Lord George Gordon Byron:

Seduction, Defiance, and Despair in the Works of Kierkegaard

Bartholomew Ryan

Soon, soon you will be mine. When the sun shuts its vigilant eye, when history is over and the myths begin, I will not only throw my cloak around me but I will throw the night around me like a cloak and hurry to you and listen in order to find you—listen not for your footsteps but for the beating of your heart.¹

Søren Kierkegaard never read English, but he did keep a German edition of the complete works of Byron, the English Romantic poet, in his personal library. Lord George Gordon Byron was born in 1788 and died in 1824. He is the image of the Romantic poet *par excellence*: reckless, brilliant, handsome, prolific, polemical, and forever young. Byron was born in London to a Scotswoman, Catherine Gordon, and the penniless but titled widower, Captain John Byron. Byron's charming and reckless father soon abandoned both wife and child. He died in 1791, perhaps of tuberculosis or poison, but not before appointing his son as heir to his non-existent estate.

The young Byron, educated at Harrow School and the University of Cambridge, soon became well-known for his volatile temperament and wild antics of promiscuity with both sexes. Byron's first collection of poems, *Hours of Idleness*, was published in 1807. The Cantos I and II of *Childe Harold Pilgrimage* in 1812 brought him instant celebrity. Suddenly Byron became a handsome hero, lauded by the aristocracy and pursued by countless women. Thus the Byron legend was born.

The significance of this cannot be underestimated. Already in 1818, six years before Byron's death, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) was quoting directly from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and referring to him as one of "the great men of genius." Lady Caroline Lamb (1785–1828) memorably

SKS 2, 428 / EO1, 441.

² Lord Byron's sämmtliche Werke. Nach den Anforderungen unserer Zeit neu übersetzt von Mehreren, vols. 1–10, Stuttgart: Hoffman 1839 (ASKB 1868–1870).

Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vols. 1–2, London: Dover 1969, vol. 1, p. 181; p. 191; p. 251. (Kierkegaard owned the second edition of Schopenhauer's work in German, see *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, vols. 1–2, 2nd revised and enlarged ed., Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus 1844 [1819] (*ASKB* 773–773a).) Byron is also quoted and referred to on numerous occasions (such as the poems *Don Juan*, *Lara*, *The Prophecy of Dante*, *Childe*

remarked that Byron was "mad, bad and dangerous to know." Byron's *The Corsair* (1814) was also hugely popular with its dashing, enigmatic hero and pirate adventure. The poems *The Prisoner of Chillon* (which was imitated by Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), the darling of Russian letters, in *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1822), in its title and inset portrait of the poet⁶) and the Faustian *Manfred* were published in 1816. *Cain: A Mystery* was published in 1821, while the unfinished *Don Juan*, considered Byron's masterpiece, was published in its episodic Cantos (16 in all) in the years 1819–23. In his final year, Byron joined the revolt of the Greeks against the Ottoman Empire. He died of a fever in Missolonghi, Greece, in 1824.

II.

Among Kierkegaard's published works, Byron is mentioned in *Either/Or* (1843) and *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844). It is no surprise that Kierkegaard would refer to Byron in *Either/Or*, since the English poet might well have been a model for the aesthete depicted in Part One of that book. We will now examine the passages in which Byron is explicitly named. In his reflections on Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the aesthetician A comments:

That Byron was in many ways particularly endowed to present Don Juan is certain enough, and therefore one can be sure that when that undertaking failed, the reason was not in Byron but in something far deeper: Byron has ventured to bring Don Juan into existence for us, to tell us of his childhood and youth, to construct him out of context for his finite life-relationships. But Don Juan thereby became a reflective personality who loses the ideality he has in the traditional picture.⁷

Two pages later, A draws the following conclusion about Byron's *magnum opus*: "Therefore, Byron's *Don Juan* must be regarded as a failure because it stretches out epically." In Part Two of *Either/Or*, on "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage," the pseudonym Judge William also comments on Byron: "What I am saying here does not apply only to some seducer prowling about in the world like a beast of prey. No, it fits a goodly chorus of often highly gifted people, and it is not only Byron who

Harolde's Pilgrimage again, *Cain* and *Euthanasia*) in the second volume of Schopenhauer's major work, but this volume was added and expanded later in 1844 and 1859.

Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend*, London: Faber and Faber 2003, p. 164.

There seems to be no connection between Byron's poem and Goldschmidt's satirical weekly paper of the same name. Goldschmidt's *Corsair* (*Corsaren*) heralds from Paris. For more on this, see Joakim Garff, *Søren Aabye Kierkegaard*. *A Biography*, trans. by Bruce H. Kirmmse, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2005, p. 326. The image of the pirate though fits both Byron's image and Goldschmidt's paper; a travelling, seafaring outlaw was an image that Kierkegaard was equally fascinated and repelled by.

T.J. Binyon, *Pushkin: A Biography*, London: HarperCollins 2002, p. 151. We might view Pushkin, in his own masterpiece *Eugene Onegin*, as attempting to overcome his debt to Byron, by directly mocking him.

⁷ SKS 2, 110 / EO1, 106.

⁸ SKS 2, 111 / EO1, 108.

declares that love is heaven and marriage hell." Twenty pages afterward, Judge William mentions Byron for the second and final time: "For the person who reflects temporally, the first kiss, for example, will be a past (just as Byron has put it in a short poem); for the person who reflects eternally, there will be an eternal possibility." From these references, it can be ascertained that Kierkegaard at least read some of *Don Juan* and Byron's first collection of poems, *Hours of Idleness*.

All of Kierkegaard's remaining substantive references to Byron are to be found in his journals and notebooks. In what may be called Kierkegaard's Faustian period (1836–37), Byron is mentioned three times in the journals. In this period, Kierkegaard explores the aesthetics of Mozart's Don Giovanni, the concept of irony, the idea of mythology, and Goethe's Faust. Byron makes his first appearance in connection with Kierkegaard's reading of Karl Ernst Schubarth's (1796-1860) comparative analysis of Goethe's Faust and Byron's Manfred:11 "He [sc. Schubarth] shows that some have simply understood the poem to be a complaint that he was denied the highest pleasures of life, and that Lord Byron has reproduced the matter and content in F.[aust] from this standpoint."12 Further on, Kierkegaard refers to Byron as among the "great poets," claiming that Byron's dramatic piece, Cain, "has understood the Devil from another side." Still reading Schubarth's work on Faust and Manfred, Kierkegaard jots down in another journal entry a few days later, "Probably Lord Byron's Manfred is Faust without a Goethean educating Mephisto?"14 The last mention of Byron in Kierkegaard's journals is 14 years later; "Yes, one who wishes to enjoy life on a grand scale (a Lord Byron, for example) could certainly wish to be healed—but not on the condition that he has to die to the world once and for all."15

The final section of teasing out the works and general myth of Byron in Kierkegaard's writings concludes with interpretations of their place in Kierkegaard's body of work. I will briefly mention five aspects in Kierkegaard's writings that invite an interpretation of his use of Byron: his use of Byron's *Manfred* alongside Goethe's *Faust*, the role and image of the poet, the creation and critique of the seducer, the critique of *Don Juan*, and finally, the essay "The Rotation of Crops."

III.

A.

As mentioned, Kierkegaard's interest in Byron began during his Faustian phase. In journal entries from this period, Kierkegaard refers to both *Manfred* and *Cain*. His interest in *Cain* lies in the presentation of Lucifer, and *Manfred* is likened to a *Faust*

⁹ SKS 3, 31 / EO2, 22.

¹⁰ SKS 3, 48 / EO2, 41.

K.E. Schubarth, *Ueber Goethe's Faust. Vorlesungen*, Berlin: Enslin 1830, especially pp. 45–6; pp. 81–2 (*ASKB* U 96).

SKS 17, 89, BB:7 / KJN 1, 82.

¹³ SKS 17, 89, BB:7 / KJN 1, 83.

Pap. I C 102, p. 277 / JP 5, 5160.

