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# Byron's Underground Manfred

Daniel Terkla, *Illinois Wesleyan University*



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# THE COMPARATIST

## BYRON'S UNDERGROUND MANFRED

by

Dan Terka

What I have done is done; I bear within  
A torture which could nothing gain from thine:  
The mind which is immortal makes itself  
Requital for its good or evil thoughts—  
Is its own origin of ill and end—  
And its own place and time— . . . .<sup>1</sup>

Byron's *Manfred* is ultimately triumphant in exorcising the "gods" that he sets up within himself (Sperry 197); Dostoevsky's anti-hero in *Notes from Underground* is not. This essay constitutes a comparative study of the one's triumph and the other's failure.<sup>2</sup> Such a study will enable us to clear away some of the contradictory critical mists which seem to have risen up around *Manfred*.

I say that Byron's hero triumphs because at the drama's climax *Manfred* is *not* a Sartrean anti-hero. I do not perceive him as someone characterized by "his own vision of human helplessness in the face of an indifferent universe" (Clubbe 31). He achieves a victory over the forces of nature and over his all-too-human mental suffering, as D. M. McVeigh rightly states: "In the end *Manfred* does conquer his curse and enjoy a certain triumph. He does so by remaining true to himself, however blighted his nature" (609). Granted, his seemingly pyrrhic victory is achieved only in death and is short-lived; but *Manfred*, at that point both human and divine, is "past reproaches . . . past the wish of vengeance," much as Byron was at the time of the poem's creation (*Letters and Journals* 3: 365).

Pairing *Manfred* with *Notes from Underground* proves interesting and instructive for a number of reasons, the most obvious being the thematic similarities of self-determination, self-consciousness, and alienation. By exercising their wills against a system, each protagonist achieves a state of heightened awareness, be it as a result of *Manfred*'s quest for arcane knowledge or the Underground Man's intermittent striving for consciousness. As a result of their respective quests, each man is driven further and further inward, thereby progressively and purposely alienating himself from the society of man. We can see each of them as "tormented not within the bounds of social order, but within the disordered bounds of his own mind" (Luke 26). In each case, this solipsistic existence leads to an even greater sense of awareness and a desire for greater knowledge or power.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, in leading such a life, each creates for himself a closed universe, a circular existence from which it is difficult (in *Manfred*'s case), if not impossible (in the Underground Man's case), to escape. The only way out is through the agency of another: in Dostoevsky's tale Liza is the agent, in Byron's it is Astarte.

While these similarities indeed provide interesting and informative avenues for the reader to follow, the differences in the two works prove to be the most fruitful in helping us read *Manfred*. As stated above, while *Manfred* triumphs, the Underground Man fails, and he fails miserably. These different outcomes are the results of the ways in which each man implements the knowledge or consciousness which he has gained: the Underground Man comes just to the point of epiphany but does not allow himself to experience it, because he rejects the psychological salvation offered by Liza. *Manfred*, increasingly self-reliant, confronts his many demons head-on, rejects their bids for domination over him, and

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progressively travels through the cosmic hierarchy until he reaches Astarte. It is she who provides him with the peace of mind that he seeks when she informs him that he will die. After this he is able to maintain his tortured independence until the very last moment of his earthly existence. Or, as Stuart Sperry puts it, using different imagery:

Manfred's lines ring with a kind of lonely heroism. They suggest a man, who, confronting the reality of his own misdeeds, has found it in his heart, if not to absolve, at least to release himself, a man who has achieved liberation not by self-repudiation but by going to the bottom of the night of his own experience and somehow reemerging on the other side. (201)

I would only add to this that it is Astarte's almost cursory, yet vital, assistance that allows him to "somehow reemerg(e) on the other side." Therefore, he is not simply "the now traditional Byronic hero, the alienated and ill-starred man whose destiny is to be taken out of his control" (Luke 16). "Alienated" yes, for the most part, but once he has peace of mind from Astarte, he is in complete control over his destiny and even overcomes his alienation.

