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Historicism Research on Poe

Probable Sources for Poe's "The Visionary" and "To One in Paradise"

Edgar Allan Poe was an avid reader and sometimes imitator of the poetry and persona of Lord Byron. The quote commonly referenced to support this claim is in a letter that Poe wrote to John Allen in May 1829, "I have long given up Byron as a model."¹ Many critics argue that the character of "the stranger" in the short story "The Visionary" is likely based on Lord Byron by way of the *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* edited and written by Thomas Moore and published in 1829.² The resemblance has been studied by Richard P. Benton, in an article published in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 1963. In this article, "Is Poe's 'The Assigination' a Hoax?" Benton argues that Poe's story is a "twisting" of Byron's love affair with Countess Guiccioli. While in Venice in 1816, Byron wrote Thomas Moore, "[i]t is my intention to remain in Venice during the winter . . . I have fallen in love."³ This woman's name was Marianna; she was the twenty-two year old wife of a middle-aged "Merchant of Venice" named Count Guiccioli. When Guiccioli discovered that his wife was in love with Byron, "he not only abused her cruelly but also made the English poet fear for his own life."⁴ Whether the story was based on the Byron-Guiccioli romance or not, Benton provides substantial evidence that

¹ *Selected Poetry and Prose of Edgar Allan Poe*. E. Thomas Ollive Mabbott. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.

² It should be noted that Mabbott and Benton share this opinion. Others such as Campbell and Quinn, accepted the Gruener-Cobb thesis that Poe's story was primarily inspired by E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Doge and Dogaressa."

³ Moore, Thomas. *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*. 1829. Reprint, London: John Murray, 1929. The letter written 10 days before was from Verona where Byron visited the tomb of Juliet. The double suicide in "The Visionary" bears resemblance to this story as well.

⁴ Benton, Richard P. "Is Poe's 'The Assigination' a Hoax?" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Sept., 1963), 193–197.

Poe was deriving specific passages from Thomas Moore's *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*.

In a letter published herein Byron writes:

At Florence I remained but a day . . . However, I went to the two galleries from which one returns drunk with beauty. The Venus [de Medici] is more for admiration than love . . . What struck me most were . . . *the* Venus; Canova's Venus also in another gallery . . . and the Antinous, the Alexander, and one or two not very decent group of marble.⁵

Benton compares this to the stranger's passage in the story:

"Ha!" said he, thoughtfully, the Venus?—the beautiful Venus of the Medici?—she of the diminutive head and the gilded hair? Part of the left arm . . . and all the right, are restorations . . . Give *me* the Canova! The Apollo too . . . who cannot behold the boasted inspiration of the Apollo! I cannot help it—pity me!—I cannot help preferring the Antinous.⁶

Benton also compares Moore's description of his visit to Byron's palazzo in 1819 in which Moore writes of proceeding in Byron's gondola until they found themselves "at the steps" of Byron's "palazzo on the Grand Canal," not far from the Rialto Bridge. Moore followed Byron "up the staircase" to "an apartment spacious and elegant." During the visit Byron expressed his views on art. In Poe's story the narrator rides a gondola with the stranger until, "I found myself . . . at his Palazzo . . . one of those huge structures . . . which tower above the waters of the Grand Canal in the vicinity of the

⁵ Quoted in Benton, 194.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Rialto.” He is “shown up a broad winding staircase . . . into an apartment of “unparalleled splendor.” Once inside, the stranger expresses his views on art.⁷

A probable source for the strange opening incident was Oliver Goldsmith’s *Vicar of Wakefield* (1766). In the twenty-third chapter of the novel, “Matilda was married . . . to a Neapolitan nobleman . . . and found herself a widow and a mother at the age of fifteen. As she stood one day caressing her infant son in the open window of an apartment which hung over the river Volturna, the child with a sudden spring leaped from her arms into the flood below and disappeared in a moment.” This incident is often omitted from abridged editions of *The Vicar*.⁸

Another all but undeniable reference to the allegorical identity of Poe’s stranger is the stranger’s verse. Not only is it written in English, it is clearly Byronic. Roy P. Basler’s “Byronism in Poe’s ‘To One in Paradise’,” illustrates this point. Basler argues that the stranger’s beloved is based not on Countess Guiccioli but on Byron’s first love, Mary Chaworth. Moore describes an incident when the young Byron wrote a poem in a volume belonging to Mary.

It was before this interview [the last before Mary’s marriage] that he wrote, with a pencil, in a volume of Madame de Maintenon’s letters belonging to her, the following verses, which have never, I believe, before been published:

Oh memory, torture me no more,
The present’s all o’ercast;
My hopes of future bliss are o’er,

⁷ Benton, 197.

In mercy veil the past.⁹

Basler compares this to the second stanza of “To One in Paradise”:

But the dream—it could not last;
Young hope! Thou did'st arise
But to be overcast!
A voice from the Future cries
“Onward!”—while o'er the Past,
Dim gulf!—my spirit hovering lies,
Mute—motionless—aghast!¹⁰

Poe's verse echoes the theme of the pain of memory and loss of hope in the future found in Byron's poem. Poe uses the same words *overcast*, *hope*, *Future*, *Past*, *o'er* in this borrowed trope. The over-employed dash and line ending in a semi-colon are also characteristic of the Byronic poets. Another Byron poem written to Mary reveals further similarities.

'Tis done!—I saw it in my dreams:
No more with Hope the future beams;
My days of happiness are few:
Chilled by Misfortune's wintry blast,
My dawn of life is overcast;
Love, Hope, and Joy, alike adieu!¹¹

⁸ In *Selected Poetry and Prose of Edgar Allan Poe*. E. Thomas Ollive Mabbott. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 149.

⁹ Quoted in *American Literature*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (May, 1937), 234.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Here is a similar theme with numerous uses of the words *no more, o'ercast, past, and hope*.

These allusions and imitations must have been apparent to his contemporaries. This supports the notion that “The Visionary” was a parody of a *Blackwood's* type Gothic tale. Another possible reading of the story's derivative nature is that it was an allegorical killing of Poe's inner-Byron. Poe admitted to modeling Byron in his early writing, but then wrote in 1829 (five years before the story's first publication) that he gave up Byron as a model. The death wish plays a role in many of Poe's characters, but only one of them ever actually commits suicide, the stranger. If we accept this reading, it can be argued that by writing a story in such an ironic mode Poe is actually modeling Byron all the more. Another contradiction in this reading lies in the strength of the poem “To One in Paradise.” Mabbott writes, “[w]ho cannot but be charmed by the melodiousness of rhyme and alliteration, the lulling lilt, and the indefiniteness of meaning imposed by a syntax purposely inconclusive, of the last stanza in “To One in Paradise?”” It is strange that such a lovely lyric should be used in such a parody. If Poe is killing off his inner-Byron, is this Poe's elegy to Byron? If so, it has come to be considered one Poe's best lyrical poems. Perhaps there is an irony here that Poe was not aware of. Or perhaps there is sincerity beyond the parody meant for the reader who is keen enough to pull away the story's many layers.