¹⁵ SKS 23, 424, NB20:57 / JP 2, 1872.

without Mephistopheles. Kierkegaard's interest and avid note-taking on different versions and interpretations of the Faust story fades once his former tutor Hans Lassen Martensen (1808–84) published an extended essay on Lenau's *Faust*. But there are aspects of Byron's *Manfred* that are akin to Kierkegaard and his project on *Faust*. The poem's epigraph is from Hamlet—surely one of Kierkegaard's most cherished fictional characters. Both *Manfred* and *Cain* can be related to *Faust*, with respect to their content; this can be seen from Kierkegaard's reading of Schubarth and Faust's own efforts to overcome the classic notion of good and evil.

B.

The second aspect of the presence of Byron in Kierkegaard's writings might be seen in the whole image and mythology of this very charismatic poet, and in Kierkegaard's own ongoing complex depiction of the use and abuse of a being a poet. This image is reflective of the reception of Byron outside England, in continental Europe. One influential image is Napoleonic in kind: not simply in evoking a battlefield and territorial conquest, but as a tribute to one's own art and to the triumph over one's god. Nietzsche, for example, salutes Byron's *Manfred* as follows: "There thus arises the danger that man may bleed to death from knowledge of truth. This was expressed by Byron in immortal verse: 'Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most / Must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth, / The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.' "18 Others' images of Byron are of the revolutionary fighter, the great seducer, and the colossal poet of despair and restless wanderer.

Byron served as a leader of Italy's revolutionary organization "the Carbonari" which fought against Austria, and, as already mentioned, he fought against the Turks in the Greek War of Independence. There are many odes to various women throughout his works, from Marion to Lesbia, Emma to Caroline, Eliza to Anne, not to mention the erotic eulogies to all those in *Don Juan*. Byron's poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is enough to create the image of the restless wandering poet, and the anguish and despair of the poet can also be felt throughout his writings from "My Soul is Dark" to "Darkness," from "Parisina" to *Manfred*. One can begin to see the disparity between Byron (and the image of Byron) and Kierkegaard; this gives us a clue to Kierkegaard's own constant conflict with what a poet ought to be.

Hans Lassen Martensen, "Betragtninger over Ideen af Faust med Hensyn til Lenaus Faust," *Perseus, Journal for den speculative Idee*, no. 1, 1837, pp. 91–164. Nicolaus Lenau was the pseudonym for the Austro-Hungarian poet Nicolaus Niembsch von Strehlenau (1802–50). See Kierkegaard's journal entry in *Pap*. II A 597 / *JP* 5, 5225: "How unhappy I am—Martensen has written an essay on Lenau's *Faust*."

 $^{^{17}}$ SKS 7, 151 / CUP1, 163 "...to pray is just as difficult as to play the role of Hamlet, of which the greatest actor is supposed to have said that only once had he been close to playing it well; nevertheless he would devote all his ability and his entire life to continued study of this role." See also SKS 6, 417–19 / SLW, 442–54.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, vol. 1, p. 109; pp. 60–1; Byron, *Manfred: A Dramatic Poem*, Act I, Scene i; quoted from *Byron: Poetical Works*, ed. by Frederick Page, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1970 (the piece was first published in 1817), p. 390.

When one arrives at Either/Or with its opening question, "What is a poet?," one finds an answer that applies best to the typical portrait of a Romantic poet: "An unhappy person who conceals profound anguish in his heart but whose lips are so formed that as sighs and cries pass over them they sound like beautiful music." Byron embodies Kierkegaard's tortured aesthetic man, that seducer and larger-than-life figure of Either/ Or, Part I; this figure is a reflection of the cult of Byron that was then cultivated by French, German, and Russian men of letters. On a Kierkegaardian reading, Byron remains a slave to aestheticism and defiant despair. The poet suffers, as does the poetic character of Either/Or, in order to alleviate his sufferings; he loses himself in Mozart's sensual masterpiece, and in the seduction and conquest of women. Close to the end of Stages on Life's Way, Frater Taciturnus clarifies the distinction that Kierkegaard is himself trying to make: "The aesthetic hero is great by conquering, the religious hero is great by suffering."²⁰ This first part of this sentence succinctly affirms the Byronic way of life. Byron's poet, in the tradition of the Romantic idea of its day, is the living embodiment of poetry as life lived to the fullest and amid a great outpouring of work. In The Sickness unto Death, the suffering poet as religious poet is presented most directly by Kierkegaard's Anti-Climacus.²¹ In this same text, the Byronic character with whom Kierkegaard empathizes is confronted in the section "Despair as Defiance," which is the final and most potent stage of despair. Here are a few examples of Manfred's defiant despair from a Kierkegaardian perspective:

I plunged deep,
But, like an ebbing wave, it dashed me back
Into the gulf of my unfathom'd thought
...I dwell in my despair—
And live—and live for ever.²²

I have sunk before my vain despair, and knelt To my own desolation.²³

There is no power in holy men,
Nor charm in prayer, nor purifying form
Of penitence, nor outward look, nor fast,
Nor agony—nor, greater than all these,
The innate tortures of that deep despair,
Which is remorse without the fear of hell.²⁴

Anti-Climacus' descriptions of the person of defiant despair reflect the manner in which the characters Manfred, Cain, Don Juan, and the poet Byron himself, sense,

¹⁹ SKS 2, 27 / EO1, 19.

²⁰ SKS 6, 420 / SLW, 454.

SKS 11, 191–2 / SUD, 77–8. These first two pages of the second section of *The Sickness unto Death* offer a fascinating glimpse into the dilemmas of the poet in the face of the poet's muse.

²² Manfred, Act II, Scene ii.

²³ Ibid., Act II, Scene iv.

²⁴ Ibid., Act III, Scene i.

feel and act: "The self is its own master, absolutely its own master, so-called; and precisely this is the despair, but also what it regards as its pleasure and delight." Anti-Climacus could well be speaking for Byron's Cain when Cain abandons all that he loves to agree with Lucifer, in his defiance of God, whom he sees as having shamed his family. Here Anti-Climacus' defiant despairer begins to understand that he treads a very dangerous path, yet he proceeds with ever more fury:

By now, even if God in heaven and all the angels offered to help him out of it—no, he does not want that, now it is too late. Once he would gladly have given everything to be rid of his agony, but he was kept waiting; now it is too late, now he would rather rage against everything and be the wronged victim of the whole world and of all life, and it is of particular significance to him to make sure that no one takes it away from him—for then he would not be able to demonstrate and to prove to himself that he is right.²⁶

Byron's friend and contemporary, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), displays his own perception of this demonic defiance and rage embodied in the Byronic figure in a three-line fragment for Byron published posthumously: "O Mighty mind, in whose deep stream this age / Shakes like a reed in the unheeding storm, / Why dost thou curb not thine own sacred rage?" A comparison of Shelley's fragment to Kierkegaard's analysis of defiant despair in *The Sickness unto Death* allows us to attain a more nuanced understanding of Byron in terms of this image of the poet full of creativity, defiance, and rage. Nevertheless, in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Byron is described alongside Shelley and Shakespeare as one of the few poets who are able to "break the silence." This silence is usually approached with awe and terror by Kierkegaard, especially in *Fear and Trembling* and *The Concept of Anxiety*. Yet both the poet and the seducer have the potential to "break" this silence. Silence, however, will always have the last word, whether that be in Agnete's silent faith in the face of the charismatic Merman in *Fear and Trembling*, or as one of the three guides in the discourse on the lily and the birds of 1849.

C.

Kierkegaard's third use of Byron can be discovered through his creation and critique of the pseudonym A and the seducer in *Either/Or*. In the second part of *Either/Or*, Judge William connects the writer (who is referred to as A) of Part One to Byron in his attitude towards commitment to marriage and women in general, and in his being a slave to romantic love and nothing more. Judge William alludes to Byron's poem,

²⁵ SKS 11, 183 / SUD, 69.

²⁶ Ibid.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Fragment: To Byron" in *The Complete Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, New York: The Modern Library Edition 1994 (written in 1818), p. 608.

