

# Inhabiting a Place beyond ‘To be or not to be’: The Playful Devotions of Byron and Coleridge

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‘The valleys of foolishness have more grass growing in them for the philosopher than do the barren heights of cleverness.’<sup>1</sup>

However it is defined, and however ‘incorrigibly plural’ it is thought to be, Romanticism is customarily seen as having to do with seriousness. Whether we are thinking about the Natural Supernaturalism of M.H. Abrams; the Romantic Agony of Mario Praz; the Ecopoetics of Jonathan Bate; or any of the various accounts of Romantic Irony, Ideology or their radicalised poststructuralist counterparts—which somewhat paradoxically deem the saving grace of the movement to be those moments where Romantic writing double-crosses itself in allegorising its own deconstruction—the story in this respect tends to remain largely the same. Even when it comes to a poem such as *Don Juan*, which, as we know, Byron wrote ‘to giggle and make giggle,’<sup>2</sup> its laughter is seen as a self-consciously counter voice, and thus as bound up with, because parasitically dependent upon, even as it seeks to furnish a critique of, seriousness. It’s probably apparent without saying so explicitly that I’ve got a bone to pick with this consensus.

I wish to suggest—rather synecdochically here, with reference to the cases of Byron and Coleridge<sup>3</sup>—that what it leaves out of account is another voice or way of thinking of importance to Romantic writing, which could not be characterised as ‘serious’ in a customary sense, but which does not have seriousness as its opposite either; a voice which is, to invoke Hölderlin’s felicitous phrase, ‘Weder im Scherze noch im Ernste’ [‘neither in jest nor in earnest’].<sup>4</sup> This ‘third voice’ is often marked by what I shall refer to as the language of seeming—by which I mean phrases such as ‘to seem,’ ‘to appear,’ ‘as if’ and the like—and points towards or opens up a space beyond those apparently all-exhausting options of ‘To be or not to be.’ What makes this realm beyond ‘To be or not to be’ and this voice which is ‘neither in jest nor in earnest’ of relevance to the present volume is the fact that we can see this sort of realm and this sort of voice emerging in the lines that echo *Christabel* in *The Siege of Corinth*—and indeed throughout Byron’s poem, which is inscribed to John Hobhouse, January 22nd 1816, and written nearly twenty years after the first part of *Christabel*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 92e.

<sup>2</sup> To John Murray, 12 August 1819 (*Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols. (London: John Murray, 1973-94), vol. 6, p. 208).

<sup>3</sup> This paper draws upon some of the arguments set forth in a larger work in progress entitled *Signifying Imperfectly: Romantic Poetry and the Language of Seeming*.

<sup>4</sup> *Hyperion*, in: *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, ed. Eric L. Santner (New York: Continuum, 1990), p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> There is a useful hypertext history of the transmission of *Christabel*, by Chris Koenig-Woodyard, published by *Romanticism on the Net*, available at: <<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scat0385/xtabel.html>>

## I.

It may at first seem somewhat eccentric to see *The Siege of Corinth* as concerned with the supernatural or enchanted realms and employing a voice which is anything other than serious, since it is founded on and flaunts its attachment to this-worldly circumstance<sup>6</sup> and, since even by the standards of Byron's tales, it is an especially dark and violent poem (written, we might note, during the year of his marriage).<sup>7</sup>

The poem's darkness is partly a matter of sheer proportion. Even though the poem focuses on a single event and is the shortest of Byron's Eastern tales, it contains several separate descriptions of extreme violence and two Byronic heroes—Alp and Minotti—pitched against each other. Perhaps the most disturbing violence, however, takes place in the wake of the assault. After a day's fighting and unable to sleep, Alp goes for a walk in what is to begin with a familiar Romantic setting:

'Tis midnight: on the mountains brown  
 The cold, round moon shines deeply down:  
 Blue roll the waters, blue the sky  
 Spreads like an ocean hung on high,  
 Bespangled with those isles of light,  
 So wildly, spiritually bright;  
 Who ever gazed upon them shining,  
 And turned to earth without repining,  
 Nor wished for wings to flee away,  
 And mix with their eternal ray? (9, 242–52)<sup>8</sup>

After a while, though, as if he has unwittingly crossed over into another realm, Alp's Romantic walk along the beach brings him, strangely unnoticed, to the Corinth garrison and the corpse-strewn battlefield that lies before it. Here he sees dogs 'beneath the wall/ Hold o'er the dead their carnival,' which 'From a Tartar's skull [...] had stripp'd the flesh,/ As ye peel the fig when its fruit is fresh,' and whose 'white tusks crunch'd o'er the whiter skull' (16, 454–5; 458–60). '[D]espicable stuff,' according to Gifford, who wanted Byron to omit the whole of this passage.<sup>9</sup> As if this wasn't horrific enough, Byron widens the focus to show the rest of nature predatorily gathering and a nightmarish inversion of man's wonted dominion:

<sup>6</sup> By way of advertisement, the poem is prefaced by a quotation describing the siege from the anonymous *Complete History of the Turks*, which the poet interrupts with a slightly pedantic footnote of his own, correcting its outdated information and detailing his first-hand experience of the area.

<sup>7</sup> According to Robert Gleckner, there is in the poem 'almost a total absence of theme aside from Alp's incredible revenge' (*Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 168).

<sup>8</sup> All quotations from Byron's works are taken from: *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-93). Hereafter cited as *BCPW*.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in: *BCPW*, vol. 3, p. 487.

But when all is past, it is humbling to tread  
 O'er the weltering field of the tombless dead,  
 And see worms of the earth, and fowls of the air,  
 Beasts of the forest, all gathering there;  
 All regarding man as their prey,  
 All rejoicing in his decay. (17, 489–94)

For most critics, the poem is little more than this—a violent tale of apostasy and revenge, which pits the Crescent against the Cross, and revels in its own nihilism.<sup>10</sup> And yet, in spite of all its darkness and horror, there is something else running through and framing the poem which has been all but overlooked; something to which the poem tentatively but continually points. This 'something' is quite difficult to articulate; partly because it is so tentatively suggested, and partly because it is of its nature neither this nor that. Nevertheless, we might for the moment hazard that this 'something else' with which the poem is concerned pertains to the obscure sense of a connection between the human, natural and divine orders—the sceptic's name for which is superstition. Though, importantly, the teller of this tale is a believer.

In order to help clarify this 'something else,' I want to have a look at a short extract from the beginning of *Christabel* and the lines from *The Siege of Corinth* which echo it. Here are the relevant lines from Coleridge's poem:

She kneels beneath the huge Oak Tree,                    35  
 And in Silence prayeth She.

The Lady sprang up suddenly,  
 The lovely Lady, Christabel!  
 It moan'd as near, as near can be,  
 But what it is, she cannot tell—                    40  
 On the other Side it seems to be  
 Of the huge broad-breasted, old Oak Tree.

The Night is chill; the Forest bare;  
 Is it the Wind that moaneth bleak?  
 There is not Wind enough in the Air                    45  
 To move away the ringlet Curl  
 From the lovely Lady's Cheek—  
 There is not Wind enough to twirl  
 The One red Leaf, the last of its Clan,  
 That dances as often as dance it can [...]                    50

Hush, beating Heart of Christabel!  
 Jesu Maria, shield her well!

<sup>10</sup> There are of course exceptions. Most notably, M.K. Joseph, who describes *The Siege of Corinth* as 'less serious' than its predecessors, though unfortunately doesn't really elaborate on this insight (*Byron the Poet* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964), p. 47).

She folded her Arms beneath her Cloak,  
And stole to the other side of the Oak. 55  
    What sees she there?

There She sees a Damsel bright,  
Dressed in a silken Robe of White,  
That shadowy in the moonlight shone:  
The Neck, that made that white Robe wan, 60  
Her stately Neck and Arms were bare;  
Her blue-vein'd Feet unsandal'd were;  
And wildly glitter'd here and there  
The Gems entangled in her Hair.  
I guess, 'twas frightful there to see 65  
A Lady so richly clad, as she,  
    Beautiful exceedingly!

