Lord Byron’s Preposterous Liberalism: Perversity, or The Fear That Pleases

Clara Tuite
University of Melbourne

I

In The Spirit of the Age: Or Contemporary Portraits (1825), the radical essayist William Hazlitt delivers one of several memorable attacks on the poet Lord Byron, “who in his politics is a liberal, in his genius is haughty and aristocratic.” Comparing Byron with that avowed Tory Sir Walter Scott, Hazlitt delivers his withering judgment of taste on both: “We do not like Sir Walter’s gratuitous servility: we like Lord Byron’s preposterous liberalism little better. He may affect the principles of equality, but he resumes his privilege of peerage, upon occasion.” And if it is a commonplace of modern-day conversation (embodied or virtual) to say we don’t “like” someone’s politics, Hazlitt’s comments demonstrate that this strange if habitual mode of evaluation, by which one person’s politics should be the object of another person’s taste, has a history.

In the current context within the critical humanities, where liberalism is routinely identified with the degradations of neoliberalism, global capitalism, and the bad affect of a complacency that subtends things as they are and is “worse than conservatism”—as Amanda Anderson puts

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2 Ibid., 178–79.
3 “[L]iberalism as a subtending force is often perceived by the radical left as worse than conservatism, insofar as it is seen to legitimate rather than lament capitalist modernity, and because it fails to capture fundamental human and social needs.” Amanda Anderson, “Character and Ideology: The Case of Cold War Liberalism,” New Literary History 42 (2011): 210.
it in her rich critical history and “reframing” of twentieth-century liberalism—this essay recalls a historical moment when liberalism signified a progressive political disposition (indeed, one so progressive as to be associated with radicalism) and when the claim to liberalism might be something worth arguing about. Hazlitt’s essay is an occasion within that moment. Liberalism emerged in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, when Europe saw the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy orchestrated by the Congress of Vienna (1814–15); it first referred to the Spanish democrats (the liberales) who in 1820 rebelled against the Bourbon king Ferdinand VII (installed and then overthrown by Napoleon in 1808, and restored in 1813), forcing him to honor a short-lived liberal constitutional monarchy. The term was then widely attached to a range of radical and nationalist causes across Britain and Europe.

The life and career of George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1824), recognized as a hero of the Greek War of Independence, Italian republicanism, and Chartism, coincide with this emergence of liberalism. A figure with enduring resonance throughout the long nineteenth century, Byron has long served as a test case (and cliché) of the relationship between literature, emotion, and politics. Byron is in many ways the archetypal “bleeding-heart” liberal. Indeed, the phrase was coined for him by the Victorian liberal Matthew Arnold:

> What helps it now, that Byron bore,  
> With haughty scorn which mock’d the smart  
> Through Europe to the Aetolian shore  
> The pageant of his bleeding heart?  
> That thousands counted every groan,  
> And Europe made his woe her own?⁴

However, Arnold’s ambiguous figure hints at a dark side of the bleeding heart, dripping with overwrought and even false emotion. The association of liberalism with inauthenticity that Anderson engages has a long history, then; and the association of Byron both with authentically deep emotion and with superficial or false emotion was the keynote of Byron’s original reception. This linking of Byron with false emotion and a kind of cynicism was shared across the political spectrum—radical, Whig, Tory, and liberal—and was a tradition arguably initiated by Hazlitt (who, after all, originally coined the figure of the “pageant” for Byron: “The man is nothing without the pageant”).

Byron as the initiatory bleeding-heart liberal offers a paradigmatic case study of the nexus of liberalism, emotions, and literature in the long nineteenth century. Examining how Byron’s life and career coincide with the emergence of liberalism in Britain and Europe in the early nineteenth century, this essay uses the fraught yet productive reading of Byron by Hazlitt to illuminate the contradictions of liberalism at this moment of emergence in the wake of Napoleon. In what follows, I start by examining Lord Byron’s liberal claim to liberalism by Hazlitt. (And I use “putative” advisedly, for nowhere does Byron actually claim to be a liberal.) I then consider liberalism in relation to the religious politics of *Cain, A Mystery* (1821), Byron’s parodic “mystery play” and allegory of free speech that was denounced as blasphemous. Finally, I analyze Byron’s involvement in the Carbonari, an exemplary cause of European liberal nationalism, which coincided with the conception of *Cain* in early 1821.

II

The Spirit of the Age started life as essays in the New Monthly Magazine, a journal established in 1814 by Henry Colburn expressly to counteract the radical politics of the Monthly Magazine and its support of Napoleon, before eventually becoming liberal enough for Scott to have refused to contribute to it. One of Byron’s most perceptive contemporary critics, Hazlitt, the lower-middle-class radical Dissenter, was keenly suspicious of Byron’s rank—hence his sarcastic italicizations of “liberal” and “liberalism” in the essay on Byron. This suspicion animated a great rivalry and a powerfully ambivalent engagement with Byron that took place in reviews in the major periodicals that emerged in this period with the institutionalization of modern literary criticism. While Matthew Arnold defined the liberal institution of criticism as “a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best”5—consecrating the disinterest, rationality, and autonomy that Regenia Gagnier has identified as essential to liberalism’s formation of “the literary subject”6—Hazlitt’s criticism is proudly marked by emotion, polemics, radical politics, and personal animus.7

The Spirit of the Age: Or Contemporary Portraits apotheosizes Romanticism’s discovery of contemporaneity as a mode of cultural historiography. Hazlitt was one of the most important early theorists of celebrity, which is an initiatory and exemplary social formation of liberal modernity, for two reasons: first, as a secular form of fame that appeals to the here and now of contemporaneity rather than to an afterlife, and, second, as a putatively democratic social form that is nevertheless mediated by commercial culture (thereby embodying the contradiction of liberalism as both democratic and market based). Obsessively preoccupied with Byron’s double boon of nobility and fame (“He has a seat in the House of Lords, a niche in the Temple of Fame”),8 Hazlitt is particularly attuned to how Byron works this “niche in the Temple of Fame” and to the temporality of these strategies of immortality—what he saw through his keenly honed class animus and ressentiment as Byron’s relentless pursuit of both posthumous fame and contemporary celebrity.9

