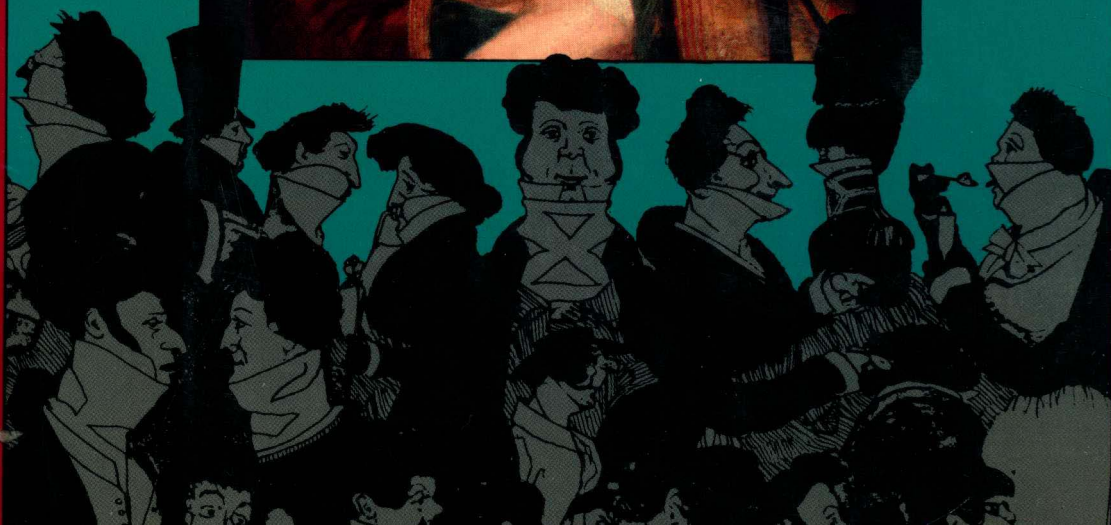


Modern Critical Views

GEORGE GORDON,
LORD BYRON

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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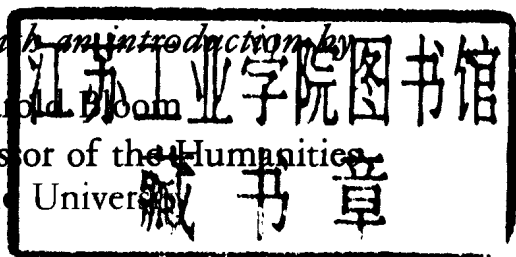
GEORGE GORDON,
LORD BYRON

Edited and with an introduction by

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Editor's Note

This volume gathers together a representative selection of the best criticism available upon the poetry of George Gordon, Lord Byron. The editor is grateful to Kevin Pask for his assistance in research, and for his critical judgment.

The essays comprising this book are reprinted in the chronological order of their original publication, with the exception of the editor's introduction, a version of which appeared as the chapter on Byron in the revised edition of *The Visionary Company* (1971). As an overview of most of Byron's major poems, it serves here to highlight much that is problematic in Byron's achievement.

With G. Wilson Knight's eloquent rumination on Byron's central conflict, "torn between history and tragic insight," the chronological sequence begins in something of Byron's own exuberant mode. Knight is followed here by the equally distinguished critic, Northrop Frye, whose emphasis upon the interweaving of Byron's life and Byron's writings is refreshingly direct and necessary.

Another generation of Byron critics is represented in the essays by George M. Ridenour, Leslie Brisman, and Michael G. Cooke. Ridenour finely describes Byron's poetic stance in 1816, when in the company of Shelley he had to absorb the strong influences of Rousseau and of Wordsworth. Brooding upon Byron's "romantic origins," Leslie Brisman offers a remarkable reading of *Cain* and an equally perceptive account of *Lara*, each as a prelude to a brief but illuminating consideration of *Manfred*. *Don Juan*, Byron's masterpiece, is analyzed by Michael G. Cooke from a perspective that provides a useful contrast to that employed by the editor in his own exegesis of *Don Juan* in this book's introduction.

