is identified with the accursed line of Cain and doomed to be 'the wandering outlaw of his own dark mind':

> And by thy brotherhood of Cain,
>
> I call upon thee! and compel
>
> Thyself to be thy proper Hell!

Manfred is thus sentenced to an ageless existence, with only his troubled but excruciatingly rational mind for company, being denied the mercy of madness. 'It is his punishment to have to live in a world of fiction, simulacra and phantasms which he himself had created.'[16] The principle of the autonomous mind is critically undermined here, revealing possible limitations of that ideal(istic) concept. Byron was very much aware of the danger that instead of soaring to intellectual transcendence, 'the concentred self would merely descend into solipsism or madness'[17] – *Manfred* is a case in point, staging a one-man drama of a tormented titanic mind.

Scene II reveals Manfred 'alone upon the Cliffs' of the Jungfrau in the morning hours, bewailing his accursed state and musing upon the futility and fragility of human existence in another famous soliloquy:

> I lean no more on superhuman aid;
>
> It hath no power upon the past, and for
>
> The future, till the past be gulf'd in darkness,
>
> It is not of my search.[18] – My mother Earth!

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[15] echoing Macbeth's quandaries of bad conscience resulting in insomnia.

[16] Procházka, M., 'The Illusion of Nature, Experience and Science in Byron's Poetry: Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Manfred*', in Procházka, M. and Hrbata, Z., *Romanticism and Romanticisms: Concepts, Currents, Contexts* (Prague: Karolinum, 2005); my translation from the Czech

[17] Cheeke, S., op.cit., p.85

[18] In a letter to Annabella, Byron addresses the question of the meaning of life and the issue of eternity as follows: 'Why I came here, I know not. Where shall I go to, it is useless to enquire. In the midst of myriads of the living and the dead worlds – stars – systems – infinity – why should I be anxious about an atom?' (my emphasis – again we see Byron's scepticism about the importance of an individual's fate in the wide macrocosm. The influence of Cuvier's theories of cyclic cosmic cataclysms is made very much conspicuous here.); *BLJ*, III, p.42

And thou fresh breaking Day, and you, ye Mountains,

Why are ye beautiful? I cannot love ye.

Manfred's refuses transcendence and the quest for the meaning of life, 'it is not of [his] search'. His inability to feel, to experience emotionally the beauty of nature renders the world around him meaningless, despite all its magnificence. 'He has become Self without motive, presumably the inevitable conclusion of intellectual Man, who by his very nature is isolated from all about him'[19]

Manfred continues to muse on the nature of man and his place in the universe:

How beautiful is all this visible world!

How glorious in its action and itself!

But we, who name ourselves its sovereigns, we,

Half dust, half deity, alike unfit

To sink or soar, with our mix'd essence make

A conflict of its elements, and breathe

The breath of degradation and of pride,

Contending with low wants and lofty will,

Till our mortality predominates,

This is a crucial passage which evokes a central aspect of the moral of *Manfred*[20], laying bare Byron's own contemplation on the 'sad jar of atoms' that he considered man to be. It echoes both the melancholy monologues of Hamlet (man being 'a quintessence of dust' in 'a sterile promontory') and the most famous passage of Pope's *Essay on Man*:

Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state,

A being darkly wise, and rudely great

[19] '...and in whose being itself the unity of his intellectual Truth with moving Beauty and Goodness is beyond possibility.' Marshall, W.H., op.cit., p.101; I agree with the first half of this statement only, the latter half quoted here seems a trifle too pessimistic and limiting.

....

He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest,

In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;

In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer,

Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;

....

Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus'd;

Still by himself abus'd, or disabus'd;

Created half to rise, and half to fall; (from Epistle II; emphasis mine)

The above-mentioned soliloquy represents an apex of despair for Manfred, a convulsion of melancholy he feels on behalf of all humanity - our flesh-bound existence prevents us from achieving the noble aims of the mind, 'our mix'd essence' holds us in a check-mate situation, suspended between heaven and earth, 'alike unfit to sink or soar'. Herein lies one of the thematic gravitational centres of the dramatic poem, evoking the meaninglessness of life without emotion, without love.

Manfred continues unavailingly in his speech, wishing to shed the burden of physical existence and rejoice in the desired Ariel-like harmony of bodiless being:

> Oh that I were
>
> The viewless spirit of a lovely sound,
>
> A living voice, a breathing harmony,
>
> A bodiless enjoyment – born and dying
>
> With the blest tone which made me!

The therapeutic concept of 'thought seek[ing] refuge' in the 'soul's haunted cell' is echoed here: 't'is to create and in creating live / A Being more intense, that we endow

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[20] The moral of Manfred is far more complex, involving the question of the empirical existence of nature and the question of ethics independent of the orthodox Christian doctrine of Sin.

/ With form our fancy'.[21] Manfred is 'grown old in this world of woe / In deeds, not years, piercing the depths of life'[22].

The metaphysical speech of Manfred which ends in attempted suicide is put into sharp contract with the simply practical, good-willed attitude of the Chamois Hunter, who seizes Manfred just as the latter is about to hurl himself down from the edge of the cliff with the symptomatically scientific-secular outcry of pathos: 'Earth, take these atoms!'.

The first scene of Act II shows Manfred and the Chamois Hunter in a 'cottage in the Bernese Alps'. The Chamois Hunter unwittingly identifies the dualistic problem of Manfred, observing: 'Thy mind and body are alike unfit / To trust each other'. Manfred is recuperating, but starts in horror on looking at a cup of wine: 'There's blood on the brim!', perceiving the symbol, pursuing the association of his tortured mind rather than ordinary reality – the gulf between the straightforward hunter and the obscure character of Manfred as to their perception of and place in the world is accentuated here and so is Manfred's 'oppressive sense of guilt'[23]. The hero speaks in broken images about the incestuous guilt of the past, revealing as much as his 'embrace was fatal'. The scene is rich in *Macbeth* allusions (namely the banquet scene, where a cup of wine plays a similar role, revealing the culpability of the main protagonist in his violent reaction to a purple stain on a goblet[24]).

Scene II encompasses Manfred's meeting with the Witch of the Alps, a 'Shelleyan-Wordsworthian spirit of nature and Ideal Beauty'[25]. He conjures the Witch

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[21] *CHP*, III ,vi
[22] *CHP*, III, v
[23] Marchand, L.A., op.cit., p.79
[24] For detailed comparison, see Richardson, A., op.cit., p.138
[25] Bostetter, E., op.cit., p.279; similarly, she is identified as a 'Shelleyan spirit of natural beauty' in Bloom, H., *The Visionary Company*, p.244

in a cataract which reminds him of the 'giant steed of the Apocalypse'[26]. She recognizes him for being 'a man of many thoughts, / And deeds of good and ill, extreme in both, / Fatal and fated in [his] sufferings'. Manfred confesses to the Witch, revealing all in all the most comprehensive version of the story of his past, together with a supremely Romantic self-characterization:

> [...] 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.

Harold Bloom perceives this as 'an idealized history of the outcast Romantic poet'[27], while Leslie Marchand considers it 'an autobiographic statement'[28]. I tend to appreciate it as a mixture of the two readings, as a romantically idealized autobiographic statement in the fashion of Byron's poetic voice in the third and fourth cantos of *Childe Harold.*

What follows is Manfred's poignant account of Astarte, whom he portrays as a twin, possibly an alter-ego or a gentler, humane self:

> She was like me in lineaments; her eyes,
> Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone
> Even of her voice, they said were like to mine;
> But soften'd all, and temper'd into beauty:
> ... ...

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[26] the pale steed is that of Death in The Apocalypse
[27] Bloom, H., op.cit., p.244

Her faults were mine – her virtues were her own –

I loved her, and destroy'd her!

[...] Not with my hand, but heart, which broke her heart;

Manfred's love for Astarte has been rendered 'narcissistic' for obvious reasons; the mysterious circumstances of her death continue to haunt Manfred – he 'lives in the shadow of the past which destroys his ability to enjoy life'[29]. The Witch offers help on the condition that Manfred swear obedience to her will, which he scornfully rejects[30]. Yet another Hamlet- or Macbeth-like[31] soliloquy ensues, wherein Manfred ponders the pathetic order of mankind:

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.

Voicing unbearable remorse for Astarte, Manfred decides to try the 'last resource', namely to 'call the dead, / and ask them what it is we dread to be'. Brazened enough 'to champion human fears', he exits and leaves the stage to a supernatural summit of The Three Destinies and Nemesis taking place 'on the summit of the Jungfrau' (Scene III), an echo of the three witches' gathering in *Macbeth*.

The ultimate scene of Act II takes us to the dreaded underworld, the 'Hall' of the Zoroastrian evil principle Arimanes. Manfred, having offended the court of spirits by being made of 'condemned clay', braves the throes of Manichaean hell, refuses to pay homage to Arimanes and remains defiant and strong (yet another hint that the entire dramatic action is governed by self-conjured phantasms). He posits himself on

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[28] Marchand, L.A., op.cit., p.79

[29] Wang, Shou-ren, 'Lord Byron: Closet Drama' in Wang, *The Theatre of the Mind: A Study of Unacted Drama in 19th Century England* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p.23

[30] Some critics speculate that the rejection is a symbol of Byron's unwillingness to submit to either the Shelleyan or the Wordsworthian system of aesthetic thought.

the same level as the spirits and even Arimanes, whom he bids to bow 'to that which is above him / the overruling Infinite – the Maker / who made him not for worship'. Recognized by the 'First Destiny' as a man 'of no common order', 'his sufferings hav[ing] been of an immortal nature', Manfred asks the spirits to call Astarte, pining for presence, seeking her forgiveness or condemnation. A mere phantom arises; the real Astarte 'belongs to the other powers'[32]. Manfred entreats her to speak, but receives only a haunted 'Manfred!' in reply, together with a prophecy: 'To-morrow ends thine earthly ills!'. He overcomes the paroxysm that seizes him on Astarte's disappearance, gaining respect from the spirits, who once again associate him with the super-human, immortal order: 'he mastereth himself, and makes / Torture tributary to his will. / Had he been one of us, he would have made / An awful spirit.' The fact that the various adverse spirits unanimously comply to Manfred's will is presented as the victory of his daunting mind - it can, however, equally be read as signalizing the hero's utter immersion in solipsistic simulacra, the only possible way of eventual escape from this conundrum of spirits being death.

