Caroline Lamb was born in 1785, the third child of four, and the only daughter of an Irish peer, Lord Duncannon, and his wife Henrietta, daughter of the first Earl Spencer. Her maternal aunt was the famous Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, at whose house she spent much of her childhood. She married William Lamb, the son of Lady Melbourne, when she was seventeen. They had one child, a son, who was probably what we would call autistic. At first the marriage was a loving one, but as Lamb grew more ambitious politically they grew apart.

Caroline’s affair with Byron occupied four months in 1812. She had been attracted to him – as had many – via her reading of Childe Harold I and II. He soon broke off the liaison, despite her willingness to dress as a pageboy, and despite such inventions as the gift she sent him, of some of her pubic hair, inscribed “From your Wild Antelope”. Surface respectability never appealed to her. She pursued and tormented him without compunction for the rest of their lives, spreading rumours, during the separation, of his homosexuality and incest. She had a set of buttons with Ne Crede Byron – reversing his family motto – cut on to them. Her novel Glenarvon (1816) was another weapon in her war against him. The poem below may be another.

Caroline was very thin: Hobhouse named her “the mad skeleton”. She may have been bisexual, as Byron was. She was certainly very intelligent and Wittily creative. The infatuated Edward Bulwer Lytton described her conversation as being full of “a wild originality”, which combined

… sudden contrasts from deep pathos to infantile drollery; now sentimental now shrewd. It sparkled with anecdotes of the great world, and of the eminent persons with whom she had been brought up, or been familiarly intimate; and, ten minutes after, it became gravely eloquent with religious enthusiasm, or shot off into metaphysical speculations – sometimes absurd, sometimes profound – generally suggestive and interesting. A creature of caprice, and impulse, and whim, her manner, her talk, and her character shifted their colours as rapidly as those of a cameleon.¹

It sounds rather like any number of passages from Don Juan, and is not unlike the free-associationary humour to be found in the poem below, which may or may not be Caroline’s work; if it is hers, it is longer and much more ambitious than any other poems she wrote, except for the 1821 work Gordon: A Tale – A Poetical Review, which is similar in tone and style, is generally acknowledged to be hers, and which contains such things as this (“he” is Byron):

Yes; he will make it moral, but then first
He roots out from within us all morality
He murders all our virtues, and the worst
Of faithless sins, with such great liberality
He clothes in virtue’s garb. He, like the curst
Egyptian taskmasters, pitying mortality,
Tells us to work like men, when his malignity
Destroys completely what preserves our dignity.²

²: Here is another stanza (it is number 42):
Grant him there is no God, no future state,
A New Canto, which was published in 1819, the year of Don Juan I and II, uses implication more than the Gordon does. It pretends to be by Byron, and imagines his aim in writing not to be “a little quietly facetious about everything”, not just to be satirical about everything, but to will into being an apocalypse which will end everything: an aim which perhaps goes better with the mentality of Caroline than with the more moral mind of her ex-lover. The apocalypse peters out in the twenty-first stanza, in the contemplation of an alternative future state from those not Byronically disaffected. Perhaps the difficulty of writing more ottava rima stanzas defeated the writer; though in fact the rhymes come very naturally, and the poem is for the most part more than adequate pastiche. Latin tags (though not from Horace) and subconscious echoes of Shakespeare mingle with half-conscious references to Pope and fully-conscious references to the Bible in a way which is quite Byronic; though the fact that the poem anchors itself firmly in London throughout makes it unlike any Byron work. Don Juan passes through London, but does not stay there long.

In ventriloquising her version of Byron, Caroline (if it is she) does not neglect his wit and poetic energy, but stresses as well a nihilistic exhibitionism which was probably a quality which, while their brief relationship lasted, they shared.

Caroline Lamb died in 1828.

A NEW CANTO

I.

