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> Matter, that is, the universe, and Spirit, that is, the God who indwells it, are closely interconnected, and the attempt of the 'orthodox' mystics of all faiths to separate them is, by the standards of Christianity seen as the religion of the Word made flesh, both a blasphemy and a heresy. —R. C. Zaehner[1]

> The very ground of all Miracle . . . [is] the *heterogeneity* of Spirit and Matter. —Samuel Coleridge[2]

> "Why then," I said to him, "have you gained to yourself the name of impious, and enemy of all religious belief from your writings?" He answered, "They are not understood, and are all interpreted by the malignant." —Reported of Lord Byron[3]

Byron and fellow Romantics found ample grounds for varying degrees of antireligious sentiment in the sometimes sordid history of institutionalized Christianity, in its traditional hostility to intellectual

freedom, in clerical privilege and religious cant and hypocrisy of every kind (perhaps most disturbingly manifest in the toleration of slavery and oppressive child-labor practices coexisting with societies organized to enforce Sabbath observance). Although moralists might argue the appropriateness of Byron's place in the "Satanic school" of poets, even based on his defiant flouting of conventional mores, there is little doubt, despite some contemporary views on the matter, that religiously he had cogent grounds for rejecting traditional Christianity.

I will suggest that had the history of Christian metaphysics taken a different course than the one it did, it is likely that Byron's considerable objections to religion would have been diminished by at least one. About the particulars of Christian theology, he had little to say, his writings suggest a general discomfort with particular aspects of Christian metaphysics as they had developed by the nineteenth century.

An analysis of Byron's metaphysical/religious misgivings might serve to clarify the nature of his discontent, clearly showing that his particular "heresy" is radically distinct from others of the "Satanic school." It might also show that the type of linguistic mystification Byron disliked arose from the same complex of institutionalized notions and cultural constructs that produced the religious cant and poetic discourse typical of superficial Romanticism.

I will confine myself to an introductory excursion into the second, more general of these issues. Later scholars may wish to examine the problem in its fuller historical, theological, and poetic dimensions, or compare Byron's position with his "Satanic" cohorts. I wish merely to set the groundwork for a future and more complete study of Byron's fractious engagement with the world of poetic discourse and the religious cosmology he inherited.

Long conditioned and shaped by the heritage of Platonism, Christianity has ever since shown a predilection for a cosmology that emphasizes the radically dualistic nature of the universe, one in which the spiritual is almost universally privileged to the detriment of the material. The history of Christianity's absorption of Plato's metaphysics is well-traveled territory.[4] Suffice it to say, in the words of theologian Benedict Ashley, that even though the Platonic dualism had a "final rejection by the great scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages, its influence on popular Christianity still remains to be overcome."[5] Perhaps compounded by the increasing threat of materialistic secularism

(responsible, in M. H. Abrams' familiar model, for the sublimation of religious categories into the "naturalsupernatural,"[6]) religious thought in the nineteenth century tended to be ever more vigilant against threats to the sacred, the ineffable, the transcendent.

By way of illustration, we might consider briefly the case of three religious thinkers who indicate—through the varying degrees of editing, sanitizing, or censuring they invited—the way such a spiritual/material hierarchy, when challenged, tends to find predictable, definitive resolution in favor of the ineffable. These examples, brief as they are, are only meant to be suggestive of the struggle of the religious and poetic imagination against the strictures of an unyielding dualism. This is a struggle that will reemerge in the poetry of Byron, and whose ideological stakes we will next examine.

A glance at three modern mystics of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries provides a view of a path Christian metaphysics might have taken, but didn't. First, we have the German visionary Jacob Boehme. If the domesticating intrusion of his editor is any indication, we can see—laid bare as it were—the criteria by which prophetic discourse is deemed amenable to canonical standards. Stephen Hobhouse begins by quoting several authorities to establish beyond question Boehme's preeminence as "the greatest mystic produced by any of the Churches of the Reformation;"[7] both William Low and Nicolas Berdyaev, for example, regarded Boehme as "one of the greatest mystics of all time."[8] Yet another, W. R. Inge, calls his works "a mine, in which precious metal is embedded,"[9] and many other authorities can be cited to similar effect. It is therefore amazing to observe the facility with which the editor, so manifestly in awe of his subject, yet without any compunction whatsoever, blithely assumes the burden of protecting Boehme from himself:

> I have left out . . . subjects dealt with by Boehme . . . which are to us today [1949] so incredible and fantastic as to be out of place in serious reading; e.g., imaginary details of the life of the angels and of Adam in paradise, Adam's sexual nature, and the geography of Heaven and of Hell. These must, in my judgment, be described as "false" mythology without that symbolic value or relevance to reality possessed by all true "myths" (like those of Plato and Genesis).[10]

And a little later, Hobhouse expresses the hope that his readers "will find a substantial residue of truth in the theology and psychology of this book, while enjoying the imaginative poetry and charm of such parts as they can only regard as pleasant mythology, quite divorced from reality."[11]

Boehme, then, is worthy of consideration only to the extent that his works can be related to reality "symbolically," or "mythically." That they should be read as simple *reflection* of reality is apparently deemed too absurd to consider.

Emanuel Swedenborg was the most visible and highly respected visionary of the Enlightenment period. His contemporary fame and prodigious output, his implicit endorsement by the philosopher Immanuel Kant, his dominant influence on the writings of William Blake, all bespeak an influence out of all proportion to what turned out to be a very insubstantial impact on the history of religious thought. The reason is not hard to fathom. One historian of mysticism writes that "his books are . . . so much in the nature of realistic reports, replete with physical detail, so lacking alike in divine imagination and mystic illumination, that the seers in the line from Plotinus and Boehme, though grateful to the Swedish visionary for, so to speak, shaking up Christendom, parted from him upon mature test of his 'system'."[12] Like his most famous disciple William Blake, Swedenborg exhibited what Thomas Weiskel called (referring to the former) an "enmity to the inscrutability which always attends the numinous."[13]

Swedenborg's "mysticism," then, was of the unabashedly material variety: the realms he visited and the personages he encountered were to him as real and tangible as anything on the streets of Stockholm. As he stated matter of factly,

> [I]t has been granted me to associate with angels and to talk with them as one man with another: and also to see what exists in the heavens and in the hells, and this for thirteen years: and to describe them from the evidence of my own eyes and ears in the hope that ignorance may be enlightened, and unbelief dispelled. Such direct revelation is now made . . .[14]

In fact, Swedenborg absolutely disallowed the allegorizing of these revelations. His own doctrine of correspondence, by which he attempts to explain the relationship of the material to spiritual worlds, should not be

misunderstood as some neo-dualism. On the contrary, as one critic writes, Swedenborg had

> a profound respect for physical reality. Therefore, his awakening perceptions of spiritual reality did not bring him to a radical subordination of matter, nor even a dualistic construct, but rather produced a vastly enlarged whole of reality. This holistic approach to a traditional spirit/matter and mind/body dichotomies is one of Swedenborg's major contributions . . . [and leads to] a comprehensive view of reality as a whole.[15]

Swedenborg's repudiation of trinitarianism, in this light, is at the same time an attack on the pretentiousness of theological language, its insistent gestures toward otherworldliness intimated by linguistic self-contradiction, the whole august tradition of the *via negativa* and the hand-wringing despair of verbal inadequacy:

> [The angels] said also that members of the church who come from the world entertaining an idea of three Divine Persons cannot be admitted into heaven, because their thought wanders from one Person to another; and that it is not allowable there to think of three and speak of one, because in heaven every one speaks from his thought; speech being there from thought itself or thought speaking . . . ; for in heaven there is a general communication of thought, so that if any one should enter there thinking of three and speaking of one, he would be instantly discovered and rejected.[16]

Finally, coming at the tail end of the Romantic movement, we have the career of the most influential and controversial American mystic, one Harold Bloom refers to as "an authentic religious genius, [who] surpassed all Americans, before or since, in the possession and expression of what could be called the religion-making imagination"—Joseph Smith.[17] Employing the language of religious experience with even more emphatic literalism than his predecessors, Smith aroused a degree of hostility and opposition unknown to any of them. Not only was he visited by angels, but he could describe their dress to the last detail. Not only did one deliver him a heavenly record, but Smith had eleven witnesses testify to its material, palpable reality. ("We did handle [the

leaves] with our hands," report eight of the men, thus preempting those who would seek to spiritualize the earthy solidity of the new religion's bases.[18]) To newspaperman James Gordon Bennett, Smith's blurring of the boundaries between the sacred and the mundane was amusing: he reported in his New York Herald that in the summer of 1842, at the height of violent persecutions, "Jo goes on prophecying [sic], preaching, and building the temple, and regulating his empire, as if nothing had happened. They are busy all the time establishing factories to make saints and crockery."[19]

