ESSAY II

A ‘Voice from out the Wilderness’

Cain and Philosophical Poetry

To read Byron’s poetry as philosophy without reference to form is to miss the poetry’s philosophical significance. This seems most pressingly true in the case of Don Juan, a poem in which language is untethered within the precincts of intellectual history with effects that are at once critical and creative. In what follows I want to think about this complicated meeting of philosophy and poetry, something, I suggest, in which Byron was deeply interested, with primary reference to what seems in many ways the poet’s most obviously ‘philosophical’ literary work, Cain.

Byron began writing Cain in Ravenna on 16 July 1821. Six months later he would resume Don Juan after having written nothing of his sprawling epic for over a year.1 The new cantos of Don Juan, beginning with canto vi, would display several significant changes from previous instalments, notably an increase in digressive material and a closer integration of this into the narrative of the story.2 These newly extensive digressions, which punctuate (and frequently open) the later cantos of the poem, have a strong philosophical flavour, a fact it seems reasonable to connect with the composition of Cain and its strong speculative themes. Despite their chronological and thematic proximity, however, Cain and Don Juan appear to have little in common in terms of scope, tone and form. Don Juan is on the whole a much fuller, more diverse and more comically evasive poem, one wonderfully uncontained by its philosophical interests and brimming with energies that seem the antithesis of argumentative rigour. Cain, by comparison, looks far more obviously and directly like something we can call a ‘philosophical poem’; it is easier to read, that is, as a vehicle for its grounding polemical commitments than as a poetic shaping to the unargued contours of life. These differences have tended to mean that critics have approached the two works not only in isolation from one another, but with very different assumptions and aims: where serious critics of Don Juan have been minded of the poem’s fragmen-
tariness and resistance to systematic thought, *Cain’s* commentators have often looked at the play as something closer to a manifesto, as containing a definite philosophical or religious message. For this reason the play, or ‘Mystery’ as Byron termed it, has assumed an especial significance among those interested in Byron’s philosophical position(s). Largely this is right: much of the play is driven by argument and polemical force and we feel these energies as dominant within a literary frame that feels, by contrast, unsure of itself. In particular the play has a strong political voice, one that dominates within standard interpretations of the play. On the other hand, argument is not left untouched by dramatic staging; it is altered and unsettled at the edges in ways that raise questions about the sufficiency of rational explication. Other kinds of intelligence – dramatic form, irrational action, tradition and allusion, love and vatic apprehension – enter and complicate the play. We need to understand the play’s dominant argument (one forged in linguistic scepticism and political dissent); but we also need to understand the literary awareness through which argument is made alive to its own limitations in the face of existence.

One of the earliest responses to *Cain*, by the clergyman Reginald Heber, came in an unsigned review of Byron’s dramas in the *Quarterly Review* of July 1822. Heber looks at the play from an intelligent, orthodox perspective, reading it as a work of radical scepticism and thus as an attempt to undermine all forms of organized religion: the ‘sarcasms of Lucifer and the murmurs of Cain’, he suggests, ‘are directed against Providence in general; and proceed to the subversion of every system of theology’. A more intriguing response came from William Blake, who, after reading *Cain*, wrote *The Ghost of Abel*, his first known attempt at drama for over forty years. Byron, who is addressed in strikingly direct terms, has, according to Blake, missed his way as a poet and prophet. He has been seduced by the scepticism that drives the world of reason and science and has lost touch with the permanent forms of spirit and imagination:

**TO LORD BYRON IN THE WILDERNESS:**

What doest thou here, Elijah? Can a poet doubt the visions of Jehovah?
Nature has no outline; but Imagination has. Nature has no time; but Imagination has! Nature has no supernatural and dissolves: Imagination is Eternity.

Byron has strayed into a wilderness of ‘doubt’ and apprehends only the physical world of ‘Nature’, which ‘dissolves’ and which has ‘no outline’;
Heber (and in different ways Blake) set the pattern for the majority of the play’s later reception as a work of rationalist scepticism in which Cain and Lucifer share the role of hero-exile. Leslie Marchand, for instance, suggested that Cain is ‘an outpouring, not wholly coherent or consistent, of Byron’s revolt against conventional religious orthodoxy’. Edward Bostetter, in an influential reading, takes the play in a more political direction, suggesting that Byron’s ‘God stands for the very real tyranny of a social and political hierarchy that justified its acts by appeal to divine authority’. Cain, in such a reading, is the ‘rebellious intellect who insists upon questioning the justice of divine and therefore social decrees’.

Bostetter’s view of the play as staging a conflict between God as tyrant and Cain as hero in pursuit of ‘emancipation of mind’ seems eminently sensible in its recognition of Byron’s God as a distant, authoritarian figure, and his cowed human subjects as having a strong whiff of the despot’s yoke about them. Cain, moreover, seems in many ways a sympathetic character: a rebellious spirit who, like other uncompromising Byronic heroes, is admirable for his courage and lack of self-interest. The play’s eponymous ‘hero’, however, is susceptible of being read in very different terms, as frustratingly narrow-minded, chained to reason, and closed to the full range of possibilities that flit through (poetic) consciousness. Hoagwood, for instance, reads the character, in classical Pyrrhonist terms, as a ‘counterexample of ataraxia’. Cain’s ‘relentless demanding of knowledge, of certainty, of an explanation’, Hoagwood argues, ‘consign him to the brutal incoherence of human tragedy, because his own demands for knowledge are not only frustrated but doomed. Chained to the conviction that one must believe something, and determined to forge or find an explanation of experience and the world, Cain dramatizes the deadliness of the wish for certainty’. According to this reading Cain is less the hero of a political allegory and more a dogmatic philosopher who imposes an inadequately rigid understanding upon his world. Rather than fronting a sceptical assault on the establishment, his ‘murmurs’ are taken in reflection by the embracing scepticism of the work as a whole. Blake was right, from this point of view, to find in the play a morbid rationalism; his mistake was to identify this directly with the author rather than seeing it as the tragic flaw of the central character.

Classical Pyrrhonism, as we have seen, has a long association with orthodox Christianity, a fact exploited in Wolf Z. Hirst’s reading of the
play. Beginning from a similar position to Hoagwood, Hirst counter-intuitively argues for *Cain* as an expression of religious orthodoxy, finding in it a ‘critique of unmitigated rationalism [which] invalidates the traditional view of the play’s bias towards sacrilege’. *Cain* demonstrates, Hirst continues, ‘the futility and danger of reason’s rebellion, even in the name of justice, against the human condition and against the mystery of the cosmic order’. Rather than associating Byron’s play with the tradition of nineteenth-century anti-establishment discourse, Hirst draws it more into line with the Book of Job or Montaigne’s ‘Apologie de Raimond Sebond’ as a work that ‘ultimately establishes the inscrutability of divine providence’.

The fact that *Cain* has been associated with such radically different theoretical perspectives might be taken to suggest, in itself, that we are not dealing with a work of straightforward polemical intent but one that is more resistant to interpretation than has generally been allowed. In particular, the directly opposed readings of Bostetter and Hirst, when taken together, seem to call into question the very possibility of understanding the play from a single, overarching philosophical point of view. The latter’s identification of Cain’s ‘unmitigated rationalism’ as a potential object of sceptical critique is entirely plausible and tends to complicate the connection between rebellion and heroism assumed by the play’s ‘orthodox’ readings. On the other hand, to go as far as to suggest that *Cain* is an expression of religious orthodoxy that ‘facilitates the task of vindicating God’ is to go too far.

