

2008

# Byron in Baghdad

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## Recommended Citation

Smith, Mike. "Byron in Baghdad." *The Iowa Review* 38.1 (2008): 64-73. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6412>

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MIKE SMITH

*Byron in Baghdad*

*"He knows that comedy is talk, and he takes more than  
full advantage of the principle."*

— Mark Van Doren

(PART 1)

Forgive me, Lord, for all that is to come.  
Humility isn't easy. I am  
a product of my age, and your rima's not  
for me. Rhyme Royale's too much too. (I sought  
constraint before. The work remains, as yet,  
unknown to most, though findable on the Net.)  
We post-Postmodernist Americans  
like meals *pre*-cooked, in someone else's pans,  
swallowing a lot; but since we're not chewers,  
I'll honor "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers."  
(The name hangs from my lips as from a dog's,  
the deadest thing dug up, but my tail wags....)  
We've been sound-bit, and couplets might well suit  
these epitaphic days of ab and glute.

A lot has happened since your death, as Auden  
had it, but nothing's changed. We kill for God-N-  
Country, still. War has always been *the* way  
to start a century. As of today,  
we've got several stewing, backed by the new  
old thinking born again between us: True  
Triumphalism needs no exit-plan.  
(A lot has happened since even the time,  
the year, sweet Auden stopped and I began,  
I really ought to cc this to him.)

Of course, this isn't as much a letter as  
a summons. You're being transferred. Matters  
are bleaker than I write. I've left unsaid  
how deaths accrue daily upon each head;  
how poets' protests settle in like a cough  
too dry and weak to bother shaking off.  
No jeremiad rings dire enough for  
this germaphobic, antiseptic *War*  
*on Terror's* lesson in plurality:  
*Add foes to maximize morality.*

Heroes have never been more common. (A few  
I wanted for myself, but I'll make do.)  
Which is where you come in. I'll start you out  
Smack dab in a Middle East you wrote about  
but, like me, haven't seen. The trope's well-known,  
but there's no place for growth like a Green Zone.  
Think of those women and men, the fighting poor  
who volunteered and found the draft's back door.  
Not that they're left to spin there like spun tops  
alone. Our leader loves his photo-ops.  
He cheers the troops with scripts as clear as tantra,  
as deft down on his knees as Cleopatra.

Why you? Because I know by heart the life  
that put your books on every English shelf,  
if not on reading lists for college courses—  
Most knowledge comes from secondary sources  
these days. Because your zeal for under cover  
and/or action begat a whole new lover,  
archetypally speaking. Because Iraq's  
now also being bled to death by quacks.

Because I would have liked you whether or not  
you liked me, though it might have been a sore spot.  
(Like Auden, you snobbed grandly as Miss Bishop,

whose greatest moment came hauling a fish up.  
And your *Don Juan* nets me Auden, too;  
each age rewrites its Shakespeare, why not you?  
Seven decades to the month have passed since he  
addressed and mailed his letter, which used to be  
a lifetime, now it's two or half—There's give,  
depending on the coverage where you live.)

Because all acts of satire seem fated  
to be eventually updated,  
but name-dropping Coughlin and Dick Sheppard?  
Why don't I iPod Blondie and Def Leppard,  
or blast them from a box riding the Metro?  
At least that's young enough to still be retro.  
(The Cooper name is recognizable,  
but use will only make more sizable  
the risk of conjuring Grandma from a haze  
age-appropriate for her new life-phase,  
and not a cause for your concern.)

Pity

has frequent issues with Modernity,  
I find, don't you?

Don't answer that, and I  
won't overstep authorial bounds to try  
and answer for you. (Though I've barely started,  
the time is drawing near we must be parted.  
It's murder/suicide for me to let  
the build-up build up for one more couplet.  
I mean, I may as well just tear a brick  
from the Western Wall, while speaking Arabic.)  
I'll keep your thoughts to myself, which will annoy  
you, but our capacity to enjoy  
a fellow poet's speech has been done for since  
the advent of the annual conference.

