

## ‘In One We Shall Be Slower’: Byron, Retribution and Forgiveness

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Not in the air shall these my words disperse,  
Though I be ashes; a far hour shall wreak  
The deep prophetic fulness of this verse,  
And pile on human heads the mountain of my curse!

That curse shall be Forgiveness.—Have I not—  
Hear me, my mother Earth! behold it, Heaven!—  
Have I not had to wrestle with my lot?  
Have I not suffered things to be forgiven?

(*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV, 134-35)<sup>1</sup>

It feels somewhat counter-intuitive to attribute to Byron, a poet associated with more than usual expenditures of energy in anger, hatred and retribution, a sustained interest in forgiveness. Some of Byron's most famous characters carry a grudge—The Giaour, Conrad, Tasso, Manfred, Dante, Cain, Azo, Loredano—and if they don't—the Prisoner of Chillon, Beppo, Sardanapalus—Byron usually constructs scenarios in which we feel as though they should. Forgiveness is also an issue linked to sincerity, a subject which has frequently been treated with suspicion in Byron. In analysing Byron's famous curse of forgiveness in Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (a passage which has dominated the subject to a disproportionate and distorting extent, but to which I will need to return several times in this essay), for example, Peter Cochran notes an allusion to Coleridge's *Remorse* where the wicked brother Ordonio pleads with his wronged sibling 'Forgive me, Alvar!—Curse me with forgiveness!' (V, 1). Cochran is more readily able to accept the occasion of Ordonio's entreaty than that of Byron's who, 'reversing things in his usual way, gives it to the character whom

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay I quote Byron's works from Jerome McGann's edition of *The Complete Poetical Works*.

he would wish us to see as the injured party, the sinned against—namely, himself’. ‘For the sinner’, Cochran proceeds, ‘to ask to be cursed with forgiveness, is fair enough’ (presumably as it indicates a full acceptance of guilt and remorse), while ‘for the person who claims to be the victim of the sin to wish their forgiveness to operate as a curse [...] is surely a bit much’ (86-87). In other words Byron’s expression of forgiveness is compromised by his inability to prove he has relinquished hate.

When Andrew Stauffer analyses the same stanzas, he calls Byron out for momentarily lifting ‘the veil of conciliatory emotions’, concealing forgiveness’s ‘basis in hatred’ (144), which is further exposed through reference to the series of angry, vindictive letters that Byron wrote about the women who closed ranks around Annabella Milbanke during the separation crisis of 1816. Stauffer argues that anger characteristically alienates auditors, disrupting the typical intimacy of Romantic poet and reader where, according to Deborah Forbes, ‘sincerity is [...] determined by a poet’s relationship to his audience, rather than his relationship to himself’ (122). Here, truth content is said to be social rather than ontological. Sometimes this dynamic puts Byron’s readers in a position where they feel required to act as both ‘audience and judge’ on the question of the guilt that—as Jerome McGann has argued on many occasions—is the defining trait of his lyricism, wherein Byron courts readerly complicity by admitting ‘his weaknesses as a writer and his faults as a character’ (2002, 199).

To focus solely on these stanzas from *Childe Harold*, is, however, to misrepresent Byron’s attitudes to forgiveness and retribution and it is only by attending to other examples in his life and verse that a fuller picture emerges. It is also the case that nobody has yet measured Byron’s attitudes against a coherent model of forgiveness—whether that is religious or secular in nature—which is partly my

intention in this essay. One quirk, which explains why such work is necessary, can be found in the fact that, while the admission of faults is nearly always, in religious and secular contexts alike, considered as the first step towards forgiveness and reconciliation (and this is undeniably the moral basis for Cochran's endorsement of Ordonio's recognition and ownership of his guilt), critics have more easily explained Byron's negative moods and emotions than his consequent explorations of forgiveness, compassion and mercy which are particularly evident in the later manifestations of the Byronic hero. Proclamations and representations of forgiveness which, I argue here, constitutively involve the recognition of sin, guilt and fault—McGann's verities for reading Byron—are just as common in Byron's oeuvre as are the retributive emotions. These examples of forgiveness, whether in lyric or narrative, are, as I will argue, by no means inconsistent with those found in the Bible.

It is not that Stauffer or Cochran are necessarily inaccurate, but that if there *are* appropriate occasions for forgiveness, as there must be for anger, then of what do these consist and what role, if any, do readers play in their establishment? This is yet to be properly established in Byron's verse, where retribution and its limits can only be truly understood by a more extensive examination of its opposite, forgiveness.

Drawing in this essay on models of forgiveness deriving mainly from religious and ethical sources, I will propose that the aesthetics of forgiveness in Byron's poetry have a duration that exceeds, and so modifies, expressions of anger, and that they are usually more legitimate and biblically orthodox in nature than some of the examples we find in the work of more celebrated Romantic advocates of forgiveness such as William Blake and P. B. Shelley. Moreover, I believe the complexity of Byron's representations of forgiveness disclose more fully than do those of a poet such as

Blake the reasons why the drive to secure an objective judgement for wrongdoing can never be satisfied by the most successful act of retribution.

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Critical pronouncements on Shelley's advocacy of 'non-violent revolution through love, sexual equality, and forgiveness' in works such as *Laon and Cythna*, *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Mask of Anarchy* (where Hope triumphs bloodlessly by a sleight of hand) are commonplace (Bieri, 54), as is the argument, illustrated here by John Beer, that Blake's attraction to the gospels 'lies in their teaching of forgiveness through vision' (208). In contrast, critics receive even Byron's most quotidian expressions of forgiveness with some misgiving. James Soderholm's reading of Byron's tendency towards confessional self-display 'in which disguise and disclosure intermix and where the aim is not forgiveness or self-expiation, but rather rhetorically evoking various responses in one's audience to manipulate one's own image' is typical (cited in Wilson, 145). 'I speak not, I trace not, I breathe not thy name' is a poem that Byron sent privately to Thomas Moore, wherein the speaker proclaims: 'Oh! Thine be the gladness, and mine be the guilt! / Forgive me, adored one!—forsake, if thou wilt'. Despite its subject matter, it is chosen by McGann to illustrate Byronic irony, evasion, or his 'elaborate mechanism of concealments' (2002, 134; 65). (Sincerity only operates rhetorically, disclosing the missing substance of a genuine change of heart.)