“Preposterous” is used to resonant effect in Hazlitt’s critique, which fully exploits the word’s double meanings: incredible or unbelievable, and untimely or anachronistic. The perverse domain of the latter before the former (pre-post) enables Hazlitt to align Byron with the old political regime, as he does also by figuring Byron as tyrant and victim of the “Bastile of his own ruling passions.”10 Underscoring this critique of Byron’s untimeliness, Hazlitt refers to Byron as a “chartered libertine.” This Shakespearean epithet—first wielded against Byron by Francis Jeffrey in the Whig-aligned Edinburgh Review—anachronizes Byron’s liberalism and aligns it with an archaic Whig libertinism that arrogates the “privilege” to indulge personal license in the name of political freedom. The temporal figures of “resuming privilege upon occasion” associate Byron with an atavistic habit of veering back to the past—as caprice takes him and as befits his lordly prerogative.

8  Hazlitt, Spirit, 177–78.
9  On the distinction between posthumous fame and contemporary celebrity, see Clara Tuite, Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), xxi, 21.
10  Hazlitt, Spirit, 164.
Hazlitt’s attack on Byron was intended as personal, but Byron’s liberalism was preposterous, I suggest—structurally and necessarily so—as a form of aristocratic radical Whiggism. In that sense, what Hazlitt attacks in Byron is the social form of the aristocrat radical, of which Byron is an exemplar, for better and worse. Concomitantly, what Hazlitt attacks as personal contradiction in Byron is the condition of liberal modernity itself: the contradiction between political affiliation and class location or social rank.

Although many commentators assume a direct line between Whiggism and liberalism, Whigs were devoted to an idea of liberty that was postabsolutist but predemocratic. As Leslie Mitchell explains, “[i]t was a moment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries between autocracy and democracy that might be called the parliamentary period. It alone provided the oxygen which Whigs could breathe freely.”\(^{11}\) Ambivalently poised between the support of radical causes and a belief in the aristocratic prerogative to govern, the Whigs were an increasingly vestigial form of political and social power in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Drawing on an eighteenth-century English form of civic humanism, Whiggism is predicated on mixed government, constitutional monarchy, and the check on monarchical power that the aristocracy provides. By the end of the 1850s, the party that eventually emerged out of an alliance of Whigs, Peelite conservatives, and radicals was a Liberal party, not a Whig one. And the 1867 Reform Act saw the end of the Whigs by ushering in a fully representative political system. Radicalism is the other vital political culture relevant here. In fact, radicalism and liberalism are often used interchangeably in this unusually repressive period of British history, when the Tory Liverpool administration introduced a range of punitive legislative measures expressly designed to suppress radical activity. Liberalism is an emergent, hybrid political ideology that develops out of both Whiggism and radicalism. From the liberalism that replaces Whiggism, modern political democracy emerges, and this begins to erode the principle of cross-class representation and with it the perceived legitimacy of the gentleman radical.

Hazlitt was both right and wrong, I suggest. Indeed, the terms of Hazlitt’s attack may have been more accurate than Hazlitt intended. For while Hazlitt’s comments speak to personal “ego,” they also speak in spite of themselves to the structural contradiction—that Byron was himself aware of—between Byron’s status as a lord, with its “privilege of peerage,” and his commitment to “principles” of republicanism and revolution. That contradiction, I argue, was the necessary form of cross-class support vital to so many nineteenth-century liberal struggles and is powerfully dramatized by the liberal causes Byron supported: the armed struggles of European liberal nationalism in the early 1820s—the Italian Carbonari movement and the Greek War of Independence—as well as the radical John Hunt’s journal the Liberal (1822–23). Subtitled Verse and Prose from the South, the Liberal marks a critical moment in the increasing radicalism—and increasing Italianization—of Byron’s work; it also offers one of the earliest uses of the noun “liberal” as a political term in English.\(^{12}\) The Liberal was a collaborative venture produced predominantly by English writers based in Pisa, including Percy Bysshe Shelley (before he died in July 1822); Byron was closely involved with it after his Carbonari association and before his departure for Greece. Interestingly, an ongoing tension and factor in the eventual collapse of this

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short-lived project was “a lack of clarity…as to whether Byron’s role was aristocratic patron or literary and business partner.” Hazlitt was also a contributor.

What is “preposterous” about Byron’s form of liberalism is that it undertakes to support democracy and represent the laboring classes from the position of a titled peer: necessarily contradictory from the perspective of a lower-middle-class radical like Hazlitt. For “in the discourse of British radicalism...aristocrat took on from the French the ideological burden of referring to all those who opposed revolution abroad and reform at home: an anti-Jacobin.” However, from Byron’s own perspective, and within a long-standing tradition of cross-class political representation, it was precisely Byron’s noble status that legitimated (indeed necessitated) his support of European liberal causes, as he wrote in October 1820 in an epistolary address to the Neapolitan Carbonari insurgents, referring to himself in the third person: “As a member of the English House of Peers, he would be a traitor to the principles which placed the reigning family of England on the throne, if he were not grateful for the noble lesson so lately given both to people and to kings” by “the determination of the Neapolitans to assert their well-won independence.” He then offers his services as a “volunteer...sharing the destiny of a brave nation defending itself against the self-called Holy Alliance.”

