

Religion in byrons cain philosophy essay



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Byron wrote his closet drama *Cain* in Italy during a period of his life that Hoxie Neal Fairchild describes as coinciding with a “strong attraction toward Roman Catholicism”(437). *Cain* dramatizes the fourth book of Genesis. After refusing to offer sacrifices to God with his family, Cain slays his brother Abel and receives the punishment of banishment. Before killing Abel, Cain engages in a long dialog with Lucifer on the nature of death, the age of the universe, and the value of knowledge. Byron’s poem calls on several religious controversies. First, Byron depicts the views of prominent factions of English Christians, including the Evangelicals, the Latitudinarians, and the Catholics. Second, the poem criticizes the Evangelical and Calvinist views of depravity and the literalness of scripture. Finally, by making Abel a figure of the priesthood and by sometimes invoking the language of the Catholic Mass, Byron questions the Calvinist idea that human beings have no capacity to offer sacrifices. Byron’s exposition on the efficacy of sacrifices allows him to challenge the Calvinist doctrines of depravity and predestination. *Cain* is a poem that reflects Byron’s typical hostility to Evangelicalism. However, the drama also expresses skepticism of the Latitudinarian confidence in human reason, and Byron sympathizes with a Catholic, apostolic version of the Church and the efficacy of priestly sacrifices. While critics like Fairchild point to biographical explanations, Byron’s doctrinal and theological decisions in *Cain* also convey political meanings. Byron’s early reviewers sometimes recognize the politics of the poem, and some of these responses show that Byron’s Italian residence, his representation of Catholicism, and his theology touch on the English anxiety over revolution. Byron’s position on rebellion engages with Rousseau’s conception of rights and the natural law. In contrast to Rousseau, though, Byron’s *Cain* retains the natural law as

external to the individual who participates in it. Rejecting both Calvinist depravity and progressive ideas of reason and voluntarism, Cain opposes Rousseau's idea of the human being and diverges from the narrative of rebellion in Rousseau. Byron instead postulates the created essence of humanity and the precedent of natural law.

The English Romantic tendency to distance revolution from violent excess appears in Charlotte Smith's *The Emigrants* and permeates the Romantic project in general. "Cain," writes Paul Cantor, "is like Frankenstein in its ambivalence, showing a world order that is ripe for rebellion, and yet at the same time suggesting that rebellion is somehow self-defeating." (139). Cantor traces the revolutionary potential in the Romantic "world order" to an abandonment of the Christian creation account in favor of a gnostic creation story and Rousseau's ideas of a return to the state of nature. Cantor sees the Romantics as engaging in a misreading of Rousseau because while Rousseau does not propose a strict return to the state of nature, the Romantic writers, according to Cantor, seek this primal, free state from which humanity can acquire for itself new, different meanings in opposition to the Biblical view of a fixed, created human essence. The question of human ontology, then, differs greatly in the Christian account and Rousseau. Rousseau abandons a created human essence in favor of an adaptability in which "man can become something other than what he originally was." (6). Rousseau's idea of potentiality, which Hume and, later, Sartre also share, denies any law deriving from essential nature because it proposes that the general will according to which legitimate political action operates is habitual, not essential. Rousseau consequently also denies the traditional

principle of the natural law and invests in a version of political rights which, in contradiction even to Locke, separates political rights from a basis in human ontology.

Rousseau's reversal of the natural law rejects the notion that juridical systems derive from an innate natural law which in turn reflects a participation in the eternal law. Rousseau overturns the Aristotelian tradition of the natural law in which "[w]hat is natural is what has the same force everywhere and does not depend on people's thinking." (93). Rousseau proposes a voluntarist model of law in which any sense of an innate, pre-existing law is really a development coming from the progression of historical acts. For Rousseau, there is no law apart from human will and human action. In opposition to Locke and Rousseau, in *Cain*, Byron opposes Rousseau's notion of the societal origin of the law.