The reasons for the lack of critical attention to forgiveness in Byron's work are straightforward. Firstly, he did not, unlike Blake and Shelley, personally propound a creed of forgiveness. Secondly, Byron manifestly found it hard to forgive in his personal life. Forgiveness is slow in coming to those who have wronged him, and to

himself for wrongs done to others, which led Stauffer to go as far as to argue that ‘Byron was incapable of attending to the common directives for palliating anger: “don’t take it personally” and “forgive and forget”’ (155).<sup>2</sup> As an example, the embarrassments he suffered due to his mother’s unpredictable temperament could be cited. On 30 November 1808, Byron wrote to Augusta that ‘Mrs. Byron I have shaken off for two years [...] I never can forgive that woman, or breathe in comfort under the same roof’ (*BLJ*, 1, 179-80).<sup>3</sup> Byron could also write, somewhat insouciantly, to the pious Annabella that ‘the *moral* of Christianity is perfectly beautiful—& the very sublime of Virtue—yet even there we find some of its finer precepts in earlier axioms of the Greeks.—particularly “do unto others as you would they should do unto you.”—the forgiveness of injuries—& more which I do not remember’ (*BLJ*, 3, 120). When Byron declares, in a letter to Augusta of 11 May 1817, in which he reflects on the separation crisis of the previous year, that ‘I forgive [Annabella] the injuries she has done me’ it comes with the qualification that ‘it is as well she should know that she has done me injury—because—apparently—she acts as if I sustained none—& could feel nothing’ (*BLJ*, 5, 225). If forgiving means absolving a wrongdoer of guilt, while not condoning their actions, as Jean Hampton has argued (40), then Byron’s sentiments here suggest the opposite; the need, before forgiveness can be entertained, to secure the recognition of his feeling of injury and a correspondent remorsefulness in Annabella.

Byron was not, however, incapable of admitting his own indiscretions and personally beseeching for forgiveness. In a letter to Coleridge of 31 March 1815, he

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<sup>2</sup> This popularly disseminated narrative fails to account for letters such as the one written to Annabella on 17 November 1821, discussed in note 7 below.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this essay I quote Byron’s correspondence from Leslie Marchand’s 13-volume edition of the letters and journals, cited in the text with the abbreviation *BLJ*, followed by volume and page numbers.

admits his culpability and shame for criticism of the elder poet in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*:

You mention my ‘Satire,’ lampoon, or whatever you or others please to call it, I can only say, that it was written when I was very young and very angry, and has been a thorn in my side ever since; more particularly as almost all the persons animadverted upon became subsequently my acquaintances, and some of them my friends, which is ‘heaping fire upon an enemy’s head,’ and forgiving me too readily to permit me to forgive myself. The part applied to you is pert, and petulant, and shallow enough; but, although I have long done every thing in my power to suppress the circulation of the whole thing, I shall always regret the wantonness or generality of many of its attempted attacks (*BLJ*, 4, 286).

Unable to forgive himself, Byron parallels the position of Coleridge’s Ordonio, where any forgiveness is conceived as a curse. His precise biblical reference—one of his favourites—is to Romans 12:20 and Proverbs 25:22: ‘For thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head, and the Lord shall reward thee’. The metaphor of ‘heaping fire’ is probably taken from the transformation and purification of metals in smelting, the implication being that both parties, but specifically the forgiver, are decontaminated of anger and resentment by the act of forgiveness.<sup>4</sup> But the implications need teasing out. Byron undergoes the heat of shame, but is embarrassed not at his past conduct—even though this is genuine and his crimes not excused—so much as Coleridge’s precipitate forgiveness: the inference is that Byron, like Annabella in the previous example, has not suffered extensively enough to merit it. His own admission of wrongdoing, which in McGann’s model would secure absolution from his correspondent by making demands upon Coleridge’s moral judgement, is belated and leaves Byron discomforted because Coleridge forgives without first securing the recognition that his feeling of injury finds a correspondent remorsefulness in Byron.

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer records that, while the meaning of the Old Testament phrase is obscure, ‘Origen, Augustine, Jerome and some modern commentators have thought that the “coals of fire” were symbolic of burning pangs of shame. The enemy would be moved by such kindness to shame and remorse; it would burn like coals of fire upon his head’ (193).

Curiously the occasion for forgiveness is doubly impermissible and acceptable: Byron's shame, exacerbated, as he claims, *by* the unmerited act of friendship on Coleridge's part, leaves regret but not resentment, which is often perceived to be an appropriate outcome in therapeutic models of forgiveness where the terminus is 'to restore and promote good relations' (Watts, 44).

Byron's use of the biblical image of coals of fire in the letter to Coleridge helps us to reconsider its valency in the more extensive, contested context of its inclusion in the famous stanzas from *Childe Harold IV*. Regina Reitsma offers a working definition of Christian forgiveness as 'a type of grace', accompanied by 'a willingness to set aside the demand that moral debts be (entirely) paid up' (93) and yet there seems to be precious little in Byron's forgiveness-curse that we can adequately square with this view.<sup>5</sup> Standing amidst the ruins of the Coliseum in Rome, Byron turns from an abstract discussion of Time to consider his own broken marriage and the accusations of cruelty, infidelity and mental illness that were levelled at him by Annabella, Lady Milbanke and others.