‘Mary mother, save me now!’  
Said Christabel ‘And who art thou?’<sup>11</sup>

And here are the lines from *The Siege of Corinth*, whose ‘close, though unintentional resemblance’ to Coleridge’s lines was nervously acknowledged by Byron in a note to his poem,<sup>12</sup> and coyly milked by Coleridge in an advert for his:<sup>13</sup>

There he [Alp] sate all heavily,  
As he heard the night-wind sigh.  
Was it the wind, through some hollow stone,  
Sent that soft and tender moan?  
He lifted his head, and he looked on the sea,  
But it was unrippled as glass may be;  
He looked on the long grass—it waved not a blade;  
How was that gentle sound conveyed?  
He looked to the banners—each flag lay still,  
So did the leaves on Cithaeron’s hill,  
And he felt not a breath come over his cheek;  
What did that sudden sound bespeak?  
He turned to the left—is he sure of sight?  
There sate a lady, youthful and bright!  
He started up with more of fear  
Than if an armed foe were near.  
‘God of my fathers! what is here?  
Who art thou? [...]’ (19, 519–20, 536)

<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Coleridge’s poetry are taken from: *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poetical Works*, ed. J.C.C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Hereafter referred to as *CCPW*.

<sup>12</sup> *BCPW*, vol. 3, p. 486.

<sup>13</sup> *CCPW*, I, pp. 481–2.

The contexts from which these two extracts are taken are, to be sure, completely different: the one is a medieval romance—or fairytale, as Coleridge described it—in which the heroine meets a female stranger; the other is an historical narrative in which a Byronic hero encounters the woman he loves, from whom he has been forcibly kept apart. Nonetheless, the parallels turn out to be surprisingly revealing. In both cases, there is something uncanny about the appearance (in both senses) of the unexpected female. There seems to be a brightness about her which the darkness does not as it were comprehend, and she seems to appear as if from nowhere. Of course, in both poems she turns out to be a supernatural visitant, which obviously complicates even as it explains matters; but in both cases this is for a while left teasingly unclear. Additionally, in the two poems, her arrival is confused with the operations of nature, as the perceiver's senses both suggest and reject a quotidian explanation of the events that announce her advent. This confusion is especially powerful in Coleridge's poem, with its terrifying 'It' in line 39—'It moan'd as near, as near can be'—which may be read both as a 'prop' subject without semantic content, innocently used in climatic descriptions, and as a pronoun that points towards some frighteningly unspecified 'thing.' Lastly, in both poems, our sense that something supernatural is afoot is to a large degree elicited by the use of questions, which suggest the existence of other—disconcertingly unnamed—possibilities.<sup>14</sup> What we have, then, in both extracts is a sense of things illicitly crossing over between the human, natural and supernatural realms, the presentation of which is in both cases a matter of tentative suggestion or 'seeming.' That such seeming and 'trespassing' between realms is an important feature of *Christabel* hardly needs emphasising. My contention that this is an underlying and unifying feature of *The Siege of Corinth* will, however, require a little substantiation.

The first thing we should notice about Byron's poem is that the tale is told by a first-person dissonant narrator; that is to say, someone who is involved in but looking back upon the story he is telling. The second thing we should notice is that he is a Christian. This is how the poem begins:

In the year since Jesus died for men,  
Eighteen hundred years and ten,  
We were a gallant company,

<sup>14</sup> We might note that Scott, too, took a liking to Coleridge's suggestive use of questions (see *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, I, 132–5). Jeanie Watson notes that Coleridge's questions involve a 'refusal to put even the natural details into neat categories' and comments helpfully on the effect of such refusals: 'The expected answer [to the question 'Is the night chilly and dark?'] is yes or no, but the actual answer is "The night is chilly, but not dark": that is, yes and no, a yes and no that in both cases affirms an in-between state' (*Risking Enchantment: Coleridge's Symbolic World of Faery* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p. 169).

Riding o'er land, and sailing o'er sea.<sup>15</sup>

These two facts have important consequences. The narrator is not Byron—or 'Byron'—and he is not omniscient. He is a character who has limited knowledge, even about his own story. Furthermore, as a Christian describing a battle between the Crescent and the Cross, he has a vested interest in the story he is telling. Byron is therefore telling us a story about someone who is telling us a story, whose telling is simultaneously a reading of the story. Byron's poem thus turns out to be something like a dramatic monologue. What does this matter?

Most obviously, it affects the status of that which is said, as the form offers the poet a way of asserting something whilst simultaneously dissociating himself from that which is asserted. It is, if you like, a mode of assertion with a get-out clause or a sort of poetic equivalent of a reverse charge call, in that the views the poem puts forward are ascribed not to the poet but to a speaker the poet has brought into being. The poet may in this way entertain a point of view he does not or does not wholly endorse. Or perhaps better, the form offers a way of holding up for questioning the point of view one is simultaneously putting forward. This is not to say that what the story-teller tells us cannot be true. Though it does mean that it is part of the story (as it is in *Wuthering Heights*, for example) that the narrator may be twisting the story—or maybe not. What, then, is ventured in *The Siege of Corinth* that might warrant such caution or dissociation? I wish to argue that Byron's adoption of the dramatic monologue form *avant la lettre* allows him to suggest and at the same time to question the suggestion that there may be some sort of obscure continuity between the natural, human and supernatural orders. The moments in the poem where such suggestions are ventured would seem to be conspicuous enough, but as they have gone largely unexamined, it may be worth briefly identifying them here. Appropriately, the first example concerns an act of prayer:

As rose the Muezzin's voice in air  
 In midnight call to wonted prayer;  
 It rose, that chaunted mournful strain,  
 Like some lone spirit's o'er the plain:  
 'Twas musical, but sadly sweet,  
 Such as when winds and harp-strings meet,  
 And take a long-unmeasured tone,  
 To mortal minstrelsy unknown.  
 It seemed to those within the wall  
 A cry prophetic of their fall;

<sup>15</sup> These lines form part of a belatedly written opening section (1–45 in most recent editions, 'Lines Associated With *The Siege of Corinth*' in McGann's edition), which the poet was undecided about, and which were not at first published as part of the poem but which it has since become customary to include. The point still holds, however, whether or not these lines are taken into consideration, as the narrator's use of first-person plural pronouns elsewhere in the poem when speaking of Christian observance makes clear (see, for instance, section 33, where he speaks of an image of the Virgin Mary, which fixes 'our' thoughts on things divine and before which 'we' kneel).

It struck even the besieger's ear  
 With something ominous and drear,  
 An undefined and sudden thrill,  
 Which makes the heart a moment still,  
 Then beat with quicker pulse, ashamed  
 Of that strange sense its silence framed:  
 Such as a sudden passing-bell  
 Wakes though but for a stranger's knell. (11, 266–83)

It is appropriate because prayer realises—in yearning for—a connection between the human and the divine. It is therefore the most ‘everyday’ way in which the boundary between the natural and supernatural is crossed or revealed to be a *pseudo*-boundary.<sup>16</sup> In *The Siege of Corinth*, the act of prayer is accorded an intriguing prominence, as it is the first event of the story proper, and since in its description the discourse time dramatically slows down to correspond to the time of the story. What is particularly interesting to the present discussion, however, is its strangely prophetic character and the effect it has on those who hear it. To those within the garrison, the prayer seems to bespeak their fall ahead of its occurrence; and, perhaps more surprisingly, it even troubles the besiegers as well, whose ear it strikes ‘With something ominous and drear,/ An undefined and sudden thrill [...]’ In both cases—and this tendency will be repeatedly confirmed—what we are presented with is a *sense* of something supernatural, an *apparent* connection between the different realms, an *indefinite* portent or intimation—‘something ominous’ and ‘undefined.’ In each case, this may be merely superstition, but it may equally be a truthful, if imperfect, apprehension of something that holds in reality. Importantly, the narrative leaves both options in play: the speaker’s tale suggests that there is a real, if obscure, connection between the different ontological realms, whilst the form of the poem inclines us to question the validity of this suggestion. In this way, I wish to argue, Byron’s poem presents us with an engagement with reality whose logic structurally parallels the paradoxical logic of fetishism.

