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Gustav Davidson

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## PORTRAIT OF JOE

*Gustav Davidson*

I HAD THE FEELING, when I first met Joseph Byron Steinhart, that he would prove a disturbing influence in my life. And I imagine it was this feeling, or premonition, which was at the bottom of my resisting his earliest attempts at cultivating my friendship.

Joe was president of the Golden Quill Club and a former editor of its monthly journal. I was a former president of the rival Zenith Literary Society and the then current editor of its illustrated quarterly. Both clubs were membered by the usual group of Promising Young Men whose aggregate talents barely totaled one B-grade Hollywood scenarist. Their literary output was diarrheic. They all wrote in an affected, turgid style mainly on Death and the vanity of earthly joys. Love was also a favorite subject — Love and Revolution. In those far-off, pre-war, pre-Communistic days, it was the fashion among the “free spirits,” that is to say, among those who for one reason or another protested against the existing order of things, to espouse, according to the extent of their grievances, socialism, anarchism (the Emma Goldman brand), or — in extreme cases — nihilism. Socialists at the time were considered pretty radical; anarchists were pictured simply as socialists with a bomb; while nihilists, who wanted everything scrapped, including government by law, were so far “left” that they looked upon the anarchists as chauvinistic reactionaries. As for the Zenith boys, there was a sprinkling of all shades of radicalism among them. Joe could be found in the camp of one or another of these rebels, according to the state of his digestion.

Their gods, literary and ideological, were Shelley, Marx, Bakunin, and Ibsen, with Oscar Wilde, d’Annunzio, and Aubrey Beardsley as lesser deities. They thought nothing of filching whole passages from

these masters and passing them off as their own. Like Oscar Wilde, they combed their hair back pompadour fashion, wore battered fedora hats, trousers with unmatching jackets, and loud socks. The majority of them believed they were destined for the bay and laurel. As a matter of record, after a few good throws from the winged horse, they realized that the Olympian heights were not for them, and so they became, in later years, dentists, obstetricians, insurance canvassers, and cut-rate pharmacists. But Joe was different.<sup>1</sup> He had dedicated his life to High Thoughts and Noble Pursuits. He walked, ate, rose, and went to bed with the Muses. Nothing could deflect him from his resolve to get to Parnassus, on foot if not on horseback. He was by then the author of some reverberating apostrophes to the North Wind, Sappho in Lesbos, and Eugene V. Debs. He had, besides, launched forth on an Alexandrian epic, tentatively entitled *Babylon Delivered* which, he threatened, would run to more than three hundred pages. He had done, to date, only six stanzas of the magnum opus, but none of us doubted that he would do the rest. I myself once saw him compose a sonnet while we waited for a street car. After reading and impressing me with the octave — it began, “Ah Musa, from what lone abysses dim!” — he tore up the envelope on which he had hieroglyphically jotted down the lines and cast the fragments to the four winds. “Mere doggerel,” he said loftily, “not worth the paper it’s written on.”<sup>2</sup>

We were born rivals and neither of us ever overlooked an opportunity for belittling or plagiarizing each other’s work, until Joe decided to bolt the Golden Quill Club and join the Zenith. It happened that we needed just then a challenger to represent us at a forthcoming Inter-Settlement Oratorical Contest and since Joe, in addition to his other accomplishments, was a pomp-and-circumstance orator, we welcomed him eagerly into the fold. On the occasion of the contest he chose for his subject the declaimer’s fool-proof “Horatio at the Bridge” and carried off the prize: a silver (plated) loving cup. While I shared in the general glory as a member of the winning club, I was inordinately jealous of the aura which surrounded Joe and in which

<sup>1</sup> Another exception was Russian-born C. B. Cherney. He used to intercalate his own macaronic verse in his Englishings of Slavic poets. Cherney liked to dine off oxtail soup and bisons’ brains at squalid restaurants on lower Lexington Avenue to keep, as he said, mentally fit.

<sup>2</sup> Some years later I came across the sonnet in one of Joe’s published volumes of poems. In fact, all the poems he used to tear up with such easy prodigality were included.

he henceforth moved. Immediately after the event he got himself a Malacca cane with a carved ivory handle and, instead of wearing his coat in the normal manner, he now threw it over his shoulders, cape fashion. This at once set him apart as something special and almost untouchable.