Besides, even the mountains losing face  
only results in their that-much-bigger base.  
Already, SUVs outside the meeting  
idle and serve as overflow seating;  
their bumpers show each other how determined  
they are that no one gets away un-sermoned.  
(I wish all this proved real as, say, clean air,  
freedom, or the benevolent millionaire.)

Few fans, My Lord, await *your* resurrection,  
coming soon, but in a separate section.

(PART 2)

As when after beating an early boss,  
you level up, and back your way across  
the board with bonus strength and extra speed,  
plus an earned combo, upgrades you will need  
just to remain, at the next stage, immortal  
and reach the checkpoint of the pulsing portal;  
or when at supper a telemarketer  
will call and, sometimes, rather than bark at her,  
you listen (not for pitch, but pitch of voice,  
its busyness of kindness and choice)  
beyond her spiel and, by doodle and design,  
connive a way to keep her on the line,  
once I conjured you up, I spent a week  
indulgent, deciding what to do.

I seek  
a happening, like everybody else,  
an outlet to recharge this screen-lit pulse.  
My angst is anti-existential. Ends  
and means are everywhere, the dividends  
of too much faith and purpose in the world  
that serve and starve by turns the serpents curled  
beneath our ribs. We've lived and died so long

we think it's meet and proper to die young  
once more. Which brings me back to you. And war.  
Of course, we like to keep it clean and far.  
Word-lists are worth 1,000 Pulitzer-  
Prize winning photographs of bullets or  
bomb fragments ripping parents from their kids  
before they have the chance to grieve from AIDS.  
Contrast them with our sudden stars who flash  
the brightest when their planes and bodies crash,  
those accidents enduring of the age  
whose chiseled features prove too fit for stage  
or office work, augmented eyes and lips  
off-set by strong and narrow prows of ships  
that once were noses on heads as innocent  
as prepubescent sex and mild dissent.  
Which brings you back to me, My Champion.  
Poet-subjects have served me amply on  
previous occasions. I need a fierce  
and slender hand to end this little farce  
with the style and force of a CNN newstream:  
*Lord B. Proud Member of Baghdad Slam Team.*

Besides, like all of England now, you were  
more an American-styled character,  
which makes me think had you not died in Greece,  
you might have made it over here, noblesse  
oblige, if nothing else, foil to dafter  
politicos who live ever after,  
true students of the cowboy avocation  
of firing from an undisclosed location.

Those guys are made-for-TV monsters and,  
although we love a horror flick, demand,  
polls show, can't meet increased supply, of late.  
(The line between the sunk and saturate  
is fine for any sponge. We Pluribus

Unums vote our consciences to worry less  
about communalized better interest—  
But squeezed enough, all sponges turn centrist.)  
One-third alone approve a CEO  
whose daily mispronouncements softly echo  
his enemies. I've heard myself on tape  
and want to sympathize, but stand agape  
(in wonder, not in love) at what he says.  
Printers once brayed their ink, but he just brays.

Which brings me back to you. My champion  
satyr, reputed handy with a gun  
and handier in love, a swimmer, too.  
Byron, this time and space were made for you.  
One double-click will let your Profile show  
your pic to friends you count but never know:

“Can you believe it's been two centuries!”  
“Let's set time aside to voice our stories.”

And how would yours begin if you could speak?  
The English of your birth, your death in Greek?  
Napoleonic French or Italian  
when putting on your misanthropic mien?

(Forgive me, Lord. I tend to put the scar  
before the open wound.) It's true we are  
a country full of witnesses, Signor,  
prismed by the fabulistic memoir...  
*Abbiamo mangiato molto bene,*  
but the price is well above what we can pay.

Our appetites are larger than these lives  
that gravitate to blame and praise. Our loves  
are pharmaceutical. (Is fame the spur  
that drives us on before we find a cure?)

But what drove you? And what still forces me  
away from fallow ground I take to be  
Alaskan mind (with wilderness to roam  
and lead ambition harmlessly back home?)