Paul Cantor identifies an ambivalence in English Romantic ideas of rebellion, but the literalness of this ambivalence already surfaces in Rousseau's idea of the habitual characteristic of law because the capacity of the law to take on different forms according to the progress of history means that the law is always ambivalent and ambiguous, acquiring different values and progressing in different directions according to the movement of history. Rousseau's view thus denies the epistemological foundation of the Aristotelian concept of the natural law because Aristotle's conception of the law depends on a view of knowledge as the settling of doubt. Because it rejects Rousseau's idea of the law, Byron's *Cain* does not express gnostic and progressive ideas of the mutability of human nature which, in Cantor's model, "gave rise to hopes of man's recapturing paradise." (xiv). Rather, <https://assignbuster.com/religion-in-byrons-cain-philosophy-essay/>

Cain returns to a more traditional version of law and human nature which recognizes the ambivalence and ambiguity in Rousseau and restores creation and its failures to more traditional terms than Rousseau's.

The English Romantic project of returning to tranquility, of finding meaning away from the activity of history, is both a response to the failure of the Revolution and a means of integrating progressive values to traditional religious and national narratives. Often, the critical response to the Romantics has located this tendency mainly with the early poets and especially with the Lake Poets. This turning away from immanence toward transcendence also appears in Cain. As in Frankenstein, there is a similar doubt in Cain of an innate and primary creative capacity in human beings. Byron distinguishes Cain from Abel by the differing extent to which each is able to realize, but not to create, his capacity to participate in the sacrifice which ultimately defines his potentiality. Byron therefore breaks with Rousseau because the realization of creative potential depends on participation in a mandate that precedes the will but nevertheless requires its cooperation.

In moving away from a Protestant emphasis on personal rebirth and toward a Roman Catholic idea of the commission of a priesthood to administer sacraments, Byron distances himself from the progressive view of the law as immanent in subjective acts. Furthermore, Byron makes a connection between the Catholic priesthood's reenactment of a previously completed sacrifice and humanity's participation in a moral law that exists beforehand as an ontologically independent absolute.

The divisions in the English Church of the nineteenth-century consist chiefly of three “ great parties” which Newman defines in the French edition of his *Apologia* as the Tractarian, the Evangelical, and the Latitudinarian (72). The Tractarian party of Newman’s time develops from an earlier Anglo-Catholic movement which itself traces back to the Nonjurors of the seventeenth century. “ They rested their faith,” says Geoffrey Faber, “ upon a two-fold revelation: upon the Bible, as the Church and the councils of the Church alone knew how to interpret it, but still more certainly upon the existence and authority of the Church itself.” (72). Although this group generally was “ hostile to Roman pretensions, and severe toward Roman abuses,” (72), the incipient or covert Catholicism that the movement suggested appears in Dryden’s *Absalom and Achitophel* and persists into the late nineteenth century. The typical anxiety toward its Catholic-leaning emphasis on authority and tradition becomes part of Byron’s defense of Roman Catholicism in his “ Roman Catholic Claims” speech when he says that “ the worst that can be imputed to Catholics” is “ believing not too little, but too much.” (33). The Evangelical party opposed this version of Christianity. It held that the Bible alone provides everything people need for salvation and that the institutional Church and its extra-scriptural rites and teachings interfere with an individual’s direct, personal relationship with God. This view descends from Calvin and tends toward a literal or fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. It holds that a person can have perfect assurance of salvation. The Latitudinarian party, or the Liberal party, put an emphasis on reason and, through Locke and Butler, associated itself with the Whigs by emphasizing social progress and the freedom of the individual will. The Latitudinarian reliance on reason and empiricism eschews literal Biblical

interpretation. While rejecting Calvin's predestination and the Evangelical version of an exclusively internal relationship with the supernatural, Byron's Cain also rejects the expansive Latitudinarian freedom of the will which, like Rousseau, imagines a political order that is neither subservient to, nor even necessarily related to, anything outside material history.

