

BYRON AND THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

I begin where I left off in an essay in *Romanticism and Colonialism* (1998). A Venetian shell lands on an Ottoman powder magazine in the Acropolis at Athens. It is an incident in more than two millennia of war. My point of departure in these wars is Marathon; the terminus ad quem is the entry into Damascus of the Byronic avatar T. E. Lawrence.

The geographical limits of these imperial wars extend from the Danube to the Arabian peninsula; from beyond the Pyrenees to the frontiers of the Persian Empire. The centre of this area is the Levant.

A brief paper requires specific textual focus. That text is Thomas Hope's *Anastasius* (1819). Hope's novel was attributed to Byron, and Byron told Lady Blessington that he would have given any two of his own publications to have written it. I shall read Hope's text byronically. Also historically. Byron's contemporary, Sydney Smith, in *The Edinburgh Review* likened *Anastasius* to Tacitus. I read Hope with the same seriousness as analogous imperial novels: for instance Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown*. The common theme of Hope and Scott is the alienation of individuals caught up in cataclysmic historical events. So too the poetic Byronic hero, and, I shall suggest, Byron as would be hero.

Because the specific point of focus is Byron, the legends and fictions of 'Greek' history are unavoidable. I shall use the word 'Hellenic' to refer to classical antiquity, and 'Greek' in reference to the invention of the modern nation State. In between is the Byzantine Empire, whose peoples are 'Romaioi'. The Christianized Romaioi became the subjects of the Ottoman Empire diffused from the Black Sea to the upper reaches of the Nile. Different cultures should not be conflated by common

designation.

The Ottoman Empire absorbed the imperial structure of the Eastern Roman Empire. Elizabeth I of England addressed the Sultan as *augustissime, invictissime Caesar*. The provinces were governed by Pashas analogous to Proconsuls (Montesquieu's designation). As in ancient Rome, religious tolerance was an instrument of State. Jews, fled persecution in Europe for the security of the Empire. Likewise, the Eastern Orthodox Church was more secure under Ottoman rule than under the Roman Catholic Venetian empire. The structures of power within the Empire were permeable. Slaves became rulers; Romaioi governors. Adoption of the State religion (Sunni Islam) opened all doors. Ottoman government at its best provided an ordered structure for Society across an immense geopolitical region. This favourable characterization of the Ottomans is not familiar among the historians of the Empire whom Byron read. They usually portray the contemporary Ottoman Empire as tyrannical, corrupt and in rapid decline. Inevitably, Christian historians were biased against Islam. Byronism has been readily contextualized in this interpretative matrix. The mountains look on Marathon and the lonely poet dreams of a people freed from an evil empire. For ancient Persians it was common to substitute the superstition and tyranny of 'the Turk.' The British, in 1918, opened negotiations for peace with the Turks on board the warship *Agamemnon*.

But what territories were to be included within the confines of the newly invented Greek State? Napier saw Constantinople as the natural capital. What of Macedonia to the North or Asia Minor to the East? Alexandria was a 'Greek' foundation. What exactly are the limits of *mare nostrum*? And what religions might the State incorporate? The presumption is that a free Greece would exclude Islamic superstition. What of the Jews?

But supposing for a nationalist account one substituted an Imperial interpretation. Let me return to the point of departure of the nationalist legend: Marathon. From the viewpoint of the Great King in Persia, the Hellenic peninsular must have seemed like Afghanistan today: anarchic, a source of regional instability and impossible to control. But the expedition which terminated at Marathon was predominantly successful. The western shores of the Empire were stabilized; the Aegean cleared of pirates; the renegade Miltiades forced back upon Athens. Indeed a substantial minority of the Athenians wanted peaceful accommodation with Persia. None of the major Hellenic tribes backed Athens. The city ultimately was burnt by Xerxes's punitive expedition. In vain. The nature of the terrain in the Hellenic peninsula, the Empire's inordinately long lines of supply, and the sheer bloody fierceness of the opposition drove out the Persians. So too modern Afghanistan. But it is preposterous to celebrate Persian withdrawal as representing the 'freedom' of 'Greece'. That is to yield to what even Hobhouse described as 'the daring mendacity of the Grecian annals'. Persian withdrawal merely liberated the Hellenic city states to push the Peloponnesian War to its disastrous conclusion. See Thucydides. Or consider Mitford. The Golden Age of Pericles was a period of 'virulent enmity' among the Hellenes. The Peloponnesian war was the culmination of the 'piratical, thieving, and murdering kind of petty wars to which the Greeks at all times and in all parts were strongly addicted.' He compares the 'liberal and mild' governance of the Persians.

