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Lord Byron's Opinions on Religion.

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LORD BYRON'S OPINIONS
ON
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Preface

The following study and the resulting conclusions, in regard to the religious life of Lord Byron, are based almost entirely on the poet's correspondence, because it seems that he expressed himself even far more freely and intimately in his letters than in any other form of writing.

It is true that Byron's poetry sometimes reflects his life very clearly, but, on the other hand, it is hard to separate the real from the imaginary and to extract Byron from the characters he created in rhyme. Moreover, Byron himself advised that one should not depend on his poetry for an opinion of the author:

> "People say that I have told my own story in my writings. I defy them to point out a single act of my life by my poems, or of my thoughts; for I seldom write what I think. All that has been published about me is sheer nonsense, as will be seen at my death, when my real life is published.[1] Everything in that is true".[2]

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1. Byron gave his life-story to Moore to be published after his death. Moore sold it to Murray, but later bought it back in order that he might burn it. Cf. Article on Moore in D. N. B.
2. Trelawny, E. J.: Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron, p. 197. Boston, 1859

The Life of Lord Byron, with his letters and journals by Thomas Moore, was selected for this study as the collection of Byron correspondence best adapted to the subject. Moore made the poet's acquaintance through a quarrel in 1811, and remained his friend until Byron's death in 1824. He had an opportunity to observe Byron from all angles. Since Moore was a man of nominal Catholic faith ~~and was~~s especially interested in theological questions,[3] he paid particular attention to the religious opinions of Lord Byron .

There are two dangers in relying entirely upon Moore for one's opinions of Lord Byron. In the first place, Byron looked up to Moore because of his genial disposition and his success in society.[4] Such an attitude on the part of a man like Byron must have flattered Moore into a desire to present a very favorable picture of his hero. In the second place, Moore was given to excesses and an exaggerated idea of the necessity of pleasing his readers.[5]

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3. D. N. B. - *Under* Moore
4. Maurois: Byron, p. 168
5. Cf. Bibliography. Along with this study, I have made a bibliography of the Byron material in the library of the College of William and Mary, and have placed it in that library for the use of Byron students.

I have taken precaution against such dangers by allowing the words of Byron, rather than those of his biographer, to influence my final decisions. I have used the additional safeguard of reading as many Byron letters as it was possible to find in other collections.[6]

This investigation of Byron's religious opinions has been made with full realization of the obstacles which arise to prevent accurate conclusions, and with a sincere desire to avoid the mistakes which such difficulties may cause.[7]

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6. Cf. Note 5, Preface
7. I wish to express my thanks to the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Jackson, Dr. Landrum, and Dr. Fisher, all of the College of William and Mary, for the patient assistance they have given me in the preparation of this paper.

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EARLY INFLUENCES

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In order to understand the mind of Lord Byron and his wavering views on religious questions, it is necessary to know something of his ancestry and early connections.

The Byrons, who were originally inhabitants of Normandy,[1] became wealthy English land-owners,[2] soldiers,[3] and objects of royal favor.[4] The family history includes the shipwreck of Lord Byron's grandfather,[5] the murder of Mr. Chaworth by his grand-uncle,[6] and the elopement of the poet's father with the wife of Lord Carmarthen.[7]

A year after the death of Lady Carmarthen, Lord Byron's father married Catherine Gordon of Gight, an heiress, of impulsive, quick-tempered, and emotional nature, who indulged herself in fits of excessive anger and affection. Among the Gordon ancestors there were some "marked with the brand of Cain",[8]

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1. Moore, Life and Letters of Lord Byron, Vol. I, p. 1 Boston, 1830
2. Ibid., I, 1
3. Ibid., I, 3
4. Ibid., I, 4 and 5
5. Ibid., I, 6
6. Ibid., I, 7
7. Byron married Lady Carmarthen, who died in 1784.
8. Maurois; op. cit., II, 14 The elder

as well as some of more desirable characteristics.[9]

Byron, the poet, was a curious mixture of the good and bad qualities of both lines of his ancestry. He combined "the generosity, the love of enterprise, the high-mindedness of some of the better spirits of his race, with the irregular passions, the eccentricity, and daring recklessness of the world's opinion that so much characterized others".[10] The inherited traits most important to this study are those of a restless and variable spirit, and a highly impressionable mind, tendencies which were inherent in both the Byrons and the Gordons.

While quite young, Byron came under influences which were never entirely erased from his mind. First, there was that of his nurse, May Gray, who indulged herself in drinking and bad companionship. She often entertained her young charge by telling him hair-raising tales about the murdered and drowned Gordons, and about the wicked and powerful Byrons.[11] These narratives, which were colored greatly by imagination, gave Byron a desire to be as wicked and eccentric as his predecessors, who were made to seem heroes to his childish and enthusiastic mind. May Gray added to these adventurous episodes the story of Cain,[12] who was predestined to an unhappy doom, leaving the im-

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9. Ibid., II, 15
10. Moore, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 13
11. Maurois, op. cit., p. 24
12. Moore, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 40

pression on the child Byron that nothing a person can do will change the fate which has been fixed for him. She must be given credit, however, for teaching him a number of the Psalms and for interesting him in the Holy Scriptures.[13]

Byron's mother was no less influential in shaping his impressions of life. She was given to fits of temper which caused her to be very harsh and cruel to her young son.[14] She possessed a natural tendency to superstition[15] which became somewhat of a substitute for religion.[16] Believed her son destined to be great because of his lameness,[17] she consulted a fortune-teller, Mrs. Williams, who confirmed her opinion as to Byron's future greatness, and predicted the ages of twenty-seven and thirty-seven would be dangerous years in the poet's life.[18] Such beliefs laid the foundation[19] for Byron's belief in ghosts and bogles,[20] his belief that the shape of his hands was an indication of high birth,[21] and his faith in the omen of

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13. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 14
14. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 13
15. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 136
16. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 206
17. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 28
18. Maurois, op. cit., p. 42
19. Moore, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 136
20. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 80
21. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 294

twelve Eagles at Parnassus.[22]

Byron's life was also more or less affected, by the indiscreet Dr. Lavender of Nottingham, to whom he was entrusted. Lavender distressed Byron by twisting his foot into horrible shapes and thrusting it into a wooden apparatus, which was nothing less than a device of torture. During Lavender's professional calls, it afforded him great amusement to send Byron to bring his beer. The child did this errand with all possible caution, lest he should spill the quack doctor's pint and receive a beating for it. Byron had very superior mental qualities, ~~however~~, and it was not long before he was able to turn the joke on Lavender. "Lavender was a pompous ignoramus, but pretended a knowledge of all languages. The boy (Byron) scribbled all the letters of the alphabet on a scrap of paper, arranging

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22. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 304. The reference is to an episode which occurs several times in Byron's journals: "Going to the fountain of Delphi (Castri) in 1809, I saw a flight of twelve eagles (H. says they were vultures - at least in conversation) and I seized the omen. On the day before I composed the lines to Parnassus (in Childe Harold) and, on beholding the birds, had a hope that Apollo had accepted my homage. I have at least had the name and fame of a poet during the poetical part of my life (from 20 to 30); whether it will last is a different matter".

them haphazard in the semblance of sentences, and then laid the script before the conceited bully. What language was this, he asked. 'Italian' answered the charlatan. And Byron burst into triumphant laughter."[23]

Through association with May Gray, who did not practice the Scriptural injunctions she taught him, through contrast with his mother, who seemed to love him one minute and who was anything but what he pretended to be, Byron thus began at an early age to hate hypocrisy in all its forms.[24] It may have been this hatred of sham that caused Byron to be so slow to express any enthusiasm concerning religion. When he could not honestly agree with people to the fullest extent, it was not his nature to pretend.

Other personal influences on the early life of Lord Byron were those of his tutors: Bowers, Ross, and Patterson.[25] At the age of four Byron was sent to Bowers, who conducted school in a dirty room and received a fee of five shillings a quarter from each pupil.[26] Maurois writes:

> "There the children learnt to read in a book of one-syllabled words. 'God made man - let us love Him . . .' The Byron boy had a good memory, and soon had learned the first page by heart. He then announced that he

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23. Maurois, op. cit., p. 40
24. Ibid., p. 40
25. Moore, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 18
26. Maurois, op. cit., p. 26

> could read. And actually recited to his mother his little couplet - with great success, until she turned to the next page and he started off again with 'God made man . . .'. The text, alas, was different, and the impatient Mrs. Byron slapped her son. Returning to Bodsy's (Bowers) he learnt that 'God made Satan - and Satan made sin . .'. Satan and sin were regular subjects in these Scottish schools".[27]

Since Bowers seemed to Mrs. Byron an inadequate instructor, she sent her son to take private lessons from another, whom Byron described[28] as follows:

> "He was a very devout, clever little clergyman, named Ross, afterwards minister of one of the kirks (East, I think). Under him I made astonishing progress; and I recollect to this day his mild manners and good-natured pains-taking. The moment I could read, my grand passion was history, and, why I know not, but I was particularly taken with the battle near the Lake Regillus in the Roman History, put into my hands the first. Four years ago, when standing on the heights of Tusculum, and looking down upon the little round lake that was once Regillus and which dots the immense expanse below, I remembered my young enthusiasm and my old instructor".