Prompted by his surroundings, he first invokes the Goddess Nemesis, the patroness of gladiators who was worshipped at Rome as the avenger of crime: 'And thou, who never yet of human wrong / Left'st the unbalanced scale, great Nemesis! / [...] I call thee from the dust!' (*CHP*, IV, 132). Byron imagines making a sacrifice to Nemesis—'But now my blood shall not sink in the ground; / To thee I do devote it'—who will act a part that he cannot for reasons left deliberately vague: 'The vengeance,

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<sup>5</sup> What Reitsma elides—central to my argument—is the distinction, as in the Catholic doctrine of indulgences, between forgiveness and punishment. Sins can be forgiven while a debt of punishment still to come (purgatory) remains, which can in turn be remitted by indulgence. Byron undoubtedly liked the idea of purgatory because it avoided the absolutes of heaven and hell. Teresa Guiccioli recorded Byron's view that 'Catholicism at least offers the consolation of Purgatory, of the Sacraments, of absolution and forgiveness; whereas Protestantism is barren of consolation for the soul'. She noted that Byron 'inclined towards the Catholic belief in Purgatory, which agreed better with his own appreciation of the goodness and mercy of God' (Guiccioli, 1, 92; 111). It also agreed with his views of forgiveness. Mercy and forgiveness overlap but, as I argue below, they are not the same.

which shall yet be sought and found, / Which if *I* have not taken for the sake—/ But let that pass—I sleep, but thou shalt yet awake’ (IV, 133) [original emphasis]. The theme is the Old Testament one of settling scores; the readjustment of an ‘unbalanced scale’ that is the key to reading Byron’s Ravenna tragedies where, for instance, Loredano in *The Two Foscari* pursues ‘hereditary hate too far’ (I, 1, 18) and Marino Faliero puzzles why ‘we must work by crime to punish crime’? (IV, 2, 168).

But at the height of his outburst Byron performs a *volte face*, of the type for which he was to become famous, which appears to entirely change the mood of these stanzas. Wishing to ‘pile on human heads the mountain of my curse’ (IV, 134), he continues, ‘That curse shall be Forgiveness’ (IV, 135), abruptly altering his context from classical to Christian. His wish is now to ‘move / In hearts all rocky [...] the late remorse of love’ (IV, 137). The scriptural authority for this can be found in Romans 12:21—‘Be not overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good’—where the act of forgiveness leads the resentful subject to reconsider their feelings and discover love and reconciliation through mutual remorse.

Despite that biblical precedent, Shelley was the first to be unconvinced by Byron’s abrupt change of tack. In a letter to Thomas Love Peacock he was prompted to give, as Cian Duffy has put it, a ‘diagnosis of Byronic disaffection’, criticising the ‘kind of obstinate & *self-willed* folly in which [Byron] hardens himself’ (159) [original emphasis]. This was confirmed for Peter Manning by the discovery of a deleted stanza, originally intended to follow 135, which revealed that ‘the vindictive impulses surviving beneath the proclamation of charity’ were specifically directed at Caroline Lamb and others (93).<sup>6</sup> Concluding on the subject of love and reconciliation

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<sup>6</sup> The deleted stanza reads as follows:

If to forgive be ‘heaping coals of fire’  
As God hath spoken—on the heads of foes



allows Byron to ‘assume the morally impeccable pose of having personally renounced vengeance’ (Manning, 93)—softening rather than hardening his position—although Stauffer finds vindictive emotions not merely surviving but ‘thriving’ beneath the surface (142).

Byron’s rendering of the act of forgiveness—despite affronting liberal sensibility—is, however, biblically orthodox. Jeffrie Murphy allows that forgiveness is the ‘overcoming of resentment’, where resentment is a defence of ‘certain values of the self’ (as I will shortly show in relation to *Marino Faliero*) (1988, 16).<sup>7</sup> Byron’s representation of injury is proportionate to the energy expended on forgiveness: ‘Have I not had my brain seared, my heart riven, / Hopes sapp’d, name blighted, Life’s life lied away?’ (*CHP*, IV, 135). Further clues can be found in Byron’s continued use of the modal verb shall—‘That curse *shall* be’—which is a promise whose effects are not immediately felt in stanza 135, but deferred to a future moment, as described in 137 (the stanza wherein I would argue the true emotional volta in this sequence occurs):

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 remembered tone of a mute lyre,  
Shall on their softened spirits sink, and move  
In hearts all rocky now the late remorse of love.

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Mine should be a Volcano—and rise higher  
Than o’er the Titans crushed, Olympus rose  
Than Athos soars, or blazing Aetna glows:  
True—they who stung were creeping things—but what  
Than serpent’s teeth, inflicts with deadlier throes.  
The Lion may be goaded by the gnat—  
Who sucks the slumberer’s blood?—the Eagle? no, the Bat.

Peter Cochran has pointed out that ‘the bat’ was one of Byron’s derogatory names for Caroline Lamb, indicating that this passage is really about personal grudges rather than abstract pronouncements. (‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage Canto IV’, 58 [n.161] <<http://petercochran.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/chp4.pdf>>).

<sup>7</sup> There again needs to be a distinction made between punishment and forgiveness, where forgiveness does not exclude punishment, as I argue at note 5 above.

There is nothing theologically inconsistent with Byron's turn to 'the *late* remorse of love', where forgiveness is precisely the relinquishment of personal resentment to future, or later, divine judgement, which neither removes nor affirms the possible curse of the 'fire and brimstone' of Psalms 140:10. The readings of the stanza by those critics who have aligned themselves with Shelley are, without accounting for this biblical context, incomplete.

