Byron, George Gordon

Gavin Richard Hopps

Lord Byron, George Gordon

Byron hated systems but loved stories, so it is no surprise that whilst he frequently quarreled with propositional theology, he was 'a great reader and admirer' of the Bible, which he read 'through and through' before he was eight (Marchand, VIII, 238), and which, according to James Kennedy, he read every day (140). But what, more precisely, was his relationship with the 'Old Text' (*DJ*, XI, 4)? One way of trying to answer this question is to think about the different uses he makes of Scripture in his poetry (though it is worth bearing in mind, as Wilson Knight points out, that Byron's 'prose thinking and conversation kept on happier – if awestruck – terms with "the Deity"' (247)). To do this, it may be helpful to distinguish loosely between (i) textual allusions; (ii) concepts, ideas, motifs etc; and (iii) retellings of biblical stories.

I

A handy compendium of biblical usage in Byron's poetry has been assembled by Travis Looper. In addition to its value as a reference tool – which systematically catalogues quotations and less explicit allusions as well as more developed treatments of Scriptural themes – Looper's work is an important source of information regarding the Bibles actually owned by Byron, the version he tended to use in his poetry (the King James Bible) and the frequency of his references to particular books, themes and the two testaments (his poetry contains nearly twice as much material from the Old as from the New). It also attests to the importance of Scripture for Byron's poetry, more generally (Looper identifies a total of 1,704 uses of the Bible in Byron's verse).

Looper's compendium is a valuable resource in part because the data it provides is presented in a fairly raw state, and thus it is to some extent free of interpretive tiltings. This is also the volume's weakness though; for it has little to say about the meaning or *manner* of Byron's use of Scripture. Perhaps most problematical in this connection is Looper's recourse to the worryingly approximate category of the 'parodic', which he defines as imitation that makes the imitated 'appear ridiculous' (18). Since, for Byron, saying something in jest isn't the opposite of 'meaning it', and since his levity often serves as an enabling condition – and not just as a subversive strategy – in gaining entry where a more solemn comportment may have

met with resistance, Looper's cataloguing of all humorous or playful references to the Bible as 'parodic' is potentially misleading.

An illuminating supplement to Looper's groundwork on the poet's biblical allusions has been tendered by Wolf Z. Hirst. In an influential collection of essays entitled *Byron, the Bible and Religion*, Hirst offers us a more 'agonistic' reading of the poet's use of Scripture, in considering not only Byron's attempt to subvert or impose new meaning on biblical material but also, reversing the hermeneutical flow, the ways in which Scripture reasserts its power and threatens to subvert the poet's intended subversion. He writes: 'A person who questions or rejects a given biblical doctrine is still subject to its subtle pressure when confronting the motif in which the doctrine is embedded' (Hirst, 1991: 82). This is because, as Eric Auerbach argues in *Mimesis*, Scripture lays claim to a superordinate vision of reality, which purports to encompass all other realities within its supra-historical frame. Thus, whilst in one sense Byron's poetry subsumes the materials it draws from the Bible, in another sense the biblical vision subsumes his poetry. Of course, the same could be said of any work of fiction that seeks to make use of biblical materials; however, this hermeneutical chiasmus is especially relevant in Byron's case, as his poetry reflexively meditates upon such issues, and whilst it doesn't unequivocally endorse a Scriptural vision, it nonetheless keeps its claims in play and reminds us that, since they are verification-transcendent, they cannot be ruled out:

> this unriddled wonder,
> The World, which at the worst's a glorious blunder –
>
> If it be Chance; or if it be according
> To the Old Text, still better: – lest it should
> Turn out so, we'll say nothing 'gainst the wording,
> As several people think such hazards rude:
> They're right; our days are too brief for affording
> Space to dispute what *no one* ever could
> Decide, and *every body one day* will
> Know very clearly – or at least lie still. (*DJ*, XI, 3-4)

II

The presence of Scriptural concepts and motifs in Byron's poetry is far harder to trace than its local intertextual allusions and more extensive retelling of biblical stories. The task is also complicated by the fact that Byron's religious thinking is not coherently shaped by a single tradition; instead, it is informed, in not always wholly consistent ways, by a variety of sources,

the most important of which are Calvinism and Catholicism. (According to Earnest Lovell, the poet's religious views were shaped on the one hand by his early 'Calvinist-generated categories' and on the other by 'the Catholic sympathies of his later years' (192).) Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a number of prominent and recurrent themes that clearly have a biblical provenance.

