

## THE SERPENT BITES THE FILE: BYRON AND THE ARMENIANS

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*The Armenian Monastery at the Isola San Lazzaro, Venice.*

Byron and his friend John Cam Hobhouse discovered the Armenian Monastery at San Lazzaro on November 13th 1816 – nine days after arriving in Venice from Milan. Hobhouse’s diary entries for this time are worth reading in full. On November 13th he records the following:

Byron and I then went in gondola to the establishment of St. Lazare. It was some time before we were let in – the brothers were at prayer, but when we walked into their church one of them bowed out and most courteously showed us about. Unfortunately the key to the library was not to be found – the keeper of it was out. We saw the neat galleries and little chambers of the fathers with Armenian letters over them. Our conductor showed us a man’s dictionary of Armenian and Latin – told us there were about forty *frati* and eighteen pupils, some few from Armenia but mostly Constantinople. One has been in London and talks English – the youths learn Latin, all of them, and some Greek – also German and French some – and all Italian – English will now be taught. Those who please of the pupils enter the order – they have revenues on the mainland. Zanetto said Napoleon despoiled them, but our conductor contradicted this and said that he gave a decree from Paris saving this brotherhood from the fate of the other monasteries on account of their patriotic labours for their countrymen. We saw their press, where eight men are employed, when we saw them on an Armenian Testament. They are now on a translation of Rollin. Their average is four books a year. They are all for the use of the Armenian nation and all printed, as our guide said, in the literal Armenian. They are shipped for Constantinople and there sold. The dining-hall set out there looked like a Cambridge dining-hall, and the establishment is about 100 years old founded by one [space left: “Mechitar”] whose picture is in the refectory. It did our hearts good to see the place – we are to return and see the library – they are all Catholics ...<sup>1</sup>

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A paper delivered in part at Yerevan State University, Armenia, in autumn 1996. All quotations from *Don Juan*, *Manfred* and *The Vision of Judgement* are edited by me from the rough manuscripts. I am grateful to the staff at the Morgan Library, New York, and to John R. Murray and Virginia Murray, for their help. The following abbreviations apply: LJ: *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*, ed. Prothero (John Murray, 1900). BLJ: *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*, ed. Marchand (John Murray, 1973-94), CPW: *Lord Byron the Complete Poetical Works* ed. McGann and Weller (Oxford 1980-93). CMP: *Lord Byron the Complete Miscellaneous Prose* ed. Nicholson (Oxford 1991).

1: Broughton papers, B.L.Add.Mss.56538, 12v.-13r (edited).

It made a huge change from mainland Venice, which, in its fixation with the flesh, its brutal Austrian masters, its drained economy, and its starving populace, formed in some ways (not all, as we shall see) a small-scale image of hell. And the monastery had been blessed by Napoleon! The Emperor was, even now, in his final exile on St Helena, a defeated demi-god to the two men; they could even ignore the awkward fact that it was he who, by the Treaty of Campo Formio in 1797, had given Venice to the Austrians in the first place.

On the November 29th, Hobhouse had a further visit to record (I do not think Byron went with him this time – “we” refers to his family, who had by now joined him in Venice):

Went with party to the Armenian convent and was shown the library there by a monk who has been in England and who is a professor of that language – and intends composing a grammar in English and Armenian. He showed us several very curious works in Armenian MSS – also some few of Adams mathematical instruments – a life of Alexander the Great – illuminated with pictures – of the fourth century, original and differing from Quintus Curtius and Arrian – not in material, but containing other details. The copy is torn, but there is another in Smyrna, from which our monk intends to publish an Italian translation. Also an Armenian translation of the fifth century, of the Chronicles of Eusebius, of which Scaliger has published fragments. He told us they had no MSS older than the fourth century, but that the most esteemed and the greatest number were of the eighth – the library contains about 400 MSS, of which 120 or 130 are different works, the remainder duplicates. They have history, geography, and biblical learning, besides some treatises on the arts. We saw one on navigation printed and another on perspective – compilations. They have printed about twelve MSS works, and of other books about twenty since the foundation of the institution some 120 years go. Their present principal is a Transylvanian. They have forty resident monks and fifty elsewhere at Constantinople, in Hungary, and in Armenia. Amongst their books is a history of Armenia compiled about forty years ago, in three volumes thick octavo, by a brother of the convent. Also they showed us Whiston’s *Historiæ Armeniæ*, published in London with a Latin version, which our monk said was well done, although Whiston had neither Armenian grammar nor dictionary – the work itself is old. We saw a little book printed in fourteen languages. Many of the works from their press had pretty plates to them. The library contains also a very good collection of other works of reference in Latin, Greek, Italian, French and German. They have compiled a French and Armenian dictionary. The scholars amount in all to eighteen. Eleven in one class all learn literal Armenian, all Italian, and all Latin. Some learn Greek and Turkish and German and French and now will be taught English. We were shown the press again, where they were hard at work on the Rollin. We all were highly delighted with the society, and shall not forget the answer given to us when we asked our monk what was the purpose of the establishment – “*The illumination of our people*”. We were shown the Armenian newspaper, published once a fortnight. There is some little addition continually made to the funds of the society. The refectory, the *combination* room, the chapel, the school, all are in a style of most complete neatness. I have seen nothing in Italy which pleases me so much or elsewhere of the kind.<sup>2</sup>

Hobhouse was impressed by the grave all-male camaraderie on San Lazzaro. With its dining hall, “combination room” and chapel, it was like a Cambridge college, except that it lacked the drunkenness, venality and sloth prevalent in real Cambridge colleges, and was dedicated (as the Englishmen thought) to bringing “Enlightenment” to the Armenian people, just as Cambridge should be – but was not – dedicated to bringing it to the English people. Byron was as impressed as Hobhouse. On December 4th he wrote to Murray:

They have an establishment here – a church & convent of seventy monks – very learned & accomplished men – some of them – they also have a press – & make great efforts for the enlightening of their nation<sup>3</sup>

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2: Broughton papers, B.L.Add.Mss.56538, 22v.-23r (edited).