In Cain, the derivative creative capacity comes from Byron's analysis of the efficacy of sacrifices. Byron links the priestly capacity to offer a sacrifice that receives its efficacy from a previous, divine sacrifice with the ability of human beings to access a moral law that derives from an ontological absolute. When Fairchild proposes the incompatibility of Christianity and Romanticism, he cites a Romantic impulse whose satisfaction "could be found only in complete intellectual and spiritual autonomy." (3). Yet whenever transcendent values interrupt an investment in creative power and the immanence of the law, autonomy struggles with its dependence on a prior, extrinsic essence.

Byron's preface to Cain begins with a discreet rejection of a six-day creation. Referring to the second act of Cain, Byron anticipates criticism of his having Lucifer show Cain the remains, from the ages, of the extinct creatures of earth. When Lucifer responds to Cain's indignation at the suggestion that the earth is not new, he tells Cain that "mightier things have been extinct / To make way for much meaner." (158). Lucifer then shows Cain remains of the former creatures of the earth which rest "myriads below its surface," and Cain acknowledges "those / Mighty pre-Adamites who walked the earth."

Ian Dennis argues that Byron's plain, almost naive juxtaposition of the account of Genesis with practical and scientific data is a "defiant

accommodation” by which Byron can express his hostility toward religion only after an act of self-abasement which allows him to reach a broad, largely religious readership by engaging in religious questioning that is really beneath him (663). For Dennis, Cain is an example of the “ passive aggressiveness” according to which Byron recognizes that he must attract audiences in a pluralistic field of religious discourse even while he harbors an “ impulse to be offensive” (655). Fairchild arrives at a similar analysis of Cain when he mentions Byron’s “ enlistment of science against orthodoxy,” but he then claims that Byron “ does not like to admit even to himself the full extent of his unbelief” (429). While Dennis recognizes that Byron negotiates a plurality of Christian beliefs, his expectation that the perspective of science indicates Byron’s hostility to Christianity overlooks the drama’s skepticism of reason’s primacy. Byron’s rejection of literal Biblical exegesis corresponds to a rejection of Evangelicalism, but this rejection is not sufficient to support Dennis’s reading of the play as treating theological issues insincerely. In the preface, Byron catalogs his sacred and secular sources, and he claims that Cuvier’s account of the ancient fossil relics “ is not contrary to the Mosaic account, but rather confirms it (157). In any case, while Byron’s subjective feelings are interesting, the text of Cain and its reception treat the theological and political issues in a particular context of which Byron’s private disposition makes up only a part. Byron’s preface rejects the idea that scientific discoveries contradict the Bible, and this rejection accompanies a rejection of overly literal readings of the Bible which, in nineteenth-century England, characterize the Evangelical party. While adapting his drama from Genesis, Byron also puts forward an exegetical method for reading Genesis. This method corresponds more to the

Latitudinarian and Roman Catholic method than it does to the Evangelical, and Byron expresses a Thomistic view of creation as the diffusion of history from a divine essence. The extent to which Byron really accepted religious stories or any exegetical method is an interesting question, but it does not arise explicitly in his preface or his poem.

In contrast to Cain and Lucifer, Cain's wife Adah responds to Lucifer's challenge by proposing a more flexible account of creation that resembles Aquinas's philosophy of predestination. In Cain, Adah does this. When Lucifer questions her, Adah repeats the Thomistic view of the unfolding of creation according to a divine will:

[God] hath

The angels and the mortals to make happy,

And thus becomes so in diffusing joy.

What else can joy be, but the spreading joy? (478).

Cain mistrusts Adah's confidence in the unity of creation when he doubts the necessity of the division between God and Lucifer: " Would that there were only one of ye! Perchance / An unity of purpose might make union / In elements which seem now jarred in storms." (377). In an effort to surpass the distinction between good and evil, Cain rejects the division of identities and powers in what Adah describes as the diffusion of creation. Cain's attempt resembles the emergence of Rousseau's natural man from the natural law's bondage in order to create the law himself according to the general will. Cain's powerlessness even in this endeavor leads ultimately to

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his rejecting his capacity to perform the sacrifices with Abel. When Cain finally kills Abel, the act leads not to independence from the moral law but instead to its assertion.

