

Me and Lord Byron at Last Call

by Con Chapman

Byron said of some of the cantos that he wrote them on gin. [His] achievement, certainly quite remarkable, is to have raised the drunken monologue to a literary form.

Edmund Wilson, In Honor of

Pushkin



I'm sitting at the bar in the Copley Plaza Hotel, nursing a glass of Malbec, wondering if I've been stood up. I was the high bidder at a PTO charity auction for "Drinks With George Gordon, Lord Byron!"—\$350—and it's going to royally frost my ass, if I may be allowed to wax poetic for a moment, if he doesn't show.

I mean, I could have bid on something else—the picnic basket with gourmet foods, the personal hockey fight with former Boston Bruin Derek Sanderson—but I've had a thing about Lord Byron ever since I found out that he took boxing lessons back at the sunset of the bare knuckle era.

I mean, the guy had a deformed foot and he still punched above his weight in the Romantic Poets class. No scented lavender fool's cap for this bad boy—he was a true *poete maudit*, no MFA poseur.

I check my watch; he's fifteen minutes late and I'm beginning to wonder if it's worth it to stick around when in he walks, trailing clouds of glory to steal a line from Wordsworth, who wasn't using it anyway.

“Lord Byron?” I ask, keeping my voice down so as not to set off a Beatles-like crush in case there are any poetry fans in the house.

“The same—you the guy who won the auction?”

“That's me—I saved you a seat.”

He casts a gimlet eye about the room, taking in the scene. “Did you pick this place?”



Dave McKenna at the Copley Plaza

"Yeah—it has sort of a sentimental connection for me," I say wistfully.

"What's that?"

"I had my first martini here, when I was about thirty."

The bartender appears and GGLB orders a Tanqueray martini, straight up with a twist.

"What was the occasion?" the Romantic One says as he takes a first wary but eager sip.

"For the first—and the only—time in my life, I'd parlayed small talk on the subway into a date with a gorgeous woman."

"How'd you do that?"

"There was a disassociating crazy guy on the T, muttering about the Pope, the CIA, the FBI."

"I think I sat next to him on my way in."



"For my talent, I built these bookshelves."

"Must be a different guy. Mine's probably retired on disability now. Anyway, one of the most important social functions these guys perform is to act as icebreakers for yuppies on public transportation. She started giggling, I said something, we got off at the same stop, and I got her number."

"So . . . pretty nice?"

"Are you kidding? She'd been runner-up for the Miss Congeniality award at the Miss Massachusetts Teen competition when she was in high school."

"Cool," he said by way of hipster affirmation, but I could tell he wasn't too impressed. After all, the man famously described by Lady Caroline Lamb as "mad, bad and dangerous to know" had hit on everything in a skirt that wasn't related to him and, in the case of his half-sister Augusta Leigh, one who was. "So this Miss Congeniality . . ."

"Runner-up to Miss Congeniality."

"Excuse me—you brought her here for martinis?"

"She had a chablis . . ."

"Yuck!"

"It was the 80's, everybody was drinking it back then—and I thought I'd order a martini just to show how suave I was."

He gives me a look that says "You coulda fooled me," and defending myself—since no one else will—I say "I was *trying* to crank it up a notch in the sophistication department."

"And why," he pauses for skeptical effect, "did you do that?"

"I'd just turned thirty. I was feeling *old*, but I figured I should just . . . go with the flow and start to look and act mature."

"So what'd you do?"

"I went for the Full Yuppie Makeover. Blue blazer, tassel loafers . . ."

"Good Lord!"

". . . yellow power tie."

"And was Miss Runner-Up Congeniality . . . impressed?"



"I think so. Until I took a drink of my martini."

"You took a *drink* of it? Like it was a gin and tonic?"

"Right."

"You gotta sip it."

"Now you tell me. Where were you thirty years ago?"

"Still dead, so it doesn't matter. What happened?"