3: BLJ V 137.

What they did not understand was the use of the word “illumination” (Father Avgerian, their guide, would have used the English word, not “*éclaircissement*” or “*illuminismo*”). It did not for the monks have a primarily eighteenth-century meaning – although with their up-to-date mathematical and scientific interests they were very enlightened in some senses. It had a prior Christian meaning; the first Christian missionary to Armenia had been St Gregory the Illuminator. Napoleon had not protected them because he imagined them disciples of Voltaire.

Early in December, Hobhouse left Venice, and Byron was alone with his “Adriatic nymph” Marianna Segati:<sup>4</sup>

I fell in love the first week with Madame Segati & I have continued so ever since – because she is very pretty & pleasing – & talks Venetian – which amuses me – & is naive & I can besides see her & make love with her at all or any hours – which is convenient, with my temperament ...<sup>5</sup>

It was a new luxury; none of the English women he had loved had been as relaxed, frank or available as this. He had not been offered sex by a mature and uninhibited bourgeoisie since Josepha Beltram of Seville had invited him to her bed in late July 1809, and then he had been too young, uncertain, and too snooty, to accept.<sup>6</sup> Marianna impressed him. On November 17th, four days after his first visit to San Lazzaro, he began a letter to Thomas Moore:

... I have fallen in love, which, next to falling into the canal, (which would be of no use, for I can swim) is the best or the worst thing I could do. I have got some extremely good apartments in the house of a “Merchant of Venice,” who is a good deal occupied in business, and has a wife in her twenty-second year. Marianna (that is her name) is in her appearance altogether like an antelope. She has the large, black, oriental eyes, with that peculiar expression in them which is rarely seen among *Europeans* – even the Italians ... This expression she has *naturally*, – and something more than this. In short, I cannot describe the effect of this kind of eye, – at least, upon me. Her features are regular, and rather aquiline – mouth small – skin clear and soft, with a kind of hectic colour – forehead remarkably good: her hair is of the dark gloss, curl, and colour of Lady J[ersey]’s: her figure is light and pretty, and she is a famous songstress – scientifically so; her natural voice (in conversation, I mean) is very sweet; and the naiveté of the Venetian dialect is always pleasing in the mouth of a woman.

There the letter breaks off, only to start again six days later:

You will perceive that my description, which was proceeding with the minuteness of a passport, has been interrupted for several days. In the mean time

Here it breaks off again, for Thomas Moore – its editor – felt that Byron’s description of what had happened “in the mean time” was unsuitable for print. Then it starts again, on December the 5th:

Since my former dates, I do not know that I have much to add on the subject, and, luckily, nothing to take away; for I am more pleased than ever with my Venetian, and begin to feel very serious on that point – so much so, that I shall be silent<sup>7</sup>

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4: BLJ V 153.

5: BLJ V 193.

6: Senorita Beltram reproached Byron about this on July 28th 1809. He wrote to his mother about it (BLJ I 219) and Hobhouse recorded it in his diary (Broughton papers, B.L.Add.Mss.56527, 14v.-15r.).

7: BLJ V 130.

Between the start of the letter on November 17th and its resumptions on the 23rd and on December 5th, two things have happened: the first is that he has fallen deeply in love with Marianna; and the second is at once revealed in the letter:

By way of divertisement, I am studying daily, at an Armenian monastery, the Armenian language. I found that my mind wanted something craggy to break upon: and this – as the most difficult thing I could discover here for an amusement – I have chosen, to torture me into attention. It is a rich language, however, and would amply repay any one the trouble of learning it. I try, and shall go on; – but I answer for nothing, least of all for my intentions or my success.<sup>8</sup>

His relationship with Marianna needed (he claimed) to be complemented with something intellectually challenging, if both sides of his nature were to be satisfied. On November 27th, therefore<sup>9</sup> in the middle of the letter, two days *before* Hobhouse's second visit, while Hobhouse was sight-seeing with his newly-arrived family, Byron returned to San Lazzaro, met Father Harut'iwn Avgerian properly<sup>10</sup> and began Armenian lessons with him.

According to George Eric Mackay, the minor poet who visited San Lazzaro in the 1870s, the sessions began with two days of Armenian history, climaxing thus:

After being repeatedly invaded and ravaged, Armenia was finally divided among three nations, and became the prey of Russians, Persians and Turks, the Turks claiming the largest share. Armenia is the Poland of the East, and Leo [the Ruppenian] was its Kosciusko; its avenger is not yet born!<sup>11</sup>

If Mackay is correct, the introduction was well-calculated to appeal to Byron's liberal, anti-imperialist politics. Oblivious to the cryptic "intentions" of his new pupil, Father Avgerian further assured him that Armenia had been the historical location of Eden. Whatever his reaction was to this (and he repeated it twice in writing, once publicly and once privately, as we shall see) Byron was, on closer acquaintance, still more impressed by the age and continuity of the civilisation of which the monks were the modern guardians. He examined in greater detail the ancient manuscripts which they possessed. The letter to Moore continues still further:

There are some very curious MSS. in the monastery, as well as books; translations also from Greek originals, now lost, and from Persian and Syriac, &c.; beside works of their own people.<sup>12</sup>

Many of these Armenian texts deepened his interest in the theme of psychological and theological dualism, with which he had for some time been preoccupied: the idea that man's spiritual nature was irreconcilable with his physical nature, that each had been created by a separate deity, and that the soul was a divine spark, in a prison-house of flesh (a highly agreeable prison-house admittedly, if one shared it with Marianna Segati). Either assisted by, or assisting, Father Avgerian, he translated several of the texts, including – as I have argued elsewhere<sup>13</sup> – the following Persian creation myth. It is from a text, called *Against the Sects*, sometimes Latinised as *De Deo*, by the fifth-century Christian apologist Eznik of Kolb, who includes it only to refute it in a passage over twelve times its length. Its provenance is

**8:** BLJ V 130.

**9:** See the monastery visitors' book, quoted at LJ IV 9n.

**10:** This name is always gallicised inaccurately as "Pascal Aucher". Charles Dowsett, "*The Madman Has Come Back Again!*" (*Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies*, 1988-1989 – hereinafter *Madman* – pp. 50-1 n13) suggests *Anastase* as a more accurate French version of his Christian name. An anonymous writer in Volume V of *Bentley's Miscellany* for 1839 (pp. 257-62) describes two hours spent in his company on San Lazzaro.

**11:** George Eric Mackay, *Lord Byron at the Armenian Convent* (Venice 1876) p.26.

**12:** BLJ V 129-30.

**13:** See Cochran, *Byron and the Birth of Ahrimanes*, *Keats-Shelley Review* No 6, 1991, pp. 49-59.

unknown, but the myth it describes seems to be Zurvanite. Zurvanism was a variant of Zoroastrianism;<sup>14</sup> it took a step back logically from the idea of two powers ruling the universe, and imagined a greater prior power, which created them both:

(The authors of the Persian religion) say, that before the creation of heaven and earth and their creatures Zervanus existed, which being interpreted signifies *fortune*, or *glory*. He sacrificed a thousand years that a son might be born to him (named Hormistus) who should create heaven and earth and whatever in them is.

And after this sacrifice of a thousand years, he began thus to meditate: Will this sacrifice profit me? and produce my son Hormistus, or do I labour in vain?

And, during this meditation, Hormistus and Harminus were conceived in the womb of their mother; Hormistus by sacrifice, but Harminus by doubt.

Zervanus being assured of the fact, said: There are twins in the womb, to the elder shall the sovereignty be given.

But Hormistus having divined his father's determination, betrayed it to Harminus, saying: Our father Zeruuanus [sic] is disposed to give the sovereignty to the elder of us two.

But Harminus hearing these words, came forth immediately, and presented himself to his father.

Having seen him Zeruuanus knew not who he was, and said: Who art thou? he replied: I am thy son. But Zeruuanus said: My son is bright and of a grateful odour, but thou dark and offensive.

But while they thus discoursed, Hormistus was born at this time, shining and sweet, and presented himself to Zeruuanus.

And Zeruuanus knew him to be Hormistus his son for whom he had sacrificed. And he gave the instruments with which he had sacrificed into the hands of Hormistus saying: With these I sacrificed for thee, henceforward do thou the same for me.

And Zeruuanus held forth the instruments to Hormistus; and blessed him. But Harminus standing before Zeruuanus, said: Hast thou not vowed the kingdom to the elder born?

Zeruuanus who could not promise in vain, said to Harminus: Hence thou deceitful and malicious! the kingdom is thine for nine thousand years. But Hormistus I appoint over thee, and after nine thousand years he shall reign alone, and do what he wisheth.

Then began Hormistus and Harminus the creation. All things made from Hormistus, were good and right, but which Harminus made, was bad and wrong.<sup>15</sup>

Hormistus is Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian God of Light; and Harminus is Ahriman, the Zoroastrian God of Darkness. Byron may have helped Father Avgerian translate Eznik's version of this myth, in addition to the other texts on which they worked; it is printed in the *Armenian Grammar for Englishmen*, which was published in 1819 as the fellow to the *English Grammar for Armenians*. Byron had assisted Avgerian at both: he refers to the former in a letter of January 2nd<sup>16</sup> and was to finance the latter. The text is, however, excluded from the *Armenian Grammar's* second edition, of 1832<sup>17</sup> – a sign that Father Avgerian was uneasy with it, as well he might be, and had only included it to honour Byron and to acknowledge his help.

Byron's own interest in it would not have lessened by the fact that the offensive twin Harminus – Latinised as "Arimanes" – played an important role in the tragedy which, unknown to all, even to Hobhouse (and certainly, I should think, unknown to Marianna) he had all the time been writing: *Manfred*. Much of this work, he told Scrope Davies, had been written the previous autumn in Switzerland:<sup>18</sup> but now, in Venice, he was to find the confidence to finish it, and to find, on San Lazzaro of all places, several reassuring confirmations of its unorthodox theology – or theologies: "a mixed mythology of my own –

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14: For a detailed discussion, see R.C.Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma* (Oxford 1955) Chapter III; also Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1975) pp. 51, 181-3, or 214-15.

15: Paschal Aucher, *A Grammar, Armenian and English*, Venice 1819, pp. 199-203.

16: BLJ V 156.

17: Avgerian puts in its place (1832 edition, pp. 169-71) a poem by the twelfth-century Nierses Clajensis (Nerses Shnorhali) translated by Alexander Goode.