As most critics of Byron agree, one of his central and abiding concerns is the Fall. Agreement seems to end here, however; as the centrality of the Fall in Byron's thought is something that is affirmed, for example, by Robert Gleckner's *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*, which attributes to the poet a vision of despair from within 'the hell of human existence' (16), but also by Bernard Beatty's *Byron's 'Don Juan'*, which calls attention to the poet's 'testing, trusting and evolving relationship with the mysterious given' and concludes that his masterpiece is 'inescapably religious' (1985: 230, 226). In view of these divergences, David Leigh has not implausibly divided critics of *Don Juan* into 'the party of salvation' and 'the party of despair' (121). Allied to the poet's preoccupation with the Fall is an almost obsessive interest in sin, both as a constitutive dimension of human nature and a tormenting sense of personal guilt. With respect the former, whilst prominent critics such as Jerome McGann, in *Fiery Dust*, have tended to favour psychological readings of the poet's pilgrimage and its attendant meditations upon sin, and whilst other critics, such as Robert Gleckner, have sought to retain the pessimism and dispense with the theology, it's hard to make sense of passages like the following without recourse to the Calvinist doctrine of 'total depravity':

> Our life is a false nature – 'tis not in
> The harmony of things, – this hard decree,
> This uneradicable taint of sin,
> This boundless upas, this all-blasting tree,
> Whose root is earth, whose leaves and branches be
> The skies which rain their plagues on men like dew –
> Disease, death, bondage – all the woes we see –
> And worse, the woes we see not – which throb through
> The immedicable soul, with heart-aches ever new. (*CHP*, IV, 126)

More recent readings by Paul Barton, Alan Rawes and Mary Hurst, by contrast, have attempted to lay bare the ways in which theological ideas about sin inform Byron's poetic thinking, even where he is in conflict with or unable ultimately to accept those ideas. With respect to the tormenting sense of personal guilt, critics have tended to include this in the portfolio of that

dastardly heartthrob known as the Byronic hero. This hugely popular figure, who teasingly resembles his creator, is typically haunted by some secret transgression, which sets him darkly apart from the crowd but also alienates him from himself. Perhaps the most sustained and philosophically probing treatment of this violently self-estranged subjectivity is to be found in *Manfred*, which stages a kind of inside-out and back-to-front Gothic pursuit, in which the mysterious transgressive protagonist is fleeing from an interiorized darkness from the past. Clearly, then, the Byronic hero is haunted by some 'half-maddening sin' (*Manfred*, II, i, 31); but what, more precisely, is his relationship with the religious?

If we take *Manfred* as an exemplar – which, according to Alice Levine, gives 'dramatic form to the personality, psychology, and moral and metaphysical speculations of the Byronic hero' (247) – the relationship is complicated but not incoherent, and by no means a simple matter of nihilism, as certain critics would have us believe (McGann, 2002). In the first place, we need to make a distinction between Manfred's attitude towards God and towards the church; for whilst he defiantly rejects the authority of the latter, he consistently evinces belief in the former:

> *Man.* Bid *him* [a Spirit] bow down to that which is above him,
> The overruling Infinite – the Maker
> Who made him not for worship – let him kneel,
> And we will kneel together. (II, iv, 46-9)

Instead, what Manfred is opposed to is any form of this-worldly mediation:

> *Abbot.* […] reconcile thee
> With the true church, and through the church to heaven.
> *Man.* […] whate'er
> I may have been, or am, doth rest between
> Heaven and myself. – I shall not choose a mortal
> To be my mediator. (III, i, 50-5)

This radical animosity towards terrestrial mediation – which, we should note, coexists alongside an acceptance of the Abbot's 'heaven' – appears to be more Protestant than nihilistic, and is consistent throughout Byron's early work. As E.W. Marjarum observes: 'Byron's most characteristic conception of the Divine […] retains the idea of a transcendent Deity, sovereign, manifested in his works, but not identified with them' (65). The most explicit statement of such views is given in 'The Prayer of Nature', which calls out to a transcendent 'Father of

Light', acknowledges a sense of 'death in sin' and scoffs at the 'mystic rites' of priests and the compulsion to 'bend in pompous form'.