Let me add Barthélemy and Gibbon. Barthélemy's *Anarchasis* (1788) took up the story after Thucydides. The point of view is that of a Scythian barbarian; the authorial stance is that of an enlightened ironist. Hellas is in terminal decline about to submit to Macedonian power. Formerly Hellenic power had been sustained by a

governing elite recruited by eugenic selection of those males best suited to fight and to rule (a quasi-Platonic culture). Work was the province of slaves, not of the citizen (so Aristotle). The domesticated role of women was to breed children for the State. Homer supports Barthélemy. The epics are centered upon the lives of the *Urbemenschlich* man-killing Achilles and the equally murderous, but more cunning Ulysses. The destruction of Troy involved the extermination of all Trojan males and the rape and enslavement of the Trojan women and children. Now, according to Anarchasis, the universally admired elite culture of the Hellenes has sapped the ancient warrior virtues. The Scythian barbarian ultimately quits the Hellenic world at the end of *Anarchasis* preferring to an enlightened culture in decline: *le repos chez un peuple qui ne connait que les biens de la nature*.

Meantime a new Achilles, Alexander of Macedon, accomplished what the Persians could not: control of the Hellenic world. Thebes was destroyed like Troy. Which brought the other city states into line. The next task was to destroy the Hellenic soldiers who formed the backbone of the Persian army: at the battle of Granicus. Then, like the Great King, it was imperative to bring the western seaboard of the Aegean under control. The official word was 'liberation'. The Hellenes now paid tribute to the Macedonians rather than the Persians. Then, the enemy within pacified, Alexander moved against the rest of Asia Minor. It was after this hero that Byron's colleague, The Phanariot Prince, Alexander Mavrocordatos, was named. The Achilles/Alexander axis was attractive to Byron. Yet there is another side to Alexandrian history. The new Great King seems to have aimed for a deliberate melding of peoples into an imperial multicultural unity. It was to be based around city states but cemented by intermarriage between cultures. Hence the mixture of costume, custom and languages at Court; and ultimately the forced intermarriage of

Macedonians with Persians. It was an Imperial aim -indeed such ‘multiculturalism’ (*e pluribus unum*) may be a prerequisite of Empire. But, in Hellenic context, it was a process vigorously resisted.

The Romans were more successful. Within the Empire the idea *civis Romanus sum* obliterated distinctions of geographical origin or religious affinity. Subsequently, under the governance of the Arab peoples, something of the same imperial idea still subsisted. Consequently Gibbon emphasized the ‘philosophical theism’ of emergent Islam and contrasted this to the Byzantine absurdities of Christian theology. There were ‘strong and numerous’ passages of the Koran which recommend toleration. Islam is more liberal than the Law of Moses; less inconsistent with reason than the creed and superstition of medieval Christendom. If *The Decline and Fall* offers another Golden Age equivalent to that of Rome under the Antonines it is the time when the conquests of the Arabs had diffused ‘a common religion, name and origin’ from the Euphrates to the Atlantic. Here ‘the blood of strangers and natives was insensibly mingled’ and the Koran was studied ‘with equal devotion at Samarcand and Seville: the Moor and the Indian embraced as countrymen and brothers...and the Arabian language was adopted as the popular idiom in all the provinces to the westward of the Tigris.’ Ultimately the extraordinary achievement of Ottoman rule was to incorporate both the Arabian and the Byzantine Empires within a multi-ethnic polity, polyglot and pan-Abrahamic in religion. But that is to move beyond Gibbon and thence to Byron and Thomas Hope