As Joseph Fitzmyer argues of forgiveness, as represented by St Paul through the image of coals of fire, '[r]evenge', is incorporated by the act of forgiveness, which 'is not the mark of the Christian disciple, who should rather leave that to God himself' (193). The misreadings of the passage have perhaps arisen from a focus on the role attributed by Byron to the written word—the poem—in the dynamic of remorse, but there is a larger failure to account for the relationship between interpersonal forgiveness and the theological absolution of God, which in Byron, unlike many secular accounts of forgiveness, cannot be prised apart. According to Watts and Guilford, 'though God always forgives, God waives the retribution or retaliation *only* if the wrongdoer acknowledges—and repents of—wrongdoing. If a person is not reconciled to God, God's retributive justice will ultimately follow. If the Prodigal Son had not returned, he would have lived with the folly of his actions and remained at odds with his father'. Considering the role of forgiveness in therapeutic contexts such as counseling, they add a further permissible driver, wherein 'the belief that ultimately there will be retributive justice may well help a client to forgive unconditionally and not seek retribution or retaliation', which may also be applicable here (47).

Having established the legitimate occasion and terms of this act of forgiveness, we can make a first step towards providing a better definition of its function elsewhere in Byron's poetry. But it is first worth considering how this

apparent orthodoxy is distinct from the ‘teaching of forgiveness through vision’ that has been widely celebrated in the poet Blake. Blake’s representation of forgiveness, while more widespread, is, I would argue, much more idiosyncratic than that of Byron. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1789), for example, Blake includes several examples of what he would later call ‘false forgiveness’, notably the proverbs ‘The cut worm forgives the plow’ and ‘A dead body revenges not injuries’ (7). According to Jeanne Moskal, ‘in both cases the act of forgiveness is not, properly speaking, an act at all, but merely the passive complicity of victims in their own oppression’ (18). The occasion for forgiveness is impermissible as it is given too easily and so taints the wronged party. More spectacularly, one of the Romantic period’s most confident ethical statements on forgiveness, Blake’s *Everlasting Gospel* (c. 1818), also turns out on examination of its ethics to misattribute, by most standards of judgement (secular and sacred), the word forgiveness. The poem is prefaced by a remark written in pencil—‘the “seedbed” of the entire effort’ (Moskal, 38-39)—which invokes the example of Christ and the Lord’s Prayer, from which Blake highlights the instruction to forgive that you might be forgiven:

There is not one Moral Virtue that Jesus Inculcated but Plato & Cicero did Inculcate before him; what then did Christ Inculcate. Forgiveness of Sins. This alone is the Gospel & this is the Life & Immortality brought to light by Jesus, Even the Covenant of Jehovah, which is This: If you forgive one another your Trespasses so shall Jehovah forgive you, That he himself may dwell among you but if you Avenge you Murder the Divine Image & he cannot dwell among you (Bronowski, 73).

Despite Blake’s usual idiomatic quirks, the Preface establishes a biblically orthodox version of Christian forgiveness linked to the absolution of God. Jesus’s parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew, 18:21-35) carries the same message. Within the poem, however, the examples on which Blake bases his philosophy of forgiveness are not of

this sort. Take, for instance, Blake's representation of Christ as an apologist for adultery and the Virgin Mary as an adulteress for whom Blake acts as defendant:

Was Jesus Chaste? or did he  
Give any Lessons of Chastity?  
The morning blush'd fiery red:  
Mary was found in Adulterous bed;  
Earth groan'd beneath & Heaven above  
Trembled at discovery of Love.

[...]

Hide not from my Sight thy Sin,  
That forgiveness thou maist win. (Bronowski, 82-83)

What is the argument being advanced in favour of forgiveness? Blake's case is that Mary had an adulterous relationship with God, which was (something missed by Blake's fictional accusers) actually a demonstration of the sanctity of love. But here we have a problem. As Hampton puts it, '[f]orgiving someone presupposes that the action to be forgiven *was* wrong, and nothing in the act of forgiveness communicates to the wrongdoer that her action was permissible after all' (40).

In *The Everlasting Gospel*, what looks like forgiveness is actually a justification of Mary's crime—if we follow Blake's heresy and call it that—which is reconsidered as permissible after all. 'In the work as a whole', as Moskal remarks, 'Blake mixes his protest against obligation-excusing forgiveness with his search for a disposition to replace them' (39). According to Blake, Mary's crime was no crime as it was vindicated by his concept of love. Blake is interested not in forgiveness *per se*, but in how forgiveness might be recalibrated to accommodate sins such as adultery, something which becomes clear when he queries Christ's instruction 'Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you' by arguing 'He who loves his Enemies, hates his Friends' (Bronowski, 76).

Evidently forgiveness is more than just ‘waiving one’s right to revenge’, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu has argued (cited in Murphy, 2003, 15), and in overcoming wrongdoing and proffering the restoration of good interpersonal relations between wrongdoer and wronged it needs to be distinguished from other possible reactions to wrongdoing—which are indistinct in Blake—before Byron’s struggle to obtain an objective judgement can be properly expressed. Four other responses, which have been enumerated in the context of legal ethics by Hampton and Murphy, are relevant and worth pausing over. These are justification, excuse, mercy and pardon.

