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978-1-107-47038-5 - Byron's War: Romantic Rebellion, Greek Revolution

Roderick Beaton

Excerpt

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PART I

The rebel imagination
(1809–1816)

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CHAPTER I

Land of lost gods . . .

A CHILDE IS BORN

Byron was only twenty-one years old when he set out on his version of the Grand Tour in the summer of 1809. The wars against France were in their second decade. Towards the end of the previous century, an improving itinerary had been becoming standard for young British aristocrats. But the overland route to Italy, and Italy itself, were out of the question. The entire continent was controlled by Napoleon. So Byron set out instead, by sea, for Portugal. With him went his friend from student days at Cambridge, John Cam Hobhouse. From Portugal, their journey took them through southern Spain and then to the British naval outpost of Malta, which they reached in September. The plan at this time was to continue by sea to Smyrna (Izmir) and on to Constantinople, capital of the Ottoman empire, seeing something of the ancient sites of Greece on the way.¹

At Malta, Byron and Hobhouse fell under the spell of Spyridon Forresti, the long-serving British consul at Corfu who had been ousted by the French. As well as introducing Byron to a married woman who features in *Childe Harold* and some other poems, Forresti persuaded the travellers, for the next stage of their journey, to take a passage on a Royal Navy escort vessel bound for Preveza in western Greece. From there, they were to pay a courtesy visit to the semi-independent despot Ali Pasha, in his capital at Ioannina. For more than a decade, Ali had been playing off competing French and British interests in the region. Astute diplomacy, coupled with extreme violence towards his own subjects, had enabled him to consolidate his hold over much of today's northwest Greece and southern Albania. Still nominally subject to the Ottoman Sultan, Ali was already preparing the ground for his own bid for full independence ten years later.²

Now, while Byron and Hobhouse were in Malta, a British naval expedition was preparing to set sail to capture the Ionian Islands, off the west coast of Greece, from the French. Ali had long had these islands in his own

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sights. This made it important for British diplomacy to keep him onside while the Royal Navy went into action. It has been suggested that Byron was charged by Forresti with some sort of secret mission to Ali.³ This is unlikely. The serious business was in the safe hands of His Majesty's representative at Ioannina, Colonel William Martin Leake – who was understandably put out when the dandified young travellers turned up there. But a courtesy visit from a high-ranking young Englishman, fortuitously seeming to coincide with British action in the Ionian Sea, might help to smooth any ruffled diplomatic feathers in the region. If this was the idea, it can only have been Forresti's. Afterwards, neither Byron nor Hobhouse would ever explain why they had diverted so far out of their way to visit a country that, as Byron would become fond of boasting, had until then been visited by hardly any other Englishmen.⁴ And whether they knew it or not, the scheme involved a real possibility of danger. Ali Pasha, as they would discover, was a ruler whose feathers were not ruffled with impunity.

Those were the auspices under which Byron and Hobhouse had their first sight, as Hobhouse put it, of 'ancient Greece', across the Gulf of Patras. It was at nine o' clock in the morning, on Saturday, 23 September 1809. Three days later, they first set foot on Greek soil. In a field outside Patras, Byron and Hobhouse practised pistol shooting for a few hours, before being summoned back on board to continue their journey to Preveza.⁵

Of all his eastern travels, the experience that seems to have impressed Byron the most deeply was this unplanned diversion into northwest Greece and Albania. What excited him was not their first sight of ancient ruins (the Roman city of Nicopolis, outside Preveza) but the landscape. 'The scene was savage, but the scene was new', he would exclaim shortly afterwards, in *Childe Harold*.⁶ Later, he would take up the theme of antiquity and its traces. But after leaving Preveza there *were* no ancient ruins.⁷ It was the primitive, raw *newness* of this world, its different-ness from anything he had known before, that first caught the imagination of the twenty-one-year-old Byron.

It took them ten days to reach Ioannina. Heavy rain made the going difficult. Their first sight of Ali Pasha's capital was not encouraging: 'under a tree, hanging to a twig – an arm torn from the shoulder (this belonged to a priest executed for rebellion about five days [ago])'.⁸ Efthymios Vlachavas had been quartered alive on the order of Ali and his remains distributed strategically around the town. He had been only the latest of many Orthodox Christians who had attempted to rouse a revolt against the Pasha's rule, in Thessaly the previous year. Byron can have had no illusions about

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the kind of man he had been sent here to meet, and to greet on behalf of His Britannic Majesty. As Hobhouse laconically recorded, 'Lord Byron and myself a little sick.'