"What do you think? I couldn't keep it down, and I could barely keep myself from snorting it out my nose like a toddler spewing Cheerios and milk."

He laughed a mirthless little laugh. "And she noticed?"

"How could she not? I was red in the face, puffed out like a blowfish."

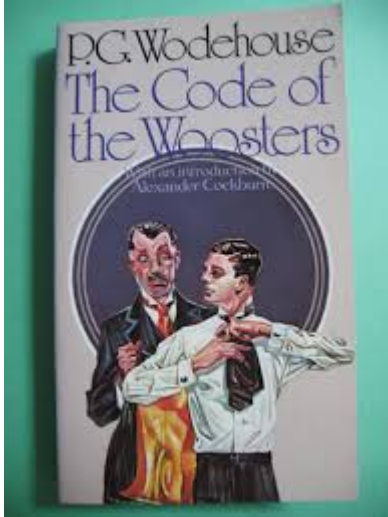
"And the Heimlich maneuver doesn't work on liquids."

"Thanks for the first aid tip."

He drains his glass and signals for another. While the bartender is preparing it, he takes out a quill pen and starts to jot down some lines on one of the hotel's fancy cloth napkins.

"You . . . sure you want to do that?"

"Why not?" he asks. "What's the point of being a romantic poet if you can't do foolishly destructive things? I've got a reputation as a madcap personality to maintain."



The bartender returns and, like Jeeves in the Bertie Wooster books, registers his disapproval of Byron's daring choice of stationery in a manner that is unmistakeable and yet discreet.

I hear some chatter over my shoulder and see two women who I guess are fans, hesitating, trying to decide whether to approach the great poet who is productively cranking out cantos on the linen cloth.

"Don't look now," I say, "but I think you're about to be asked for your autograph."

"The price of fame," he says without looking up. "I try to limit myself to paid autograph shows, but the stupid people in this 'Athens of America' only want jock signatures."

"Excuse me," one of the young women says. "Aren't you . . . Lord Byron?"

"That I am, young lady," Bryon says, turning on the charm.



Ogden Nash

"I love 'Ode to a Nightingale,'" the other one says, and I can tell he's trying to suppress a laugh. "That's not one of mine," he says. "You're thinking of Ogden Nash."

"Are you sure?" the young woman says, consulting the index of a three-ring binder she's holding. "Nope—he's not in our syllabus."

"I was teasing," Byron says pleasantly. "It's by Shakespeare."

"I *thought* so," her friend says, so we're squared away on that issue.

"Do you want any special inscription?" Byron asks. I can tell he's feeling the gin.

"Yes," she says as she hands the binder to her friend and raises her sweater to reveal a white camisole. "Write 'To Melanie—my totally awesome friend!'"

Byron looks at me and I shrug my shoulders. "Hey," I say, "you want to sell books, sign!"

He starts to scrawl the pen across her undergarment, and finds it's not easy going moving felt across 100% cotton.

"This is like driving through a snow drift," he says, but he soldiers on, making big looping G's, an L and a B when he signs his name.

"There," he says as he leans back for perspective; "how's that?"

Instead of an expression of thanks or appreciation we hear instead a gruff "Get your hands off my girl!" as a beefy Division III football player throws a sucker punch.

Byron trained with the best of 'em, Jack Broughton, author of the first rules of boxing written in the English language, and is well-prepared. He ducks, the punch flies over his head, and he counters with a left to the ribs, then an uppercut. The kid staggers back, regains his balance, and the fight is on.

Fine for a guy who straddled the 18th and 19th centuries, but I've gotta straddle the 20th and 21st. "Let's go," I yell, intervening. "I may have to come to some charity gala here or sumpin' some night."

The football player's tackled by a bouncer, and we make our way to the Copley Square exit where there's a taxi stand.

"Buy all the poetry you can," he yells as I push him out the revolving door, recalling John Belushi at the end of a Blues Brothers concert. "And if it doesn't say 'Lord Byron' on the label—ask for the real thing!"