Ross was a devout minister of gentle manners and, no doubt, had more influence on the mind of Byron than the letters indicate.

Byron describes the third master thus:

> "Afterwards I had a very serious, saturnine, but kind young man, named

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27. Ibid., p. 26
28. Moore, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 18

> Paterson, for a tutor. He was the son of my shoemaker, but a good scholar, as is common with the Scotch. He was a rigid Presbyterian also".[29]

Doubtless, Paterson attempted to instil his Calvinist doctrine into his young charge. He taught him that we have all participated in the original sin and are corrupt from birth; that only certain men who are united arbitrarily to Christ can be saved from eternal damnation. This plunged the child into deep thought from which he never entirely emerged.

All of these early influences on the mind of the young Byron seem to be of the type to inspire rebellion and wonder. He was impressed with the utter helplessness of man in the hands of a Fate from which there was no escape. These were ideas which followed him throughout the rest of his life and, in spite of all he could do to shake off his fears, haunted him forever.

Other influences came through his life at Cambridge, which was pervaded by a spirit of sceptical cynicism.[30] First, there was that of Matthews, whom he called his "guide, philosopher, and friend",[31] but who, nevertheless, "laughed at God and the Devil".[32] Second, there was that of Hobhouse, an

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29. Ibid., op. cit., Vol. I, p. 13
30. Maurois, op. cit., p. 107
31. Moore, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 63
32. Maurois, op. cit., p. 102

unbeliever of a more serious nature, a real thinker who preferred the serious side of life.[33] Third, there was the less important influence of Davies, who spent a great part of his time gambling, and who encouraged Byron to join him, much to the distaste of Hobhouse.[34]

After Byron had received the degree of Master of Arts on July 4, 1808,[35] the four friends were separated, but since their associations had left deep impressions on the mind of Lord Byron, and their friendship continued. Something of what these friendships meant to him may be seen in a letter written by the poet, in 1811,[36] a short time after the death of Matthews:

> "Matthews was indeed an extraordinary man; it has not entered into the heart of a stranger to conceive such a man: there was the stamp of immortality in all he said or did; - and now what is he? When we see such men pass away and be no more - men, who seem created to display what the Creator could make his creatures, gathered into corruption, before the maturity of minds that might have been the pride of posterity, what are we to conclude? For my own part, I am bewildered. To me he was much, to Hobhouse everything. - My poor Hobhouse doted on Matthews. For me, I did not love quite so much as I honoured him; I was indeed so sensible of his infinite superiority, that though I did not envy, I stood in awe of it. He, Hobhouse, Davies, and myself, formed a coterie or our own at Cambridge and elsewhere. Davies is a wit and man of the world, and feels as much as such a character can do; but not as Hobhouse has been affected. Davies, who is not a scribbler, has always beaten us all in the war of words, and by his colloquial powers at once delighted and

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33. Ibid., p. 102
34. Maurois, op. cit., p. 103
35. Ibid., p. 107
36. Moore, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 63

> kept us in order. Hobhouse and I always had the worst of it with the other two; and even M. yielded to the dashing vivacity of S. D."[36]

Enjoying close friendships with men of sceptical ideas, men whom he admired and esteemed very greatly, did much toward filling the mind of Lord Byron with diversified thoughts and emotions concerning the problems of life.

36. Moore, op. Cit., Vol. II, p. 69

CHAPTER II

BYRON IN A RESTLESS AGE

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When Byron left college and went out into the world, he came in contact with a restless age. People were feeling the "injustice and madness" of the universe.[1] The middle class was becoming important, and science was beginning to yield power to men of all classes. It was an age of excitement and religious inquiry.[2] The poet was prepared by his inherited characteristics and early contacts to take his place among the doubters and thinkers of the age. The spirit of the times was shown in the emotional instability of Lord Byron,[3] who knowing more philosophy than he could comprehend, consequently had no consistency except in politics, to which he was practically indifferent.

In the world, as well as in college, Byron had friends who took delight in questioning the orthodox and philosophizing on the problems of life and death. His letters are constant reminders of the doubts with which the poet came in contact while conversing and corresponding with the great minds of the day.

1. Maurois, op. cit., Introduction, p. VIII
2. Moore, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 132
3. Boyd, Literary Blasphemies, p. 194
   New York and London, 1927

The Cambridge friendships continued, but with changes. Davies went on with his gambling and jesting until he was finally forced to flee from England before 1821, while Matthews was drowned in the Cam in 1810. Hobhouse, who was a lifetime friend, was the most important of the three as an influence in the life of Lord Byron.

From June 26, 1809, to July 24, 1810, Hobhouse traveled with Byron from England to Greece.[4] He had a rather sobering and restraining influence on the poet, who was naturally of more ardent and rebellious nature than himself. The travelers were held over in Albania for a while by a storm, which delay enabled Byron to become better acquainted with some of the natives. He was delightfully impressed by the costumes and the religious enthusiasm of these people who chanted, "There is none other God than Allah",[5] and preferred his love to his money.[6] As a result of his admiration for these men "of violent passions, adept in murder and in friendship",[7] his contempt for religion became greater. He had been in the company

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4. Maurois, op. cit. Chapter XIII
5. Ibid., p. 129
6. Maurois, op. cit., p. 131
7. Ibid.

of Catholics, Protestants, Mussulmans, and Orthodox believers all within a short time, but he respected the Albanians most of all. He wrote:

> "I like the Albanians much; they are not all Turks; some tribes are Christians. But their religion makes little difference in their conduct".[8]

It was enough to Byron that they were sincere in their beliefs and passions.

Finally Byron and Hobhouse reached and toured Greece together. Byron was working on Childe Harold, which Hobhouse thought "exaggerated and rhetorical".[9] For a year the two had made fun of each other in a playful manner, but each became bored with the other. They parted at Constantinople, whence Hobhouse returned to England, leaving Byron to go back to Athens.[10] At this time Byron wrote to his mother:

> "I am very glad to be once more alone, for I was sick of my companion, - not that he was a bad one, but because my nature leads me to solitude, and that every day adds to this disposition".[11]

To Hobhouse the parting was less agreeable. He wrote in his journal:

> "Took leave, non sine lacrymis, of this singular young person, on a little stone terrace at the end of the bay,

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8. Moore, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 299
9. Maurois, op. cit., p. 136
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p. 139

dividing with him a little nosegay of flowers; the last thing perhaps that I shall ever divide with him".[12]

In a postscript to a letter to Byron, Hobhouse wrote:

> "I kept the half of your little nosegay till it withered entirely, and even then I could not bear to throw it away. I can't account for this, nor cay you either, I dare say".[13]

Byron's reply was less sentimental:

> "Your last letter closes about a nosegay; I advise you to introduce that into your next sentimental novel. I am sure I did not suspect you of any fine feelings, and I believe you were laughing, but you are welcome".[14]

Regardless of the cramping influence of Hobhouse on the poet, he was one of the first persons Byron thought of on his return in 1811.[15] When Byron's Mother died, in the same year, Byron wrote thus to Hobhouse:

> "There is to me something so incomprehensible in death, that I can neither speak nor think on the subject. Indeed, when I looked on the mass of corruption which was the being from whence I sprung, I doubted within myself whether I was, or whether

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12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 151

she was not. I have lost her who gave me being, and some of those who made that being a blessing. I have neither hopes nor fears beyond the grave".[16]

Immediately after the death of his mother, another great sorrow came to Byron in the death of Matthews. Byron wrote:

"Some curse hangs over me and mine. My mother lies a corpse in this house; one of my best friends is drowned in a ditch. What can I say, or think or do?... Peace be with the dead! Regret cannot wake them. With a sigh to the departed, let us resume the dull business of life, in the certainty that we also shall have our repose".[17]

He invited Hobhouse to visit him at the Abbey, where they drank to the memory of Matthews. "We will drink to his memory," said Byron, "which though it cannot reach the dead, will soothe the survivors, and to them only death can be an evil".[18]

When Byron was married to Lady Milbanke, he took Hobhouse along to be his best man. After the ceremony, when Hobhouse had helped the bride into her carriage, Byron caught his hand twice and held it as if the separation were giving him great pain, and Hobhouse was left with the feeling that he had lost a friend.[19]

