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G. F. Parker

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Between Satan and Mephistopheles: Byron and the Devil

Fred Parker

Men of diseased hearts and depraved imaginations, who ... labour to make others as miserable as themselves, by infecting them with a moral virus that eats into the soul! The school which they have set up may properly be called the Satanic school ... characterised by a Satanic spirit of pride and audacious impiety, which still betrays the wretched feeling of helplessness wherewith it is allied.

(Southey, Preface to *A Vision of Judgment*)

WHEN IN 1821 the British Poet Laureate, Robert Southey, attacked the ‘Satanic school’ in contemporary poetry, it was very clear to his readers who, above all others, occupied that bad eminence. For years Byron had built his immense success around a series of darkly heroic figures – the Giaour, Conrad, Lara, Manfred, Childe Harold – who share many characteristics with Milton’s great ‘Archangel ruined’. Byron’s ‘Satanic’ protagonists in these poems are charismatic yet profoundly isolated figures, exiles or outlaws from conventional society, alienated by a combination of their superior nobility of mind and some obscure act of crime in their past. This quality of alienation is crucial; the root meaning of ‘Satan’, as Milton reminds us, is Adversary, one who stands opposite: the Satanic way of being arises from ‘the hateful siege | Of contraries’,¹ in which the dichotomy between self and other is felt as painfully absolute. (Hence in *Paradise Lost* Satan’s defining emotion can often be named as *envy*.) In Byron’s heroes it often seems to be – with a familiar Romantic emphasis – the intensity of consciousness itself that constitutes the alienated self: knowledge

¹ *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London 1968): *Paradise Lost*, IX. 121 f. Further references are to this edition.

as alienation. Their consciousness is withdrawn, inflamed and brooding; the pain they carry within is never fully communicated, but expressed in part by the attitude of disdain, severe and superb, which they show to human weakness in others as in themselves, and also to the littleness of life itself, its failure to sustain their desires. They are *fallen* beings, or so at least they experience their existence, but tremendous in their fallenness: they can neither altogether regret what they have become, because of the dark knowledge which they now possess, nor reconcile themselves to their condition, but vibrate between the poles of grim acquiescence and unappeasable rebellion.

This painful intensification of self, and the desire for relief from it, was, Byron believed, what made him a writer:

To withdraw *myself* from *myself* (oh that cursed selfishness!) has ever been my sole, my entire, my sincere motive in scribbling at all; and publishing is also the continuance of the same object, by the action it affords to the mind, which else recoils upon itself.²

That image of the mind's self-recoil remembers Milton on Satan's

dire attempt, which nigh the birth
Now rolling, boils in his tumultuous breast,
And like a devilish engine back recoils
Upon himself; horror and doubt distract
His troubled thoughts, and from the bottom stir
The hell within him, for within him hell
He brings, and round about him, nor from hell
One step no more than from himself can fly
By change of place.

(IV. 15–23)

Satan cannot escape himself; and Byron's word 'scribbling' shows how tenuous, how close to self-mocking, was his belief in his poetry as a form of action that could release him from himself.

Indeed, most of the poems that made Byron famous are inescapably self-referential; they launch themselves as fictions, but curve back upon their author. This contributed to their extraordinary success; the potency of these 'Satanic' heroes was enormously enhanced by their relation to Byron's own reputation. 'Mad – bad – and dangerous to know',³ Byron was

² Journal entry, 27 Nov. 1813; *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols. (London 1973–82) iii. 225.

³ Caroline Lamb's prescient description in her journal of 1812, quoted in Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London 2002) p. 164.

understood, like his creations, to walk on the wild side: he had travelled in the exotic East, lived the life of the libertine, taken the radical side in politics, driven his virtuous wife to separation, and was rumoured to have slept with his half-sister; now he lived in exile in Italy, where he was known to indulge in all manner of sexual licence, and kept company with the atheist Shelley. His club foot suggested some more essential deformity, or brand of distinction, half-concealed like the Devil's cloven hoof. In Byron there is continual feedback between these biographical matters and the poetry. The mere choice of Don Juan as protagonist, for example, in a poem narrated in such a way as to mock the conventional pieties, was outrageously provocative; or, in *Cain*, the lines in which Lucifer reflects how odd it is that incest will become a sin, given that Cain's sister is necessarily his wife, glance ostentatiously at the rumours of Byron's *affaire* with his half-sister. They express an aspect of Byron's personality that needed to court his own damnation in the eyes of his readership.⁴ By 1821, with the opening cantos of *Don Juan* in view, Southey was happy to oblige; and his denunciation was followed by the storm of protest that greeted the publication of *Cain* later that year. This was the work that Byron referred to in *Don Juan* as his Waterloo,⁵ the work that put him finally beyond the pale in the eyes of the British public. Until then, the Devil had been allowed only a metaphorical presence in Byron's poetry; in *Cain*, Lucifer appears in person and speaks for himself – and, many thought, for Byron also.

But to assimilate what is diabolical in *Cain* entirely to Byron's earlier 'Satanic' heroes would be to overlook what differentiates it from the earlier work: for in it the Satanic theme is handled with a new objectivity, a more intelligent detachment. Jerome McGann sees *Cain* as the culmination of the process by which 'Byron moved beyond his attachment to the frustrated figure of the Satanic hero'; he dates the start of this movement to 1816, and attributes it to Byron's renewed reflection upon Milton.⁶ However, 1816 was also the year when Byron first met the Mephistopheles of Goethe. I have sketched the Satanic element in Byron only briefly, partly because it is well known and much discussed, but mainly because I want to speculate on the new horizon that may have been opened up to Byron by his encounter with Mephistopheles. Goethe had published *Faust: First Part of the Tragedy* in 1808. Byron's German was rudimentary, but in the autumn of 1816 Matthew

⁴ And his wife. 'He used to declare that he was a fallen angel, not symbolically but literally, and told Annabella that she was one of those women spoken of in the Bible who are loved by an exile from Heaven.' *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell (New York 1954) p. 106.

⁵ Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford 1980–93), v. 482 (canto XI stanza 56). Further references are to this edition.

⁶ Jerome J. McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (London 1976) pp. 46, 23–46.

'Monk' Lewis translated *Faust* to him *viva voce* over several days while staying as his guest, and Byron records that he 'was naturally much struck with it'⁷ – so much so, that he was to imitate specific passages in *Manfred* and *The Deformed Transformed*, and dedicate *Sardanapalus* and *Werner* to Goethe as 'the first of existing masters' (vi. 15). He would have been able to refresh his sense of the work in the months before Shelley's death in 1822, when both men were living in Pisa, and Shelley was translating passages of Goethe's play; he also ordered from London Retzsch's *Analysis* of the play in English, with accompanying illustrations, which arrived at the beginning of the same year. In 1824 George Finlay, a good Germanist, could gather from Byron's conversation that although he knew nothing of the German language, 'he was perfectly acquainted ... with Goethe in particular, and with every passage of *Faust*'.⁸

Part of what Byron was 'much struck' by in *Faust* was surely the modernity of Goethe's conception of Mephistopheles, a modernity most obviously manifest in the ironic consciousness which Mephistopheles commands, and in which his whole diabolism might be said to consist. In the 'Witch's Kitchen' scene he declines the name of Satan, as a figure 'long since consigned to the book of fables – although humans are no better off: the evil one is gone, the evil ones remain'.⁹ Both that and the 'Walpurgisnacht' scene, the two most obviously 'Gothic' episodes in terms of their supernatural content, are in fact written in a style of ironic grotesquerie, with a crisp, critical consciousness untouched by any frisson of the uncanny. Rather than take Faust up to the top of the Brocken to meet the great Satan, Mephistopheles turns aside from the daemonic throng, preferring a more retired circle and a satirical interlude. It is a decision that has been variously interpreted, but is in any case nicely emblematic of Mephistopheles' detached and ironic appraisal of his own role as Devil: an irony which at these moments is also Goethe's. He is, one might say, a post-Enlightenment Devil: the Spirit of denial, as he introduces himself to Faust: 'Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint!' (l. 1338). His is a consciousness of unrelieved negativity, which sees life as worthless and aspiration as vain, and expresses that vision in a voice of irresistible dry, ironic mockery, of unamused amusement at the state of unfulfilment and self-deception which is human life. Again and again, Mephistopheles pinpoints with deadly precision what is inflated or self-deceiving in Faust's intuitions of transcendence. Whether

⁷ *Letters*, vii. 113.