Mormonism's response to the secularist impulse seen in the growth of Uniformitarianism, Materialism, and Positivism was not to challenge or defy these critiques of supernaturalism, to insist on a cosmic dualism, but to produce a religious system consonant with a monistic world view. In one of the last revelations published by the prophet, he would affirm, "there is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; We cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter."[20]

Of his many "heresies," the boldest and most consequential was Smith's eventual collapse of the realms of the sacred and the secular into one holistic system—what one scholar refers to as the old medieval heresy of Cosmism.[21] Smith's anthropomorphic conception of deity, the dismantling of sacred distance, his utter dislike of ineffability and mystery, continue as central reasons for Mormonism's dubious place even today within the community of Christian sects.

At least one significant thread unites these prophet/mystics: their demand that their language of religious experience not be construed according to a complicated semiotics, one that would reinforce the premise that the world of experience, of the nameable, constitutes but a shadow of greater realities beyond or outside of language. Furthermore, it is significant that the holistic cosmos envisioned by Boehme, Swedenborg, or Smith, are precluded by a theology of the ineffable, a linguistics of despair, and a reveling in obscurity.

From St. Augustine to the present, theologians have proposed numerous theories, exegetical and linguistic, to articulate models of meaning more appropriate to religious discourse than simple referentiality. But recently, philosopher William P. Alston has criticized those accounts of "nonassertive language" as unconvincing, whether they be expressive, symbolic, mythic, ritualistic, or other:

> There is no doubt that in talking about God, religious people express
> feelings of various sorts, present moral ideals, and articulate what is
> going on in ritual. But it is not at all clear that they would be using
> this kind of language if they were not convinced of the truth of the
> statements they make. Why should I express a feeling of security by
> saying "God made the heavens and the earth" unless I believe. . . that
> as a matter of objective fact the physical universe owes its existence to
> the creative activity of a supernatural personal deity?[22]

What all this suggests is captured nicely by a remark of George
Steiner. "Only language knows no conceptual, no projective finality. . .
When Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* declares the limits of language to be those
of our world(s), it uses 'limits' tautologically. Language need halt at no
frontier."[23]

If Steiner is correct—and I believe he is—then the insufficiency of
language is guarantor of the Transcendent, just as surely as the
Transcendent affirms the insufficiency of language. In other words, to
contain the power of language to refer, to name, assures the survival of a
realm beyond the human one. Or the illusion of one, in any case. As
William James so astutely observed, for some persons, "*richness* is the
supreme imaginative requirement. When one's mind is of this type," he
continues, one's inner needs include "at every stage objects for adjectives
of mystery and splendor, derived in the last resort from the Godhead."[24]

Taken together, the comments of Steiner and James may serve to
remind us why Edmund Burke's 1756 treatise on the sublime (*A
Philosophical Inquiry into our Ideas Concerning the Sublime and the
Beautiful*) could have the culturally transforming power that it did.
Coming at a time when supernaturalism was under siege from intellectuals
everywhere, the obscurity he proposed offered a rhetorical solution to an
acute metaphysical crisis. As Maurice Cranston explains:

> His critique of classicism begins with a refutation of the principle that
> clarity is an essential quality of great art. On the contrary, Burke
> argues, what is greatest and noblest in art is the infinite, and the infinite,
> having no bounds, cannot be clear and distinct. Against the then fash-
> ionable view of the abbe du Bos that painting is an art superior to poetry
> because of the greater clarity that painting achieves in representation,

> Burke claims that poetry is superior to painting precisely because poetry can better render obscurity and ambiguity: "It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration and chiefly excites our passions. . . . A clear idea," he goes so far as to say, "is another name for a little idea."[25]

As a consequence, as Thomas Weiskel writes, "In poetry and in theory the sublime becomes associated not with the clear and the distinct but with the vague and the obscure; . . . both with the failure of clear thought and with matters beyond determinate perception."[26]