Hirst’s reading of Abel as one of the play’s ‘advocates of love’, for instance, is unconvincing, whereas Bostetter’s claim that he is one of the ‘self-righteous supporters […] of the tyrant God’ fits the tones and emphases of the play far more closely. As for why Byron would write a religiously orthodox play during a hiatus in the composition of *Don Juan*, Hirst’s answer that *Cain* represents ‘an extreme in the Byronic canon’ and ‘conveys a standpoint too absolute for Byron’s philosophy of uncertainty’ again fails to convince. It is certainly the case that most established readings of *Cain* overstate or simplify Byron’s rationalist and anti-establishment intentions, but I don’t think the play licenses quite this much certainty at the other end of the spectrum either. Its sub-titular ‘Mystery’ is not so easily dispersed.

We might, given this apparent philosophical messiness, conclude that *Cain* is a muddled piece of thinking lacking any real intellectual coherence. We may even decide, with Philip W. Martin, that the work is ‘as potent an affirmation of Byron’s bankruptcy as a philosophical
poet as we are likely to find’. This seems undeniable if we understand ‘philosophical poet’ to mean a philosopher who has chosen to formulate his opinions in verse. On the other hand, if we take such a poet to be a thinker interested in the philosophical implications of literary form as a distinct means of apprehension, then the case becomes more complex. If we understand poetry, that is, as being ‘philosophical’, not because it makes direct philosophical claims but because it is interested in the context of philosophy’s emergence into epistemological privilege, then we will need to judge that poetry in less impoverished terms.

There is a bad habit in Byron criticism of deciding that the poet is not being serious when he says things that don’t fit with the critic’s reading of him. This leads to critics choosing what they listen to rather than listening. This is what Byron says in defence of *Cain* in letters to friends and associates:

If “Cain” be “blasphemous” – Paradise lost is blasphemous – and the very words of the Oxford Gentleman [Byron is responding to a reviewer who signed himself ‘Oxoniiensis’] – ‘Evil be thou my Good’ are from that very poem – from the mouth of Satan, – and is there anything more in that of Lucifer in the Mystery? – – Cain is nothing more than a drama – not a piece of argument – if Lucifer and Cain speak as the first Murderer and the first Rebel may be supposed to speak – surely all the rest of the personages talk also according to their characters – and the stronger passions have ever been permitted to the drama. (*BLJ*, ix, 103)

With respect to “Religion,” can I never convince you that I have no such opinions as the characters in the drama, which seems to have frightened every body? […] My ideas of a character may run away with me: like all imaginative men, I, of course, embody myself with the character while I *draw* it, but not a moment after the pen is from off the paper. (*BLJ*, ix, 118–9)

McGann claims that these ‘remarks are [...] as all the early reactions to the play indicate, disingenuous’. Certainly, Byron’s attempt to hide behind Milton is difficult to take without a pinch of salt: although the latter can be and has been read in radically unorthodox terms, Byron’s Lucifer (‘bringer of light’) seems far more clearly and subversively intended than the former’s Satan (‘adversary’). Lucifer’s precipitous extrusion from his biblical context as well as his clear identification with the Byronic (not quite the same as Byron’s) quest for liberty might also suggest that Byron’s claim to have written a ‘drama’ rather than
an ‘argument’ is something of a red herring. On the other hand, it has not been easy for critics to agree about what precisely *Cain* is arguing. The play isn’t as good as *Don Juan* at making the determined reducer of poetry look silly, but it also can’t help being a literary work written by a poet who always struggles to accept the assumption that argument and thought are identical. This is partly to do with Byron’s scepticism about the enthusiasms of liberal progress: he knew that the determined arguer who thinks that argument is everything can, for all his heroic potential, easily become the author of aftermath (the French Revolution made this clear enough, if it wasn’t already). This is why Byron is very different to the Hunt brothers, even if he thought that they were broadly right in some of their key political convictions. The other side to this has more to do with poetry, and this is where I think the poet’s insistence that he has written a work of literature rather than a manifesto should not be wafted off as just a smokescreen. I disagree with Hirst’s distancing of *Cain* from *Don Juan*, because for all their stylistic differences the two works share important intellectual concerns. They are both interested in argument as something necessary, energetic and transformative, but also as a form of system, as something we should not mix up with truth. We can’t escape the fact that *Cain* is full of philosophical and political purposiveness, and that it attacks things – the abuse of political power, the corruptions of State religion, the use of language to enslave. There is no need to argue any of this away or to say that Byron didn’t believe it (he did, even if not in quite the way Shelley or Hunt did). What we can say, I think, is that conviction and belief in the play, while not undermined, are thought about in the very process of their articulation. *Cain* contains a critical and sceptical way of thinking about tyranny (through its appropriations of language), but it is not finally a work of scepticism because this initial critique is placed within a larger conditioning context of (literary) thought (‘I doubt if doubt itself be doubting’). It is sceptical, that is, not just about the Establishment, but about the way in which we think we are supposed to think – we are supposed, for instance, to think about what kind of ‘standpoint’ a work of philosophical poetry takes. If we decide that it doesn’t have a ‘standpoint’ then we are supposed to think that it is a work of ‘scepticism’ (and stand by that). What *Cain* does is register, at the level of form, Byron’s scepticism about these assumptions concerning thought. It wonders about the deceptiveness of language as a prop for tyranny, but it also wonders if language has tricked us into misconstruing what our minds are for. What makes him wonder in this way is his acute sensitivity to the possibilities of literary cognition.
Thinking, that is, might happen differently when we are reading a poem compared to when we are reading an argument. *Cain*, I think, is (like *Don Juan*) deeply interested in this difference. It becomes a work of visionary poetics in the process of problematizing an argument it doesn’t want to abandon.

One critic who recognized something of this is the critic who was closest to Byron’s creative processes. Shortly after *Cain’s* publication, Mary Shelley wrote to her friend Maria Gisborne:

> Perhaps by this time you have seen *Cain* and will agree with us in thinking it his finest production – To me it sounds like a revelation – of some works one says – one has thought of such things though one could not have expressed it so well – It is not this with *Cain* – One has perhaps stood on the extreme verge of such ideas and from the midst of the darkness which has surrounded us the voice of the Poet now is heard telling a wondrous tale.18

Unlike the majority of the play’s critics Mary does not read *Cain* with reference to specific philosophical and political aims but hears it as a voicing of ‘the Poet’ – as a ‘wondrous tale’ that does not break the cover of its own darkness. This voice does not speak according to the post-Lockean ideal of Augustan poetics;19 its power does not derive from its conceptual clarity but from a capacity to intimate the precipitousness of poetic thought. Rather than realizing ideas, it places us on their ‘extreme verge’.20 Byron’s wilderness, for Mary, is not one of reason and doubt as it was for Blake, but a place in which the indefinite energies of literary creation can be felt.