Act III takes us back to Manfred's castle. The four short scenes introduce a number of lesser characters - the Abbot of St.Maurice and two of Manfred's servants, whose narrative of the dramatic event of Astarte's death is interrupted by the appearance of the Abbot, so that the full account is never revealed[33]. Manfred refuses the Abbot's consolation and his attempts to curb the hero's misery and save his life by introducing Christian doctrine. He addresses his farewell to the sun[34] - the '[g]lorious orb', '[t]he earliest minister of the Almighty', the 'material God', the 'monarch of the

[31] 'What a piece of work is man…' of Hamlet; or 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow / creeps at its petty pace from day to day / to the last syllable of recorded time […] Life's but a poor player that struts and frets his hour / upon the stage and then is heard no more…' of Macbeth.
[32] i.e. the powers of Good
[33] Interrupted narrative is another topos linking the dramatic poem to *Hamlet.*
[34] Linking himself yet again to macrocosm rather than humanity

climes' - in a moving apostrophe: 'Fare thee well! / I ne'er shall see thee more. As my first glance / Of love and wonder was for thee, then take / The last look; thou wilt not beam on one / To whom the gifts of life and warmth have been / Of a more fatal nature.'

The opening of the final scene in the tower presents Manfred's last great soliloquy, recalling his memory of the Coliseum in the moonlight chiaroscuro[35]. The Abbot interrupts this reverie, attempting once more to bring Manfred back to the safe haven of orthodox Christianity. Demons appear, among them the 'genius of [Manfred]', beckoning him to come away with them. The Abbot's endeavour to chase these away is met with condescending pity: 'Old man! / We know ourselves, our mission and thine order; / Waste not thy holy words on idle uses, / It were in vain.' Manfred has to fight the ultimate battle for his soul alone – a final mock-victory of a self-sufficient, yet excruciatingly tortured mind:

> Must crimes be punish'd but by other crimes,
>
> And greater criminals? – Back to thy hell!
>
> 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;
>
> <u>The mind which is immortal makes itself</u>
>
> <u>Requital for its good or evil thoughts, -</u>
>
> <u>Is its own origin of ill and end</u>
>
> <u>And its own place and time</u> (emphasis mine)
>
> … … …

[35] The memory triggers an emotional reaction - it is, however, yet another phantasm presenting history as a moral authority. Procházka, M., op.cit., p.44. For a detailed analysis of the Coliseum scene in relation to the theme of nostalgia and history, see Cheeke, S., op.cit., p.86-7.

I have not been thy dupe, nor am thy prey –

But was my own destroyer, and will be

My own hereafter.

The curse of the spirits in Act I compels '[Manfred] to be [his] proper Hell'[36] . This of course rings the Miltonian bells of Satan's famous soliloquy 'the mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n' of the first book of *Paradise Lost*, but also his conclusion 'myself am Hell' of Book IV.[37] In the last scene of *Manfred*, the evil spirit is compelled back to his hell, while the mind is held as the fortress of independent, bold selfhood; yet another crucial emphasis of the difference of Manfred from his 'godfather' Faust. The punishment or the reward is inherent in the immortal mind; it does not need a judge or a saviour from without. By defying the demons, Manfred exemplifies 'the final transcendence of the indomitable mind'[38]. The ethics of *Manfred*, its 'whole effect and moral'[39], were according to Byron inherent in the hero's last utterance – Manfred's dismissive dying words to the abbot: 'Old man! t'is not so difficult to die.'[40]

Harold Bloom comprehends Manfred's death as 'a release, not a damnation'[41], claiming that 'the burden of his consciousness has long been his punishment.'[42] Despite being prone to criticism due to the nigh burlesque 'self-aggrandizement of the romantic ego'[43], the ethos and denouement of the dramatic poem (plus Manfred's final words) can be read as looming large in the Promethean context – Manfred

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[36] *Manfred*, Act I, Sc.1, p.383
[37] Richardson, A., op.cit., p.138
[38] Marchand, L.A., op.cit., p.83
[39] in the poet's own words
[40] Byron was furious with Murray when Manfred's crucial final line was on Gifford's recommendation left out in the first edition.
[41] Bloom, H., op.cit., p.246
[42] Ibid.
[43] Marchand, L.A., op.cit., p.84

arguably 'has the Promethean satisfaction of having asserted the supremacy of the human will over everything natural and preternatural that would oppose it'[44].

> [...] And a firm will, and a deep sense,
>
> Which even in torture can descry,
>
> Its own concentr'd recompense,
>
> Triumphant where it dares defy,
>
> And making Death a Victory.[45]

Nevertheless, the subtext of the 'bold recognition of the mind's limitations'[46] makes *Manfred* a useful memento of the trap the Romantic poet might collapse into – a 'solipsistic universe'[47]:

> In Manfred, Byron models an asocial, isolated, heroic selfhood of titanic proportions only to underscore its limitations. The failure of dramatic action does not so much compromise as constitute the fragmented tragic trajectory followed by the work and its hero.[48]

The immedicable soul, with heart-aches ever new

(*CHP IV*, cxxvi)

Manfred represents a milestone in Byron's writing after his departure from England in April 1816. It can be seen as a culmination of the *Weltschmerz* and adamant independence characteristic of the Byronic hero. Byron was even jokingly apologetic about it being 'too much in [his] old style'[49]. It is important to note that all of Byron's dramatic work was written in exile – signifying a studious effort of the

[44] Bloom, H., op.cit., p.246
[45] Byron, the ultimate lines of 'Prometheus'
[46] Marchand, L.A., op.cit., p.84
[47] Marshall, W.H., op.cit., p.103
[48] Richardson, A., op.cit., p.139
[49] And he continues '...I certainly am a devil of a mannerist and must leave off; but what could I do? Without exertion of some kind, I should have sunk under my imagination and reality.', *BLJ,* IV,p. 71

poet to seek new forms of expression (arguably a part of his overall attempt to banish the debacle of the recent past from his mind and start anew).

Despite being the first attempt to fulfil the poet's fervent wish to 'reform the [deteriorated, vulgarized] stage'[50] and put his radical, highly unfashionable regard for the neo-classical dramatic unities into practice[51], *Manfred* did gain some positive feedback even from some of Byron's contemporaries[52] and remains to be the only one of the total of eight dramas[53] to have continually been recognized as belonging to the best of Byron's poetic output.

Byron describes the piece for the very first time in a letter to his publisher John Murray as 'a kind of Poem in dialogue (in blank verse) or drama ... of a very wild – metaphysical – and inexplicable kind'[54]. Other, slightly altered notions as to the genre and composition of the dramatic work follow during the next few months – 'the very Antipodes of the stage'[55] or 'a sort of mad drama, for the sake of introducing the Alpine scenery in description [...] Almost all the *dram. pers.* are spirits, ghosts, or magicians, and the scene is in the Alps and the other world, so you may suppose what a Bedlam tragedy it must be.'[56]

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[50] Byron's famous appeal addressed to Sheridan in his first satirical work *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809): Heavens! is all sense of shame and talent gone? / Have we no living bard of merit? – none! [...] Give, as thy last memorial to the age, / One classic drama, and reform the stage. (ll.576-7 and 584-5). In 1812, Byron repeats his indignation over the state of the English stage in the 'Address Spoken at the Opening of Drury-Lane Theatre', this time prophesizing a brighter future.
For a detailed account and analysis of theatrical culture in 19th century England see e.g. Nicoll, A., *A History of English Drama: 1660-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955)
[51] 'It has been my object to be as simple and severe as Alfieri.' (an Italian neoclassical playwright much admired by Byron), *BLJ*, VIII, p.152
[52] namely Walter Scott and Goethe, for instance
[53] *Manfred* 1817, *Marino Faliero*, *Sardanapalus*, *The Two Foscari*, *Cain* 1821, *Werner* 1822, plus the (arguably) unfinished *Heaven and Earth* 1822 and the fragmentary *The Deformed Transformed*, 1824.
[54] Venice 15th February 1817, *BLJ*, V, p.170
[55] *BLJ*, V, p.194
[56] Again to Murray, *BLJ*, V, p.188

The critical assessment of the 'dramatic poem' is variegated, symptomatically – apart from the customary 'Satanic', 'Miltonic', 'Faustian'[57] and 'Promethean' labels, *Manfred* has been attributed evaluations such as the 'quintessence of the Byronic-Romantic quandary' or 'Childe Harold in his most uncompromising mood and essence'[58], a 'choric drama'[59] or a 'witch-drama and farce'[60]. Bearing in mind the melodramatic legacy of Gothic drama and its abundance in spectacular witchcraft from which *Manfred* undoubtedly also draws inspiration, we may certainly find elements of the burlesque there. It is, however, the combination, as elsewhere (or indeed everywhere) in Byron, of the serious core and the light-hearted ornament that yields the most intriguing fruit.[61]

Some critics claim that all the supernatural characters are in fact mere projections of Manfred's troubled psyche; hence they cannot give any absolution to Manfred who cannot forgive himself. I can but concur that '*Manfred* deals more with reaction than action'[62] and it is certainly plausible to regard all of the characters as 'conceptual figures'[63] – the Abbot standing for traditional Christianity etc.