In the second place, Manfred is haunted by an unextinguishable sense of sin, and is unshakable in his conviction not only that he has done wrong but that it is a *religious* wrongdoing. Thus, in spite of Nietzsche's admiration of the drama and critical attempts to read it as a proto-Nietzschean work, Manfred is decidedly un-Nietzschean in his moral evaluations. In addition, the hero's conscience or consciousness of sin – which is presented as something that is disclosed within the self and yet is not co-extensive with the speaking 'I' (I, i, 3-7) – is reinforced by a large number of biblical references (Looper identifies forty-three allusions to the Old Testament and twenty-three to the New), which keep in view a religious framework, even as the protagonist veers away from it. Yet this framework also, more subtly, engenders a kind of theological equivalent of dramatic irony, in that it raises the possibility of a level of reality which the characters only dimly intuit. A good example of this is to be found in the final climactic act of the drama, which appears to allude to the second letter to the Corinthians, in which Paul speaks of a message 'written not with ink but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts' (2 Corinthians 3). Referring to the epiphany of 'Inexpressible stillness' he experiences, Manfred reflects: 'It hath enlarged my thoughts with a new sense, / And I within my tablets would note it down' (III, i, 16-17). Out of context, this may not seem especially significant; however, until this point, Manfred has suffered from an 'excess' of self and has sought an escape from introspection ('self-oblivion' is what he asks from the spirits he conjures). And yet what he receives, in a kind of peripeteia, is a *dilation* of his interiority; and it is this, astonishingly, that brings him a momentary but transformative contentment. What's more, it is a contentment that underwrites the poise of his final utterance – which manages to be defiant even in surrender: 'Old man! 'tis not so difficult to die' (III, iv, 151) – but which also suggests, as a result of the allusion to the Pauline epistle, the advent of a grace he has been reluctant to accept.

Finally, qualifying somewhat Manfred's aversion to forms of mediation, it is possible to discern what Leonard Goldberg has referred to as a 'poetics of immanence' in the drama (154). By this he means moments in which natural phenomena appear to be invested with sacred significance. Here is an example:

> *Man.* And thou didst shine, thou rolling moon, upon
> All this, and cast a wide and tender light,

> Which soften'd down the hoar austerity
> Of rugged desolation, and fill'd up,
> As 'twere, anew, the gaps of centuries;
> Leaving that beautiful which still was so,
> And making that which was not, till the place
> Became religion, and the heart ran o'er
> With silent worship of the great of old! (III, iv, 31-9)

Thus, whilst Byron's hero sinks into despair and is given to gestures of Promethean defiance, it is hard to see how a drama that insistently keeps a biblical perspective in view and is based around a character who is haunted by an excoriating sense of sin and is open to the benedictions of a 'sacramental' vision could reasonably be described as nihilistic.

It isn't only in his reflections on the Fall and sin that Byron's poetry makes use of biblical motifs. In its more hopeful aspects too – its 'recurrent visions of Edenic purity' (Hirsch, 474), its moments of ecstatic communion and its dramatic meditations on the theme of resurrection (in *Mazeppa*, *The Vision of Judgment*, *The Island* and *Don Juan*), for example – Byron's poetry draws on the resources of Scripture. In its treatment of art, nature and eros, in particular, his poetry explores the revelatory capacities of created phenomena and envisions a world, precariously and imperfectly glimpsed, that is 'still impregnate with divinity' (*CHP*, IV, 55). Prominent examples of this include: the description of St Peter's in *Childe Harold* IV, in which the poet dramatizes the adventitious contemplation of a 'Vastness which grows / But grows to harmonize / – All musical in its immensities' and in doing so dilates the being of the beholder in a manner that anticipates the beatific vision ('and thou / Shalt one day, if found worthy, so defined, / See thy God face to face, as thou dost now / His Holy of Holies, nor be blasted by his brow' (*CHP*, IV, 155)); the 'sacramental' vision of nature in Canto III of *Childe Harold*, which is influenced by but is theologically more orthodox than Wordsworth's more opaque epiphanies ('All is concentered in a life intense, / Where not a beam, nor air, nor leaf is lost, / But hath a part of being, and a sense / Of that which is of all Creator and defence' (89)); and the redemptive erotic lure of Aurora Raby in *Don Juan*, whose 'ec-centric' spiritual existence participates in and communicates to others 'worlds beyond this world's perplexing waste' (XVI, 48). Of course, such intimations of transcendence – which are typically underpinned by a Scriptural economy – coexist alongside a variegated range of comedic, pessimistic and sceptical perspectives, which testify to the persistence of a questioning spirit. Nonetheless, as Vincent Newey affirms, 'Byron never does renounce transcendental aspiration,

though he knows its ends cannot be achieved except in flashes, at least while life continues' (177). It is important to be cognizant of these moments of transcendental aspiration and the Scriptural vision they metonymically evince, as they call into question the popular impression of the poet as a nihilist of the 'Satanic school'.