Joe was equally good at strutting and fretting an hour upon the stage, so here too we impressed his talents when the Zenith put on an Entertainment and Dance at the Madison House. The two of us were asked to enact a scene from Julius Caesar. Joe donned the tights and toga of Brutus; I, those of Cassius:

Cassius: Brutus, I do observe you now of late:

I have not from your eyes that gentleness

And show of love that I was wont to have etc., etc.

Brutus: Be not deceived; if I have veil'd my look,

I turn the trouble of my countenance etc., etc.

In order to look like a Roman, I went to a local barber and had my hair cut in bangs. Joe, not to be outdone, borrowed his Aunt Hilda's mules and palmed them off on the audience as Etruscan sandals.

To say that Joe took himself seriously is putting it mildly. He walked with a practiced stoop, head sunk on breast, brows knitted, mouth compressed and, when he was minus his cane, with hands clasped behind him—the manner in which he supposed the Greek philosophers of the peripatetic school walked when they ruminated on the more recondite problems of epistemology. Aristotle says somewhere (or was it Epictetus?) that a true philosopher is never in a hurry, so Joe always walked as though he were the first mourner in an Irish wake. He was a chronic cynic; I might say, a professional one. Yet his cynicism was not of the callous order. He was impetuous rather than calculating. I doubt if he had it in him to hate. His resentments were usually short-lived. He was really a good fellow at heart and generous to a fault—but then, as I remember, he had nothing to give away. Reared in an atmosphere of poverty, squalor, and frustration, he nursed impossible dreams of escape and glory. The tenderness and compassion he professed for all the underprivileged, maladjusted, and slightly off-balance people in the world was, at bottom, a tenderness and compassion for his own sorry lot. He really pitied himself, dramatized himself, magnified his own importance. Anything which threatened to

diminish his stature in his own eyes or in the eyes of others, he fought tooth and nail; but he generally lost the fight. He was a born actor, and he assumed (and enjoyed) the role best suited to him: that of a philosopher-poet who was far ahead of his time and who, therefore, was doomed to be unhonored and unsung till long after his death. In his moments of exaltation, which rose at times to megalomania, he regarded his contemporaries and surroundings with the indulgent omniscient eye of a god to whom the world and all its works were but a passing phenomenon. And so the melancholy hue became him. If he smiled, it was a concession to human weakness. His laughter, something rare, was hollow and mocking, like that of the villains in *Corse Payton* melodrama. I think he modeled his gait, his stoop, his preoccupied and world-weary air on a composite of Byron's *Manfred*, Mercator's *Atlas*, Rodin's *Thinker*, and Daniel Webster.

Joe was spare and below medium height, but he had a high and broad forehead crowned with a crop of dark brown hair trained to be rebellious. He was very vain of his forehead and removed his hat on the least provocation, in order to display it. Although he was rather sensitive about his height and wore folds of paper in his shoes to add to it, he held tall men in contempt, never failing to point out that the really great men of the world were undersized. When the instances of Titian, Galileo, Darwin, Goethe, Tolstoi, and others were brought to his attention, he brushed them aside with a superior gesture of negation. The size and weight of one's brain, he maintained, was really what counted, not the length of one's legs, and I could not dispute him, although it has since been established that the size or weight of the brain has little or nothing to do with genius. Napoleon's brain, they say, weighed only two and one fifth pounds, whereas an idiot's was recently discovered weighing five and a half pounds.

I wouldn't call Joe a handsome fellow (some women did, but they were interested parties) but he had good features and, if he were taller, he might have looked distinguished. His heavy eyebrows, which came together at the bridge of his nose and curled upward at the ends, produced a Mephistophelian effect. His nose was well made, short, sharp, with sensitive nostrils. His mouth was good too, thin-lipped and determined, and sustained in its firmness by a prognathic jaw. His eyes were brown and glowing. His Adam's apple, I thought, stuck out too prominently.