18: BLJ XI 164.

which you may suppose is somewhat of the strangest” was the way he alerted Kinnaird to them, on March 25th.<sup>19</sup> In the 1830s Father Avgerian still showed visitors the spot in the garden where Byron meditated on the play.<sup>20</sup>

Manfred is a man tormented by excess of systematic study – study of a kind Byron had never put himself through (*he* had emerged from Cambridge resolutely *unenlightened*). The play was his first; and it is not fanciful to think that he may have felt some personal research necessary, to enter into its nightmare world. Here he is, confessing to Murray his need (never acknowledged at any other time) for some intellectually rigorous pastime:

I find the language (which is twin, the literal and the vulgar) difficult but not invincible (at least I hope not) – I shall go on. – – I found it necessary to twist my mind round some severer study – and this – as being the hardest I could devise here – will be a file for the serpent<sup>21</sup>

His last phrase refers to the fable of Æsop,<sup>22</sup> in which the hungry (and very stupid) serpent enters the blacksmith’s forge and tries to eat one of the files there. The file, unharmed, rebukes him, explaining that it is the master of all the other metals in the forge, and that “if one struggles with a superior power one will always come off worse”.<sup>23</sup> Here is Manfred, confessing to the Witch of the Alps how *he* bit on a file:

Then I passed  
The nights of years in sciences untaught,  
Save in the old-time; and with time and toil,  
And weary vigils, and unbroken fasts,  
And terrible Ordeal, and such penance  
As in itself has power upon the Air,  
And Spirits that do compass Air and Earth,  
Space and the peopled Infinite, I made  
Mine eyes familiar with Eternity –  
Such as before me did the Magi, and  
He who from out their fountain-dwellings raised  
Eros and Anteros at Gadara,  
As I do thee – and with my knowledge grew  
The thirst of knowledge – and the power and joy  
Of this most bright Intelligence – until ...<sup>24</sup>

“Until,” that is, his thirst for knowledge and power destroyed his beloved Astarte.

The myth to which Manfred alludes, of the raising Eros and Anteros at Gadara, by the third-century Syrian philosopher Iamblichus, is little known. Here it is, in a note to

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**19:** BLJ V 195.

**20:** LJ IV 9n.

**21:** BLJ V137.

**22:** Æsop’s *Fables*, III 12.

**23:** James Beattie’s *The Minstrel* (1771-4) with which Byron was familiar, for it was one of his models for the Spenserian stanza of *Childe Harold*, uses the image powerfully:

“Like them, abandon’d to Ambition’s sway,  
“I sought for glory in the paths of guile;  
“And fawn’d and smiled, to plunder and betray,  
“Myself betray’d and plundered all the while;  
“So gnaw’d the viper the corroding file.  
“But now with pangs of keen remorse I rue  
“Those years of trouble and debasement vile. –  
“Yet why should I this cruel theme pursue!

“Fly, fly, detested thoughts, for ever from my view.” (II xiv)

**24:** Manfred, II ii 83-96. For the line *And weary vigils, and unbroken fasts*, see Cochran, *A Note on the text of Manfred II ii*, *Byron Journal* 1994, p. 79.

Pausanias, translated by the English neo-Platonic philosopher Thomas Taylor, himself an important but unacknowledged influence on Byron when he wrote *Manfred*.<sup>25</sup>

Jamblichus immediately touching the water with his hand (for he sat, perhaps, on the margin of the fountain), and murmuring a few words, raised from the bottom of the fountain a fair boy, of a moderate stature, whose hair seemd to be tinged with gold, and the upper part of whose breast was of a luminous appearance. His companions being astonished at the novelty of the affair, Let us pass on, says he, to the next fountain; and at the same time he arose, fixed in thought, and, performing the same ceremonies as before, called forth the other Love, who was in all respects similar to the former, except that his hair scattered in his neck was blacker, and was like the sun in refulgence. At the same time, both boys eagerly embraced Jamblichus, as if he had been their natural parent: but he immediately restored them to their proper seats, and, when he had washed, departed from the place.<sup>26</sup>

Eros and Anteros are not primal gods of creation: they are the god of love, and his twin who revenges the injuries of lovers. Despite this, the parallels between Jamblichus conjuring them up, Zervanus conceiving the twins Hormistus and Harminus in the Zurvanite myth, and Manfred, in imagination, following suit, is very striking.<sup>27</sup>

Byron also translated the Corinthian Epistles to and from St Paul, which were canonical in the Armenian Bible but apocryphal in the English (in fact they're forgeries,<sup>28</sup> but no-one knew that in 1817). On March 7th he writes to Scrope Davies:

I have been acquiring the Armenian Alphabet – & have lately translated into scriptural English – chapter & verse an epistle to St. Paul – and an epistle from St Paul to the Corinthians – which is in the Armenian version of the Scriptures – & not in ours; – this I mean to send on soon to Mr. Murray. – – I have also sent the said Jno. Murray Esq. two acts transcribed of a sort of metaphysical dramatic poem (written in Switzerland last autumn most of it) & I will send him the third in a few days – pray tell him so ...<sup>29</sup>

It seems that Scrope is to understand a link between the Epistles and the poem. As with Eznik of Kolb and the Zurvanite myth, Byron was less interested in the orthodox content of the Epistles, and more in the unorthodox (indeed, blasphemous) ideas which they refute:

... these are the sinful words of these impure men, for thus do they say and teach:  
That it behoves not to admit the Prophets.  
Neither do they affirm the omnipotence of God:  
Neither do they affirm the resurrection of the flesh:  
Neither do they affirm that man was altogether created by God:  
Neither do they affirm that Jesus Christ was born in the flesh from the Virgin Mary:  
Neither do they affirm that the world was the work of God, but of some one of the angels.<sup>30</sup>