One form of Byron’s literary success lay in the commodification of his aristocratic social capital. And that was the rub for Hazlitt, because the waning power of Whiggism was also newly enchanting, in the commodified form of vendible print. Byron’s capacity to attract popular reading audiences, through new technologies of print culture that re-mediated the charm of this archaic social capital, represented for Hazlitt an unfair advantage, gained through the exercise of lordly prerogative. So, again, Hazlitt was both right and wrong: Byron’s liberalism was preposterous, but his contemporary readers liked it (however much Hazlitt’s “we” did not, and however “affected” Byron’s egalitarian demons might have been). That monumental “like” was the problem for Hazlitt—indeed, the public not only liked but loved and adored and idolized—that like became the object of Hazlitt’s animus. More troubling again, the “noble poet,” when he “resumes his privilege,” does so as the Satanic lord, who enslaves his readers like a haughty despot: except that this enslavement is desired. Such willing subjection before someone so capricious, someone moreover with nothing but “contempt of his contemporaries,” was a source of bitter fascination for Hazlitt.

Byron’s despotism names—and manipulates—a certain libidinal economy of the modern liberal subject (one that Hazlitt arguably inhabits but disavows) that is perversely oriented toward willing subjection “upon occasion.” Here, the celebrity culture of Byronism embodies the contradictions of liberalism not only as a form of politics but also as a libidinal economy animated by complex and contradictory relations of emotion, style, and taste. One of these contradictions is that “the Byronic text...compounds aristocratic style with an ethos of democratic self-assertion”; and, as Hazlitt compounds it (his Byron problem), Byron’s lordly despotism masquerades as democracy. Another name for this willing subjection and desired enslavement is seduction.

15 *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols. (London: John Murray, 1973–82), 7:188, 187–88, 188. All subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text, with volume and page number preceded by BLJ.
17 Christensen, *Lord Byron’s Strength*, 368n.
Byron’s popularity staged precisely the libidinal drama of preposterous liberalism, where the lord does not rule but rather seduces readers. This scenario of desired enslavement threatens the autonomy of the desiring liberal subject because it dissolves that liberal fetish of freely given consent in the paradoxical form of consent to be enslaved.

III

A paradigmatic example of this seduction of the reader occurs in Byron’s drama, *Cain, A Mystery* (1821), which was planned (if not actually written) at the height of Byron’s involvement with the local Carbonari movement in early 1821, when he was living in Ravenna in northern Italy. The Carbonari were members of a revolutionary, antipapal, nationalist movement dedicated to the overthrow of foreign rule. The movement aimed to create a unified secular nation out of the various principalities and papal states that then existed on the Italian peninsula and was therefore an early stage in the process of Italian unification, or Risorgimento, which eventually took place in 1870. The Carbonari agitated for constitutional government—inspired by the example of the Spanish *liberales*—and many were republicans. Established in Naples and Sicily by 1806 in order to oppose French rule under Napoleon, the Carbonari later resisted Austrian rule after the Congress of Vienna treaty that concluded the Napoleonic Wars empowered Austria to intervene in Italian affairs. From late 1820, after the Neapolitans had revolted against the Bourbon king Ferdinand I of the Two Sicilies (formerly Ferdinand IV of Naples and Ferdinand III of Sicily), who was forced to establish a constitutional monarchy (just as Ferdinand VII had in Spain), the northern Carbonari schemed for revolution. In February 1821 the Carbonari planned to resist the Austrian army that was on its way to oppose the Neapolitan forces.18

Between January 4 and February 27, while living in Ravenna and preparing with the Carbonari for revolution, Byron kept a journal. An entry in the *Ravenna Journal* registers the particularly intense way in which politics, emotions, and poetry are all conjoined in the moment that occasions the composition of *Cain*:

It appears that the Austrian brutes have seized my three or four pounds of English powder. The scoundrels!…

Pondered the subjects of four tragedies to be written (life and circumstances permitting) to wit, Sardanapalus, already begun, Cain, a metaphysical subject,…

What is Poetry?—The feeling of a Former world and Future.

Thought second.

Why, at the very height of desire and human pleasure,—worldly, social, amorous, ambitious, or even avaricious,—does there mingle a certain sense of doubt and sorrow—a fear of what is to come—a doubt of what *is*—a retrospect to the past, leading to a prognostication of the future? (The best of Prophets of the future is the Past.) Why is this? Or these?—I know not, except that on a pinnacle we are most susceptible of giddiness, and that we never fear falling except from a precipice—the higher, the more awful, and the more sublime; and, therefore, I am not sure that Fear is not a pleasurable sensation; at least, *Hope* is; and what *Hope* is there

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without a deep leaven of Fear? and what sensation is so delightful as Hope? and, if it were not for Hope, where would the Future be?—in hell. . . . It is all a mystery. . . .

_Thought for a speech of Lucifer, in the Tragedy of Cain:_

(28 January 1821, _BLJ_ 8:36–38)

A logic of apposition orders this entry, which opens with a strikingly embedded eyewitness detail of the preparations for revolution, then moves to questions about poetry and emotions, before ending with the “Thought for a speech of Lucifer, in the Tragedy of Cain.” Despite the seemingly random form of the journal, these very questions about poetry and emotions are significant enough for Byron to be later developed in _Cain_ in the speeches of Lucifer and Cain.

Byron’s “feeling of a Former world and Future” is a feeling of emotional preposterousness that registers temporal displacement and inhabits the vertiginous mixed temporality of the former as future, or pre-post. This is the preposterous feeling of time being out of joint, the feeling that becomes in _Cain_ a sustained attempt to inhabit and elaborate the pre-posterous emotions of Cain’s state of guilt before the deed. These emotions of dislocation inform the sublime cosmic landscape of _Cain_’s “Abyss of Space” (the setting of act 2, scene 1), the dialogue between Lucifer and Cain, and the profound metaphysical questioning that powers the drama.