⁸ George Finlay to Leicester Stanhope, June 1824, quoted in E. M. Butler, *Byron and Goethe: Analysis of a Passion* (London 1956) p. 93.

⁹ Lines 2507–9. References are to the edition of *Faust* by Erich Trunz (Munich 1972); translations are my own.

this is Faust's contemplation of a heroic suicide, his feeling of something divine in his love for Gretchen, or his withdrawal into a state of Wordsworthian communion with nature, Mephistopheles unfailingly reminds Faust of the baser element which his affirmation leaves out, or forces a switch into a less exalted imaginative mode or register. Among Goethe's sources were the puppet-plays of Faust that he saw as a child: *Faust* has passages that are as imaginatively compelling, as lyrically intense, or as emotionally devastating as drama well can be, but it has also, pervasively, something of the puppet-play about it, with Mephistopheles as both puppet and puppet-master. His manner, as well as his commentary, pulls Faust's subjective lyricism back down into a *dramatic* relation, where it is met and often abruptly challenged by other voices or perspectives, other generic modes. This movement of bathos following afflatus is the ground-rhythm of the work; although most obviously effected by Mephistopheles, there is enough of Mephistopheles in Goethe that it does not depend upon the Devil's actual presence. The bathos is supplied sometimes by the heavy sententiousness of Wagner, the ingenuous directness of Gretchen, or a counter-movement in Faust's own consciousness.

Underlying all these exchanges and in some sense their archetype is the first great dramatic moment of the work, Faust's encounter with the Erdgeist, the World-Spirit. The knowledge that Faust has at the start of the play – intellectual, conceptual knowledge, mastery of all the disciplines of the academy – does not satisfy him: it is illusory, empty, amounting to nothing more than words; it gives no access to the heart and source of life. What he seeks instead is a knowledge that will transcend these limitations, an understanding that will allow him to enter into the principle that holds the world together at its core. To that end he takes up magic, and summons the Erdgeist, which declares itself as the dynamic, glowing, ever-changing principle of the totality of life, embracing 'birth and grave – an eternal sea – weaving the living fabric of divinity at the loom of time'. Faust greets its appearance with rapture, and with an impulse of identification: 'Spirit of activity, how near I feel myself to you!', but this presumptuousness meets with an immediate rebuff:

Du gleichst den Geist, den du begreifst,
Nicht mir!

[You resemble the Spirit that you comprehend – not me!]

(ll. 512–13)

The Spirit disappears; Faust collapses in an agony of chagrin; and the bathos of the actual is consolidated by the arrival of Wagner, who has heard Faust 'declaiming', as he puts it – 'reading a Greek tragedy, perhaps?'

(ll. 522–3) The moment of soaring lyrical aspiration is flattened into the kaleidoscope of diverse modes and brilliant fragments which is *Faust*. It is a moment of rejection that burns itself into Faust's consciousness. The Spirit that he truly comprehends – and that he therefore resembles – is not the Erdgeist, the sublime totality of things, but Mephistopheles, the Spirit of denial, who is necessarily only ever 'a part', as he himself tells Faust (l. 1349), and can never give access to the whole. Indeed, it is the approach to the Erdgeist that *generates* Mephistopheles, by a kind of necessary reaction. This is explicit at the end of Faust's later soliloquy, addressed in retrospect to the Erdgeist, the 'sublime Spirit' which gave Faust the power of communion with the life of nature:

Oh, but now I feel how nothing comes to perfection for human beings. Along with this joy, which brings me ever closer to the gods, you gave me that companion, whom already I can no longer do without – even though his cold mockery belittles me in my own eyes, and with a word turns all your gifts to nothing. (ll. 3240–6)

Eat this fruit, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil, said the serpent. Faust's aspiration to divinity through the pursuit of knowledge, through the comprehension of life in its totality, likewise generates a Fall, a necessary bathos, as the intuition of transcendence is repeatedly made subject to Mephistopheles' vision of things.

That rhythm of bathos has a strong analogue in *Don Juan*.¹⁰ But this is to look ahead. Byron's immediate response to those days in 1816 when Lewis translated *Faust* to him was to write *Manfred*, a work which shows both how strongly *Faust* had gripped his imagination, and how little he had yet begun to assimilate it. The opening closely recalls Goethe: Manfred is sitting, like Faust, in a 'Gothic' room at night, passionately unsatisfied by all his knowledge, and turning to necromancy to call up spirits that might satisfy his desire – which, in his case, is for oblivion, release from the pain of consciousness, the Lethe of 'sweet forgetfulness' which Milton's fallen angels struggle in vain to reach.¹¹ Manfred rehearses the Faustian starting-point in terms that show how perfectly this had meshed in Byron's mind with his own fascination with the Fall, and with the consciousness that heroically endures and resents its fallen condition:

¹⁰ Also, more schematically, in *The Deformed Transformed*, where the Stranger assumes the deformed body which the transfigured Arnold has discarded, and insists on accompanying him in that shape. 'I will be as you were, and you shall see | Yourself for ever by you, as your shadow' (vi. 535).

¹¹ *Paradise Lost*, II. 608.

The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.
 Philosophy, and science, and the springs
 Of wonder, and the wisdom of the world,
 I have essayed, and in my mind there is
 A power to make these subject to itself –
 But they avail not.

(iv. 53: I. i)

Manfred then calls up the ‘Spirits of earth and air’, very much as Faust calls up the Erdgeist; neither gets what they seek from the encounter, and as Faust ‘collapses’, so Manfred *‘falls senseless’* (iv. 59: I. i).

Yet the effect is almost opposite. Faust is truly humiliated, truly abased, at his rebuff by the Erdgeist; his collapse is reinforced by the effect of bathos in Goethe’s presentation, the modal instability or switch. But Manfred’s stature is only enhanced by the encounter; he passes out not because the Spirits leave him (they don’t) but at the intensity of his own suffering, for he sees in a vision they present to him the woman whom he loved and destroyed; and when, as he lies unconscious, the Spirits devote him to endless suffering, they discover there is in fact nothing they can contribute, since, like Milton’s Satan, he is himself ‘thy proper Hell’ (iv. 61: I. i). There is nothing here to challenge what he had already told them:

The mind, the spirit, the Promethean spark,
 The lightning of my being, is as bright,
 Pervading, and far-darting as your own,
 And shall not yield to yours, though coop’d in clay!

(iv. 58: I. i)

This is amply confirmed by his other encounters with the supernatural in the play. He calmly refuses to kneel to Arimanes, apocalyptic power of Evil, on his throne – for he has knelt only ‘to my own desolation’ – and this extracts an admiring character reference from the First Destiny, who acknowledges him a man ‘of no common order’, whose ‘sufferings | Have been of an immortal nature, like | Our own’ (iv. 82–3: II. iv). And in the final scene, when the Devil arrives, as in the Faust legend, to claim his soul at the point of death, Manfred sends him and his fellow demons most tremendously packing. ‘Back to thy hell!’

