



In 18th and early 19th century England, the customary Grand Tour to the Continent became an essential supplement to an Oxbridge education, particularly among the nobility and upper echelons of society who could afford it. The great Regency designer and writer, Thomas Hope, for example, spent ten years on his Grand Tour. The fact that his father was one of the wealthiest merchant bankers in Europe probably tells us how he managed it.

Paper title: “Byron’s Oriental Realism” by Allan Gregory

On the 28th of August, 1813, three months after Byron’s success with his first oriental poem, *The Giaur*, he encouraged fellow poet Thomas Moore to proceed with his plans for a work in similar mode.

Stick to the East;-the oracle, {Madame de} Stael, told me it was the only poetical policy. The North, South and West, have all been exhausted; but from the East we have nothing but Southey’s unsaleables ...The little I have done in that way is merely a “voice in the wilderness” for you; and, if it has had any success, that also will prove that the public are orientализing, and pave the path for you. {BLJ 3:101}

Byron was being uncharacteristically modest in this advice to Moore, who knew that his oriental poem, when it appeared, would inevitably be compared to Byron’s. Byron, “the oriental poet”, became a palpable presence to Moore during the years up to 1817, when Moore’s *Lalla Rookh* finally appeared in print. In the meantime Byron had published six Turkish tales including *The Bride of Abydos*, which he wrote in one week, and the *Corsair*, which he wrote in ten days. Moore, on the other hand, was a pathetically slow writer, taking over five years to complete *Lalla Rookh*.

Byron’s vast reading on the East was essentially a preparation for his encounter with reality. His favourite book was William Beckford’s great Gothic novel, *Vathek*, published in 1786, from which he borrowed ideas for his later tales; he claimed to have read the Arabian Knights before he was ten years old and is believed to have read George Sale’s translation of the Qu’ran; he undoubtedly read and admired the *Turkish Letters* of

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu {1689-1762}, who as the wife of the English ambassador lived in Constantinople between 1716 and 1718. According to Peter Cochran in *Byron's Orientalism*, "the Islamic world in 1809-1824 was vastly different to what it is today. Oil was not important and Saudi Arabia did not exist. Neither did Israel exist. The most important state was Ottoman Turkey, and all roads led to Constantinople {not yet renamed Istanbul}. Greece, Albania, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Egypt were all provinces of the Ottoman's. These were ruled with varying degrees of imperial power and conviction by pashas."

This paper looks briefly at the influence and experiences his encounters on these travels had on Byron, and how these experiences laid the foundation for the enormous success of the *Turkish Tales* beginning with the relevant parts of Canto II of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, mostly written during the tour itself.

While other poets made serious efforts to achieve documentary accuracy in their works, Byron became renowned for having the distinct advantage of direct experience of the Orient, having visited Albania, Greece and Turkey, the prime destinations of his Grand Tour from the 2nd July, 1809 to the 14th July, 1811.

While he certainly could not be described as the naïve traveler nothing could have prepared him for the *orientalism* which he encountered. The virtual reality of the Islamic Orient, its manners and customs, its landscape and climate, its values and religion, all had a profound effect on the young poet, leading Mohammed Sharafuddin to remark in his book *Islam and Romantic Orientalism*:

Byron's realistic orientalism {turned out to be} **orientalism** pulling it towards the realm of free fantasy and dream, **realistic** drawing it towards the testing ground of history, politics and verisimilitude. {IRO 229}

A more graphic way of expressing Sharafuddin's remark would be to acknowledge that the twenty-one-year-old Byron was so overawed by the stark difference in culture and climate he encountered, that he inevitably indulged in romanticising himself; fashioning the oriental persona; presenting the amorous, haughty, skeptical young lord as an idealized version of "The Exotic" to the world. Byron as poseur is starkly evident in Thomas Phillip's famous portrait of Byron in Albanian costume painted in 1814. The original painting is in the British Embassy in Athens.

Byron and his friend Hobhouse arrived in Jannina on the 5th October, 1809 to be informed that Ali Pasha, the ruler of Albania and what is now western Greece, had provided an escort for his guests whom he begged to follow him to his castle in Tepelene where he had gone "to finish a little war"¹ Ali Pasha was intent on cultivating a friendship with the English to counter the influence of the French in the Ionian Islands and the arrival of a member of the British aristocracy to his country was an opportunity he could not disregard.