In 1816, ~~however~~, the two, together with Davies, were in Switzerland,[20] enjoying the glory and majesty of the mountain

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16. Ibid., p. 156
17. Maurois, op. cit., p. 157
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., p. 282
20. Ibid., p. 354

scenery. From there Byron and Hobhouse traveled to Italy.[21] While in Milan, Byron was moved to tears by a painting of Daniel Crespi's which portrayed "a canon lying in a coffin in the middle of a church while the burial service was sung over him, and suddenly lifting the pall and emerging from the coffin with the exclamation - 'I am damned by a just judgment!'" [22] They traveled from Milan to Venice, whence Hobhouse departed for Rome, where he was later joined by Byron. In Rome Byron paid a lovely tribute to Hobhouse in the dedication to the fourth canto of Childe Harold:

> ". . . one whom I have known long and accompanied far, whom I have found wakeful over my sickness and kind in my sorrow, glad in my prosperity and firm in my adversity, true in counsel and trusty in peril - to a friend often tried and never found wanting".[23]

In January, 1818, Hobhouse returned to England,[24] leaving Byron to look out for himself.[24] Hobhouse treated Byron like a child and laughed at him, but Byron often controlled himself and acted as he would not otherwise have done in order to win Hobhouse's approval.[25] Although they loved each other dearly they spent very few hours together without quarreling.

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21. Ibid., p. 371
22. Ibid., p. 375
23. Ibid., p. 390
24. Ibid., p. 394
25. Ibid., pp. 421, 501

Byron and Hobhouse were both very much in sympathy with Napoleon and with the Greek Revolution. On Friday, July 13, 1823, Byron said his last farewell to Hobhouse and left to give his life for the cause of Greek independence.[26] On May 14 of the following year, Hobhouse received news of Byron's death.[27] At the same time he made a very significant statement when he advised Mrs. Leigh not to make public her knowledge that ever since Byron's epileptic seizure, the poet had had a Bible on his table:[28]

> "I daresay that the Bible was on his table. I have long recollected his having one near him; it was a volume given to him by his sister, and I remember well seeing it on his table, but unless his mind was shaken by disease, I am confident he made no superstitious use of it. . . . He often said to me: 'It may be true. It is, as d'Alembert said, a grand peut-être'; but I own that I think he was rather inclined to take the opposite line of thinking when I saw him at Pisa". [29]

It seems logical that Byron lost something by his close friendship with a man who spoke of religion as a superstition. Hobhouse was unsparing in his criticism and cynical mockery. Byron was sensitive. He had a sincere desire to have Hobhouse admire him. It is barely possible that he could have hidden his real feelings from Hobhouse. At

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26. Ibid., p. 500
27. Ibid., p. 539
28. Ibid., p. 540
29. Ibid., p. 540

least when Byron went to Greece, away from the influence of his friend, he seemed to change considerably his conception of religion.

While Hobhouse was perhaps the most important of Byron's friends, inasmuch as he was more constantly with him than anyone else, there were many others, six of whom - Dallas, Hodgeson, Moore, Scott, Shelley, and Kennedy - must be introduced as having exerted some religious influence.

The first two, Dallas and Hodgeson, introduced themselves to Byron about the same time by complimenting him on the publication of Hours of Idleness.

Dallas[30] was a translator and a novelist. Having heard of Byron's book, he bought and read it, and then wrote to its author:

> "My Lord - your poems were sent to me a few days ago. I have read them with more pleasure than I can express, and I feel myself irresistibly impelled to pay you a tribute on the effusions of a noble mind in strains so truly poetic. . . Your poems, my Lord, are not only beautiful as compositions; - they bespeak a heart glowing with honour, and attuned to virtue, which is infinitely the higher praise . . . I have no doubt that you will reflect more honour on the Peerage than the Peerage on you".[30]

Byron's reply reveals his hatred of hypocrisy:

> "Though our periodical censors have been uncommonly lenient, I confess a tribute from a man of acknowledged genius is still more flattering. But I am afraid I should forfeit

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30. Ibid., p. 97, ff.

> all claim to candour, if I did not decline such praise as I do not deserve . . . . . But my pretentions to virtue are unluckily so few, that though I should be happy to merit, I cannot accept your applause in that respect. . . . The events of my short life have been of so singular a nature that, though the pride commonly called honour has, and I trust ever will, prevented me from disgracing my name by a mean or cowardly action, I have been already held up as the votary of licentiousness, and the disciple of infidelity . . . In morality, I prefer Confucius to the Ten Commandments, and Socrates to St. Paul (though the two latter agree in their opinion of marriage). In religion, I favour the Catholic emancipation, but do not acknowledge the Pope. . . I hold virtue, in general, or the virtues severally, to be only in the disposition, each a feeling, not a principle. I believe truth the prime attribute of the Deity, and death an eternal sleep, at least of the body. You have here a brief compendium of the sentiments of the wicked George, Lord Byron; and, till I get a new suit, you will perceive that I am badly cloathed". [31]

Dallas admired Byron very much and seemed to feel it his duty to reform him, for which purpose he wrote [32] and conversed[33] with him, and showed himself to be a friend at all times.[34]

Hodgeson also wished to reform Byron. While he was preparing to take orders,[35] he paid a visit to Byron, who, in

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31. Ibid.
32. Moore, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 69
33. Maurois, op. cit., p. 115
34. Ibid., p. 122
35. Byron was 23 years of age at this time: Cf. Maurois, op. cit., p. 161.

the course of a discussion of poetry and religion, made the following remarks as to his religious beliefs:

> "Christ came to save men; but a good pagan will go to heaven, and a bad Nazarene to hell. . . . If mankind may be saved who never heard or dreamt, at Timbuctoo, Otaheite, Terra Incognita, of Galilee and its prophet, Christianity is of no avail: if they cannot be saved without, why are not all orthodox? It is a little hard to send a man preaching to Judea, and leave the rest of the world - negers (sic.) and what not - dark as their complexions, without a ray of light to lead them on high; and who will believe that God will damn men for not knowing what they were never taught". [36]

Hodgeson tried to drive these beliefs from Byron's mind, but he was unsuccessful in the attempt, although he doubtless had some part in directing the thoughts of the poet into religious fields.

The third of these six friends was Thomas Moore, a man with a scrupulous conscience,[37] who enjoyed reading religious poetry and holding on to a fixed faith in immortality,[38] and who pitied rather than blamed an atheist.[39] Byron met Moore in 1812 because of a quarrel over a passage of satire in English Bards which offended Moore.[40] They were reconciled at a dinner[41] and were good friends until Byron's death. In

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36. Maurois, op. cit., p. 162
37. Moore, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 241
38. Ibid., Vol. V, p. 319
39. Ibid., Vol. V, p. 321
40. Maurois, op. cit., p. 166 The passage deals with a statement of Moore's concerning an affair with Jeffrey. Cf. Moore, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 81.
41. Ibid., p. 168

1819, Moore paid a visit to Byron in Venice. While he was there, the Venetians insisted that he should persuade Byron to pursue more moral courses, for he was breaking the local code by living with his mistresses. Moore, ~~however~~, did not bore Byron with moral lectures. He enjoyed his association with the poet from a literary and social standpoint, and left Byron free to choose his own religious and moral code.

Sir Walter Scott, ~~however~~, was more concerned about Byron's religious connections, and upon their first meeting,[42] he undertook to prophesy his conversion to the Roman Catholic faith:

> "I would rather look to see your retreat upon the Catholic faith, and distinguish yourself by the austerity of your penances. The species of religion to which you must, or may, one day attach yourself must exercise a strong power on the imagination".[43]

Byron smiled at these remarks but did not object. Sir Walter Scott had been right in his feeling that Byron's needs could best be supplied by the Roman Catholic Church, and it may be that he helped Byron realize this fact.[44]

The fifth of these six friends whose influence

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42. In John Murray's office, 1815. Cf. Maurois, op. cit. p. 304
43. Ibid., p. 418
44. Ibid., [illegible]

upon Byron was considerable, is Shelley, who, with his theory of "universal love", denied having any faith [45] in the future, believed God and the Devil were merely projections of human tendencies, [46] and made himself very unpopular by attacking the religious creeds and civil institutions of his country.[47]

Byron and Shelley met at Geneva in 1816 and became very intimate. From that time their conversations were little less than a continued debate of "Calvinism versus radicalism".[48] Shelley believed "that things are dependent on man, that man's life is of his own making", and Byron contended "that evil is an external reality against which all human effort must shatter itself". [49]