This will, doubtless, sound somewhat bizarre. Yet the logic of fetishism, as famously defined by Octave Mannoni,<sup>17</sup> is also the logic of superstition (though whether what is called superstition is in fact superstition—rather than some sort of seeing through a glass darkly—cannot be decided from the hither side of things; as Byron writes of ‘Foul Superstition’ in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, ‘Who from true worship’s gold can separate thy dross?’ (II, 44)). According to Mannoni, fetishism—and I would add, superstition—is characterised by the logic of *Je sais bien, mais quand même ...* (I know very well, but nonetheless...)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Coleridge also had a strong sense of the permeability of such boundaries. See, for example, ‘The Pains of Sleep,’ in which he prays to God, whom he describes as both within and without him (‘Since in me, round me, every where/ Eternal Strength and Wisdom are’ (12–13)).

<sup>17</sup> “‘I Know Well, but All the Same ...’,” in: *Perversion and the Social Relation*, eds. Molly Anne Rothenberg, Dennis Foster, and Slavoj Žižek (London: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 68–92.

<sup>18</sup> We find a close equivalent to this logic in ‘The Pains of Sleep’ (‘To know and loathe, yet wish and do!’ (48)).

That is to say, it may be characterised as an intimation of significance or an impulse to behave in a way that we know does not ‘make sense,’ but which is strangely immune to and persists in the face of such knowledge. Though again we should note that we lack a neutral or objective vantage point from which we can weigh up the claims of the one against the other, for to allow reason to adjudicate in this case is to allow it to be juror at its own trial. Byron’s account of the soldiers’ response to the act of prayer in *The Siege of Corinth* may therefore be seen as a *mise en abîme* of the paradoxical logic of superstition which is modelled by the poem as a whole. The prayer strikes the besieger’s ear,

With something ominous and drear,  
An undefined and sudden thrill,  
Which makes the heart a moment still,  
Then beat with quicker pulse, ashamed  
Of that strange sense its silence framed [...].

Here, the heart is both stopped by and ‘ashamed’ of a ‘strange sense’ which is ‘woken’ by the sound of prayer. Byron is, of course, famous for his speed and mobility—infamous even in the Turkish tales. Yet what such fame or infamy belies is his brilliance in preserving the significance and integrity of that which occurs in passing. In the lines just quoted, Byron resolutely holds on to both the unequivocal sense of extra-ordinary significance and the lack of precise knowledge as to what is signified, in spite of the repudiation that follows (though the curious assertion—which we will meet again in *Don Juan*—that this sense is ‘woken’ implies some sort of dormant subsistence, which accords it a deeper, more enduring foundation and so partially countermands the repudiation). It is this ‘oxymoronic’ account of reason’s embarrassed repudiation of a ‘strange sense’ that somehow survives it that I am suggesting corresponds to the paradoxical logic of superstition. In *The Siege of Corinth*, this tension is a function of the poem’s structure, which permits the poet simultaneously to disavow that with which he nonetheless presents us. However, as we shall see, we find instances of this *Je sais bien, mais quand même* logic repeatedly in Byron’s works.<sup>19</sup>

The second suggestion that there might be something fishy going on in *The Siege of Corinth* emerges during Alp’s midnight walk, which leads him miraculously unnoticed into enemy territory and, without his knowing, directly to Francesca. In both cases, our sense that there is something uncanny about this is again elicited by means of questions (13, 346–52 and 16, 440–9). In

<sup>19</sup> It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves at this point that Byron was himself ‘the most superstitious of human beings,’ as Thomas Medwin puts it—‘old-womanish’ even in his superstition, according to Leigh Hunt. He was afraid of travelling or undertaking anything on a Friday; of being helped or of helping others to salt at the table or of letting bread fall; he had a superstitious ‘horror of anniversaries’; and could be profoundly troubled by presentiments and omens such as black gowns and flying bats. And, along with the narrator in *Don Juan*, he also seems to have believed in ghosts. See Arthur Palmer Hudson, ‘The “Superstitious” Lord Byron,’ in *Studies in Philology*, vol. LXIII, October 1966.



between these two passages, there is what one might be tempted to dismiss as a conventional ephrastic deployment of pathetic fallacy (15, 406–15). Yet there is something slightly excessive and a little too insistent about this account of nature's animism and the ghostly subsistence of the glorious dead—something which suggests it may be more than mere convention. Moreover, in hinting that there may be some sort of subterranean continuity across different ontological orders, it forms part of a larger and cumulatively established pattern, which in turn underwrites the local impression that something supernatural is being asserted.<sup>20</sup>

The most blatant supernatural occurrence in the poem is, of course, the meeting between Alp and Francesca—or Francesca's ghost, for Byron's description leaves us little doubt that she is a visitant from beyond the grave. Alp's first question is 'what is here?' not 'who is here?'—even though she is the 'maid who might have been his bride' (20, 545)—and she is described as 'so wan, and transparent of hue,/ You might have seen the moon shine through' (20, 561–2). Like a 'cold wave,' her glance is 'chill' (20, 552), and her

motionless lips lay still as death,  
And her words came forth without her breath,  
And there rose not a heave o'er her bosom's swell,  
And there seemed not a pulse in her veins to dwell. (20, 612–15)

Yet even here it is a matter of seeming, and it is never explicitly stated that she is dead or alive (or something in between). Indeed, it is only after the meeting, when Alp encounters her father in combat and is informed of her death that he seems to realise it was Francesca's shade (27, 847–62). We should also notice, in order to underline the point that the poem works by means of suggestion, how Alp's unwitting journey into enemy territory to meet Francesca is retrospectively made to seem supernaturally influenced by the account of Francesca's parallel journey, for which she explicitly claims supernatural assistance (21, 563–72). The general point should be apparent by now, though there are two other, climactic events which are worth mentioning as they remind us obliquely again of Coleridge. The first is the death of Alp, which is described as follows:

While Minotti's words were wreaking  
More revenge in bitter speaking  
Than his falchion's point had found,  
Had the time allowed to wound,  
From within the neighbouring porch  
Of a long-defended church,  
Where the last and desperate few

<sup>20</sup> The response of Nature to the cataclysmic explosion at the end of the poem, whilst obviously warranted on the whole by a sufficient cause, is also in its detail slightly excessive and likewise supports the poem's other suggestions that the human, natural and supernatural realms are mysteriously interconnected (see 33, 1018–27 and 1057–79).

Would the failing fight renew,  
The sharp shot dashed Alp to the ground [...]. (27, 867–75)

In case the suggestion escaped our notice, it is re-emphasised in the following section:

Still the church is tenable,  
Whence issued the fated ball  
That half avenged the city's fall,  
When Alp, her fierce assailant, fell [...].

The second event is the final explosion, whose effect upon Nature has already been mentioned. What is important here, however, is what immediately precedes it—namely, the desecration of the church and the approaching violation of the Blessed Sacrament (32, 986–33, 1015), which is described from the viewpoint of a believer.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the poem, the notions of sin, sacrilege and divine justice are insistently kept in view. To his Moslem followers, Alp's Christian origin was 'little less than sin' (12, 315). He was 'A traitor in a turbaned horde;/ And led them to the lawless siege,/ Whose best success were sacrilege' (15, 399–401). When he encounters Francesca's spirit, he cries out 'God of my fathers!' (20, 535)—paralleling the invocation of the Virgin Mary in *Christabel* (which Scott took over almost verbatim)—and 'His trembling hands refused to sign/ The cross he no more deem'd divine' (20, 538–9). It is also precisely such a sign of repentance that Francesca desires of him, upon which both her love and his salvation are said to depend (21, 577–80; 628–50). And, finally, to cite but a few examples, Francesca's prophetic warning appears to be confirmed following his death:

Ere his very thought could pray,  
Unanel'd he passed away,  
Without a hope from mercy's aid—  
To the last—a Renegade. (27, 893–6)

Given the constant emphasis, then, upon the sinful and sacrilegious character of the siege, it is almost impossible not to conclude that there is some sort of extra-ordinary significance in the fact that it is from *the church* that the shot which killed Alp came, and the fact that the besiegers were about to profane the Blood of Christ when—in a scene that prefigures innumerable Hollywood action films—Minotti at the last possible moment blows them all sky-high.