What this means is that the theological value of the mysterious, the ineffable—already well-entrenched—is now reinforced by rhetorical models in which obscurity itself has become an object of value. And here, of course, is the basis for finding in Romantic poetry 19th–century versions of nature mysticism. Scholar of mysticism Evelyn Underhill refers to the mystical communion as experience of "a nescience, a Divine Dark." "To see Him is to enter the Darkness".[27] In fact, as she points out, "It has become a commonplace with writers on mysticism to say, that all subsequent contemplatives took from Dionysius this idea of 'Divine Darkness.' ... If, therefore, they persist—and they do persist—in using this simile of 'darkness' to describe their experience of contemplation, it can only be because it fits the facts. . . . What, then, do those who use this image of the 'dark' really mean by it? They mean this: that God in his absolute Reality is unknowable-is dark-to man's intellect."[28]

The history of mysticism certainly suggests that the means have frequently become the ends, that the precondition for an immediate intuition of the divine may itself be sufficiently alluring to become all absorbing. A designation such as *Mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*[29] contains within itself the danger of a reveling in incomprehensibility for its own sake. With the legitimization of the Burkean sublime, religion and rhetoric become complicit. This is nowhere more clearly intimated that in Underhill's classic study of mysticism. "To 'see God in nature,'" she writes,

> is to attain a radiant consciousness of the "otherness" of natural things, is the simplest and commonest form of illumination. Most people, under the spell of emotion or of beauty, have known flashes of rudimentary vision of this kind. Where such a consciousness is

recurrent, as it is in many poets [here she mentions Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth], there results that partial yet often overpowering apprehension of the Infinite Life immanent in all living things, which some modern writers have dignified by the name of "nature-mysticism." Where it is raised to its highest denomination, till the veil is obliterated by the light behind, and "faith has vanished into sight," as sometimes happened to Blake, we reach the point at which the mystic swallows up the poet.[30]

It would only seem reasonable to infer that the same use of language which leads literary scholars to identify Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley and Blake, in their visionary "nature-mysticism," with natural supernaturalism, has led a scholar of another type to see in those rhetorical features evidence of religious mysticism. Now whether those poets were representing authentic religious experience, or merely "salvaging" the forms of religious experience in an Abrams-like gesture of cultural preservation, is not for us to say. My point is simply that the two are not the same. But they have been *rendered* commensurate, through a historical process that has come to posit in such veneration for obscurity both theological value (the "Empty tomb" function that enables faith, and that guarantees the domain of the Sacred) as well as cultural value (the preservation, in Abrams' words, of "traditional experience and values"[31]).

Additional evidence of the conflating of these value-constructs is a definition of Romanticism such as Bernard Reardon's. Trying to penetrate to the "essence of romanticism," he finds it in "the inexpugnable feeling that the finite is not self-explanatory and self-justifying, but that behind it and within it—shining, as it were, through it—there is always an infinite 'beyond', . . . the infinite that permeates as well as transcends all finitude."[32] It is hard to see exactly how such a definition is to distinguish Romantic ideology from Christian theology generally, in spite of Reardon's claim that the divine here becomes immanent as well as transcendent.[33] But notice that the real question goes begging. For while it is one thing to analyze German idealism and 19th–century theology to define "Romantic religion," to invoke literary figures of the period to the same end is to confuse poetics with metaphysics. To adduce Wordsworth's "sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused" and Blake's "Heaven in a wild flower" as instances of romanticism as "a religion in itself"[34] is to repeat the gesture of Underhill. To admit, in other words,

the trope of sublimity, of mystery, or of reverence, as the assurance of God's survival (or as the means by which religion "sustain[s] its authority in the new age"[35]) is to elide entirely the distinction between cultural work and theological validity.

The epigraph of Coleridge cited initially contains a hint of the appeal as well as the danger of such confusion. "The very ground of all Miracle," he wrote, is "the heterogeneity of Spirit and Matter." In other words, the supernatural (and Coleridge may be taken here as typical of Christian orthodoxy as well as Romantic poetics), is inconceivable apart from radical dualism. The preservation of the miraculous, then, *whether it takes the form of God* (or Rudolf Otto's "mysterium trememdum" or "wholly other") *or of Blake's sublime*, is inseparable from a wounded language, one which retreats from full referential sufficiency.