I’m sick of fame—I’m gorged with it—so full
I almost could regret the happier hour
When northern oracles proclaimed me dull,
Grieving my Lord should so mistake his power—
E’en they, who now my consequence would lull,
And vaunt they hail’d and nurs’d the opening flower,
Vile cheats! he knew not, impudent Reviewer,
Clear spring of Helicon from common sewer.

II.

’Tis said, they killed the gentle soul’d Montgomery—
I’ll swear, they did not shed for him a tear!
He had not spirit to revenge their mummery,
Nor lordly purse to print and persevere.

No heaven, no hell, no truth in revelation;
That soon as he has pass’d death’s dismal gate
His soul expires, its feeble scintillation
For ever ceases; it must be our fate,
To be ingulfed in sad annihilation,
To be eternal nothings – our condition
Will equal his, unconscious inanition.

I am grateful to Paul Douglass for his help here.

3: Refers to Henry Brougham’s review of Hours of Idleness (though B. thought it was by Francis Jeffrey) in the Edinburgh of January 1808, which started, “The poesy of this young lord belongs to the class which neither gods nor men are said to permit”. He was quoting Horace’s Ars Poetica, 372-3: “Mediocribus esse poetis / non homines, non di, non concessere columnae ...” (Neither men nor gods nor booksellers can tolerate mediocre poetry).

4: James Montgomery (1771-1854) Scots poet, was not killed, but fined and jailed twice, in 1795 and 1796, for publishing allegedly seditious verse; see English Bards and Scotch Reviewers 417-25.

5: B. himself paid for the printing of Hours of Idleness and the three following volumes of juvenilia.
I measured stings with 'em—a method summary—
   Not that I doubt their penitence sincere;
And I've a fancy running in my head
They'll like; or so by some it will be said.

III.

When doomsday comes, St Paul’s will be on fire—
   I should not wonder if we live to see it—
Of us, proof pickles, Heaven must rather tire,
   And want a reckoning—if so, so be it—
Only about the Cupola, or higher,
   If there’s a place unoccupied, give me it—
To catch, before I touch my sinner’s salary,
The first grand cackle in the whispering gallery.

IV.

The ball comes tumbling with a lively crash,
   And splits the pavement up, and shakes the shops,
Teeth chatter, china dances, spreads the flash,
   The omnium falls, the Bank of England stops;
Loyal and radical, discreet and rash,
   Each on his knees in tribulation flops;
The Regent raves (Moore chuckling at his pain)
And sends about for ministers in vain.

V.

The roaring streamers flap, red flakes are shot
   This way and that, the town is a volcano—
And yells are heard, like those provoked by Lot,
   Some, of the Smithfield sort, and some soprano;
Some holy water seek, the font is hot,
   And fizzing in a tea-kettle piano.
Now bring your magistrates, with yeomen back’d,
Bawls Belial, ‘and read the Riot-act’—

VI.

The Peak of Derbyshire goes to and fro;

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6: That is, wrote English Bards and Scotch Reviewers.
7: Natural candidates for damnation.
8: The dome of St. Paul’s.
9: The ball supporting the cross on the top of St Paul’s.
10: The aggregate amount of the parcels of different stocks, offered by the government for each £100 in raising loans. Roughly equivalent as a measure of economic health to today’s FTSE share index or Dow Jones average.
11: As the world crumbles, the Prince Regent goes mad, and Thomas Moore, B.’s satirical Irish friend, writes verse to celebrate his doing so.
12: See Genesis 19.
13: Some in the rough working-class tones of Smithfield meat-market, others feminine and refined.
14: Refers to the Peterloo Massacre (16 Aug 1819).
15: In Paradise Lost Belzebub (see below, line 85n) is Satan’s bold Compeer and nearest Mate (I 127, 192), whereas Belial is singled out by Milton as one than whom a Spirit more lewd / Fell not from Heaven (I 490-1).
Like drunken sot the Monument\(^{17}\) is reeling;
Now fierce and fiercer comes the furious glow,
The planets, like a juggler’s ball, are wheeling:
I am a graceless poet, as you know,
Yet would not wish to wound a proper feeling,
Nor hint you’d hear, from saints in agitation,
The *lapsus linguae*\(^{18}\) of an execration.

