MANFRED AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

At III i 164-7 the Abbot casts one remaining glance at the dualistic nature of his doomed parishioner:

> It is an awful chaos – light and darkness
> And mind and dust – and passions – and pure thoughts
> Mixed and contending without end or order
> All dormant or destructive – he will perish ...

But this is the wise and charitable Abbot of the revised Act III. Established Christianity, in the first version of the Act, is depicted as materialist and hypocritical. All the ur-Abbot is interested in is the wealth which will accrue from Manfred's "gift of all [his] lands to the monastery" (original Act III, 12-13). It is a transparently villainous gesture; Manfred rejects and punishes it with ease, by commanding Ashtaroth to transport the Abbot to the peak of the Shreckhorn. Moral progress of a sort is perceptible here, for, to speak of an earlier Byronic hero, the Giaour is happy to make the corrupt gesture which Manfred rejects:

> "I'd judge him some stray renegade,
> Repentant of the change he made,
> Save that he shuns our holy shrine,
> Nor tastes the sacred bread and wine.
> Great largess to these walls he brought,
> And thus our abbot's favour bought;
> But were I prior, not a day
> Should brook such stranger's further stay,
> Or pent within our penance cell
> Should doom him there for aye to dwell ..."[1]

The Giaour and Manfred clearly have much in common, both in terms of apparently inexpiable guilt, of suicidal tendency ...

> "... On cliff he hath been known to stand,
> And rave as to some bloody hand
> Fresh severed from its parent limb,
> Invisible to all but him,
> Which beckons onward to his grave,
> And lures to leap into the wave."[2]

... and in terms of their refusal of religious consolation:

> "The rest thou dost already know,
> And all my sins, and half my woe.
> But talk no more of penitence;
> Thou see'st I soon shall part from hence,
> And if thy holy tale were true,
> The deed that's done can'st thou undo?
> Think me not thankless – but this grief
> Looks not to priesthood for relief."[3]

Byron has a note explaining this last line:

1: *Giaour*, 812-2.
2: *Giaour*, 826-31.
3: *Giaour*, 1200-7.

> The monk's sermon is omitted. It seems to have had so little effect upon the patient, that it could have no hopes from the reader. It may be sufficient to say, that it was of a customary length (as may be perceived from the interruptions and uneasiness of the penitent), and was delivered in the nasal tone of all orthodox preachers.

The reason it had "little effect upon the patient" is, arguably, because the patient had slender reasons for feeling guilty in the first place. As T.S.Eliot points out,

> Why a Greek of that period should have been so oppressed with remorse (although wholly impenitent) for killing a Moslem in what he would considered a fair fight, or why Leila should have been guilty in leaving a husband or master to whom she was presumably united without her consent, are questions that we cannot answer.[4]

Between 1813, when *The Giaour* was published, and early 1817, when the original Act III of Manfred was probably drafted, Byron's opinion of Christianity does not seem to have changed. His ability to depict guilt and remorse has; but he still has no faith in the power of such Christian virtues as love, compassion and penitence to heal the wounds created by guilt and remorse.

The Chamois Hunter in Act I would give Christianity a better name. He exhorts Manfred "for the love of him who made you" not to stand so near the brink of the precipice (I i 101-2); and the assistance he gives Manfred show him to be most charitable. That Manfred does not really welcome his charity – that he would happily have gone over the precipice (like Gloucester in *King Lear* – see section below on Shakespeare) – is doubtless significant. Also significant is his refusal of the Chamoix Hunter's wine in II i:

Hunter: Well, Sir, pardon me the question,
And be of better cheer. Come, taste my wine;
'Tis of an ancient vintage; many a day
T'has thawed my veins among our Glaciers, now
Let it do thus for thine – Come, pledge me fairly.

Manfred: Away, Away! there's blood upon the brim!
Will it then never – never sink in the earth?

Hunter: What do'st thou mean? thy senses wander from thee.

Manfred: I say 'tis blood – my blood! the pure warm stream
Which ran in the veins of my fathers, and in ours
When we were in our youth, and had one heart,
And loved each other as we should not love,
And this was shed; but still it rises up,
Colouring the clouds that shut me out from heaven,
Where thou art not – and I shall never be. –

The hysterical rejection of the wine is not fully explained, and is (see the Giaour's refusal, quoted above) probably as much a reaction against its eucharistic symbolism as against the hospitality of the Chamoix Hunter, or against whatever associations it starts in Manfred's mind about his relationship with Astarte. Manfred, having lost, or destroyed, her love, now wants neither the love of man nor that of Christ. (For the echo in lines 28-30, see section below on *Faustus*).