Simon and Clebus, whose ideas these are, and against whom the Corinthians are asking Paul for guidance, had, it seems, been Gnostic dualists,<sup>31</sup> preaching the acute disharmony of flesh and spirit, believing in more than one god, maintaining that the physical world is the work of the demiurge, or of Satan, and that Christ could not possibly have partaken of it, or

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**25:** Byron asks Hobhouse to bring "Taylor's Pausanias" out to Switzerland on May 1st and again on June 23rd (BLJ V 74 and 80). Hobhouse obeys on July 9th (see *Byron's Bulldog, The Letters of John Cam Hobhouse to Lord Byron*, ed. Graham, Ohio 1984, p. 228). Byron quotes Taylor's Pausanias in a deleted note to the rough draft of *Manfred* II ii (see *Manuscripts of the Younger Romantics, Byron I* Garland 1986, pp. 66-67). See Cochran, *Manfred* and Thomas Taylor, *Byron Journal* 2001 pp. 62-71.

**26:** Taylor's Pausanias, III 251-2.

**27:** See also *Genesis* 25, 20-8, and 38, 27-30.

**28:** CMP 344.

**29:** BLJ XI 164.

**30:** CMP 70-1.

**31:** For a good account of Gnosticism, see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1979).

have been made flesh. They are like Manfred, who rejects Christ, whose “prophets” are not Christian but neo-platonic, whose visible, subsidiary gods exist in a many-layered hierarchy, whose Prime Mover is inscrutable, who, dying, seems destined neither for Heaven nor for Hell, and for whom the resurrection of the flesh would be extremely unwelcome. For him, as for the Gnostics, his is a spirit “cooped in clay”.<sup>32</sup> In this context, “the world” being “bad and wrong”, the last idea of Simon and Clebus parallels the creative work of Hormistus and Harminus:

(Simon and Clebus): Neither do they affirm that the world was the work of God, but of some one of the angels. (Zurvanism): All things made from Hormistus, were good and right, but which Harminus made, was bad and wrong.

Byron would have assumed Hormistus to have created Spirit, and Harminus to have created flesh.

As if anxious to see all sides of the question, Byron also translated part of an Armenian poem by one of the monks – *The Pleasures of the Summer Houses of Byzantium* – in which the physical creation is the uncomplicated and beautiful work of a single, benign deity:

Inspire my soul, thou awakening Spirit who walkest in delicious places; teach me to transport, according to my art, the material being of these beauties in the immortality of words.

That dazzling dew of Heaven rain upon me! Breathe that Spirit upon me which from the creation conducts to the Creator, and from the things made gives Glory to the Maker.

I was ignorant of the grandeur of the earth, I did not know the sites of the ocean and the earth. The limits of the horizon bounded at once my view and my imagination of things.

The voice comes upon me, the voice of Nature – to me who am a being endowed with reason, and her master – to walk the world, to discover the loveliest abode of Summer.<sup>33</sup>

Manfred is by no means “ignorant of the grandeur of the earth”: he knows “the sites of the ocean and the earth” all too well: but he can only love them when they are free of people:

... beautiful –  
 How beautiful is all this visible World!  
 How glorious in its action and itself!  
 But we, who name ourselves its sovereigns – we,  
 Half dust, half deity, alike unfit  
 To sink or soar, with our mixed essence make  
 A conflict of its elements, and breathe  
 The breath of degradation and of pride  
 Contending with low wants and lofty will,  
 Till our Mortality predominates,  
 And men are what they name not to themselves,  
 And trust not to each other.<sup>34</sup>

Manfred’s greatest sin is not incest: it is his need to delve into the primal secrets of creation, and, proud and degraded mortal that he is, aspire in empathetic terms to Godhead. He needs to find out *why* the world is the prison house of the spirit (“my soul’s sepulchre” is his phrase)<sup>35</sup> even if he can only do so by interrogating forbidden sources of wisdom. Byron, in interrogating them himself academically, was finding things on San Lazzaro with which Father Avgerian would not have been happy. In the Father’s Paradise, he had become the Serpent, Adam, Eve, and Manfred, all rolled into one: “The madman has come back again!”

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32: *Manfred*, I i 157.

33: CPW IV 111.

34: *Manfred*, I ii 36-47.

35: *Manfred*, I ii 27.



is what the Father is *said* to have said on seeing Byron's gondola approach for the second time,<sup>36</sup> and the exclamation – if he really did make it – may reflect a bewilderment as to what exactly the rich Englishman was after. Who knows whether his Armenian translation of *Paradise Lost*, published in 1824,<sup>37</sup> may not have been inspired in part by his acquaintance with Byron? He must have begun such a huge task soon after the end of the time in which he tried to teach the poet.