Meanwhile, Byron was proud to be traveling through terrain which he believed no Englishman had penetrated before. He admired the wild mountain scenery, and likened the Arnauts, or Albanese to the Highlanders of Scotland, their dialect being Celtic in its sound. Their very mountains, he asserted, seemed Caledonian, with a kinder climate; and he continued, "The most beautiful women I ever beheld, in stature and in features, we saw leveling the road which recent rains had washed away."²

Byron gave his mother a glowing account of his arrival in Tepelene. There was a barbaric splendor of Arabian Nights quality in the absolute court that Ali Pasha had established in the inaccessible mountains of Albania. Enchanted by the appearance and personality of Ali he wrote:

He received me standing, a wonderful compliment from a Mussulman and made me sit down on his right hand He said he was certain I was a man of birth, because I have small ears, curling hair, and little white hands, and expressed himself pleased with my appearance and garb. He told me to consider him as a father whilst I was in Turkey, and said he looked on me as his son. Indeed, he treated me like a child, sending me almonds and sugar sherbets, fruit and sweetmeats, twenty times a day. He begged me to visit him often, and at night, when he was at leisure {BLJ 1, 226, 227,228}

Byron was obviously very flattered by Ali's remarks but he must have been aware of a more sensual interest, having had intimations of the Pasha's propensity for Eastern sexual mores. To quote Benita Eisler's typically sardonic remark in *Child of Passion, Fool of Fame* "A shrewd judge of human nature, the vizier would also have sensed that the fatherless Byron was vulnerable to the attentions of a dotting sugar daddy."³ It has been suggested that Ali Pasha made a conquest of Byron, but this is most unlikely as Byron was not susceptible to older men; although he was enthralled by the ferocious strength of will behind the Pasha's urbanity of manner {He was so good a general that he was called the Mohometan Buonaparte} and had a ghoulis fascination in Ali's most un-English practice of impaling and then roasting his enemies. Byron never elaborated on his relationship with Ali Pasha {"though many of his later biographers felt it necessary to fantasize on the liaison}, but he did comment to his mother, and later in verse, on the contrast between Ali Pasha, the warm father figure with twinkling blue eyes and long curling white beard, and Ali, the bloodthirsty despot who "has the appearance of anything but his real character... for he is a remorseless tyrant, guilty of the most horrible cruelties" {BLJ 1, 227}

It was about this time that Byron began his autobiographical poem on the adventures and reflections of Childe Burun, which he later changed to Childe Harold. In *Elegant Selections*, an anthology he had carried with him over the mountains in Albania, he had been reading parts of Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*, written in nine-line stanzas, known as Spenserian stanzas. Byron opted for the same metrical format for his new poem, which he subsequently called *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. With masterly precision, Byron conveys the sights and sounds of his tumultuous journey and

exhilarating experiences stanza by stanza throughout the work. This is how he describes Childe Harold's entry into Ali Pasha's court:-

He Pass'd the sacred Haram's silent tower,
 And underneath the wide o'erarching gate
 Survey'd the dwelling of this chief of power,
 Where all around proclaim'd his high estate.
 Amidst no common pomp the despot sate,
 While busy preparation shook the court,
 Slaves, eunuchs, soldiers, guests, and santons wait;
 Within, a palace, and without, a fort:
 Here men of every clime appear to make resort.

{CHP, 2, LVI}

The wild Albanian kirtled to his knee,
 With shawl-girt head and ornamental gun,
 And gold-embroidered garments, fair to see:
 The crimson-scarfed men of Macedon;
 The Delhi with his cap of terror on,
 And crooked glaive; the lively, supple Greek;
 And swarthy Nubia's mutilated son;
 The bearded Turk, that barely deigns to speak,
 Master of all around, too potent to be meek...

{CHP, 2, LVIII}

Byron left Tepelene with a parting gift from Ali Pasha in the guise of Vasily, the Albanian soldier assigned by the vizier to look after Byron during his stay. Vasily, should be mentioned here, because it was he who served Byron with an "almost feudal fidelity"⁴, and proved to be the main reason Byron formed such a favourable opinion of the Albanian character. In Note {B} of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto II, Byron relates an incident which probably saved his life, if one considers the fiasco with doctors, prior to his death in 1824. He writes:

*When in 1810, after the departure of my friend Mr. Hobhouse
 For England, I was seized with a severe fever in the Morea, these men
 {the Albanians} saved my life by frightening away my physician, whose
 throat they threatened to cut if I was not cured within a given time To this
 consolatory assurance of posthumous retribution, and a resolute refusal of
 Doctor Romelli's prescriptions, I attributed my recovery. I had left my last
 remaining English servant at Athens; my dragoman was as ill as myself,
 and my poor Arnauts nursed me with an attention which would have done
 honour to civilization.*