This is, to be sure, in many respects a long way from Coleridge. Nevertheless, the technique by means of which supernatural involvement is implied recalls the technique favoured by Coleridge in *The Ancient Mariner*. As Tim Fulford has observed, the uncanniness of the poem is produced in part by

<sup>21</sup> 'That morn [the cup of consecrated gold] held the holy wine, / Converted by Christ to His blood so divine, / Which His worshippers drank at the break of day / To shrive their souls ere they joined in the fray' (32, 1002–5).

parataxis—‘the rhetorical device in which causal links between phrases are omitted [...]’.<sup>22</sup> The example offered by Fulford is taken from Part II of the poem:

It ate the food it ne’er had eat,  
And round and round it flew.  
The ice did split with a thunder-fit;  
The helmsman steered us through!

‘Does the ice split because the bird eats forbidden fruit?’ Fulford asks. ‘We are not sure. The reader is tantalised by the syntactic structure just as the mariner is by the structure of nature.’<sup>23</sup> *The Siege of Corinth*, I wish to suggest, works in a similar way. Again and again, the poem gestures towards some sort of supernatural involvement and an illicit continuity between different ontological orders, though its suggestions are invariably implicit and a matter of ‘seeming’ or parataxis, as they are in *The Ancient Mariner*. Both poems—*The Siege of Corinth* and *The Ancient Mariner*—point towards the supernatural as an explanation of the events they describe. But both—having, shall we say, ‘dubious’ narrators—give us grounds to question this explanation by simultaneously prompting us to question this pointing.<sup>24</sup>

What we are presented with in both cases, then, reflects what I have referred to as the paradoxical logic of superstition. That is to say, like the wedding guest stopped by the ancient mariner, we may know very well that there is something quite crazy about what’s going on, but its claims nonetheless have an overpowering hold on us. This immunity to the ‘I know’ should make us pause for thought. What does it tell us about the status of the superstitious gesture? And what does this tell us in turn about ourselves? In order to clarify the connection between what I have said about superstition—which Arthur Palmer Hudson describes as ‘a wild cousin of poetic imagination’<sup>25</sup>—and what I want to refer to as the ‘playful’ devotions of Byron and Coleridge, it will be helpful to digress for a moment and consider the issue of superstition and its relationship to orthodox belief more generally.

Superstition makes sport of our customary alternatives. It pitches its tent across the boundaries of what are ordinarily segregated categories, and in this way falls through the nets of both seriousness and jest. It shows that ‘yes’ and ‘no’ are not exclusive alternatives, and do not necessarily blur into something in between when they conjoin, but may agree to differ and live together. Superstition is therefore not exactly a matter of belief or disbelief or even

<sup>22</sup> ‘Slavery and superstition in the supernatural poems,’ in: *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> This epistemological insecurity is of course compounded by the pseudo-omniscience of *The Ancient Mariner’s* marginal gloss, which itself makes disturbing and intriguing use of questions and the language of seeming (‘At its nearer approach, it seemeth to him to be a ship; [...] And horror follows. For can it be a ship that comes onward without wind or tide? It seemeth him but the skeleton of a ship’ (III, 157–80)).

<sup>25</sup> ‘The “Superstitious” Lord Byron,’ p. 721.

agnosticism. It is the paradox of a belief without belief. It is as it were a plant that seems to flower without a root. For this reason, it's commonly thought of as a remnant of exploded beliefs, which will naturally die out in the wake of our enlightenment. And yet its persistence in the face of reason unfortunately argues against this. It is rather like Lacan's reading of the paradox about Achilles and the tortoise: the former will never attain the latter as it will always be either too fast or too slow. Similarly, it seems to make little difference to superstition whether we are 'naive' or 'enlightened'—whether we lag behind or 'overtake' it with knowledge—either way, it flourishes much the same. Given its curious persistence in the face of the 'I know,' superstition thus seems to reveal a fissuring or multiplicity within the self. That is to say, it suggests a form of government other than reason, which isn't exactly feeling either—and Byron's 'strange sense' seems to be faithful to this and precise in its vagueness—which we 'adulterously' take heed of as it were behind our own backs. This would imply—to adjust my formulation—that, rather than being a plant that flowers without root, it is nourished from a veiled or unconscious source. We might therefore see superstition as a sort of wakeful dreaming or psychoanalytical 'symptom,' which points towards a can of worms I have neither time nor desire to peer into here but which allows us to see superstition as a meaningful phenomenon, albeit one that is enigmatically cyphered. Looking at superstition in this way allows us perhaps with a greater generosity to understand its relationship to orthodox belief.<sup>26</sup>

Naturally enough, orthodoxy has an animosity towards superstition. Yet, obviously this comes of a dangerous proximity, which threatens to reduce the two to a common measure, since both may be said to foster behaviour which is 'scandalous' to reason. Yet the difference—upon which the latter is keen to insist—is that although certain things must in orthodox belief be wagered in faith, they are underwritten by a coherent and rational account of 'that which is' and have at least a scriptural or traditional warrant, to which the believer generally assents. The problem, however, is that there are of course radically different construals of orthodoxy and all sorts of issues whose scriptural or traditional warrant is continually contested.<sup>27</sup> This is not to imply that it is all a matter of arbitrary line drawing or that everything is equally open to dispute. But it is to recognise that the line between religion and superstition is not at all easy to draw and that there are undoubtedly grey areas. Whilst, then, there is evidently good reason for wanting to keep the two apart, there would also seem to be justification from a religious perspective for taking a rather more positive view of superstition. In the first place, because there is always a danger of rooting up the wheat with the tares; and in the second place, because of the analogy—in structure as well as content—that obtains between them.

<sup>26</sup> That superstition is related to 'genuine religious truths' is, as Seamus Perry has pointed out, 'a thought that had long appealed to [Coleridge]' (*Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 253).

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Krappé once wryly noted that 'Superstition, in common parlance, designates the sum of beliefs and practices shared by other people in so far as they differ from our own. What we believe and practice ourselves is, of course, Religion' (*The Science of Folklore* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1930), p. 203).

Superstition may be said to resemble, even as it travesties, orthodox religious belief in its content inasmuch as it is an intuition of connectedness between different orders of reality, which implicitly presupposes some sort of omniscient and omnipotent, not to mention peculiarly caring, being as a condition of its efficacy. With respect to its structure, the *Je sais bien, mais quand même* logic of superstition is in a sense analogous to the logic of the Eucharist, which in turn serves as an exemplum for a Christian reading of reality as such.