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None of this is to suggest that critics have been wasting their time in seeking to identify the play’s speculative and political content. Such content is clearly there, although its trajectories and circularities have not always been perceived. This is from Byron’s serpentine, defensive prose Preface:

> THE following scenes are entitled ‘a Mystery,’ in conformity with the ancient title annexed to dramas upon similar subjects, which were styled ‘Mysteries, or Moralities.’ The author has by no means taken the same liberties with his subject which were common formerly, as may be seen by any reader curious enough to refer to those very profane productions, whether in English, French, Italian, or Spanish. The author has endeavoured to preserve the language adapted to his characters; and where it is (and this is but rarely) taken from actual *Scripture […]* made as little alteration, even of words, as
the rhythm would permit. The reader will recollect that the book of Genesis does not state that Eve was tempted by a demon, but by ‘the Serpent;’ and that only because he was ‘the most subtil of all the beasts of the field.’ Whatever interpretation the Rabbins and the Fathers may have put upon this, I must take the words as I find them, and reply with Bishop Watson upon similar occasions, when the Fathers were quoted to him, as Moderator in the schools of Cambridge, ‘Behold the Book!’ – holding up the Scripture. (CPW, VI, 228)

Byron’s literalist exegesis of scripture is provocative. By refusing to identify the serpent with a ‘demon’ he loosens conventionally fixed attributions of evil, thus opening up the moral territory he is about to enter. He also demonstrates the sort of rational questioning spirit that will characterize Cain himself, thereby encouraging the kinds of identification between protagonist and author that are common in the play’s reception. Where Watson, an infamously pugnacious cleric Byron had read with little profit, simply holds up his closed bible as if it were single and unquestionable, Byron suggests that intelligent reading and interpretation are crucial to any meaningful discussion of religion.

Byron borrowed the point about the serpent and the demon from Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, which he read in a huge ten-volume English translation of 1734. Bayle’s brilliant, clear-sighted interrogations of classical and Christian myth, which made him famous as an enemy to the forces of closed thought and bigotry, have thus naturally been proposed as a significant influence on *Cain*. This is the Bayle whose writings have bequeathed an ‘arsenal of sceptical weapons for use against religion’, who was admired by Gibbon and probably detected by Heber in his reading of *Cain* as a work of wide-wasting scepticism. But although Bayle, and especially in the eighteenth century, is typically associated with heterodox traditions, he remains a ‘notoriously difficult philosopher to evaluate’, and, as a sceptic, has – like Byron – attracted widely different interpretations. While often viewed as the embodiment of enlightened reason, he can also, more like Montaigne, be read as a Christian Pyrrhonist seeking to erect the ‘edifice of faith on the ruins of reason’. This is the Bayle who could write, in his defensive, and by no means reliable, third ‘Clarification’ that

> By faith [man] will soar above those regions, where the storms of disputations prevail. He will stand on an eminence, whence he will hear, far beneath him, the thunder of argumentations and distinctions. An eminence which, with regard to him, will be the true Olympus of the Poets, and the true temple
of the sages; whence he will behold, with a mind perfectly unruffled, the weakness of reason, and the mistakes of such mortals as follow no other guide.29

According to this the final aim of the sceptic is not to assert the primacy of human intelligence but to abolish its flawed productions, to rise above ‘argumentations’ in the ‘unruffled’ tranquillity of faith and to look down, from his poetic eminence, upon ‘the weakness of reason’. Of course, this attempt, by an already exiled Bayle, to draw his method closer to orthodox acceptability might quite reasonably be doubted. On the other hand, the rifts evident in Bayle’s reception resist his settling as a moment in the history of ideas.

The true literary writer is not unruffled, nor does he look down upon the disputant with contempt. He does, however, in turning us to the ironies and forms of the written page, locate argument within the broader contexts of the unarguable. He might do this by ironically overforcing the tones of a case, by peeling the voice away from straightforward commitment as Byron does with his ‘poetical commandments’ in Don Juan (i, 204) and Bayle does with his mock-outraged attack on Jupiter and,30 in different ways, with his fearless reassessment of King David (hugely controversial given the New Testament designation of Jesus as David’s son).31

Bayle deplores David’s treatment of Mephibosheth (the son of his friend Jonathan from whom David stripped his estate) which, when considered by any reasonable standard, was manifestly unjust.32 Bayle’s aim is polemical in that he wants to overturn orthodox apologists (such as Théophile Raynaud) who reason that since the ‘holiness of […] David is well known to us, and since he never ordered any reparation of the wrong which he had done to Mephibosheth, we are to conclude that the sentence was just’. This, Bayle points out, ‘is to establish a very dangerous principle, [that] we must no longer examine the actions of the old Prophets by the ideas of Morality’.33 As with Watson’s holding up the book, Raynaud refuses to read in the interests of a pre-decided version of events. Bayle (like Byron) is not necessarily attacking religion, but he is attacking a refusal to accept the meliorative influences of intelligent reading.

The force of criticism here, however, cannot be trained upon a single target, nor can the critic presume his immunity to the spirit of his correction. Thus Bayle ends not with a neat conclusion, but with an opening up of critical perspective:
From all that has been said in the precedent Remarks, and in this, it may be easily inferred, that if the people of Syria had been as great Writers of Libels, as the Europeans are at this day, they would have strangely disfigured David’s glory.34

A second possible object of criticism – the libellous, haranguing culture of Reformation polemic – is entered alongside David’s own behaviour, which, from this newly relative point of view, might seem a target less worthy of pursuit. As a result the narrative voice slides down from the moralist’s eminence to become implicated in the problem(s). As one who has himself disfigured ‘David’s glory’, Bayle has participated in the strident righteousness characteristic of modern European polemical culture. Bayle’s genius, as Voltaire recognized,35 is not linear, but reflexive and dialogical; it lies in a capacity to demolish bigotry while remaining aware of how easily such reflexes atrophy into system.

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The thinking of Bayle’s *Dictionnaire* helps us with the difficulties of *Cain*. It also provides a context for the play’s odd straightforwardness. The two converge in Byron’s relentless interest in language as a staging of philosophical and political intention. *Cain* opens with a sequence of prayers:

ADAM. GOD, the Eternal! Infinite! All-Wise! –
Who out of darkness the deep didst make
Light on the waters with a word – all hail!
Jehovah, with returning light, all hail!
EVE. God! Who didst name the day, and separate
Morning from night, till then divided never –
Who didst divide the wave from wave, and call
Part of thy work the firmament – all hail!

(*Cain*, I, i, 1–8)

Byron’s claim that in his borrowings from Scripture he has ‘made as little alteration, even of words, as the rhythm would permit’ does not seem entirely outrageous if we consider his source:

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.36
The changes that are made, however, are significant. By relocating the biblical text from its original third-person narrator to the mouths of Adam and Eve, Byron creates a sense that the first parents are nervously repeating their lines. The celebratory feel of the original is shaded by a sense of the dark reiterations upon which tyranny feeds. God’s emphasized acts of division and naming, rather than being moments of incipience and liberation in the face of chaos, sound more like the proceedings of dominion, at least with respect to the modern political context in which Byron is working.

The opening of the play is pervasively concerned with language and its relationship to power. Where language for Adam is a ‘returning light’, an acknowledgement and celebration of God’s luminary fiat, for Cain it is a tool to question established relations and to assert individual thought. The latter’s first words, notably spoken before Lucifer’s appearance, come in the form of a question that interrupts his family’s flow of prayer: ‘Why should I speak?’ (Cain, I, i, 23). This withholding of officially legitimized language results in parental displeasure, Adam asking his son ‘wherefore art thou silent’ (Cain, I, i, 22) / ‘thou [...] art silent still’ (Cain, I, i, 26).