I don't remember Joe's mother. His father I recall faintly, as a man with scraggly, overhanging brows and a black beard like Persian lamb into which he constantly coughed. He always seemed to be bent over a pile of nondescript remnants in a dark cubicle adjoining Joe's "study." Joe dignified his father's occupation variously: as a wholesaler in linens, an importer of silk, a boss contractor in dress goods. If you ask me, he was just a plain dealer in rags.

Joe had an attractive sister, Sidonia (born Sadie), who was something of a flirt. She had an apple-round face, Slavic gray-blue eyes, a short upturned nose. She had a fairly good shape, very much on the plumpish side. It was said she was one of the original peroxide blondes, a fashion by the way which caught on so rapidly that the race of Nordicism among the local daughters of Israel soon degenerated into a stampede, and for a while brunettes on the lower East Side were as rare as Negroes in Iceland. Sidonia was also reputed to have started the vogue of putting kohl in the nostrils and beading the eyelashes. In summer she was among the first to shed her stockings. She had a fine pair of legs and made no bones about displaying them. In the dog days she also shed her corset<sup>3</sup> and other ingenious and mysterious feminine underpinnings, which released from their dikes waves of fat heretofore unsuspected. The challenge of her outsize breasts and buttocks was then at its high point, and few males could resist the temptation of a second glance. In those days such shenanigans were frowned down upon as the practices of a hoyden, or worse. But times have changed. Most of the Zenith boys, then in the pimply adolescent stage, stood in awe of Sidonia, and if they listened so deferentially to Joe's heroic couplets or Pindaric odes, it was due largely to his sister's hovering or imminent presence.<sup>4</sup> Joe no doubt suspected this, but whether he took it as an affront or a flattery I cannot say.

What impressed me most about Joe at the time was his ability to quote from the classic poets and philosophers, many of whom I knew by name only, if at all. With Joe, every occasion had its apt quotation. For example, if a fire broke out, he was ready with the "Bells" of Poe. If it rained, he invoked Verhaeren; if it snowed, Whittier. Corpses, garbage, and charnel houses were an excuse for declaiming passages out of Baudelaire. He loved to descant on the perfidy of women, not

<sup>3</sup> Girdles and brassieres were later innovations.

<sup>4</sup> Three of them tried to seduce her. Two succeeded. A good average.

because he was particularly wronged by them but because it gave him a chance to echo the jeremiads of Aristotle, Buddha, Montesquieu, Talleyrand, and Schopenhauer. Occasionally, when a complaisant *femme fatale* crossed his path<sup>5</sup> he would shift precipitously from vilification to adulation and sing the praises of his inamorata in the words of Mohamet, Schiller, Lessing, and others. He knew little German and less French; of Greek and Latin, nothing at all; yet his conversation and writings were full of foreign phrases, most of them lifted from Roget's Thesaurus or from the appendix of Webster's Dictionary.

For all his undeniable gifts of memory, his *Weltanschauungs* and *Weltschmerz*, his grandiose plans for the future (which envisioned a whole catalog of trilogies and tetralogies of formidable poundage), Joe was constitutionally lazy. He never, as far as I could discover, got beyond the six stanzas of his projected epic on *Babylon Delivered*. And his little desk, with its imitation bronze bust of Dante flanked on one side by Nordau's *Degeneration* and, on the other, by Swinburne's *Laus Veneris*, was littered with rejected manuscripts which he hadn't the energy to retype and resubmit.

What Joe found lacking in himself, he thought he discovered in me. Looking around him, he feared that hard work counted for as much in the world as inherent greatness. So that there was every likelihood that I, by sweating, would sooner "arrive" than he, through the exudation of genius. That he possessed genius he never for a moment doubted,<sup>6</sup> but the energy to exteriorize his genius in work was wanting. He did not, of course, rationalize the matter in precisely these terms. He was too egoistic perhaps to admit, even to himself, that he was incapable of turning his dreams of great literary productivity into reality. But something of the sort must have occurred to him. Accordingly he proposed one day a kind of amalgam of our individual forces: his genius and my sweat; his brain and my brawn. "Poor finite clod, troubled by a spark!" The world, as he saw it, was in the birth-throes of another Renaissance and was waiting tensely for some towering work of art to light up the horizon. He considered it our manifest destiny to produce that work of art, to step forth as the prophets, soothsayers, and arbiters of a new literary dispensation. While, he conceded, there

<sup>5</sup> Joe liked his women lean, pale, sad-eyed, and a little sick. According to him, no woman was beautiful who enjoyed a healthy appetite.