This logic may be formulated as follows: I know very well that what is before me is bread and wine, but nonetheless I believe that it is the Body and Blood of Christ. The believer thus acts on faith as if things were other than they appear to be. Importantly, such appearances are not deemed to be illusory. The first part of the clause—the ‘I know very well’—therefore emphatically stands. But neither do such appearances exhaust what the bread and wine after consecration are. They are more than without ceasing to be themselves. In benignly subverting the law of identity—which maintains that a thing cannot at once be itself and something else—the logic of the Eucharist models an even more radical but rationally warranted conjunction of ‘I know very well’ and ‘but nonetheless.’ According to Jean-Luc Marion, in *God Without Being*, drawing on Paul’s epistles to the Romans and Corinthians, this ‘as if’ posture elicited in the believer by the Eucharist is precisely the attitude the Bible exhorts us to adopt towards the real.<sup>28</sup> This is because whilst in contrast, on the one hand, to Platonism, for example, Christianity upholds the reality of the material order, on the other hand, in contrast to Materialism, for example, it is prepared to countenance a mysterious depth to which things give way—a ‘life intense’ in which all is ‘concentr’d,’ as Byron puts it in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (III, 89) or ‘the Eternal & Omnipresent, in whom we live, & move, & have our being,’ to cite the biblical formulation favoured by Coleridge<sup>29</sup>—which places material being as it were ‘under erasure,’ since it overcomes without destroying the material realm.<sup>30</sup>

From this short digression, we can see, it is hoped, that the logic of *Je sais bien, mais quand même* obtains both in superstition and orthodox belief, though the latter reveals—in contradistinction to the former—that it is possible simultaneously to give rational assent to both of the two radically divergent construals of reality. It should also be emerging to view that this logic announces a sort of wayfaring from quotidian protocols that is akin to play—inasmuch as it involves acting ‘as if’ things were other than we know them to be—and a space in which our customary either/or alternatives can find no secure footing.

## II.

<sup>28</sup> *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 127.

<sup>29</sup> *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 893. Hereafter cited as *CL*.

<sup>30</sup> See, *God Without Being*, p. 128.

My argument so far may be summed up in three stages. Firstly, in agreement with M.K. Joseph, I have suggested that one of the things Byron learned from *Christabel* was ‘a greater subtlety in the management of the supernatural.’<sup>31</sup> Secondly, from an examination of the dramatic structure of *The Siege of Corinth* and its local treatment of the supernatural, I have contended that this ‘subtlety’ largely consists in a paradoxical logic fostered by both poets which is commonly associated with fetishism, but also reflected in superstition, which is exemplarily negotiated by the language of seeming. And, thirdly, having pondered the nature of this logic more generally, I have attempted to show how it allows us to reconsider more positively the relationship between superstition and orthodox religious belief, both of which, according to this reading, in spite of their differences, involve adopting an ‘as if’ posture. In order to help widen our focus a little and to return us to the larger issues with which I began, I now want to look at one final extract from *The Siege of Corinth*, which connects this discussion of superstition with what I have called a place beyond ‘To be or not to be’ and a voice which is ‘neither in jest nor in earnest.’ The passage occurs at the end of the poem, just before the besieging soldiers enter the church:

Dark, sternly, and all alone,  
 Minotti stood o’er the altar stone;  
 Madonna’s face upon him shone,  
 Painted in heavenly hues above,  
 With eyes of light and looks of love;  
 And placed upon that holy shrine  
 To fix our thoughts on things divine,  
 When pictured there we kneeling see  
 Her, and the boy-God on her knee,  
 Smiling sweetly on each prayer  
 To Heaven, as if to waft it there.  
 Still she smiled; even now she smiles,  
 Though slaughter streams along her aisles:  
 Minotti lifted his aged eye,  
 And made the sign of a cross with a sigh,  
 Then seized a torch which blazed thereby [...]. (33, 947–64)

At the centre of this section is an icon of the Virgin Mother and Child, two of which also appear in *Don Juan* (as much to the regret of certain present-day critics as the poet’s irreverence was regrettable to his contemporaries). Indeed, strange as it may seem, the icon is in a sense at the centre of the poem, for, like the prayer towards the beginning, it exemplifies its underlying concerns. There are two aspects to this: the first concerns the Blessed Virgin, the second concerns icons more generally.

The Virgin Mary is traditionally seen as a principle of mediation between

<sup>31</sup> Byron: *The Poet*, p. 47.

the creaturely and the divine realms, and is therefore an emblem of interconnectedness.<sup>32</sup> She is a reminder of the dignification of the material order which was brought about through the incarnation, and of the openness of the creaturely realm to divine activity which this supremely revealed. Her mediating role also traditionally extends beyond her earthly life. As Dante beautifully envisages it in *Paradiso*, she continues to mediate between man and God in praying for the latter's prayers. Hence she may be said to exemplify the poem's underlying concern with the connection between different ontological realms.

The icon, more generally, is a peculiarly intermediate phenomenon, and this is in at least three respects. Firstly, it attempts to point to that which is 'without' or 'otherwise than' being—or, to use the formulation in my title, to that which is beyond 'To be or not to be'—since 'being' and 'non being' are categories of finitude, and if God is, the one thing that is certain is that He is without being (though each of those last four words should be put in quotation marks). Its subject is therefore perhaps best spoken of apophatically as neither this nor that. Secondly, and related to this, the icon is not realistic or referential in any ordinary sense of those words, as what it depicts cannot be depicted, though neither is it mere decoration or fantasy.<sup>33</sup> Rather, it points in pointing to its inability to point, and paradoxically asymptotically succeeds insofar as it embraces its failure, which points obliquely to that which is beyond pointing. Finally, the icon inhabits or opens up a realm which collapses a number of our customary alternatives. Since, to a believer it is perfectly proper to behave towards an icon as one would to a living and present human being deserving of honour—genuflecting, reverently kissing or addressing it and so on<sup>34</sup>—and since it, in turn, as a symbolic mediation of an immaterial reality, is capable of affecting and sustaining a relationship with the believer, as a living and present human being might, it falls outside of our customary oppositions between the animate and inanimate, the present and absent, the fictional and the real etc. Byron's description of the icon in *The Siege of Corinth* picks up on a number of these ambiguities. The Virgin Mother, in Byron's poem, is a painted image, yet Minotti behaves towards her and, the way it is described, she appears to behave towards him as though she were alive. The narrator speaks of kneeling before her and of Minotti's crossing himself in her presence with a sigh, whilst her face is said to shine upon him 'With eyes of light and looks of love.' The enjambment in line 954 allows the verb 'see' for a moment to resonate with a sense of intransitive visionary seeing, and represents in its inclusion of such dilated seeing within the seeing

<sup>32</sup> She is referred to as 'Madonna della Scala,' meaning of the 'stairs' or 'ladder,' and in the *Akathistos* she is hailed as the 'heavenly ladder by which God descended and the bridge that leads from earth to heaven.'

<sup>33</sup> One might hazard a connection in this respect between the icon and the fantastic, but not entirely unfounded, positing of relatedness in superstition.

<sup>34</sup> For 'through the images we kiss, and before which [...] we kneel, we adore Christ and venerate the saints, whose likeness they are'. The General Council of Trent, from: *Decree on the Invocation, the Veneration and the Relics of Saints and on Sacred Images* (1563). Cited in: *Theological Aesthetics*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 143.

of a particular 'her' the mediating role of the icon, which we see but at the same time beneficently 'see through.' The 'now' in line 958, in irresistably including the reader's present as well as the present of the story, similarly dilates beyond but without effacing the particular moment in a way that figuratively corresponds to the Virgin's continuing mediation, outside of time on man's behalf ('even now she smiles'). Finally, the 'as if' in line 957 seems to be poised between or open to both illusion and reality (which is another way of saying that it announces a territory beyond such oppositions) as, to a believer—like Minotti or the poem's narrator—sweetly wafting prayers to heaven is something that the Virgin Mary *actually* does; though obviously in another sense, as an image, she is incapable of doing so. The 'as if' thus functions rather like an icon. It, too, might be seen as an eloquent stammering (again in a way that recalls the dream-like groping towards knowledge of superstition), inasmuch as it renounces the task of signifying in the normal sense—not out of an infatuation with pure fiction, but as a sort of catachrestic exigency—in attempting to point towards that which evades the clutches of both being and non-being. Like the icon, its success—communicatively speaking—therefore paradoxically lies in an acknowledgement of its failure.