What I have done is done; I bear within
 A torture which could nothing gain from thine;
 The mind which is immortal makes itself

Requital for its good or evil thoughts –
 Is its own origin of ill and end –
 And its own place and time ...
 I have not been thy dupe, nor am thy prey –
 But was my own destroyer, and will be
 My own hereafter. – Back, ye baffled fiends!
 The hand of death is on me – but not yours!

(iv.102: III. iv)

Paraphrasing Milton's heroic Satan – 'the mind is its own place' (*PL* I. 254) – Manfred supplants, or makes redundant, the Devil himself.

There is, one might well think, no trace here of Mephistopheles: no bathos, no play of irony, no dramatic interaction (despite the dramatic form), just the familiar Byronic individualism, the titanic assertion of self against the void. Yet one might wonder whether the presence of Mephistopheles can be felt in the energy with which he is being repudiated. That Byron should take the Erdgeist scene in particular – the encounter that releases irony into the play, the encounter that *generates* Mephistopheles, as the Erdgeist's shadow – but then 'translate' it to such contrary effect, may express an impulse of positive resistance. (Faust frequently wishes to resist or deny what he hears from Mephistopheles, but is never quite able to.) Is there anything in the suggestion that the heroic note in *Manfred* (as in the passage quoted above) is both thinner and more extreme than in Byron's non-dramatic writing, with a ringing declamatory hollowness that, if not quite at the edge of self-parody, is still almost seeking or inviting an ironic reply, an answering bathos: an invocation, a conjuration, of Mephistopheles?

Mephistopheles came. I want in particular to suggest his presence in *Cain*, in which the Devil has a large part to play, and expounds a form of disillusioning nihilism with sufficient force as to render obsolete the old 'Satanic' assertion of self familiar from Byron's salad days. This is not to say that Byron's Lucifer sounds like Mephistopheles; but where Byron can be compared with Goethe is in the ambiguous status they give to their nihilistic Devils, and to the negativity which they express. When the drama opens, Adam, Eve and their family are offering up a hymn of thanks to God for his goodness: all except for Cain, who stands obtrusively apart, rather like Hamlet at the beginning of Shakespeare's play. Cain is in a state of sullen resentment at what he perceives as the injustice of the Fall, with its punishment of the desire for knowledge, and the pain of being human which it bequeaths. 'Content thee with what *is*', Eve pleads (vi. 233: I. i), but such an attitude is precisely what Cain's intellectual restlessness rebels

against, and for this condition of discontent he can point to the Fall as both the reason and the cause. He is in this state of grievance when Lucifer appears to him; most of the drama is then given over to Cain's conversation with the Devil, after which he strikes down his brother Abel in an act of impulsive violence.

This act is felt as partly a consequence of the conversation, which clearly contributes to Cain's unsettled and eventually murderous state of mind. Yet Lucifer does not instigate the murder. What he does is little more than offer Cain reinforcement and corroboration for his initial discontent: the Devil's main contribution is to assure Cain that he, the Devil, has made no contribution to the current painful state of things. When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Lucifer insists, it was God who was really the Tempter.

Lucifer. Did I plant things prohibited within
 The reach of beings innocent, and curious
 By their own innocence? ...
Cain. But didst thou tempt my parents?
Lucifer. I?
 Poor clay! what should I tempt them for, or how?
Cain. They say the serpent was a spirit.
Lucifer. Who
 Saith that? It is not written so on high:
 The proud One will not so far falsify,
 Though man's vast fears and little vanity
 Would make him cast upon the spiritual nature
 His own low failing. The snake was the snake –
 No more.

(vi. 239: I. i)

The Devil is said to be a liar: but there is nothing to suggest that he is lying here. His knowledge of Scripture – of what is written on high – is perfectly sound. Genesis tells only that Eve was tempted by the serpent, 'more subtle than any beast of the field'. As Lucifer says, it is a later tradition that sees the Devil in the serpent. The myth of the fallen or rebel angels is nowhere explicit in the Old Testament; it first appears in relatively late Judaic writings of the second century BCE that were excluded from the canon. In the relatively few passages in the canonical writings where there appears a figure called 'the satan' (the opponent or adversary), the scholars describe him as 'a member of the heavenly court, albeit with unusual tasks'; the idea of Satan as *God's* antagonist was established only in the New Testament,

and consolidated by later commentary.¹² To discover the work of the Devil in the events of the Old Testament, and in particular in the Fall of man, is an act of retrospective interpretation, a tidying of what is ethically problematic into mutually exclusive categories of good and evil.¹³ Such tidying up relieves, or displaces, a tremendous pressure of responsibility. For if the Devil is absent, the evils that afflict human life have their origin only in man: or, of course, in God:

I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God beside me ... I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things. (Isaiah 45: 5–7)

Such a passage, explicitly seeing God as the source equally of good and evil without qualification, is exceptional in Scripture. The book of Job does explore that idea, and does so with great power, but elsewhere in the Bible affliction that flows from God is seen sometimes as a test, more often as a just punishment. It is human depravity that relieves the pressure on divine mysteriousness (or divine perversity), and in so far as the coming of Christ dissolves human depravity through forgiveness and love, it makes perfect sense that Christ should, so to speak, bring Satan into existence along with him in the Gospels, as an alternative way of relieving that immediate pressure on the divine.

Cain undoes that act of retrospective interpretation, and reinstates the problematic. If there was no Devil in the Garden, then the serpent's offer – 'your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil' – must be allowed its full, richly tempting face value. Lucifer refers Cain to the human motives that prompt the later demonisation of this offer: man's 'vast fears and little vanity', the all-too-human impulse to deny full responsibility, to deflect guilt onto others. That sense of guilt would seem to arise inevitably from acceptance of the offer, in that the loss of innocence is implied by knowledge of good and evil. The shame felt by Adam and Eve in Genesis, even before God discovers their transgression, is one manifestation of that eye-opening knowledge promised by the serpent. 'The eyes of them both

¹² Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton 1987) p. 107; see also Peter Stanford, *The Devil: A Biography* (London 1996); and Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York 1995), where Pagels argues that Satan rises into prominence as an expression of emergent sectarian animosities within Judaism, since Satan is in the early stories not God's eternal polar opposite but an intimate, familiar enemy, a traitor to the cause, lapsed from a place of high favour among the powers of God.

¹³ This is nicely illustrated by the Gnostic revision of the story of Abraham and Isaac, where the command to sacrifice Isaac comes not from God but from Satan. Similarly, when Defoe retells the Old Testament narrative in his *History of the Devil* he religiously writes in a part for Satan at all appropriate points.

were opened, and they knew that they were naked.' The story of the Fall reads very naturally as a mythologising of the passage from childhood to adulthood, from amoral spontaneity to moral self-consciousness, with all the complex mixture of loss and gain which that involves. The myth emphasises at this moment the dimension of loss: the inevitable separation and divergence from the will of the parent is construed as an act of punishable disobedience, painful alienation. But the myth also reminds us that such loss comes at the beginning of things. One would have to value unreflective spontaneity very highly (as some strains within Romanticism were, admittedly, inclined to do) to see this passage into adult consciousness as pure loss, pure evil.