> "To those questions which Byron had been asking of the Universe since childhood, Shelley, in his piercing voice, brought answers of a subtle novelty. Byron wondered who had created this world, a God or a Devil; and Shelley, the atheist idealist, believed God and the Devil to be projections of human tendencies. ... The sole natural reality in Shelley's eyes was Beauty, which was identifiable by Harmony, and was to be found, fragmentarily, in fine evenings on the lake, in birds, in stars, in the eyes of women." [50]

Byron did not agree with Shelley's pantheism. To him, things were not so simple:

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45. Ibid., Vol. V, p. 320
46. Maurois, op. cit., p. 341
47. Taylor; Modern British Plutarch, p. 39
48. Maurois, op. cit., p. 408
49. Ibid., p. 408
50. Ibid., p. 341

> "Evil did exist. Evil was a Sin: within his own soul he beheld a conflict whose issue he could not perceive... He, for his part, knew very well that men are complex and unhappy.... Byron's mind was far too definite to contrive to cloak his faults with gilded mists of doctrine. He knew that man is not good..... He desired action, heroic and definite, for a people known and visible ..... Byron the realist, (opposed to Shelley, the idealist), was in flight from a society which he desired to conquer. . . Byron knew several Byrons, and his conflict was internal . . . He did not believe, as Shelley did, in the omnipotence of man in re-creating the universe; he recognised that he was surrounded by divine and diabolical forces . . . For Byron the Creator existed, but the creation was bad. Cain was right in complaining of the God of Israel, Prometheus in his cursing of Jove; and he, George Gordon Byron, the innocent victim of his blood's fatality, he too belonged to this race of the great rebels". [51]

Despite this difference in the essential beliefs of Shelley and Byron, Shelley's influence over the poet grew so much that Byron allowed Shelley to read to him the poems of Wordsworth. Byron learned to enjoy Wordsworth, and even introduced the peace and solitude of nature into his poetry,[52] but any acceptance of Shelley's beliefs was only a passing fancy.[53]

The last of these six friends and the one whom Byron met latest in life was Dr. Kennedy, who was stationed

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51. Ibid., p. 342
52. Ibid., p. 347
53. Ibid., p. 347

on the Island of Metaxata where Byron took a house in 1823.[54] Dr. Kennedy, a Scotsman, of deep religious convictions, was endeavoring to put the Bible into the hands of the Greeks of the Ionian Isles. Soon after Byron's arrival on the island, there was a religious meeting which he was given permission to attend after having expressed his desire to be converted.[55] The following is Maurois' account of the meeting:

> "He (Byron) sat on a sofa at Kennedy's, the others formed a circle round the table, and the doctor began his exposition.
>
> "His first theme was the difference between the Bible and the Christianity of men. Byron had promised to listen patiently, but all eyes were on him, and he soon began to talk. He had been brought up, he said, on very religious lines by his mother; questions of religion had always been passionately interesting to him; he had read numerous works of theology; but he could not understand the Scriptures. Sincere believers, he added, he would always respect and trust more than he would other men; but he had met too many pious people whose conduct was far other than the principles they professed.
>
> "Then, after a few words about his old friends, Eve and the Serpent, he returned to the difficulty which had always dogged him - the existence in the world of dreadful and meaningless evils, a fact which could not be reconciled with the existence of a benevolent Creator. For instance, he said, he had made a point of talking with nearly all the bodily infirm whom he had met, and had generally observed that their story was one of misery and sadness almost from birth. 'How had

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54. Ibid., p. 505
55. Ibid., p. 507

> these offended their Creator to be thus subjected to misery? and why do they live and die in this wretched state, most of them without the Gospel being preached to them and of what use are they in this world? Many are constantly suffering under bodily evils and paints; many are suffering from constant pressure of poverty; many are doomed to incessant toil and labour, immersed in ignorance and superstition, and neither having time nor capacity to read the Bible, even if it were presented to them'."[56]

It seems that Byron monopolized the meeting, but Kennedy, instead of resenting his remarks, called on Byron to continue the discussion. He was surprised to find that Byron was an admirer of the Bible [57] and that he had acquired a rather thorough knowledge of it. When Dr. Kennedy insisted on Byron's mending his way of living, Byron replied:[58]

> "'I am now in a fairer way. I already believe in predestination, which I know you believe, and in the depravity of the human heart in general, and of my own in particular. Thus you see there are two points in which we agree . . . . You cannot expect me to become a perfect Christian at once . . . What would you have me do?'
>
> "'Begin this very night to pray that God would pardon your sins,'" answered Kennedy.
>
> "'That would be asking too much, my dear doctor,' said Byron."[58]

It may be seen in these accounts of Byron's friendships and associations with thinking people of a restless and doubting age, that the poet met with varied opinion

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56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., p. 508; Moore, op. cit., V. VI, P. 88
58. Ibid., pp. 89-90

concerning the questions which he was always asking himself about life and religion. He valued and weighed all answers which came to him, believing some and doubting others, and passing from one to the other. Through this process his mind developed so that he was more and more able to comprehend the things which he did not at first understand. He spent most of his life collecting and sorting the opinions of others which, in the end, became a part of him. Byron is indeed a part of all he met. Hence he is not easily understood. The contradictory nature of his writings makes it difficult to judge what his real opinions were,[59] and indicate that he did not form very definite conclusions of his own early in life.

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59. Guiccioli: Lord Byron, p. 160

CHAPTER III

LITERARY INFLUENCES

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LITERARY INFLUENCES

Boyd said that:

> "Byron emotionally sums up the philosophy of an age of transition like our own and consequently his work, if little read, presents curious parallels to that element in contemporary life and literature which causes disquietude to the sedate"[1][2]

It has been shown in Chapters I and II that Byron's associations and friendships with people had quite an important influence on his thoughts and opinions. Byron's reading doubtless had a similar effect on his life.

A statement made by Dr. Glennie,[3] shows the early trend of the poet's reading:

> "His reading in history and poetry was far beyond the usual standard of his

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1. Boyd, op. cit., p. 127
2. Something of this spirit is seen in Don Juan:
   "I hope it is no crime
   To laugh at all things
   For I wish to know
   What, after all, are all things - but a show?"
3. A physician of Dulwich chosen to treat Byron's lame foot and at the same time to instruct him. Cf. Moore, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 46.

> age, and in my study he found many books open to him, both to please his taste and gratify his curiosity; among others, a set of our poets from Chaucer to Churchill, which I am almost tempted to say he perused from beginning to end. He showed at this age (He was eleven.) an intimate acquaintance with the historical parts of the Holy Scriptures, upon which he seemed delighted to converse with me, especially after our religious exercises of a Sunday evening; when he would reason upon the facts contained in the Sacred volume with every appearance of belief in the divine truths which they unfold".[4]

As further proof of the extensiveness of Lord Byron's reading, I quote a letter which he wrote to one of his teachers at Harrow, Dr. Drury:

> "Till I was eighteen years old (odd as it may seem) I had never read a review. But while at Harrow, my general information was so great on modern topics as to induce a suspicion that I could only collect so much information from Reviews, because I was never seen reading, but always idle, and in mischief, or at play. The truth is, that I read eating, read in bed, read when no one else read, and had read ~~when no one else read, and had~~ all sorts of reading since I was five years old,

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4. Byron's first nurse's husband said that Byron, when a mere child, was "particularly inquisitive and puzzling about religion". Cf. Moore, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 46.

> and yet never met with a Review, which is the only reason I know of why I should not have read them".[5]

While at Cambridge, in 1808, Byron wrote to Dallas a letter in which he said:

> "As to my reading, I believe I may aver, without hyperbole, it has been tolerably extensive in the historical; so that few nations exist, or have existed, with whose records I am not in some degree acquainted, from Herodotus down to Gibbon. Of the classics, I know about as much as most schoolboys after a discipline of 13 years; of the law of the land as much as enables me to keep 'within the statute' - to use the poacher's vocabulary. I did study the Spirit of Laws and the Law of Nations; but when I saw the latter violated every month, I gave up my attempts at so useless an accomplishment; - of geography, I have seen more land on maps than I should wish to traverse on foot; - of mathematics, enough to give me the headache without clearing the part affected; - of philosophy, astronomy, and metaphysics, more than I can comprehend....."[6]

It would be impractical as well as impossible in this paper to give a complete précis of the literature which Byron read. He was particularly interested in history, philosophy, and religion, but he did not stop with reading literature on these subjects. It will serve here to mention a few authors of philosophical and religious writings whose works Byron read and who seemed to be representative thinkers of the day. I do not know the

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5. Ibid., P.60
6. Ibid., p. 194

order in which Byron read the works of these men. I shall deal with them in chronological order -- Locke, Voltaire, Hume, Rousseau, Gessner, and Cuvier.[7]

Locke,[8] an English philosopher of Puritan stock, based his religious views on the limits of human knowledge. He believed he had proved the existence of God and "natural" religion. He showed a strong belief in revelation and a reverence for the Holy Scripture. He considered it necessary to accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah. His earnestness and sincerity, based on common sense, did much to mold the eighteenth century English theology.