This is not, however, we should note, a hand-wringing or po-faced failure, and not simply because its failure is the ground of its success but, rather, because its failure results in a kind of freedom or levity, which isn't nihilism or giving up. As Byron writes in *Don Juan*: 'March, my Muse!—if you cannot fly, yet flutter,/ And when you may not be sublime, be arch' (XV, 27). Byron does not renounce the project of communication, just as the butterfly does not—I suppose—abandon the hope of getting its lunch or doing whatever butterflies like to do. Instead, he rejects a straight-faced and straightforward approach to writing and proposes in its place a narrative detour, which carries us 'archly' towards a thing even as it appears to tarry away from it. What I am suggesting—and in this respect also it resembles the icon—is that there is something playful about the 'as if.' It is creative in a way that outwits the opposition of realism and fantasy, and has a lightness that distances it equally from seriousness and jest. But what makes it especially interesting is the fact that the 'as if'—or what I am more generally calling the language of seeming—is frequently used by the Romantics, as it is by Byron in *The Siege of Corinth*, in relation to the religious. By way of conclusion—though I shall be pointing to a beginning in coming to an end—I wish to show briefly how this 'middle voice,' which like superstition is 'neither in jest nor in earnest' and which like the icon opens up a space between 'To be and not to be,' is more generally relevant to the poetry of Byron and Coleridge.

### III.

I shall begin with Coleridge, since what the six year old Hartley with heart-breaking anxiety refers to as 'the Seems'—a quasi-agentive Thing, which comes



to haunt him when he goes to sleep—is much more prominent in his father’s poetry.

When Coleridge ‘indulges a liberty of speculation’<sup>35</sup> on religious subjects in verse, he more often than not employs the language of seeming. Naturally, the precise formulation varies—the Old English third person dative form of ‘to seem’ (‘methinks’) in ‘The Eolian Harp,’ ‘Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement,’ and ‘Frost at Midnight’; the subjunctive conditional (‘what if’) in ‘The Eolian Harp’; and ‘seems’ itself in ‘Reflections’ and ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison.’ Yet, in each case, the assertion has a tentative cast, which appears to bespeak an agnostic reserve, which is careful to leave the door onto ‘being’ as well as ‘not being’ ajar. This is one way of reading the poet’s use of a language of seeming. Another way of looking at it is suggested by poor Hartley’s petrified account of ‘the Seems,’ in which, without knowing it, he wrestles with the ancient question of whether that which ‘is not’ might have existence:

October, 1802. Hartley at Mr Clarkson’s sent for a Candle—the Seems made him miserable—what do you mean, my Love!—The *Seems*—the Seems—what seems to be and is not—Men & faces & I do not [know] what, ugly, & sometimes pretty & turn ugly, & they seem when my eyes are open, & worse when they are shut—& the Candle cures the SEEMS.<sup>36</sup>

According to Hartley’s spectral reading, which together with the foregoing agnostic reading comprises the standard dictionary definition of such language, ‘seems’ is set over against that which ‘is’—‘what seems to be and is not’ is how Hartley describes it, ‘and the Candle cures the SEEMS.’ As the earlier discussion of the ‘as if’ demonstrates, however, whilst obviously covering certain cases, these two construals of the language of seeming do not exhaust its possible functions. What, then, beyond agnosticism and illusion might ‘seems’ signify for Coleridge? Two alternative readings are suggested by his discussion of Milton’s use of such language in his lecture on *Romeo and Juliet*, and by his early versions of ‘Frost at Midnight,’ which appear to offer a paraphrase of the ‘seems’ that later replaces it.

Without referring to the language of seeming in Milton’s description of Death by name, it is clearly crucial to the sublime effects for which Coleridge, following Burke, praises it:

The other shape,  
If shape it might be call’d that shape had none  
Distinguishable in member, joint and limb,  
Or substance might be that shadow seem’d,

<sup>35</sup> John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 100.

<sup>36</sup> *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 4 vols., ed. Kathleen Coburn; vol. 5, eds. Kathleen Coburn and Anthony John Harding (London: Routledge, 1957-2002). Hereafter cited as *CN*. Above quotation: *CN*, i, 1253.

For each seem'd either; black it stood as Night,  
 Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as Hell,  
 And shook a dreadful Dart; what seem'd his head  
 The likeness of a Kingly Crown had on.

(*Paradise Lost*, II, 666–73)

What in particular this description so supremely achieves is an image—if image it might be called—that lures but eludes our imaginative grasp, and thereby produces what Coleridge calls ‘a sublime feeling of the unimaginable.’<sup>37</sup> What such writing signifies, he suggests, is ‘an effort of the mind, when it would describe what it cannot satisfy itself with the description of.’<sup>38</sup> Importantly, then, the language of seeming is linked to the foredoomed project of signifying that which is beyond signification. It is not as it were a shortfall of intuition or a state of uncertainty—still less, an illusion—that gives rise to such language. The fact that the mind ‘would describe what it cannot satisfy itself with the description of’ suggests, to the contrary, that it is somehow in touch with—else what would satisfaction mean?—that which it cannot adequately express. The fault, instead, lies on the side of conceptualisation as such. Rather than an insufficiency of being or ‘res,’ the speaker is flummoxed by an excess of givenness; or, in the case of Milton’s Death, by that which of its nature does not belong or commit itself exhaustively to finitude, and which therefore necessarily leaves finite language scratching its head after the manner of Stan Laurel. In which case, the language of seeming would reflexively betoken the inadequacy of finite predication, and in doing so—again, by embracing its failure—may point to that which is beyond it.

If we turn to the early version of ‘Frost at Midnight’ published in the *Poetical Register*, we find what I have suggested is an explanatory paraphrase of the language of seeming that later replaced it:

haply hence,  
 That still the living spirit in our frame,  
 Which loves not to behold a lifeless thing,  
 Transfuses into all things its own Will,  
 And its own pleasures; sometimes with deep faith,  
 And sometimes with a wilful playfulness  
 That stealing pardon from our common sense  
 Smiles, as self-scornful, to disarm the scorn  
 For these wild reliques of our childish Thought,  
 That flit about, oft go, and oft return  
 Not uninvited.<sup>39</sup>

The reading implied in these lines is not exactly a matter of illusion or agnosticism, though it also differs from the preceding ‘sublime’ construal. I

<sup>37</sup> Coleridge’s *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor, vol. 2 (London: Constable, 1930), p. 138.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E.H. Coleridge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), p. 241.

say ‘not exactly,’ because the speaker is in a sense divided, and aware that what he describes may be a figment of his imagination, yet the attitude signified is, I think, better seen in terms of the paradoxical logic of superstition. And, indeed, the 1798 quarto speaks of a ‘most believing superstitious wish.’<sup>40</sup> In these lines, Coleridge puts forward and gives equal weight to two apparently contradictory explanations of the curious tendency in human beings to animate the inanimate. We do so, he claims, ‘sometimes with deep faith’ and ‘sometimes with wilful playfulness.’ Moreover, although the two are temporally kept apart—‘sometimes’ this, ‘sometimes’ that—they follow on from and explain the same activity as though there were no contradiction between them. Yet the first explanation—‘sometimes with deep faith’—might appear not only to be incompatible with the second but also to offer a surprising account of the foregoing activity. Whilst according to the initial description, the sense of animism is something that is brought about and transfused into the lifeless thing by the observer, his first explanation appears—without any sense of dissonance—to contradict the implication of delusion and to be immune to the reassertion of fictionality that follows it. It is as if to say we make it up and then believe it. There is no space here to defend the apparent irrationality of this position, though I would contend it is possible to do so and plausibly hold that a mode of perception may be at once creative and truthful.<sup>41</sup> What is important for now is simply that Coleridge’s explanation as a whole corresponds perfectly to the paradoxical logic of superstition. He knows very well that such behaviour must ‘steal pardon from our common sense’ and may well be a ‘wild relique of our childish thought,’ yet nonetheless he continues to do so, and even ‘sometimes with deep faith.’ This is a sort of seeming that the candle does *not* cure. This *Je sais bien, mais quand même* logic—sadly, I think—disappears in the later versions of the poem, and is replaced by a description employing the language of seeming, which I want to suggest condenses the contradictions the earlier passage holds explicitly in play. On this reading, then, the language of seeming would signify something that looks like but ultimately differs from agnosticism, since it is not a hovering non-committally between, but rather a simultaneous attachment to, two extremes.