Channeling the scientific freethinking and geological catastrophism of Georges Cuvier, associated in Britain with infidel thought, _Cain, A Mystery_ features Lucifer taking Cain (the soon-to-be first-murderer) on a guided tour of Hades, teaching him about the world’s violent creation and viewing the sublime nothingness of all the former worlds that psychedelically if nihilistically swirl by, mutely—eloquently—challenging the orthodox Christian story of Creation. In its discussion of the relationship between science and religion, mediated by the new science of geology—both the most fashionable and the most controversial form of science in the Regency—_Cain, A Mystery_ anticipated the heated debates that marked the Victorian period in the wake of Charles Darwin’s _Origin of Species_ (1859).19

_Cain_’s “allusion to a future state” is not in the Bible, Byron remarks in the preface: “I have therefore supposed it new to Cain, without, I hope, any perversion of Holy Writ.”20 But as perversion is precisely how this breathtaking vision of a “Former world and Future” and its human joys and dolors was read. With its mix of infidel science, Miltonic republicanism, and rhetorical Satanism, _Cain_ was immediately declared blasphemous after its publication on 19 December 1821. Just as perversely, perhaps, this association with blasphemy has meant that _Cain_’s relation to contemporary Italian politics has tended to be underplayed; so, while the other dramas published in the volume with _Cain_—_Marino Faliero_ and _Sardanapalus_—have been associated with the revolutionary plots of the Carbonari, _Cain_ itself has not.21 Yet the issues of free speech, religious questioning, and resistance to tyranny that _Cain_ dramatizes are highly relevant to the politics


of the Carbonari and to the emergent political discourse of liberalism. Byron commenced the
drama in mid-July 1821 and completed it in the aftermath of the Carbonari revolution’s failure.
Byron sent the manuscript to his publisher, John Murray, in early September as he was making
preparations to leave Ravenna for Pisa. By what transtextual logic, then, is Cain’s futuristic land-
scape of fallen, former worlds connected to Byron’s present experience of the aftermath of failed
Carbonari insurrection? This is a question I wish to explore.

Lucifer’s wily, sophistical running commentary on the metaphysical caprices and blood-
thirsty pleasures of the sacrifice-demanding Jehovah goads Cain on to challenge God’s author-
ity, as Cain yells reproachfully at the Almighty: “If a shrine without victim, / And altar without
gore, may win thy favour, / Look on it!” (3.1.266–68). Another famous aristocratic republican,
then, is Lucifer, the fallen leader of the angels; egging Cain’s rebellion on, he appears not in the
shape of the serpent, as he had with Adam and Eve, but as himself—with thrilling results, as Adah
explains to her husband-brother Cain:

I look upon him with a pleasing fear,
And yet I fly not from him: in his eye
There is a fastening attraction which
Fixes my fluttering eyes on his; my heart
Beats quick; he awes me, and yet draws me near,
Nearer, and nearer: Cain—Cain—save me from him!

Adah’s “pleasing fear” is a curiously mixed emotion. Adah speaks of her “fastening attraction”
toward Lucifer in the same breathless voice with which she asks Cain to save her from him. A
mystery indeed. But such were the mysteries of the heart that Byron’s poems were so famous-
notorious for probing. It was precisely this mixing of emotions—this fascination with ambiva-
ience in all its forms—that made Byron’s work so dangerous. But in another sense, this perverse
tableau, for all its notoriety, merely extrapolates the Ravenna Journal’s questing insight that “I am
not sure that Fear is not a pleasurable sensation” (28 January 1821, BLJ 8:36–38).

Here, Byron produces an enslavement-and-rescue fantasy out of the stolid milieu of the early
biblical postlapsarian world, binding it with political rebellion: a classic Byronic scenario of erot-
icized “political emotion,” to use the term coined by Algernon Charles Swinburne, the Victorian
poet and critic who was inspired like no other Victorian by Byron’s conjunction of republican
politics with emotion and aesthetic experimentation.22

Let’s take a closer look at this seduction scene:

Adah. Omnipotence
Must be all goodness.
Lucifer. Was it so in Eden?
Adah. Fiend! tempt me not with beauty; thou art fairer
Than was the serpent, and as false.

22 Algernon Charles Swinburne, “Wordsworth and Byron,” Nineteenth Century 15 (1884), reprinted in Algernon
Charles Swinburne, Miscellanies (London: Chatto and Windus, 1895), 75.
Adah’s “pleasing fear” and poignant resistance is set against Jehovah’s bloodthirsty “pleasure” for sacrifices, as Adah registers her vulnerability before Lucifer, both mimicking and rebuking her mother Eve for succumbing to the serpent “in thy most . . . heedless, harmless wantonness of bliss” (and in Byron’s most proto-Swinburnean taste for alliteration). Just as important, then, as the spectacular blasphemies of Cain’s and Lucifer’s denunciations of Jehovah, but less remarked upon, is Byron’s reworking of the sexual politics of Paradise.

Through this emphasis on seduction, Cain recasts the book of Genesis not only as a parodic “mystery play” but also as a bedroom farce and melodrama. This generic mixing is cued by Byron’s references to Cain as both “in my very fiercest Metaphysical manner” and “in my gay metaphysical style” (BLJ 8:205, 206). This generic mixing productively compounds the mixing of emotions that Byron’s work explores; it also has a political dimension, as a form of what Maria Schoina refers to as the “improvisational aesthetics that characterized the sensibility of post-Napoleonic Europe.”