Considering the biographical context and the association of the piece with other tormented visions in Byron's poetry of 1816-1817, my reading of *Manfred* comes closest to rendering it a 'psycho-biographical drama'[64]. It 'clearly emerges

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[57] Rather than linking it to the Faustian legend and the moral dilemma of devil worship, *Manfred* might be called Faustian in the sense of developing/subverting Goethe's *Faust*. Manfred significantly refuses to accept any favours offered by the supernatural world in exchange for their leverage over him. He gains knowledge only at the price of his own suffering; he never becomes anybody's minion.

[58] Marchand, L.A., Byron's Poetry: A Critical Introduction (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p.78-9
[59] Howell, M., op.cit., p.94
[60] as far as the Victorian theatre was concerned. Ibid.
[61] A subjective note - I cannot but think of Mozart's *Fantasia in F Minor*, a marvellously complex piece written for a mechanical organ, featuring both an homage to Bach's noble, solid art of the fugue and the fashionable hallmark ornaments of Mozart himself; a piece both deeply and acutely felt, yet enticingly playful – the combination resulting in a surprisingly modern, intense whole.
[62] Richardson, A., 'Byron and the Theatre', in Jump, J.D., (ed.), *Byron: A Symposium*, p.137
[63] Wang, op.cit., p.22
[64] Cheeke, S., op.cit., p.85

from a period of psychological torment, taking this as a subject'[65]. 'Manfred is overtly personal, and is meant as a despairing triumph of the self, and a denial of the efficacy of even a Titanic purgation.'[66] Biographical reading of *Manfred* is desirable, but only to a certain extent; it is of no practical use to go identifying Astarte with Augusta or Mary Chaworth and reduce the dramatic poem into a pathetically direct confession of Byron's alleged incest[67].

The topos of stigmatization in *Manfred* is directly proportional to the hero's sense of superiority. Rearranging the story in a chronological pattern, Manfred is first a kind of self-exile by choice, having perceived early on that '[his] spirit walk'd not with the souls of men, / Nor look'd upon the earth with human eyes'; '[his] joys, griefs, passions, and [his] powers, / Made [him] a stranger'. The sense of being marked out from the rest of humanity, of being superior, embracing the knowledge of the cosmic spheres as a contented earthly exile in transcendence, was, ironically enough, inverted by the tragic event of Astarte's death – from 'that all nameless hour' onwards, Manfred's deliberate self-exile is transposed into a cacophony of guilt-ridden melancholy. The dissociation from mankind becomes, in addition, ambivalent – Manfred still takes pride in being elevated beyond the 'common order', but through the intense agony inflicted upon him by his sense of guilt, he becomes an emblem of the imperfectability of mankind, echoing the theme of the Fall which recurs in Byron's dramas. In other words – from the sense of being marked out by his superior talents, he is converted into an individual stigmatized by 1) his own moral culpability

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[65] Cheeke, S., op.cit, p.89. // Going a little further, another critic claims that '*Manfred* is the drama in which Byron symbolically works his way through to mental sanity, to the psychological perspective that made *Don Juan* possible. [...] It is a therapeutic drama into which Byron pours all of the pent-up, confused, and conflicting attitudes growing out of the debacle.' Bostetter, E., op.cit., p.278
[66] Bloom, H., op.cit., p.242
[67] As Bloom, Bostetter and Wang, despite other critical merits, do.

and 2) 'the weariness of the human condition'[68]. In this fashion, the mental quandaries of Manfred can be seen as a precursor of the recalcitrant stanzas towards the end of Canto IV of *Childe Harold*:

> Our life is a false nature; t'is not in
>
> The harmony of things, - this hard decree,
>
> This uneradicable taint of sin,
>
> This boundless upas, this all-blasting tree,
>
> Whose root is earth, whose leaves and branches be
>
> The skies which rain their plagues on men like dew –
>
> Disease, death, bondage[69] – all the woes we see,
>
> And worse, the woes we see not – which throb through
>
> The immedicable soul, with heart-aches ever new. (*CHPIV*, cxxvi)
>
> (my emphasis)

The stanza that immediately follows can be read as a reassuring reassertion of the 'Manfredian', Promethean-Byronic concept, where faith in Reason, though partial, is the only possible counterweight to metaphysical despair[70]:

> Yet let us ponder boldly – t'is a base
>
> Abandonment of reason to resign
>
> Our right of thought – our last and only place
>
> Of refuge; this, at last, shall still be mine (*CHPIV*, cxxvii)

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[68] Bloom, H., op.cit., p.243
[69] Bondage being, symptomatically, a fate worse than death for Byron
[70] Freely quoting 'The Byronic Byron', Phelps, G., p.55

Byron's is not a world of ideology, but of ironies and uncertainties.[1]

Cain : A Mystery[2]

Dramatis Personae

MEN		WOMEN
ADAM		EVE
CAIN		ADAH
ABEL		ZILLAH
	SPIRITS	
	ANGEL OF THE LORD	
	LUCIFER	

Lord Byron's three-act drama *Cain* has been read as faithless apostasy and heedless provocation by a majority of his contemporaries[3], while in recent times there is a 'tendency to convert it into an ideology' – a fact that marks 'one of the clearest instances of critical oversimplification of the complex, ironic world of [Byron's] dramatic poetry.'[4] When reading the play as an inverted theodicy, *Cain* dramatizes the existential complaint of the eponymous protagonist against the 'politics of Paradise'[5], seconded and fuelled by Lucifer's subversive perspective of God which is never proved false - the drama 'explores the conundrum of evil in the world with brutal frankness.'[6] If, however, we choose to read *Cain* as Wolf Z. Hirst does[7], we end up concluding that 'in the struggle between Byron's iconoclastic impulses and biblical impressions the latter emerge victorious'[8] – Hirst argues that 'if the poet's initial

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[1] McVeigh, D.M., ' 'In Caines Cynne': Byron and the Mark of Cain', in Gleckner and Beatty, (eds.), *The Plays of Lord Byron* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997) , p.284
[2] Published 1821
[3] For a detailed account of the individual reactions to *Cain* see the respective chapters in Chew, S.C., *Byron in England: His Fame and After-Fame* (London: John Murray, 1924) or Steffan, T.G., *Lord Byron's* Cain (Austin: University of Texas, 1960)
[4] McVeigh, D.M., op.cit., p.273
[5] *BLJ*, VIII, p.216
[6] McVeigh, D.M., op.cit., p.273
[7] in his essay 'Byron's Revisionary Struggle with the Bible', in Hirst, W.Z., (ed.), *Byron, the Bible and Religion* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991)
[8] Hirst, W.Z., op.cit., p.89

inversion of biblical theodicy were to be preserved, the ending of the Cain story would have to be contradicted.'[9]; hence all the revolted critics who have regarded 'the intended subversion of the Bible [in *Cain*] as successful'[10] have, in his opinion, been wrong. We could simply dismiss the ambivalent moral of Byron's *Cain* resulting in such disparate interpretations by arguing that it is symptomatic for the work of a poet of 'quicksilver genius' whose 'gift was not for metaphysics' and who, being 'no Augustine or Dante, [...] asked, not answered questions.'[11] We can, however, just as well claim that the inherent ambiguity is not an act of negligence, but a deliberate tactic of an artist who refused to participate in any sort of religious, philosophical or moral 'cant' – eventually taking his rebuke of metaphysics to a point of jollity in *Don Juan*: 'But I am apt to grow too metaphysical: / "The time is out of joint," – and so am I; / I quite forget this poem's merely quizzical, / And deviate into matters rather dry.'[12]

Lord Byron's attitude to Christianity has never been simple – bred a Calvinist, developing into a self-pronounced deist in his adult life[13], he regarded the dogmas of revealed religion as a false belief. Aged twenty-two, he indignantly answers his friend Hodgson's protestations of the importance of Christian faith as follows:

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[9] Hirst, W.Z., op.cit., p.94
[10] ibid.
[11] McVeigh, D.M., op.cit., p.278
[12] *Don Juan*, IX, xli
[13] Flirting with Catholicism, he decided to have his daughter Allegra brought up in a convent. In a symptomatically ambivalent letter to Thomas Moore, 8th March 1822, the tone torn between seriousness and mockery, Byron writes: 'I really though 'Cain' a speculative, and hardy, but still a harmless production. As I said before, I am really a great admirer of tangible religion; and am breeding one of my daughters a Catholic, that she may have her hands full. It is by far the most elegant worship, hardly excepting the Greek mythology. What with incense, pictures, statues, altars, relics, and the real presence, confession, absolution, - there is something sensible to grasp at. Besides, it leaves no possibility of doubt; for those who swallow their Deity, really and truly, in transubstantiation, can hardly find anything else otherwise than easy of digestion. / I am afraid this sounds flippant, but I don't mean it to be so; only my turn of mind is so given to taking things in the absurd point of view, that it breaks out in spite of me every now and then. Still, I assure you that I am a very good Christian. Whether you will believe me in this, I do not know.', *BLJ*, IX, p.123, quoted in McVeigh, op.cit., pp.285-6.