Byron sent the first act of *Manfred* back to London on February 28th 1817, but the first version of its third act (written when he was feverish after the Venetian Carnival)<sup>38</sup> found disfavour with his “literary father”, John Murray's conservative editor William Gifford<sup>39</sup> – who especially disliked its depiction of the Christian Abbot as a crooked charlatan and buffoon, whisked off by the demon Ashtaroath to the summit of the Shreckhorn at Manfred's command.<sup>40</sup> On receipt of the manuscript, Gifford wrote to Murray:

I have marked a passage or two which might be omitted with advantage: but the Act requires strengthening. There is nothing to bear it out but one speech. The Friar is despicable, & the servants uninteresting. The scene with the Friar ought to be imposing, & for that purpose the Friar should be a real[,] good man – not an idiot. More dignity should be lent to the catastrophe ... Manfred should not end in this feeble way – after beginning with such magnificence & promise – & the demons should have something to do with the scene.<sup>41</sup>

Murray conveyed Gifford's criticisms to Byron, who at once felt guilty about the vaudevillian third act. After all, he had not merely offended the distant Gifford, but, implicitly, insulted the “real, good” Christian men from whose company on San Lazzaro he was deriving so much. Perhaps using the wisdom and tolerance of Father Avgerian – “my pastor and master”<sup>42</sup> – as his model, he rewrote the Abbot's part, giving it greater eloquence and dignity, and indeed the entire third act, improving the image of Christianity which it contained, while still not losing its dualistic basis. In the third act, Christianity and its standard solutions are well-defined, but peripheralised. The Abbot cannot save Manfred, but neither can the Demon carry him off to Hell, as his dramatic predecessors carry Doctor Faustus, or Don Giovanni. Here is the new-model Abbot, in dialogue with Manfred, about the despair of the latter:

.... this will pass away – and be succeeded  
By an auspicious hope, which shall look up  
With calm assurance to that blessed place  
Which all who seek may win, whatever be  
Their earthly errors, so they be atoned;  
And the commencement of atonement is  
The sense of its necessity. Say on –  
And all our Church can teach thee shall be taught,

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**36:** See *Madman*, p.7, where Professor Dowsett concedes that there is no “firm documentary” evidence for Avgerian's supposed exclamation.

**37:** The translation is dedicated to the man who financed it, Lord George William Russell (1790-1846) brother of Lord John Russell the reformer, and husband of Elizabeth Anne, *née* Rawdon, the supposed inspirer of *Beppo* 83, 78: *I never saw but One (the Stars withdrawn) / Whose bloom could, after dancing, dare the Dawn!* The *Bentley's Miscellany* article referred to in n10 above gives an idea of Avgerian's attitude to the English aristocracy: “We have had here Lord D.— pray, do you know him? — and the Duke of P., and Sir John R. I hope you are acquainted with them. They are noblemen indeed. Bless me! I am glad to have this attention from you; and now, if you please, we will walk a little about the convent.” (*Bentley's Miscellany*, 1839 vol V p. 257).

**38:** BLJ V 211.

**39:** BLJ XI 117.

**40:** The first version of the third act is to be found in the edition of *Manfred* on this website.

**41:** John Murray Archive. I am grateful to John R Murray and Virginia Murray for permission to quote.

**42:** BLJ V 152.

And all we can absolve thee shall be pardoned ...

Manfred

... "It is too late!"

Abbot

It never can be so,  
To reconcile thyself with thy own soul,  
And thy own soul within heaven. Hast thou no hope?  
'Tis strange — even those who do despair above,  
Yet shape themselves some phantasy on earth,  
To which frail twig they cling like drowning men. —

Manfred

Aye, Father! I have had those earthly visions,  
And noble aspirations in my youth —  
To make my own the Mind of other men —  
The Enlightener of nations — and to rise,  
I knew not whither, it might be to fall,  
But fall even as the Mountain-cataract,  
Which having leapt from its more dazzling height,  
Even in the foaming strength of its abyss,  
(Which casts up misty columns that become  
Clouds raining from the re-ascended skies)  
Lies low but mighty still. But this is past;  
My thoughts mistook themselves. —<sup>43</sup>

Although there is no evidence that Byron confessed to Father Avgerian any secret ambition to be the Napoleonic Enlightener of Nations, it is hard not to agree with André Maurois and Charles Dowsett when they say that the model for this compassionate and committed Christian man must be Avgerian.<sup>44</sup> Here is the Abbot at the end of the scene, contemplating his doomed parishioner in terms which are themselves dualistic:

It is an awful chaos — light and darkness  
And mind and dust — and passions — and pure thoughts  
Mixed and contending without end or order  
All dormant or destructive — he will perish ...<sup>45</sup>

The lines echo Byron's own thoughts about the letters of Robert Burns;<sup>46</sup> but we surely can hear in them Father Avgerian's secret thoughts about Byron, intuited by the poet.

On May 5th Byron sent the improved version of *Manfred* Act III to London, and, sad to say, now the play was finished, his interest in Armenian cooled. He had, indeed, on March 3rd, advertised the dispatch of its first act, and of the cessation of his studies on San Lazzaro, in consecutive sentences of the same letter.<sup>47</sup> His love affair with Marianna Segati, on the other hand, was still in full spate when Hobhouse returned to Venice in late July. Byron had been much more fortunate than Manfred in the temporary cell-mate Destiny had chosen for him in the prison-house of the flesh, or in the sepulchre of the soul.

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43: *Manfred*, III i, 79-87 and 97-115.

44: The origin of this idea is the 1839 *Bentley's Miscellany* article quoted above, n10.

45: *Manfred*, I 164-7.

46: BLJ III 239.

47: BLJ V 179.