Cain’s rebellion lies in his placing the question over the prayer:

**CAIN** [soulos].

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, I sought not to be born; nor love the state To which that birth has brought me. Why did he Yield to the serpent and the woman? or, Yielding, why suffer? What was there in this? The tree was planted, and why not for him? If not, why place him near it, where it grew, The fairest in the centre? They have but One answer to all questions, ‘twas his will, And he is good’. How know I that? Because He is all-powerful, must all-good, too, follow? I judge but by the fruits – and they are bitter –

(Cain, I, i, 64–77)

Where his family have ‘One answer to all questions’ – they regurgitate the book – Cain deploys his words to explore his predicament and its apparent injustices. Where they accept language as a means of marking a set of fixed, unquestionable relationships, he becomes the first (human) sceptic in asserting his freedom to decide for himself.
It would not be entirely wrong to end here, and there would be an appealing crispness to it. But even if we think that Byron only used dramatic form to stage and protect his argument, we cannot avoid the questions to which the drama’s human contexts give rise. Is this really ‘emancipation of mind’ or just sullen, tiresome victimhood (or something between the two)?

Is Eve’s ‘Content thee with what is’ (*Cain*, I, i, 45) the depressed coercion of the fellow subject, or is it the distillation of human wisdom in its incipient profundity? Cain’s own questions may involve a form of self-realization, but questions can also become ways of avoiding other questions; they can become a mode of paralysis and an undermining of the basis of action. Cain certainly seems far from empowered by his sceptical re-visioning. He is in a rut, linear-minded, tyrannized over by ‘why’ and ‘what’. He is also wildly unreflexive as a speaker. His ‘I judge but by the fruits’, although intended to assert independence of mind, seems, in the wake of Eve’s well-crafted lines of regret – ‘The fruit of our forbidden tree begins / To fall’ (*Cain*, I, i, 30) – densely ironic and tied up in things Cain cannot see. Scepticism is an attempt to establish a form of mitigated control in the face of acknowledged disorder, but Cain remains all at sea amidst the inflections of his Byronic textual environment. His battle with apparent coercion may be genuine and courageous, but he lacks the intellectual fluidity that pulses through *Don Juan*. He may have grasped the rudiments of philosophical scepticism, but none of its subtleties or ironies.

Where both Hirst and Hoagwood take these problems to argue for a (Christian) Pyrrhonist reading of the play, I would suggest that Byron’s pressurizing of doubt leads, as in *Don Juan*, to something less philosophically derivable but more poetically interesting. Lucifer’s arrival on the scene changes the tack of Cain’s aporetic musings; it also alters the manner of his voice:

Whom have we here? – A shape like to the angels,
Yet of a sterner and a sadder aspect
Of spiritual essence: why do I quake?
Why should I fear him more than other spirits,
Whom I see daily wave their fiery swords
Before the gates round which I linger oft,
In twilight’s hour, to catch a glimpse of those
Gardens which are my just inheritance,
Ere the night closes o’er the inhibited walls
And the immortal trees which overtop
The cherubim-defended battlements?
If I shrink not from these, the fire-armed angels,
Why should I quail from him who now approaches?
Yet he seems mightier far than them, nor less
Beauteous, and yet not all as beautiful
As he hath been, and might be: sorrow seems
Half of his immortality. And is it
So? and can aught grieve save humanity?
He cometh.

(Cain, I, i, 80–98)

More questions, but these are of a different tenor: they respond not to apparent, external injustices, but to internal centres of emotional perception; and, while these unusual sensations are submitted to rational interrogation (‘If I shrink not [...] Why should I quail’), no resolution is found. Where Cain’s attempts to dissect his feelings are unproductive, however, his naive responses are latent with other possibilities. As a fresh if anxious sense of wonder comes over him, he becomes less the reasoner and more the man of Sensibility (‘I linger oft, / In Twilight’s hour’); he reveals a capacity to detect deep reserves of feeling, as well as an ability to reflect, with insight and no little power of expression, upon his intuitions (‘sorrow seems / Half of his immortality’). There is a wonderfully obliterated mathematics to this.

Cain’s choice is not simply between obedience and rebellion, but between knowledge and the world knowledge fails to contain. Lucifer even acknowledges something like this in demanding that his pupil ‘Choose betwixt love and knowledge’ (Cain, I, i, 429). By comparison we might think Adah’s urging her brother to take the former option (‘Oh, Cain! choose love.’ (Cain, I, i, 431)) coercive, especially when she starts to sound like her parents: ‘Alas! thou sinnest now, my Cain; thy words / Sound impious in mine ears’ (Cain, III, i, 93–4). But Adah cannot be dismissed so easily. When Cain angrily exclaims ‘Then leave me!’ she replies not as Abel would – by reaffirming God’s infallibility – but with a touchingly simple courage of her own: ‘Never, / Though thy God left thee’ (Cain, III, i, 94–5). Like Anah and Aholibamah, who defy God by loving the angels Samiasa and Azaziel in Byron’s next ‘Mystery’ Heaven and Earth, Adah is a rebellious and passionate spirit rather than a compliant one. Cain may in the end choose ‘knowledge’, but the alternative remains vitally at stake in the ethical drama and poetical presences of the play. Adah may not be able to contend with Lucifer’s power of argument (‘I cannot answer this immortal thing / Which stands before me’ (Cain, I, i, 406–7)), but this is to notice her profound difference from Lucifer rather than her irrelevance to the play.
Her silence does not award victory to reason. It resonates in the play’s reflexive depths.

Drama continues to unsettle argument in the case of Lucifer himself. If we want to claim Byron’s devil as the voice of enlightened reason then we also need to consider his opportunism and manipulative inconsistency. He appears on the scene at a high tide of dissatisfaction, just at the moment in which Cain is diagnosing the apparent bitterness of his existence. He also sounds, at first at least, more like a conventional Satanic stereotype than a liberating hero, demanding of Cain that he ‘fall down and worship me – thy Lord’ (Cain, I, i, 303). As if recognizing his miscalculation of Cain’s proud, rebellious spirit, he then changes his approach to become a confederate in subjection. It is God, not he, that would demand fealty: ‘Believe – and sink not! doubt – and perish! thus / Would run the edict of the other God’ (Cain, II, i, 5–6). Lucifer retracts his own demand and repositions himself in the shadow of his enemy’s authoritarianism.

However we construe his intentions, Lucifer does not produce an independent, Enlightenment reasoner, but a murderer and an acolyte. The strategies of linguistic scepticism that run through Lucifer’s words may offer liberation in a world where language has not yet developed a critical function, but are we truly liberated if we are merely mimicking a philosophical idea we do not fully understand? This is Lucifer defying God:

LUCIFER. Ask the Destroyer.
CAIN. Who?
LUCIFER. The Maker – call him
Which name thou wilt; he makes but to destroy.

(Cain, I, i, 266–9)

This is Cain defying God via Abel:

ABEL. Why then commune with him? he may be
A foe to the Most High.
CAIN. And friend to man.
ABEL. Has the Most High been so – if so you term him?
CAIN. Term him! your words are strange to-day, my brother.