It was perhaps some relief, after this, to discover that Ali was not at home, but was on campaign against a rival pasha several days' ride to the north, at Tepelena, in today's Albania. It flattered Byron's vanity to discover that word of his arrival had gone before him. Ali had decreed that he was to be his personal guest for as long as he stayed in his dominions. No expense was to be spared to entertain the visiting lord and his companion. Nothing was to be paid for (though gratuities could still prove expensive). This was when Byron and Hobhouse 'Tried on Albanese dresses as fine as pheasants'.⁹ Back in England, Byron would later be painted by Thomas Phillips wearing his, the famous portrait whose original hangs in the British Ambassador's residence in Athens.

Rain again hampered their onward journey. Near the first stop, at the village below the monastery of Zitsa, Byron became separated from Hobhouse in a thunderstorm and turned up at three in the morning, soaked but exhilarated by his adventure. They arrived at Tepelena on the nineteenth.¹⁰

During the four days that they stayed there, Byron met Ali Pasha at least three times. He was moved equally by the elderly, fatherly figure who received him with dignity and kindness, as by all that he had heard of the cruelties perpetrated by the man 'they call the Mahometan Buonaparte'. The diplomatic mission, if that is what it was, passed off well. News that the British had succeeded in capturing several of the Ionian Islands from the French had reached Tepelena just ahead of the visitors. Ali may have been reassured by the arrival of such a high-ranking Briton. Far from showing any sign of displeasure at the British move, he sent Byron on his way with gifts, a promise of protection, and a letter of introduction to his son, Veli Pasha, who ruled over the Peloponnese.

There is an amusing sequel to these manifestations of pleasure and esteem. The following summer, Byron, now without Hobhouse, travelled to the Peloponnese and presented Ali's letter to Veli Pasha, at his capital, Tripolitsa. This would be the only time that Byron ever saw the town that a decade later would play a central role in the Revolution. Veli received him even more graciously than his father had done at Tepelena – and was more blatant, too, in making a sexual advance that Byron seems to have found disturbing. But Veli, having read his father's letter of introduction, reserved the highest favours for another English lord, the young Marquis of Sligo, with whom Byron shared some of his travels during that summer and autumn.¹¹ The Marquis, Veli wrote to inform his father, was related

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to King George III, and had been sent to him on a secret mission from the British government. (The first was untrue, the second implausible.) The letter goes on to list the gifts that Veli had given to this important personage, together with their value, to a total of 11,000 piastres. As an afterthought, Veli added: 'Strané the English consul from Patras also came to pay his respects, and brought with him milord Biron.'¹² It was Sligo who was deemed to deserve all the honours, and took away the most expensive presents. Poor Byron was just a playboy, who might amuse the pasha. Whatever Byron might have hoped or believed, the Ottoman authorities in Greece harboured no illusions that he might be a person of political consequence.

Leaving Tepelena, on their way back south to Preveza, the travellers again stopped at Ioannina. Once again they dressed up as Albanians. They witnessed a performance of the Karagiozis shadow-puppet theatre and visited the Greek school run by the educational and linguistic reformer Athanasios Psalidas.¹³ While they were there, on the last day of October, Byron began to write 'a long poem in the Spenserian stanza'. In time this would become *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.¹⁴ Its disaffected, youthful, aristocratic hero is at once Byron and not Byron. 'Childe' was the title given to an aristocratic male heir around Spenser's time – and, like some of the poem's diction, already archaic long before the poem was written. In Ioannina, the hero was not yet called Harold, but the more transparent 'Burun'. The first canto, based on the first stage of his journey with Hobhouse, through Portugal and Spain, would be written during the travels of the next two months.

The next planned destination was Patras. The British consul there, Samuel Strané, was already an acquaintance. Strané had been visiting Malta while they were there, and had agreed to provide a *poste restante* for Byron's letters from England. The journey was an eventful one. When they got to Preveza, there were reports of raids by mountain bandits not far away. As they were still under the protection of Ali Pasha, it was decided that from Preveza they would go direct, by sea, to Patras. But their ship was wrecked and they came ashore at a wild place on the coast of Souli.¹⁵ This episode gave Byron not only the shipwreck in the second canto of *Don Juan*, but also his lifelong admiration for the Souliots, who would come near to being his undoing, many years later at Missolonghi.