The monastery had taken to Byron quickly, and tales about his talent and intentions had spread. On December 9th the Abbot himself, the “Transylvanian” of whom Hobhouse had heard (his name was Father Aconce)<sup>48</sup> wrote as follows to a Father Minas in Constantinople:

An Englishman called Lord Birën, a young man of about twenty-four, of cultivated mind, even studious, of the University of Oxford, a famous poet among them, and with a knowledge of various Oriental languages, has come to our monastery and looked at the Armenian language, for which every day at two in the afternoon he comes to the monastery with his servants, and under the supervision of our Father Harut’iwn he studies Armenian, for which he shows great aptitude. He intends to pass the winter here. At present (Father Harut’iwn Avgerian) gives him some principal passages from the *Life of Alexander* in Armenian, above all those not found in Curtius, to read in Armenian and translate into English. He is now the main person to encourage its publication; he manifests also a wish to publish the *Chronicle* (of Eusebius) into English.<sup>49</sup>

Byron was never really “of the University of Cambridge” in any serious academic way, still less of Oxford; although he does express interest in publishing the unknown portions of Eusebius in 1818.<sup>50</sup> What he did express immediate interest in funding was Father Avgerian’s *English Grammar for Armenians*, about which Hobhouse had been told on November 29th. On December 19th he wrote to Hobhouse, who had now gone from Venice with his family:

By way of requital for his instructions (as I could not offer sordid money to these Friars) I have taken upon me the expenses of his Armenian & English grammar – which is now printing – it costs but a thousand francs to print five hundred copies – and being the first published in these joint languages – I think “I do the state some service”<sup>51</sup>

And on January 2nd he refers to it again, in a letter to Murray:

In another sheet I send you some sheets of a grammar English & Armenian for the use of the Armenians – of which I promoted & indeed induced the publication; (it cost me but a thousand francs of French livres) ...<sup>52</sup>

However, he and the Father could not agree about the anti-imperialist Preface which he wrote for it, part of which runs thus:

These men are the priesthood of an oppressed and noble nation, which has partaken of the proscription and bondage of the Jews and of the Greeks, without the sullenness of the former or the servility of the latter. This people has attained riches without usury, and all the honours that can be awarded to slavery without intrigue. But they have long occupied, nevertheless, a part of “the House of Bondage,” who has lately multiplied her many mansions. It would be difficult, perhaps, to find the annals of a nation less stained with crimes than those of the Armenians, whose virtues have been those of peace, and their vices those of compulsion ... If the Scriptures are rightly understood, it was in Armenia that Paradise was placed – Armenia, which has paid as dearly as the descendants of Adam for that fleeting participation of its soil in the happiness of him who was created from its dust ... though long a powerful kingdom, it was scarcely ever an

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48: See LJ IV 9n.

49: Quoted Dowsett, *Madman*, p. 14. The letter was shown to Professor Dowsett by Father Sahak, head of the Seminary at San Lazzaro, during the Armenian-Iranian conference at Venice in 1978.

50: BLJ VI 9.

51: BLJ V 142.

52: BLJ V 156.

independent one, and the satraps of Persia and the pachas of Turkey have alike desolated the region where God created man in his own image.<sup>53</sup>

Flattering as it was to Armenia, and to Father Avgerian, whose assertion about Paradise it repeats, and whose history lessons it echoes, this post-Waterloo rhetoric went too far for the community, who needed to keep on the good side of both Turkish and Austrian authorities if they were to survive. If Napoleon had approved of them when he was in control of Venice, what might not the Austrians do to them by way of revenge, now that he was thousands of miles away in the South Atlantic? The Whiggish gesture – easy for an English nobleman to make – was too dangerous for the monks. In the 1870s George Eric Mackay heard from a blind old monk a dramatic and, it is to be hoped, fanciful account of the dialogue which ensued:

Padre Paschal did not approve of the preface. He said it was an attack on the Turkish Government, whose flag protected the Convent, and declined to accept it.

– What! [exclaimed Byron] you refuse to print this preface because it is severe on your masters and oppressors? Slaves and cowards! You ought to have hard masters; you are not worthy of the great nation from which you sprang!

Padre Paschal remonstrated, but Byron, who as the Blind Friar remarked, hated the Turks beyond the limits of reason, knew no bounds to his fury and exclaimed:

– Monks, not men! you're cowards all, and I know not what keeps me from beating you!

The Monk withdrew deeply offended and Lord Byron soon afterwards quitted the convent, – to return again, however, to ask and obtain forgiveness of the Padre.<sup>54</sup>

And on March 3rd the repentant (and forgiven) poet announces simply

The Armenian Grammar is published ...<sup>55</sup>

I am not fully competent to criticise the grammatical accuracy of the book on which Byron assisted Avgerian, although such constructions as “thou love”, “he love” and “thou have love”<sup>56</sup> are a bit worrying. It seems that much of it was written before Byron arrived, and that his role was one of revising and polishing (not very thoroughly, as can be seen). There is, I think, one section when his hand seems to be at work: called “Familiar Discourses”, it is towards the back. It consists of several short dialogues for everyday situations, and sampling one gives us an amusing idea of the kind of Armenian student Byron, at least, thought the work should be aimed at. These are some of the English phrases for which the *Grammar* provides Armenian equivalents:

— Where is your master? Is he asleep still? — No, sir, he is awake.

— Is he up? — No, sir, he is a-bed.

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**53:** CMP 67.