(Cain, III, i, 168–71)

Abel may be awed into complicity by words that make him a subject, but is Cain’s descent into irrational fury via scepticism necessarily to be preferred? Eve’s ‘Oh! my son, / Blaspheme not: these are the serpent’s words’ (Cain, I, i, 34–5) may be in one sense an act of official censorship, but we might also read it as a charge of unoriginality, one echoed later
by Adah: ‘Thou hast not spoken well, nor is that thought / Thy own, but of the spirit who was with thee’ (Cain, III, i, 77–8). We might also note that in the immediate aftermath of fratricide, Cain’s questioning, which according to conventional readings of the play is the basis of emancipation, becomes confused and incoherent: ‘Where am I? alone! Where’s Abel? where / Cain? Can it be that I am he?’ (Cain, III, i, 322–3). Cain’s resistance to language-as-coercion, expressed in his initial withholding of prayer, is transformed into the silence of guilt and identity loss as the repeated imprecations of his family to ‘Speak’ (Cain, III, i, 393, 394, 396), rather than provoking just defiance, can now only be met by the flinching of one who has gone beyond reason.

These problems with Cain and Lucifer do not provide the basis of a counter-reading capable of supplanting established understandings of the play as a work of anti-establishment polemic. Such a reading would require us to ignore even more than the reading it seeks to overthrow. *Cain* has a profoundly straightforward aspect, especially (as McGann suggests) in Lucifer’s final speeches where the processes of tyranny are subjected to a plangent critique grounded in linguistic scepticism. Where Milton’s Satan forges his malice in acceptance, recognizing unequivocally that ‘all good to me is lost’ (*Paradise Lost*, iv, 109), Byron’s Lucifer accepts only that he has lost the power to name abstract concepts:

> He as a conqueror will call the conquer’d <br>Evil; but what will be the good he gives? <br>Were I the victor, his works would be deem’d <br>The only evil ones.  

(*Cain*, II, ii, 443–6)

Political action, construed in such terms, depends upon a reflexive capacity to apprehend the distortions created by official language. Lucifer’s grasp of this sounds decidedly modern, notably in his complaint that his nemesis

> names me demon to his angels; they <br>Echo the sound to miserable things, <br>Which knowing nought beyond their shallow senses, <br>Worship the word which strikes their ear, and deem <br>Evil or good what is proclaim’d to them <br>In their abasement.  

(*Cain*, II, i, 7–12)

Provocatively picking up Byron’s (Bayle’s) point about the biblical tempter not being named ‘demon’, Lucifer identifies the twin process
through which ideology subsumes the real: the language of control is disseminated (echoed) by complicit forces, while education is denatured and reified in order to incapacitate dissent. To read this is to be jolted out of the fictive, especially when we come to the phrase ‘tyrannous threats to force you into faith’. This is not really spoken by Lucifer to Cain (who can have no doubts about God’s existence) but by the post-Waterloo (and post-Murray) Byron to his reader:

Had Bonaparte won at Waterloo,
   It had been firmness; now ’tis pertinacity:
Must the event decide between the two?
   I leave it to your people of sagacity
To draw the line between the false and true,
   If such can e’er be drawn by man’s capacity:

   (Don Juan, xiv, 90)

Where ‘event’ rather than thought dictates our dominant economies of meaning then the Byronic hero of action must adapt to become a sceptic about language. This new kind of hero is identified in his refusal to be positioned within the flux of signification. In the face of a hard, bullying language determined to bring down thought, to categorize, homogenize and control, we must forge our own meanings and codes. Lucifer in these terms is not goading Cain on to destruction, but urging him (or us) to create in defiance of those who would destroy:

   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.

   (Cain, II, ii, 459–66)

If Cain is being seduced here, then it is by the stirring, universal voice of Byronic heroism:

   Yet let us ponder boldly – ’tis a base
   Abandonment of reason to resign
   Our right of thought – our last and only place
   Of refuge; this, at least, shall still be mine:

   (Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, iv, 127)

If we can hold to anything of Byron’s, then surely it is this.
The only reason not to end here (although in part we should) is that Byron didn’t. Increasingly in his post-Harold works, and certainly by 1821, ‘Our right of thought’ resists the monopoly of ‘reason’ implied by these famous sentiments. The forming of our world was not, for Byron, something that could happen entirely according to the dictates of philosophy because ‘she too much rejects’. Such acts of creation needed, rather, to open out into the less specifiable environments of imagination and literary form. This is not argued in Cain, but it is registered – often haphazardly – in the reshaping of argument by drama and also in the balancing of linguistic scepticism by visionary poetics. The play’s critical stance on language-as-subjection runs into another sort of question, one concerned with language as a tentative claim upon the sublime. As we found with Don Juan, scepticism cedes to a more hopeful if less orderly poetics, something we will notice most clearly in Cain’s transformation from failed sceptic to uncomprehending visionary. This shifting between textures of misapprehension will concern what remains.

* * *

In Don Juan, the anxieties of the question are offset by the energies of form. The poet’s commitment to the word, always under pressure from a compelling linguistic scepticism, is revalidated in the act of poetry. I want to argue for a similar (and importantly different) shift from scepticism to poetics in Cain. To see this we will need to analyse the pedagogical contexts of Cain’s journey with Lucifer through space and time.

The problem with Cain’s response to mystery is that it is marked by a failure of imagination. This is not to say that he has a deficient mind or that he lacks the capacity for wonder (he is powerfully receptive to his surroundings), but that his insistence upon apprehending the world solely through reason inhibits as well as emancipates. Here he considers the spectral idea of death:

Thoughts unspeakable
Crowd in my breast to burning, when I hear
Of this almighty Death, who is, it seems,
Inevitable. Could I wrestle with him?
I wrestled with the lion, when a boy,
In play, till he ran roaring from my gripe.

(Cain, I, i, 256–61)

Cain’s question has more of the child than the Promethean sceptic. He
wishes to comprehend the sublime mysteriousness of ‘almighty Death’, but instead of grappling with the idea as a philosopher might, he wonders if he could ‘wrestle with him’ as he ‘wrestled with the lion’. He has unwittingly hit upon an appropriate metaphor for his predicament, but lacks any sense of the logic implicit in such substitutions. His ‘ran roaring from my gripe’ thus takes on an ironic charge in hinting at precisely what Cain fails to register – the limited grasp of reason.

Cain conceives of knowledge as ‘being / The road to happiness’ (Cain, II, ii, 230–1), as a direct, linear route to fulfilment. In this respect he has about him something of Pope’s enthusiastic but inexperienced scholar:

Fir’d at first Sight with what the Muse imparts,
In fearless Youth we tempt the Heights of Arts,
While from the bounded Level of our Mind,
Short Views we take, nor see the Lengths behind,
But more advanc’d, behold with strange Surprize
New, distant Scenes of endless Science rise!
So pleas’d at first, the towering Alps we try,
Mount o’er the Vales, and seem to tread the Sky;
Th’ Eternal Snows appear already past,
And the first Clouds and Mountains seem the last:
But those attain’d, we tremble to survey
The growing Labours of the lengthen’d Way,
Th’ increasing Prospect tires our wandering Eyes,
Hills peep o’er Hills, and Alps on Alps arise!