Adah’s words (“I look upon him with a pleasing fear, / And yet I fly not from him”) apply equally to the scandalous authorial celebrity, Byron. Cain thus allegorizes Byron’s reception, with Lucifer serving as the voice for Byron to write back to his critics. This rhetorical membrane between character and author was something that Byron exploited and that orthodox Tory and liberal readers alike, such as Francis Jeffrey in the Whig-aligned Edinburgh Review, feared as having the potential to inspire the lower orders to revolution (or, possibly worse, more reading).

Measuring the distance between early and long nineteenth-century liberalism, Arthur Symons commented airily in 1909 that “Cain’s arraignment of God, which has nothing startling to say to us, who have read Nietzsche, raised all England in a kind of panic; religion itself seemed

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to be tottering.” And so it was. Even Byron’s publisher, John Murray, was afraid of *Cain*, as he was of *Don Juan* (1819–24). As Byron writes to his agent Douglas Kinnaird: “To me he talks of the power—of ‘Cain’... but he *cants* about its tendency also.... Abel & Adah &c are as pious as possible.... Milton’s Satan is twice as daring and impious as mine” (BLJ 9:60).

In a preemptive move designed to present a more politically and religiously palatable poem, Byron dedicated *Cain* to Scott (“ludicrously,” according to Hazlitt), who rose to the occasion, “accept[ing], with feelings of great obligation, the flattering proposal of Lord Byron to prefix my name to the very grand and tremendous drama of *Cain*.” Scott duly rehearsed the Byronic case for respectability by invoking the Miltonic precedent and arguing for Cain’s punishment as just desserts when he wrote to Murray that Byron “has certainly matched Milton on his own ground. Some part of his language is bold, and may shock one class of readers.... But then they must condemn *Paradise Lost* if they have a mind to be consistent. The fiend-like reasoning and bold blasphemy of the fiend and of his pupil lead exactly to the point which was to be expected,—the commission of the first murder, and the ruin and despair of the perpetrator.” Scott’s reading aligns Byron’s poem with the “consistent” reasoning of an implicitly liberal subject against the “fiend-like reasoning” of the Devil. But for many readers, Byron and Lucifer were one and the same. Hence, when Murray took legal action against the radical pirating of *Cain*, the court refused to protect the copyright of such a mischievous work.

*Cain* and its reception offer a workout of the changing meanings of political liberalism from its seventeenth-century origins in John Milton (not only *Paradise Lost* but political pamphlets advocating free speech, divorce, and republicanism) and John Locke, where it is associated with republicanism, religious toleration, rationality, and the right to resist misgovernment; through *Cain*’s appearance in Regency piracy trials; to Byron’s association with European nationalist liberal movements and other nineteenth-century radical and liberal causes, such as Chartism, and the later stages of the Risorgimento, whose chief spokesperson, Giuseppe Mazzini, announced that “the day will come when Democracy will remember all that it owes to Byron;” and beyond to Symons’s account of Byron’s poetry as both “too conscious of politics” but with “a passion for liberty.” *Cain* was a touchstone of political emotion in poetry for Victorian liberals—the poem was regarded as the most powerful challenge to orthodox religious views and most clearly registers how far British liberalism had traveled in the nineteenth century toward religious toleration and freedom of speech. John Ruskin, for example, who regarded Byron as “my master” and as one of the “leaders of revolution for the poor,” recounts that while his parents read *Don Juan* aloud at the dinner table, they discouraged his interest in *Cain*. For Byron’s contemporaries—whether Tory, liberal, or radical—what was so confronting was the way he seduced readers with “a pleasing fear” and staged the messy contradictions of

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such pleasing fear. It was this ambivalent emotional terrain of perverse attraction to scandal and misdeed that inspired the identification of Byron with perverted “genius.” Byron’s popularity staged precisely this drama of “preposterous liberalism,” a luxuriance in ambivalent emotion, and a willing subjection to power, a taste for “fiend-like reasoning” or the inability to distinguish that “fiend-like reasoning” and its “forky tongue” (1.1.230) from the avowedly open and transparent rationality of the autonomous liberal subject. This, as the drama’s subtitle has it, is the domain of mystery; and it is the “simultaneous evoking and annulling of mystery” that Jacqueline Rose proposes “as a working definition of celebrity.” For Byron, too, was a manipulator of emotions, just like Lucifer, whose designs upon Cain necessitated finding ways “to depress” Cain and not “elate him,” as Byron explains in a letter to Murray: “the object of the demon is to depress him still further in his own estimation . . . till he falls into the frame of mind—that leads to the Catastrophe” (i.e., the killing of Abel) (BLJ 9:53). Here, then, “the politics of Paradise” (BLJ 8:216) involves the political manipulation of emotion. And if Lucifer should be such a sophisticated and emotionally intelligent manipulator, what does that say about the “genius”—or spirit—that created him?

As Hazlitt writes in The Spirit of the Age, “Lord Byron makes man after his own image, woman after his own heart; the one is a capricious tyrant, the other a yielding slave.” And this “image” is a fantasy that readers “like.” Another name for that relationship between capricious tyrant and yielding slave is celebrity. That Hazlitt was driven to mimic Byron’s Tory detractors in these attacks on personality—while at the same time linking Byron in this invidious comparison with the “servile” Tory Scott—demonstrates both the complexity of the political field at this point at which liberalism was emerging as a discourse and Hazlitt’s own perverse and unstable relations to the political affiliations of liberalism and radicalism.

John Barrell has argued that “while the political republic may properly be, for Hazlitt, democratic,” the “republic of taste” was “governed by an aristocracy of genius.” But Hazlitt’s critique of Byron suggests otherwise, that politics and taste are more interimplicated, sharing a more fraught relationship. After all, Hazlitt’s attack on Byron takes the form of an expression of taste; and what Hazlitt does not “like” about Byron is his “preposterous liberalism,” which is a political disposition. I would argue that it is precisely such contradiction—between politics and genius—that marks liberal modernity and becomes generative for the modern liberal subject.