[...] the basis of your religion is *injustice*; the *Son of God*, the *pure*, the *immaculate*, the *innocent*, is sacrificed for the *Guilty*. This proves *His* heroism; but no more does away *man's* guilt than a schoolboy's volunteering to be flogged for another would exculpate the dunce from negligence, or preserve him from the Rod. [...] As to your immortality, if people are to live, why die?[14] And our carcasses, which are to rise again, are they worth raising? I hope, if mine is, that I shall have a better *pair of legs* than I have moved on these two-and-twenty years, or I shall be sadly behind in the squeeze into Paradise.'[15]

The concept of responsibility is central for Byron – the idea of Christ's martyrdom eternally alleviating the collective *culpa* of mankind is simply unacceptable for him.[16] Hence there is Manfred, whose action is entirely 'governed by his guilt for the death of Astarte'[17] - the moral of the dramatic poem reasserts the claim that it is not possible to rid oneself of the stigma of guilt, either by way of supernatural, aesthetic or religious transcendence, the hero finally perishing after having won the battle with the demons of his 'own proper hell'. 'Though he considerably softened his statements in later writings, [Byron] never altered his attitudes toward the dogmas of Christianity.'[18] The principle of the *felix culpa*, rationalizing evil into good, and the apologetic notion of this world being 'the best of all possible worlds' was for him an unassailable point of contention.

The opening scene of the drama is reminiscent of Act I, Scene II in *Hamlet*. The setting is a familial ritual scene - an offering and prayer here and a wedding at

[14] an existential question which echoes the complaint of Cain in the 1821 drama of the same name.
[15] Letter to Hodgson, 11th September 1811; quoted in Bostetter, E., op.cit., p.257
[16] This is echoed by Cain replying scornfully to Adah's suggestion of the possibility of future redemption of mankind:
Adah: How know we that some such atonement one day / May not redeem our race?
Cain: By sacrificing / The harmless for the guilty? What atonement / were there? (Act III, Sc.I)
[17] Procházka, M., 'Imaginative Geographies Disrupted? Representing the Other in English Romantic Dramas', p.3

the Danish court. The rituals are, in both cases, disrupted (and, for the audience/reader, desecrated) by the disdainful presence of the surly protagonist - both Cain and Hamlet stand apart, casting bitter repartees at the expense of the rest of the family. The tradition of modern psychological reading of Byron's play sees in Cain a Hamlet-like, 'existential hero caught up in irresolvable conflicts between spirit and matter, knowledge and love – an angry young man, rebelling against a world he had not made.'[19] Twisting this concept a little along the satirical line, it may be argued that Cain's acidic replies render him more the epitome of a defiant teenager than a full-fledged Promethean hero. It needs be said that there is a bathetic potential in the opening scene of the drama – the comic relief of a kind of biblical sitcom, featuring set types such as 'the worrier mum' Eve, 'the slightly inert dad' Adam, with 'the bothersome son' Cain versus 'the good boy' Abel.[20] This of course is a gross oversimplification – but, bearing the possibility of such a reading in mind, we can grasp the finesse of Byron's approach to the biblical story – the comic tension is a means of textual *Verfremdung*, of stepping outside the original myth, considering it from the safe haven of a satirical stance; yet, significantly, Byron never subverts the myth entirely[21], his object being, after all, 'serious' drama.

Cain's primary predicament of a 'rebel with a cause' is stated in his first soliloquy that follows the scene of the family gathering:

> And this is
>
> Life? – Toil! And wherefore should I toil? – because
>
> My father could not keep his place in Eden.
>
> What had *I* done in this? – I was unborn,

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[18] ibid.

[19] , Eggenschweiler, D. ,'*Cain* and the Antimythological Myth', in Gleckner and Beatty, (eds.), *The Plays of Lord Byron* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), p.233

[20] My reading corresponds to Eggenchweiler's interpretation of the play as having a comic potential largely neglected by critics.

I sought not to be born; nor love the state

To which that birth has brought me.

The rest of the family do not share Cain's dismay over the politics of Paradise – 'They have but / One answer to all questions, "t'was *his* will, / And *he* is good."'. Cain is characterised by doubt and intellectual defiance; rejecting to join his kin's humble acceptance of God's will and unshaken belief in the Divine benevolence, he continues his mock-Socratic argument[22]: 'How know I that? Because / He is all-powerful must all-good, too , follow? / I judge but by the fruits – and they are bitter – / Which I must feed on for a fault not mine.' From the line of thought above we can discern the fact that Cain refuses the God-imposed stigma of the Original Sin – he sees no morally or even logically justifiable connection between the sin of his parents and his present ordeal of a life spent in prayer and 'toil' in the 'land without[23] Paradise'. Later on, after his first discussion with Lucifer, he treats the motive of the Fall with blatant sarcasm, pondering the case of Adam and Eve:

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?[24]

Lucifer's haughty sophistry exacerbates Cain's mental struggle – after having lured Cain by protesting sympathy for 'dust' and flattering his superior intellect[25], Lucifer then sets out to boost Cain's feeling of self-sufficiency, but at the same time

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[21] Eggenschweiler, D., op.cit., p.237

[22] 'The style here is as important as the attitude it presents. The rhetorical questions, each generating its answer in yet another question, are a parody of Socratic method.' Eggenschweiler, D., op.cit., p.238

[23] The meaning of the word 'without' is potentially two-fold – physically outside Paradise or *sans* Paradise, lacking Paradise.

[24] 'By changing the snake and the fruit into the generic plural, Cain is thumbing his nose at the whole business. He is refusing to take the Fall seriously.' ,Eggenschweiler, D., op.cit., p.240

undermining his feeling of kinship with his family, corrupting the unwitting Cain with what he deems to be the 'truth', tearing away the hero's last shreds of belief – Lucifer's indoctrination of Cain sows the seeds of violence. Lucifer appears to Cain as a Promethean figure bringing enlightenment and freedom[26] – he brings the comfort of the autonomy of the mind[27]: 'Nothing can / Quench the mind, if the mind will be itself / And centre of surrounding things – t'is made / To sway.'[28] Though Cain refuses to worship this strange 'god', he embarks upon the cosmic voyage that would unravel (such is Lucifer's promise[29]) the mysteries of life and death.

The second act is set in the 'Abyss of Space'. Lucifer takes Cain on a cosmic flight, showing him 'the history / Of past, and present, and of future worlds.' Cain's idealistic belief in the enlightenment project, in knowledge being 'a road to happiness' is countered by Lucifer's assertion of the contrary. Exemplifying the Manfredian maxim that 'knowledge is sorrow', the magical mystery tour leaves Cain in utter existential crisis, marked with the stigma of his own insignificance which is mirrored by the insignificance and meaninglessness of all existence. The cosmos, as revealed by Lucifer, is governed by the conundrum of birth and death - all is trapped in a vicious circle of creation and destruction. Echoing Cuvier's theory, Lucifer speaks of the 'dull damp degeneracy' of creation, describing the phantoms of the 'pre-Adamite' creatures[30] as 'high / Intelligent, good, great, and glorious things, / As much superior unto all thy sire, / [...] as the sixty-thousandth generation shall be [...] to thee

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[25] establishing a kind of intellectual kinship with Cain: '[Yours] are the thoughts of all / Worthy of thought; - t'is your immortal part / Which speaks within you.'
[26] Lucifer mocks religious worship: '[...] prefer the independency of torture / To the smooth agonies of adulation / In hymns and harpings.'
[27] As in *Manfred*, an echo of Milton's Satan.
[28] 'It is part of the subtlety of Byron's 'mystery' to have Lucifer recycle Miltonic-Satanic resistance as a possibility not open to Cain, or worse still, as a condition also inherited – *all* Cain has is the mind as the 'centre of surrounding things – and therefore not entered into freely.' Cheeke, S., op.cit., pp.174-5
[29] Lucifer: 'If thou dost thirst for knowledge, I can satiate / that thirst.'
[30] The motive of the pre-Adamite creatures echoes Eblis' sombre revelations in Beckford's *Vathek*.

and thy son.'. Cain is struck by nihilism: 'Alas! I seem / Nothing.'. Lucifer's well-pleased reply is: 'And this should be the human sum / Of knowledge, to know mortal nature's nothingness.'[31] The final consolation given to Cain by Lucifer before they return to the Earth is a second variation on the crucial theme of 'the mind as its own place' we already know from Milton's Satan and from *Manfred*:

> 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;

This time, the problem with accepting the above argument unconditionally is Lucifer's motive in lecturing Cain – he seeks to induce Cain to sin. Therefore it is impossible to claim that Byron employs the theme of the mind's autonomy without subverting it. In the end, Lucifer's cosmic lesson indirectly leads to the murder of Abel – the irreverence and disdain for authority Lucifer has kindled plays an important part in the dramatic scene when Cain, threatening to destroy the altar after his offering of fruit has been rejected by God, kills his pious brother:

> Abel: [*opposing him*] I love God far more / Than life.
>
> Cain: [*striking him with a brand, on the temples, which he snatches from the altar*]: Then take thy life unto thy God, / Since he loves lives.

Abel's God-favoured offering involved the killing of an innocent lamb, which Cain, in a tragic irony, regarded as brutal: 'this bloody record / Shall not stand in the sun, to

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[31] Lucifer's subversive ideology has often been identified as the author's – it is therefore of prime importance to distance myself from this reductive stance; if anything is to be deemed Byron's authorial intention, it is the ambivalent employment of the motive of the Fall in the play, the 'chameleon poetry' allowing for various interpretations, fluidity of genre clothing the timeless moral of the Cain story.

shame creation!' A second later, his own bloody act shames creation. Having killed his innocent brother in a fit of rage[32], in spite of Abel's last words of forgiveness[33], Cain finally becomes the accursed mythical figure.