(An Essay on Criticism, 219–232)

Cain’s cosmic education at the hands of Lucifer follows a similar trajectory, but the educative contexts established by Pope and Byron are very different. Where Pope’s lesson is accompanied by the reassuring, narrative wisdom that marks the poem’s solid couplets, Cain has only the untrustworthy Lucifer to shape his disappointment. Where Pope offers his reader a stable platform for comprehension by transferring the problem over to a navigable environment of metaphor (‘What oft was Thought, but ne’er so well Exprest’), Cain is confronted directly with the wearying prospect of infinitude. Under Pope’s guidance we are taught acceptance from one who has preceded us; under Lucifer’s, Cain is immersed, as Mary Shelley recognized, in a reality that is subjected to a minimum of interpretation or rhetorical control. Philosophically this is disastrous for Cain because he has no capacity for absence; for the reader interested in poetics, however, we find ourselves drawn into an intriguing experiment.

Lucifer’s pedagogy can claim very little in the way of eighteenth-
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century rectitude; it borrows its tricks, rather, from the discredited ‘modes’ of Aenesidemus. Where the sun and the moon had been constants in Cain’s experience they lose all distinctness as he is shifted rapidly away from them:

Methinks they both, as we recede from them,
Appear to join the innumerable stars
Which are around us; and, as we move on,
Increase their myriads.

(Cain, II, i, 40–3)

The reverse effect occurs when Lucifer and Cain enter Hades where the latter is startled by his sudden close-up perspective:

How silent and how vast are these dim worlds!
For they seem more than one, and yet more peopled
Than the huge brilliant luminous orbs which swung
So thickly in the upper air, that I
Had deem’d them rather the bright populace
Of some all unimaginable Heaven
Than things to be inhabited themselves,
But on that drawing near them I beheld
Their swelling into palpable immensity
Of matter, which seem’d made for life to dwell on,
Rather than life itself.

(Cain, II, ii, 1–11)

While drawing a strong imaginative response, Lucifer’s vast and rapid transitions successfully bewilder Cain’s reason, leaving him desperate for something familiar to hold to:

Can it be?
Yon small blue circle, swinging in far ether,
With an inferior circlet near it still,
Which looks like that which lit our early nights?
Is this our Paradise? Where are its walls,
And they who guard them?

(Cain, II, i, 28–33)

Byron found ‘something sensible to grasp at’ in the tangible presences of Catholic art. Cain, however, searches hopelessly for the walls that have determined the political geography of his life thus far. Lucifer, knowing that his pupil’s sense of wonder will always decay into the frustrations of reason, meanwhile seems to be revelling in his task, asking Cain to ‘Point me out the site / Of Paradise’ (Cain, II, i, 33–4)
full well that Eden will no longer be distinguishable amidst the crowding myriads of space. Knowledge, we are subtly reminded, demolishes the prospect of bliss.

*Cain* pulses with the need for a reasoned, sophisticated response to the intellectual lockdown of tyranny. It also, in its testing and picking at Cain and Lucifer through the forms of drama, refuses to settle with the idea that reason might be sufficient. The play’s heroism is constantly running into the unvanishing facts of Luciferian inheritance as well as Cain’s tragically naive and suggestible framing of the mind’s relation to its absolute contexts. The critical, conditioning awareness that generates this disjunction, however, also suggests a kind of synthesis. To be critical in these terms is inescapably to be creative as well. Thus, even as Lucifer is tearing up the remaining certainties of Cain’s psycho-geography, the play’s language is filling with a sense of why the tragedy we are witnessing need not have happened. Although he cannot make an argument out of it, Cain does intuit something of this visionary potential, telling Lucifer that ‘Thou speak’st to me of things which long have swum / In visions through my thought’ (*Cain*, I, i, 167–8). He also understands these ‘visions’ to be different in nature to the cognitive mapping of his ‘Tamed down’ (*Cain*, I, i, 180) parents who, he complains, ‘talk to me / Of serpents, and of fruits and trees’ (*Cain*, I, i, 170–1). But while Lucifer acknowledges Cain’s visionary perspective (‘thou now beholdest as / A vision that which is reality’ (*Cain*, II, ii, 110–11)) he does not help him to understand the human and ethical contexts of his privileged but vulnerable predicament. Byron leaves out the reliable wisdom offered by Milton and Pope, or at least he has no narrator or character to voice such wisdom at the level of direct theorization.

Vision and prophecy for Lucifer are not objects for serious moral consideration; they are, rather, opportunities for some pointed Byronic mischief. Lucifer looks into the future (Byron’s Baylean past) in order to multiply the ironies that work through his sceptical critique. He predicts, for instance, the unjustified interpretative tradition to which he will become subject:

> When thousand ages
> Have roll’d o’er your dead ashes, and your seed’s,
> The seed of the then world may thus array
> Their earliest fault in fable, and attribute
> To me a shape I scorn […]
>
> (*Cain*, I, i, 233–7)

Lucifer rightly reiterates his proposal that the imposition of shape can
be an act of hypocrisy and control. What he does not mention is the fact that the call to shape things, for all its inevitable inaccuracies, is not necessarily implicated in the immoral. Speculative activity will never get very far in a vacuum of form, and the genuine attempt to mitigate this in the act of shaping can be heroic as well as misleading. The fictive may be inherently unreliable, but it is not irrevocably so; we should not be too willing, then, to consign it over entirely to scepticism: ‘Apologue, fable, poesy, and parable, / Are false, but may be render’d also true’ (Don Juan, xv, 89).

The contrary impulse suggested here by the narrator of Don Juan is there in Cain for the reader who is attentive to the poetic and allusive textures into which he is being drawn. This un-Luciferian idea of a truthful poetic shaping or rendering comes to Byron from the visionary poetics of Milton and is voiced by Raphael when asked by Adam to describe the proceedings of heaven:

High matter thou enjoinst me, O prime of men,
Sad task and hard, for how shall I relate
To human sense the invisible exploits
Of warring spirits; how without remorse
The ruin of so many glorious once
And perfect while they stood; how last unfold
The secrets of another world, perhaps
Not lawful to reveal? Yet for thy good
This is dispensed, and what surmounts the reach
Of human sense I shall delineate so,
By lik’ning spiritual to corporal forms,
As may express them best, though what if earth
Be but the shadow of heav’n, and things therein
Each to other like, more than on earth is thought?

(Paradise Lost, v, 563–76)

Despite his archangelic eminence, Raphael is strikingly unsure of himself, caught up in questions that reflect Milton’s own uncertainties about his role as divine interpreter. Such anxieties, which Byron feigns over in his Preface, circle around the central problem of all visionary and prophetic discourse, that of finding human words for that which ‘surmounts the reach / Of human sense’. Raphael’s solution, a form of compromise, is to employ figurative language to ‘delineate’ what exceeds the mind of man by ‘lik’ning spiritual to corporal forms’. Not unlike Montaigne’s solution to the problem of expressing his philosophical state of mind, Raphael’s
answer proposes metaphor as a form of resistance to the annihilation that lurks within every act of figuration.