VII.

Mark yon bright beauty, in her tragic airs,
How her clear white the mighty smother tinges!
Delicious chaos! that such beauty bares!—
And now those eyes stretch out their silken fringes,\(^{19}\)
Staring bewildered—and anon she\(^{20}\) tears
Her raven tresses ere the wide flame singes—
Oh! would she feel as I could do, and cherish
One wild forgetful rapture, ere all perish!—

VIII.

Who would be vain? Fair maids and ugly men
Together rush, the dainty and the shabby,
(No gallantry will soothe ye, ladies, then)
High dames, the wandering beggar and her *babby*,\(^{21}\)
In motley agony, a desperate train,
Flocking to holy places like the Abbey,\(^{22}\)
Till the black volumes,\(^{22}\) closing o’er them, scowl,
Muffling for ever curse, and shriek, and howl.

IX.

A woman then may rail, nor would I stint her;
Her griefs, poor soul, are past redress in law—
And if this matter happen in the winter,
There’ll be at Petersburg a sudden thaw,
And Alexander’s\(^{23}\) palace, every splinter
Burn, Christmas-like and merry, though the jaw
Of its imperial master take to trembling,
As when the French were quartered in the Kremlin.\(^{24}\)

X.

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16: Refers to Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, where Caroline had been almost annually from the time she was three until she was married, then somewhat less often (– thanks to Paul Douglass for this note).
17: The tower marking where the Great Fire of London started; erected 1671-7.
18: “Slip of the tongue”.
19: Compare *The Tempest*, I i 408: “The fringed curtains of thine eye advance …”
20: “The mother”: Chaos; “Great Anarch” of *The Dunciad*, penultimate line.
22: Those containing the names of the damned. Compare *The Vision of Judgement*, 3, 4: “the Recording Angel’s black bureau”.
24: During the brief occupation of 1812. The Russians themselves burned Moscow, forcing the French out.
Rare doings in the North! as trickle down
Primeval snows, and the white bears swash and caper,
And Bernadotte, that swaggerer of renown,
To Bonaparte again might hold a taper.
Aye, truckle to him, cap in hand or crown,
To save his distance from the sturdy vapour.
Napoleon, too, will he look blank and paly?
He hung the citizens of Moscow gaily—

XI.
He made a gallant youth his darkling prey,
Nor e’er would massacre or murder mince,
And yet I fear, on this important day
To see the hero pitifully wince:
Go, yield him up to Belzebub, and say,
Pray treat him like a gentleman and prince.
I doubt him thorough-bred, he’s not a true one,
A bloodhound spaniel-crossed and no Don Juan.

XII.
Death-watches now, in every baking wall, tick
Faster and faster, till they tick no more,
And Norway’s copper-mines about the Baltic
Swell, heave, and rumble with their boiling ore,
Like some griped giant’s motion peristaltic,
Then burst, and to the sea vast gutters pour;
And as the waters with the fire-stream curl,
Zooks! what a whizzing, roaring, sweltering whirl!

XIII.
Lo! the great deep laid bare, tremendous yawning,
Its scalding waves retiring from the shore,
Affrighted whales on dry land sudden spawning,
And small fish fry where fish ne’er fried before.
No Christian eye shall see another dawning—
The Turkish infidel may now restore
His wives to liberty, and ere to Hell he go,
Roll in the bottom of the Archipelago!

XIV.
And now, ye coward sinners (I’m a bold one,
Scorning all here, nor caring for hereafter,
A radical, a stubborn, and an old one)
Behold! each riding on a burning rafter,
The devils (in my arms I long to fold one)
Splitting their blue and brazen sides with laughter,
Play at snapdragon, in their merry fits,
O’er some conventicle for hypocrites.

XV.