A still younger generation of Byron critics completes this volume, with the essays by Sheila Emerson, Peter J. Manning, and Jerome Christensen. Sheila Emerson's reading of *Childe Harold* III is a distinguished instance of an eclectic version of our contemporary "language"-oriented criticism of poetry. With Peter J. Manning's "textualist" study of the radical publisher William Hone's pirated adaptation of Byron's *Corsair*, we receive another engaging example of a current mode of cultural criticism, somewhat in the spirit of Walter Benjamin. Finally, Jerome Christensen's masterly juxtaposition of *Don Juan* and Byron's drama,

Marino Faliero, provides a kind of intratextual poetics of satire from within Byron's own work, and shows the High Romantic companion of Shelley as Pope's true heir, who can be seen as "taking on Pope's power without his authority."

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Introduction

*but man's life is thought,
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
Ravening through century after century,
Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality.*

—W. B. YEATS

PROMETHEAN MAN

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage

Byron's pilgrimage as poet will be introduced here by a study of this series of poems, as we might regard them. Cantos I and II (1812) are merely a descriptive medley, mixing travel and history. Canto III (1816) is a poem in the confessional mode of Rousseau and Wordsworth, and marks Byron's first imaginative maturity. Canto IV (1818) attempts a synthesis of the two previous poems. In it, Byron and Italy are alternatively obsessive themes, and fail to balance, so that Canto III remains probably the best poem of the sequence.

The entire series Byron called *A Romaunt*, and both the title and the verse form (the Spenserian stanza) derive from the romance tradition. The quest-theme of romance previously internalized by Blake and Wordsworth appears again in Shelley's *Alastor* and Keats's *Endymion* under Wordsworth's influence. Canto III of *Childe Harold* manifests a more superficial Wordsworthian influence, probably owing both to Byron's relationship with Shelley in 1816 and to his own reading of *The Excursion*. The theme of a quest away from alienation and toward an unknown good is recurrent in the Romantics, and Byron would have

come to it without Wordsworth and Shelley, though perhaps then only in the less interesting way of Cantos I and II.

The alienation of Harold in Canto I is hardly profound, though peculiarly relevant both to Byron's time and to ours:

Worse than adversity the Childe befell;
He felt the fulness of satiety.

He has run through Sin's long labyrinth, is sick at heart, and more than a little weary. So are we as we read Cantos I and II, though this is more the fault of his imitators than it is of Byron. Too many Byronic heroes have moved across too many screens, and Byron's rhetoric in Cantos I and II is not yet supple enough to keep us from making the association between the master and his disciples:

Yet oft-times in his maddest mirthful mood
Strange pangs would flash along Childe Harold's brow,
As if the memory of some deadly feud
Or disappointed passion lurk'd below:
But this none knew, nor haply cared to know;
For his was not that open, artless soul
That feels relief by bidding sorrow flow,
Nor sought he friend to counsel or condole,
Whate'er this grief mote be, which he could not control.

Most of what follows, in these first two cantos, has been described, quite aptly, as "the rhymed diary of two years' travel." What counts in these cantos is the first emergence of Byron's Romantic hero, Promethean Man, who will reach his culmination as Manfred and Cain, and then be replaced by Don Juan. Manfred and Cain are ravaged humanists, though they acquire some diabolical coloring. Childe Harold is scarcely even a vitalist until Canto III, and ends his quest in Canto IV by implying that the posture of pilgrimage is itself a value worth the affirming. We can agree, provided this pilgrimage has an imaginative element, an energy of vision and creation powerful enough to convert its spiritual emptiness into a deliberate theme. This is in fact Byron's great achievement in the third and fourth cantos; his faltering Prometheanism becomes the vehicle for myth. The myth concerns the condition of European man in the Age of Metternich, and is presented in and by the person of the Pilgrim, a complex wanderer who shares only a name with the Childe Harold of the Romantic guidebook that is Cantos I and II.

Canto III opens with Byron's departure into voluntary exile, as he regrets the loss of his child, left behind with the estranged Lady Byron. The poet gives himself to the ocean's guidance, and is content to go "wher'er the surge may

sweep." As he is borne on by wind and water, he states the nature of his alienation. No wonder awaits him; his deeds have pierced the depth of life. His heart has grown hard, having endured too much love, sorrow, fame, ambition, strife. Most important, his thought is now turned away from ordinary reality and towards the refuge of "lone caves, yet rife with airy images," and the visionary shapes of "the soul's haunted cell." Fleeing England, he escapes into his poem, and affirms a therapeutic aesthetic idealism:

'Tis to create, and in creating live
 A being more intense, that we endow
 With form our fancy, gaining as we give
 The life we image, even as I do now.
 What am I? Nothing: but not so art thou,
 Soul of my thought! with whom I traverse earth,
 Invisible but gazing, as I glow
 Mix'd with thy spirit, blended with thy birth,
 And feeling still with thee in my crush'd feeling's dearth.