So where does this leave us? In the dark, certainly—but not without qualms, if one is Byron. His contempt for emotionalism, religious cant, and all fuzzy-mindedness would by themselves be sufficient to explain Byron's cynicism toward the rhetoric of sublimity, as expressed in *Don Juan* for instance ("Besides, the sad's a source of the sublime,/Although when long a little apt to weary us" ({12:1}[36]). But his unease clearly extends to the metaphysics such an aesthetic entails. I certainly don't mean to suggest that Byron at any point directed his attention, specifically, to his dissatisfaction with the kind of theological dualism he inherited as a product of Protestant 19th-century England. By looking briefly at two of his works where linguistic issues feature prominently, *Don Juan* and *Cain*, I hope merely to suggest the outlines of an approach to Byron—and potentially others of his generation—that might do well by considering his discomfort with religion in the context of a metaphysical dualism that was entrenched in and abetted by a kind of glorying in referential inadequacy.[37] Such a dualistic paradigm had repeatedly shown its incapacity to accommodate more holistic—and imaginative—approaches to religious experience, as we suggested, briefly, above.

One of the most famous instances of Platonic dualism, of course, is entailed by so-called "Platonic love." Both Plato's original version and more popular conceptions posit a spiritualized affinity as a higher, more edifying form of attachment than merely physical attraction. When it comes to dualism of this kind, Byron is quite explicit in his condemnation. Byron presents Juan and Julia as an archetypal instance of lovers betrayed by this classical sophistry: what begins as an innocent

touch ("a pure Platonic squeeze") leads inexorably, abetted by the deceptive rhetoric of idealization, to illicit consummation. Neither Byron nor his narrator is a prude—it is not the *fait accompli* that is distressing. More disturbing is the self-deception implicit in such a version of spiritualized sex that obscures from us the true nature of our deeds:

> Oh Plato! Plato! you have paved the way,
>> With your confounded fantasies, to more
> Immoral conduct by the fancied sway
>> Your system feigns o'er the controlless core
> Of human hearts, than all the long array
>> Of poets and romancers: —You're a bore
> A charlatan, a coxcomb—and have been,   .
>> At best, no better than a go-between. (DJ 1:116)

In the context of such depictions of ethereal love, untainted and untouched by the messy, hard contours of reality, all sublunary versions of love—in all their authenticity and materiality and domestic dullness—are devalued and even debased. This is the implication that looms even larger in his critique of Plato. As he puts it more pointedly, "Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch's wife,/ He would have written sonnets all his life?" (DJ 3:8).

I would suggest Byron sees in Platonic love a paradigmatic instance of the tendency of religious dualism generally to use language to erect transcendent categories. These categories, by their very nature, assert the incapacity of language to adequately encompass them. So in a kind of Wittgensteinian tautology, the failure of reference becomes a sign of the transcendent. At times, Byron's satire reads like a flippant dismissal of this whole metaphysical enterprise.

> And therefore will I leave off metaphysical
> Discussion, which is neither here nor there:
> If I agree that what is, is; then this I call
> Being quite perspicuous and extremely fair. (DJ 11:5)

But his humor conceals what can be read as a fairly serious indictment of those who confuse the limits of linguistic reference with the scope of linguistic efficacy. In the eighth canto of *Don Juan*, for example, the

somber anti-war context suggests the urgency of the linguistic stakes; in the ethic of 19th-century British militarism, "dulce et decorum est" to die for one's country, as long as one receives due credit for one's sacrifice in the *Moniteur* or *Courier*. For this reason,

> Thrice happy he whose name has been well spelt
> In the dispatch: I knew a man whose loss
> Was printed G*rove*, although his name was Grosse. (*DJ* 8:18)

The stanza appears to be a commentary on the fragility of reference, the contingency of such valued commodities as recognition, honor, and solace on orthography; or one might read in it the bitter irony of a man's ultimate sacrifice rendered futile through a printer's error. But the problem of reference in this case is clearly a pseudo-problem, insofar as the connection between word and thing is here over, not underdetermined. "Thrice-happy" indeed! As if the loss of a human life could justly and fully be conveyed through more fastidious attention to spelling. What is most powerfully indicted in this verse is *the incapacity of language to mystify*, not its incapacity to represent. The bathetic inadequacy of language to compensate is at stake, not its power to signify univocally. "Call them Mars,/ Bellona, what you will—they mean but wars" he writes in another stanza (DJ 8:1). Poetry cannot *obscure* that reality. By its very orthographic failures and euphemistic contortions, if read aright, it points only the more clearly to those realities that resist erasure and misunderstanding. Turning to the theme of death again, Byron remarks the case of fellow-poet John Keats, the presumed victim of an immoderately harsh review:

> 'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,
> Should let itself be snuffed out by an Article (DJ 11: 60)

Certainly even the scientific modernists acknowledge that words can do things. But Byron's note of the "strangeness" of that interaction, the *only apparently* incommensurate relationship between printed word and physical annihilation, points to the difficulty of relegating such interaction to the status of mere convention.