> The mystery play is concerned with the ways in which Cain becomes 'Cain', fulfilling the sign or mark by which he is known, and revealing the tensions between free will and providence with a characteristically Romantic emphasis upon psychological compulsion.[34]

If heretofore the dramatic action was conducted in *allegro* and *staccato*, *largo* prevails for the rest of the third act. Cain's diction changes, coloured in hues of remorse, irreparably guilt-ridden conscience, self-pity and pathetic acceptance of his fate. The reader 'has to balance the predominant scepticism, wit and ironic form of the first two acts with the traditional morality, directness, and tragic form of the third.'[35] The mastery of Byron's *Cain* lies in the careful balance between the subversive and the orthodox:

> We could feel more comfortable if we could classify [Byron's] treatment of the myth – a satiric inversion or an intellectual modernization or even a framework for satiric and philosophical digression – but to do this we would have to amputate too many asymmetrical parts of this baggy dramatic monster. We would have a tidier but a less interesting play.[36]

The furore of the honest citizens of England unleashed at the publication of *Cain* can only be compared to the violent reactions to its 'sequel', *Heaven and Earth* – nowadays, it is extremely hard to imagine 'what a bombshell *Cain* was when it

[32] One of the major changes to the biblical original – Byron's Cain acts in a momentary frenzy, not in cold-blooded spite and revenge.
[33] Echoing the martyred Christ :'Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they have done.'
[34] Cheeke, S., op.cit., p.176
[35] Eggenschweiler, D., op.cit., p.250
[36] Eggenschweiler, D., op.cit., p.234

struck England in 1821.[37] Hobhouse was appalled and declared the piece 'unworthy' on second reading, Crabb Robinson thought along the same lines – most irritating for Byron was the radical change of opinion in his friend Thomas Moore, who originally sang the drama's praises ('*Cain* is wonderful – terrible – never to be forgotten'[38]), but later 'recanted' and expressed regret that Byron ever wrote it. There were numerous threats to Murray, Byron's publisher, and a whole series of texts cropped up where various authors thought it their Christian duty to rewrite the story of Cain in a 'proper' way and erase the contaminating effect of Byron's work.[39] Significantly, both Goethe and Scott appreciated the drama[40], and so did the Shelleys.[41] Scott even enthusiastically claimed that 'Byron surpassed Milton on his own ground.'

Considering the history of Cain mythology, Byron's contribution is novel, as it does not follow any single one of the traditional concepts listed below, but rather incorporates ambiguity[42] and ironic tension into the quintessential story of the second fall of Man.

> To the early church fathers, Abel symbolized Christ, and Cain us. The Cains of medieval mysteries would be surly, almost laughable brutes. Folk mythology through the ages made Cain the progenitor of *Beowulf*'s

[37] 'It is all but impossible for the modern reader to appreciate the audacity of *Cain*, or to realize the alarm and indignation which it aroused.' E.H.Coleridge, quoted in Marchand, L.A., op.cit., p.84

[38] '...If I am not mistaken, it will sink deep into the world's heart; and while many will shudder at its blasphemy, all must fall prostrate before its grandeur.', letter to Byron, 18th September 1821, quoted in Steffan, T.G., *Lord Byron's Cain* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1960), p.312

[39] For the hilarity of the individual moralistic reactions, see Chew, S., 'The Reception of *Cain*', in *Byron in England: His Fame and After-Fame* (London: John Murray, 1924)

- Blake's *The Ghost of Abel* (1822) was dedicated to 'Lord Byron in the wilderness' and meant as a counterbalance to the scepticism of *Cain*. Coleridge's fragment of *The Wanderings of Cain* (1828) features the guilt-stricken Cain wandering aimlessly in exile, with Enos his son. A far more provocative work of apostasy than Byron's, Coleridge's composition shows a dejected ghost of Abel, wandering in the self-same wilderness, bewailing the loss of his place with the God he loves – he says that 'the dead have another God'. In the end, the harmonic element, the child Enos, succeeds in uniting the three exiles, and they exeunt, 'pass[ing] over the white sands between the rocks, silent as the shadows.'

[40] Byron dedicated the piece to Walter Scott ,possibly in order to gain the blessing of an authority that might influence positively its reception.

[41] Though we can imagine that their reasons for so doing were quite dissimilar.

[42] Even the very biblical story is slightly ambivalent – Cain is the banished sinner, but he is also the establisher of the first city on earth.

> 'eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas'[43], and later of the slaves of pious plantation owners. The Romantics [...] linked Cain with noble outlaws like Faust, Satan and Prometheus.[44]

Rather than conceptualizing the Promethean strength of Cain alone (his inquisitiveness, apt intellect, power of will and courage to defy God), Byron investigates also the weaknesses of Cain's character that lead him to kill Abel – his precipitate, mercurial nature, his wounded pride and exasperation at his brother's unconditional faith, all thrown into a turmoil of blind rage when, in the dramatic finale immediately before the murder, God rejects his offering while favouring Abel's. The tragic irony of Cain lies in the fact that it is his keen quest for higher knowledge and his defiance of death that leads him ultimately to bring death to the world. While he originally regarded himself as free from all responsibility, suffering unjustly for the sins of his parents, blaming the strict divine rule for the inadequacy of punishing all mankind by mortality, he has to accept full responsibility for the killing of his brother – from an apostate, Cain becomes the primary ambassador of Death[45]. Cain's dilemma lies between love and knowledge, Adah and Lucifer. Love incarnate, Adah remains by Cain's side after the murder, when the rest of the family shun and curse him. She is the sole source of consolation, capable of mollifying the stigma of Cain's guilt-ridden conscience. The nature of evil is explored in this play - Byron 'saw evil as an intrinsic and possibly dominant factor in human life, dooming man to degradation and death, thwarting his conceptions of and aspirations toward good'[46]. The limits of discursive reason are likewise explored (considering the fateful ramifications of Lucifer's 'education' of Cain), together with the concept of the

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[43] *Beowulf*, l.112; l.107 includes the exemplary 'in Caines cynne'.
[44] McVeigh, D.M., op.cit., p.274
[45] Paul West sees Cain as 'an apostate becoming a criminal.', 'The Plays', in West, P., (ed.), *Byron: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p.52

autonomy of the mind – like the self-conjured reality torturing Manfred, the cosmos Cain gets to see on his trip across 'the abyss of space' might be a Luciferian *laterna magica*, a mere set of phantasms created by Lucifer to support his dystopian world view (such crucial points of ambivalence are never resolved, making the play a sophisticated labyrinth of conflicting thought and discourse).

As far as the topos of 'being stigmatized' is concerned, the archetypal character of Cain represents the very epitome of exile and predestined desolation – the point of departure is therefore a myth of doom and the second Fall of man, the first murder in history – all elements of the 'Mark of Cain'. Byron's main protagonist can be read as a troubled intellectual who ruminates over the injustice of having to suffer the consequences of the Original Sin committed by his parents, resulting in the loss of Paradise which he regards '[his] just inheritance'. This Cain scorns the flaws of creation, which left him 'born but to die', sentenced to the tedium of daily toil - a life spent in humble subjection to the absolute authority of God to whom he should be thankful. He rejects the hegemony of the divine good will and reveals the inner strife fuelled by his feeling of being a victim of divine injustice – a problem that shakes the foundations of theodicy. This dissatisfaction and thirst for 'higher knowledge' is abused by Lucifer, who sets his own principles in direct opposition to God[47] and defines himself in negations and subversions of orthodox Christian doctrine[48]. He renders the concepts of Good and Evil as relative, resulting from the set-up of the cosmic power-relationship, merely depending on who is the 'victor', and portrays

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[46] Bostetter, E., op.cit., p.259

[47] In Lucifer's lines: ...'the great double Mysteries! The *two Principles*!' (Act II, Sc.II) , fulfilling the Manichaean scheme of Lucifer's dualistic world view.

[48] As Byron nonchalantly states in his preface to the play ,'It was difficult [...] to make [Lucifer] talk like a Clergyman.'

God as imperfect and evil[49] - a fact, according to Lucifer, undeniably reflected in and therefore proved by the flawed nature of Creation at large. Adah, Cain's loving sister and wife in one[50], represents a foil to this sceptic *Weltanschaunung* – hers is a vindication, not rejection, of earthly life; her speeches are an ode to the power of love - she is the symbol of the Romantic ideal of Nature as a harmonising element[51]. Speaking in dichotomies, Adah stands for emotion and idealism, while Lucifer represents reason and pessimism. Manfred looses Astarte symbolizing the emotional, 'gentler' part of life, and is therefore doomed to die. Cain retains the blessing of Adah's companionship, hence the tragic ending of the drama simultaneously marks a new beginning, echoing (in diction only) the nigh optimistic scene of Adam and Eve's departure from Paradise in Milton[52].

The biblical story of Cain is universally known, so the 'who dunnit' element of the plot is out of the picture (as in *Paradise Lost*) – what remains for Byron to explore is the rendering of the motifs and factors that lead to the murder – a quest for understanding and explanation of Cain's violent act. Byron's Cain seeks meaning and justification – of earthly existence and all creation. His cosmic trip with Lucifer leaves him drowning in melancholy and nihilism – he has been shown the insignificance and mutability of life on earth and the relentless mechanism of creation and destruction that defines the very universe. Having seen the deterioration of life on earth, the

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[49] He claims to 'dare look the Omnipotent tyrant in / his everlasting face, and tell him, that / His evil is not good!' (Act I, Sc. I)

[50] Mirroring Manfred and Astarte – however, the relationship is not rendered sinful for being incestuous , drawing on the biblical source. Lucifer, though, warns Adah and Cain that such familial ties will be proclaimed sinful by God already in the next generation:
Adah: What? / Must not my daughter love her brother Enoch? / *Lucifer*: Not as thou lovest Cain.
- Here follows Adah's innocent vindication of sexual love between her and her twin brother Cain: 'Shall they not love and bring forth things that love / out of their love? [...] was not he, their father, / born of the same sole womb, in the same hour / with me?'

[51] Like Solveig to Peer Gynt, Adah stands for the harmonizing element that amends and heals; she is characterized by unconditional love, goodness and patience.