It would be possible to extrapolate from this that *Cain* is fundamentally a demystifying work, a work of rationalist critique that undoes the Devil altogether. That seems to be how many of *Cain*'s scandalised readers understood the work. But this is a mistake: or, more precisely, it is true only in so far as Lucifer can be identified with the whole intelligence of the play. Certainly, there are passages where Lucifer seems to speak as the play's *raisonneur*, and acts rather like some rationalist of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in encouraging his audience – Cain – to emerge from a state of mere superstition. He rebuts the notion that the evils of the human condition are the work of the Devil; he reveals the traditional conception of the Devil as the projection of our human anxieties; and he urges Cain to test the motives to piety against the realities of his own experience. Kant had defined the Enlightenment as the mind's coming to maturity, and proposed as its motto *sapere aude*, dare to think; Lucifer encourages Cain to open his eyes and think for himself, and speaks of the joy of knowledge and the autonomy of intellect.¹⁴

¹⁴ Closer to home, Lucifer's comments also chime well enough with Shelley's stance in his essay 'On the Devil', composed at about the time that Byron was writing *Cain*. Shelley observes that the Devil makes no appearance in the earlier Old Testament writings, and it is the Christians who 'have turned this Serpent into their Devil', a figure 'invented or adopted' in a desperate endeavour 'to reconcile omnipotence, and benevolence, and equity, in the Author of an Universe where evil and good are inextricably intangled and where the most admirable tendencies to happiness and preservation are for ever baffled by misery and decay'. Christians hold to belief in the Devil in order to appease the God of their conception, 'like panic-stricken slaves in the presence of a jealous and suspicious despot', but this doctrine is in truth 'the weak place of the popular religion – the vulnerable belly of the crocodile'. Although Shelley is here pretty much at one with Lucifer, he was not so with Byron; in a letter to Horace Smith disclaiming his alleged influence on *Cain*, he lamented his lack of power 'to eradicate from his [Byron's] great mind the delusions of Christianity which, in spite of his reason, seem perpetually to recur'. See *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols. (New York 1965) vii. 104, 89, 87 and x. 378.

What that knowledge involves is revealed in the central act of the drama, where Lucifer offers Cain the fruit of a modern, secular, scientific understanding. He takes him out into the immensities of the universe, in a great tour through time and space. What he shows him on this tour is, so to speak, mortality writ small: the insignificance of human life when seen in the perspective that takes in millions of other worlds, the mutations of our own world over aeons of distant time, and the shadowy underworld of the dead, which includes the exalted race of pre-Adamite beings, destroyed in a geological catastrophe, in line with the recent scientific theories of Cuvier. If the universe looks beautiful, that, Lucifer explains, is merely the effect of distance, promoting delusion – and when Cain objects the loveliness of Adah, his wife and sister, Lucifer replies that her beauty too will pass away, with so much the greater loss for those who cherish it. It is a bleak view of humanity's place in the long perspectives of astronomy and geological time, and Cain is inclined to resent his education, but Lucifer commends to him the inner strength that disillusionment brings:

Cain. And to what end have I beheld these things

Which thou hast shown me?

Lucifer. Didst thou not require

Knowledge? And have I not, in what I show'd,

Taught thee to know thyself?

Cain.

Alas! I seem

Nothing.

Lucifer.

And this should be the human sum

Of knowledge, to know mortal nature's nothingness;

Bequeath that science to thy children, and

'Twill spare them many tortures.

(vi. 273–4: II. ii)

This inner strength comes from confidence in intellectual independence, in the unintimidated exercise of reason:

One good gift has the fatal apple given –

Your *reason*: – let it not be over-sway'd

By tyrannous threats to force you into faith

'Gainst all external sense and inward feeling:

Think and endure, – and form an inner world

In your own bosom – where the outward fails;

So shall you nearer be the spiritual

Nature, and war triumphant with your own.

(vi. 275: II. ii)

These are Lucifer's last words in the play, his valediction to Cain. Revising but also echoing Raphael's final words to Adam in *Paradise Lost* before the Fall (VIII. 635–43), as well as Michael on 'rational liberty' afterward (XII. 82 and ff.) they do not sound like an instigation to evil.

Yet, despite the tendency of these passages, Lucifer cannot be consistently read as a corrective intelligence, as 'the Devil' only in inverted commas, or as an evident device by which Byron articulates a demystifying critique. For there are also moments in which it is clear that Lucifer's is not the master-consciousness of the play, but rather a *dramatised* figure, whose voice is one element within a larger dramatic field. When Lucifer suggests that a short course in nihilism will have a certain anaesthetic or even tonic value for suffering mankind, he misses the way that nihilism itself is painful for human beings, who cannot detach themselves from the conditions of creation with the Devil's sublime contempt.

Lucifer. I pity thee who lovest what must perish.

Cain. And I thee who lov'st nothing.

(vi. 270: II. ii)

It is crucial that Cain is thus differentiated from Lucifer – is not his protégé or his stooge – not so much because of the positive human value that Byron invests (rather thinly) in Cain's relationship with Adah, as because this sustains the dramatic principle itself. We are given a certain critical perspective on all the characters, who mark one another's limits of imagination and experience, so that our understanding, including theirs, is more complex than theirs. This may seem a very obvious thing to say: what else should a drama do but dramatise? But in Byron's case the point has a particular significance, since so much of his earlier poetry encourages an unrestricted identification with its Byronic hero, whose charismatic consciousness, unlimited and unqualified by the consciousness of others, colours the whole work and the whole world. In *Manfred* the protagonist's state of mind was dominant from beginning to end, and the protagonist was, so to speak, his own situation; other characters had nothing to do but look on in wonder. In *Cain*, however (as also in the two plays published with it in the same volume), Byron is trying for something new: the dramatic, where no one character's subjectivity reaches to the horizon, and the main motor of our involvement is not the pleasure of identification but an appreciation of differences. Thus, although Cain's rebelliousness is sympathetic, it is also plainly adolescent, and although Lucifer's analysis is arresting and persuasive, in offering it he *may* (the uncertainty that is dramatic) also be acting as the Tempter. When he speaks to Cain of 'the joy | And power of

knowledge', it is not only as a son of the Enlightenment, but also with an obliquely sinister exhilaration, a dark investment in the sense of *power*:

Nothing can
Quench the mind, if the mind will be itself
And centre of surrounding things – 'tis made
To sway.

(vi. 239: I. i)

This is very different from the calm confidence with which Kant proposes the autonomy of intellect, or the idealism with which Shelley (in some moods) affirms the liberation of the spirit. It identifies enlightenment – or more precisely, the realisation of the vigour and freedom of the individual mind – as a Faustian compact, as the Devil's bargain. What Lucifer is asserting in these lines is a profoundly anti-dramatic principle, that would return to the earlier Byronic mode of a single dominant and defiant subjectivity, the fundamental principle of Romantic Satanism, or Satanic Romanticism:

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.

(PLI. 255)

But in *Cain* this principle does not carry all before it; Lucifer's sentiments lack the Miltonic emphasis, are not powerful enough to give shape to the pentameter line (e.g. the metrical weakness of 'Nothing can | Quench the mind') and, more importantly, Lucifer's encounter with Cain has consequences that reach beyond Cain's own state of mind. The knowledge that Lucifer gives Cain – of 'mortal nature's nothingness' – sharpens his discontent, exacerbating his already dangerous and unreconciled mood. As a result, when alongside Abel he offers sacrifice in the final act, he will not kneel, and addresses God in terms so challengingly independent, so full of grudge and potential accusation, and so inclined to assert his own ability to judge of good and evil, that it is hardly surprising that his sacrifice is rejected and his altar overthrown by a whirlwind from heaven, while Abel's blood-sacrifice is accepted. Infuriated, he goes to throw down Abel's altar in repudiation of such a God, and when Abel persists in defending it he strikes him down. His anguish and self-horror, however, are immediate, and intense. If there has been something of adolescence in his rebelliousness until now, blaming others for his situation, he now has blood on his hands, a moral agent who has made his own contribution to the sum. He has brought death into the world; he has *realised* the Fall, perhaps even intensified its

results, he reflects, by depriving the gene pool of Abel's gentleness. 'I am awake at last – a dreary dream | Had madden'd me; – but *he* shall ne'er awake!' (vi. 289: III. i). It is not clear what Cain means by this – was it his resentment over the sacrifice that was the dreary dream, or the long interview with Lucifer, or his state of chronic discontent? – but this doesn't much matter; the key thing is the image of awakening, with its acknowledgement of a reality beyond the subjective. In the final exchanges of the play Byron gives some space to this reality – to the feelings of Adah, and the future of their child – but what is more striking is how little amplitude he gives to Cain's anguish. Lara, Harold, Manfred all felt their individual alienation with Satanic intensity: there is some of this in Cain still, to be sure – 'It burns | My brow, but nought to that which is within it' – but the operatic flamboyance is, as throughout the work, counterpointed by a subdued, undeclamatory cadence, with weak line-endings and enjambments that run into the sand, essaying a newly tentative, understated music:

After the fall too soon was I begotten;
 Ere yet my mother's mind subsided from
 The serpent, and my sire still mourn'd for Eden.