Somewhere behind Raphael is Dante, who is thus doubly behind Cain in that Byron, two years before composing his play, had written the lyric monologue The Prophecy of Dante. Speaking to us directly, an aged poet reflects upon the prophetic tradition to which he has contributed a life of thought:

THE Spirit of the fervent days of Old,
When words were things that came to pass, and thought
Flash’d o’er the future, bidding men behold
Their children’s children’s doom already brought
Forth from the abyss of time which is to be,
The chaos of events, where lie half-wrought
Shapes that must undergo mortality;

(The Prophecy of Dante, ii, 1–7)

The age of the great biblical prophets, when ‘words were things that came to pass’, was a time of exuberant spirit and inspiration. ‘Dante’s’ own latter-day voyage into the ‘abyss of time’, however, has been more poignant than ‘fervent’: his vocation – to find words to approximate the ‘half-wrought / Shapes’ of prophetic experience – is, to recall Milton, a ‘Sad task and hard’. He has not shaped events in the way complained of by Lucifer, but has sought some mitigation in poetry for the shapelessness of visionary truth. Rather as Mary Shelley describes Byron’s own, his has been a ‘voice from out the Wilderness’ (The Prophecy of Dante, ii, 12), not only as a political exile, but as a poet excluded from divine centres of meaning. What presses upon him, even in the fullness of his prophetic power, is a moving sense of limitation:

[…] I cannot all record
That crowds on my prophetic eye: the earth
And ocean written o’er would not afford
Space for the annal, yet it shall go forth;
Yes, all, though not by human pen, is graven
There where the farthest suns and stars have birth.

(The Prophecy of Dante, iii, 4–9)

Like the Harold poet, Byron’s Dante cannot ‘wreak [his] thoughts upon expression’. But where the former must ‘live and die unheard, / With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword’ (Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, iii, 97), Dante’s voice, albeit from ‘out the Wilderness’, will be heard. Even if his ‘human pen’ can set down only a fraction of what
flashes before him, his words ‘shall go forth’. As with the narrator of *Don Juan* and his voyaging forth in his ‘slight, trim, But still sea-worthy skiff’ (*Don Juan*, x, 4), he accepts the fragmentary in preference to a cursed pursuit of identity.

Cain does not lack the Dantine or Miltonic capacity for visionary apprehension: where ‘Dante’s’ ‘prophetic eye’ cannot ‘record’ all that ‘crowds on’ it, Cain finds, similarly, that ‘Thoughts unspeakable / Crowd in my breast to burning’. What he lacks is the pedagogical context in which to tone down this ‘burning’ into acceptance but also the capacity to mitigate an overhanging sense of loss in the energies of poetic shaping and creation. While vividly present to Byron, such wisdom is deliberately left out of the sceptical theorizations of Lucifer. Cain is not allowed to recognize his own voice as the universal voice of the poet and is left to construe his failure as personal, one relating to ‘my born faculties’. Where the Harold poet is attuned to the logic of curse and Dante and Raphael accept their struggle towards the partial, Cain is led fatally to misunderstand his predicament.

We need to understand *Cain*, then, not just as a work of philosophical scepticism or political critique (although we also shouldn’t try to argue these things away), but as a unique intervention in the tradition of the reflexive visionary poem. Its uniqueness and experimental force derive from its eponymous ‘hero’ thinking like an (anachronistic) Enlightenment philosopher while occupying the position and bearing the raw aptitude of the vatic poet. In this sense the play’s intelligence is concerned with the irrevocable difference between these two roles. *Cain* is about our rise and slide into the mind of modernity. The poet’s reporting back reflects and tests this thinking in its odd, resistant emptiness. Visionary poetry wonders what it might look like when exiled from the pedagogical contexts of Dante and Milton:

Oh ye interminable gloomy realms  
Of swimming shadows and enormous shapes,  
Some fully shown, some indistinct […]

(*Cain*, II, ii, 30–2)

The words on the page have not travelled very far from their origins. There has been no recollection in the Wordsworthian sense, nor is there any of Raphael’s saddened but necessary control. Byron’s lines have more in common with the radically defamiliarized, smashed up utterances of Shelley’s Maniac, and, like Shelley’s, open themselves to accusations of weakness. Poetry, in wondering about itself, is in danger of annihilating its own possibility. Unframed by theory, wisdom or even strong
technique, the reader is thrown upon writing that tumbles about in visionary unknowing. He may sense a slight shaping of form in the way the thinness of the punctuation is subtly counteracted by the regular density of the long vowel sounds, but no clear way is opened to emerge from the ‘midst of the darkness’.

Cain’s first act is to question the sanctity of God’s imposition of form upon chaos. He is encouraged throughout to see this simply as an act of tyranny. His ending as an exiled murderer is thus ironic because it depends upon his blindness to his own capacity to shape boundlessness. This suppressed wisdom is not set down in the play as an argument or rational proposition, but it is felt in the struggle of language with its own figurations:

Oh, thou beautiful
And unimaginable ether! and
Ye multiplying masses of increased
And still-increasing lights! what are ye? what
Is this blue wilderness of interminable
Air, where ye roll along, as I have seen
The leaves along the limpid streams of Eden?
Is your course measured for ye? Or do ye
Sweep on in your unbounded revelry
Through an aerial universe of endless
Expansion, at which my soul aches to think,
Intoxicated with eternity?

(Cain, II, i, 98–109)

Any sense of Miltonic concreteness is tugged back into the vacuum of space by those echoing, untethering words: ‘unimaginable’, ‘interminable’, ‘unbounded’, ‘endless’, ‘eternity’. They become an ironic stress pattern within a jumbled and fractured blank verse marked by ungainly clashes and jagged questioning pauses. The sculptured majesty of Milton’s far-from-blank writing has lapsed into a boy throwing himself at words. Those rushed repetitions (‘increased / And still-increasing’) smack of desperation as Cain takes up an already emptied word and taps it on the side in the hope that more meaning will fall out.

One line stands out from this and thus suspends, briefly, the poetry of the abyss: ‘The leaves along the limpid streams of Eden’. With its metrical regularity (apart from the final unstressed syllable), tethering metaphors and paced, euphonic vowels it might have come from another poem. As Cain is seized with a sudden, recollected apprehension of beauty his words break free from the logic of despair that haunts the
play’s philosophical contexts. We are shifted to a poetics of the path not taken. Cain’s insistence upon the way of reason leads to an engulfing silence, broken only by stage direction (‘striking him with a brand, on the temples, which he snatches from the altar’). But if he could only have listened (closely) to his own voice rather than becoming Lucifer’s first un-nuanced reader, things might have been different:

LUCIFER: Approach the things of Earth most beautiful,
And judge their beauty near.

CAIN: I have done this –
The loveliest thing I know is loveliest nearest.
Lucifer: Then there must be delusion – What is that,
Which being nearest to thine eyes is still
More beautiful than beauteous things remote?

CAIN: My sister Adah. – All the stars of heaven,
The deep blue noon of night, lit by an orb
Which looks a spirit, or a spirit’s world –
The hues of twilight – the sun’s gorgeous coming –
His setting indescribable, which fills
My eyes with pleasant tears as I behold
Him sink, and feel my heart float softly with him
Along that western paradise of clouds –
The forest shade – the green bough – the bird’s voice –
The vesper bird’s, which seems to sing of love,
And mingles with the song of cherubim,
As the day closes over Eden’s walls; –
All these are nothing, to my eyes and heart,
Like Adah’s face: I turn from earth and heaven
To gaze on it.