Thought seeks refuge in the creation of poetry, for by it we gain more life, even as Byron gains in the life he images. His own limitations are transcended as he blends himself with the birth of what he creates. Rousseau, in Shelley's *Triumph of Life*, returns from this transcendental illusion to the reality of natural limitation. Byron is so wavering in his own aspiration that he turns from it in his very next stanza:

Yet must I think less wildly: — I *have* thought
 Too long and darkly, till my brain became,
 In its own eddy boiling and o'erwrought,
 A whirling gulf of phantasy and flame.

Yet to cease in this wild thinking is to submit one's thoughts to others, and Byron says of his Childe Harold *persona*:

He would not yield dominion of his mind
 To spirits against whom his own rebell'd.

This might be Manfred speaking. And again like Manfred, Harold turns to the mountains for companionship, for "they spake a mutual language." But between the Pilgrim and the Alps lies "an Empire's dust," the legacy of the fallen Titan, Napoleon. The poem pauses to brood on the fate of Prometheanism, and to read in Napoleon the same spirit, "antithetically mixt," that reigns in the Pilgrim. Napoleon is either "more or less than man," yet falls through an aspiration beyond man's hope:

But quiet to quick bosoms is a hell,
 And *there* hath been thy bane; there is a fire
 And motion of the soul which will not dwell
 In its own narrow being, but aspire
 Beyond the fitting medium of desire;
 And, but once kindled, quenchless evermore,
 Preys upon high adventure, nor can tire
 Of aught but rest; a fever at the core,
 Fatal to him who bears, to all who ever bore.

Blake or Shelley would not have acknowledged that desire had a fitting medium, though Shelley frequently emphasizes its fatality to him who bears it. Byron is already caught between admiration and disapproval of those whose "breath is agitation," of "all that expands the spirit, yet appals." Unlike Wordsworth but like Shelley, he seeks the summits of nature not for their own sake but because they show "how Earth may pierce to Heaven, yet leave vain man below." Nor does Byronic solitude much resemble the Wordsworthian kind. Wordsworth goes apart the better to hear humanity's still sad music emanate from nature. Byron desires to be alone that he may "love Earth only for its earthly sake." If he lives not in himself, it is only to become a portion of the nature around him, and so to evade the burden of being a man, "a link reluctant in a fleshly chain."

Rather unfairly, Byron attributes the same desire to Rousseau, a greater Promethean than Napoleon or Byron:

His love was passion's essence:—as a tree
 On fire by lightning, with ethereal flame
 Kindled he was, and blasted; for to be
 Thus, and enamour'd, were in him the same.

The fire stolen from Heaven both kindles and blasts, and in Rousseau, human love is one with the stolen flame and in turn becomes existence itself. Byron praises Rousseau as inspired, but dismisses him as "phrensied by disease or woe," an anticipation of modern Babbitty toward Rousseau's genius. Byron's ambivalence is a necessary consequence of the extraordinary view of the natural world that *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* develops. Every element given to man is simultaneously a way to moral greatness and divine blessing, and also a quicker way to self-deception and damnation. Every human act that widens consciousness increases both exaltation and despair. No other poet has insisted on maintaining both views with equal vigor, and one can wonder if Byron ever justifies his deliberate moral confusion by fully converting its aesthetic consequences into personal myth.

In Canto IV Byron reaches Rome, the goal of his Pilgrimage, and is moved by its aesthetic greatness to intensify his statement of negations. The mind is diseased by its own beauty, and this auto-intoxication fevers into false creation. So much for the Romantic Imagination. Disease, death, bondage become an obsessive litany:

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.