In a sense we meet Manfred at the very place in his life where we leave the Underground Man: Dostoevsky's anti-hero has psychologically destroyed Liza and has returned to his psycho/spatial underground to reencounter his story. Manfred has literally killed Astarte when we meet him, but it is "her death [that] marks the ill-fated hour at which his desolation and trial begin" (Luke 20). We see him alone in his psycho/alpine "underground," ruminating on his suicide, her death, memories of their relationship, and longing for her forgiveness (or at least an escape from his mental torture through forgetfulness.) In other words, both he and the Underground Man have discovered that "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n" (*Paradise Lost* 1: 254-55). The manners in which they function within their psychological spaces, however, are diametrically opposed and lead them to different ends.

There are other significant differences. Byron has set his tale on a higher existential plane than Dostoevsky. Manfred does not deal with *les petits-bourgeois*, with prostitutes or the soldier classes like the Underground Man; he not only consorts with the fundamental spiritual forces of Nature, he rebukes them. This setting differential is indicative of the authors' intentions: Byron, with his Titanic ego, is after a kind of published exorcism, a cathartic experience that he can get only by creating Manfred in his own psychic image and then killing him off. John Clubbe aptly sums up what seems to be the prevailing critical trend on this issue:

(Manfred's) action, within the context of Byron's life, signifies hope: hope of which Byron probably was not conscious when he wrote *Manfred*, but which we, with the hindsight denied him, can see. Viewed within a life's perspective, the effect on Byron of writing *Manfred* was nothing less than cathartic. When he left for Italy on 5 October . . . he had completed a stage in his life. (46)

Placing his hero in this "metaphysical mental theatre" (Bone 177) therefore allowed Byron to adjure publicly the emotional demons that plagued him during the period following his exile from England. He sets the poem "above" the common man, on a Byronic "metaplane" in the world of spirits. In other words,

Byron is the beneficiary, not the reader.<sup>4</sup>

Dostoevsky, on the other hand, wrote *Notes* as a cautionary tale for the reader. It is a tale firmly grounded in nineteenth-century Russian reality: his characters eat, get drunk, sweat, and experience physical pain. In this setting, he shows us that the Underground Man fails miserably but that the reader, who functions daily on this lower plane, can learn from his failure. The anti-hero rails from his underground against what he perceives to be the evils of positivism and of a deterministic universe. Again, we find critical opinion regarding *Manfred* applicable to Dostoevsky:

It is a lament for a primitive age of simple wonder and belief, before science and its knowledge replaced the integrity of man's imaginative apprehension with the sharper but divided insights of the modern consciousness. (Sperry 194)

Dostoevsky indicates as positive steps the Underground Man's consciousness-inducing "luxurious inertia" and its resultant forays against the rising tide of determinism.<sup>5</sup> The Underground Man, however, stifles his own positive outward progression by rejecting Liza's love. This is his failure.

Now to my task.<sup>6</sup> When we meet Manfred he already possesses his arcane knowledge and its attendant power. He is close to being on a par with the spirits and can conjure them almost at will; certainly it would seem that he is in an enviable situation. However, he is tormented by his memory of Astarte's death and blames himself: "I loved her, and destroy'd her!" (II.ii. 116). He is cursed with eternal "consciousness, / With the fierce thirst of death—and still unslaked!" (II.i. 47-48). At this juncture he is a static figure, caught in his own brand of inertia and "powerfully powerless" (Twitchell 614). Manfred's curse then, part of his consciousness, is that he must carry forever the burden of memory: "He is not seeking the future; like the Ancient Mariner, he is fleeing the past" (Twitchell 601). Manfred tells the Witch of the Alps: "Forgetfulness / I sought in all . . . I dwell in my despair— / And live—and live for ever" (II. ii. 144-49). For the Underground Man, memory both calls forth his tale and allows him within it to brood over his consciousness-raising confrontations with society. For one character memory is an affliction and for the other a benefaction.