[52] Cain: Eastward from Eden will we take our way; / T'is the most desolate, and suits my steps.

unsettling vision of the great pre-Adamites who were annihilated by a cosmic cataclysm, Cain returns to the earth in dismay and deprivation, which ultimately ascertained in the murder of Abel.

Finally, the metaphor of the 'Mark of Cain', echoed in the story of the 'Wandering Jew' of the New Testament, is quite significant in the Byronic context. The traditional biographical reading of Byron portrays the poet recursively through his protagonists, resulting in conclusions similar to the following:

> "When shall I cease acting the part of the Wandering Jew and being stared and wondered at as if I bore the mark of God's malediction on my countenance." Prepared to flee anywhere before his countrymen, even to abjure religion, Beckford knows that he will everywhere feel himself a stranger and an exile. But the role of the Wandering Jew is not simply forced upon him by other Englishmen; as in the case of Byron a generation later, it is a pose inflicted by his own Anglican conscience.[53]

I strongly disagree with Immerwahr on the point of the alleged moral momentum of Byron's Anglican consciousness – though self-inflicted, exile is for Byron, symptomatically, ambivalent – both a choice and an ordeal (a status to be both cherished and lamented). Beckford's complaint, however, is more than relevant when we consider Byron's rendering of his own exile:

> I was accused of every monstrous vice by public rumour, - and private rancour; my name which had been a knightly or a noble one since My fathers helped to conquer the kingdom for William the Norman, was tainted. - I felt that, If what was whispered and muttered and murmured was true - I was unfit for England, - if false - England was unfit for me.--

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Adah: Lead! Thou shalt be my guide, and may our God / Be thine! Now let us carry forth our children.

> -- I withdrew - But this was not enough. - In other countries - in Switzerland - in the shadow of the Alps - and by the blue depth of the Lakes I was pursued and breathed upon by the same blight.---- I crossed the Mountains - but it was the same - so I went a little farther, and settled myself by the waves of the Adriatic, - like the Stag at bay who betakes him to the waters.[54]

The apologetic tone Byron utilizes when addressing the alienated, prejudiced audience, is marked by melodramatic, religious register. Invoking the chivalric glory of his family's past (or rather of the name 'Byron'), he employs a sermon-like rhetorical splendour to put across his sense of being wronged, marked out and disdained by a thing so ephemeral and vain as public opinion.

Apart from this traditional connotation of the 'Mark of Cain' in the Byronic context, we can draw a parallel to the idea of Lord Byron being reduced to a branded concept, a label, a name, 'Byronism'. McGann investigates this problem aptly in his essay 'Byron's Lyric Poetry'[55], quoting some crucial passages from *The Prophecy of Dante*, wherein we may suspect that Byron is both lamenting upon and exploiting the fact that he is, while yet living, just 'a name':

> T'is the doom
>
> Of spirits of my order to be wrack'd
>
> In life, to wear their days in endless strife, and die alone;
>
> Then future thousands crowd around their tomb,
>
> And pilgrims come from climes where they have known

[53] Immerwahr, R., ' 'Romantic' before 1790', in Eichner, H. (ed.), *'Romantic' and its Cognates, The European History of a Word* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972): p. 48, quoting Beckford's *Journal in Portugal and Spain* (1787-8)

[54] 'Some Observations', in Nicholson, A., op.cit., p.95; (Nicholson's note: the final phrase echoes As You Like It, Act II, Sc. II,1 29-40 and Pope's 'To Mr.Gay' 11-14)

[55] in Bone, D., (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Byron* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)

> The name of him, who now is but a name.[56]

As McGann aptly observes, the 'structure of convertibility [Byron creates in his poems] turns everything into its opposite'[57]. Thus, the moral of *Cain* is perhaps to appreciate the drama's volatile structure of ambiguities, where the myth of the Fall is treated 'both as an object of ridicule and as a serious symbol of man's state.'[58] It is perhaps proper to conclude this chapter with the wit and wisdom of Lord Byron *in propria persona*:

> The heterodoxy of yesterday is the orthodoxy of to-day; the heresy of to-day is the commonplace of to-morrow. Times change, and thoughts and manners with the times. Though a more refined aestheticism no longer finds pleasure in it as a work of art, and though it seems now but to scratch the surface of the problems it seeks to probe, *Cain* remains a monument of protest against the fetters which a hundred years ago bound freedom of discussion, and with which some people even to-day still seek to bind it.[59]

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[56] quoted in McGann, op.cit., p.217
[57] ibid.
[58] Eggenschweiler, D., op.cit., p.251
[59] Letter to Douglas Kinnaird, November 1822, *BLJ*, IX, p.78; quoted in Chew, S.C., *Byron in England*, p.104

Heaven and Earth: A Mystery[1]

Founded on the following passage in Genesis, chap.VI: '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.'

Dramatis Personae:

ANGELS:	SAMIASA	WOMEN:	AHAH
	AZAZIEL		AHOLIBAMAH
	RAPHAEL, the Archangel		
MEN:	NOAH and his sons		
	IRAD	*Chorus of Spirits of the Earth*	
	JAPHET	*Chorus of Mortals*	

Lord Byron's second biblical play, the one-act *Heaven and Earth*, was originally intended for the same volume as *Cain*, but due to the scandalized rage following the appearance of the latter, Murray hesitated to put it into print[2], hence it was not until January 1823 that the play was finally published, by Leigh Hunt in *The Liberal*. It is in a wider sense a 'lyrical' or 'choric' drama, with no particular main protagonist. The most striking aspect of the play and the source of its original notoriety is the love of the angels[3]. The pivotal theme, however, is the concept of the Divine Election and the question of its justification – it betrays 'Byron's attempt to understand the doctrine of the elect'.[4] The 'mystery' is set on the eve of the Deluge, its action immediately preceding the cataclysm (as opposed to *Cain*, where the plot is framed by the first and the second Fall of man and the two subsequent departures into

[1] Byron began writing the play shortly after having finished *Cain*, in September 1821.
[2] Byron cursed Murray's 'slow obstetric hands' and his fearful procrastination and the eventual refusal to publish the play.
[3] Thomas Moore's *Loves of the Angels* appeared roughly simultaneously, but Moore carefully explained that his interpretation of *Genesis* recognized the 'sons of God' as descendants of Seth, not supernatural beings (as in the faulty interpretation of *The Book of Enoch* which appeared in 1821.); Stevens, R., 'Biblical Allusions in *Heaven and Earth'*, in Hirst, W.Z., (ed.), *Byron, the Bible and Religion* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991), p.120

forced exile). The denouement portrays the horror already imagined in 'Darkness', the annihilation of mankind in an elemental catastrophe; while the poem depicts an arbitrary cosmic disaster, in *Heaven and Earth* the catastrophe is orchestrated from above.

The play dramatizes the moral and existential predicaments of Japhet, son of Noah, tormented by the God-imposed 'blessing' of being one of the few Chosen ones destined to survive the flood. Japhet wishes for a universal salvation of mankind – his outraged humanism and his opposition to the plans of the Divine Providence are 'the play's moral standard'[5], rendering God's ways as not only inscrutable, but also extremely hard to justify – the planned destruction of the majority of humanity appears to Japhet a rather obscure exercise in blind orthodoxy and merciless power[6]. The play ends with Japhet's plaintive question: 'Why, when all perish, why must I remain?' Though *Heaven and Earth* does probe the existential quandaries above, the moral and teleological enigma of the mysterious ways of God and the meaning of life is left unresolved[7].

Apart from his sympathy for doomed mankind and the soon-to-be-destroyed earth in general, Japhet's more particular and worldly plight is his unrequited love for Anah, a beautiful descendant of Cain who is destined for extermination. Anah and her symptomatically proud sister Aholibamah[8] have the opposite problem – theirs is the stigma of the Doomed. The spectacular centre of the play is the love of the women and the angels (the utmost provocation disconcerting the mores of Byron's day) – a love affair not only consummated but also presented as a means of defying and evading the stern politics of Paradise. In the end, we see the doomed women escaping 'the chaos-founded prison' of the

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[4] Ibid. For a detailed analysis of the play's affinity to the Bible, see Ray Stevens' essay 'Biblical Allusions in *Heaven and Earth*', in Hirst, W.Z., (ed.), *Byron, the Bible and Religion* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991)
[5] McGann, J.J., *Fiery Dust*, p.263
[6] Trite orthodoxy is preached by the mouthpiece of God, Raphael, echoed by the stern Noah. Japhet's predicament is regarded as foolish and blasphemous by his father who accepts God's will unconditionally, as 'just Jehovah's wrath'.
[7] The concept of the divine election is treated sardonically in the shipwreck scene of the second canto of *Don Juan*. Also stanzas 13-15 of *The Vision of Judgement* employ the theme. (Stevens, R., op.cit., p.133)

Earth, literally on the wings of the angels, in order to establish, on 'some untroubled star', an alternative community based on love and hope. Love is therefore idealized as a panacea. The erotic union of the Cainite women and the Seraphim defies the set morals of orthodoxy, bridging the discrepancy between heaven and earth. The 'divine qualities possible in sexual love'[9] are enacted in this play.

Scene III, a central point of the play, opens with Japhet's musings about the meaninglessness of earthly existence – unable to rationalize the absurdity of eradicating this 'all-beauteous world' in order to create another, he imagines, in a convulsion of nostalgia, the world at a future moment after the Deluge, when none of the beauty he now sees will any longer exist:

> Ye wilds, that look eternal;
>
> [...] , in a few days,
>
> Perhaps even hours, ye will be changed, rent, hurl'd
>
> Before the mass of waters; and yon cave,
>
> Which seems to lead into a lower world,
>
> Shall have its depths search'd by the sweeping wave,
>
> And dolphins gambol in the lion's den!
>
> And man – Oh, men! My fellow-beings! Who
>
> Shall weep above your universal grave,
>
> Save I? Who shall be left to weep? My kinsmen,
>
> Alas! What am I better than ye are,
>
> That I must live beyond ye?

