

## The (Un-)Popular Reception of *Cain*, or the Multiple Lives of a Text

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Referred to by Byron as his Waterloo (*Don Juan* XI 56 2), *Cain: A Mystery* was risqué even for the standards of a poet who provoked more controversy during his lifetime than perhaps any other writer in the English canon. Too “Satanic” for contemporary reviewers and clergy, without sporting the typical Byronic hero<sup>1</sup> to counterbalance its perceived weaknesses of form or poetic decorum, the play was given a very uneven reception from friends and foes alike. The paper attempts to trace these responses and the reasons behind the (un-) popular reception of *Cain*. It is argued that *Cain* represented an experiment in style that didn’t come off and was misunderstood—ironically, even by Byron himself who was not sure exactly what he was doing with the drama, other than being provocative. Eventually, more than any other poem that Byron wrote, the text of *Cain* became fused not only with the author’s life, but with everything that was said or written about it, both before and after publication, resulting in a plural, public, and radically de-centred work that escapes critical consensus and theatrical orthodoxy to this day.

From its very first appearance, the play provoked mixed feelings. At Byron’s insistence, *Cain* was published together with *Sardanapalus* and *The Two Foscari* because his publisher, John Murray, viewed it as potentially blasphemous and was reluctant to take it on. He urged Byron at least to tone down some of Lucifer’s speeches, but Byron

made light of his fears, claiming that to make the Fallen Angel “talk like the Bishop of Lincoln – would not be in the character of the former” (*BLJ* IX 53). John Hobhouse was even more apprehensive, calling the work “irreligious” and urging Byron not to publish it if he valued his reputation or Hobhouse’s friendship (qtd. in Lovell 126-27). “*Cain* is a poem much too striking to be passed in silence,” claimed Edgerton Brydges, “But its impiety is so frightful that it is impossible to praise it while its genius and beauty of composition would demand all the notice which mere literary merit can claim” (qtd. in Martin 152). Although Leigh Hunt ostensibly praised the work, he too was aware of the difficulties it posed its various readers: “The civil authorities would rather say nothing about it,” he asserted, “the religious cannot say anything fairly; and the critical are exceedingly hampered between the two” (qtd. in Corbett 146)

Other readers were more unequivocally supportive of Byron’s latest extravaganza. Walter Scott, graciously accepted Byron’s dedication of the play to him and, in a letter to Murray, defended Lucifer’s heretical and dubious rhetoric as naturally suited to someone who wants to misrepresent God and undermine His authority. The Shelleys were even more effusive in their praise, with Percy Bysshe in particular claiming that *Cain* contained “finer poetry than has appeared in England since the publication of *Paradise regained*.” “*Cain* is apocalyptic,” he enthused, “a revelation not before communicated to man” (Jones II 388). Moore too called it “wonderful – terrible – never to be forgotten”, and compared Byron favourably to Aeschylus, claiming, “here is the true spirit of the Poet and the Devil” (Dowden II 495).

This concluding coupling of poet and Devil was not coincidental. Even before *Cain* had been published, the Poet laureate, Robert Southey, had implicitly associated

Byron with the “Satanic school” of poetry<sup>2</sup>, and although such a characterization seems to have been borne out by a long list of impious and rebellious personages sporting the pages of Byron’s works, *Cain* was the first time that the Enemy of Man had appeared in person, as it were. As E. H. Coleridge noted in his famous introduction to the play, “it was taken for granted that Lucifer was the mouthpiece of Byron, [and] that the author was not on the side of angels” (177). The same assumption was eloquently voiced in an 1821 review of Henry Hart Milman’s, *The Fall of Jerusalem*, where it was claimed that, Byron, one of the “mightiest spirits of the age, has apparently, devoted himself and his genius to the adornment and extension of evil” (*BLJ* VII 132).

The play’s scandalized reception confirmed Murray’s and Hobhouse’s worst fears, and surpassed the uproar that had accompanied the appearance of *Don Juan* earlier in the year. Although Lord Chancellor Eldon, acting as censor, would not initially allow the play to come out until a jury ruled that it was not sacrilegious, John Murray was subsequently denied an injunction against pirated copies on the grounds that the play was blasphemous (Steffan 14). The government’s confusion regarding the play’s ethics did not seem to extend to the church, however, and as Byron facetiously put it, parsons began preaching “at it from Kentish Town and Oxford to Pisa,” (*BLJ* IX 111) protesting that it was “a book calculated to spread infidelity” (MacCarthy 414). Nevertheless, as often happens in these cases, it is doubtful whether the clergymen in question had gone to the trouble of actually reading the work, since their attacks seemed to be aimed more at Byron himself and his scandalous sexual history than at the play itself. The Reverend John Styles, for example, in a characteristic “fire and brimstone” sermon delivered from Holland Chapel, Kennington, castigated the author as a “denaturalized being, who having

exhausted every species of sensual gratification, and drained the cup of sin to its bitterest dregs is resolved to show that he is no longer human” (MacCarthy 415). In a slightly more sophisticated yet still very personal vein, Bishop Heber, the author of the of Milman review referred to above, opined that...