(vi. 293: III. i)

The final line of the drama is eloquent only in what it refuses to do:

Cain. O Abel!
Adah. Peace be with him!
Cain. But with *me!* –

(vi. 295: III. i)

We finish with the alienated ego, italicised and emphasised, but also stranded weakly at the end of the line. It may be that Cain will now turn into the Byronic/Satanic hero (the ingredients are certainly all in place: alienation, guilt complicated by resentment, superior powers of mind, an intense sense of self, experience of exotic foreign travel), but it matters that the drama cuts him off here, denying itself the big set-piece that would call for our identification.

If Satanism means celebrating and identifying with the stance of titanic discontent that certain of the Romantics found in Milton, and more or less explicitly writing under the sign of Milton's Satan, then *Cain* is not Satanic. But it does invoke the Devil, and in no merely nominal sense. We learn that there was no Devil in the Garden, and that to see the Devil as the cause of our unhappiness is a psychological projection, the enlarged shadow thrown by human weakness; but we learn this from Lucifer himself. Byron does not

always, perhaps, have this paradox under perfect control, but it is very much alive in the work, and the most interesting thing in it. One might say that the discovery that the traditional understanding of the Fall is mere superstition is itself the knowledge of good and evil that reinstates the Fall in something like its original form. Crucial to this paradox is the way that Byron keeps the question of Lucifer's *motives* perfectly ambiguous; for we cannot tell whether the Devil means well or ill. He offers Cain knowledge and enlightenment, of a necessarily – because truthfully – disillusioning kind; but what follows on from this enlightenment, and is to some indeterminate degree its consequence, given the state of affairs ordained by God, is death and anguish. Was this foreseen and intended by Lucifer? Has he been acting, after all, as the Tempter? It is impossible to say. The *raisonneur* and the Devil flicker into one another, but neither defines the other, so that one can infer neither that diabolism is rational, nor that rationalism is diabolical. Lucifer does not instigate the murder; though he does, at one point, put Abel's irritatingly acceptable piety into Cain's mind. Most of the time his manner is convincingly disinterested, but there are also passages where he is glad to reinforce Cain's alienation from God, whom he acknowledges as his eternal adversary. Such ambiguity dissolves the presumption of *dichotomy* that supports the familiar notion of the Devil; in so doing, it opens the possibility of engaging in more complicated, functional relations with the Adversary.

In defending his representation of the Devil in *Cain*, Byron repeatedly appealed not only to *Paradise Lost* but also to the example of *Faust*. What links Lucifer and Mephistopheles is not only their belittling, disillusioning account of human life, but also their cool, unsettling detachment from their role as Devil.¹⁵ Like Lucifer, Mephistopheles knows perfectly well how humans use the Devil as scapegoat for their own weaknesses and crimes. When Faust is gripped (belatedly enough) by horror at the consequences for Gretchen of their *affaire*, he turns on Mephistopheles in passionate reproach, addressing him for the first time as the monstrous figure of evil familiar from tradition and from nightmare ('Roll your devilish eyes furiously in your head'), as if trying to force the register of the play into that of Gothic horror; but he has no reply to Mephistopheles' calm, lethal response: 'Why join with us, if you can't carry it through? . . . Who was it, who ruined her? I or you?'¹⁶ Like Byron's Lucifer, Mephistopheles declines to take the blame. He may be the Devil, but he is not *that* Devil. He does not, in truth, actively instigate or tempt Faust to the seduction of Gretchen,

¹⁵ In *The Deformed Transformed*, similarly, the 'Stranger' calmly suggests ways in which he can be differentiated from the Devil Arnold supposes he may be (vi. 522–3).

¹⁶ From the prose scene 'Dreary Day. Field', pp. 137–8 in the Trunz edition, after line 4398.

whom Faust appears to meet by chance, and his supernatural contribution to the process amounts to nothing very essential: a supply of Viagra and a credit card would do as much. As Byron was to do with Lucifer, so Goethe keeps continually ambiguous the question of Mephistopheles' intention with regard to Faust. True, he tells us in a rare soliloquy that he plans to destroy Faust by exposing him to a life of worldly dissipation, whose hollow pleasures will only reinforce his insatiability, his torment of unfulfilment. But this plan seems to make no sense in relation to Faust's wager that Mephistopheles can never bring him to a moment of contentment, a moment of such complete fulfilment that Faust could wish it might last for ever: only then, it is agreed, may Mephistopheles claim him. By Plan A, Mephistopheles should be scheming to frustrate Faust's desires, by Plan B, to fulfil them; and this ambiguity only compounds our doubt as to whether, most of the time, Mephistopheles is scheming against Faust at all, or rather offering his sharp, ironic, belittling commentaries without any malicious or manipulative intent, but simply because that is how things are. There *is* a great and terrible evil in the play: it is what happens to Gretchen, implicated in the deaths of her mother and brother, abandoned by her lover, rejected by her community, and driven to infanticide and madness, but Goethe does not tell us how much of this, if any of it, Mephistopheles engineers or even foresees.¹⁷

This ambiguity is not just a matter of Mephistopheles' intentions, as we may try to imagine them; it involves what might be called his ultimate ethical orientation. He famously describes himself to Faust as

Ein Teil von jener Kraft,
Das stets das Böse will, und stets das Gute schafft.
[A part of that power that always wills what is evil, and creates what is good.]

(ll. 1335–6)

This looks to a potential to undo dichotomy and alienation, to transform relations between the self and the Adversary who appears to us as the Devil. The idea is most strikingly realised in the 'Prologue in Heaven' with which Goethe prefaced *Faust: Part One* after it was virtually complete. The Prologue

¹⁷ In its draft, unpublished, form *Faust: Part One* consisted of two separate clusters of passages: the early Faust/Mephistopheles scenes and the Gretchen tragedy. Between these came what Goethe called the great gap, which he struggled for years to find the right way to fill. In the final version there is material connecting the two sections, but there is also a strong residual sense of discontinuity – between motives and events, between the Devil and the evil – and this is very much part of the play's power.

opens with the archangels singing to the Lord God in splendid verse of the splendours of the creation; but also present is Mephistopheles, who cannot make 'great speeches' about the universe as a whole, but reports that on earth everything goes as badly as ever. Human beings are a torment to themselves, made miserable by their imperfect glimpse of the divine: like grasshoppers, they spring upward, only then to fall into the shit. He himself hardly cares to hurt the poor things. At which God mentions Faust, whom he declares his servant, but Mephistopheles raises an eyebrow at this description. In his absurd and restless discontent, Faust is indeed a case in point, and he bets that God will 'lose' him if he, Mephistopheles, is allowed a free hand. God accepts the wager without concern; error, he declares, is an inevitable part of that 'striving' that marks a good man's dim consciousness of the right path. God then withdraws, the archangels disperse, and Mephistopheles is left in possession of the stage to speak the closing lines, as a figure who is naturally intimate with the audience, and who will preside over the human drama that is about to unfold.

Goethe's Prologue bases itself, of course, on the opening of the book of Job, and to Satan's place in the court of Heaven as presented there.