(Cain, II, ii, 248–69)

Lucifer once more plays the sophist-sceptic with a touch of Swift’s misogynistic deadness to beauty thrown in. It doesn’t really work, however, because Cain is too alive amidst the poetry of his love. What he cannot do is construe the choosing of love as anything else than a betrayal of knowledge. The philosophical hero cannot ‘turn from earth and heaven’ because he is born to throw his mind at them. He can link the acceptance of the ‘indescribable’ with ‘pleasant tears’ (an emotional sublime) but he cannot link its address with meaningful philosophical (ethical) action. The choice, which many readers have failed to see, was never as clear-cut as Cain is led to believe. Turning towards Adah and life is only un-philosophical where philosophy is understood as being securely tied to reason and abstract truth. The alternative, present here in
Cain’s brief turn as a love poet, cannot guide us clear of the wilderness but it might help us to re-vision such places as emblems of possibility rather than failure.

Notes

1. The reasons for this suspension (after completing five cantos) are complex, but seem to involve a mixture of Don Juan’s hostile reception back home, increasing tensions with Murray, and Byron’s domestic instability in Italy. Byron had also recently lost both his daughter Allegra and his friend Shelley. Also see CPW, V, 716–18.

2. See M. K. Joseph, Byron the Poet, appendix C.

3. Byron thought the review ‘extremely handsome & any thing but unkind or unfair’ (BLJ, x, 68).


6. Hoagwood, Byron’s Dialectic, 106.


12. The most obvious reason for doing this is that it is harder for the authorities to suppress an apparently dramatic work of literature than an undisguised manifesto. It was, of course, precisely by reading Cain as the latter that the authorities did come to suppress the work. See Truman Guy Steffan, Lord Byron’s Cain: Twelve Essays and a Text with Variants and Annotations (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 13–18.

13. BMW, 1071. This is not quite correct. Heber, despite reading the play as an attack on orthodox religion, in fact also defended it in terms strikingly similar to Byron’s own: the ‘expressions of Cain and Lucifer’, he claims, ‘are not more offensive to the ears of piety than such discourses must necessarily be, or than Milton, without offence, has put into the mouths of beings similarly situated’. Byron: The Critical Heritage, ed. Rutherford, 243.

14. ‘Lucifer’s final two speeches [...] declare a commitment to intellectual freedom that has never been surpassed in English verse’ (BMW, 1072).
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19 Mary alludes to Pope: ‘True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest, / What oft was Thought, but ne’er so well Exprest’ (An Essay on Criticism, 297–8).
20 Compare Percy Shelley’s A Defence of Poetry. ‘We are on the verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of – how little we know’ (Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, 508).
21 As early as 1811 (when Watson was Professor of Divinity at Cambridge) Byron wrote: ‘I have read Watson to Gibbon. He proves nothing, so I am where I was, verging toward Spinoza; and yet it is a gloomy Creed, and I want a better, but there is something Pagan in me that I cannot shake off.’ (BLJ, ii, 136). Byron also described Sir William Drummond’s Oedipus Judaicus (1811) as ‘worth fifty Watsons’ (BLJ, ii, 140).
22 Compare Leigh Hunt’s lively, ironic defence of Cain which attacks those who find in the bible ‘nothing but morality, right reason and perfection’ and who ‘take the letter of the story for the very essence of the Divine Spirit’. The Examiner, no. 52 (Sunday, 2 June 1822), 337–52 (339).
26 Bracken, ‘Bayle not a Sceptic?’, 169.
31 See, for instance, Matthew 1.1 and Matthew 22.41–2.
32 II Samuel, 6 and 19.
33 A General Dictionary, Historical and Critical, IV, 536 (Remark I). The remarks of Raynaud are quoted by Bayle.
34 A General Dictionary, Historical and Critical, IV, 537 (Remark I).
36 Genesis 1. 2–5.
38 Byron wrote that ‘Cain is a proud man – if Lucifer promised him kingdoms &c. – it would elate him – the object of the demon is to depress him still further in his own estimation than he was before – by showing him infinite things – & his own abasement – till he falls into the frame of mind – that leads to the Catastrophe – from mere internal irritation – not premeditation or envy – of Abel – (which would have made him contemptible) but from rage and fury against the inadequacy of his state to his Conceptions – & which discharges itself rather against Life – and the author of Life – than the mere living’ (BLJ, ix, 53–4).

39 As the language of prayer echoes between Cain’s family members the language of doubt echoes between Lucifer and Cain. The former’s ‘Amerced, for doubts beyond thy little life’ (Cain, II, i, 15), for instance, is picked up later in Cain’s ‘thou shalt be amerced for sins unknown’ (Cain, III, i, 24).

40 The Luciferian Stranger of The Deformed Transformed, for instance, proclaims that ‘I have ten thousand names, and twice / As many attributes; but as I wear / A human shape, will take a human name (The Deformed Transformed, I, i, 533–5). Compare Byron’s joke in the Preface to Cain about being ‘accused of Manicheism – or some other hard name ending in ‘ism’ which make[s] a formidable figure and awful sound in the eyes and ears of those who would be as much puzzled to explain the terms so bandied about as the liberal and pious Indulgers in such epithets’ (CPW, VI, 229; compare BLJ, vii, 132). Goethe is somewhere behind this. When Faust asks Mephistopheles ‘what is your name?’ he receives the reply: ‘The question is absurd, / Surely, in one who seeks to know / The inmost essence, not the outward show, / And has such deep contempt for the mere word’. Goethe, Faust Part One, trans. David Luke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 41–2 (II, 1327–30).

41 In particular the seventh ‘mode’, which denies that we can know the reality of something when its appearance varies according to perspective. As ‘it is not possible to observe [...] things apart from places and positions’, as Diogenes Laertius puts it, ‘their real nature is unknowable’. Diogenes Laertius, ‘Life of Pyrroh’, in Lives of the Eminent Philosophers, II, 499. For Hume’s dismissal of this sophistry see An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, ed. Beauchamp, 200.

42 Cain refers to these walls on a number of occasions (I, i, 88–90; II, ii, 139; II, ii, 266).

43 Compare his prediction of Christ’s sacrifice (I, i, 165–6). On this aspect of the play’s intelligence also see Eggenschweiler, ‘Byron’s Cain and the Antimythological Myth’, 239.

44 Notably when Lucifer informs Cain that he is to bear witness to ‘the history / Of past, and present, and of future worlds’ (II, i, 24–5). Byron is remembering Milton’s God looking down upon Satan: ‘Him God beholding from his prospect high, / Wherein past, present, future he beholds’ (Paradise Lost, iii, 77–8). The idea was clearly an important one for Byron who, six months before writing Cain, described poetry in his Ravenna Journal as the ‘The feeling of a Former world and Future’ (BLJ, viii, 37). Also see Don Juan, x, 61 and The Vision of Judgment, 53. Also compare Ian Balfour’s observation that ‘if prophecy is always oriented towards a future – even when it does not take the form of a prediction – it is also profoundly a thing of the past, an echo, a citation’. The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 129.
45 ‘O how my speech falls short, how faint it is / For my conception! And for what I saw / It is not enough to say that I say little’. Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, trans. C. H. Sisson, notes by David H. Higgins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 499 (Paradiso, xxxiii, 121–3). Compare Cain: ‘I know not what thou art: I see thy power, / And see thou show’st me things beyond my power, / Beyond all power of my born faculties, / Although inferior still to my desires / And my conceptions’ (Cain, II, i, 79–83).

46 Compare Byron’s early letter to his mother from Prevesa: ‘I could tell you I know not how many incidents that I think would amuse you, but they crowd on my mind as much as would swell my paper, & I can neither arrange them in the one, or put them down on the other, except in the greatest confusion & in my usual horrible hand’ (BLf, i, 230).