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In what way may we use Hope’s *Anastasius* both to interpret this Empire and Byron’s response? What is instantly remarkable is the way both writers mirror each other: in tone, in narrative device and in their philosophy of history. These relationships have

already been well-explored, most recently in a long essay by Peter Cochran. In Hope the chasm between the ‘departed worth’ of the ancients and their degenerate descendants is even greater than in Byron: witness the idealized Caucasian ur-race in his *Essay on the Origin and Prospect of Man* (1831). Both writers are cultural materialists. They see the degenerate state of the modern Greeks as the product of their subject status within the Ottoman Empire.

Both writers chose to be portrayed masquerading in the ‘oriental’ costume of the Empire. Byron is in ‘Albanian’ costume. As an ‘Albanian’ he stands in a quasi-independent and militant relationship to the Ottomans; albeit the portrait does not specifically locate ‘Albania’. Missolonghi, for instance, under Ali Pasha was an Albanian town. Hope, on the other hand, chose to be portrayed by Sir William Beechey as a high-ranking ‘Turk’ and at the Abu Ayyub mosque, the holiest Muslim site in Constantinople. Byron is an outsider, Hope an insider. Whereas Byron in real life settled in Athens, Hope explored the full extent of the Empire and its Capital. One reason for the difference may derive from the social origins of the writers. Byron’s mindset was shaped by the traditions of his English public school. His Greek and Latin studies trained him to become a member of the English male ruling elite: warrior and orator; that ethos separated the male from ‘Woman’ whose social function in Byron’s caste was to perpetuate the family line (or service his sensual needs). Like the ‘natural’ ruler described by Aristotle, government and serviced leisure were Byron’s by right. Hope, on the other hand, originated from a polyglot, trans-national mercantile class. The ‘natural’ training for a member of the commercial class was in the mechanisms of global exchange. The Turkey trade had been a major element. A mercantile system requires peaceful and stable international relationships. There is little point in a merchant dreaming of the glories of Hellas and

losing his profit. On the other hand, Byron, raised upon Homer, had been taught that war is ‘the only subject heroic deemed.’

This is speculative. One is on more certain ground with *Anastasius*. Anastasius’s position is analogous to that of Stendhal’s Julien Sorel. His first aim is to make his own living; his second to acquire wealth and power. Hence he manipulates the social, political and religious system. One of his first acts is to convert to Islam. He turns Turk, like Hope in the Beechey portrait, or like Byron’s Beppo. All careers are now open to him as Selim, the Muslim (like a Catholic convert to Anglicanism in Regency Britain). As for theological niceties: both the Christian and Islamic versions of Abrahamic monotheism agree on the moral duties owed to Society. The wise man will have no problems reconciling himself to Ottoman culture. This Unitarian view is explicitly stated. Equally explicit is the satire directed at theological controversy. Nonetheless, one is always aware, as in the Beechey portrait, of an element of masquerade. Something confuses essential identity, albeit the idea of identity itself is fluid. This is not an experience unique either to Hope or to Anastasius/Selim. It becomes critical in Byron, and in the Ottoman Empire’s last Byronic antagonist T.E. Lawrence.

How essential is it to the novel that Anastasius is a ‘Greek’ by birth? It is something Hope ironizes. The Greeks are a ‘mongrel’ people he suggests (a view Hobhouse shared). So much for trans historical Hellenic racial continuity. Anastasius is the son of a polyglot dragoman. So much for ethnic linguistic purity. A dragoman’s livelihood depends upon the Ottoman Empire. It is necessary to accommodate oneself to things as they are. Nonetheless, it has been suggested that the name Anastasius suggests a Grecian allusion to ‘resurrection’ -with insurrectionary implications. Young Anastasius at one time sees himself as

Achilles/Alexander redivivus: the killer of every Turk. But, on the other hand, his adopted name, Selim, is suggestive of Islamic peace. Separated from his Grecian origins he becomes a cosmopolitan traveler and escapes from what James Joyce described as the 'nets' of language, religion and nation: 'Our Lord, Our People, Our Language' -in the words of the Irish Brigade.