To regard a crime as ‘justified’ is to argue that it wasn’t actually a crime in the first place and so it is not proper to morally resent or forgive. This is the case in the example of Blake’s defence of the Virgin. It is dismissed in a letter of Byron’s to Annabella of 26 September 1813: ‘You say I never attempt to “justify” myself. you are right—at times I can’t & occasionally I wont defend by explanations—life is not worth having on such terms’ (*BLJ*, 3, 119). Shelley’s Prometheus, on the other hand, is an example from the period of the way in which a crime can be *excused*, rather than forgiven. Prometheus appears to repent his curse of Jupiter, but actually offers the excuse that he was not really responsible at the time: ‘words are quick and vain; / Grief for awhile is blind, and so was mine’ (I, 303-304). Prometheus was not, as it were, a fully responsible agent and it is only proper to resent *culpable* wrongdoing. Murphy argues that Christ’s words from the cross ‘Father forgive them for they know not what they do’ (Luke, 23:34), ‘would go better as “Father *excuse* them for they know not what they do”’ (1988, 20). The same sentiments are uttered by Byron’s Abel—‘Oh, God! receive thy servant, and / Forgive his slayer, for he knew not what / He did’ (III, 1, 318-20)—and Francis Foscari—‘I forgive this, for / You know not what you say’ (II, 1, 125-26). It is worth adding to these examples the response of

Angiolina, wife of Marino Faliero, who appears to forgive Michel Steno, responding to Marianna's indignant insistence on punishment—'Some sacrifice is due to slander'd virtue' (II, 1, 56)—with the pious, 'Why, what is virtue if it needs a victim?' (II, 1, 57). Angiolina seems to be an example of a figure whose self-worth is so secure she feels no sense of diminishment by Steno's insult and so has no resentment to overcome. When she advises Faliero 'Heaven bids us to forgive our enemies' (II, 1, 260), she lacks the proper standing to forgive. As Byron wrote to Annabella, 'to *forgive*—we must first be offended' (*BLJ*, 3, 179).

Mercy and pardon are more intimately linked to forgiveness, but it is possible to be merciful and not to undergo the experience of forgiveness at all. In literature's most famous example, Portia pleads for mercy from the law for Shylock, but she has never been wronged by him, and to argue that she forgives him doesn't stack up. Forgiveness involves a change of heart, but mercy is an action undertaken despite no such change. In Byron's *Cain*, Abel commends God's mercy, 'as to / Accord a pardon like a Paradise' (III, 1, 229-30), '*despite* our father's sin' (III, 1, 226) [emphasis added]. In *Marino Faliero*, Angiolina, a figure free of resentment but in a position to plead for mercy, disinterestedly remarks of Steno's punishment, 'He hath been guilty, but there may be / mercy' (V, 1, 360-61). It is possible to forgive, without being in a position to offer mercy: mercy and pardon usually have some public dimension.

Acts of mercy and pardon are often mistaken for forgiveness although they lack the interpersonal content—suffering things to be forgiven—that distinguishes the overcoming of resentment.<sup>8</sup> But at the heart of the aesthetics of forgiveness in

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<sup>8</sup> One further response that becomes blurred with forgiveness but with which it should not be confused is condonation. It is possible, as St Augustine famously remarks, to 'hate the sin but not the sinner'. For both Hampton and Murphy this distinction is absolutely central to forgiveness 'because forgiveness is precisely the decision that [the wrongdoer] isn't bad' (Hampton, 85). Byron's heroes tend to stand up to this kind of moral scrutiny, as in the case of the Giaour whose behaviour 'speak[s] a mind not all degraded / *Even* by the crimes through which it waded' (864-65) [emphasis added]. Recognising the

Byron's verse lies more frequently the threatened incursion of self-justification and excuse, which, in the series of revenge narratives that he composed during and following the period of his exile, such as *Manfred*, *Parisina* and the Ravenna tragedies, enable Byron to render the psychology of forgiveness with a perhaps surprisingly meticulous orthodoxy and, I would even go so far as to suggest, genuine, unperformed sincerity. These narratives will be the testing ground for my belief that Byron *does* widely represent, and even advocate, forgiveness as a way of overcoming resentment.

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In his confession to the Witch of the Alps in Act II, scene 2 Manfred reveals, or more accurately half-reveals, his incestuous crimes with Astarte, concluding with self-recrimination: 'Her faults were mine—her virtues were her own—/ I loved her, and destroy'd her!' (116-17). It is commonly accepted that Manfred's primary desire throughout the play is to forget and it is for this reason that he engages with the supernatural agents. In his encounter with the Seven Spirits in Act I, scene 1 he requests 'Oblivion, self-oblivion!' (144) and this appears to be re-emphasised when he recalls to the Witch of the Alps that, following the death of Astarte, 'I plunged amidst mankind—Forgetfulness / I sought in all' (II, 2, 145-46). That modification to the past tense—'I sought'—is an indication, I would argue, of a subtle but significant change in Manfred's desires, which is more spectacularly articulated when he encounters the phantom of Astarte in Act II, scene 4, of whom he begs not forgetfulness but forgiveness. 'Forgive me or condemn me' (105), he first addresses the phantom, and then 'Say that thou loath'st me not—that I do bear / This

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decency of an individual despite his crime and not, as in the case of Blake, because of it is the implication.

punishment for both' (125-26). Finally, 'Yet one word more—am I forgiven?' (153). Manfred's punishment then appears to be sanctioned by the spirit's refusal, or inability, to offer forgiveness.

What, if anything, has led Manfred to alter his entreaty for forgetfulness to one for forgiveness? We might decide that the yearning for forgetfulness already contains within it the wish to be forgiven, that forgiveness is elided and leave it at that. But Byron's compulsive exploration of the psychology of crime and punishment suggests that this is unlikely. It is rendered even less likely when we remember that whilst apparently seeking to forget her, it is Manfred himself who commands Nemesis to 'call up / Astarte' (II, 4, 82-83).

What occurs between the two Faustian encounters is the scene on the Jungfrau. Here Manfred reveals that his suffering has led to a profound personal change: 'for I have ceased' he claims 'To justify my deeds unto myself' (I, 2, 27-28). In moral terms, the relinquishment of self-justification, as I have argued, entails the acknowledgement of responsibility for wrongdoing and an acceptance of guilt, which is preparatory to repentance. For some commentators (though not all) this is a prerequisite of the ability to ask for, and receive, forgiveness. '[S]incere (uncoerced) repentance might reasonably be made a condition of forgiveness' (2003, 39) writes Murphy in an echo of Cochran's appraisal of Coleridge's *Ordonio*. Although none is forthcoming here, it becomes apparent that Byron is, as in the Coliseum stanzas of *Childe Harold*, going through the motions of forgiveness. By this I do not mean that we should accuse Byron of being false or of performing a role, but rather that his characters inhabit a world in which the channels of forgiveness are open. Manfred's relinquishment of justification is, I believe, what enables the drama to first enter the territory of forgiveness.