Byron’s poetic devotions are manifestly less frequent, though are arguably more orthodox than those of Coleridge. They are also more ‘Catholic’ in their positive evaluation of the mediate. Whereas Coleridge withdraws somewhat guiltily at the end of ‘The Eolian Harp’ from his attempts to figure the divine in language (‘These shapings of the unregenerate mind’) to a more ‘Protestant’ preference for unmediated sublimity and *sola fide* (‘For never guiltless may I speak of him,/ The Incomprehensible! save when with awe/ I praise him, and with Faith that inly feels’), Byron responds more positively towards and is drawn into devotion by artistic mediations of the divine. In *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, for example, the poet is drawn into an astonishing, sustained

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> This issue is discussed in my forthcoming monograph *Romantic Invocations: Literature and Theology*.

religious meditation by the art of St Peter's, which turns into a virtual—and wholly orthodox—sermon in addressing the reader on the subject of their salvation:

But thou, of temples old, or altars new,  
Standest alone—with nothing like to thee—  
Worthiest of God, the holy and the true,  
Since Zion's desolation, when that he  
Forsook his former city, what could be,  
Of earthly structures, in his honour piled,  
Of a sublimer aspect? Majesty,  
Power, Glory, Strength, and Beauty, all are aisled  
In this eternal ark of worship undefiled.

Enter: its grandeur overwhelms thee not;  
And why? it is not lessened; but thy mind,  
Expanded by the genius of the spot,  
Has grown colossal, and can only find 1390  
A fit abode wherein appear enshrined  
Thy hopes of immortality; and thou  
Shalt one day, if found worthy, so defined,  
See thy God face to face, as thou dost now  
His Holy of Holies, nor be blasted by his brow. (IV, 154–5)

Here, artistic mediation of the divine is seen as fitting and honourable ('Worthiest of God') rather than a culpable indulgence or holidaying from 'more serious' devotion. Byron also evidently understands the affective, mediating role of religious art, brilliantly describing how the mind is 'Expanded by the genius of the spot,' beyond that which stimulates this expansion ('thy mind,/ Expanded by the genius of the spot,/ Has grown colossal, and can only find/ A fit abode wherein appear enshrined/ Thy hopes of immortality').<sup>42</sup> This balancing of the glimpse 'through a glass darkly' afforded by the mediate and the apophatic insistence upon the radical transcendent otherness of God—Aquinas's analogical 'middle way' between univocal and equivocal predication—is wonderfully reflected in Byron's enjambment in line 1394, which momentarily allows us a sense of seeing God 'face to face' *in medias res*, whilst in fact deferring such unmediated vision and presenting us instead with an icon or symbol to which this is analogically related.

Byron evinces a similarly positive attitude towards the mediate and is once again drawn into devotion by art in *Don Juan*; though in this case we find him adopting an 'as if' posture and putting the language of seeming into play. At

<sup>42</sup> This is of course the orthodox defence of images against the iconoclasts. As Aquinas writes in his consideration of whether in divine matters we should abandon the imagination: 'Holy Scripture presents the divine to us in symbols our senses can grasp, not as a place for our mind to rest in, but as a place it can start climbing from, to immaterial things.' *Expositio super Librum Boethii de Trinitate*, 2 (cited in: *Aquinas Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. Timothy McDermott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 42).

the end of Canto III, the intense beauty of the twilight landscape leads the narrator to turn in prayer to the Virgin Mary:

Ave Maria! o'er the earth and sea,  
That heavenliest hour of Heaven is worthiest thee!

Ave Maria! blessed be the hour!  
The time, the clime, the Spot, where I so oft  
Have felt that moment in its fullest power  
Sink o'er the earth so beautiful and soft,  
While swung the deep bell from the distant tower,  
Or the faint dying day-hymn stole aloft,  
And not a breath crept through the rosy air,  
And yet the forest leaves seemed stirred with prayer.

Ave Maria! 'tis the hour of prayer!  
Ave Maria! 'tis the hour of love!  
Ave Maria! may our spirits dare  
Look up to thine and to thy Son's above!  
Ave Maria! oh that face so fair!  
Those downcast eyes beneath the Almighty dove—  
What though 'tis but a pictured image?—strike,  
That painting is no idol,—'tis too like. (101–3)

This passage recalls the description of the icon and Minotti's attitude towards it in *The Siege of Corinth* in several respects. At its centre is an image of the Virgin Mary or 'Mediatrice,' as the doctors of the Church commonly refer to her. We are therefore once again presented with a homological devotional image, in that it is a depiction of a mediating figure which is itself mediating. Related to this, there is in the prayer in *Don Juan*, also, a strangely fluid movement—or disinclination to distinguish—between artistic, human and spiritual realms, along with a relaxed attitude towards this sort of confusion, since it is hard to say whether the initial 'Ave Maria' is prompted by or prompts the speaker to imagine the image he subsequently describes. Though either way, in addressing the Virgin in stanza 103, he is at once speaking 'to' and speaking to that which is beyond the image, and in both cases he is treating the addressee as if she were alive and present. The prayer thus conjures up an addressee whose intercession is confined to no particular ontological realm. Additionally, the 'as if' is again presented as a reciprocal posture: it is adopted by the speaker towards the icon, but it also describes how the icon affects the speaker and appears to exceed its materiality ('Those downcast eyes beneath the Almighty dove—/ What though 'tis but a pictured image?—strike'). We should furthermore notice that this 'as if' is once again governed by the logic of superstition, for the speaker knows very well it is 'but a pictured image' though nonetheless insists its eyes have the power to 'strike.' This logic returns a few stanzas later in relation to the pathetic fallacy involved in the description of the

vesper-bell:

Soft Hour! which wakes the wish and melts the heart  
 Of those who sail the seas, on the first day  
 When they from their sweet friends are torn apart;  
 Or fills with love the pilgrim on his way  
 As the far bell of vesper makes him start,  
 Seeming to weep the dying day's decay;  
 Is this a fancy which our reason scorns?  
 Ah! surely nothing dies but something mourns! (108)

Like Coleridge's account of our tendency to animate the inanimate, Byron's sense of universal sympathy is presented as something that is foolish and simultaneously makes a serious claim upon him. And the language of seeming—whose assertive gesture the final two reflexive lines squabble about and in doing so paraphrase—provides the poet with a way of holding onto these divergent responses.

In Canto XIII, we come upon yet another icon of the Blessed Virgin, which provokes a similar devotional response:

But in a higher niche, alone, but crowned,  
 The Virgin-Mother of the God-born Child,  
 With her Son in her blessed arms, looked round;  
 Spared by some chance when all beside was spoiled;  
 She made the earth below seem holy ground; 485  
 This may be superstition weak or wild,  
 But even the faintest relic of a shrine  
 Of any worship wakes some thoughts divine. (61)

Here, too, the narrator is drawn into a devotional stance by a work of art in spite of his contemporaneous sense that there may be something irrational about this. His description of the Blessed Virgin once more suggests a breaching of the quotidian boundaries between spiritual, human and artistic realms. The 'looked round' of line 483 recalls the apparent sentience of the earlier icon's 'strike' as well as the appearance of life in the 'eyes of light and looks of love' in the description of the Madonna in *The Siege of Corinth*. The image thus seems to give way to something to which the narrator responds which is enabled but not circumscribed by its materiality. Similarly, the assertion that she 'made the earth below seem holy ground' allows, without insisting upon, a sense of her affective power and sanctifying agency (the 'earth below' encouraging a concentric widening of perspective—in a way that recalls the temporal dilation of 'even now she smiles'—so that she seems at once, as an icon, to look down from her niche upon the ground beneath the 'venerable arch' and, as a saint in heaven, to look down upon the whole of the earth below). The icon therefore mediates by intimating a providential transgression of the boundaries between apparently segregated realms—and recognising this

is a form of devotion. Here, as elsewhere, Byron knows very well that he is responding to something that ‘reason scorns’ (‘This may be superstition weak or wild’), but nonetheless he still responds, and—insofar as he does—demonstrates that there is something within him that surpasses the scorn of reason. This something, I have been attempting to show, reveals itself in play.