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them.

And the Lord said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.

And the Lord said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?

Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, Doth Job fear God for nought?

Hast thou not made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land.

But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face.

And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power. (Job 1: 6–12)

Satan here is not yet what he will become: the Devil who is the great Enemy of God and man. It seems clear that he is part of the court of Heaven, and that he works for God, under licence, and is answerable to him. Yet it is also clear that he is something of a loose cannon, a semi-freelance,

one of the sons of God but also distinguished from them. He is not the great Enemy, but his role is that of Adversary (which is what 'satan' means), adversary to Job in questioning how deep his virtue goes and in putting him to the test, and adversary also to God in putting an opposing point of view (although we may note that God seems to be fishing for such opposition). The result of this adversarial behaviour will be the infliction of great suffering on earth, pain that would seem to demand, for comprehension, the hypothesis of evil, whether in Job himself (as his companions will propose) or in the higher powers. The book of Job makes us feel very clearly the forces that were to produce (or unveil) Satan-as-Devil, even while it refuses to see Satan thus, or indeed to curse God to his face. Satan appears only in the first two chapters, and when at the end of the book God finally manifests himself to Job it is as the not-to-be-comprehended God of Isaiah 45, source of all phenomena both good and evil – and in that respect close kin to the principle of dynamic totality which is Goethe's not-to-be-comprehended Erdgeist.

In its very different idiom, Goethe's 'Prologue in Heaven' expresses a comparable vision. Although Mephistopheles brings an oppositional and discordant voice into the heavenly rejoicing, beneath God's mild exasperation with him there is a largely cordial note: 'I have never hated your kind. Of all the spirits of denial, a rogue like you is the smallest burden to me. Human beings all too easily slacken in their activity, and grow fond of peace and quiet: that's why I like to give them a companion who draws them on and works upon them and must be devilish busy' (ll. 337–43). That phrase, *muss als Teufel schaffen*, also carries the implication, 'must, as a devil, be productive', or in Shelley's rendering, 'must create forever'.¹⁸ What is suggested here is an extraordinary reassimilation of the Devil into the larger, productive functioning of the whole. In this positive scenario the roguish kind of negativity is ultimately salutary; Mephistopheles, while willing evil, produces good; and Faustian discontent will end not in damnation but salvation – as indeed it does at the end of *Faust Part Two*, published twenty-four years after *Part One*. What the Prologue offers the ethical imagination is therefore something precious: the glimpse of a liaison or rapport between the Adversary and God which, as at the start of Job, stops the Adversary from becoming unequivocally the Enemy, and so models an intuition of the world other than as radically divided between good and evil.

It is only a glimpse. This rapport between God and the Devil is audaciously figured as (merely) an attitude of *politeness* that keeps two individuals on speaking terms who differ strongly in their attitudes, their interests, and their position in the world. The positive scenario which this hints at does

¹⁸ *Works*, iv. 326.

not reappear in *Faust Part One*, rather as in the book of Job the sense of *liaison* between God and the Adversary appears only in the opening frame, and even in the Prologue this is held in considerable tension against the independent dramatic life given to Mephistopheles. If God regards Mephistopheles with a tolerant condescension, at the end of the scene Mephistopheles meets that condescension with a certain irresistible condescension of his own:

Von Zeit zu Zeit seh'ich den Alten gern,
Und hüte mich, mit ihm zu brechen.
Es ist gar hübsch von einem grossen Herrn,
So menschlich mit dem Teufel selbst zu sprechen.

[I like to see the old fellow from time to time, and take care not to break with him. It's really rather sweet of such a great lord to speak so humanely even to the devil.]

(ll. 350–3)

God has described him as a rogue (*Schurke*: rogue, knave, wag) who acts as a devil (*als Teufel*), but the space this leaves between Mephistopheles and his role is exploited by Mephistopheles himself in remarking the irony by which God has been speaking so humanely 'even to the Devil' or 'to the Devil himself' (*mit dem Teufel selbst*). Such behaviour is *gar hübsch* ('really rather sweet', or more literally, 'pretty': 'civil enough',¹⁹ in Shelley's version), he says: a feline tribute to God's good manners to his poor relation that also suggests something conceivably weak or vulnerable in God's sublime tolerance of what would otherwise be called evil. Just for a moment we see the Lord (as he is called in the text) as something of an old buffer, an amiable colonial administrator who is rather out of touch with conditions on the ground: when Mephistopheles tells us that he takes care not to break with him this simultaneously reminds us that he *could*, and that other stories tell us that he *has*, and that there is in that cool, ironic self-possession something formidable that is still fully to be reckoned with.

When defending his representation of Lucifer in *Cain*, Byron's mind went not simply to *Faust*, but to the 'Prologue in Heaven' in particular.

What would the Methodists at home say to Goethe's 'Faust'? His devil not only talks very familiarly *of* Heaven, but very familiarly *in* Heaven. What would they think of the colloquies of Mephistopheles and his pupil, or the more daring language of the prologue, which no one will ever venture to translate?²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell (Princeton, NJ 1966) p. 130.

Shelley was, in fact, working on a translation of the Prologue at the time, to be published in the first number of *The Liberal*, the radical journal founded by Shelley, Byron and Leigh Hunt. It appeared together with a new poem by Byron, *The Vision of Judgment*. Readers of the journal must have been struck by the juxtaposition. Not only does the setting of Byron's poem, which takes place outside Heaven's gate, clearly recall Goethe's Prologue, but it contains one passage that translates the spirit of the Prologue more effectively than any literal version.

The Vision is a wonderfully sharp and funny response to, and spoof of, Southey's *A Vision of Judgment*, which had solemnly related the Poet Laureate's vision of the ascension of George III into Heaven. It was in the preface to that work that Southey attacked 'the satanic school' in poetry, and Byron takes evident pleasure in turning Satan back on his accuser: angels and devils dispute what is to be done with George, given his abysmal political record, but when Southey himself turns up to testify neither Satan nor the Archangel Michael can endure to listen to his poetry, and in the ensuing chaos King George slips unobserved into Heaven. (Goethe was a great admirer of *The Vision*, and George's salvation, infinitely ironic yet ultimately generous, may have contributed something to the salvation of Faust at the end of *Part Two*.²¹) The passage which can be said most directly to 'translate' Goethe's Prologue in Heaven, however, comes earlier, and is not directly satirical; it describes the encounter of Michael and Satan.

He and the sombre, silent Spirit met –
 They knew each other both for good and ill;
 Such was their power, that neither could forget
 His former friend and future foe; but still
 There was a high, immortal, proud regret
 In either's eye, as if 'twere less their will
 Than destiny to make the eternal years
 Their date of war, and their 'Champ Clos' the spheres.

But here they were in neutral space: we know
 From Job, that Sathan hath the power to pay
 A heavenly visit thrice a year or so;
 And that 'the Sons of God,' like those of clay,
 Must keep him company; and we might show,
 From the same book, in how polite a way
 The dialogue is held between the Powers
 Of Good and Evil – but 'twould take up hours ...

²¹ Butler thinks this 'almost certain': *Byron and Goethe*, p. 165.

The spirits were in neutral space, before
 The gate of heaven; like eastern thresholds is
 The place where Death's grand cause is argued o'er,
 And souls despatched to that world or to this;
 And therefore Michael and the other wore
 A civil aspect: though they did not kiss,
 Yet still between his Darkness and his Brightness
 There passed a mutual glance of great politeness.

(vi. 322 f.)