Perhaps more significant than his allusions to language and its problems, is the cosmology reflected in Byron's works, for it is a cosmology, as

suggested above, in which the absence of a discourse of sublimity is tantamount to a collapse of natural and supernatural categories. He hinted of such a world in *Don Juan*, anticipating the day when his words would be found

> With other relics of 'a former world,'
> When this world shall be *former*, underground,
> Thrown topsy-turvy, twisted, crisped, and curled,
> Baked, fried, or burnt, turned inside-out, or drowned,
> Like all the worlds before, which have been hurled
> First out of and then back again to Chaos,
> The Superstratum which will overlay us. (DJ 9:37)

The universe may suffer temporal discontinuities, in other words, but they do not appear to him to be ontological ones. He picks up the theme again in *Cain*, his darkest work and most sustained engagement with the aesthetics—and ethics—of the sublime.

Recalling the Lucifer—and cosmology—of Milton, Byron's Lucifer is similarly insistent about challenging traditional ways of structuring reality: "Where dwellest thou?" Adah asks, and is answered:

> Throughout all space. Where should I dwell? Where are
> Thy God or Gods—there am I . . . and that
> Which is not heaven nor earth, but peopled with
> Those who once peopled or shall people both—
> These are my realms! . . . His angels are within
> Your vision. (Cain 1:545-56).

Borrowing both from William Beckford's pre-adamites and Cuvier's catastrophism, Byron's Lucifer next gives Cain a guided tour of those realms in which—once again—orders of creation are historically rather than ontologically differentiated. Hell is emphatically *not* "other-worldly." It is the reality of an unceasing, inescapable, eternal "thisness." As Lucifer torments Cain with the question,

> And if there should be
> Worlds greater than thine own, inhabited
> By greater things, and they themselves far more

In number than the dust of thy dull earth,
Though multiplied to animated atoms,
All living, and all doom'd to death, and wretched,
What wouldst thou think?

Cain tries to respond manfully, "I should be proud of thought Which knew such things," but Lucifer persists:

But if that high thought were
Link'd to a servile mass of matter, and,
Knowing such things, aspiring to such things,
And science still beyond them, were chain'd down
To the most gross and petty paltry wants,
All foul and fulsome, and the very best
Of thine enjoyments a sweet degradation,
A most enervating and filthy cheat
To lure thee on to the renewal of
Fresh souls and bodies, all foredoom'd to be
As frail, and few so happy. (Cain 2:43-59)

Ultimately, the human tragedy is not the passing of our life, but our inability to finally transcend its conditions. As Lucifer insists, "Thou canst not *All* die—there is that what must survive" (Cain 2:72-73). As with Manfred, whose dying words affirmed that, "Tis not so difficult to die,"(Manfred 3:151) Cain learns that death cannot alter significantly the terms of our existence.

That this vision is effectively a rejection of ontological dualities is made fairly explicit when Cain asks pointedly if things are mortal or immortal. Lucifer responds, "*Both*, partly" (Cain 2:135).

At the same time that Byron resists the dualism associated with the sublime, he rejects the implications of what Weiskel sees as the root of Romantic sublimity in particular—the "divorce of *res* and *verba*."[38] Michel Foucault, who traced this decisive rupture of words and things to the seventeenth-century crisis of representation, describes the implications this way: "It is the task of words to translate the truth if they can: but they no longer have the right to be considered a mark of it. Language has withdrawn from the midst of beings themselves and has entered a period of transparency and neutrality."[39] It is the temptation to see in language a

neutrality that infects the world of ethical choice and paralyzes the will, that *Cain* represents most compellingly and—almost—persuasively. But, what is ultimately the most remarkable about Byron's darkest flirtation with nihilism, is the mode by which he ultimately rejects the implications of language's new status.