In *Notes* the Underground Man recalls his tale, and we see him progress through scenes in which he attains or has reinforced his particular brand of consciousness. In the dinner scene with Zverkov, Simonov, and "friends" his anti-deterministic views are substantiated as he clashes with these members of the class who he feels are to blame for the decay in Russian society. In his encounters with Liza the prostitute he is forced to confront and ultimately reject "the loathsome truth" (1157); the awareness that the *caritas* which she offers, like Dante's Beatrice, is his way out of his underground. The problem with this, of course, is that he will have to give up his dominance, the imposition of his will on her. He says:

. . . with me love meant tyrannizing and showing my moral superiority. I have never in my life been able to imagine any other sort of love, and have nowadays come to the point of sometimes thinking that love really consists in the right—freely given by the beloved object—to tyrannize over her. (1171)

Manfred, on the other hand, has experienced a wholeness with Astarte the

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Underground Man will never allow himself to know. Along with her forgiveness, he seeks to recapture this essence which he extinguished. Astarte had the complementary elements that he now lacks. From her he seeks *caritas*; with her he seeks oneness, not domination:

Pity, and smiles, and tears—which I had not;  
And tenderness—but that I had for her;  
Humility—and that I never had.  
Her faults were mine—her virtues were her own—  
I loved her, and destroy'd her! (II.i. 113-17)

We first witness Manfred's powerful will when he calls forth the seven spirits in Act I. Interestingly enough this ability is based on his cursed existence: "By the strong curse which is upon my soul, / The thought which is within me and around me, / I do compel ye to my will. —Appear!" (I. i. 47-49). The various spectres can only offer the "Child of clay" (I.i. 131) what he does not need: "subjects, sovereignty, the power / O'er earth" (I. i. 140-41); "Kingdom, and sway, and strength, and length of days" (I.i. 168). These natural spirits are unable to assist him; "the fault is in him and not in nature" (Manning 72).

It is the frustration left by the spirits' powerlessness, his inability to embrace Astarte's shade, and the ensuing mental suffering which ultimately drives Manfred on and out of himself. The curse laid upon him by the voice of the Incantation "must be understood as an externalization of Manfred's self-accusations" (Manning 78): "thy spirit shall not sleep, / There are shades which will not vanish, / There are thoughts thou canst not banish" (I. i. 203-05); and, worst of all: "And by the brotherhood of Cain, I call upon thee! and compel / Thyself to be thy proper Hell!" (I.i. 249-51). This inner misery is also what activates the Underground Man; unlike Manfred, however, he is driven constantly inward. He frequently states or manifests the dictum that "suffering (physical first, which leads to psychological) is the sole origin of consciousness" (1109). Each man's suffering is completely self-inflicted; each curses himself.

Manfred's failed suicide and meeting with the Chamois Hunter function much like the Underground Man's failed confrontation during the dinner party for Zverkov. Each instance is characterized by a futile attempt to exercise dominance or control—the Underground Man's over his "friends" and Manfred's over himself and Nature. Manfred asserts himself over the Chamois Hunter because the man saves his life; he does all that he can to distance himself from the peasant, resorting even to verbal abuse in a moment of anger:

Patience and patience! Hence—that word was made  
For brutes of burthen, not for birds of prey;  
Preach it to mortals of a dust like thine, —  
I am not of thine order. (II. i. 35-38)

Of course, he is precisely the one here with the "burthen," the one preyed upon by himself. The peasant undercuts this "eagle's" haughtiness in short order:

Thanks to heaven!  
I would not be of thine for the free fame  
Of William Tell; but whatsoe'er thine ill,  
It must be borne, and these wild starts are useless.  
(II. i. 38-41)

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This does not undermine the fact that Manfred is superior; it only helps focus his energy within himself. Even at this early point, he fits Peter Thorslev's definition of hero:

The Hero of Sensibility is always isolated from birth because of his very sensitivity; he has a superfluity of soul and of imagination, and he has a private vision. (169)

We see this even more clearly later on when Manfred confronts the Witch of the Alps:

My pang shall find a voice. From my youth upwards  
My spirit walk'd not with the souls of men,  
Nor look'd upon the earth with human eyes;  
The thirst of their ambition was not mine,  
The aim of their existence was not mine;  
My joys, my griefs, my passions, and my powers,  
Made me a stranger . . . (II. i. 50-56)

If we can see, with Peter Manning and K. Luke, the incantation as "an aspect of Manfred's own mind" (Luke 16), we can regard his conversations with the Hunter and these others he encounters as external projections of his ongoing psychomachy. As he progresses through these meetings and finds that the spirits are unable to help him, he is forced deeper within himself. He becomes further alienated from both the magical and the mundane worlds. This does not mean that he gives up. On the contrary, he is driven to act. He does not come "out of each encounter with a growing realization that his dilemma is insoluble" (Clubbe 36); if he did, he would not continue to seek Astarte, would not magically rebuke each shade:

- Witch. That is not in my province; but if thou  
Wilt swear obedience to my will, and do  
My bidding, it may help thee to thy wishes.
- Man. I will not swear—Obey! and whom? the spirits  
Whose presence I command, and be the slave  
Of those who served me—Never! (II. ii. 155-60)

Manfred finally succeeds in having Astarte's shade conjured up by Nemesis. Theirs is the most crucial meeting in the drama, albeit one with the least amount of dialogue (if we can call it dialogue). For, as K. Luke says, "Manfred's destiny (is) crucially bound to Astarte" (19). This confrontation parallels in effect the equally fundamental final one of the Underground Man and Liza. There she manifests her love for and understanding of him:

She suddenly leapt up from her chair with an irresistible impulse and held out her hands, yearning towards me . . . .  
Then she rushed to me, threw her arms around me and burst into tears. (1170)

Characteristically, the Underground Man cannot fully accept her: "At this point there was a revulsion in my heart, too." He ambivalently approaches his moment of epiphany: "How I hated her and how I was drawn to her at that min-

ute! The one feeling intensified the other. It was almost like an act of vengeance" (1170). This "blackguard . . . the . . . nastiest, stupidest, *absurdest*, and *most envious of all worms on earth*" (1169), cannot allow the positive within him to triumph. He further violates Liza in an unmentionable way: "I had insulted her finally, but . . . there's no need to describe it" and says that he was "insufferably oppressed by her being here" (1171).<sup>7</sup>

Manfred, though not afflicted by such feelings, at first cannot speak to Astarte; he addresses Nemesis: "bid her speak— / Forgive me or condemn me" (II.iv. 104-05). However, Nemesis is powerless to command the shade and informs Manfred that it is hopeless: "She is not of our order, but belongs / To the other powers. Mortal! thy quest is in vain. / and we are baffled also" (II. iv. 115-17). Ultimately, only Manfred can command her, perhaps because he is in a sense commanding himself: we have seen above how they were one in the past. This is similar to the way that the seven spirits failed to grant him forgetfulness: it was out of their ken. Having come this far on his quest, Manfred realizes that he is the one on whom his deliverance rests: "Astarte! my beloved! speak to me / . . . / Say that thou loath'st me not / . . . / . . . that thou wilt be one of the blessed—and that I shall die" (II. iv. 118-27). He wants to hear that Astarte will be in heaven, where he can again join with her after his death, a death for which he longs. In addition to this bid for release, Manfred says "Say that thou loath'st me not." He wants absolution from Astarte and begs her six times to speak to him, hoping that she will bless him with it, thus "affirm[ing] that his original request for 'oblivion' was only a desperate substitute for his true desire, forgiveness" (Manning 81).

This is not granted him explicitly, though. Astarte counters his six pleas with "Manfred!" (three times, II. iv. 150, 152, and 156); "Farewell!" (also three times, II.iv. 152, 153, and 154); and, most importantly: "To-morrow (sic) ends thine earthly 1115" (II. iv. 152). Astarte's Farewell(s)!" adumbrate Manfred's leave-taking of the Abbot when he asks for the old man's hand: "Fare thee well— / Give me thy hand" (III. iv. 148-49), thereby retrospectively imparting a conciliatory tone to Astarte's brief appearance here and departure.