There may be no direct quotation here of *Faust*, but the manner of invoking Job, and the idea of 'polite' relations between the Devil and his opposite, are unmistakably after Goethe. The first stanza strongly recalls the old Satanic note ('a high, immortal, proud regret'), but this is already significantly qualified by the sense of reciprocity, and the passage then modulates – in the special imaginative conditions of 'neutral space' – into a realisation of something of the likeness that underlies, or complicates, the great opposition of Good and Evil, the ultimate dichotomy of 'that world' or 'this'. It is 'both for good and ill' that Michael and Satan know each other, a knowledge of good and evil that weaves that dichotomy into a different pattern, and an entire poetic is implicit in the 'civil aspect', the 'mutual glance', that temporarily unite Michael and 'the other'.²² The other, crucially, remains itself – 'they did not kiss' – remains the Adversary, that which is set over against the self, and there is in this eternal alienation matter for a great regret; but still, what can be glanced at and glimpsed in neutral space is that the Adversary is not the Enemy absolutely, although often obliged to play that role (as Byron himself will in a few stanzas resume his role as anti-establishment satirist). Though unresolved, there can be a dialogue with the Devil. And this intuition is wonderfully supported by the voice which gives such life and energy to the writing: Byron's impudent familiarity, his sublimely casual irreverence with regard to matters of the greatest moment (and recognised as such), is the best match in English poetry for the idiom of Mephistopheles, who speaks so 'very familiarly', as Byron noted, of Heaven and in Heaven.²³

²² See McGann, *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (Oxford 1989) pp. 38–64. McGann sees Byron's way of maintaining oppositions as calling into question Romantic ideals of self-integrity and identity, since these depend, by the Hegelian analysis, on the negation of 'Otherness, that which is not the subject ... in the process of knowledge we call consciousness' (p. 41).

²³ When Crabb Robinson visited Goethe in 1829 he found the great man overflowing with admiration for the *Vision*, in which 'Byron has surpassed himself'. *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. Thomas Sadler, 3 vols. (London 1869), ii. 436.

When Byron wrote the *Vision* he had already published the first five cantos of *Don Juan*, and the growing affinity with Goethe's handling of Mephistopheles can readily be felt in his great poem. Its narrator presents himself as a disillusioned, all-too-knowledgeable ex-participant in the great game or masquerade of life; he no longer loves or hates 'in much excess', but has attained, or been reduced to, a stance of ironic detachment.

For my part, I am but a mere spectator,
And gaze where'er the palace or the hovel is,
Much in the mode of Goethe's Mephistopheles.

(v. 527: XIII/7)

Certainly the 'Spirit of denial' is potent in the poem. 'And the sad truth, which hovers o'er my desk | Turns what was once romantic to burlesque' (v. 204: IV/3): a transformation which epitomises the movement from Satan to Mephistopheles. The Mephistophelean bathos is everywhere in *Don Juan*, a poetic re-enactment of the Fall that is built into the manner of the writing, which – like Faust before the Erdgeist, though without Faust's dismay – continually collapses in the approach to finality or transcendence.

For oftentimes when Pegasus seems winning
The race, he sprains a wing, and down we tend,
Like Lucifer when hurl'd from heaven for sinning;
Our sin the same, and hard as his to mend,
Being pride, which leads the mind to soar too far,
Till our own weakness shows us what we are.

(v. 203: IV/1)

This bathos, this negativity is functional, it appears; it 'shows us what we are'. But there is some danger for the modern reader who finds this position simply attractive, and the ironic, critical voice in *Don Juan* entirely genial and congenial. There is such evident moral intelligence in Byron's mockery of cant in all its forms, and many of Byron's targets are so readily antipathetic to the modern mind, that one can fail to note how continuously and without border controls Byron's strong contempt runs into the voice of Mephistopheles, the voice that implies that cant is universal, that *all* pretension to the ethical falls to the negative critique.

It is helpful to recall how acutely the negativity of *Don Juan* was felt at the time of its publication. This was not true only of the conventionally minded and the self-righteous whom Byron was obviously baiting, and who duly execrated the poem. Most of his own circle were also dismayed, urging him not to publish. And there was nothing shallow or obtuse about Francis Jeffrey's

hostile account of the first five cantos in the *Edinburgh Review*. Jeffrey explicitly dismisses the outcry against Byron as 'a disciple or an apostle of Satan' whose poetry is 'a mere compound of blasphemy and obscenity'. On the contrary, it is precisely Byron's inwardness with the values which he sees through as illusions that makes him so dangerous.

Love, patriotism, valour, devotion, constancy, ambition – all are to be laughed at ... but the author ... has the unlucky gift of personating all those sweet and lofty illusions, and that with such grace and force and truth to nature, that it is impossible not to suppose, for the time, that he is among the most devoted of their votaries – till he casts off the character with a jerk – and, the moment after he has moved and exalted us to the very height of our conception, resumes his mockery at all things serious or sublime – and lets us down at once on some coarse joke, hard-hearted sarcasm, or fierce and relentless personality – as if on purpose ... to demonstrate practically as it were, and by example, how possible it is to have all fine and noble feelings, or their appearance, for a moment, and yet retain no particle of respect for them – or of belief in their intrinsic worth or permanent reality.²⁴

This goes to the heart of the matter: Byron's destabilising of the (Romantic) idea of self-identity, the softening of the opposition between self and other, and the 'mutual glance' between adversarial principles which this makes possible. Jeffrey leaves out, perhaps, the extraordinary energy release that this involves, and he assumes or half-assumes, against the grain of his own perception, a real Byron in the poem who can be identified with the voice and strategy of Mephistopheles, to whose nihilistic vision all roads lead. One can reply to this that a narrator who reflects that he looks on 'in the mode' of Mephistopheles cannot be identified with Mephistopheles; Byronic self-consciousness in *Don Juan* has no terminus, but 'personates' cynicism no more finally than it personates what is 'sweet and lofty', as in the Haidée episode for example. What is true is that negativity tends to come with reflection and hence with time; it is age and experience that turn what was once romantic to burlesque, but for that very reason *Don Juan* is a thoroughly un-teleological poem, whose comic energies are mobilised in its digressive, episodic, discontinuous qualities. Like *Faust*, *Don Juan* takes a protagonist who is traditionally bound for hell, and opens the possibility of a different outcome, partly by opening the possibility of suspending an inevitable outcome altogether. The *Vision* made fun of the very idea of a final judgement (it is by mere accident that King George gets into Heaven), and

²⁴ Theodore Redpath (ed.), *The Young Romantics and Critical Opinion 1807–1824* (London 1973) pp. 288–90.

Don Juan presents itself as unplanned, *ad hoc*, and without end. This has its parallel in the way in which *Faust* – so long deferred, and at first published as a fragment with its final tragic scenes removed – came out in 1808 as, explicitly, part of an as yet inaccessible whole: *First Part of the Tragedy*. It is Mephistopheles who is only ‘a part’, as he knows, and whose perspective is partial; his positive function, as God declares it in the Prologue, lies precisely in stirring things up, in keeping life in motion. It is for the Adversary to sustain the dramatic principle, the primacy of relations and the dynamic plurality of viewpoints, against closure: the dominion of the ego on the one hand, or the voice of ‘realism’ on the other. The Adversary is the shadow thrown by the totality of things, which we cannot know in its totality, but only in terms of the relations of its parts.

Nevertheless, Jeffrey’s analysis is helpful in reminding us that the Spirit of negation is the Devil still, and not easily to be assimilated to some salutary larger movement. Even the impulse to abandon the teleological, to live *ad hoc* and for the moment, can be advocated with sardonic irony:

But ‘Carpe diem,’ Juan, ‘Carpe, carpe!’
 To-morrow sees another race as gay
 And transient, and devoured by the same harpy.
 ‘Life’s a poor player,’ – then ‘play out the play,
 Ye villains!’ and above all keep a sharp eye
 Much less on what you do than what you say:
 Be hypocritical, be cautious, be
 Not what you *seem*, but always what you *see*.