... it is better that Lord Byron should be a manichee, or a deist—nay, we would almost say, if the thing were possible, it were better that he should be a moral and argumentative atheist, than the professed and systematic poet of seduction, adultery, and incest (qtd. in MacCarthy 415)

In the light of these impassioned attacks, Byron’s apology in the Prologue to *Cain* and elsewhere that it was difficult to make his Lucifer talk like a clergyman is highly ironic. Firstly, Lucifer frequently *does* talk like a clergyman, as “in his evident disgust for sexual intercourse” (Karkoulis 274), and, if we take the Hebrew meaning of the word “Satan” as “the accuser,” then the various incensed churchmen who pronounced fiery judgment on *Cain* from their pulpits can be said to have unconsciously repaid the compliment.

Peter Cochran has also pointed out that Lucifer’s theological position in *Cain* is very close to one expressed by Byron himself in a letter to Francis Hodgson, dated 13 September 1811, ten years prior to the play’s publication: “the basis of your religion is *injustice*; the *Son of God*, the *pure*, the *immaculate*, the *innocent*, is sacrificed for the *guilty*” (*Religions* 4). Thus, the connection drawn by many spokesmen of the religious establishment between Byron and his work was not entirely unwarranted. As Fred Parker has argued,

... 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 their Satanic heroes was enormously enhanced by their relation to Byron's own reputation (2).

For example, Lucifer's and Adah's discussion of the changing ethics of incest in Act I of *Cain* is clearly intended to remind the audience of Byron's own close relationship with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh, which was the cause of his having to flee England in 1816. Indeed, theological and sexual seduction seem to go hand in hand in *Cain* in a way which, if not deliberately intended to scandalize its more pious readers, was certainly meant to bolster its author's "mad, bad, and dangerous to know" reputation; hence Lucifer's irresistible attraction for all that come into contact with him in the play, mirroring his author's Don Juan reputation. Adah, in particular, is seduced merely by setting eyes on the Fallen Angel, recalling the way Byron could proverbially magnetize members of the opposite sex through mere physical proximity:

There is a fastening attraction which  
 Fixes my fluttering eyes on his; my heart  
 Beats quick; he awes me, and yet draws me near  
 Nearer, and nearer: Cain—Cain—save me from him! (I.i.410-13)

“What dreads my Adah?” asks Cain, “This is no ill spirit.” But all the evidence is to the contrary, and the clergymen who feared for their flock in the presence of Byron and his provocative work were partly encouraged to do so by the author himself.

But *Cain*'s most scathing critic, by far, was Francis Jeffrey who, in the *Edinburgh Review* of February 1822, penned a venomous 40-page review of the volume in which Cain appeared. According to Jeffrey *Cain* was likely “to give great scandal and offence to pious persons in general – and may be the means of suggesting the most painful doubts as distressing perplexities to hundreds of minds that might never otherwise have been exposed to such dangerous disturbance” (437). However, Jeffrey's most scathing criticism was not so much that Byron was “an apostle or disciple of Satan” whose poetry was “a mere compound of blasphemy and obscenity,” —this was more or less taken for granted—but that the author possessed “the unlucky gift of personating ... love, patriotism, valour, devotion, constancy, ambition” while really believing in none of them (qtd. in Parker 24). However, the opposite may also be true, and the poet may have been struggling to believe against his native skepticism, rather than dissimulating possession of those “sweet and lofty illusions,” as Jeffrey calls them, only to demonstrate their impotence. A comparable attempt at deliberate affirmation in the face of despair may be seen in Act III of the play when, after having struck Abel violently on the forehead, Cain is bending over his dying brother and hoping against hope that he is still alive:

His eyes are open. Then he is not dead.

Death is like sleep, and sleep shuts down our lids.

His lips are apart; why then he breathes.

And yet I feel it not. His heart! His heart!