Voltaire, was thought of, in his own age, as both poet and philosopher; but today there is doubt as to whether he should be called either.[9] His greatest philosophical work is the Dictionnaire Philosophique, which is largely composed of the articles Voltaire contributed to the Encyclopédie. It shows, more than any of his other works, his anti-religious spirit. He used the articles in this collection for the purpose of striking at the Bible, the Church, and the political institutions of the day.

Hume, a British philosopher, historian, and political economist, wrote four Dissertations: The Natural

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7. I am dealing here with mere summaries of opinions only as far as they may have affected Byron. The facts were obtained from the Encyclopedia Brittanica.
8. Moore, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 196
9. Maurois, op. cit., p. 102

History of Religion, Of the Passions, Of Tragedy, and Of the Standard Taste. The first of these concerns the deistic controversy. In this, Hume contends that polytheism was the earliest and most natural form of religious belief and that theism or deism is the product of reflection upon experience. The second of the Dissertations contains the substance of the Treatise which is the most complete exposition of Hume's philosophy - that of an unwillingness to accept as rational the existence of the world. Besides these works, Hume wrote Dialogues on Natural Religion in which he denied the possibility of proving the existence of God.[10]

Rousseau,[11] a sentimental deist, entirely undisciplined in anything but the emotional side of religion, took refuge in a kind of natural religion which was fashionable in his time. Byron was an admirer of Rousseau and was able to enlist on the philosopher's side all of his own friends - most of the younger men and women of Europe from 1820 to 1850. Rousseau was tolerated by others because he did not make fun of religion while expounding his theories.[11]

The Der Tod Abels of Gessner, Swiss poet,[12] painter and etcher, was translated into nearly every European language and was enjoyed by Scott and Wordsworth, as well as by Lord Byron. The extreme popularity of the book was pro-

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10. Moore, op. Cit., Vol. I, P. 267
11. Ibid., pp. 218 and 267
12. Maurois, op. cit., p. 31

bably due to the fact that in it were combined a keen observation and love of nature and a deep religious feeling, and strong patriotism.

Cuvier, the French naturalist, was interested in the structure of fossil and living animals. One of his most important works was Letters of Toleration. Thomas Moore found that Byron had been reading Cuvier, and warned him thus as to the dangers of the philosopher:-

> "I look upon Cuvier's book to be a most desolating one in the conclusions to which it may lead some minds. But the young, the simple, - all those whose hearts one would like to keep unwithered, trouble their heads but little about Cuvier. You, however, have embodied him in poetry which every one reads; and, like the wind, blowing 'where you list', carry this deadly chill, mixed up with your own fragrance, into the hearts that should be visited only by the latter. This is what I regret and what, with all my influence, I would deprecate a repetition of".[13]

It cannot be determined just how much influence each of these writers had on the life of Lord Byron, but no doubt they had their share in controlling the trend of the poet's thoughts and the apparently contradictory nature of his writings. Lord Byron was easily impressed by the thinkers of an age of doubt.

Although Byron read widely among the works of his predecessors and contemporaries, he did not neglect the

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13. Letter to Byron from Moore, March 16, 1822. Cf. Moore, op. cit., Vol. 5, p. 321.

search for first-hand information about his religious questions in the reading of the Holy Bible.

It has already been said in connection with the early personal influences that May Gray was largely responsible for the early age at which Byron became interested in the Bible. She taught him to repeat a number of Psalms, among which were the first and the twenty-third.[14] Further testimony of Byron's childhood acquaintance with the Bible may be observed in a letter written by the poet to Murray, in 1821. Among a list of things Byron wished to have sent to him is a request that Murray send him a "Bible, of good legible print (bound in russia [sic])". He continued thus:

> "I have one; but as it was the last gift of my sister (whom I shall probably never see again), I can only use it carefully, and less frequently, because I like to keep it in good order. Don't forget this for I am a great reader and admirer of those books, and had read them through and through before I was eight years old, - that is to say, the Old Testament, for the new struck me as a task, but the other as a pleasure. I speak as a boy from the recollected impressions of that period at Aberdeen in 1796."[14a]

Reference has already been made to Dr. Glennie's statement about the eleven year old Byron's intimate acquaintance with Biblical History.[15] To that statement

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14. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 14
15. Page 26

14a. Moore, Op. Cit., Vol. V, P. 265

Dr. Glennie added;

> "That the impressions thus imbibed in his boyhood, had, notwithstanding the irregularities of his after life, sunk deep into his mind, will appear, I think, to every impartial reader of his works in general; and I never have been able to divest myself of the persuasion that, in the strange aberrations which so unfortunately marked his subsequent career, he must have found it difficult to violate the better principles early instilled into him". [15a]

Dr. Glennie's story concerning Byron's knowledge of the Scripture is corroborated by an incident which happened in 1806. John Becker, a Southwell clergyman who often advised Byron, told him that instead of wasting his time on contemporary literature, he should spend more time perusing the pages of Milton and Shakespeare, and "above all seek to elevate his fancy and taste by the contemplation of the sublimer beauties of the Bible". [16] It was found that this advice in regard to the Holy Scripture had been anticipated by Byron, for Becker found him proficient in discussing the poetical parts of the Scripture. [17] Since, however, Lord Byron's letters contain numerous references to Scriptural personages and Biblical passages, such testimonies as those just given are unnecessary in the proof of Byron's superior knowledge of all parts of the Holy Book.

Byron's favorite characters seem to be Adam and

15a. Moore, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 46
16. Maurois, p. 90, op. cit.
17. Moore, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 120

Eve,[18] Cain,[19] Solomon,[20] Moses,[21] and above all, Job.[22] Adam and Eve signified to him the beginning of the world and the introduction of man, in all his weakness. The story of Cain embodied his early conception of predestination, which followed him to the grave. Solomon was an example of wisdom and a kind of measuring rod for making comparisons. Moses, the great law-giver, set forth the moral code which Byron knew should serve as a guide for all humanity. Job was the symbol of patience and the model for suffering and wretched humanity.

Byron mentioned many other characters of the Bible— Elijah,[23] Pharaoh,[24] Joshua,[25] Noah,[26] Abraham,[27] David,[28] Joseph,[29] Lamech,[30] Peter,[31] Paul,[32] and others. He said that he named his daughter Ada, feminine for Adam, who is mentioned in Genesis as the wife of Lamech.[33]

Further proof of Byron's knowledge of the Bible appears in direct references to ~~and quotations from~~ references Scriptural passages. The following will serve to illustrate:

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18. Ibid., p. 157
19. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 321. Byron wrote Cain, a drama.
20. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 157
21. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 321
22. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 157
23. Ibid., Vol. III, p. 358
24. Ibid., p. 353
25. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 97
26. Ibid., p. 321
27. Ibid., p. 321
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 351
31. Ibid., p. 25
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., Vol. V, p. 351

(1) "The region is desolated where God created man in his own image." [34]

(2) "I shall go to her, but she shall not return to me." [35]

(3) "The women of Ravenna transfer marriage to adultery, and strike not out of the Commandment." [36]

(4) "You might as well have me on 'a pale horse' like Death in Revelations." [37]

(5) "Out of Chaos God made a world." [38]

(6) "Pluck that mote from my neighbor's eye." [39]

(7) "In whose name two or three are gathered together." [40]

(8) "All is vanity." [41]

While these selections do not show intimate knowledge, because they suggest well-known passages, they reveal some knowledge of both the Old and the New Testament, and therefore are worthy of being mentioned.

Byron's knowledge of the Bible does not, ~~by any means~~ does it indicate a complete understanding of its prove a profound belief, ~~but~~ teachings. It proves only his intense interest, which may have been, to a certain extent, a literary interest. In

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34. Ibid., Vol. III, p. 337
35. Samuel ii, XII, 23, quoted on Allegra's tomb. See Moore, op. cit., Vol. V, p. 335.
36. Ibid., p. 265
37. Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 340
38. Ibid., Vol. V, p. 58
39. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 114
40. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 286
41. Ibid., p. 298

1823, Byron astonished Kennedy by asking him questions about the Devil and the Witch of Endor. The poet made this remark,[41] which shows he, at least, did not overlook the literary value of the Bible:

> "I have always thought this the finest and most finished witch-scene that ever was written or conceived. It beats all the ghost-scenes I ever read. The finest conception on a similar subject is that of Goethe's devil, Mephistopheles [sic]; and though of course you will give the priority to the former, as being inspired, yet the latter, if you know it, will appear to you one of the finest and most sublime specimens of human conception".[42]

Byron's intense interest in Biblical literature led him to translate into scriptural prose English, from Armenian, two Epistles, which Byron says, are "a correspondence between St. Paul and the Corinthians, not to be found in our version, but the Armenian....". They seemed to Byron quite orthodox.[43]

In this chapter, we have seen that Lord Byron read widely in books which dealt with the philosophy and religion of his contemporaries. In the next, we shall observe the melancholy, fatalistic and superstitious tendencies in the make-up of the poet, in order that we may

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42. Maurois, op. cit., p. 508
43. Moore, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 370: "The only possible claim of these epistles to authenticity arises from the circumstance of St. Paul having (according to the opinion of Mosheim and others) written an epistle to the Corinthians, before that which we now call his first. They are, however, universally given up as spurious."

better understand the impressions which these books, as well as the previously discussed personal associations,[44] made on his mind.