In describing sacrifice in particular, Byron contrasts Abel's view with Cain's. When he offers his sacrifice, Cain resigns himself both to his own powerlessness and to the incomprehensible divine judgment that precedes and determines his life and actions. Cain does not believe his actions can affect his fate but rather takes a view similar to Boston's that even his will is bound by a divine mandate. Byron joins with Burns in criticizing Boston's brand of Calvinism, and Cain's distress comes in part from his disgust with his perception of powerlessness in directing his fate. In contrast to Rousseau's notion of the human capacity to create the law and to alter human ontology, Byron's response to this facet of Calvinism calls on the efficacy of sacrifices. Byron's view assumes a fixed human nature which has access to an extrinsic source of law and redemption. It is not therefore a progressive view. Besides a return to an Aristotelian idea of the law and human nature, Byron's redemptive philosophy invests in an Aristotelian epistemology which, unlike the continuum of Rousseau's adaptability, seeks knowledge in a finality beyond which there is no more development in being or comprehension.

At his altar, Cain speaks to God and expresses his discontentment:

[All r]est upon thee; and good and evil seem To have no pow'r in themselves,
save in thy will. And whether that be good or ill I know not, Not being

omnipotent nor fit to judge Omnipotence, but merely to endure Its mandate, which thus far I have endured (274).

In contrast, Abel sacrifices as the “ watching shepherd boy who offers.”(183). He asks Cain “ to join me and precede me / In our priesthood.”(198). Abel builds altars “ whereupon to offer / A sacrifice to God,”(96), and “[h]is sacrifices are acceptable.”(352). In his description of Abel and his sacrifices, Byron makes references to the language of the Catholic Mass and its sanctioning of the power of sacrificers and their sacrifices. These references come mainly from the Offertory parts of the rite and have no counterparts in the Book of Common Prayer.

These references and the general leaning toward the efficacy of sacrifices in Cain come during Byron’s residence in Italy which Fairchild, and others say coincides with “ his attraction to Italian Catholicism” and “ responsive[ness] to Catholic worship”(425). Beyond demonstrating any biographical inclinations, though, Byron’s adoption in Cain of Catholic rhetoric resonates domestically amid particularly English religious and political stances

In adopting Aquinas’s view of an essence which diffuses itself in the particular elements of creation, Byron engages in essentialism, particularly about the natural law. When Lucifer tries to convince Adah that sin develops “ in those who replace ye in / Mortality.”(379), he expresses the voluntarist ideas of Rousseau according to which moral laws develop ambiguously by the progress of history. Adah, however, questions “ the sin which is not / Sin in itself” and asks Lucifer, “ Can circumstance make sin / Of virtue?”(380). Byron’s Cain proposes an ontological definition of the human being that

differs from Rousseau's acceptance of humanity's creative capacity with regard to the law. Whereas Rousseau proposes that human beings' reason, arising from historical circumstances, creates the law out of nothing, Byron conceives of a prior essence to which humanity's creative endeavors have access. Byron also rejects the determinism of Calvin. Byron's limited conception of creativity corresponds to Wordsworth's view of the poet's access to the transcendent forms which, though derivative, enable creative work, and there are links here with the commission of priestly sacrifices in Catholic theology and with the Thomistic idea of the law. In drawing on the capacity in Aristotle and Aquinas for human participation in laws and actions that are ontologically independent of human history, Byron shapes a worldview in Cain that conflicts with the progressive ideas of Rousseau. This conflict extends beyond the reshaping of progressive secularism because although Byron's conception of humanity shares with progressive secularism an expectation that good prevails over time, Byron relies on a supernatural, or at least metaphysical, essence beyond the material circumstances of history, participation in which determines individual success or failure, as it does for Abel and Cain. In Byron's Cain, a transcendent reality precedes the encoding of law, and the law is a concrete reality, not merely an abstraction derived from material experiences.