Peter Manning says that at the drama's end, Manfred's "vaunts of self-sufficiency are hollow. Manfred perfectly comprehends his situation, but without Astarte he does not possess the resources to change it . . ." (76). I would argue that at the moment when Astarte informs him that he will die, he has from her the intimations of a pardon. "The sole companion of his wanderings / And watchings" (III. iii. 43-44) has done what neither Manfred himself nor any spirit could do: she has granted him death, release, after which there is the possibility that they will be reunited. It is only because of this that Manfred can speak these words:

There is a calm upon me—  
Inexplicable stillness! which till now  
Did not belong to what I knew of life  
. . . . I should deem  
The golden secret, the sought 'Kalon,' found,  
And seated in my soul. It will not last,  
But it is well to have known it, though but once:  
It hath enlarged my thoughts with a new sense. . . .  
(III. i. 6-16)

Not only is he becalmed by this "Inexplicable stillness," but he has been granted something else for the first time: "a new sense," a feeling of elevated consciousness. Significantly, it comes from Astarte and; equally significantly "It will not last." This is the best for which Manfred can hope: a new, albeit fleeting, feeling of awareness and the surety of death.

This is decidedly a different perspective on life than the one with which we left the Underground Man. For him there can be no such catharsis, however brief. He throws Liza out of his flat and returns to his miserable, solipsistic, antagonistic existence: "And, indeed, I will ask on my own account here, an idle question: which is better—cheap happiness or exalted sufferings? Well, which is better?" (1178).<sup>8</sup>

In the drama's final scene Manfred, not surprisingly, does not "combat against death" (III. iv. 112); rather, he battles the unbidden demons who come to take him away. He refuses to submit to them as he has refused submission to all of the other spirits, with the exception of Nemesis. He tells the spirit of death: "I stand / Upon my strength—I do defy—deny— / Spurn back, and scorn ye!" (III. iv. 119-21). Compare this to his last words to Nemesis: "for the grace accorded / I now depart a debtor. Fare ye well!" (II.iv. 168-69). He is a "debtor" to Nemesis, and only to her, because she put him in touch with Astarte; he owes nothing to the spirit of death and can confidently assert his power, cognizant that he is in control of his death.

Manfred further rejects the Abbot's offers of help and prayer, just as he does in Act III.i. He feels that he is beyond this sort of spiritual salvation and can only think of Astarte and the possibility of spiritual reunion. However, at the last moment he asks for the Abbot's hand and bids him a sincere farewell (again, like the ones Astarte bids him and he bids Nemesis). Why? Has he abandoned intellectual independence for the emotional dependence? (Sperry 194) Is it because "in the touch of the good abbot, death gives Manfred the contact with humanity which his life's destiny denied him? (Luke 25) Does he accept "death as meaningless because it is inevitable?" (Twitchell 614) Is he "at the crucial moment . . . identified with the super-human?" (Bone 180) Or, has he "lost touch with the organic process"? (Clubbe 43) It seems the answer lies somewhere in the midst of this welter of opinions, some of which go too far. Manfred has not "lost touch," or he would not ask for the Abbot's hand; his death is not "meaningless," it has been his main objective; and he would not link himself with to the all-too-human Abbot were he "super-human." Luke's proposition comes the closest to the mark, for it seems that just at the moment of death Manfred has bridged the cosmic gap between this world and the next. He leaves this one firmly connected to it via the Abbot: "Fare thee well— / Give me thy hand" (III. iv. 148-49) and faces the next with confidence: "Old man! 'tis not so difficult to die" (III. iv. 151).