A conspicuous sign of this sort of play is the adoption of an ‘as if’ posture, which is most obviously evidenced in the use of what I have been referring to as the language of seeming. Such language does not, as one might expect, always set itself over against the actual or signify an agnostic comportment towards its own assertions. It may alternatively, as I have illustrated, be a form of catachresis or ‘legitimate stammering’<sup>43</sup>—signalling the embarrassing advent of a surplus of givenness or that which of its nature does not commit itself exhaustively to finitude—or else it may signify an attempt to remain simultaneously faithful to the claims of two divergent responses, both of which are deemed to point to something that holds in reality in spite of their apparent gainsaying of one another. It is these ‘alternative’ uses of the language of seeming that are, I suggest, reflected in and crucial to the poetic devotions of Byron and Coleridge, and which I wish to identify as a sort of reverent levity or play. There are obvious differences between the two poets in their ‘playful’ devotion, which can only be partially alluded to here. Nevertheless, in spite of such differences, we can discern in both poets a sort of playfulness in their poetic devotions which is largely neglected or distorted by the official ‘serious’ reading of Romanticism.

Doubtless, the devotions of which I have been speaking in some ways don’t sound very playful—or insofar as they do, we might assume, they cease to be devotions. Yet to see play in all respects as opposed to devotion is grossly to misunderstand the former and forget its distinguished heritage (and only imperfectly to understand its recent poststructuralist revival). Play, for Plato, was a religious activity. It is associated with wisdom (which he defined as an awareness of the object-in-motion); it is a mode of exploration and a vital force,<sup>44</sup> which his own ‘playful’ dialogues reveal may lead to a disclosure of truth; and it is a way of making ourselves pleasing to God, which subsumes the activities of sacrifice, song and dance.<sup>45</sup> In the Bible, also, Wisdom is seen as playful and as pleasing to God as such (whilst God created the world, personified Wisdom engaged in childish play, under His shelter and to His delight (Proverbs, 8:22–31)). There are, however, other reasons for viewing and valuing devotion as a playful activity. Rather than rendering the act of worship irreverent and frivolous, seeing devotion as a form of play may be a way of paradoxically safeguarding its reverence and reminding us of its seriousness. According to Schiller—a great defender of play—we should distinguish between ‘aesthetic semblance’ (or art) and semblance in the realm

<sup>43</sup> Martin Buber, *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Coleridge agrees: ‘Amid the profoundest and most condensed constructions of hardest Thinking, the playfulness of the Boy starts up, like a wild Fig-tree from monumental marble’ (*CN*, iv, 4777).

<sup>45</sup> See E. Douka Kabitoglou, *Plato and the English Romantics* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 27–49.

of experience, where the former is identified with play—as a semblance ‘which we love just because it is semblance, and not because we take it to be something better’—and the latter is ‘mere deception.’<sup>46</sup> Play, then, is rather like the icon, in that it involves—and advertises—a renunciation of the unattainable and idolatrous aim of comprehensive representation, and instead keeps us in mind of the distance between its pointing and that to which it points. It is thus, we might say, following Heidegger, a ‘non-covetous’ discourse.<sup>47</sup> As Jean-Luc Marion observes, respecting the propriety of the ‘iconic’ discourse of praise: ‘Predication would [be] unacceptable with regard to [the divine], if it were not impossible to begin with.’<sup>48</sup> The referential modesty or apophatic cast of play keeps this ‘impossibility’ clearly in view, which at once sanctions the desire creatively to fashion images of the divine—which is a fallen co-operation with the on-going activity of incarnation<sup>49</sup>—whilst eliciting a sense of humility and reverence by reminding us that we can only ever do so ‘under erasure.’ This ‘impossibility,’ however, is not absolute. If it were, such play would become a matter of pure fiction or leisure. Rather, if we take seriously the biblical teaching that we are made in the image of God (Genesis, 1:27)—which is to say, we are made in the image of a Maker<sup>50</sup>—and that the invisible Creator may be known from the created world (Romans, 1:20), it is possible to hold not only that in creatively fashioning icons we are fulfilling our telos, but also that in doing so we may analogically disclose something of the hidden reality in which they participate and to which they point.

What this analogical disclosure of that which is hidden opens up is a space between ‘To be or not to be’; a space in which that which is ‘not yet’ is somehow ‘already’; a space in which revelation coincides with concealment and proximity coincides with distance; an iconic space in which that which is limitless and above all predication is given ‘a local habitation and a name’;<sup>51</sup> a space, I have argued, that the poetic devotions of Byron and Coleridge inhabit. This space, I suggest, is exemplarily announced by the language of seeming, which—in accordance with the logic of fetishism—allows the poet to signal what Coleridge speaking of *Christabel* describes as ‘witchery by daylight’;<sup>52</sup> that is, a sense of supernatural commerce which coexists alongside of but is not abolished by a sense of its absurdity. And what else is faith?<sup>53</sup> As John Milbank

<sup>46</sup> *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 26, 5.

<sup>47</sup> See his discussion of ‘nonobjectifying thinking and speaking’ in ‘Phenomenology and Theology’ (in: *The Poetry of Thinking: Essays by Martin Heidegger*). In this respect, my argument also concurs with Derrida’s claim that play ‘is the disruption of presence’ (‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,’ in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 369.

<sup>48</sup> *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), p. 184.

<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of this issue, see Graham Ward, ‘The Beauty of God,’ in: *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty*, John Milbank, Graham Ward, Edith Wyschogrod (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), pp. 35–65.

<sup>50</sup> This analogous relationship is explored by Tolkien in his wonderful short essay ‘On Fairy-Stories.’

<sup>51</sup> *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V, i, 17.

<sup>52</sup> *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Table Talk*, I, ed. Carl Woodring (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 410.

<sup>53</sup> This is at least the department of faith m



has observed, ‘Redemption remains a vague rumour, and only those possessed of a true light-hearted folly will dare to abandon everything in order to pursue it.’<sup>54</sup> However, they also serve who point the way; who brave their own embarrassment and bear witness to such ‘absurdity’; who whilst retaining a proper silence or iconic reserve with respect to its inconceivable and nameless transcendence nonetheless attempt to attest the occasion of that of which we cannot speak, whose visitations leave behind no pledge to which we can point; and who accustom us to the practice of faith—even in an aesthetic sphere—by encouraging a ‘willing suspension of disbelief,’<sup>55</sup> which allows us to hold on to ‘Theseus’s rationalistic view of things and the fairies’ survival of their dismissal, or, as Byron puts it, ‘sounds that seem as from above,/ In dreams that day’s broad light can not remove.’<sup>56</sup>

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odelled by Kierkegaard’s Abraham, who ‘believed the ridiculous’ and ‘on the strength of the absurd,’ and who was ‘great in that wisdom whose secret is folly, great in that hope whose outward form is insanity’ (*Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 54; 65; and 50).

<sup>54</sup> *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 105.

<sup>55</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, in: *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 7, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (London: Routledge, 1983), II, p. 6. Coleridge frequently claimed that fairytales and romance ‘habituated his mind to the Vast’ (*CL*, I, p. 354) and, as John Beer notes, ‘[keep] the mind open to possibilities which a dominant rationalism might otherwise hide’ (‘Coleridge and Poetry: I. Poems of the Supernatural,’ in: *Writers and their Background: S.T. Coleridge*, ed. R.L. Brett (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1971), p. 52).

<sup>56</sup> ‘The Harp the Monarch Minstrel Swept,’ 19–20.