As Mr. Flosky says in Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*, after hearing Mr. Cypress (Byron) paraphrase this stanza, we have here "a most delightful speech, Mr. Cypress. A most amiable and instructive philosophy. You have only to impress its truth on the minds of all living men, and life will then, indeed, be the desert and the solitude." But this is to miss, however wittily, the direction of Byron's rhetoric, which does not seek to persuade, but to expose. Mr. Cypress is a marvelous creation, and we are sad to see him depart "to rake seas and rivers, lakes and canals, for the moon of ideal beauty," but he is a better satire upon Childe Harold than he is on Byron the Pilgrim. Mr. Cypress sings a song that ends as Childe Harold might be pleased to end, knowing that "the soul is its own monument." Byron as the Pilgrim of Eternity refuses to yield the human value of his life to his own vision of all-consuming sin:

But I have lived, and have not lived in vain:
 My mind may lose its force, my blood its fire,
 And my frame perish even in conquering pain;
 But there is that within me which shall tire
 Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire;
 Something unearthly, which they deem not of,
 Like the remember'd tone of a mute lyre,
 Shall on their soften'd spirits sink, and move
 In hearts all rocky now the late remorse of love.

What survives, as in Shelley, is "like the remember'd tone of a mute lyre." In this case, that means the continued reverberation of this stanza, which accurately predicts its own survival. Seeking an image for such aesthetic immortality,

Byron turns to the plastic art around him in Rome. Gazing at the Apollo Belvedere, he sees the statue with the approving eye of neoclassic aesthetics, a doctrine of stoic and firm control, of the selected moment or incident that shall be both representative and exemplary:

Or view the Lord of the unerring bow,
The God of life, and poesy, and light—
The Sun in human limbs array'd, and brow
All radiant from his triumph in the fight;
The shaft hath just been shot—the arrow bright
With an immortal's vengeance; in his eye
And nostril beautiful disdain, and might
And majesty, flash their full lightnings by,
Developing in that one glance the Deity.

In the next stanza this statue's informing conception is called "a ray of immortality." Just as Byron, in this poem, makes no attempt to reconcile his conviction of the value of human aspiration with his conviction of sin, so he does not try to bring into harmony this neoclassic aesthetic and Rousseau's vision of art as expressive therapy or Wordsworth's more active theory of a poet's creation. A subsequent stanza demonstrates Byron's awareness of the conflict within his own views:

And if it be Prometheus stole from Heaven
The fire which we endure, it was repaid
By him to whom the energy was given
Which this poetic marble hath array'd
With an eternal glory—which, if made
By human hands, is not of human thought;
And Time himself hath hallow'd it, nor laid
One ringlet in the dust—nor hath it caught
A tinge of years, but breathes the flame with which 'twas wrought.

The Promethean fire we "endure" rather than enjoy, for its origin is illicit; it was stolen. We repay the Titan for the gift of creative energy by a work like this statue, but though the work is of human hands, it is not of human thought. Byron is enough of a Romantic to credit the artist with Promethean energy, but is also too uneasy about the autonomy of Imagination to credit timelessness to a merely human conception. The statue breathes the stolen flame that wrought it, but the aid of more than human inspiration vivifies it.

The timelessness of art ends the wanderings of Byron's Pilgrim, for he comes to rest before the beauty of Rome, his search accomplished. Byron concludes

the poem by offering his Pilgrim to the reader as a means of aesthetic grace of the kind the statue of Apollo has supplied to the Pilgrim himself:

Ye! who have traced the Pilgrim to the scene
Which is his last, if in your memories dwell
A thought which once was his, if on ye swell
A single recollection, not in vain
He wore his sandal-shoon and scallop-shell;
Farewell! with *him* alone may rest the pain,
If such there were — with *you*, the moral of his strain.

The Pilgrim has been a catharsis for his creator, who has sought by his creation to transvalue exile and wandering into an essential good appropriate for a generation whose Titanic force is spent. In an age of reaction and repression the heroic spirit must roam, must indulge the residue of a Promethean endowment, but without yielding to it utterly. Somewhere in the endurance of human art an ultimate value must lie, but Byron cannot give a final assent to any view of human nature or art available to him. In this powerful skepticism that refuses to be a skepticism, but throws itself intensely at rival modes of feeling and thought, the peculiar moral and aesthetic value of Byron's poetry comes into initial being. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* has passion and conflict without balance. We turn elsewhere in Byron to find both a clearer exaltation of the Promethean and a firmer control of the critical attitude that seeks to chasten and correct this immense energy.