4: *Byron*, reprinted in *English Romantic Poets, Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Abrams, p. 201.

In the revised Act III, shamed, firstly, by William Gifford's reaction to his depiction of the Abbot[5] secondly by the inadequacy of the original catastrophe, and thirdly, perhaps, by a new-found respect for holy men, consequent upon his association with Father Aucher on San Lazzarro, Byron seems to move away both from the eclectic theology of the play's first two acts, and from his earlier contempt for Father Confessors, and to pay more respect to an orthodox Christian viewpoint. He allows the Abbot dignity, and a pious, even heroic concern for his doomed parishioner. His respect for what Shelley was to call "the monstrous superstitions of the popular worship"[6] was a thing from which Shelley, to his regret, could never woo him, and his motives for recasting Act III of Manfred seem to have been as much religious as artistic.

However, the gesture comes, arguably, too late. When the Abbot pleads "... reconcile thee / To the true church – and through the church to heaven" (III i 50-1) we have to protest that so much of the play has made real to us a series of demonologies which have nothing to do with "the true church", that the church itself now stands exposed merely as one system among many, all equally worthy – or unworthy – of belief.

Still, the devil who comes "unbidden" (III iv 72) for Manfred's soul, is identified neither with Nemesis nor Arimanes, as we might legitimately expect, but with Satan, via the Abbot's reference to "Thunder-scars" at III iv 77 (compare *Paradise Lost*, I 600-1). But it is true that the Abbot, who can only interpret what he sees from a conservative Catholic viewpoint, would naturally see the devil as Satan, equally true that the devil merely calls himself "the Genius of" Manfred, and true that he has not the power to drag his intended prey down to Hell, as have Mephistopheles in *Doctor Faustus*, or the demons at the end of *Don Giovanni.* The religious and mythical parameters of the denouement are deliberately blurred: we are at liberty to wonder whether Manfred is going, unwillingly, to an orthodox Hell, at the behest of God the Father, or whether he will now, willingly, undergo another stage of that "death still more durable and profound" which Thomas Taylor, interpreting the Eleusinian Mysteries, suggests will be the lot of those souls "in a state of impurity". The latter would be consistent with his neo-Platonism, as would his refusal even of a token Eucharist; it is Jessie L Weston who writes that

> The attainment of union with the god, by way of ecstasy, as in other Mystery cults, is foreign to the Eleusinian idea ... Greek religion lacks the Sacramental idea.[7]

Whatever the case, whether Manfred's end be Neo-Platonic or Christian, it will certainly never resemble the lot of that other Manfred, part of the sheep-like group who stand dumbly amazed at Dante's shadow in *Purgatorio* III. This Manfred, unlike Byron's, is capable of repentance:

> Orribil furon li peccati miei;
> ma la bontà infinita ha sì gran braccia,
> che prende ciò che si rivolge a lei.[8]

Byron's Manfred is indifferent to the power of Infinite Goodness to embrace him, and seems rather to define his integrity as the capacity to scorn anyone who offers him love (Astarte excepted).

He is supported by the opportunistic game which Byron plays, juggling with ideas from a multitude of systems, and taking unscrupulous imaginative advantage of whatever they offer.

5: See Cochran, *Byron, John Murray, William Gifford and the Third Act of Manfred, Notes and Queries* September 1991, 308-10.

6: Letter to Horace Smith, April 11th 1822, L PBS II 412.

7: *From Ritual to Romance,* Chivers Press / C.U.P. 1980 p. 134.

8: *Purgatorio* III 121-4.

"... a mixed mythology of my own - which you may suppose is somewhat of the strangest" was the way he alerted Kinnaird, on March 25th 1817:[9] an "Olla Podrida" was what his concoction was called in an early review, by William Roberts.[10] Byron was subsequently to exercise his wit at Roberts' expense, in *Don Juan* I Stanza 209: might not part of his motive have been annoyance at Roberts' attempt to call his bluff in *Manfred*?

9: BLJ V 195.
10: *The British Critic*, 2nd series, VIII, July 1817, RR BI 275.