{CHP: Canto II, Note B}

Ali Pasha left such a profound impression on Byron that the motif of Ali Pasha, “the warm father figure with twinkling blue eyes and long curling beard” and Ali Pasha, “the bloodthirsty despot... who has anything but the appearance of his real character” permeates Byron’s *Turkish Tales*; almost as much as the image of the nightingale {bulbul} singing to the rose {gúl} is a ubiquitous trope of Persian poetry, as used by Fitzgerald in his translation of *Omar Khayam*, Thomas Moore in *Lalla Rookh* and Byron in *The Bride of Abydos*. Ali Pasha becomes, for Byron, a literary device; a symbol of realistic orientalism as he had experienced it. The heavenly oriental image of the nightingale singing to the rose is the metaphor for the lover singing to his beloved, while Byron’s protagonist, as the very embodiment of self-division, self-contempt and capable of horrible cruelty, is the image of oriental hell. In *The Giaur*, the first of Byron’s *Turkish Tales* he writes:

*Strange----that where Nature lov'd to trace,
As if for Gods a dwelling place,
And every charm and grace hath mix'd
Within the paradise she fixed----
There man, enamour'd of distress,
Should mar it into wilderness,
And trample, brute-like, o'er each flower
That tasks not one laborious hour;*

*Strange---- that where all is peace beside
There passion riots in her pride,
And lust and rapine wildly reign
To darken o'er the fair domain.*

{Lines 46-53, 58-61}

Byron’s *Turkish Tales* became hugely popular in Regency England, and many of his contemporaries borrowed from them, even though they would have read most of the texts Byron was familiar with. The fact that Byron had been to the East had a sustaining effect on his readers and probably made his tales, for them, more picturesque and realistic. The only other writer to have similar success was Irish poet, Thomas Moore, whose *Lalla Rookh-An Oriental Romance* underwent several printings following its first publication in May, 1817. This long narrative poem was an outstanding success, receiving rave notices, even from the usually critical *Edinburgh Review*. It is with this poem I would like to conclude my paper because although Byron’s tales are still in print, sadly, *Lalla Rookh* is almost forgotten, even in our own country. I believe it is still available and popular in India. The work is divided into four parts consisting of *The Veiled Prophet of Korassan*, *Paradise and the Peri*, *The Fire-Worshippers*, and *The Light of the Haram*. Do these sub-titles not conjure up a more realistic image of the Orient than *The Giaur*, or *The Bride of Abydos*? Could the “veiled prophet” of the title be one of Moore’s borrowings from Byron? Is the veiled prophet Mokanna really Ali Pasha? This is how Moore describes the prophet through the eyes of Zelica, the heroine of the poem:

There on that throne, to which the blind belief
 Of millions rais'd him, sat the Prophet-Chief,
 The Great MOKANNA. o'er his features hung
 The Veil, the Silver Veil, which he had flung
 In mercy there, to hide from mortal sight
 His dazzling brow, till man could bear its light.⁵

But, as the poem develops, this dramatic portrait of Mokanna is revealed by Moore as merely a disguise hiding a monstrous reality:

Upon that mocking Fiend, whose Veil, now rais'd,
 Show'd them, as in death's agony they gazed,
 Not the long promis'd light, the brow, whose beaming
 Was to come forth, all conquering, all redeeming,
 But features horribler than Hell e'er trac'd
 On its own brood; - no Demon of the Waste,
 No church-yard Ghole, caught lingering in the light
 Of the blest sun, e'er blasted human sight
 With lineaments so foul, so fierce as those
 The Impostor now, in grinning mockery, shows...⁶

Mokanna's character, as interpreted in his chilling and ferocious speeches about the folly of mankind is akin, in terms of cynicism and misanthropy, to any Byron anti-hero. His very ruthlessness exemplifies Byron's image of the romantic villain. Mokanna is Byron's Ali Pasha. The extremities of humanity in the character of the great vizier he had confronted in Tepelene, suggest that Ali Pasha might be the genesis for what we have now come to regard as "the Byronic hero".

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5th August, 2009

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Notes:

- 1. Byron A Portrait, P.70**
- 2. Byron A Portrait, P71**
- 3. Byron-Child of Passion, Fool of Fame, P221**
- 4. Byron A Portrait, P73**
- 5. Lalla Rookh, P.10**
- 6. Lalla Rookh, P93**

Allan Gregory-Profile

Allan Gregory is a practicing consulting engineer in Dublin and joint founder of the Irish Byron Society. He has studied Irish and English literature at University College Dublin, and has a Master's degree in Anglo-Irish Literature and Drama. His doctorate is in Gaelic/English literary translation. His poem *Some Other Place*, written in Irish, was Ireland's contribution to the SYMPOSIUM ON PEACE FOR THE MILLENIUM at Roma Tre University in August, 2000, and has been published in Irish, English and Italian. Other literary works include *Remembering Michael Hartnett* {Four Courts Press}, with an introduction by Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney and *Byron's Orientalism* {Cambridge Scholars Press}, edited by Dr. Peter Cochran. He is a regular participant at International Byron conferences advocating particular emphasis on the literary relationship between Byron and Moore.