Ay, serve the skulkers, with their looks so meek,
As they’ve, no doubt, served lobsters in their time,
(Poor blacks! no Wilberforce\(^{30}\) for them can speak,
Pleading their colour is their only crime.)
Trundle them all to bubble and to squeak\(^{31}\)—
No doubt they shut their ears against my rhyme,
Yet sneak, rank elders,\(^{32}\) fearful of denials,
To pick Susannahs\(^{33}\) up in Seven-Dials.\(^{34}\)

XVI.

Brave fiends! for usurers and misers melt
And make a hell broth of their cursed gold:
On all who mock at want they never felt,
On all whose consciences are bought and sold,
E’en as on me, be stern damnation dealt,
And lawyers, damn them all—the blood runs cold,
That man should deal with misery, and mock it,
And filch an only shilling from its pocket.

XVII.

Ay, damn them all, a deep damnation\(^{35}\) wait
On all such callous, crooked, hopeless souls!
Ne’er mince the matter to discriminate,
But let the devil strike them from the Rolls:
’Twill cheer their clients to behold their fate,
And round their bonfires dance in merry shoals.
Some poor men’s tales I’ve heard upon my journies,
Would make a bishop long to roast attornies.\(^{36}\)

XVIII.

\(^{30}\): William Wilberforce (1759-1833) first among the anti-slavery campaigners.
\(^{31}\): Bubble and squeak: a vulgar but savory kind of omnium gatherum dinner of fried scraps, the scrapings of the cupboard (John Bee, Slang: A Dictionary of the Turf, 1823); an apt metaphor, in heat and tastelessness, for Hell.
\(^{32}\): See next note.
\(^{33}\): Heroine of the Apocryphal Book of Susannah, whose innocence is proved when two lustful elders accuse her of wantonness but are themselves condemned to die when their evidence contradicts itself.
\(^{34}\): Rough area of London between Soho and Covent Garden (themselves rough enough); few Susannahs found here would be innocent.
\(^{35}\): Compare Macbeth, I vii 20: “... the deep damnation of his taking-off”. Also Beppo, 32, 6: Dreading the deep damnation of his “Bah!”
\(^{36}\): Bishops and attorneys normally going hand-in-glove.
Perhaps the thing may take another turn,
  And one sharp shock may split the world in two,
And I in Italy, you soon may learn,
  On ‘t other half am reeling far from you.  140
No doubt ’twould split, where first it ought to burn,
  Across some city, that its sins should rue,
Some wicked capital, for instance, Paris,
And stop the melodrames from Mr Harris.  38

XIX.

Save London, none is wickeder, or bigger; 39
  An odious place, too, in these modern times,
Small incomes, runaways, and swindlers eager
  To fleece and dash; and then their quacks and mimes,
Their morals lax, and literary rigour,
  Their prim cesuras, 40 and their gendered rhymes,—  150
Mine never could abide their statutes critical,
They’d call them neutral or hermaphroditical.

XX.

True, their poor Play-wrights (truth, I speak with pain)
  Yield ours a picking, and I beg their pardon—
'Tis needless—down must come poor Drury Lane,
  And, scarcely less poor, down come Covent Garden.  42
If we must blaze, no squabbles will remain
  That Actors’ hearts against each other harden—
Committees, creditors, all wrapped up in flames,
That leave no joke for Horace Smith or James.  43  160

XXI.

In rebus modus est: 44 whene’er I write
  I mean to rhapsodize, and nothing more—
If some poor nervous souls my Muse affright,
  I might a strain of consolation pour,—
Talk of the spotless spirits, snowy white,
  Which, newly clad, refreshing graves restore,
And silvery wreaths of glory round them curl’d,
Serenely rise above the blazing world.