Let me see, doth it beat? (III.i.337-41)

As David Eggenschweiler observes, the protagonist's voice has lost its habitual cynical tenor in this scene, and "Cain is desperately trying to convince himself, rather than sarcastically playing with his certainties" (246). And the same reaching out for faith is evident in Cain's rare appeal to God a few lines later ("Oh, God! Oh, God!") which verge on repentance and procure Abel's forgiveness with his dying breath.

One of the many ironies of *Cain's* reception is that Byron managed to alienate not only the more pious and conservative readers with his play, but also friendly skeptics and free thinkers alike. As an exasperated Shelley wrote to Horace Smith, disclaiming his own purported influence on *Cain*, I lament my "lack of power to eradicate from [Byron's] great mind the delusions of Christianity which in spite of his reason, seem perpetually to recur" (Jones II 412). Moore too, for all his appreciation of the poem, warned Byron in the strongest possible terms not to refer to Cuvier in *Cain* for fear of disillusioning the young and tender-hearted reader with such a "desolating" scientific theory as geological Catastrophism.

The young, the simple, —all those whose hearts one would like to keep unwithered, trouble their heads but little about Cuvier. You however, have embodied him in poetry which every one reads; and, like the wind blowing 'where you list,' carry this deadly chill mixed up with your own

fragrance into hearts that should be visited only by the latter. (Dowden II 504-5)

Blake, too, hardly the most conservative thinker of his generation, found Byron's pessimistic treatment of the biblical story hard to swallow and, replied to *Cain* in a seventy-line poetic drama called *The Ghost of Abel: "A Revelation In the Visions of Jehovah Seen by William Blake."* He pointedly addresses the prelude "To LORD BYRON in the Wilderness," implying that any equivocation in matters of true faith—which he evidently observed in Byron's drama—as opposed to mere doctrine, place one in dangerous error.<sup>3</sup> Even the friendly Walter Scott expressed what turned out to be one of the most common objections to the play: that the author hadn't placed "in the mouth of Adam, or some good protecting spirit, the reasons which render the existence of moral evil consistent with the general benevolence of the Deity" (qtd. in Corbett 166). But, it can be argued that Byron does precisely this in Abel's prayer before the two altars in Act III which presents the revealed theology position in a few simple words, effortlessly refuting everything that Cain and Lucifer have spent the whole play sophisticatedly debating about the origin of evil as well as the nature and knowability of godhead.

Sole Lord of light!

Of good and glory, and eternity;

Without whom all were evil, and with whom

Nothing can err except to some end

Of thine omnipotent benevolence—

Inscrutable, but still to be fulfill'd— (III.i.231-36)

Although, as Martin Corbett points out, “Byron has no wish to present Lucifer of all—people!—as the purveyor of truth” (152) the balance in the play is clearly in favour of Deist as opposed to fideistic arguments without it being clear where the poet’s sympathies lay. In the end, no-one was pleased: intellectual readers found it philosophically inept and inexplicably disingenuous and pious readers deliberately provocative and dangerously irreligious.

Nor did Byron’s desperate efforts to defend the play in his letters succeed in elucidating his intentions and dispelling the misunderstandings surrounding the text. His early pronouncements, before the so-called “humbug Row about Cain” (*LJM* 435) had broken out, appear, in hindsight, to have been naïve: he claims to have “a good opinion of the piece as poetry” which he says is written in his “gay metaphysical style, and in the Manfred line” (*BLJ* 6 361). But it is one thing to write a wholly invented drama like *Manfred* in the occult Faustian tradition and quite another to adapt a well-known biblical story for the stage and turn it into what many believed was a Manichean tract.<sup>4</sup> In any case, as Phillip Martin points out, even if Byron were “no Manichean, nor *Any*-chean,” as he indignantly protested to Murray following the Heber review, in *Cain*, “he was prepared to play at Manichaeism for the benefit of a public who wished to be scandalized” (156). Against the accusation that the author was expressing his usual Satanic irreverence through Lucifer’s and Cain’s pronouncements, Byron countered by saying that “Cain is nothing but a drama – not a piece of argument” (letter to John

Murray, 8/2/1922, *BLJ* 9 103) and that the play represented “no creed nor personal hypothesis” (*BLJ* 9 53) of his.

Trevor Hart has supported Byron’s defense by partially dissociating the author from the work and asserting that “in a genuinely creative act, the maker remains hidden behind as well as being revealed in and through his or her poetic output” (15). But what is a work of art other than the rhetorical expression of diverse “creeds” and “personal hypotheses”—whether the author’s or not—and how is it possible for an audience not to be affected by a work’s ideological content? What Byron’s apology reveals, in fact, is that *Cain* was an experiment in style that didn’t quite come off and was therefore misunderstood, but we will speak more about this below.