The contradiction Hazlitt names between Byron’s politics and “genius” (where, to use Samuel Johnson’s definition, “genius” means variously “mental power,” “disposition,” or “nature”) is not specific to Byron but general to the “spirit” of the post-Napoleonic age. One of the reasons for the public’s mighty “like” of Byron is that Byron both embodies and solicits this contradiction which entails the conflation of politics with desire or disposition, whereby even the naming of politics as something to like, or not, suggests the transformed political landscape of the post-Napoleonic age, in which politics and morality are irrevocably mixed and compounded by the claims of personal style, taste, emotion, and occasion (to take a key term of Hazlitt’s text and the name of the present journal).

30 Hazlitt, Spirit, 154.
Arguably, the inaugurating contradiction of liberal modernity is the contradiction between the “principles” Napoleon voiced (“I am the Revolution”) and Napoleon’s “privilege,” the preposterous resumption of the trappings of monarchy in his self-declared emperor-dom (which is then trumped by the Holy Alliance) and the preposterous “Restoration” of the Bourbon monarchy at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Likewise, Benjamin Constant’s critique of Napoleonic anachronicity in *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation* (1813) is one of the primary documents of modern liberal political theory. For Biancamaria Fontana, writing in the late 1980s, Constant’s emotional “volatility” continues to speak to the modern crisis in socialist and liberal ideologies, making Constant “the true representative of ‘modern’ liberalism: not the simple-minded, crudely utilitarian ideology of triumphant nineteenth-century capitalism, but a subtle, sophisticated and sceptical vision of that ideology, better suited to the stagnation and gloom of the late twentieth century.”

Skepticism is a key affective tonality in Byron’s writing, as *Cain, A Mystery*amply demonstrates, and one that has always been read suspiciously by supposedly sunnier liberal dispositions. Such skepticism accords with the ambivalence of Byron’s powerful dis-identification with Napoleon. And the death of Napoleon on Saint Helena in May 1821 (Napoleon’s own post-Napoleonic fade-out) is another event in the political and emotional background of *Cain’s* composition, another step in the transtextual logic that connects *Cain’s* futuristic landscape of fallen, former worlds to Byron’s present experience of the aftermath of failed Carbonari insurrection and Napoleonic empire.

**IV**

Byron’s participation in the Carbonari movement was, to some extent, the chance result of his relationship with Countess Teresa Guiccioli, whose brother, Count Pietro Gamba, and father, Count Ruggero Gamba, brought Byron into the Carbonari in 1820, when an uprising was planned for October, then rescheduled for March. As I argue, Byron’s political entanglements were serious (and not “affected,” to revisit Hazlitt’s term), but this is not to say they weren’t farcical or weren’t subject to chance. They were, as I wish to suggest.

“Occasion”—to use that very loaded and barbed word in Hazlitt—is everything. Byron died in Greece of fever and likely medical mistreatment, but it could have been in Italy, supporting the armed struggle of the Carbonari—except that the fighting never really got off the ground, and the plans were continually deferred. The *Ravenna Journal* continually complains about this tendency to deferral among Byron’s “Carbonari cronies” (*BLJ* 8:47) while plotting Byron’s own role as an aider and abettor and, indeed, a facilitator of the plans for revolution:

> The Car[bonar]i seem to have no plan—nothing fixed among themselves, how, when, or what to do. In that case, they will make nothing of the project, so often postponed, and never put in action.

> Came home, and gave some necessary orders, in case of circumstances requiring a change of place. I shall act according to what may seem proper, when I hear decidedly what the Barbarians mean to do. At present, they are building a bridge of boats over the Po, which looks very warlike. A few days will probably show. I think of retiring towards Ancona, nearer the northern frontier; that is to say, if Teresa and her father are obliged to retire, which is most likely, as

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33 Biancamaria Fontana, introduction to *Political Writings*, by Benjamin Constant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2–3.
all the family are Liberals. If not, I shall stay. But my movements will depend upon the lady’s wishes—for myself, it is much the same.

(23 January 1821, BLJ 8:32–33)

This entry situates Byron on the ground. And he is situated, however seemingly detached and distant the tone is here, and however much it veers into skepticism (which is not the same thing as cynicism). He “belongs,” as he later writes in a reflection on clubbability: “I belonged to . . . the Alfred, to the Cocoa tree [a gambling club]—to Waitier’s [another gambling club] . . . to the Hampden political Club—and to the Italian Carbonari . . . ’though last, not least’” (October 1821, “Detached Thoughts,” BLJ 9:23). He belongs as well when he “[m]et a company of the sect (a kind of Liberal Club) called the ‘Americanis’ in the forest, all armed, and singing, with all their might in Romagnuole—‘Sem tutti soldat’ per la liberta’ (‘we are all soldiers for liberty’). They cheered me as I passed—I returned their salute, and rode on. This may show the spirit of Italy at the present” (BLJ 8:39).

Indeed, being situated is a defining feature of liberalism, as Anderson argues: “Liberalism’s own character can only be discerned . . . if one sees liberalism not only as a philosophy aiming to set out fundamental principles of political life, but also, and almost from the start, as a situated response to historical challenges.”34 A situated response involves recognizing conflict and contradiction, how political engagement is entailed by emotions, and how personal entanglements inform political alliances: in Byron’s case—whether retiring to the northern frontier or staying to help in the fighting—“my movements will depend upon the lady’s wishes.” Politics here is not only romantic but also a family affair.

In October 1820, when the Carbonari uprising was originally scheduled, Byron offered financial support to the liberals, accompanied by that address to the revolutionaries (never delivered, as it turned out, because it ended up in the hands of a spy): “An Englishman, a friend to liberty, having understood that the Neapolitans permit even foreigners to contribute to the good cause, is desirous that they should do him the honour of accepting a thousand louis, which he takes the liberty of offering” (BLJ 7:187). In January 1821 Byron had a practical role in purchasing and storing weapons, and he offered strategic and moral support—so much so that he was made an honorary chief of the local Turba, or mob (hence his giving “some necessary orders”).