We find in Byron's Lucifer an archetypal skeptic of scientific modernism. Byron had remarked earlier on the slipperiness of linguistic reference. Toward the end of *Don Juan*, for example, he criticized with increasing intensity the effects of verbal misappropriation: "Were things only call'd by their right name," he lamented, "Caesar himself would be ashamed of Fame" (DJ 14:102). It may be true that the poet decides what he "Sometimes calls 'murder,' and at others 'glory'" (DJ 7:26). Still, the euphemisms he points out are not *necessary* signs of unstable and arbitrary relations: "*Contented*, when translated, means but cloyed," and "Had Buonaparte won at Waterloo, It had been firmness; now 'tis pertinacity: Must the event decide between the two?" (DJ 14:79, 90). But in *Cain*, he fathoms the limits of such instability only to reject the implications.

Here we find a universe in which good and evil are but changing categories, and morality is merely an arbitrary construct, as even the child-like Adah learns to her horror. Finding that fraternal cohabitation will one day be stigmatized as incest, she asks:

> What is sin which is not
> Sin in itself? Can circumstance make sin
> Or virtue?—if it doth, we are the slaves
> Of —— (Cain 1:380–383)

As Lucifer helps Cain plumb both "the mystery of [his] being" and the destiny of the human race, the human world is increasingly reduced to contending verbal paradigms. "Evil" becomes what "the conqueror will call the conquer'd,"(Cain 1:443, 2:444) "*Death*" becomes both "*another life*" and the "surest knowledge," the "fall" becomes the product of God "who fells," a "victor" is "no superior,"(Cain 2:77–78, 429) and so on in a game where he who puns best controls the language, and thus the version of reality that prevails. But in one subtle, almost imperceptible gesture, Cain repudiates the power of language to dictate the terms of his existence or the ultimate content of his reality.

Speaking from the depths of a hell which is both intensely personal and, as Lucifer has shown him, eventually to be near universal, Cain terrifies his wife with murderous thoughts directed at his sleeping child:

CAIN

   Little deems our young blooming sleeper, there,
   The germs of an eternal misery
   To myriads is within him! better 'twere
   I snatch'd him in his sleep, and dash'd him 'gainst
   The rocks, than let him live to—

ADAH

             Oh, my God!
   Touch not the child—my child! *Thy* child! Oh Cain!

CAIN

   Fear not! for all the stars, and all the power
   Which sways them, I would not accost yon infant
   With ruder greeting than a father's kiss.

ADAH

   Then, why so awful in thy speech?

CAIN

             I said
   'Twere better that he ceased to live, than give
   Life to so much of sorrow as he must. . . .(Cain 3: 122-134)

In this dramatic climax to the relentless movement of Lucifer's logic of despair, Cain abruptly arrests the descent down the slippery slope of nihilism. Adah's panic, notwithstanding Cain's protest, is a perfectly reasonable response to the implications of a chilling dialectic. She has not misunderstood a thing. It is up to Cain to explain the rupture between his words and his inaction—but he cannot. His feeble response to Adah ("I said 'twere better that he ceased to live") does nothing to answer the question his wife has put him. He merely repeats his earlier words—hoping to distance himself from what they signify by the mere act of reiteration. He recoils before the deed, but is incapable of impugning

either the logic or the rhetorical coherence of his words. This must be viewed as the decisive moment in the play. Cain's *in*action, then, with its concurrent affirmation of human love and loyalty, is a gesture of pure faith. But in this version, such faith is not a step *toward* the transcendent or ineffable, but *away* from it. And it may be said to reflect, as well, a powerful skepticism about any language wrenched free of its rootedness in the world of immediacy, of experience that is profoundly human. Byron may at times flirt with a linguistic cynicism that approaches the threshold of scientific materialism. Nevertheless, there are recurrent glimpses in Byron of his hope that one day, he may find words "which are things" (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* 3:114). In the interim, he refuses to capitulate to the tyranny of the autonomous word, to an ethical system reduced to mere linguistic contingency. If we see Byron's Satan as a kind of scientific rationalist, then a return here to Weiskel's analysis is strikingly apt. "We properly associate the divorce of RES and VERBA," he writes, "with the program of the scientific moderns, . . . but this divorce lies at the base of the sublime, too. Scientific thinking and the aesthetic of the sublime are correlative expressions of an episteme in which order is arbitrary, a matter of hypothesis, or as Burke says, of custom."[40] If Weiskel is correct, then *Cain* may be said to embody Byron's repudiation of a sublime thus conceived.

In the end, Cain's rejection of child-murder demonstrates, like the blessing of Margaret in Wordsworth or the pity of Prometheus in Shelley,[41] a movement away from the temptations of despair and toward a faith that has nothing to sustain it—except the poet's own gesture.