"Prometheus"

In July 1816, in Switzerland, Byron wrote a short ode in three strophes, "Prometheus." Composed at the same time as the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, this ode gathers together the diffused Titanism of the romance, and emphasizes the heroic rather than the sinful aspect of Prometheus' achievement and fate. Yet even here there is a troubled undersong, and a refusal to neglect the darker implications of the fire stolen from Heaven. The overt celebration of human aspiration is properly dominant, but is all the more impressive for the juxtaposition of Byron's darker intimations. The gift of fire is the basis of Byron's art and theme, but the gift is unsanctioned by the withdrawn but responsible Power that has lawful possession of energy. Byron's entire poetic career at its most serious — here, in *Manfred*, *Cain*, *Don Juan*, *The Vision of Judgment* — can be understood as an attempt to justify the theft of fire by creating with its aid, while never forgetting that precisely such creation intensifies the original Promethean "Godlike crime." Byron, in this, writes in the line of Milton's prophetic fears, as do Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Shelley in *Prometheus*

Unbound. The fallen Angels in *Paradise Lost* compose poetic laments and celebrations for their Fall and of their deeds respectively, while Satan journeys through Chaos. Milton rises with immense relief from the abyss he so powerfully creates, and the temptations of Prometheanism constitute the dangers he has escaped. The invocations in *Paradise Lost* exist to establish Milton's hope that his inspiration is Divine, and not Promethean and hence Satanic. Byron has no such hope; his inspiration is both glorious and sinful, and his creation glorifies human aspiration (and his own) and increases human culpability.

The ode "Prometheus" defies the sufferings consequent upon such guilt, though it recognizes their reality:

Titan! to whose immortal eyes
 The sufferings of mortality,
 Seen in their sad reality,
 Were not as things that gods despise;
 What was thy pity's recompense?
 A silent suffering, and intense;
 The rock, the vulture, and the chain,
 All that the proud can feel of pain,
 The agony they do not show,
 The suffocating sense of woe,
 Which speaks but in its loneliness,
 And then is jealous lest the sky
 Should have a listener, nor will sigh
 Until its voice is echoless.

This begins as the Prometheus of Aeschylus, but the emphasis on the pride of silent suffering starts to blend the Titan into the figure of Byron the Pilgrim of Eternity, who does not show his agony, but whose sense of radical sin is suffocating, and who speaks to the mountains in the glory of mutual solitude. This first strophe commends Prometheus as an accurate as well as compassionate observer of human reality, the function Byron tries to fulfill in his poetry. The start of the second strophe dares to attribute directly to the Titan the Byronic conflict of negations:

Titan! to thee the strife was given
 Between the suffering and the will,
 Which torture where they cannot kill.

Prometheus suffers most, like Byron, in the conflict between his sympathy for and participation in human suffering, and the impious drive of his will in gloriously but sinfully bringing relief to humanity. Byron's will cannot bring fire

to us, but can create an art that returns the Titanic gift with the human offering of a poem, itself a mark of creative grace but also an agency of further suffering, as it increases our guilt. This rather vicious circularity, a distinctive feature of Byron's view of existence, is very evident in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and enters into the final strophe of "Prometheus." Byron rises to his theme's power with a firmness of diction and mastery of rhythm that his lyrical verse does not often manifest:

Thy Godlike crime was to be kind,
 To render with thy precepts less
 The sum of human wretchedness,
 And strengthen Man with his own mind;
 But baffled as thou wert from high,
 Still in thy patient energy,
 In the endurance, and repulse
 Of thine impenetrable Spirit,
 Which Earth and Heaven could not convulse,
 A mighty lesson we inherit.

The Titan's kindness was "Godlike," yet remains a crime. The Promethean gift would have strengthened Man by making the human mind immortal, but the gift's full efficacy was baffled by God. The stolen fire, thus imperfectly received, is itself a torture to us. What survives unmixed in our Titanic inheritance is the emblem of "patient energy," the endurance that will make Manfred's Spirit impenetrable. Prometheus and Man alike fall short of perfection, and so share one tragic fate, but they share also in a triumphant force:

Thou art a symbol and a sign
 To mortals of their fate and force;
 Like thee, Man is in part divine,
 A troubled stream from a pure source;
 And Man in portions can foresee
 His own funereal destiny;
 His wretchedness, and his resistance,
 And his sad unallied existence:
 To which his Spirit may oppose
 Itself—and equal to all woes,
 And a firm will, and a deep sense,
 Which even in torture can descry
 Its own concentr'd recompense,

Triumphant where it dares defy,
And making Death a Victory.