Japhet's soliloquy is a classic *ubi sunt* lamentation of a survivor who bewails his loneliness in a world where all he has ever known has perished. Paradoxically, Japhet possesses God's

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[8] Aholibamah's diction echoes the precipitate defiance of Cain (and Manfred).

[9] 'Byron's poetry - *Don Juan* in particular - acknowledges both the divine qualities possible in sexual love and its potentially corruptive force.', summary of Gordon Thomas' essay 'Eros and Christianity: Byron in the Underground Movement', in the introduction to Hirst, W.Z.,(ed.), *Byron, the Bible and Religion*, p.11

blessing, yet he feels an outcast's desolation. Feeling sympathy for the world, his outcry evokes the concept of responsibility. Japhet's is a stigma of a conscience tortured by the shame of being unable to avert the mechanism of destruction, the inability to influence the dreadful course of events which he, for no obvious reason, has been chosen to survive[10] - Japhet's, like Cain's, 'curse is Forgiveness'[11]. While he is immersed in melancholy contemplation, a chorus of spirits appears on the scene. Japhet attempts to communicate with them – the first reply is merely a disdainful 'Ha! Ha! Ha!'; eventually the spirits scorn Japhet's protestation of the redemption of man through Christ, ridiculing the *felix culpa* principle, and foretell the sordid history of mankind to come in a sinister chant:

> Meantime still struggle in the mortal chain,
>
> Till earth wax hoary:
>
> War with yourselves, and hell, and heaven, in vain,
>
> Until the clouds look gory
>
> With the blood reeking from each battle plain;
>
> New times, new climes, new arts, new men;
>
> But still
>
> The same old tears, old crimes, and oldest ill,
>
> Shall be amongst your race in different forms;

This is one of the instances of Byron's essential conception of history as *one* page[12], the 'moral of all human tales' being 'but the same rehearsal of the past'. The vicious circularity of history immersed in violence, destruction and absurdity is a haunting vision recurring through Byron's entire oeuvre. In *Don Juan*, this is conveyed in the 'catastrophist' stanzas of canto IX[13], avowing Cuvier's cataclysmic and devolutionary theories: 'Even worlds miscarry, when too oft they pup, / And every new creation hath decreased / In size, from overworking the

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[10] Japhet's predicament is particularly relevant in the post-Holocaust era
[11] We shall come back to the concept of paradox in Byron later in this chapter.
[12] see *CPH*, IV, cviii. 'And History, with all her volumes vast, / Hath but *one* page.'

material - / Men are but maggots of some huge Earth's burial'.[14] This notion of the stigma of the imperfectability of humankind is central and brings to mind Pope's *Essay on Man* and Dr. Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes* – a work that Byron respected for its timeless wisdom:

> [...] t'is a grand poem – and so *true*! – true as the 10th of Juvenal himself. The lapse of ages changes all things – time – language – the earth – the bounds of the sea – the stars of the sky, and every thing "about, around, and underneath" man, *except man himself*, who has always been, and always will be, an unlucky rascal. The infinite variety of lives conduct but to death, and the infinity of wishes lead but to disappointment.[15]

Beautiful paradoxes

It is often the case that critics resort to describing Byron's works in absolute statements, but it is hardly ever practical. As in the case of Gleckner and his thesis *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*, it leads to overt simplification of the complex universe of Byron's poetry. Let us ponder briefly Gleckner's critical approach: 'Whatever theological implications *Cain* has, and whether it is a great play (as Goethe thought) or 'some of Byron's worst rubbish' (as H.W.Garrod thought), it must be read as a despairing prelude to the grim prophecy of *Heaven and Earth.*'[16] His sombre reading of the plays is not very enticing and its imperative does not even seem entirely plausible, but it allots an equal status to Byron's second 'mystery' (which is often treated as secondary to the sophistication of *Cain*) and recognizes a thematic continuity of the two works. Gleckner's overall perspective of the dramas as ' rehears[ing] the themes [...] of fundamental injustice and corruption of the world,

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[13] Stanzas xxxvii - xl

[14] Significantly ,the pessimism of the above is interwoven with exquisite humour – the famous 'mammoth' satire on the monstrous corpulence of George the Fourth, the massive skeleton of the king becoming an exhibit in a paleontological museum of the future!

[15] *The Ravenna Journal*, January 1821, *BLJ*, VIII, p.26; quoted in Gleckner, R., op.cit., p.321

the futility of steeling one's mind to revenge, the loss of love, and man's inveterate and repeated fall'[17] covers one significant aspect of the poetry, but the complexity of the whole is deprived of its due effect when the satirical muse of Byron is ignored or intentionally shunned as a mere comic mask, a mimicry for the 'real' moral of catastrophism and Munch-like shriek of existential despair.

Though Byron employs the concept of erotic love as a possibility of living a better life, this life is invariably transposed to a place outside the reach of Western civilization and its values. Curiously, Byron never actually portrays the 'brave new world' of an alternative community in exile. This wariness of approach may signalize Byron's awareness of the limits of this concept, marking rather sharply the limit of his idealism. Let us consider the dramas analyzed in this study: the originally happy communion of Manfred and Astarte ends abruptly in Astarte's mysterious death and the irreparable guilt of incest, all of which takes place before the play even begins. In *Cain*, Adah offers to her husband/twin brother the idea of establishing a paradise of their own in the lost Eden's stead ('Why wilt thou always mourn for Paradise? / Can we not make another?'); an optimistic notion that Cain rejects[18]. Their departure into exile at the end of the play is set in the mournful tones of the biblical myth – yet, the overpowering misery and desolation of Cain is balanced by Adah's determination to be strong and supportive[19]. Though far from a happy ending, the drama is one step further away from the boundless scepticism of *Manfred* and moves one step forward towards the triumph of love in *Heaven and Earth*. It is in *Heaven and Earth* that the concept of the cosmic power of love is effected, although even here we do not get further than to the exeunt stage direction: 'Azaziel and Samiasa fly off, and disappear with Anah and Aholibamah.'. As in *The Island*, we are left with promises of a new beginning (Azaziel to Anah: 'a brighter world

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[16] Gleckner, R., op.cit., p.323
[17] Gleckner, R., op.cit., p.314
[18] For Adah , there is a possibility of happiness on the Earth; she does not feel 'the want of this so much regretted Eden.'

than this, where thou shalt breathe / Ethereal life, will we explore: / These darken'd clouds are not the only skies.') which is never realized within the plot. Byron's idea (as recorded by Medwin) about 'conveying the lovers to the Moon or one of the Planets' or having the women return to the earth and perish in the Deluge in the intended second part of the drama, suggest that he considered the piece unfinished. In my opinion, the text we are left with is perhaps the best version[20], the open ending a modern feature allowing for subjective interpretations of the lovers' fate, shifting the final focus to the problem of Japhet's 'blessed ordeal' and the frightful melodrama of the Deluge.

Ambiguity rules in the realm of Byron's poetry – as in the potentially suspicious outcry of joy in Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: 'More happy love! more happy, happy love!'[21], the ironic tension in Byron's rendering of love as a universal panacea, a means of evading or conquering adverse reality, is difficult to deny. After the failure of religious, aesthetic and Faustian supernatural transcendence and the ineffectuality of the solipsistic concept of 'the mind as its own place' revealed in both *Manfred* and *Cain*, Byron employs the idea of transcendence through erotic love in *Heaven and Earth.* The question that remains unanswered is to what extent this transcendence is plausible and whether or not it comes down to sheer escapist idealism. Despite the angel Azaziel's comforting protestations of escaping to a 'brighter world', Japhet's woeful observation upon the lovers' departure is crucial due to its inherent ambiguity: 'They are gone! They have disappear'd amidst the roar / Of the forsaken world; and never more, / Whether they live, or die with all earth's life , / Now near its last, can aught restore /Anah unto these eyes.' (my emphasis).

[19] 'I alone must not weep! My office is / henceforth to dry up tears.'

[20] though it would be interesting to see what Byron would have done with the story.

[21] It can be argued that there is an ironic tinge to the verse when it is featuring a total of six instances of the plain adjective 'happy' in one single stanza.

'Every human act that widens consciousness increases both exultation and despair. No other poet has insisted on maintaining both views with equal vigour.'[22] Paradoxes are the vivid substance of Byron's poetry. As in my description of the 'blessed ordeal' of Japhet, critics often resort to the oxymoron when analyzing the poetry, echoing Byron's famous paradoxical coinages: 'fiery dust'[23], 'the remember'd tone of a mute lyre'[24], 'the unreach'd Paradise of our despair'[25] or 'That curse shall be Forgiveness'[26]. We should be aware of the fact that the conflation of the sacred and the profane, the serious and the satiric, the tragic and the comic in Byron is not entirely reserved for *Don Juan*, but does resurface throughout the Byronic canon. As in the characters of the lovers, sin and innocence are indivisibly entwined – contradictory notions do coexist. The quandaries of Japhet show us that the concept of being elect may be understood as its reverse, the stigma of doom. An awareness of relativity and of ambivalence is essential if we are to appreciate the full impact of Byron's works, dramatic or other.