Despite Byron’s initial reluctance to take responsibility for the furor that was provoked by the publication of *Cain*—“I wrote it when I was drunk. When I reread it later I was astonished” (qtd. in Martin 150)—, as soon as it appeared that Murray may be prosecuted on account of the play, he offered to stand trial in his place and refund the copyright, if necessary (*BLJ* IX 103). Nevertheless, it is apparent from the Prologue to the play that Byron had few illusions about the objections that most readers were likely to have concerning his so-called “speculative” but “harmless production” (qtd. In Quennell 694). This does tend to suggest, as some critics argue, that the play was “concerned less with its artistry than with an assault upon decorum” (Martin 148).

The prologue begins by justifying the subtitle “a Mystery” which Byron gave the play on the grounds that this constituted a time-honoured tradition of popular drama, adding that “The author has by no means taken the same liberties with his subject.” However, it is clear to anyone reading *Cain* that this is no Mystery or Morality play.

These types of drama traditionally conveyed a kind of licensed profanity in keeping with the carnival tradition which was a period when the official control of public expression was lax in preparation for the strictness of lent. But, if anything, *Cain* is more “profane” than these works because its objective is not to poke carnival fun at figures of authority so that the audience may let their hair down before Christ’s passion is remembered, but to explore certain wide-ranging cosmological and theological speculations that were challenging the literal interpretation of the Bible as a result of late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century science<sup>5</sup> and Higher Criticism. In this regard, Byron flirts not only with Manichaeism in *Cain*, but with a wide range of other “isms” too: including skepticism, Gnosticism, Deism, rationalism, and arguably diabolism. In one of his letters, Byron also revealed that the subtitle “a Mystery” was also an apt description of what the play was likely “to remain for the reader” (Goode 295), but he may have underestimated the full extent to which this insight was true.

In the prologue, Byron claims fidelity to the book of Genesis in terms of the language which his characters use, explaining that “where it is [rarely] taken from actual Scripture” the author “has made as little alteration ... as the rhythm would permit.” The irony is that these personages say very little in the Bible—indeed, the whole story of the fratricide and its consequences is dismissed in 16 lines—and the one instance where Byron does quote the biblical Cain, “Am I then my brother’s keeper” (III.i.468-69), he does so in a way which raises some interesting questions. Besides keeping more to the rhythm of Byron’s verse, the addition of “then” to this famous line, suggests that Cain is self-consciously, albeit reluctantly, quoting from scripture. As Leonard Michaels has observed, this detail...

... reveals the various ways in which Byron has conceived this particular hero—as reliving rather than living the Biblical myth. In effect, Byron’s Cain is a dramatic creature who plays Cain until *voilà*, he murders his brother and discovers he is Cain. (71)

If this is the case, then the play invites a somewhat different reading from the ones it has traditionally received. In the short line “Am I then my brother’s keeper?” it appears that, for all of Cain’s Promethean rebelliousness, he cannot help identifying with his biblical namesake and is unable to avoid playing the role scripted for him in the Holy Book that he would like to dispute. Or, in existentialist terms, by committing homicide, unpremeditated or not, Cain is sacrificing a multitude of possible futures and identities to become the first murderer in the biblical tradition, the patriarch of the tribe of Cain. The whole play, then, can be said to represent the dawning of the protagonist’s self-realization, or in terms familiar to students of tragedy, his *anagnorisis*.

There is a problem, however, with the chronology of the play. *Cain* begins with a prayer by Adam which echoes the onset of cosmic creation described in Genesis where the spirit of the Lord was hovering over the waters: “God, the Eternal! Infinite! All-Wise— / Who out of darkness on the deep didst make/ Light on the Waters with a word—all hail! (I.i.1-3). What is easy to overlook is that the Book of Genesis was written *after* the murder of Abel, so how does Adam know these details of the creation myth? This is only the first of many instances when Byron’s supposedly biblical characters behave as though the Old Testament has already been written and they have somehow got

their hands on a copy of the text in which they first appeared but which they are simultaneously actors in. However, this kind of self-referential, or metatheatrical situation was not likely to have been understood by the average reader in the 1820s—indeed it can be argued that Byron himself was barely conscious of what he was doing with *Cain*—and hence the problems with the play’s reception.