In *Parisina*, the last of the Oriental tales, the permissibility of forgiveness is once again consequent on the rejection of self-justification and an inability to excuse a crime (which subsequently demonstrates the impotence of resentment). The drama of the trial of Hugo, the bastard son of Azo, hinges on the father's opportunity to forgive and the son's correspondent openness to confession and absolution. Hugo has committed adultery with Azo's new bride, Parisina, which is revealed when Parisina calls out her lover's name in a dream. An interview with his servants confirms Azo's suspicion that his son has cuckolded him. Hugo is placed on public trial and sentenced to be beheaded. At his execution a ghastly scream rings out revealing Parisina to have been watching from the tower where she was confined. The narrator leaves it unclear whether she dies of grief or is sent to a nunnery. Azo takes another wife and has more children, but lives out his days haunted by his actions.

That the lovers' relationship is acknowledged as an act of transgression is evident from their reactions when they part: 'With many a lingering look they leave / The spot of guilty gladness past / [...] While gleams on Parisina's face / The Heaven she fears will not forgive her' (49-52). The face caught in guilt reveals the primary Christian context, but attention to the body helps to intensify the reader's experience of Azo's combined feelings of injury, resentment and the desire for revenge. As he stands over his dreaming wife, the shock at the discovery of her betrayal is embodied in the moment when Azo goes first to draw and then to sheathe his sword:

He plucked his poignard in its sheath,  
But sheath'd it ere the point was bare—  
Howe'er unworthy now to breathe,  
He could not slay a thing so fair—  
At least, not smiling—sleeping—there—  
Nay more:—he did not wake her then,  
But gaz'd upon her with a glance  
Which, had she roused her from her trance,

Had frozen her sense to sleep again—  
And o'er his brow the burning lamp  
Gleamed on the dew-drops big and damp,  
She spake no more—but she still slumbered—  
While, in his thought, her days are numbered (107-19).

Bulwer Lytton was wrong when he claimed that '[w]hen Byron's heroes commit a crime, they march at once to it: we see not the pause—the self-counsel—the agony of settling into resolve' (291). Psychological depth is captured through action, or a description of the body poised in action (not unlike Manfred described 'in act to spring' from the Jungfrau). The sweat on Azo's forehead is, indicated by the word 'damp', a cold one. As with Parisina's guilt, it is picked out on his face by a light source, the burning lamp rather than the moon in this case. But why does Azo not kill Parisina on the spot? One answer is the one we can infer from the narrator: his conscience intervenes. In other words, even in the white heat of anger, he undergoes the 'motions' of forgiveness. As Hampton observes, there is a huge difference between desiring revenge and acting upon those desires; Azo entertains his own revenge—'in his *thought*, her days are numbered'—but instead chooses to order Hugo and Parisina to stand trial as criminals rather than to compromise himself—surely in the eyes of God—through direct action.

But Azo too is a guilty man and in the courtroom scene we would do well to ask who stands trial? Azo's crime was to father Hugo—'the offspring of his wayward youth'—before betraying Hugo's mother, Bianca. At no point does Byron indicate that Hugo's love for Parisina is borne out of a desire to gain revenge upon Azo, but Hugo ruefully notes the fittingness of the crime: 'See what thy guilty love hath done! / Repaid thee with too like a son!' (294-95). This is purely dramatic, rather than moral, satisfaction, however. Justice ought to condemn both men: 'As erred the sire, so erred

the son, / And thou must punish both in one' (314-15). Hugo's admission of his crime has the effect of momentarily reversing the roles of victim and accused:

'Tis true that I have done thee wrong—  
But wrong for wrong:—this,—deemed thy bride,  
The other victim of thy pride,  
Thou know'st for me was destined long. (252-55)

To coin a phrase, the two wrongs—'wrong for wrong'—do not make a right. And in a direct reversal of the logic of Blake's *Everlasting Gospel*—which also happened to be an echo of Manfred's change of heart—Hugo haughtily declares, 'I will not plead the cause of crime' (276). In other words he won't seek to justify or excuse actions which he admits to be wrong.

The subsequent suffering of Azo indicates the inefficacy of self-justification and excuse as a response to wrongdoing in a moral—rather than Blakean, visionary—world. The excuse—that 'he / Had only passed a just decree' (575-76)—provides no comfort. 'Dark the crime, and just the law' (428) is the narrator's comment on Hugo's death, but the justness is what opens up the channels of forgiveness. It is only possible to forgive an action which is wrong, or for that matter to repent of an action which is wrong. The drama of forgiveness lies right at the core of the tale, captured when Hugo refuses to look at Parisina during his trial, 'Else had his rising heart betrayed / Remorse for all the wreck it made' (196-97). He stands on the cusp of, without admitting to, remorse, but that opportunity is wholly given, and taken, in his subsequent scene of confession.

As Mary Hurst has argued, a 'language of atonement' surrounds Hugo and she suggests that Byron's inclusion of the sacrament bears witness to his understanding of its place in 'the assuredness of salvation' (99). So when Hugo declares 'My crime

seems worst to human view, / But God must judge between us two!' (316-17), he vocalises exactly the same interpenetration of revenge and forgiveness—the other of the ‘two’ to be weighed in this scale must be Azo—we find in *Childe Harold IV*. While, for Hurst, some earlier Byronic heroes, such as The Giaour, ‘contain their guilt, as does Azo’ (100), Hugo asks instead for absolution. The scene is delivered without cynicism.