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[22] Bloom, H., op.cit., p.236
[23] *Don Juan*, II, ccxii
[24] *CHP* IV, cxxxvii
[25] *CHP* IV, cxxii
[26] *CHP* IV, cxxxv

Conclusion

> This world is a comedy to those who think and a tragedy to those who feel.[1]
>
> Horace Walpole

A synthesis of the maxim above proclaims life a tragicomedy to those who both think and feel. The complexity of Lord Byron's oeuvre is, generally speaking, cast in tragicomic colours, employing irony as an antidote for melancholy[2], until the 'amused scepticism'[3] of *Don Juan* prevails. The topos of stigmatization can be metaphorically described as one of the many minor thematic streams responsible for the myriad of eddy currents that constitute the 'deep and dark blue' ocean of Byron's poetry. Within this thematic streamlet, as well as in the poetic macrocosm without it, the forces of ambiguity and ironic subversion carefully (de)construct the concepts of pose and truth, comedy and tragedy, satire and sincerity. 'Like Beckett's, the texts rise to unbuild themselves repeatedly.'[4]

As to the problem of excessive biographical interpretation, its attraction consists largely in the fact that

> Byron has agreed to collapse his 'personal life' and his 'poetical life' - a final distinction cannot be drawn between the man who suffers and the poet who sees. [...] [Byron's personal life is] at once a life and a reflection, a self and a text. The work is engulfed in that dissolving, disillusioning ambiguity – an ambiguity which it also embraces.[5]

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[1] Quoted in Gleckner, p.318 footnote, Letter to Horace Mann, 31st December 1769, from *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, in 16 vols., Toynbee, P. (ed.), (Oxford, 1904), VII, p.346

[2] This of course is but a hint of the exquisite complexities of irony in Byron - its analysis would consume a bulky thesis of its own.

[3] Bostetter, E., op.cit., p.10

[4] McGann, J.J., 'Byron's Lyric Style', pp.222-3

[5] McGann, J.J., op.cit., p.220

'Byron was a protean figure and also a protean poet.'[6] The inter-relatedness of what can be called the quasi-autobiographical aspect and the purely fictional elements in his poetry is a crucial issue, a Gordian knot better to be left tied. The fragment of Canto XVII of *Don Juan* offers an intriguing insight as far as the 'chameleon' image of Byron is concerned – portraying himself in a series of witty contradictions[7], the narrator concludes: 'So that I almost think that the same skin / For one without – has two or three within.'[8]

The 'metaphysical' or 'speculative' dramas of Lord Byron conceptualize the instability and mutability of existence, the failure to transcend 'the limits of human nature and to attain the ideal, cosmic form of being.'[9] The stigma of being branded or unjustly ostracized is counterbalanced by the concept of the self-stigmatized consciousness. The stigma of duality – of the 'clay-cold bonds'[10] of human existence versus the macrocosmic aspirations of the soul - is also an essential theme employed in the plays. Religious or aesthetic transcendence is rendered impossible, the falsity of such notions revealed as the simulacra of Manfred's self-conjured, torturous imaginary reality. What remains is the strongly ambivalent notion of transcendence through erotic love. The biblical dramas can be read as 'an outpouring [...] of Byron's revolt against conventional religious orthodoxy coupled with speculations on free will and man's destiny, and a questioning of the 'politics of Paradise''[11].

The catastrophism of Cuvier pervades the Byronic ethos, its influence manifested especially in the three dramas studied here; in *Don Juan*, Cuvier's concepts of perpetual degeneration of creation and cyclic cosmic cataclysms are combined with satire and humour,

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[6] Bone, D., 'Introduction' to Bone, D., (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Byron* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.3

[7] 'Temperate I am – yet never had a temper; / Modest I am – yet with some slight assurance; / Changeable too – yet somehow *'Idem semper'* / Patient – but not enamoured of endurance; / Cheerful – but, sometimes, rather apt to whimper: / Mild – but at times a sort of *'Hercules furens'*'

[8] Stanza II

[9] Procházka, M., ''But he was phrenzied': Rousseau's Figures and Text in the Third Canto of *Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, in Gassenmeier, M.(ed.), *British Romantics as Readers, Intertextualities, Maps of Misreading, Reinterpretations* (Heidelberg: Universitatsverlag Carl Winter, 1998), p.175

[10] *CHP* III, lxxiii

[11] Marchand, L., op.cit., p.84

alleviating the weight of the boundless horror they imply. The motive of the Fall of man is explored and exploited in the plays. Despite the pessimism of his vision of history as a vicious circle of absurdity and terror, Byron balances this sombre perspective by his sympathy for the 'sad jar of atoms', man:

> 'What sensation is so delightful as Hope? And, if there were not for Hope, where would the Future be? - in hell. [...] From whatever place we commence, we know where it all must end. And yet, what good is there in knowing it? It does not make men better or wiser. [...] It is all a mystery. I feel most things, but I know nothing'[12]

Apart from existential musings conceptualized in the plays, there is the crucial element of Byron's humour which is central to a full understanding of the poet's writing – universally cherished in Byron's letters and journals and the satirical pieces, its importance throughout the entire oeuvre is often overlooked.

> I can never get people to understand that poetry is the expression of *excited passion*, and that there is no such thing as a life of passion any more than a continuous earthquake, or an eternal fever. Besides, who would ever *shave* themselves in such a state?[13]

'Sorrow is our element'[14], as well as mutability, absurdity and tragicomedy – we are, however, bound to pursue the quest of getting to know ourselves, even if the end of all our pursuits would lead us back to the beginning, in a kind of hermeneutic circle. Having begun with T.S. Eliot, I shall conclude with a quote that in my opinion establishes a link between the two avatars, of Romanticism and Modernism: 'We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time'[15].

[12] *The Ravenna Journal,* January 1821, *BLJ* VIII, p.33
[13] Letter to Thomas Moore, Ravenna 1821, quoted in Phelps, op.cit., p.58
[14] *Heaven and Earth,* Act I, Sc.I
[15] T.S.Eliot, 'Little Gidding'

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Czech summary | Resumé v češtině

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá tématem stigmatizace v Byronově díle, se zvláštním zaměřením na poetická dramata *Manfréd*, *Kain* a *Heaven and Earth*[1]. V první části úvodu je rozebírán pojem „Byron" jako básníkova maska, kterou si z části sám stvořil a z části ji byl (okolnostmi, společností, literární kritikou) nucen nosit. V tomto bodě se témata byronovského mýtu a stigmatizace protínají. V druhé části úvodu je pak stručně představen přehled literární kritiky týkající se výše zmíněných dramat od doby Byronovy po současnost.

Následující krátká kapitola objasňuje různé aspekty tématu stigmatizace v širším kontextu Byronova díla a pokouší se o strukturovaný pohled na tuto problematiku. Ve zkratce se zaprvé jedná o „stigma" pronásledování, které se často snoubí s pocitem viny a špatného svědomí, dále pak o „stigma" nedokonalosti lidství, které Byron opakovaně zobrazuje v metafoře vyhnání z ráje. Úpadek lidstva zračící se v krvavém kolotoči dějin je odrazem katastrofických teorií francouzského geologa Cuviera. Cuvierovy vize cyklické destrukce a zrodu země i vesmíru byly Byronovi velkou inspirací – v básníkově díle se tento vliv projevuje zejména v silném tématu bezcílnosti a absurdity lidského bytí, tak nicotného v měřítku makrokosmu, a existence vůbec. Je kladen důraz na důležitost ironie a humoru, bez kterých je jakákoliv interpretace Byrona neúplná. Proto jsou tyto skeptické vize à la Cuvier u Byrona nerozlučně spjaty s nadějí a vírou, byť omezenou, v člověka. Byronovo vidění světa je tragikomické.

Tři další kapitoly se postupně zabývají tématem stigmatizace v příslušných dramatech. Po krátkém úvodu následuje přehled děje, přičemž je brán zřetel na různé možnosti interpretace. V každé kapitole je také stručný výběr kritiky o příslušném dramatu, po kterém následuje závěr.

[1] Používám originální název, protože hra nebyla ještě přeložena do češtiny.

V *Manfrédovi* je topos stigmatizace prolnut s mučívým pocitem viny, který pronásleduje hlavního hrdinu. Stigma špatného svědomí ze smrti milované Astarte je hybatelem děje. Na první pohled prométheovský romantický hrdina statečně čelící přízrakům je v osidlech ironie odhalen coby zkormoucený mág žijící ve světě fantasmat, která jeho titánská mysl stvořila - Manfréd na konci umírá, pohlcen nicotou.

Druhé drama, *Kain*, má s *Manfrédem* společné téma odpovědnosti za druhé, stigma smrti a touhu hlavního představitele po poznání a transcendenci. Byronova verze biblického příběhu dává Kainovi prostor a líčí jej jako zatrpklého intelektuála, který nakonec svým hrůzným činem splní svůj předepsaný úděl a zpronevěří se všemu, čemu dosud věřil. Byron se zamýšlí nad možnostnmi svobodné vůle proti silám osudu.

Poslední hra, *Heaven and Earth* neboli *Nebesa a země*, se především zabývá tématem predestinace. Spojitost s *Kainem* je zřejmá v postavách dvou žen z Kainova pokolení, které jsou odsouzeny k záhubě při blížící se Potopě světa. Jafet, syn Noemův, se jako jediný zamýšlí nad boží spravedlností. Je Bohem vyvolený přežít, přesto trpí pocitem viny a nostalgií nad žívotem, který bude smeten z povrchu země. Podružným tématem hry je příběh oněch dvou zatracených žen a jejich milenců, andělů, kteří se nakonec vzepřou boží vůli a odletí hledat štěstí mimo její dosah. Konec hry, kdy chóry tonoucích střídavě volají k Bohu a proklínají Jafeta, jenž se na ně dívá, je ve znamení ambivalence – spása může být břemenem, prokletá láska naopak osvobozením, ale i tento ideál je zpochybněn, neboť osud andělů a žen nám zůstane skryt.

V samém závěru práce jsou shrnuty hlavní body tématu stigmatizace a je zde také pokus o interpretaci poselství Byronovy tragikomické múzy.