What the novel 'shows' is that one may live happily, prosperously and virtuously anywhere within the Ottoman Empire without troubling about nationalism, sectarianism, or the romantic discourse of 'freedom' and 'tyranny'. Selim's mentor is the son of a Greek merchant, Spiridion -a 'Good Angel' figure, or a Sophia to Selim's Tom Jones. He is wealthy through trade, a quiescent Christian who practices virtue untroubled by niceties of theology, and who retires to a contented domestic life secure within the Empire. Spiridion is the mercantile equivalent of Fielding's Squire Allworthy.

Selim's education takes him throughout the Empire. Infinitely adaptable he can make his living as a dragoman for European tourists, a warrior on the European frontier, an administrator in Egypt, a merchant in Smyrna, a Bedouin in Arabia, and even briefly as a Greek pirate. He visits the great cities of the modern Levant: the opulent beauty (and squalor) of Constantinople; Cairo; Baghdad. Small-town Athens does not feature: a mere tourist attraction for the Franks. The Levant is an area of total fluidity of movement. The world is all before him, and Selim might have settled into comfortable retreat with an Arab wife. 'Would that the desert were my dwelling place...?'

As for revolutionary insurrectionism.....The idea of a Greek war for independence is the subject of an episode which must have registered strongly with Byron. Selim meets a Frenchman who delivers a substantive lecture on the rights of

Man and of the Citizen. 'Every where the young shoots of reason and liberty... will burst asunder... religious inquisition, judicial torture, monastic seclusion, tyranny, oppression, fanaticism, and all the other relics of barbarism...' Selim should become Anastasius again and promulgate the Greek cause in Paris. 'All you have to do is to present yourself in the august assembly of the great nation, as the representative of oppressed and mourning Greece.' As her liberator he will be hailed 'as the worthy descendant of Harmodius and Aristogiton!'

Selim records: 'This rhapsody made me laugh; but I thought the subject serious.' His attitude is ambivalent, quasi Byronic. In the abstract, human rights are serious, but in the real world Selim has no intention of presenting himself as a fictitious ancient Hellene or the signifier of the non-existent Grecian nation. Fundamental to Selim's judgment is the ethos of the spokesman for human rights. This French revolutionary is, in fact, a charlatan on the make. The individual represents the type. Europeans preach human rights to Muslims, but they do so for self-interest. Throughout the novel both the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Russian Empire are intent upon replacing Ottoman rule in the Balkans with their own. Constantinople is the goal. The Empire was to be dismembered, like Poland.

In a revelatory choice of vocabulary, Selim characterizes Europe as 'Franguestan'. The European monarchies are quarrelling tribes (or Hellenic city States) writ large. Hope's reader in 1819 would need no reminding of the recent anarchy in Franguestan. The Alexandrian ambitions of Bonaparte had led to the invasion of Egypt en route to India. He preached human rights. The intention was imperial conquest. By comparison the internal conflicts of the Ottoman Empire were mere bush fires-brigands contained in the main by effective regional Pashas. Ultimately it was the anarchy of Franguestan which sucked in and destroyed the

Ottoman Empire in 1918. The post-colonial result? The Sykes-Picot agreement and the vain attempt by the imperial powers France, Britain and ultimately the USA to do a better job than the Ottomans.

This is to pre-empt the future. Anastasius's tragedy is personal, not political. By the end of the novel his position resembles that of the cosmopolite of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. 'Je hassais ma patrie. Toutes les impertinences des peuples divers, parmi lesquels j'ai vécu, m'ont réconcilié avec elle.' Anastasius's initial reasons for hating Greece are commonplace. The Greeks as a race are cowardly, deceitful, malicious, superstitious and hate each other as much as the Turks. Indeed, in many respects, they share the same defects as the Hellenes. But as Anastasius grows older he cannot escape the existential continuity of his origins. The child is father of the man. Like Joyce 'exiled' in Trieste, his thoughts turn constantly homewards. But Chios, where he was born, is no spiritual Ithaca to which the wanderer may return. His family has disowned him. His wife and child die. He meets his own death alone in southern Europe, among people of an alien tongue and religion. This is the deracination of the trans-cultural cosmopolitan.