**54:** Mackay, op.cit. pp. 79-80.

**55:** BLJ V 179. Charles Dowsett quotes Avgerian's diary to the opposite effect:

... because he spoke disparagingly in it [the Preface] concerning the Turks and Persians, Father Harut'iwn was not willing to publish it. And although he promised to write another, inoffensive preface, his heart had already grown cold, and he no longer wished to frequent the monastery, and thus the Grammar remained in manuscript form, and he did not give the money he had promised for its printing (*Madman*, p. 26, quoting Khach'ik Dastents': *Bayrone ev Hayere (Byron and the Armenians, Yerevan 1959, p.95)*. Transliterated Dastenc Xacik, this author is recommended at CPW IV 477. The diary entry is hard to reconcile with Byron's January 2nd letter to Murray, in which the past tense (“it cost me but a thousand francs”) would put the cash gift already in the past by the new year. This is confirmed by a letter from Byron to Hoppner of February 27th 1823: “... I printed at my own expence an Armenian Grammar in 1816 ...” (BLJ X 112)

**56:** *Grammar, Armenian and English*, Venice 1817, pp. 25-6.

— What a shame 'tis to be a-bed this time of day?  
 — I went to bed so late last night, I could not rise early this morning.  
 — What did you do after supper? — We danc'd, we sung, we laugh'd, we play'd.  
 — At what game? — We play'd at picquet with the knight.  
 — What did the rest do? — They play'd at chess.  
 — How griev'd I am I did not know it. Who won? Who lost? — I won ten pistoles.  
 — Till what hour did you play? — Till two in the morning.  
 — At what hour did you go to bed? — At three, half an hour after three. — I don't wonder at your rising so late.  
 — What's o'clock? — What do you think it is?  
 — Scarce eight, I believe, yet. — How! eight! It has struck ten. — Then I must rise with all speed.<sup>57</sup>

I do not think even a sophisticated monk such as Father Avgerian would have inserted this unprompted (the prose passages printed after it, for more continuous reading, are at once more mundane and more high-minded). It looks like a polite and neutered version of a daily scene with which Byron had, when in England, been all too familiar. I wonder how many Armenians interested in the study of English would have led such a lifestyle.

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In 1822 Byron wrote his *Detached Thoughts*, and in the fifty-fifth he remembered San Lazzaro and Father Avgerian (whose name he now reproduces in Italo-Gallic):

... my master the Padre Pasquale Aucher ... assured me "that the terrestrial Paradise had been certainly in *Armenia*" — I went seeking it — God knows where — did I find it? — Umph! — Now & then — for a minute or two.<sup>58</sup>

If he had found Paradise on San Lazzaro, he had also made the unsurprising discovery that he could not survive in it for very long, any more than Aesop's serpent survived in the forge. But he had, as I hope I have shown, derived much inspiration from it, not only artistic but moral; much more learning, too, from his Armenian teacher than he had ever condescended to receive from his Cambridge ones.

His interest in dualism, whether its religious source was Zoroastrian, Zurvanite, Manichean, Gnostic, or all four, or whether it was simply intuitive, was secretly nurtured by his work with Father Avgerian, and stayed alive in his poetry for a long time. It underlies *Cain*, where it is made explicit in several of the speeches of Lucifer.<sup>59</sup> It springs up very

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**57:** *Grammar, Armenian and English*, Venice 1817, pp. 106-8. A similar section goes:

— Who is there? — What will you please have, sir?  
 — Be quick, make a fire, dress me. — There is a fire, sir.  
 — Give me my shirt. — Here 'tis, sir.  
 — 'Tis not warm, 'tis quite cold.  
 — If you please, sir, I'll warm it. — No, no; bring me my silk stockings.  
 — They are torn. — Stitch them up a little, mend them.  
 — I have given them to the stocking-mender.  
 — You have done right — where are my slippers? Where is my night-gown? Comb my head. Take another comb. Give me my handkerchief. — There's a clean one, sir.  
 — Give me that which is in my pocket. — I gave it to the washer-woman, it was foul.  
 — Has she brought my linen? — Yes, sir, there wants nothing. What clothes will you wear today?  
 — Those I wore yesterday. — The tailor will bring your cloth suit presently.  
 — Somebody knocks, see who 'tis. — 'Tis the tailor.  
 — Let him come in. (*Grammar, Armenian and English*, pp. 108-9).

**58:** BLJ XI 31.

**59:** See *Cain*, II ii 401-7.

suddenly and dramatically in the encounter between St. Michael and Sathan in *The Vision of Judgement*:

Yet still between his Darkness and his Brightness  
There passed a mutual glance of great politeness.<sup>60</sup>

The twins Eros and Anteros appear unexpectedly in *The Deformed Transformed* (they are renamed by Arnold “Memnon” and “Huon”),<sup>61</sup> and might have played a greater part in the drama if that work had been completed. It is not until Canto XIII of *Don Juan* that Byron seems to reject the idea of the Two Principles:

But Heaven must be diverted; its diversion  
Is sometimes truculent – but never mind;  
The World upon the whole is worth the assertion  
(If but for comfort) that all things are kind;  
And that same devilish doctrine of the Persian  
Of the “Two Principles,” but leaves behind  
As many doubts as any other doctrine  
Has ever puzzled Faith withal, or yoked her in.<sup>62</sup>

Faith must either remain “puzzled,” indeterminate and speculative (in which case it ceases to be faith) or it must bow to the “yoke” of an unquestioned “doctrine”. The unsayable rhyme in Byron’s couplet links dogma with submission – and with spiritual drudgery of the kind he always refused, even at the risk of seeming slightly Sathanic himself. Father Avgerian’s cheerful submission was a lesson in humility which he could acknowledge, but never take to heart. It is not until he has encountered Paradise, after all, that the Serpent really knows his own identity – not until he has bitten the file that he knows his own limitations. And for Brother Nicholas, the old blind monk who told George Eric Mackay about Byron’s passionate argument with Father Avgerian, the poet was still, after all, “a Saint in Heaven”.<sup>63</sup>

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**60:** *The Vision of Judgement*, Stanza 35, 7-8.

**61:** See *The Deformed Transformed*, I i 510-33.

**62:** *Don Juan*, XIII Stanza 41.

**63:** Mackay, op. cit. p. 45.