A mountain people who spoke Greek and dressed in the Albanian manner, the Souliots had for years fought with terrible ferocity against the annexation of their villages to Ali Pasha's domains. For the time being they had been subdued, but their reputation was fearsome, and their welcome

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to the shipwrecked travellers could not be taken for granted. Byron already knew the story, still told to every child in Greek schools, of the women of Zalongo, who when their men had all been killed by Ali's troops, danced in a line over a cliff to their deaths rather than submit.¹⁶ But these Souliots gave shelter to the castaways, and an escort so that they could return to Preveza overland. For these kindnesses Byron would repay them fulsomely in verse, not long afterwards.¹⁷

Back at Preveza, neither Byron nor Hobhouse was anxious to take to the waves again. So, despite the risk from bandits, they set off with a military escort round the bay for Loutraki. It was here that bandits had struck, only a few days before. In *Childe Harold*, Byron calls the place Utraiky. There, in the evening, round the soldiers' campfire, Byron had an experience which, taken together with his recent rescue by the Souliots, had as great an effect on his future life and poetry as any other single experience of these travels. While a goat was roasted whole on a spit, the escort began to sing and dance. In *Childe Harold* Byron gives a free translation of what they sang, and in the notes added a transcription of the words in Albanian.¹⁸ But Hobhouse in his journal quotes a refrain in Greek. From his account it is evident that the songs and stories he and Byron heard that night were of the type now known in Greek as 'kleftic' songs or 'songs of the klefts'.

Hobhouse describes the threat at Loutraki, and on their passage over the mountains the next day, as being from 'robbers'. Byron in the poem calls them 'marauders'.¹⁹ Both are translating the Greek word *kleftis*, which means literally a thief, but at this time referred to a phenomenon widespread in the Greek mainland, and known to modern anthropologists as 'social banditry'. Often idealised as Robin Hood figures, these social bandits preyed on flocks, settled villagers, and travellers in the mountain areas, regardless of creed or ethnicity. This kind of banditry was a seasonal occupation – the raids that Byron and Hobhouse narrowly avoided came at the very end of the bandit season. In winter, the bandit would return to his village and his family, before taking to the mountains again in spring. Throughout the previous century, it had been common practice for local Turkish rulers to recruit armed bands from the villages, and pay them to keep these klefts in check. In practice, this meant that the roles of cop and robber were constantly interchanging, as the same individuals slipped in and out of the pay of the authorities. One of the NCOs of their escort boasted to Hobhouse that this had been his case. Four years ago he had been the leader of a kleftic band 200 strong. The great Ali Pasha himself, the travellers learned, had started out from less.²⁰

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A little over ten years later, these armed bandits would become the main fighting force of the Greek Revolution. Ever since then, the songs that celebrated their lives and violent deaths have been venerated as part of the Greek national heritage, and appear prominently in every anthology of the oral tradition.²¹ Those published anthologies were not, of course, available to Byron (the earliest would be published in Paris in the year of his death). But at Loutraki on the night of 14 November 1809 he had direct experience of that oral tradition of song, and of the anecdotes that went with it.

Much has been written, since, about the 'ideology' of these social bandits, at a time before there was a national revolution to fight for. Their songs that have been preserved reveal an obsession with pride, daring, and a will to freedom, all of which consists in nothing but the absolute assertion of the individual in the face of violent and inevitable death.²² Was it on that November night, on the shore of the Ambracian gulf, that the 'byronic hero' was born? The self-destructive urge that pits the 'giaour', Conrad the Corsair, Lara, Manfred, and other future creations of Byron's imagination against all comers in an ultimate, doomed assertion of their own individual, anti-social freedom has much in common with what is celebrated in these traditional Greek songs. Or, to put it another way, did Byron, hearing those songs and these stories that November night, instinctively recognise something in himself?

They stopped briefly at Missolonghi to take a boat through the fortified lagoon and across the gulf to Patras on the opposite shore. From there they were to travel the short distance round the coast into the gulf of Corinth, to Vostitsa (modern Aigio, pronounced 'Eyio'). Their next planned destination was the site of the ancient sanctuary of Delphi below Mount Parnassos, on the northern side of the gulf. But bad weather kept them at Vostitsa for nine days. There they enjoyed the hospitality of Andreas Londos, son, they were told, of the richest man in the Peloponnese, whose wealth was based on currants. The Londos family were 'primates', that is, Greeks who had risen to a position of local power and influence under their Ottoman rulers, in this case Veli Pasha, son of Ali. When Veli was deposed three years later, Londos *père* would lose his head and the family their property. It would take the outbreak of Revolution in 1821 to restore Andreas and his brothers to something like the prominence they enjoyed at the time when Byron met them. Today, Andreas Londos is remembered in Greece as a hero of the Revolution. A portrait of about 1830, which may be his, shows its subject in traditional costume with a long, lugubrious face (indeed, wearing a rather byronic expression) but sitting down

