

Crossroads

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THAT Shelley's dreamer in 'The Mask of Anarchy'
met Murder over a century
before Neil Parker and Madeleine, his fiancée
in the Halperin's' *White Zombie*

should not dismay our disbelief.
Bela Lugosi, like Shelley's Castlereagh,
was simply wearing Murder's name.
Underneath the face remained.

After all, Robert Southey, Percy's
short-term friend and long-term enemy,
was amongst the first to resuscitate
the word 'zombi' in English,

a *bokor* of language's body.
Castlereagh's bloodhounds: Fraud and Hypocrisy
and the others follow in this 'ghastly
masquerade' 'disguised, even to the eyes,

Like Bishops, lawyers, peers, and spies.'

Legendre, as Bela Lugosi,
takes pleasure in introducing
his six-fold zombie menagerie:

Lavaux, witch doctor, Von Gerder,

a swine 'swollen with riches', the dignitary:

'His Excellence; Richard; Minister

for the Interior; Garcia, a brigand chief,

Marquis, captain of the gendarmerie,

Chauvin, the High Executioner':

almost an anatomy of high

Haitian society, as suggestive in its way

of colonisation and invasion

as the delicate map of Haiti

sewn into Madeleine's

silk wedding drawers,

or Lugosi's scraggy vulture familiar

squawking from the wall outside.

Peterloo chose Manchester.

They were no fleeting nightmare,

those militiamen, to brush away

from the tumbling bodies of factory-girls

and the movie producers returned:

28 Days and *Let Sleeping Corpses Lie*.

Murder as a Christian name

must be fairly rare in movies.

Yet for those with eyes to see,

'Murder Legendre' simultaneously

engenders death and legend and, taken

in the imperative, as zombies always are,

also serves as subliminal command

to render death-in-life a single name.

Note

Victor and Edward Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932) starts at a crossroads where the carriage bearing a betrothed couple encounters a native burial ceremony. My poem crosses this film with Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819), his bitter, allegorical denunciation of the slaughter at Peterloo, an event two centuries old this year and one which also led to native burials. Notably, both the Halperins' film and Shelley's poem feature a meeting with a character called 'Murder' and his monstrous followers. Amongst other issues, my poem is about naming in different post-colonial and cultural contexts and, hopefully, it evokes more questions than answers.