Byron, also appeals to the biblical source in defense of Lucifer’s argument that the serpent which tempted Eve was nothing other than a common snake because, as he says, “the book of genesis does not state that eve was tempted by a demon, but by ‘the Serpent’.” This is the most outrageous part of Byron’s whole disingenuous apology in the Prologue for a number of reasons. Firstly, Lucifer’s account of the temptation scene in Genesis goes against scripture. The Bible says that only *after* the Fall was the Serpent cursed by God to crawl on its belly which means that before, it stood erect or moved in a different manner.<sup>6</sup> This contradicts Lucifer’s assertion to Cain that, “thy / Fond parents listen’d to a creeping thing / And fell ... I tell thee that the serpent was no more / Than a mere serpent” (I.i.231-32). To state the obvious, “mere serpents” are not wont to converse using human speech, so whatever it was that seduced Eve in the Garden of Eden was something more than that. Moreover, there can be little doubt that Satan acted through the serpent in question, and even if the authorized Bible does not make this explicit, many alternative versions of the genesis story do.

What Byron is trying to say—and this is Lucifer’s argument too—is that Adam and Eve could not have been tempted solely from without, so the blame cannot fall exclusively on him; hence Lucifer’s claim that the serpent “woke [a demon] / In those it spoke to” (I.i.229-30). But the conclusive evidence comes when Cain confesses to

Lucifer that he would rather consort with spirits than with his own kind, to which Lucifer replies that were Cain not fit...

For such companionship, I would not now  
 Have stood before thee as I am: a serpent  
 Had been enough to charm thee as before. (I.i.192-95)

This does rather let the cat (or the serpent) out of the bag. Why, then, is Byron contradicting the evidence of his own text—not to mention his repeated claims of authorial impartiality—by lending his voice to a notoriously unreliable character who is, moreover, known as “the Father of Lies”? Whatever the reason, this kind of behaviour does lend fuel to the arguments of those critics who, like Jeffrey, claimed that “Lucifer is nothing more than the personified demon of [the author’s] imagination” (439). It is almost as if Byron is deliberately provoking controversy by siding with Lucifer in the Prologue, or as Martin puts it, “playing the vandal” (153).

What emerges from the story of Byron’s *Cain* is that a text possesses a multitude of distinct and often contradictory lives which depend on its different readers, or “users,” we could say; it has a pre-life in the thoughts of its creator and in the opinions of those in which he confides—his closet friends, his colleagues, his agent or publisher; it has a life proper as a published work available for social consumption, public appropriation, commercial and ideological exploitation; and it has an after-life in the official interpretations and evaluations that the work receives from various “specialists” (e.g. critics, government officials, directors) which often continue to bear upon it many

centuries after it is first published. What also becomes apparent with *Cain* is that an author is never entirely in control of his or her offspring—nor indeed fully informed of its doings—and only in vain does s/he attempt to affect its reception via disingenuous apologies and impassioned appeals in letters, diaries, prologues, and epilogues. But what *Cain* makes especially apparent is that a text cannot be entirely separated not only from the life and opinions of its author but also from everything extra-textual around it—indeed it is often impossible to separate the textual from the extra- or meta-textual, the critical from the literary, or the biographical from the fictional.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As Ian Dennis has argued, defiance “doesn’t work nearly so well for the protagonist [of *Cain*] as earlier Byronic defiance did. Cain ends up a violent murderer, not a victim and, more tellingly still, looks mean and pathetic in the process: nastily, not theatrically guilty” (661).

<sup>2</sup> As Leslie Marchand writes, “Southey’s *Vision* appeared with a preface which made pointed reference to Byron, without naming him, as the leader of the Satanic school of writers whose works ‘breathe the spirit of Belial in their lascivious parts’ and a ‘satanic spirit of pride and audacious impiety’.” (*Byron: A Portrait*, London: Abury Press, 1987, p 351). As Roderick Beaton suggested to the author, based on the timing of *Cain*, the play may have constituted a literary response on the part of Byron to Southey’s attack, designed to capitalize on and perhaps even confirm the poet laureate’s accusations in *The Vision*.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie Tannenbaum offers a diametrically opposed reading of *The Ghost of Abel*, arguing that, by placing Byron in the wilderness, Blake is associating him with Elijah and therefore with a reliable prophet of God. (351)

<sup>4</sup> For an informed analysis of Byron’s relation to Manichaeism and the religious doctrines of similar sects, see Peter Cochran, “Byron and the Dualists,” in *Byron’s Religion’s*, pp. 274-285.

<sup>5</sup> For the philosophical influences on *Cain*, see Bernard Beatty, “Byron in the Eighteenth Century,” *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*. Drummond Bone, ed. Cambridge: CUP, 2004, pp. 247-48.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 3.14.

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