III

Aside from the translations he made of the Epistle of the Corinthians to Paul and the Third Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, from the Armenian apocrypha, Byron's most sustained engagements with biblical material are to be found in his two 'mysteries', *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth*, and the series of poems set to music by Isaac Nathan known as the *Hebrew Melodies*. The first of these is by far the most controversial, and was denounced by many of Byron's contemporaries as sacrilegious, whilst the latter – which was published during the poet's 'treacle-moon' – is much more serenely orthodox (though not all of the poems are explicitly related to 'Hebrew' themes). Until fairly recently, interpretations of *Cain* tended to side with Henry Crabb Robinson, who described it as:

> A book calculated to spread infidelity by furnishing a ready expression to difficulties which must occur to everyone, more or less, and which are passed over by those who confine themselves to scriptural representations (Rutherford, 37).

Yet the grounds of a defence are already apparent in this attack on the play's apparent 'infidelity'. For as more recent readings by Hirst, Beatty and Hart have emphasized, whilst Byron does, to be sure, 'leave the thing a problem' – in refusing to provide answers to Cain's complaints against the deity – the poet is confronting what is *in fact* a problem 'which must occur to everyone', believers and unbelievers alike. As Hirst puts it, 'the poet's failure to solve the intractable dilemma of theodicy does not make his play sacrilegious' (Hirst, 1997: 268-9). Indeed, as Trevor Hart points out, its refusal to pass over the thorny issues of theodicy, as Crabb Robinson thinks proper, is an imaginative strategy it shares with Bible, which contains 'elements of vibrant and vital "countertestimony" in which serious questions are asked of God, and in which he is construed on occasion as "devious, ambiguous, irascible and unstable"' (18). That such perspectives are aired and such questions asked is, as Hart suggests, 'an important part of the health of the text, giving vent to feelings that, far from being sacrilegious or blasphemous, constitute an important and natural part of faith's response to the messy and

painful eventualities that divine providence encompasses' (18). In leaving the thing a problem, then, and in confronting what Crabb Robinson would have us gloss over, Byron, as Bernard Beatty observes, 'thinks like Job, who cannot solve the problem and lives and suffers in its incomprehensibility' (2011: 37). It seems that the poet's preference for stories over systems may not have been so irreligious after all.

Bibliography

Barton, Paul. *Lord Byron's Religion – A Journey into Despair* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003).

Beatty, Bernard. *Byron's 'Don Juan'* (London: Croon Helm, 1985).

Beatty, Bernard. 'Byron and Religion', in *Byron's Religions*, ed. Peter Cochran (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011).

Beatty, Bernard and Newey, Vincent (eds.). *Byron and the Limits of Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988).

Gleckner, *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967).

Gleckner, Robert and Beatty, Bernard (eds.). *The Plays of Lord Byron: Critical Essays* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997).

Goldberg, Leonard. 'Byron and the Place of Religion', in *Byron, the Bible and Religion*, ed. Hirst.

Hart, Trevor. '*Cain*'s Byron: A Mystery – On the Inscrutability of Poetic Providence', in *The Byron Journal*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2009).

Hirsch, E.D., Jr. 'Byron and the Terrestrial Paradise', in *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

Hirst, Wolf, Z. (ed.). *Byron, the Bible, and Religion* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991).

Hirst, Wolf. 'Byron's Lapse into Orthodoxy: an Unorthodox Reading of *Cain*', in *The Plays of Lord Byron: Critical Essays*, ed. Gleckner and Beatty.

Hopps, Gavin (ed.). *Byron's Ghosts: The Spectral, the Spiritual and the Supernatural* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

Hopps, Gavin and Stabler, Jane (eds.). *Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

Hurst, Mary. 'Byron and the Noonday Demons', in *Byron's Ghosts: The Spiritual, the Spectral and the Supernatural.*

Kennedy, James. *Conversations on Religion, with Lord Byron and Others* (Philadelphia: Carey & Lea, 1833).

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

Leigh, David, S.J., 'Infelix Culpa: Poetry and the Skeptic's Faith in *Don Juan*', in *Keats-Shelley Journal*, vol. 28 (1979).

Levine, Alice (ed.). *Byron's Poetry and Prose* (New York: Norton, 2009).

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

Lovell, Earnest. *Byron: The Record of a Quest* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1966)

Marchand, Leslie, A. (ed.). *Byron's Letters and Journals*, 12 vols. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972-83).
Marjarum, Edward Wayne. *Byron as Skeptic and Believer* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962).
McGann, Jerome. *Byron and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
Newey, Vincent. 'Authoring the Self: *Childe Harold* III and IV', in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, ed. Beatty and Newey.
Rawes, Alan. 'Byron's Confessional Pilgrimage', in *Romanticism and Religion: From William Cowper to Wallace Stevens*.
Rutherford, Andrew (ed.). *Byron: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970).