²⁸ SKS 4, 432 / CA, 131.

²⁹ SKS 2, 317 / EO1, 327: "Let her hate me, scorn me, be indifferent to me, love someone else—I do not fear; but stir up the water, break the silence."

"To Eliza," which reads, "Though women are angels, yet wedlock's the devil." Again, A is compared to Byron in the priority of the first kiss, and the slow fading away of the first stirrings of love. Byron writes: "Give me the mild beam of the soul-breathing glance, / Or the rapture which dwells on the first kiss of love." Does Judge William interpret Byron correctly? For Byron, the first kiss of love seems to be greater than the actual muse: "The earnest remembrance will still be the last, / Our sweetest memorial the first kiss of love."

Judge William had written: "for the person who reflects eternally, there will be an eternal possibility."33 Byron's lines seem to indicate that the first kiss is eternal, in that it will always be remembered and thereby resonant. As long as one reflects on the first kiss, there is the eternal possibility. This is something that Judge William overlooks. The poem reveals the religiosity that pervades the true poet, and the first kiss itself is equated with the divine sphere: "Some portion of paradise still is on earth, / What are visions like these to the first / Kiss of love?"34 Like Byron, the seducer in Either/Or, Part One, also speaks of a divine kiss: "a kiss, unlike a human kiss, which subtracts something, but rather a divine kiss, which gives everything."35 Finally, the seducer invokes the literary image of a vampire, which again brings to mind Byron or the Byronic figure. The protagonist comes across as a kind of vampire, residing in the shadows of the city streets, deftly moving in and out of the city crowds, and always alert with the sleepless eye. The references to this image are numerous: "living in a kingdom of mist," "eyes in a cape," and "continually seek[ing] my prey."36 Through the use of the cape (Kappe) or cloak (Kaabe) throughout the essay,³⁷ the seducer's shadow world is vividly evoked.

D.

Next, mention should be made of the critique of Byron's *Don Juan* in the essay on Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in *Either/Or*, Part One. For Kierkegaard's pseudonymous

Judge William is referring to Byron's poem "To Eliza," in *Lord Byron's sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 1, p. 83; quoted from *Byron: Poetical Works*, ed. by Frederick Page, p. 29.

Byron, "The First Kiss of Love," in *Byron: Poetical Works*, ed. by Frederick Page, p. 8.

³² Ibid

³³ SKS 3, 48 / EO2, 41.

Byron, "The First Kiss of Love," in *Byron: Poetical Works*, ed. by Frederick Page, p. 8.

³⁵ SKS 2, 362 / EO1, 374.

³⁶ SKS 2, 299 / EO1, 310. SKS 2, 305 / EO1, 314. SKS 2, 314 / EO1, 324.

See, for example, *SKS* 2, 321 / *EO1*, 314. *SKS* 2, 310 / *EO1*, 321. *SKS* 2, 14 / *EO1*, 323. *SKS* 2, 341 / *EO1*, 352. *SKS* 2, 352 / *EO1*, 363. *SKS* 2, 428 / *EO1*, 441. The seducer is the hunter with his cape (*Kappe*) chasing Cordelia as the prey with her green cloak (*Kaabe*) *SKS* 2, 315 / *EO1*, 325. *SKS* 2, 317, *EO1*, 327. *SKS* 2, 319–21 / *EO1*, 329–31. In a passage deleted from the final draft, Kierkegaard actually does write: "this vampiric tendency of his. Just as the shadows of the underworld sucked the blood out of the real human beings and lived so long, so did he." *Pap*. III B 45 / *EO1*, Supplement, p. 553. This vampire image is also apparent in *Repetition* where, in Berlin, Constantin relishes watching the city by a window at moonlight, and desiring to throw on a cape after midnight, looks out his window and "sees the shadows of passersby hurrying along the walls." *SKS* 4, 28 / R, 151–2.