<sup>6</sup> He counted himself among the ten men who understood Nietzsche.

were many minds of the first magnitude at work, there were always others on the rise (like us) who would overshadow them, just as Bach overshadowed Vivaldi; Shakespeare, Ben Jonson; Newton, Leibniz; etc., etc.

For months Joe stalked me. After school hours—I was then in my freshman year at college, while Joe was already “making his way in the world” as a P.S. alumnus—he would accompany me on my periodic rounds to my father’s debtors.<sup>7</sup> He would descend with me down dark basements or up four and five flights of stairs, joining me in my demands for payment. He’d share in the rebuffs, insults, sometimes blows which I got for being too zealous in my exactions. I felt I had, in Joe, a real friend, one on whom I could count in an emergency. All the time, however, he was distilling into my ear a slow, subtle poison, the poison of ambition (Cassius and Brutus all over again!). But realizing one day that subtlety was lost on me, Joe gave over palliating and came straight to the point. The point was that we collaborate on a blank verse masterpiece and so enscroll our names in letters of gold in the book of literary glory. He struck a responsive chord, I must confess, and I was sorely tempted. He pointed out that youth was the time for accomplishing things—“The spirit of a youth that means to be of note begins betimes,” he quoted aptly from Anthony and Cleopatra. He further pointed out that a formal education might easily be the ruin of me and what he called my “God-given talent.” Ah, he knew how to “commend the poisoned chalice to the lips!” What, he demanded to know, could I hope to attain, after I got a B.A. or M.A. degree? He had the answer ready: a mothy instructorship in some midwestern college where I would end up my days marking examination papers for lymphatic co-eds. The picture he drew of my probable academic future was uncomfortably dismal, especially when it was contrasted with the coruscating splendor of literary fame. As he put it, the choice was clear: on the one hand, correcting examination papers ad nauseam and ad infinitum; on the other, the output of a series of dramatico-poetico-philosophical works like *The Divine Comedy*, *Faust*, or *The Cid*, such as he proposed we at once start on.

<sup>7</sup> People owed my father money for insurance policy premiums, rented pianos, steamship tickets, and engagement rings sold on the instalment plan. My father, it should be explained, was a commission agent and handled everything, including a marriage brokerage.

"But are we ripe for such a work?" I presumed to question.

"Ripe?—Are we *ripe!*" He threw back his head and laughed (or rather gurgled) his dry, antisthenic laugh. "Gus, you amaze me! Don't you know that Tasso was already famous at ten; that Comte and Pascal were great thinkers at thirteen; that Hugo and Goethe were winning world laurels at fifteen?" I could not refute him. His ready-to-hand knowledge of such facts—if they *were* facts—was encyclopedic. "Think of Chatterton, dead at eighteen," he continued in a withering crescendo, his jowls working up a fine lather of precept and example. "Dead at eighteen!" he repeated. "And what about Goldsmith, who burned up verses at seven; Macaulay, who wrote a compendium of universal history at eight; William Cullen Bryant, who published his first poems at ten. —Ripe? Why, I could cite you scores of other instances of geniuses at five, six, even four—Mozart, for example. Ripe? Good God, we're *overripe!* We're *rotten!*"

Under such an avalanche of illustrious precedents, the least I could do was to offer to take the summer off and, in lieu of going to the Catskill Mountains, spend it with him on some farm in Connecticut where, undistracted from worldly cares, we could labor over our assorted masterpieces-to-be. But Joe sneered at a summer. He sneered at Connecticut. A year would hardly suffice, he estimated. As for Connecticut, it might be good enough for woodpulp hacks with electric typewriters but not for geniuses like us. No, we'd have to journey to some distant land rich in ruins—Egypt, perhaps, or India, any retreat that sounded far enough away and was sure to be romantic and malarial. Nothing and no place was too good for us. "Aut Shakespeare aut nihil!" he thundered, and straightway recommended this Jovian "either-or" as our slogan.