In another entry, three days later, Byron is an observer, a sympathizer, though this is in itself a kind of participation:

The gentlemen, who make revolutions and are gone on a shooting, are not yet returned. They don’t return till Sunday—that is to say, they have been out for five days, buffooning, while the interests of a whole country are at stake. . . .

It is a difficult part to play amongst such a set of assassins and blockheads—but, when the scum is skimmed off, or has boiled over, good may come of it. If this country could but be freed, what would be too great for the accomplishment of that desire? for the extinction of that Sigh of Ages? Let us hope. They have hoped these thousand years. The very revolvement of the chances may bring it—it is upon the dice.

(26 January 1821, BLJ 8:36)

34 Anderson, “Character and Ideology,” 212.
This entry registers support for the struggle, from the particular moment of the here and now and through the long historical view; it registers hope, as well as a kind of realistic fatalism and skepticism, in recognition of the difficulty of the undertaking of the centuries-long “desire” and struggle for independence. The overriding expression of support, the alternating hope and detachment, even the references to scum and buffooning blockheads—at once critical and fond—all reflect a deeply held and locally grounded (and situated) knowledge of Italian culture, history, and politics and a support of armed struggle to see the project of Italian independence through.

As the *Ravenna Journal* consistently demonstrates, Byron’s participation in and experience of the preparations for armed insurrection involve the same preoccupation with chance, chaos, and world-making that informs *Cain, A Mystery*. This preoccupation reflects a form of utopianism, not pessimism: “out of chaos,” after all, “God made a world” (*BLJ* 8:13). These entries document the historical, biographical, and compositional links between the liberal skepticism and scientific freethinking of *Cain*’s future-former worlds and Byron’s involvement in the liberal-nationalist project of the Carbonari. The journal’s elaboration of the contemporary geological debates that underpin *Cain*’s sublime vision of chaos offers a case in point:

> It is not one man, nor a million, but the *spirit* of liberty which must be spread. The waves which dash upon the shore are, one by one, broken, but yet the *ocean* conquers, nevertheless. It overpowers the Armada, it wears the rock, and, if the *Neptunians* are to be believed, it has not only destroyed, but made a world.

(9 January 1821, *BLJ* 8:20)

The Neptunists believed that the earth and the planet’s rocks were formed in the water, while for the Plutonists, they were formed in fire: both views challenge the biblical Creation narrative of Genesis. Here, the geological and emotional catastrophism that informs *Cain* is explicitly linked to political world-making, and the spirit of liberty connects Italian politics to the creation of the world. This world-making project is for Byron simultaneously metaphysical, aesthetic, and political. It is also emotional, in that the circuit from destruction to creation traces the loop from fear to hope that is echoed in the *Ravenna Journal*’s question “what Hope is there without a deep leaven of Fear?”

In Byron’s inter- and extratextual universes, the occasions of poetic composition and sexual and political revolution, and the emotions of love and revolution, are linked; political alliances and romantic entanglements are equally fraught with emotion (and with elements of farce and “buffooning,” it has to be said), like Byron’s affair with Teresa Guiccioli, aided and abetted by her brother’s involvement in the cause of Italian liberation. (And it was Pietro Gamba who encouraged Byron in the Greek cause.) In April 1819 Byron and Teresa became lovers. Byron and Count Guiccioli were rivals for Teresa, and the contest was sorted not through a duel but through a papal arrangement. In July 1820 Teresa was granted a legal separation from her husband, Count Guiccioli, but was not allowed to live with Byron (who resided, incidentally—farically—in a rented apartment in the palace of Guiccioli, his rival): Teresa was restricted to living either with her father or in a convent, and so she chose her father.35

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35 The Palazzo Guiccioli in Ravenna is currently undergoing restoration and will eventually house the “Museo Byron” dedicated to the poet’s life and works in Italy and his relationship with Countess Teresa Guiccioli. (At the time of writing, opening is scheduled for the spring of 2019.)
In early January 1821, as preparations for the insurrection mounted, Byron was still living in the Guiccioli palace, which was close to Teresa’s father’s house in Ravenna. Byron had spent two sleepless nights waiting for Teresa’s brother and the other local Carbonari to seek shelter and arms to protect themselves from the Austrians, “the Powers (as they call now those wretches with crowns)” (BLJ 8:20). On the third night, as he waited, he realized there would be no fighting that night on the part of these on-again-off-again liberals: “It seems,” Byron wrote, “that, just at this moment (as Lydia Languish says), there will be no elopement after all” (BLJ 8:18). Thus, Byron mimics the disappointment of the wealthy young heiress in Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s The Rivals (1775)—who prefers the poor soldier to a man of her own class, and who has fallen in love with Ensign Beverley—once her lover is revealed to be a young aristocrat, Captain Jack Absolute, in disguise. (As Captain Jack’s servant, Fag, says: “my Master is in love with a lady of a very singular taste: a lady who likes him better as a half-pay Ensign than if she knew he was son and heir to Sir Anthony Absolute, a baronet with three thousand a year!” And as Mrs. Malaprop says to Lydia: “Why, thou perverse one!—tell me what you can object to him?”) So, Byron’s political entanglements were serious, I suggest, but they were also farcical. Political intrigue and bedroom farce go hand in hand, as do sexual intrigue and political farce, as they had in the career of Sheridan himself—Lydia Languish’s creator, the Foxite Whig, and Byron’s early political and literary mentor.