What is confused, here and throughout Byron, is the attitude toward divinity. The "inexorable Heaven" of the second strophe, which creates for its own pleasure "the things it may annihilate," is nevertheless to be identified with the "pure source" from which Prometheus and Man are only troubled streams. Byron insists upon having it both ways, and he cannot overcome the imaginative difficulties created by his spiritual shuffling. Man's destiny is "funereal," for his "sad unallied existence" is detached from God; such are the consequences of Man's Promethean fall. Byron is like Blake's Rintrah, a voice presaging a new revelation but too passionate and confused to speak its own clear truth. The concentrated requital for Man's tortured striving is merely the glory of a defiant defeat. It is only by making Heaven altogether remote that Byron goes further in *Manfred*, where a defiant Titanism at last attains to its imaginative limits.

Manfred

Manfred, Byron thought, was "of a very wild, metaphysical, and inexplicable kind." The kind is that of Goethe's *Faust* and Shelley's *Prometheus*, the Romantic drama of alienation and renewal, of the self purged by the self. *Faust* strives for the universal, and *Prometheus* is apocalyptic; *Manfred* is overtly personal, and is meant as a despairing triumph of self, and a denial of the efficacy of even a Titanic purgation. The crime of Manfred is that of Byron, incest deliberately and knowingly undertaken. Oedipus gropes in the dark, the light bursts upon him, and outwardly he allows the light to pass judgment upon him. Manfred, like Byron, claims the right of judging himself.

The Manfred we first encounter in the drama has elements in him of Faust and of Hamlet. The setting is in the Higher Alps, where he has his castle. The opening scene is as it must be: Manfred alone, in a Gothic gallery, and midnight the time. By his deep art he summons a condemned star, his own, and attendant spirits. He asks forgetfulness of self; they offer him only power, and suggest he seek his oblivion in death, but refuse to vouchsafe he will find it there. They serve him only with scorn for his mortality; he replies with Promethean pride. His star manifests itself as Astarte, his sister and mistress, but she vanishes when he attempts to embrace her, and he falls senseless. A spirit song is sung over him, which marks him of the brotherhood of Cain.

The second scene is the next morning out on the cliffs. Manfred, alone, soliloquizes like Milton's Satan on Mount Niphates. But Byron's reference here is a deliberate and critical parody. Satan on Niphates has his crisis of conscience and realizes the depth of his predicament, but refuses to believe that he can

escape the self he has chosen, and so is driven at last to the frightening inversion "Evil, be thou my good." Manfred, like Satan, sees the beauty of the universe, but avers that he cannot feel it and declines therefore to love it. But he then proceeds to declare its felt beauty. Like Hamlet, and curiously like Satan, he proclaims his weariness of the human condition:

Half dust, half deity, alike unfit
To sink or soar.

He desires to sink to destruction, or soar to a still greater destruction, but either way to cease being human. His attempted suicide is frustrated by a kindly peasant, but the wine offered to revive him has blood upon the brim, and his incestuous act is made directly equivalent to murder:

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.

With his crime established, Manfred descends to a lower valley in the Alps, where he confronts a cataract that he identifies with the steed of Death in the Apocalypse. In a marvelous invention, he calls up the Witch of the Alps, a Shelleyan spirit of amoral natural beauty. To her he speaks an idealized history of the outcast Romantic poet, the figure of the youth as natural quester for what nature has not to give, akin to the idealized portraits of self in Shelley's *Alastor* and Keats's *Endymion*. But the incest motif transforms the quester myth into the main theme of *Manfred*, the denial of immortality if it means yielding up the human glory of our condition, yet accompanied by a longing to transcend that condition. The Witch stands for everything in *Manfred* that is at once magical and preternatural. She scorns the Mage for not accepting immortality, and offers him oblivion if he will serve her. With the fine contempt that he displays throughout for all spirits that are not human, Manfred dismisses her. At no time in the play is Manfred anything but grave and courteous to his servants, the poor hunter, and the meddling Abbot who comes to save his soul. To the machinery of the poem, which he himself continually evokes, he is hostile always. This is most striking when he glides arrogantly into the Hall of Arimanes, the chief of dark spirits, and a veil for the Christian devil.

Arimanes is a Gnostic Satan; like Blake's Satan, he is the god of the natural world, worshiped by the three Fates and by Nemesis, who is a very rough version of the dialectical entity Shelley was to call Demogorgon. Manfred refuses to