**\* *Lord Byron and I* \***

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***Cain’s Mystery***

*****Lord Byron Pays a Visit***

***To C.3.3.***

[*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.*

**

***From Père Lachaise***

***Abel and Cain, Frankenstein***

***and the Monster***

Since there’s a chasm bottomless

In me ‘twixt Abel and his brother,

I am nothing and I am another,

Am several, at least, yet less

Than one, much as the ‘real’ author,

Pseudonym Junius, in *The Vision*

*Of Judgment* is pure Indecision

As limned by Byron, errant father

Of our ambiguous modernity.

(A handsome Vulcan, he, who smokes,

Drinks, chases the boys, and makes jokes

At the expense of vast Eternity,

He who has everything to say

And loves to say it, the sentimental,

The dental and the transcendental

All come ‘neath the Childe’s wayward sway.)

And I? I am both Prometheus

And Viktor Frankenstein’s experiment,

A monster rather prone to merriment,

At least when he is what he was.

Accept me as I was, I pray,

And tolerate what now I am,

A shadowy *In Memoriam*

To glories of another day.

In memory I am alive,

In the imagination, too.

I’m only made of signs, it’s true,

But so are you. There is a give

And take between unreal and real,

Between the dreamer and the waker,

Reader and read, giver and taker.

We are as real as we feel.

***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 extremest 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!

*Byron’s fiendish mien fades and*

*gives way to a frank, downright*

2. *expression. He has shaken off*

*You don’t believe that tired old story? his vampiric visage or image.*

*I’m really not at all vampiric.*

*He was a quack, a mere empirick,*

*An envious hack, that Polidori. 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*

*The grey non-entity that wrote sublime* Vision of Judgment.

*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. *Cain, the Idealist*

Abel, first murder victim, can

Attest what power’s coiled in the fist

Of Cain, that violent pacifist

And bloody vegetarian.

For in your tortured *Mystery* Cain: A Mystery.

An unfortunate ‘altar-cation’

Leads to poor Abel’s expiration,

And leaves Cain with the misery

Of living with a mother’s curse.

Into the wilderness he goes

To found a history, God knows,

That has been but one long reverse.

Strangely is destiny unfurled.

In struggling on behalf of life

Thinking he’d found the source of strife

Cain fathered death upon the world.

*England! you were my mother, I*

*The Cain you cursed. My vengeance was*

*My poetry, and the noble cause*

*For which I found a way to die*

5.

*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? *’Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,*

*I have since modified my stand Should let itself be snuffed out by an article.*

*On Keats; yes, he is of the Band —*Don Juan

*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. ‘Byrony’, perhaps?—*[Mr V]

*Mr V, are you a ghost-writer’s*

*Keats, my fine sleeping boy, inside ghost-writer? Pray focus your*

*The earth, beneath that coffin lid mind on what I am dictating.*

*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!*

**7. *Keats The ghost of Keats floats into view--or*

*rather, his head floats by on its death-pillow.*

*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*

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8. *After a Long Silence….*

In Greece, Armenia, Italy,

Streets, neighbourhoods proclaim you Byron

(Though modern Greeks pronounce you ‘Vyron’); *He’s an incurable ‘necromantic’!* [Mr V]

Your statue still declaims, in the *That’s quite enough. Mind the script! Pay*

*attention! You are encroaching on the*

Borghese Gardens, its great ode *body of the text! Just now you caused me*

Out of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage to enjamb very clumsily, on the word ‘the’.*

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 *hommage* to you.

You fashioned, when the time was ripe,

By your great, wayward way with rhyme,

A serio-comical sublime Beppo, The Vision of

Unique, and yet an archetype Judgment, Don Juan.

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 Klezmer music of the mind,

The soul’s Levantine melodies:

You sing your ‘blues’ in smiling keys

That love leaves only grief behind.

\*

*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!

