

Religious Training and Byronic Psychology

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Despite Byron's consequent aversion to traditional observances, he was always acutely sensitive about religious beliefs. At the age of nineteen Byron had finished reading Hugh Blair, A Scottish Presbyterian divine and popular writer of sermons; Porters, Tilloston and Hooker all eminent men in the field of religion and theology. Doctrinal Christianity, also known as Calvinism had a deep impact on Byron. When Byron was back from his first tour on the continent he received long visits from Francis Hodgson and William Harness at Newstead. Both of these Byron's close friends later became clergymen of the Church of England. Harness subsequently wrote, "Byron from his early education in Scotland had been taught to identify the principles of Christianity with the extreme dogmas of Calvinism. His mind had thus imbibed a most miserable prejudice, which appeared to be the only obstacle to his hearty acceptance of the Gospel. Of this error we were most anxious to disabuse him."

By the extreme dogmas of Calvinism Harness meant the great emphasis laid upon original sin and predestination in Calvinistic systems, doctrines that exercised a profound influence upon Byron's imagination. The fascination, which they held for him, explains in large measure his life-long concern with theological controversy. He could not digest that one should suffer for other's fault. He protested, "... the basis of your religion is injustice; the Son of God, the pure, the immaculate, the innocent, is sacrificed for the Guilty. This proves His heroism; but no more does away man's guilt ..."

Byron's wife Annabella Milbanke later confirmed Harness' account. During the courtship she questioned Byron about his religious beliefs. But he shied away from answering that time. She later discovered that Byron's dislike for religion was closely related to fear. The fear he used to feel in his childhood in Aberdeen, living close to a grave yard. Lady Byron related, "There was a deliberate purpose [on Byron's part] to set God's will and human law at defiance...Vice in itself was spoken of as insipid, as deriving its zest from its lawfulness."

"Over and over again there were the raging fits, the despairing fits, and the reference to some abnormal, unforgivable sin."

Byron and his wife used to have a great many discussions on religion and Lady Byron's authoritarian dogmatism was the disturbing element in their conversation.

"He tried to undermine her faith in Christianity as a rule of life by argument and ridicule."

Byron experienced an inner conflict, which his constant preoccupation with traditional beliefs is evidence.

"So that his mind is continually making the most sudden transitions- from good to evil- from evil to good."

He wanted to shake off this burden of conflict:

"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:

Though from our birth the faculty divine
Is chain'd and tortured- cabin'd, cribb'd, confined,
And bred in darkness, lest the truth should shine
Too brightly on the unprepared mind,"

His contact during youth and early manhood with the orthodox tradition consisted in a series of experience to which he attached certain values. His vacillations between belief and doubt were always attended by inward distress; religious uncertainty was a constant source of suffering to him. Sin and suffering are the recurrent theme throughout his works:

"Existence may be borne, and the deep root
Of life and sufferance make its firm abode
The bare and desolated bosoms; mute
The camel labours with the heaviest load,
And the wolf dies in silence"

But in spite of the religious confusion and skepticism Byron was a firm believer in God and His creation. 'God made man, let us love him, piped the little Aberdonian at five. His acceptance of the belief in a creator was by no means a rationalistic or philosophical theism. It was the product of religious teaching, grounded upon the Old Testament. His poetry reflects this truth everywhere. It is found in his earliest poetry, and is intimately associated with the development of his natural religion and his pantheism. "*Cain*" and "*Heaven and Earth*" show most markedly Byron's concern with the Divine purpose. Whatever skepticism may be traced in these dramas there is no question that Byron assumed the existence of divine will:

"...all
Rests upon thee; and good and evil seem
To have no power themselves, save in the will."

By 1815 Byron shows that tendency toward Catholicism, which seemed to carry with it an increasing reverence for the person of Christ. Not until maturity did he come to a sympathetic attitude toward the Christian system of grace. The relation of the creature to the creator, or, in traditional language, the salvation, appeared to him during his formative years in Hebraic rather than in its Christian aspect; his early poetry ignores the New Testament teaching of a divine mediator between man and God. Although he came finally to conceive of Christ as a divine teacher, he seldom concerned himself with Christ as a redeemer. The later speculative poems, "*Cain*" and "*Heaven and Earth*" are hence conceived in the spirit of the Old Testament. But one can hardly escape the conclusion that Byron's mind was fundamentally religious -Religious, not in the sense of orthodox piety, but in the sense of a being innately predisposed to concern itself with the supernatural order, or to inquire into the bearing of traditional beliefs upon human experience. To a mind of that stamp, sin and its consequences are of prime importance. Byron's awe in the presence of all that lies beyond ordinary experience, and his exaggerated sense of guilt, are closely connected with the strong emphasis placed upon the doctrine of original sin by Calvinistic creeds. It would be hard to find a mentality more likely than his to be thrown into a state of emotional agitation by such a doctrine. His blazing sense of justice, his passionate desire for a state in which the guiltless should be unmolested and the wicked should be restrained, made Byron preeminently the poet of revolution. Yet he was confronted with a dogma, which laid upon him and all men the guilt for another's misdeed. Byron was thoroughly convinced that there lay upon the Byron family a curse which predestined its members to the expiation of ancestral faults. He knew well enough that to have the blood of the wicked Byrons in one's veins was no matter for rejoicing:

"... - 'tis written on my brow!
There read of Cain the curse and crime,
In characters unworn by time:"

Almost every biographer has remarked the strange fatality, which seemed to hang over his existence. Byron thought he could trace the hand of destiny in the most ordinary circumstances of his kin. It was a line accursed, for whom naught but misfortune was to be expected. His own personal sense of moral guilt was hence rendered morbidly alert. The perversity with which he paraded his own escapades was in part but a flippant substitution of bravado for uneasiness; Moore called it inverse hypocrisy. The traditional expressions of viciousness in the first cantos of "*Childe Harold*" may in part be discounted as new evidence of immaturity.

"I am tolerably sick of vice, which I have tried in its agreeable varieties."

"I have been guilty of many excesses."

But there persists in his mind a prepossession with the mental states associated with guilt indicative of an acute sensitivity in such matters. Even in the intrigues to which he devoted so much of his energy he seems never to have lost his awareness of guilt. His letters to Lady Melbourne about the intended seduction of Lady Francis Webster are frankly uneasy about the tremendous

"beam in my own eye"; and the "strongest mixture of right and wrong"

in the Lady's justification of her conduct. In another letter to the same Lady he writes, about his relations with 'X' i.e., Augusta Leigh (His half-sister),

"as for me, brought up as I was, and sent into the world as I was, both physically and morally, nothing better could be expected, and it is odd that I always had a foreboding ..."

Byron seems very definitely to have associated his rearing, his lameness, and his violent blood as integral parts of the fatality, which appeared to rule his life.

With regard to Byron's lameness, the testimony of Lady Byron about the effect of Calvinistic training is of great importance. From all Byron's associates comes the evidence that he was in certain recurrent moods the prey of fears for which nothing external to his native temperament will account save his preoccupation with the most extreme dogmas of Calvinism. His intermittent periods of skepticism were but an added source of agitation. He was haunted by his religious heritage. Although he revolted against it, he could no more evade the spell it exercised upon him. His overpowering sense of guilt, deeply infused into the characterization of the Byronic hero, is a direct result of Calvinistic training. In similar fashion one can trace in Byron's misanthropic tirades the initial impetus of the theological doctrine of total depravity. He rejects the positive or redemptive elements of Christianity for a special aspect of its tradition, the Hebraic emphasis on the need of submission and the insignificance of men. Cain questions the greatness of the God:

"... They have but
One answer to all question, 'Twas his will,
And he is good'. How know I that? Because
He is all- powerful, must all – good, too, follow?"

In the depths of his mind the doctrine of 'original sin' was deeply ingrained. "*Manfred*" was but a defiance of this doctrine. "*Cain*" was an exposition of its minor premises. Through the heterodox speeches of Lucifer, Byron made an impression on his radical and conservative contemporaries. The two dramas, together with "*Heaven and Earth*", may be considered as giving Satan's side of the high argument in Heaven which resulted in the fall of man and as protesting against the punishment of man for acts committed through no fault of his own will. The character of "*Cain*" is an unsuccessful attempt to trace the invertible causes of crime to outside forces. The deliberate anticlimaxes of "*Don Juan*" are again the expression of a soul that could not look upon earthly matters with the calm, cheerful acceptance of the conventional pagan, but that decried every foible and folly of mankind as a mortal fall from grace. He wrote to Hodgson,

"God would have made His will known without books."

From the point of view of the humanist, Calvinism was a crueler religion. Its purpose is to make man ill. It denies the full, healthy, rich life. It destroys a sense of beauty and proportion in

conduct, by isolating these qualities from the moral order. By ascribing natural instincts to the acts of the Devil, it makes suffering inevitable, creates a morbid sense of sin. Its cruelty is spiritual rather than physical, and hence all the sharper. It has necessitated hard thinking and action. Upon Byron its action had this two-fold result. It exaggerated his melancholy and sufferings; it denied him ease.

“There is a war, a chaos of the mind,
When all its elements convulsed, combined,
Lie dark and jarring with perturbed force,
And gnashing with impenitent Remorse-
That juggling fiend, who never spake before,
But cries, ‘I warn’d thee’! when the deed is o’er”

Between Byron’s Calvinism and his passion for liberty existed an intimate relationship. The two supplemented each other. Fretted by the shackles of a religion basically fatalistic, he developed a horror of being confined or ruled and hence championed Liberty of thought and expression. His eccentricities, inconsistencies, and violent passion may be traced largely to the fact that, essentially a man of action caught in inactivity, he floundered about like a whale in a puddle, until the Greek Revolution presented him with his chance for relief. Paradoxically, Byron was deeply affected by his Calvinistic training. His sense of guilt was, in large measure, responsible for his notoriety. Though more violent, he was not wicked. He boasted openly of those things not to be admitted but it was to relieve his conscience by talking of his sins.

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