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The Byronic themes of *Anastasius* are self-evident: restless peregrination, alienation from one's own culture, scepticism about 'the claims of the ideal'. They reach their culmination at Missolonghi. The claim of the ideal is still there, of course. In his definitive account of Byron's Greek politics (*Byron's War*) Roddy Beaton emphasizes Byron's aim was to 'regenerate' a 'nation' -but these words were left undefined. His approach to events on the ground was practical, and in the long run might have been successful. But equally clear are the frustrations, even horrors, of the helpless months in what Pouqueville called the *cloaca* of Greece, Missolonghi. Byron

was to be tasked to deliver a loan (which he did not possess) to a government split into factions. His own resources ran to waste paying a mercenary fleet -which promptly sailed away- and mercenary soldiers, -more dangerous to their paymasters than to the enemy. As for the Muslim population of Missolonghi (estimated by Hobhouse as some 5,000): the men had disappeared (murdered or fled); the women and children, as Beaton claims, were to be sold as slaves. It is a classic Homeric situation. Byron's main contribution was humanitarian aid. But what I would emphasize above all is Byron's alienation. As Beaton shows there was no real connection between Byron and the insurgent forces. His last poetic effusions of Greek love are unrequited. There is no penetration of Greece. Even Beaton grants that Byron's ultimate disintegration may have been psychosomatically driven. In his disillusionment he babbled about flight to America.

With hindsight we know that numerous Balkan wars impended. When murder was not the instrument of war, mass deportations served the same purpose. Even cosmopolitan Smyrna, where Selim worked as a merchant, became a charnel house as Greece endeavoured to recover ancient Hellenistic colonies. On the evidence of *Anastasius* Byron must have perceived these potential developments. Young Anastasius qua Christian Greek, had fantasized about killing every Turk (man, woman, child, eunuch). On the other side of the Ottoman Empire, the Arabian Wahhabi's explicitly declared to Selim their intention of waging jihad against the heretical Sunni Turks and exterminating them -so Lawrence's Bedouin in real life. The disintegration of Ottoman rule would open the gate to local tyrannies or to racial and religious Anarchy in the Levant. So much for the attempt to 'regenerate nations'. My general theme is that one cannot separate Byron at Missolonghi from the previous and subsequent history of the Levant. My local theme is the alienation of individuals

caught up in these events: Selim/Anastasius, the Byronic hero, Byron himself. Hence the terminus ad quem: the entry of the Byronic avatar, Lawrence of Arabia, into Damascus. The date: 30th September 1918. Greek history had shaped Lawrence's interpretation. He had been reading Xenophon. For Cyrus stood Allenby; for the internecine conflicts of the 'ten thousand' Hellenes, there were the Bedouin tribes. Now the modern 'Persian' Empire has fallen; but Lawrence turns in revulsion from the bloodshed and from the 'liberators'. These liberators are 'demeaned' by their license to kill; they are mere 'slaves' to other Powers which command them. After dark, masquerading as an Arab, Lawrence passes unknown among the Bedouin and British killers. He is filled with shame and distaste: 'Not merely did I see the unlikeness of race, and hear the unlikeness of language, but I learned to pick between their smells...' - the odour of Arab sweat and the 'feral' piss of the English. 'I could walk as I pleased, an unconsidered Arab: and thus finding myself among, but cut off from, my own kin made me strangely alone.' He belongs neither to one world nor the other: an alien, cross-dressed between cultures -like Byron at Missolonghi. Nigel Leask has called this the 'existential fragmentation' of the 'heroic psyche' caught up in the 'exigencies of history.' That is too academic. It is a visceral alienation compounded of sweat and excrement, and dismembered, dead bodies: the decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire. Witness Syria today even as I speak.

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