Manfred, as we have seen, is not an existential anti-hero, railing against an indifferent universe. Rather, he is a man who has raised himself to the status of a demigod through the pursuit of arcane knowledge. This knowledge allows him to ascend powerfully through the cosmic hierarchy to confront the only shade who can offer him death and the possibility of forgiveness, Astarte. He is, therefore, the antithesis of Dostoevsky's anti-heroic Underground Man, who rejects any and all salvation, prefers to turn himself inward, and privileges his alienation over communion with humankind. With *Manfred* Byron succeeds, however briefly, in reconciling the clay with the spirit; and, when read against *Notes from Underaround*, succeeds in disproving Nietzsche:



Alas, whoever knows the heart will guess how poor, stupid, helpless, arrogant, blundering, more apt to destroy than to save is even the best and profoundest love! (219)

University of Southern California

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Manfred, III. iv. 127-32. This and all subsequent references to the poem are to Jerome J. McGann's edition.

<sup>2</sup>I intend the term "essay" in Montaigne's sense of a trial effort, hoping that the results are not too irregular or indigested. Also, I hasten to add that I do not mean to posit *Manfred* as the source for *Notes*, nor to establish any sort of direct linkage. Any that is implicit in such a study would arise, I assume, out of the general nineteenth-century literary-philosophic *Zeitgeist* such as that discussed by Peter Thorslev regarding the transformation of eighteenth-century villains into nineteenth-century heroes (*Hero* 66).

<sup>3</sup>In *Manfred* this has already occurred when we meet the magician; in *Notes* we experience it along with the Underground Man through his retrospective narration.

<sup>4</sup>Byron's state of mind during the period of *Manfred*'s creation has been well documented by Prothero and Coleridge, among others. In his journal entry for 28 September 1816 he indicates that his wanderings in Switzerland had been anything but cathartic:

But in all this—the recollections of bitterness, and more especially of recent and more home desolation, which must accompany me through life, have preyed upon me here; and neither the music of the Shepherd, the crashing of the Avalanche, nor the torrent, the mountain, the Glacier, the Forest, nor the Cloud, have for one moment lightened the weight upon my heart, nor enabled me to lose my own wretched identity in the majesty, and the power, and the Glory, around, above, and beneath me. (*Letters and Journals* 3: 364-65)

Of course, many of these natural elements figure significantly in *Manfred*, lending further credence to the autobiographical argument. In Byron's letter to John Murray on 15 February 1817, it is not too hard to see him in his own description of *Manfred*:

. . . the hero is a kind of magician (or poet?), who is tormented by a species of remorse (like Byron and his marital problems), the cause of which is left half unexplained. He wanders about invoking these spirits, which appear to him and are of no use. (*Letters and Journals* 4: 55)

<sup>5</sup>*Notes from Underaround*, 1194. This and all subsequent page references to Dostoevsky's text are to this edition.

<sup>6</sup>I have chosen to focus primarily on the Underground Man's relationship with Liza and not the events leading up to their meeting, although passing reference will be made to them. I have tried to concentrate on *Manfred* and use Dostoevsky's text in a more general, contrapuntal way. From *Manfred* I have selected those scenes which illustrate Manfred's active quest for "forgetfulness" through Astarte. These naturally are the places where he employs the will and power (will to power?) which constitute his makeup.

<sup>7</sup>It seems only logical here that he rapes Liza. After all, what better way to humiliate her? She loves him and seems receptive to having sex with him; only sex for her equates with love, if she has it with him. Instead we see, after a fifteen minute gap in the narration, that Liza is seated on the floor next to the bed. She is in tears and alone. He peers at her through a crack in the screen and admits to having "insulted her finally." To make matters worse, he then throws her out of his flat. As she is leaving, he tries to pay her for the sex/rape, thus throwing her sordid profession in her face and thoroughly debasing her and her love for him.

<sup>8</sup>Curiously enough, this sounds much like the Byron of whom Peter Manning speaks: "Tenderness toward Annabella was followed by icy withdrawal of deliberate insult, as if only by that means could he be sure of his mastery" (86). And, after Annabella and Ada left London: "Byron had sadly conspired against himself to produce the abandonment he suffered" (87). This seems to be further evidence for Manfred's cathartic/auto-biographical nature. For surely this is not the same soul who calmly faces death in Act III. iv.

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