We finally compromised on Palestine. What led us to this decision I cannot now recall. Probably we thought the soil would inspire us. Since our work, to be great, would of necessity deal with the loftiest subjects (God, man, the flesh and the devil) it was better to be as close to as many holy shrines bunched together as possible. I guess that's how we figured it out.

Still I hesitated and procrastinated. I told Joe I would have to have time to think the matter over. One couldn't embark on so momentous an enterprise without considerable forethought. Well, Joe

gave me time, a week. I was still undecided, however. Joe became impatient. One day I got the following from him:

More than a week has passed and still no decision from you! How shall I construe this silence???-Has anything expected or unexpected come up to frustrate our plans? Have there arisen powers stronger than the strength of our wills?-or have you suddenly been recalled from the feverish influence of a vague and empty dream?!? Are we doomed to have it said of us as Brutus said of Cassius:

“. . . hollow men, like horses hot at hand,  
Make gallant show and promise of their mettle;  
But when they should endure the bloody spur,  
They fall their crests and, like deceitful jades,  
Sink in the trial.”

Please let me hear from you at once!

Joe

P.S. “’Tis not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings.” And remember, “aut Shakespeare aut nihil!”

This letter, crackling with exclamation points and interrogation marks, and with every other word heavily underscored, gnawed at my conscience. I could not let him down. I was certainly better than a horse. I would show him that the promise of my mettle would endure the bloody spur, and that I would not, come what may, sink in the trial. I think though it was the poetry of Shakespeare rather than the catechizing of Joe that overcame my scruples.

The problem we faced, of course, was how to corral funds necessary for our trip. To whom could we apply? Who in his right mind would lend a sympathetic ear, let alone a generous amount of cash? Joe, however, was confident. He had several people in mind, he said. He knew a real estate operator, a very wealthy man, to whom two or three thousand dollars was a mere pinch of snuff. Joe would put the proposition to this man, cold. We might, Joe suggested, if the fellow proved stubborn, guarantee him a percentage of the earnings (net) from our work. To this I readily agreed. He'd be crazy, Joe said, to turn us down. Well, the realtor turned us down, cold. And he wasn't crazy. Never mind! There was Joe's uncle, a multi-millionaire (anyone who owned a Buick car was a multi-millionaire to Joe). But the uncle was in Miami, toasting his toes. A jobber of artificial flowers was next thought of, but that gentleman was in Canada. Furriers, neckwear manufacturers, book binders, even buttonhole makers were successively

appealed to, with equally discouraging results. Joe then spoke of a patroness, a mysterious "dark lady," a member of the *haut monde* who, he said, had already given him some encouragement. The nature of that encouragement Joe did not reveal, nor did I think it discreet to press him. Well, Joe wrote to the lady and she finally consented to see him. In her apartment on Riverside Drive, Joe sipped unending cups of tea served by Simmons the butler in a rococo drawing room. A day or two later I received this mournful missile:

I despair once more! Lady X has failed us!! The whole thing was an *affaire flambée*. She is unable, she said, because of "previous commitments," to provide the necessary funds! *Who* can be depended on, these days???? Did Chance ever toy so cruelly with a human being?—Cursed be the Power that brought me into the world!!! Unhappily,

Joe

P. S. I fear I'll go insane!

Ah, if he only had! For then we both would have been spared the fiasco of our hegira to the Holy Land where, in the early part of 1912 (with funds provided by my father) we landed, fortified with typewriters, ink erasers, carbon, penwipers, and a quantity of writing paper sufficient to wear out a dozen geniuses. A year later we were back in New York with the manuscript of a five-act poetic tragedy warranted to make us immortal—and shake the world to its foundations. The world, however, was not shaken. Broadway producers remained strangely indifferent. A publisher in North Dakota was persuaded finally to bring out the play in book form, at the authors' expense. The reviewers ignored it completely.

Disillusioned, I went back to college. Joe, now an "authority" on Palestine, wrote one or two articles on Bedouin morals, and then dropped out of sight. Years afterwards he was observed in the town of Hohokus, New Jersey, wheeling a baby carriage. *Sic transit gloria mundi!*