37: B. was in Italy from October 1816 to July 1823.
38: Thomas Harris (d.1820) was the manager of Covent Garden. If the world split, he’d no longer be able to import French plays to compensate for the paucity of British ones.
39: Than Paris. B. never went there, though C.L. did.
40: Balancing point in the middle of a French line of verse.
41: Rhymes were either masculine or feminine, and you could not, in rhyming theory, mix the genders, though B. did so constantly.
42: The Theatre Royal Drury Lane and the Covent Garden Theatre were the only two London theatres allowed to put on plays all the year round.
43: James and Horace Smith (1775-1839, 1779-1849) joint authors of the Rejected Addresses: expert parodists, writing in different authors’ styles about the re-opening of the Drury Lane Theatre, which burnt down in 1809.
44: “There is a moderation in all things”; perhaps with a pun on “rebus”, a riddle in which a name is conveyed by a picture, therefore with the alternative meaning, “The usual way is to write in riddles”.

XXII.

Free, bursting from his mound of lively green,
Wing’d light as zephyr of the rosy morn,  
170
The poor man smiling on the proud is seen,45
With something of a mild, forgiving scorn—
The marbled, proud one, haply with the mean,
Sole on his prayer of intercession borne:
Upward in peal harmonious they move,  
175
Soft as the midnight tide of hallow’d love.

XXIII.

The rich humane, who with their common clay
Divided graciously, distinguished few:
Good Christians, who had slept their wrongs away,
In peace with this life, and the next in view;  
180
Strugglers with tyrant passion and its prey,
Love’s single-hearted victims, sacred, true,
Who, when dishonour’s path alone could save,
Bore a pure pang to an untimely grave—

XXIV.

Blest they, who wear the vital spirit out,  
185
Even thus, degrading not the holy fire,
Nor bear a prostituted sense about,
The misery of never quench’d desire,
Still quench’d, still kindling, every thought devout
Lost in the changeful torment—portion dire!—
Return we to our heaven,46 our fire and smoke,
Though now you may begin to take the joke!

XXV.

What joke?—My verses—mine, and all beside,
Wild, foolish tales of Italy and Spain,47
The gushing shrieks, the bubbling squeaks,48 the bride
Of nature,49 blue-eyed, black-eyed, and her swain.
Kissing in grottoes, near the moonlit tide,50
Though to all men of common sense ‘tis plain,
Except for rampant and amphibious brute,51
Such damp and drizzly places would not suit.

XXVI.

46: “heaven” is monosyllabic – “heav’n”.
47: Of B.’s narrative poems, Parisina alone is set in Italy and only Lara and Don Juan I are set in Spain.
48: Compare joke in line 117.
49: See Don Juan, II, 201, 1: Haidee was Nature’s bride …
50: Can refer only to the love-scenes between Juan and Haidee in Canto II, to which A New Canto thus reacts.
51: May imply Byron’s bisexuality (and Caroline’s); see also line 152.
Mad world! for fame we rant, call names, and fight—
I scorn it heartily, yet love to dazzle it,
Dark intellects by day, as shops by night,
All with a bright, new speculative gas lit,
Wars the blue vapour with the oil-fed light,
    Hot sputter Blackwood, Jeffrey, Giffard, Hazlitt—
The Muse runs madder, and, as mine may tell,
Like a loose comet, mingles Heaven and Hell.

XXVII.

You shall have more of her another time,
    Since gulled you will be with our flights poetic,
Our eight, and ten, and twenty feet sublime,
    Our maudlin, hey-down-derrified pathetic:
For my part, though I’m doom’d to write in rhyme,
    To read it would be worse than an emetic—
But something must be done to cure the spleen,
    And keep my name in capitals, like Kean.

THE END


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53: Frances Jeffrey (1773-1850) editor of the Whig Edinburgh Review.
54: William Gifford (1756-1826) editor of the Tory Quarterly Review, published by John Murray; B. “literary father”.
56: Echoes The Vision of Judgement, 2, 4-6.
57: Edmund Kean (c.1789-1833) famous actor whose personality influenced B. in the creation of some of his heroes, especially Conrad in The Corsair, and for whom he probably conceived the part of Manfred, though Kean never played it. According to the concluding couplet of the poem, B. writes only for notoriety.