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44. Chapters I and II of this discussion

CHAPTER IV

THE MELANCHOLY, FATALISTIC, AND SUPERSTITIOUS LORD BYRON

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One explanation of the contradictory nature of Lord Byron is the fact that he was often under the influence of a deep melancholy.[1] This infirmity caused him to magnify his griefs and invent them where none existed,[2] to indulge in morbid thought and to entertain murderous intentions against those whom he loved most. It caused him to make light of what he valued[3] and to sacrifice every just feeling to the impulse of the mood. Reaction, however, always brought with it a feeling of deep regret and an attitude which could but secure willing forgiveness from those whom he had injured.[4] When suffering from injured pride or some imaginary wrong, he often sought relief in libertinism, or indulged in riotous mirth which, for the time being, saved him from the pain of hate.[5] At times he would flee from society to a high rock,[6] where he could gaze at the

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1. Symon: Byron in Perspective, p. 69
2. Ibid., p. 69
3. Moore, op. cit., Vol. V, p. 51
4. Symon, op. cit., p. 69
5. Moore, op. cit., Vol. V, p. 52
6. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 1

sky and water, or to a tomb where he could sit and meditate on the dead within.[7] In one breath he would be discussing clubs and dinner parties as if he enjoyed them[8] and expressing a feeling that he was beginning to like everybody, and in the next, uttering with a sigh, "Man delights not me".[9] He imagined that all the world was against him,[10] he brooded over criticism and disappointed affections, and spent the greater portion of his life trying to "harden his heart".[11] He even cultivated an air of melancholy in order to secure attention from the gay crowd around him. He contrived to appear ill and cruel to all he met and, to this end, painted himself as a dark and solitary being.[12] Yet, beneath his mask of melancholy, there lurked a kind and sympathetic nature which was willing to make any sacrifice for friend or enemy. He was kind alike to servants,[13] beggars,[14] and dogs,[15] to Englishmen,[16] Turks,[17] and Greeks.[18] He once said, "I could not have slept satis-

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7. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 4; Vol. I, p. 77
8. Ibid., Vol. III, p. 233
9. Ibid., Vol. III, p. 7
10. Ibid., p. 200
11. Moore, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 87
12. Brecknock: Byron, p. 149
13. Moore, op. cit., Vol. VI, p. 216
14. Ibid., Vol. V, p. 190
15. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 222
16. Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 164
17. Ibid., p. 162
18. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 122

fied with the reflection of having unintentionally injured any individual".[19] The testimonies of friends and critics have confirmed his statement.[20]

The connecting link between Lord Byron's melancholy disposition and his religious life is his belief in fate or fortune. It is one of the underlying causes of his hypochondria and forms an essential part of his religion. In everything he did, he seemed to feel the hand of Fate forcing him to act in that way. Many examples of such a feeling may be found in his correspondence.

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19. Brecknock, op. cit., p. 149
20. An incident of his kindness while still a school-boy is told by Moore:
"(Byron) happened to be in a book-seller's shop at Southwell, when a poor woman came in to purchase a Bible. The price, she was told by the shopman, was eight shillings. 'Ah, dear sir,' she exclaimed, 'I did not think it would cost half the money.' The woman was then, with a look of disappointment, going away, - when young Byron called her back, and made her a present of the Bible." - Cf. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 137

Byron wrote to Henry Drury,[21] in 1808, that he had hoped to meet him at some public place on January 13; but, he said, "My stars decreed otherwise, as they generally do when I have any favor to request of them".[22] He felt greatness within him, but doubted whether his destiny would let him bring it forth.[23] He thought fate confluenced with the fact that there were so many "only children" in his immediate family.[24] He wrote of his "bitch of a star",[25] of the fatality of love,[26] and of Luck,[27] Providence,[28]

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21. One of Byron's Harrow schoolmasters. Cf. Maurois, op. cit., p. 96
22. Moore, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 200
23. Ibid., p. 207
24. Ibid., p. 11:- "In reference to the circumstance of being an only child, Lord Byron, in one of his journals, mentions some curious coincidences in his family, which, to a mind disposed as his was to regard every thing connected with himself as out of the ordinary course of events, would naturally appear even more strange and singular than they are. 'I have been thinking,' he says, 'of an odd circumstance. My daughter (1), my wife (2), my half-sister (3), my mother (4), my sister's mother (5), my natural daughter (6), and myself (7), are, or were, all only children. My sister's mother (Lady Conyers) had only my half-sister by that second marriage, (herself, too, an only child), and my father had only me, an only child, by his second marriage with my mother, an only child too. Such a complication of only children, all tending to one family, is singular enough, and looks like fatality almost.' He then adds, characteristically, 'But the fiercest animals have the fewest numbers in their litters, as lions, tigers, and even elephants, which are mild in comparison'."
25. Ibid., Vol. III, p. 121
26. Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 194
27. Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 127
28. Ibid., p. 134

and Nemesis.[29] To Byron, success in love depended upon fortune because she is one of the Fates and is more powerful than her sisters.[30] He had a premonition that he was fulfilling his own doom in his expedition to Greece,[31] and then left on Friday, the day of bad luck,[32] because he thought that all things were in the hands of Providence [33] and that no man can control his fate.[34] He told the doctors who sought to save his life, through bleeding, that he knew if his hour had come he would die, whether he lost or kept his blood.[35] For all his strength and for all his weakness, Lord Byron blamed fortune and the stars:

> "Like Sylla, I have always believed that all things depend upon fortune, and nothing upon ourselves. I am not aware of any one thought or action worthy of being called good to myself or others, which is not to be attributed to the good goddess, Fortune!" [36]

Despite the fact that the poet believed in the supremacy of Fate, his superstitious nature led him, at times, to try to control the course of events in his life.

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29. Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 184
30. Ibid., Vol. V, p. 157
31. Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 57
32. Ibid., p. 63
33. Ibid., p. 172
34. Ibid., Vol. V, p. 371
35. Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 204
36. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 27. The date of this remark was not given by Moore.

Just before he departed for Greece, he presented Lady Blessington with a pin. Later she had the following letter [37] from him:

"Albaro, June 2, 1823

My dear Lady B-,
I am superstitious, and have recollected that memorials with a point are of less fortunate augury; I will, therefore, request you to accept, instead of the pin, the enclosed chain, which is of so slight a value that you need not hesitate". [37]

Byron refused, at times, to travel on Friday,[38] because the day was unlucky for travel, and at such times, he seemed to forget his theory that "what is to be will be" in spite of all man can do to prevent it. Yet, he told Lady Blessington that the ghost of Shelley had appeared to a woman, in a garden, and he was frightened if she should break glass.[39]

Further evidence of Byron's belief in ghosts appears in a letter which he wrote to Murray from Ravenna, October 9, 1820:

"The 'White Lady of Avenel' is not quite so good as a real well authenticated ('Donna Bianca') White Lady of Colalto, or spectre in the Marca Trivigiana, who has been repeatedly seen. There is a man (a huntsman) now alive who saw her also. Hoppner could tell

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37. Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 58
38. Maurois, op. cit., p. 293
39. Ibid., p. 294
[illegible], Vol. V, p. 81

> you all about her, and so can Rose, perhaps. I might have no doubt of the fact, historical and spectral. She always appeared on particular occasions before the deaths of the family, etc., etc. I heard Madame Benzoni say that she knew a gentleman who had seen her cross his room at Colato Castle. Hoppner saw and spoke with the huntsman who met her at the chase, and never hunted afterwards. She was a girl attendant, who, one day dressing the hair of Countess Colalto, was seen by her mistress to smile upon her husband in the glass. The Countess had her shut up in the wall of the Castle, like Constance de Beverley. Ever after, she haunted them and all the Colatos. She is described as very beautiful and fair. It is well authenticated".[40]

The following year[41] Murray got another letter, of similar superstitious nature, from Byron, this time from Pisa:

> "I have got here into a famous old feudal palazzo, on the Arno, large enough for a garrison, with dungeons below and cells in the walls, and so full of ghosts, that the learned Fletcher (my valet) has begged leave to change his room, and then refused to occupy his new room, because there were more ghosts there than in the other. It is quite true that there are most extraordinary noises (as in all old buildings), which have terrified the servants so as to incommode me extremely. There is one place where people were evidently walled up; for there is but one possible passage, broken through the wall, and then meant to be closed again upon the inmate. The house belonged to the

40. Moore, Op. Cit., Vol. IV, P. 31
41. Ibid., p. 292. Date of letter; December 10, 1821

> Lanfranchi family, (the same mentioned by Ugolino in his dream, as his persecutor with Sismondi), and has had a fierce owner or two in its time. The staircase, etc., is said to have been built by Michel Agnolo. It is not yet cold enough for a fire. What a climate!
>
> "I am, however, bothered about these spectres, (as they say the last occupants were, too), of whom I have as yet seen nothing, nor, indeed, heard (myself); but all the other ears have been regaled by all kinds of supernatural sounds. The first night I thought I heard an odd noise, but it has not been repeated. I have now been here more than a month".

