

Lord Byron Pays a Visit

[He takes issue with the following passage in my letter to Bosie: 'Byron was a symbolic figure, but his relations were to the passion of his age and its weariness of passion. Mine were to something more noble, more permanent, of more vital issue, of larger scope'.]



*You say I was the symbol of
Passion alone, whereas you stood
For something nobler! Oh, that's good!
What stood you for? Depraved boy-love.*

*(Stood in the dock for it, alas!)
It's true, I had a taste for boys,
For male and female sexual joys,
But never did I try to pass*

*As anything but what I was.
I scorned the good opinion
Of England as freely as one
Would scorn the braying of an ass.*

*I went abroad with spirits high
And did not care a fig that fools
At home who worshipped senseless rules
Were hanging me in effigy.*

*You feared exile, didn't you?
One cannot be a rebel and
Not pay a price. I left the land.
You stayed, and let the yahoos do*

*Their worst, and drive you to your grave.
You were attached to High Society
So fondly that you could not pry
Yourself away, even to save*

*Yourself. To what were you a martyr?
Love of respectability,
Not Uranus. You were never free,
Because you stooped to ask for quarter*

*From tyrants, cowards, and the Crown!
You gave snobbery a bad name
Splattering it with the mud of shame.
To let that midget bring you down!*

*You sacrificed your freedom for
The sake of pleasure. I gave my life
For freedom, in the smoke and strife.
I asked for nothing more.*



Success leads to satiety.
It killed my soul. It is one-sided.
Failure is easily derided,
But it is life's great mystery.

*You are a fat Narcissus. I
Looked better in a looking glass.
You posed like a conceited ass,
But nobly was I born to die.*

*Dem me, I give it up! I know
Not what to do with you. You are
Beyond the pale of truth so far
Your every breath's a lie. A show*

*Put on is every tear you shed.
You even pose as a poseur!
Enough. Farewell. A lady, sir,
Is waiting for me in my bed.*



The Vampire Vyron

At the mention of his name Byron drops in on a hashish dream of mine, at first I do not recognise him, and he seems to have forgotten all about our acrimonious encounter in Canticle II of In Memoriam C.3.3. Wine is consumed. He takes on the sinister features of the vampire Polidori portrayed him as. I am seeing him through Polidori's vengeful eyes.



1.

A boding and malarial air
Hangs o'er the castle in my dream.
I wake—I think I hear a scream!
There is a Vampire on the stair!

Handsome, and fairly tall, but ah!
An Oedipus-Hephaistos, with
His club-foot, limping through the myth
Of his dashing anathema.

Could it be Lord George Gordon Noel
Byron? Back through the dismal Portal
You pass, O ghastly-dead immortal,
From the Hell only you know so well.

As Manfred, in the wanderings
Of Harold... From your mountainous soul
You look down on the poisoned bowl
Where valley-dwellers chase small things

They call the joys of life, herd-creatures
With whom you've not one thing in common,
You scorn them all, save one loved woman
You killed: her gentle, radiant features

Haunt you up to the highest cliff,
To its extrekest craggy brink!
How sweet to fall, or swooning sink
Into the abyss, become a stiff

And cold thing 'mid things stiff and cold,
O'er-shaded by firs whispering,
And overhead the circling
Lammergeier... Why, Manfred, so bold

In hopeless knowledge as you are,
Still cling to life at death's wide gate
Of void, which all must enter, late
Or soon? Oblivion leaves no scar.

Useless to plunge! You cannot die.
You have forgotten how to sleep
At night. Back to your coffin creep
Ere the dawn burns you with its eye!

2.

*You don't believe that tired old story?
I'm really not at all vampiric.
He was a quack, a mere empirick,
An envious hack, that Polidori.*

Byron's fiendish mien fades and gives way to a frank, downright expression. He has shaken off his vampiric visage or image.

*I apologise for Lord Byron, Gabriel.
I know he was your uncle.*

[Now I put on Goethe glasses, and before me leaps and bounds the Euphorion of Faust II, mercurial, reckless and doomed. His leaps and bounds up hills and rocky slopes begin to weary me; merely watching him makes me dizzy. He jumps two hundred feet into the air and falls, with a surprising lack of alacrity, to a reasonably soft landing and without pausing walks up to me, looking a bit irritated at having been put through these somewhat gruelling paces, short of breath and sweating profusely. But he could certainly use the exercise.]



*Here's some advice that you should be
Grateful for, though of course you won't be—
Not interested? Well, then, don't be.
'Tis naught to me, what weird ye dree.*

He speaks as the author of the sublime Vision of Judgment.

*The grey non-entity that wrote
The Junius Letters, less than one
And far too many, and Chatterton,
Macpherson, and more I could quote*

*If I knew whose work I was quoting,
Forgers of literature's uneasy
Conscience, though they make Peter queasy,
Are seen among the Blessèd floating.*

*The Judgment is perpetual
Forgiveness, but to be forgiven
Is also (so, at least, in Heaven)
To be despaired of, fulfil all*

*One's destiny as what one can
Be, and no more, with no potential
Remaining, thus, inconsequential.
Why expect more of such a man*

*As this? I plead his little crimes
In his defence. He could no more
Do other than a thief or whore
Could do when fallen on hard times.*



*If that is what you are, and you
Demand forgiveness, very well.
You're not much in demand in Hell.
Come in, then. What else can God do?*

*If mad King George is sly enow
To scuttle into Paradise,
Oscar, perhaps even you are wise
Enough to get in there, somehow.*

3.