As Byron will himself say in a less somber moment, when speaking of ghosts:

> I merely mean to say what Johnson said,
> That in the course of some six thousand years,
> All nations have believed that from the dead
> A visitant at intervals appears;
> And what is strangest upon this strange head,
> Is, that whatever bar the reason rears
> 'Gainst such belief, there's something stronger still
> In its behalf, let those deny who will. (*DJ* 16:7)

Notes

1. R. C. Zaehner, *Dialectical Christianity and Christian Materialism* (London: Oxford UP, 1971), 6.

2. Samuel T. Coleridge, "Notebooks," *Samuel Taylor Coleridge* , ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985), 555.

3. Count Pietro Gamba to James Kennedy, 21 May 1824. In Ernest J. Lovell, Jr., ed., *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 373.

4. The classic, though now dated, study is by Edwin Hatch. See *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1970 repr. of 1957 edition), especially 177ff..

5. Benedict Ashley, *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian* (Braintree, Mass.: The Pope John Center, 1985),104.

6. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: Norton, 1973).

7. Hans L. Mortensen, *Jacob Boehme: Studies in his Life and Teaching*, trans. T. Rhys Evans. Rev. edition, ed. Stephen Hobhouse (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), xi.

8. Hobhouse, xi.

9. Hobhouse, xii.

10. Hobhouse, xxii.

11. Hobhouse, 29.

12. Sheldon Cheney, *Men Who Have Walked with God* (New York: Knopf, 1945), 313.

13. Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976), 7.

14. Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and its Wonders, and Hell. From Things Heard and Seen* (New York: Dutton, 1920), 2-3.

15. Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Universal Human and Soul-Body Interaction*, ed. and trans. George F. Dole (NY: Paulist Press 1984), xiii-xiv.

16. Swedenborg, 3.

17. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 96-7. My discussion of Joseph Smith is in part a borrowing from a larger study of mine, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford, 1997), pp. 76-93.

18. *The Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1980), [ii].

19. 4 August 1842. Cited in *Viper*, 90.

20. *Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 131:7-8.

21. Hugh Nibley attributes this term to the nineteenth-century scholar Carl Schmidt. See Nibley's "Unrolling the Scrolls," *Old Testament and Related Studies*, ed. John W. Welch, Gary P. Gillum, and Don E. Norton, vol. I of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon

Studies, 1989), 122.

22. William P. Alston, "Religious Language." In *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 7 (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 173.

23. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989), 53-4.

24. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985), 362.

25. Maurice Cranston, *The Romantic Movement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 48-9.

26. Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976), 16-17.

27. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 335, 337.

28. Underhill, 347-48.

29. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. J. W. Harvey, 2nd ed., (London: Oxford UP, 1950), 12, 13-28, 146.

30. Underhill, 235.

31. Abrams, 69.

32. Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religion in the Age of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), 3.

33. In contrast to Romantic belief in an infinity that "permeates as well as transcends," Reardon equates "orthodox dogma" with belief in "a duality of worlds, the natural and the supernatural, the here and the hereafter, the realm of humanity and the realm of God" (4). In other words, what distinguishes Romantic religion from orthodox Christianity seems to be the addition of immanence to simple transcendence.

34. Reardon, 2.

35. Reardon, viii.

36. All of Byron's poetry is taken from *Byron*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) and will be cited parenthetically.

37. Linda Marshall has provided the most thorough analysis to date of Byron's linguistic hope that "there may be Words which are things" (*Childe Harold* III: 114). See her "'*Words* are *things*': Byron and the Prophetic Efficacy of Language" in *Studies in English Literature* 25.4 (1985), 801-22. Marshall's study provides a comprehensive philosophical context, and focuses on Byron's efforts to surmount the language problem through "true nomination" (819), or in Byron's words, "to show things really as they are" (*DJ* 15:60 etc.) Certainly this vatic aspect of Byron's poetic is undoubtedly strong, but I mean to emphasize that while he may be concerned to "forge a new prophetic bond between words and things," (820), this project should not be separated from his implicit discomfort with Platonic/Christian metaphysics.

38. Weiskel, 16.

39. See his *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), 30-34.

40. Weiskel, 16.

41. See Terryl L. Givens and Anthony Russell, "Romantic Agonies: Human Suffering and the Ethical Sublime," In *Romanticism Across the Disciplines*, ed. Larry H. Peer. New York: UP of America, 1998.