Byron's superstitious nature was inseparably connected with his religion, so much so that superstition became a kind of substitute for religion.[42]

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42. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 206

CHAPTER V

DEISM, Theism, and Other Beliefs

CHAPTER V

DEISM, Theism, and Other Beliefs

Lord Byron has been called an atheist[1] and an infidel.[2] He was neither. These charges were doubtless made by people who had not read Byron's letters, but who had formed hasty opinions with the reading of Byronic poetry.[3] It would be difficult to understand how a normally intelligent person could make such accusations, after having read the correspondence.

In his letters, Byron not only spoke of his belief in God again and again, but censured others for unbelief and disrespect. He called Matthews a noxious atheist because he proclaimed his unbelief in all societies.[4]

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1. Moore, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 14; p. 41; p. 58
2. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 192; Vol. II, p. 216
3. Cain was attacked from the point of view of religious orthodoxy, and Byron was accused of voicing his own opinions in the speeches of the characters. Cf. Maurois, op. cit., p. 450
4. Moore, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 54

He thought Townsend's[5] anticipation of the "Last Day" a little too daring because he seemed to be telling the Lord what to do, and he wished Harness[6] to "confute the infidels".[7]

It seems that Byron, being a man who enjoyed shocking people, might have enjoyed being called an atheist, but such was not the case. He always denied the charges.[8] In one letter of 1814[9] he wrote, "I am no atheist"; and in another, one year earlier, he wrote:

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5. Ibid., p. 58: In a letter from Newstead Abbey, August 27, 1811, to Dallas, Byron said, "There is a sucking epic poet at Granta, a Mr. Townsend, protége of the late Cumberland. Did you ever hear of him and his 'Armageddon'? I think his plan (the man I don't know) borders on the sublime: though, perhaps, the anticipation of the 'Last Day' (according to you Nazarenes) is a little too daring: at least, it looks like telling the Lord what he is to do, and might remind an ill-natured person of the line,

'And fools rush in where angels fear
to tread".

6. Maurois, op. cit., p. 161: Harness was a school-mate and friend of Byron's at Harrow.
7. Moore, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 96
8. Ibid., Vol. III, p. 68

> "I am no bigot to infidelity, and did not expect that, because I doubted the immortality of man, I should be charged with denying the existence of a God".[9]

Byron not only affirmed a definite belief in God, but he mentioned, time and again, certain attributes of the Divine Ruler of the universe. At one time, he said that truth is the greatest attribute of the Deity[10] and that a leader in truth is next to the Divinity.[11] At another, he spoke of love as His chief characteristic.[12] At all times, he believed God an all-wise[13] and omnipotent[14] Being Who created the world in all its glory,[15] and always does what is best for His creations:

> "God knows and does best for us all; at least, so they say, and I have nothing to object".[16]

He felt that man should bow before Him, in humble reverence, and pray for the good of the nation rather than that of the insignificant individual.[17] Of his own feelings

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9. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 216
10. Collins' Lord Byron In His Letters, p. 20
11. Moore, op. Cit., Vol. VI, p. 39
12. Ibid., VI:90
13. Ibid., I:352
14. Ibid., VI:90
15. Ibid., VI:250
16. Ibid., I:352 - Letter written to Mrs. Byron, in which Byron expressed hope of being able to return home and rest.
17. Ibid., II:254

Byron wrote:

> "Devotion is the affection of the heart, and this I feel. When I view the wonders of Creation, I bow to the Majesty of Heaven; and when I feel the enjoyments of life, I feel grateful to God for having bestowed them upon me".[18]

According to Byron, man is unworthy of the gifts of God, and he should feel great gratitude when such blessings are showered upon him by the Divine hand. He was humble and submissive to the will of God. When his beloved daughter, Allegra, died, Byron said it was the will of God;[19] and when the poet himself was suffering untold agony on his death-bed, he said, "Let His will, not mine, be done".[20] He was so convinced of the kindness of the Creator that he could place no faith in the doctrine of eternal punishment which would have shown God a cruel and partial Being Who destined some men for endless suffering and chose others for eternal bliss.

While Byron had unlimited reverence for God, the Creator, he had little confidence in man, His chief creation.[21]

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18. Galt's Life of Byron, p. 275
19. Moore, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 363
20. Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 210
21. Collins, op. cit., p. 108

He wrote his editor to be careful about blunders in the parts of his writing dealing with God, because a single blunder might become a blasphemy.[22] Yet, of the creation, he said, "poor human nature",[23] and was quite surprised to find anything agreeable in this world.[24] He believed in the existence and omnipotence of God and in His perfection, but he believed also in the existence of Evil,[25] and the "nothingness of man",[26] when considered as a part of the great whole. "What nothings we," he wrote, "before the least of these stars!"[27]

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22. In regard to his drama Cain, Byron wrote: "I have avoided introducing the Deity in Scripture (though Milton does, and not very wisely either), but have adopted his angel as sent to Cain instead, on purpose to avoid shocking any feelings on the subject by falling short of what all uninspired men must fall short in, viz., giving an adequate notion of the effect of the presence of Jehovah. The old Mysteries introduced him liberally enough, and all this is avoided in the new one".
23. Moore, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 105. This was said in connection with a favorable criticism of Sheridan.
24. Ibid., p. 159
25. Ibid., III:273
26. Guiccioli, Lord Byron, p. 117
27. Moore, op. cit., Vol. V, p. 306

following statement in regard to the effect of nature upon Byron:

> "I shall go over my old seas and mountains, the only acquaintances I ever found improve upon me".[30]

Later, however, he wrote, to the contrary, that even the power and the glory, around, above, and beneath him have failed to lighten his heart.[31]

The rocks and rivers, mountains and valleys were his friends, and very desirable ones because they allowed Byron to be himself, and they remained unchanged in attitude no matter what his thoughts. Yet, they did not assume the voice of God, and advise him as to his actions. There was something in the recklessness and freedom of the different objects and actions of the natural world that seemed to sympathize with the wild recklessness of the poet's being. It was not the voice of God, nor that of the Devil, but it was simply that of a fellow-creation, of, perhaps, a more important, because a more lasting, creation.

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30. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 341
31. Ibid., Vol. III, p. 268

Byron did not believe in revealed religion, nor did he have any faith in the various creeds of religious sects. He frequently expressed his belief in God, and his desire to believe more,[1] but, in spite of his undecided and wavering opinions, it is clear that he never accepted as absolute truth any human creed. In one of his conversations with Kennedy on religion, Byron revealed his unhappiness at not being able to have more fixed opinions concerning religion, and at not being unable to understand the Scriptures or the conduct of those people who professed sincere belief.[2] I am convinced that Lord Harrington was right when he said:

> "Byron was no Christian, but a firm believer in the existence of a God - not an atheist or a Christian, but a confirmed Deist".[3]

To verify this opinion, I use the following words[4] from the poet's own pen:

> "I have no wish to reject Christianity without investigation; on the contrary, I am very desirous of

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1. Collins, op. cit., p. 108
2. Moore, op. cit., Vol. VI, p. 85
3. Guiccioli, op. cit., p. 160
4. Galt, op. cit., p. 275

accuracy of his statements, he wrote:[9]

> "I do not know what to believe, or what to disbelieve; to have no religion at all. All sense and reason are against it; but all belief and much evidence is for it. ---- I have such a detestation for some of the articles of faith that I would not subscribe to them if I were as sure as St. Peter after the cock crew".[9]

Quite different was Byron's attitude when he stated his intention of showing the priests what a good Christian he was by returning good for evil.[10]