For Azo, the drama is a dark reprise of the scene of Hugo’s courtroom pride, where the possibility to forgive (and offer mercy in his public role as judge) physically contorts him as he passes sentence: ‘And here stern Azo hid his face—/ For on his brow the swelling vein / Throbbled as if back upon his brain’ (223-25). Even when the channels of forgiveness appear frozen in Azo’s old age, it is possible for them to thaw and move again, which is, I think, what Byron means in his final reflection on Azo’s suffering:

The deepest ice which ever froze  
Can only o’er the surface close—  
The living stream lies quick below,  
And flows—and cannot cease to flow.  
Still was his sealed-up bosom haunted  
By thoughts which Nature hath implanted;  
Too deeply rooted thence to vanish,  
Howe’er our stifled tears we banish;  
When, struggling as they rise to start,  
We check those waters of the heart,  
They are not dried—those tears unshed  
But flow back to the fountain head,  
And resting in their spring more pure,  
For ever in its depth endure,  
Unseen, unwept, but uncongealed,  
And cherished most where least revealed (553-68).

Azo ‘contains’ his guilt—by refusing to repent—but equally guilt’s capacity to produce the desire for atonement. Azo’s dramatic choice is to forgive or to condemn

Hugo, just as we have seen Manfred beg Astarte, ‘forgive me *or* condemn me’. The characteristic Byronic drama from the period of the separation crisis onward would not function unless this was a genuine choice. Similar formulations in which the word ‘or’ is essential are used many times by Byron, as in the stanzas on Voltaire and Gibbon in Canto III of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* where their fate ‘’Twill be to be forgiven, *or* suffer what is just’ (108) [emphasis added]. Several stanzas earlier, Byron writes about the fate of the persecutors of the French revolutionaries lines that recall something of Azo’s grief: ‘It came, it cometh, and will come,—the power / To punish *or* forgive’ [emphasis added]. Tellingly, Byron continues ‘in *one* we shall be slower’ (84) [original emphasis]; that one is, of course, forgiveness.

By the time of the Ravenna tragedies, composed between 1820 and 1821, it becomes apparent that rather than advocate or adhere to retribution, which is a model for reading Byron that seems to have persisted through a desire to find echoes of his early heroes in his later ones, Byron’s explorations are of its potential to diminish and harden into suffering the subject who is unable to forgive. A clearer formulation of the reasons for the futility of retribution can also be discerned. In a sense any grounds for revenge demand an objective scale of measurement—in Azo’s case another reason for his public trial of Hugo and Parisina, rather than a personal act of vengeance—which is ironically inaccessible due to the fact that injury is proportionate only to the extent of its subjective apperception (low to non-existent, as I have argued, in a character like Angiolina). The feeling of resentment at being wronged usually arises from damage to self-worth or self-respect, which nearly always has some personal content, as in the experience of betrayal. We find an example of this in *Marino Faliero*, where Faliero is wounded by Steno’s insulting graffiti about his wife, but he *resents* the leniency of the punishment passed by his friends in the Forty. This is why

Faliero sees the legal system of Venice in personal terms: ‘In my life I have achieved / Tasks not less difficult—achieved for them, / Who thus repay me’ (I, 2, 271-73). The weight of insult is verbally signaled by the way the pronouns, ‘them’ and ‘me’, buffer and threaten to angrily compress ‘repay’. As Hampton argues, such resentment can easily turn into hatred and vindictive feelings against the wrongdoer (70). The feeling of resentment ordinarily has some competitive content too: such feelings often arise in Byron’s verse where the victim of crime feels personally diminished in his own eyes relative to an aggressor, not resenting the criminal so much as fearing that they may have been right and acted permissibly. The psychology of personal diminishment that underlies malicious hatred can be found in the character of Faliero who projects his fears onto the lower classes:

Ay, doubtless they have echo’d o’er the arsenal,  
 Keeping due time with every hammer’s clink  
 As a good jest to jolly artisans;  
 Or making chorus to the creaking oar,  
 In the vile tune of every galley slave,  
 Who, as he sung the merry stave, exulted  
 He was not a shamed dotard like the Doge. (I, 2, 391-97)

Reading the lines via Hampton, it becomes apparent that ‘the resentful victim [...] struggl[es] to have full confidence in [the belief] that the wrongdoer’s action has failed to respect their true value’ (59). Faliero suspects, against his professed opinion, that Steno may be right all along.

Resentment pursued to a pathological extent is the accusation usually leveled at Byron following the separation from Annabella—which colours readings of the Coliseum stanzas of *Childe Harold IV*—but in the Ravenna tragedies the exploration of the psychology of diminution develops out of its earlier manifestations in the middle period works on forgiveness such as *Parisina*. Consequently, in *The Two*

*Foscari* Marina affirms that Loredano's anxiety is about status: 'Oh! / It galls you:— well, you are his equal, as / You think; but that you are not, nor would be, / Were he a peasant' (II, 1, 289-92). As Stauffer observes, Byron's feelings are often 'sharpened by an aristocrat's hauteur' (134), but, as Hampton argues, such malicious hatred is self-defeating because '[t]he more exalted you feel by any victories over him, the higher the rank you are in fact according him, and the more you have failed either to effect his diminishment or to reveal him as low in rank' (75). Byron clearly knows this, and he articulates it much more clearly than has ever been noticed. The absence of an objective secular scale for righting wrongs is precisely the reason that Loredano seeks a confession of Foscari's assumed crimes. He experiences a need to crush not only the Doge's person but also the status he symbolically and psychologically represents: 'If he dies innocent, that is to say, / With his guilt unavow'd, he'll be lamented' (I, 1, 349-50). Barbarigo's reaction exposes Loredano's fear that even his personal victory and successful revenge will depend on confirmation of Foscari's superiority: 'What, wouldst thou slay his memory?' (I, 1, 351). It is Byron's most pithy and telling commentary on the futility of retribution.