*Enough of Manfred, Giaour, and Childe
Who heralds nothing but self-pity
Grandiose, picturesque or pretty.
I am as witty as you are, Wilde.*

*I'm known for slipping in ironic rhymes
From time to time, a cynical joke, a
Jape and a jibe. I'm known to smoke a
Bowl of hashish when the Byronic rhymes*

*Won't come...—You have learned to dance the line
Between the slapdash and the dashing—
From whom? Why, me!—not bull-like smashing,
Nor shop-keep-worshipping the fine*

*Blue china of poetic form.
Congratulations, you strange rogue!
Why don't you break out in a brogue?
That is a trick I won't perform.*

4.

*My hand is reaching for the Rhenish,
I know not how. You honour me, sir,
By knowing me a fallen Caesar-
Hater who hankered to replenish*

*In freedom's drought, its parchèd spring.
Greece first, but the Armenians,
The Kurds, the Slavs! To win back Man's
Right to the world the poets sing*

*I gave my life in action's fever.
At Missolonghi I learned rest.
It is a lesson one learns best
Forgetting everything for ever.*



You, Shelley, Keats, such promise giving....!
Funny, almost, how doctors bled you
To death with kindness. Even dead you
Are more full-blooded than most living.

*What friends I was with Shelley, till
I made those.... those... You mean, advances?
With Eros, ah! one takes one's chances.
Just now I'm feeling rather ill.*



5. His Ode to Shelley

*Oh down to earth the gods once sent
A poet at his most concrete
When writing of the clouds. His feet
Had palms. His body underwent*

*Two deaths, by water and by fire:
Drowned far from shore, burned on the sand
Save for the heart a faithful hand
Reached down and plucked up from the pyre.*

*Guardians of Heaven, do your duty,
Hail him, ye Powers, as ye march
Through a rainbow's triumphal arch,
Angels of Intellectual Beauty!*

6. His Ode to Keats

*And Keats, killed by an article?
I have since modified my stand
On Keats; yes, he is of the Band
Of the Elect, and I was full*

*Of snobbery. 'What, a Cockney
Shakespeare? We'll see', I drily thought.
In this opinion I forgot
My own Byronic irony.*

*'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,
Should let itself be snuffed out by an article.*

—Don Juan

*'Byrony', perhaps?—[Mr V]
Mr V, are you a ghost-writer's
ghost-writer? Pray focus your
mind on what I am dictating.*

*Keats, my fine sleeping boy, inside
The earth, beneath the coffin life,
What greatness lies for ever hid?
All died a little, when you died.*

*Sweet Keats, the Fates, so cold of heart
To keep you in this world alive
For scarcely twenty years and five,
Spoil not the ageless Youth of Art.*

*A broken lyre adorns your stone,
And yet the name that you thought writ
In water shines in the Infinite,
Star of a brightness all its own!*



*The ghost of Keats floats into view--or
rather, his head floats by on its death-pillow.*

7. Keats

*Think how it feels to leave Apollo
Half-changed into the deity
His beauty destines him to be!
And no more golden notes will follow,*

*Though he stood poised in potent song
Where'er he ventured with the lyre
His spark of fructifying fire
To scatter 'mongst the listening throng.*

*He bows his head now, and surrenders
To the impossibility
Of that which he was meant to be,
With all the fairer hopes and tenders.*

*In stars of inky black you die
Mid-sentence: moult in your dark fire,
Apollo! Phoenix of Desire,
From ashes may you one day*

* * *

8. After a Long Silence....

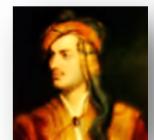
In Greece, Armenia, Italy,
Streets, neighbourhoods proclaim you Byron
(Though modern Greeks pronounce you 'Vyron');
Your statue still declaims, in the

Borghese Gardens, its great ode
Out of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*
To that 'fair Italy' whose rage
For freedom you did much to goad.

I envy you, I really do,
A little, George. And you're quite handsome.
The Book this ghost throws o'er Life's transom
Is partly an *homage* to you.

You fashioned, when the time was ripe,
By your great, wayward way with rhyme,
A serio-comical sublime
Unique, and yet an archetype

He's an incurable 'necromantic'! [Mr V]
That's quite enough. Mind the script! Pay
attention! You are encroaching on the
body of the text! Just now you caused me
to enjamb very clumsily, on the word 'the'.



Of what we call the Modern, half
In lamentation, thinking on
What choices had to be foregone,
And half—at least half—with a laugh.

No vengeful old Commendatore
Will from the dead rise, and Don Juan seize
And drag to Hell for amourous truancies,
Not in *your* version of the story.

A Kletzmer music of the mind,
The soul's Levantine melodies:
You sing your 'blues' in smiling keys
That love leaves only grief behind.

Beppo, The Vision of
Judgment, Don Juan.

*

We drink a final toast.

9.

I much enjoyed this talk with you,
Lord Byron—George, if you don't mind.
Likewise, Oscar. *You are quite kind*
In your keen way. Adieu. Adieu.

He lingers, his brow darkens, a lurid fire
burns in his eyes... It is the thirst for blood!

*You know, Oscar, when England grew
A rumoured couch of damnèd incest,
I sought, yes, with a certain...sin-zest,
Exotic climes. The boys I knew...!*

You may let go my hand, Lord Byron.
I said, Let go my hand!—What's this?
I'll give thy throat a cobra's kiss.
Fiend! Loose me from thy grip of iron!