I fear I've talked too much and dropped again  
the tone I took such trouble to maintain.  
I seem to fall for every trap except  
the trappings of success. (Confessed inept-  
itude is no defense, but pre-empts the sport  
of remonstrance, renouncement, and retort.)  
Solipsism's a theory I can hold  
as long as you, who did not set the mold.

(PART 3)

You didn't set the mold, so who am I  
to break it?

Sweet of you not to reply—  
clairvoyance is one of the lamer bar tricks.  
(Plus, servants left in Greece your lungs and larynx.)

Still, I could use a little input, B.  
Sequels get hard enough, but a trilogy?  
I need some genuine hocus-pocus  
unless I want to end up George Lucas.

It's not just form, but material, Byron,  
and Research is no strong suit to try on  
if you can't afford to buy. The manifest  
of poets who wash out sailing midmast  
on their good scholarship destined to swell  
beyond the broad Tigris, née Hiddekel,  
but fails to reach the stolid sea of scholars  
who long to hear the lines that loose their collars  
(to pinkish tongues of pretty girls and boys),

whose palimpsestic appetites for toys  
might well engulf the whole Shatt al-Arab  
and give the marshlands back from one bare rub.

But it is fruitless of me to debate these  
commonplaces as old as the Euphrates  
that only make my task harder. The times  
demand their stories honestly told, and rhymes  
tend to exact exaggerated candor,  
more suitable for eulogy and slander:

He lived a holy life amid good works,  
made senior partner, beloved by all his clerks,  
but left behind the world, unfortunately,  
before he cleared the cookies from his PC.

Born first a firebrand, he glared long enough  
to make it easy to forgive his bluff  
exterior. He hung a witch or two  
on flimsy evidence while young, it's true,  
and argued the liberal dispensation  
of bunker bombs in lieu of conversation,  
but cooled as he softened. He kept his mate  
and purebreds on his mountaintop estate.  
He even asked forgiveness and wished them well,  
the multitude he once consigned to Hell.

You think I under-sympathize. Perhaps  
I do. Perhaps interest in inner scraps  
of publicly successful lives is crude  
and lacks the philosophic attitude  
to see that ethics operate within  
the bounds of universal law, so when  
I judge our George or their Saddam, I ought  
to hope that on that unknowable ballot  
cast in the skies, even a total loss

might earn a couple points, having done less than they had planned—Most sound businesses set a standard of production they can't meet.

(You set a standard I can't meet, but I digress...)

You've missed too much to catch up by watching old sitcoms on TV, which is the way time travelers in the movies get their questions answered. (Like how to slip you in Iraq without my losing grip! Maybe I'll drop you upstream, far from sea, to let you trickle down like prosperity in Reaganomics, unless, of course, the damned tributaries divert the flow and send you back by rivers underground, which can occur but isn't, they say, part of the plan.)

Forgive me, but you must be used to long delays. They steeped your corpse in spirits strong enough to keep your cheeks flushed for the full three months it took to hold your funeral. (But London treated you like a foreigner and wouldn't let you rest in Poet's Corner.) I won't let you rest, and now I've done you in again, sure as Shelley sailed the *Don Juan*.

I wonder if you knew he'd take that prank so hard. It was cruelly just, pulling rank on a sailor-poet who couldn't swim. Fate let it fall to you to bury him, a conclusion too easily reached to warn the rest of us who aren't precisely torn in two.

(Maybe I make too much of things and scratch until they bleed the bites and stings

that itch of life. He itched for life, or life-  
in-death, but were you better to feel the knife  
of age before you died?)

    You *were* better  
and worse, which labels me aid and abettor,  
and keeps you deep inside my mind, a kind  
of promise, imperfectly imagined.  
Stay there. To seek perfection is to seek  
your death, they say. We draw nearer each week,  
which means I'm closer now by three or four  
than when I started, not that I'm keeping score.  
(I'm keeping score, and hope for more volume,  
less frequency.)

    It's time I sent you home,  
My Lord, as predictable a remedy  
as war after congressional hymnody.

July – August, 2006