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No doubt forgiveness is slow in coming for Byron: the Byronic hero, like Byron himself, usually finds it hard to forgive. Because of this he is often overlooked in discussions of forgiveness in the Romantic period for the examples of Blake and Shelley, whose advocacy of forgiveness is more widespread but, as we have seen, less securely representative of either Christian or secular requirements for forgiveness. If resentment plays out on the surface of Byron's early heroes, it is evidently not the sole province of the poetry and drama by the time we reach his middle period and later

works. Stauffer writes of the long-suffering posture of the Byronic narrator, which is exposed by the power of underlying anger and resentment. But that doesn't quite accommodate the *range* of responses to wrongdoing we discover in Byron's verse, nor in fact the possibility for 'late' remorse in Byron's correspondence.<sup>9</sup> Indeed forgiveness often appears to be embedded in the language that Byron uses: there are three Hebrew words in the Bible that translate into English as forgiveness. *Kipper* means 'to cover'; *nasa* means 'to lift up'; while the most common of these words is *salach*, which means 'letting go'. For the writers of *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*, *salach* means 'letting go of the weight of resentment against the person who harmed you, and also of the dubious pleasures of revenge and retribution' (Armentrout, 105). Significantly, 'letting go', or associated formulations, is nearly always part of Byron's presentation of long-sufferance in his narrators and characters post-1815 (whether we believe it to be genuine or not). A quick catalogue will prove this: in *Childe Harold* Canto IV, Byron imagines Europe suing for Italy's forgiveness, concluding 'let it go!' (52); at the end of Donna Julia's letter to Juan she writes 'And so farewell—forgive me, love me—No / That word is idle now—but let it go' (I, 196); in *The Prophecy of Dante*, Byron's Dante tortures himself with fantasies of tyranny and retribution—'sometimes the last pangs of a vile foe / Writhe in a dream before me'— before turning, like Hugo, to the agency of God, absolution and

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<sup>9</sup> Byron's attitude to Annabella, for example, undoubtedly softened over time. A letter of 17 November 1821, following the receipt from Annabella of a lock of their daughter Ada's hair, is written in a conciliatory tone: 'I assure you that I bear you *now* (whatever I may have done) no resentment whatever. Remember, that if *you have injured me* in aught—this forgiveness is something—and that if *I have injured you*—it is something more still—if it be true as the Moralists say—that the most offending are the least forgiving' (*BLJ*, 9, 65). These are undoubtedly guarded sentiments, but I don't think that there is any more reason to doubt Byron's sincerity at a distance of five years from the separation than to dispute his anger on the same subject in his correspondence of 1816-17. Byron gives, however, a more wry summary of Christian forgiveness in his letter to Hobhouse of 16 December 1821: 'I forgive you as a Christian should do—that is I never will forgive you as long as I live—and shall certainly pay you in kind with interest the very first opportunity' (*BLJ*, 9, 82).



reflecting ‘let them go!’ (I, 107-109);<sup>10</sup> Byron’s Tasso first laments his affair with Leonora—‘the sin which shuts me from mankind’—before deciding to ‘let them go’ (56-57); and Don Juan has no choice but to let go his resentment, as his opportunity to seek vengeance on Lambro is taken away. All, in their way, seem to counter the position that Byron takes on in *Childe Harold IV*, and yet their incompatibility with the resentful readings of those Coliseum stanzas, which I have demonstrated are a quite legitimate expression of forgiveness, means that they have been marginalised, and seen Byron himself marginalised, in discussions of forgiveness.

To conclude we might take the contrasting example of the last Byronic hero, Fletcher Christian in *The Island*, who dies in battle holding tight to his weapons and symbolically to his anger: ‘to the last, / As long as hand could hold, he held them fast’ (348), Byron tells us. Christian is a character, like Azo, who refuses to let go of his resentment. Or we might even find, if we look carefully at that comprehensively dismissed example from *Childe Harold IV*, a further occasion in which Byron contemplates revenge before, significantly, declaring ‘let that pass’ (133).<sup>11</sup> Is this the language of forgiveness? If the answer is yes, then it suggests that Byron’s ability to feel—and certainly to capture in verse—forgiveness has been too precipitately dismissed. Byron’s outbursts of anger were legendary and his reputation for resentment and retribution has been well documented but, as I have argued here, the veracity and the legitimacy of its occasioning needs to be argued for rather than just

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<sup>10</sup> The case of Byron’s Dante is an interesting one as, in 1315, Florence granted an amnesty to those in exile, including Dante, but on the condition he submitted to a public penance. Dante preferred to remain in exile and continued to justify his actions. This is captured in the line ‘Man wrongs, and Time avenges’ (50), something akin to the invocation of Nemesis in *Childe Harold IV*, but just as in the latter example, the appetite for vengeance ebbs as well as flows and anger modulates into the quotation cited in the main text here which is an expression of forgiveness in all but name.

<sup>11</sup> I could also add here the example of *The Vision of Judgment* in which George III is admitted to heaven. Wilkes appeals for his forgiveness—‘for me, I have forgiven / And vote his *habeas corpus* into heaven’ (71)—in exactly the terms I have argued Byron uses to bring together forgiveness and judgement in a Christian context. Ultimately it is the certainty—as against Christian uncertainty—as to God’s judgement which appalls Byron in Southey’s poem and against which his own poem is directed.

asserted. And the true lineaments of retribution cannot be analysed and understood independently of Byron's oft-disputed, though oft-displayed, renderings of forgiveness. Neither can they be understood without articulating the biblical and ethical context for that forgiveness. Rather surprisingly, it is in Byron's verse, rather than in Blake's, that we find the most extensive, psychologically insightful, probings of forgiveness, as well as retribution, in the Romantic period.

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