(v. 491: XI/86)

This comes as the climax of a great sequence of exclamation at how rapid, frantic and incessant have been the changes in England in the last few years: therefore – or nevertheless – the narrator urges Juan, now just arriving in London, to fling himself into the merry-go-round of London high society and all its opportunities for flirtation and seduction. ‘I have seen ... I have seen ...’ reiterates the narrator, sixteen times in the preceding twenty-four lines, nowhere more the detached spectator of *vanitas* than in this passage, but then urges Juan to be spectator and participant both, to be ‘always what you *see*’. This is dangerous, double-edged, mocking advice. The life recommended for Juan’s embrace is transient and worthless; still, as the alternative – middle-aged *ennui*, withdrawal and disillusionment – is hollow also, so hollow indeed that it has nothing better to advise than this, then, after all, why not? And so we get the quotation from Falstaff on playing out the play, defending hedonism and life lived as role-playing against Hal’s threat of a final judgement. Yet to give such advice in that

all-too-knowing spirit poisons the ability to embrace it. It has the ring of the Devil about it:

Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie,
Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.

[All theorising, my dear friend, is grey: the golden tree of life is green.]

(ll. 2039–40)

Mephistopheles is here advising the student to consider taking up medicine; other academic disciplines are hollow, but this one has real substance, for the opportunities for handling women's bodies which it provides. The Devil's irony is never keener than when, from the vantage-point which has seen through everything, he urges his protégé to *choose life*.

Those acid lines by Byron come, significantly, at the moment of Juan's entry into London. The 'English cantos' comprise roughly the final third of the poem in its unfinished state, and it has often been noticed that they feel different from what has gone before. The narrator's voice is noticeably dominant, and the proportion of reflection and commentary to action is much greater. Juan himself does little; little happens to him; and we get little access to his consciousness. This contributes to the reader's sense that the youthful Juan is no longer much of a foil to his worldly and world-weary narrator: Juan's recent service in war and as hard-worked stud to Catherine of Russia make him a more experienced, perhaps jaded, perhaps shop-soiled hero, however dashing and desirable a figure he cuts in London high society. By setting these cantos in that empty, glittering world he knew so well, Byron is satirising a very specific way of life, and in one sense this puts him on firm moral ground. Yet the note of a bottomless negativity is also sounded, since it is not clear by what viable positive values the *ennui* of high society life can be condemned or even, more simply, set aside. It is an utterly superficial world – but can a return to sexual comedy, in this setting and at this stage in the poem, have the vitality that speaks of depth? There is some sense – or threat – that by coming home to the world of the English upper classes Byron is, paradoxically, embracing the real more closely than before, and that this anti-teleological poem *might* be drawing towards, if not an end, then a point from which no vital development is conceivable. We'll go no more a-roving: there will be no more Greek island banquets or adventures in harems, just the true, definitive bathos of reality. In the opening canto we were told that 'in canto twelfth I mean to show | The very place where wicked people go' (v. 75: I/207); as it turns out, London stands in for Hell. In the terms of my argument, in the English cantos the narrative voice becomes ever more intimate with Mephistopheles.

Bernard Beatty has written well about this aspect of the poem; the preceding paragraph is indebted to his subtle discussion.²⁵ He argues that when the poem breaks off it is preparing its own deliverance through the figure of Aurora Raby, who brings with her values beyond the reach of the narrator's negativity, and whose connection with Juan will effectively redeem him from the nullity of London life. If this is right, then Aurora can be imagined as taking approximately the same place in *Don Juan* that Gretchen has in *Faust*: a crucial third centre of consciousness that stands altogether clear of the rhythm of aspiration (or lament) and bathos. But this argument implies that *Don Juan* is already beginning to reveal itself as a surprisingly directional work after all, or at least as a work that invites a markedly teleological reading. Well, perhaps; but it isn't necessary, I think, to attribute so much significance to Aurora in order to feel that it is possible to be seriously intimate with a seriously dangerous Mephistopheles and yet escape him. When Beatty quotes the line where – deep in the London section – the narrator describes himself as a mere spectator in the mode of Mephistopheles, he comments, 'this sounds plausible enough until we recall that there is no Faust with whom this Mephistopheles can talk'.²⁶ That sounds plausible enough until we recall Byron's wonderful fluidity of tone, which is itself a kind of dialogue. The narrator's self-identification with Mephistopheles comes cheek by jowl with equally persuasive moments of identification with Johnson and with Cervantes: all figures of intelligent disillusionment, but disillusionment of different kinds, which Byron indeed distinguishes between rather than amalgamates:

Rough Johnson, the great moralist, professed,
 Right honestly, 'he liked an honest hater' –
 The only truth that yet has been confest
 Within these latest thousand years or later.
 Perhaps the fine old fellow spoke in jest: –
 For my part, I am but a mere spectator,
 And gaze where'er the palace or the hovel is,
 Much in the mode of Goethe's Mephistopheles;

But neither love nor hate in much excess;
 Though 'twas not once so. If I sneer sometimes,
 It is because I cannot well do less,
 And now and then it also suits my rhymes.
 I should be very willing to redress
 Men's wrongs, and rather check than punish crimes,

²⁵ Bernard Beatty, *Byron's Don Juan* (London 1985).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Had not Cervantes in that too true tale
Of Quixote, shown how all such efforts fail.

(v. 527: XIII/7–8)

We then get three stanzas on Cervantes that are equally divided between warm endorsement of the truth of his vision, with which the narrator sounds entirely at one, and dismay at its destructive implications, where the narrator is moving to a new and critical standpoint. Within these five stanzas the narrator convincingly associates himself with Johnson, Mephistopheles, Cervantes, and a point of view critical of Cervantes. It is always hard to know where to stop a quotation from *Don Juan*; the accent, the point of view are always changing. And this is in a real sense Faustian, if one recalls the terms of Faust's wager: only if he ever rests content in the pleasure of the moment, so that he truly wishes it to last, only then will time be at an end for him and Mephistopheles can claim him (ll. 1699–1706). Until that moment comes, the same incapacity for fulfilment that exposes him to Mephistopheles, and that Mephistopheles sustains and symbolises, also preserves him from Mephistopheles. The sardonic knowledge that underlies 'carpe, carpe!' may not, after all, be wholly malevolent.

Mephistopheles is only a part. It is Byron's wonderful fluidity of tone in *Don Juan* that allows him to be more than partial (though never impartial); the mobility of the narrative voice across a broad spectrum – worldly wisdom, a more savage disillusionment, mischievous flippancy, the relishing of absurdity, reader-baiting 'wickedness' (or mock-innocence), moral anger, a withering contempt, residual 'romantic' passages of yearning or regret that survive the mutation to burlesque – expresses, through the self-consciousness of its performance, that 'mutual glance' between opposed positions that dissolves the absoluteness of their opposition. As with Lucifer in *Cain*, it is not possible to fix the boundary where intelligent critique ends and a devilish negativity begins; but the writing in *Don Juan* finds life in that ambiguity. For a self of such fluid identity, the world is no longer a realm of pure alienation, defining the self-in-exile by its otherness, but – despite its oppositional, disillusioning, 'fallen' condition – can yet have a tonic presence and reality in the poem: so that the forces that preside over the human comedy, and the impossibility of fulfilment, can – just – be imagined, if not as altogether benign, then at least not as altogether hostile:

But Heaven must be diverted: its diversion
Is sometimes truculent – but never mind:
The world upon the whole is worth the assertion
(If but for comfort) that all things are kind:
And that same devilish doctrine of the Persian,

Of the two Principles, but leaves behind
As many doubts as any other doctrine.

(v. 537: XIII/41)

It is a stance that comes out of Byron's dialogue with Mephistopheles, the Adversary and the denier, but not – at least not certainly – the Enemy.