aesthetician, Byron's *Don Juan* is a failure because it does not treat Don Juan himself as an ideality; instead, it presents him as a human being who was born, had a childhood, and developed relationships. The argument in *Either/Or* is that when Don Juan is interpreted musically, the true splendor of the character is revealed, as the "total infinitude of passion," "the infinite power that nothing can resist," "the wild craving of desire," and the "absolute victoriousness of this desire." Music represents Don Juan as a power, not as an individual. Here, Kierkegaard's aesthetician's interpretation can be affiliated with the power of an abyss-like religiosity, abyss-like in that its demonism (Don Juan is described as "demonically powerful") is such that Don Juan cannot come into conflict with the world but is to be forever lost to the infinite. A makes this point: "If Don Juan is interpreted as an individual, then he is *eo ipso* in conflict with the world about him."

Е.

Finally, one might attribute the framework of the essay "The Rotation of Crops" in *Either/Or* to one of the verses of Canto XIII in *Don Juan*. I quote the verse in full:

Our ridicules are kept in the back ground—
Ridiculous enough, but also dull;
Professions, too, are no more to be found
Professional; and there is nought to cull
Of folly's fruit; for though your fools abound,
They're barren and not worth the pains to pull.
Society is now one polish'd horde,
Form'd of two mighty tribes, the *Bores* and *Bored*.⁴¹

The last lines closing with "the *Bores* and *Bored*" strikingly bring to mind Kierkegaard's "The Rotation of Crops." Kierkegaard's aesthete practically repeats this idea:

The word "boring" can designate just as well a person who bores others as someone who bores himself....How remarkable it is that those who do not bore themselves generally bore others; those, however, who bore themselves entertain others. Generally, those who do not bore themselves are busy in the world in one way or another, but for that reason they are, of all people, the most boring of all, the most unbearable....The other class of human beings, the superior ones, are those who bore themselves.⁴²

Indeed: so much of *Don Juan* conjures up a world where most men and women sleepwalk through life, busying themselves with vacuous conversation to cover up the abyss of "civilized" existence. This is the world-view of the superior aesthete both

³⁸ SKS 2, 110 / EO1, 107.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Don Juan, Canto XIII, verse 95; quoted from Byron: Poetical Works, ed. by Frederick Page, p. 819.

⁴² SKS 2, 278 / EO1, 288.

in *Don Juan* and *Either/Or*. The poet who moves through *Either/Or* is at times the sufferer of his sonorous art, the triumphant seducer of women, the graveyard wanderer and the bored aristocrat. In Kierkegaard's own vivid imagination, all of these aspects of the poet of *Either/Or* embody perfectly the Romantic poet Lord Byron.

In this same section from *Don Juan* we can see also the influence of—or at least parallels with—Goethe's *Faust*, to which both Byron and Kierkegaard are indebted. When Byron writes, "Society is now one polish'd horde," I am reminded of Mephistopheles' remarks in the "Witch's Kitchen" Scene in *Faust*: "Besides, civilisation, which now licks / Us all smooth, has taught even the Devil tricks."

The name Byron is mentioned only a handful of times in Kierkegaard's published works, and yet he made his mark as one of the "real poets" in the works of Kierkegaard, most notably in Byron's "demonic" works, *Cain* and *Manfred*, and in his story of a seducer, *Don Juan*. Though Byron never attained a place as substantial as Shakespeare in the works of Kierkegaard, it is nonetheless the despair of "real poets" such as Byron that Kierkegaard recognized as needing to be confronted in the journey toward the religious realm. It is not simply a cliché to place Byron in the role of the seducer that we think we understand; instead, one is tempted to be seduced by the troubled seducer whose power enters into the religious realm of Kierkegaard's probing thought. In the philosopher's own words: "He who *could* not seduce men *cannot* save them either. This is the qualification of reflection."

⁴³ Don Juan, Canto XIII, verse 95; quoted from Byron: Poetical Works, ed. by Frederick Page, p. 819.

Goethe, *Faust I* (1808), lines 2495–6; quoted from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Part One*, trans. by David Luke, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1987, p. 78.

⁴⁵ SKS 21, 148, NB8:8 / JP 3, 3706.