Regardless of his efforts to believe and convince people of his belief, Byron was never convinced of the truth of Christianity. His life-time endeavors never advanced much farther than the following confession indicates:

> "As to Christianity - there I am vulnerable; though I should be as little inclined to teach a child disbelief as belief, as a formal Creed".[11]

He was ready to become the disciple of any true Christian, but he failed to find one so perfect. In 1823, he wrote to Moore:

> "I suspect that I am a more orthodox Christian than you are; and whenever I see a real Christian, either in practice or in theory, (for I never yet found the man who could

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9. John Murray, ed. Lord Byron's Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 46
10. This was written because of the attitude of priests toward Cain. Cf. Moore, Op. cit., Vol. V, p. 307
11. John Murray, ed., op. cit., Vol. II, p. 35. I am unable to secure date reference.

drunkenness".[23] A little later, he wrote that he "had always lived a great deal, and got drunk occasionally".[24] At Newstead he "sat up late in friars' dresses, drinking burgundy, claret, champagne, and what not, out of a skull-cup".[25] In regard to his dissipations in London, Byron said:

> "I took my gradations in the vices with great promptitude but they were not to my taste.---- I could not share in the common-place libertinism of the place and time without disgust".[26]

In 1810, he was "sick of vice" and made good resolutions,[27] which he kept for a while.[28] Later he wrote:

> "My whole life has been at variance with propriety, not to say decency; my circumstances are become involved; my friends are dead or estranged, and my existence a dreary void".[29]

He had heard that virtue is its own reward and felt that it should be well paid for its trouble.[30] Indeed, it seemed to be too much trouble for Lord Byron. In 1818, he

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23. Ibid., p. 174
24. Ibid., p. 182
25. Ibid., p. 183
26. Ibid., p. 210
27. Ibid., p. 322
28. Ibid., p. 351
29. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 63
30. Ibid., p. 252

In spite of Byron's scepticism concerning the religious beliefs of his day, one cannot fail to observe that he was very ~~anxious to reach the place of being able~~ eager to accept some tangible religion and enjoy the peace of mind which it would bring with it. He seemed to realize there was something lacking in his life which could be supplied by religion alone. He wrote that he was an admirer of tangible religion, and thought the Catholic religion very "elegant", because the incense, pictures, statues, altars, shrines, and relics give one something tangible to grasp.[42] Byron refused to allow his daughter to remain with Shelley[43] because there was danger that her religious feelings might be disturbed. He sent her to a convent that religious feelings might be cultivated and that she might be made the possessor of that peace which was not his to secure. Toward the end of his life, he wrote:

> "I am no enemy to religion, but the contrary; I am educating my natural daughter a strict Catholic; I think people can never have enough of religion; I incline very much to Catholic doctrine".[44]

Again, he wrote:

> "In religion, I favor the Catholic

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42. Ibid., p. 324
43. Ibid., p. 142
44. Ibid., p. 313

CHAPTER VII

BYRON'S IDEAS ON IMMORTALITY

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It is only natural that a man of Byron's nature, morally weak, restless, and sceptical, yet desirous of peace and of some assurance of future happiness, should have thought much about death and the nature of the soul.

In speaking of the death of Matthews, Byron confessed that he was was bewildered over the question of death.[1] A short time after that, he said that the dead "are at rest, and none but the dead can be so".[2] "It was the comparative insignificance of ourselves and our world which led (him) to imagine pretentions to eternity overrated".[3] He tried to persuade himself that it makes no difference whether one believes in the immortality of the soul or not.[4] "Time must decide (and) eternity won't be less agreeable or more horrible because one did not expect it."[5] Death, Byron said, will level all class

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1. Moore, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 63
2. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 51
3. Ibid., p. 216
4. Ibid., p. 282
5. Ibid., p. 282

distinctions because all must lie down quietly together.[6] He failed to see anything very terrible in a dreamless sleep, and could not conceive of any existence which would not become tiresome after a while.[7] He knew what he was, but did not know what he might be later.[8] He thought of death as peaceful, and felt that sorrow for the dead is selfish,[9] and doubted "that we have any right to pity the dead for their own sakes".[10] He said that religion and Christianity are not necessary to a calm and peaceful death. "Men died calmly before the Christian era and since without Christianity."[11] "A deathbed," Byron wrote, "is a matter of nerves and constitution, and not of religion."[12]

Byron himself had no fear of death. He picked out his burial place at the foot of a stone in Venice,[13] and selected the motto "_implora pace_" for his epitaph.[14] He did not know which is best, life or death,[15] but he was not afraid to die. On his deathbed, he said, "Do not

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6. _Ibid._, p. 291
7. _Ibid._, p. 282
8. _Ibid._, p. 25
9. _Ibid._, p. 50
10. _Ibid._, Vol. IV, p. 52
11. _Ibid._, p. 32
12. _Ibid._, p. 32
13. _Ibid._, p. 83
14. _Ibid._, p. 159
15. _Ibid._, Vol. V, p. 86

think I am afraid to die - I am not"; and in his last moments he said he did not care for death, but he could not bear the pain.[16]

Just what would happen to him after his death, he did not pretend to know,[17] but he seemed to feel that death was a great adventure which would more than likely better his condition. At times he indulged himself in the feeling that death is merely a long repose,[18] and in other moments he persuaded himself that the soul is separated from the body and goes into another world.[19] He, at least, thought of that future world as a better place than this. Lamartine once called Byron the "chantre d'enfer", which the poet considered "a pretty title to give a man for doubting if there be any such place".[20] He thought "eternal sleep better than agonized vigil". "But," he said, "men cling to life so they would probably prefer anything to quiet".[21] He felt that if ever the soul left the body, man would fight to keep it out,[22] and he "feared" that he would live hereafter.[23]

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16. Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 211
17. Ibid., p. 263
18. Maurois, op. cit., p. 142
19. Moore, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 199
20. Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 330
21. Ibid., Vol. V, p. 315
22. Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 5
23. Ibid., p. 195

Toward the end of his life, Byron thought much about death and the immortality of the soul. The nearer he came to death, the more he seemed to try to believe man immortal.

> "It has been said," wrote Byron, in 1821, "that the immortality of the soul is a grand peut-etre - but still it is a grand one. Everybody clings to it - the stupidest, and dullest, and wickedest of human bipeds is still persuaded that he is immortal."[24]

In answer to a prayer for Byron, the poet noted (1821) the following advantage of the believer over the sceptic:

> "If there be no hereafter, they (the believers) can be with the infidel, having enjoyed hope without disappointment, since out of nothing, nothing can arise. A man's creed does not depend upon himself; faith grows weak; the sceptic grows to be a believer".[25]

All of Byron's hopes, fears and thoughts on immortality merely led him to one conclusion, and that is that he could only guess what would happen after death. He kept asking himself, "Is there anything beyond?" and answering with another question: "Who knows?" This uncertainty followed him to the grave.

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24. Ibid., Vol. V, p. 86
25. Ibid., pp. 289-90

Byron died, says Count Gamba, "in a strange land and amongst strangers, but more loved, more sincerely wept he never could have been whenever he had breathed his last. Such was the attachment, mingled with a sort of reverence and enthusiasm, with which he inspired those around him that there was not one of us who would not, for his sake, have willingly encountered any danger in the world".[26]

26. Ibid., Vol. VI, P. 215

CONCLUSION

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After having read and studied the correspondence of Lord Byron and collected such passages as could be found concerning the poet's thoughts on religion, I still find difficulty in giving a concise estimate of his religious opinions, because the poet himself was never sure of his beliefs.

There is only one doctrine of religion that Byron accepted with absolute conviction at all times. God was a reality to him. He placed a lasting faith in the Divine Creator who had arranged his life for him. Churches, bishops, priests, creeds of all kinds were unnecessary to him. He often wished that he could believe firmly in Christianity and the immortality of the soul, but he was never convinced beyong reasonable doubt. Byron seemed to feel that he could be much happier if he could convince himself of the truth of the Roman Catholic faith, which he preferred above all others. He pondered over religion, especially over death and the soul. For moments he seemed to be convinced of certain truths, but these flashes of seeming belief were merely evidences of his great desire

to have his mind at rest. All of his doubts and all of his desire to believe did not advance him beyond the state of uncertainty. He consoled himself by arguing that what man thinks cannot change the state of affairs, so that it makes no difference what opinions he may hold. The world will go on and all people will meet death, believers and unbelievers alike. Those who expect nothing cannot be disappointed; and those who do, have the advantage of peace and hope in this world. Byron arrived simply at one conclusion, and that is that his mind was incapable of grasping the whole truth. "There must be a sense or two lacking in mortals," he wrote, for "where much is to be grasped, we are at a loss".[1]

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1. Moore, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 26

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