(Plate 2). It was Hobhouse who noted that their host was ‘a very little fellow with an enormous cap’, while Byron would much later describe Londos, affectionately, as having ‘the face and figure of a chimpanzee’.²³

The elder Londos seems to have been absent, but the son held court among the locals in a style that impressed the visitors. His household included a native of the Ionian Islands who spoke Italian and an Albanian doctor with whom they could also communicate, it is not clear in which language. Through these intermediaries, Byron and Hobhouse learned a great deal from Londos that was new to them. This was, as Hobhouse later explained, the first time they had encountered ‘the singular spectacle of a Greek in authority’, and they clearly were not expecting it.²⁴ This Greek had had some education too, though on his own admission only in politics. Londos had read – or at least possessed – the Greek translation of the treatise on crime and punishment by Beccaria, made in Paris by Adamantios Korais (Coray). Byron probably never read anything by Korais, but it was in this house that he heard him described as ‘the most learned of the modern Greeks’. He would encounter the name of Korais again on his travels, and pay tribute to his famed erudition in the notes to *Childe Harold*.²⁵

In Londos’ household, after the initial reserve had been broken, there were high spirits and hard drinking late into the night. The travellers heard yet more anecdotes of the klefts (‘strange stories of the superiority of the Greeks in deeds of arms – in robbing, &c.’), but also of the terrible aftermath of the rising of 1770, that had greatly reduced the Greek population – and would later provide the historical setting for Byron’s poem *The Giaour*. It was in Londos’ presence that the travellers first heard of Rigas Velestinlis (also called Pherraios), the writer, translator, and political thinker who had exhorted the Greeks of the Ottoman empire to rise up and proclaim a republic modelled on that of revolutionary France. Rigas had published his ideas in Vienna in 1797. Arrested by the Austrian authorities, he had been handed over to the Turks, who executed him at Belgrade. Neither Hobhouse nor Byron ever quite got this story straight. Rigas had indeed been the author of a ‘famous war song’, but this had nothing to do with the imitation of the ‘Marseillaise’ in a crude form of semi-learned Greek that Hobhouse transcribed into his diary at Vostitsa. Later, Byron would make his own translation of this doggerel, which he, too, thought was the work of Rigas.²⁶ But Londos ‘at the mention of Riga’s name, was in an ecstasy, and tumbled over ye draft board on which he was playing with the Doctor’. Hobhouse thought this ‘odd in a man in so high employ under the Turks’ before adding: ‘we have observed the professed hatred of their masters to be universal amongst the Greeks’.²⁷

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Byron would not have been so eager to rationalise. What he had encountered so far in Greek lands was extremes of attitude and behaviour such as were hardly imaginable in the England he had known. Finding these coexisting in the same individual must have fascinated him all the more. This had been the case with Ali Pasha, with the former kleft turned loyal soldier at Loutraki, and now with his host at Vostitsa. Like Hobhouse, Byron would have been brought up on the ancient Greek maxim, 'nothing in excess'. Tradition, indeed, associated this teaching with the sanctuary of Apollo, that would be their next stop across the Gulf of Corinth. But the classical 'golden mean' can never have held much appeal for Byron. It must have delighted him, instead, to discover that here, in modern Greece, *everything* was in excess, even the contradictions. The tangled, tortured, above all excessive characters and plots of the later 'Turkish tales' were continuing to be forged, as Byron travelled through Ottoman Greece.

A LAME BRAT LOOKS AT THE ACROPOLIS

It was only after leaving Vostitsa that Byron for the first time came face to face with *ancient* Greece, that Hobhouse had thought he had glimpsed before they even landed. The travellers were rowed across the gulf and came ashore at the tiny harbour and customs post on the site of the modern (and ancient) port of Itea. From there, the ride through the 'forest of olive trees' towards the ancient sanctuary of Delphi, on the flank of Mount Parnassos, impressed even Hobhouse as 'very romantic'.²⁸ Byron interrupted the narrative of Childe Harold's adventures in Spain to write this:

Oh, thou Parnassus! whom I now survey,
Not in the phrenzy of a dreamer's eye,
Not in the fabled landscape of a lay,
But soaring snow-clad through thy native sky,
In the wild pomp of mountain majesty!²⁹

What Byron saw and what he remembered from his classical schooldays had nothing to do with moral maxims against excess. He knew that Parnassos, ever since ancient times, had been sacred to the god Apollo, patron of the Muses. This was the fountainhead, the ultimate source of artistic inspiration for every poet from Homer down to his own day. None of the great English poets had ever seen Parnassos. But all had paid tribute to the *idea*. Now he, Byron, was seeing the real thing. Before him, as he and Hobhouse rode up from the landing place, rose not a legend out of a book