Throughout January, as Byron waited to supply the arms to the Carbonari conspirators to fight the Austrian army, there was only “weather bad” and “politics quite misty” (BLJ 8:11, 45). “The weather is still muggy as a London May—mist, mizzle, the air replete with Scotticisms, which, though fine in the descriptions of Ossian, are somewhat tiresome in real, prosaic perspective. Politics still mysterious” (BLJ 8:28). This heavy weather hosts a kind of thick intertextuality of farce, coincidence, and mystery that is vital to Cain’s political contexts, Cuvierian geology, Lucretian metaphysics, aesthetic vision, and emotional moods.

And it was to continue that way until the end of the campaign. The Carbonari had claimed a constitutional monarchy in January 1821, but the Holy Alliance opposed this and called in the Austrian army to crush the resistance. On 24 February it was all over, with the collapse of the Carbonari movement in northern Italy, before the final defeat of the insurgent Neapolitan forces on 7 March: “I always had an idea that it would be bungled” (BLJ 8:49). (That is, that it would be a farce.) After all this misty politics, heavy weather, and “bungled” revolution, Byron starts Cain, A Mystery in July 1821, the same month that Teresa’s father and brother were banished from Romagna by the authorities, in the wake of the failed insurrection. Within weeks, Teresa followed them. Byron remained in Ravenna to finish the drama, before joining them in Pisa in October, after he had written Cain and The Vision of Judgment, and after he had met with the Greek government in exile, preparing for the Greek Revolution, the next liberal cause Byron would be actively involved in.

V

Mystery is one of the key registers of Cain: in its parody of the Christian genre of the mystery play; in its celebration of the mystery of chance, coincidence, and the randomness of things; and in its conjuration of the mystery of the perversity and ambivalence of human emotions, like Adah’s pleasing fear. While Cain’s presiding figure of mystery is Lucifer, another figure of mystery

who flits through the political and intertextual landscape of 1821 is Mrs. Malaprop, the queen of bedroom farce and another of Sheridan's masterful comic creations, like her charge Lydia Languish. Malaprop is a kind of goddess of mystery, alternately fierce and gay. Byron adopts her persona in a letter to Kinnaird about testy negotiations with Murray: “The Mystery is resolved,” as Mrs. Malaprop says” (26 April 1821, BLJ 8:101). Or, as Mrs. Malaprop actually says, “O, he will dissolve my mystery!” (5.3.193), meaning he will expose me, I will be unmasked, but also that he will resolve the mystery—the mystery will be both resolved and lost: here the malapropism “dissolve” allows a marvelous ambiguity and emotional ambivalence that keep the wonder of mystery in view and in play.

Intriguingly, Byron’s parodic malapropism (“resolved” for “dissolve” for “resolve”), which he appropriates from Mrs. Malaprop, is the very same term that Lucifer uses to explain the mystery of death. Speaking of the stars, Cain asks, “I would not have them die, they are so lovely. What is death?” Lucifer answers: “To be resolved into the earth” (1.1.285). Here, in one of the drama’s most penetrating, emotionally complex moments, Cain’s naïve wonder and aesthetic delight are answered by Lucifer with this chilly, evasive euphemism. Poignant and harrowing. A sorrowful mystery.

In self-deprecating comments anticipating the play’s reception, Byron wrote to his friend Thomas Moore that his “Rhapsody” Cain was “entitled ‘A Mystery,’ according to the former Christian custom, and in honour of what it probably will remain to the reader” (BLJ 8:216). Like the “politics mysterious” of the Carbonari, the mystery and the wonder of Byron’s promiscuous generic mixing—alternately “fierce” and “gay,” tragic and farcical, skeptical and hopeful, sorrowful and joyful—remain and will not be dissolved.

“Upon occasion” Byron resumes his privilege; and he resumed that privilege in 1823 to offer support to the Greeks fighting for independence from the Turks, which took the form of financial support and administration on the ground in Missolonghi.37 As Hazlitt is writing his essay, Byron dies in Greece on 19 April 1824. At the diegetic level, Byron’s death occurs just after Hazlitt has sarcastically attacked his “principles” and “preposterous liberalism”: “His Lordship has made great offers of service to the Greeks—money and horses. He is at present in Cephalonia, waiting the event!” The very next sentence registers the “occasion” of Byron’s death, with a set of asterisks, and then the tone of the thing changes, or seems to:

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We had written thus far when news came of the death of Lord Byron, and put an end at once to a strain of somewhat peevish invective, which was intended to meet his eye, not to insult his memory. Had we known that we were writing his epitaph, we must have done it with a different feeling. As it is, we think it better and more like himself, to let what we had written stand, than to take up our leaden shafts, and try to melt them into “tears of sensibility,” or mould them into dull praise, and an affected show of candour…. Lord Byron is dead: he also died a martyr to his zeal in the cause of freedom, for the last, best hopes of man. Let that be his excuse and his epitaph!38

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37 For details of Byron’s participation in the Greek War of Independence, see Beaton, Byron’s War; and Stephen Minta, “Lord Byron and Mavrokordatos,” Romanticism 12, no. 2 (2006): 126–42.

38 Hazlitt, Spirit, 179–81.
How to read this “different feeling” that is projected by Hazlitt’s act of catching himself in the act of attacking Byron as he receives the news of Byron’s death? Best not to affect false feeling but “to let what we had written stand.” Hence, if we read beyond what “stands” to the “epitaph” itself, we see that it is not the cause of freedom itself but his own zeal in that cause that Byron died a martyr to. The cause itself is mediated—effaced—by the zeal: so Hazlitt insists even now on the primacy for Byron of his own feelings. Perhaps there is no “different feeling”? Hazlitt’s critique of Byron’s “preposterous liberalism” becomes instead this preposterous tribute to it.

Heavy emotional weather. Politics still mysterious.