

The Missolonghi Manuscript: Frederic Prokosch's Lord Byron

Frederic Prokosch was fascinated by Byron from early in his life: Byron was one of the three writers who seemed acceptable to him as a subject for his doctoral thesis, although in the end Prokosch wrote on Chaucer's Apocrypha, perhaps prefiguring his later obsessions with trickery and fakery. He did not actually write about Byron, or more accurately write as him, until quite late in his career – *The Missolonghi Manuscript* was published in 1968 when Prokosch was 60, by which time he had had his moment of fame and his reputation was well into its decline, but I think he had long felt an affinity with Byron.

And Prokosch had some reason for comparing his own career to Byron's, for Prokosch too had his *Childe Harold* from which he awoke to find himself famous. In 1935 his first novel, *The Asiatics*, was published to huge acclaim – its admirers included Mann, (“astonishing”) Gide (“unique among novels” and an “authentic masterpiece”) and Camus (“it invented what might be called the geographical novel”). The novel is about an unnamed young American who travels from Beirut across Asia to China encountering almost without emotion or surprise the wildest eccentrics, the Asiatics, and weirdest adventures (including a spell in a Turkish jail 33 years before *Midnight Express*). It was, he said, partially autobiographical but mostly fictional – it turned out that he hadn't visited many of the places he describes but they are extraordinarily vividly imagined. It was translated into 17 languages. In 1936 he published his first volume of poems, *The Assassins*, which Yeats spoke well of and in 1937 a second novel, *Seven Who Fled*, about Europeans fleeing from unrest in Kashgar. During the war he was cultural attaché of the American legation in Stockholm but at the same time he became a kind of talismanic figure for the deracinated; Gore Vidal remembers a cult of Prokosch in the US army in the 40s. And

so, like Byron, Prokosch achieved overnight fame in his 20s and, also like Byron, he later became an exile in Europe, working for some time at the University of Rome and dying in Plan de Grasse in the Alpes Maritimes. There the likeness ceases for, unlike Byron, Prokosch outlived his fame, so that when he published *The Missolonghi Manuscript* almost no one remembered who he was. But Gore Vidal remained a firm supporter of Prokosch. Vidal and the travel writer Pico Iyer are Prokosch's most sympathetic critics. Prokosch seems certainly to have been gay and this may in part explain Vidal's support and Prokosch's interest in Byron's bisexuality.

The Missolonghi Manuscript purports to be three notebooks of journal entries from Byron's last months in Missolonghi. The entries begin on 25 January 1824, three days after the last actual entry – the poem on his 36th birthday. Prokosch gives the novel's paratext some Jamesian touches: a syphilitic Baron found the Manuscript, “three old note-books, yellow with age and on the verge of disintegration,” in the former dwelling house of a Dr Vaya, who is said to have been attached to the Suliote corps in Byron's time, in “a big wicker box, amongst some garments, sheets, blankets, medical treatises and surgical instruments.” The Baron passes these on to a Byron enthusiast, Colonel C. V. Eppingham, who makes a copy of them which he passes on to an American-Italian Marchesa, who in turn passes them to their editor, the academic T. H. Applebee of Bryn Mawr. Applebee makes all the appropriate demurs about the authenticity of the notebooks, the originals of which have somehow disappeared but which had been destined by Colonel, who has also disappeared, perhaps to the Andes, for Trinity College, Cambridge.

In the notebook entries Byron intersperses details of day to day events in Missolonghi with revisitings and reappraisals of his past – thus the 36 year old Byron travels from his childhood in Scotland to his arrival in Greece. The editor in his

introduction makes what is effectively Prokosch's apology for his deviation from Byron's style:

There are admittedly quirks of phrase and oddities of vocabulary which are un-Byronic. And the syntax seems in general unusually disciplined for Byron ... But most startling of all is the change of outlook (to put it mildly), which brought a visual precision quite at odds with his earlier manner. And it seems likely that his memory may occasionally have deceived him, or that he deliberately invented or distorted certain episodes. (5)

Some reviewers spoke as if the result constituted a kind of defamation of Byron ("the book may appeal to those who want to see a flamboyant figure oscillate between homosexuality and heterosexuality with the nice indifference of a metronome... Prokosch uses all the four-letter words that his earlier elegance would have found quite supererogatory;" it all "makes one wonder if the Byron of *Don Juan* ever existed," *Time*, short notice.) There is certainly a fair amount of sex and scurrility but it isn't actually terribly strong meat for 1968. The more telling complaint is that there isn't enough humour; but Prokosch, probably not himself a funny man, is wise not to attempt Byron's wit, except when he does quote directly from letters and journals. But a movement towards Byronic solemnity in Missolonghi is not impossible: there is no doubt that Byron increasingly found it difficult to find the situation in Greece risible: it was indeed often exasperating. It seems likely enough that his thoughts in his last months would have been more sombre, and it is not implausible that the stagnation of his present situation in Missolonghi might have opened his inward eye to fresh perceptions of the past, and that in turn might credibly

have created an imperative to put the record straight. Prokosch has him say “I have kept innumerable diaries and journals in my life, but it is time I spoke from a deeper recess of my being” (14).

The Byron that emerges from this compulsion to revise his past appeared in 1968 but is not a man of '68, (although I think that would be another way of refashioning the poet). He is rather a variety of the existential heroes of Prokosch's early novels. He is, however, more inclined to make moral distinctions than the hero of *The Asiatics* and in making them he is much more solemn, even portentous, than the Byron that emerges from the real letters and journals. But the novel presents quite a compelling case for believing that the wit of the letters, like the wit of *Don Juan*, is at least sometimes evasive, a cover-up for a deeply serious, even sombre, engagement with life's dilemmas.

Fictional versions of real people, particularly of well-known figures around whom legends have congregated are valuable in that they permit questions and answers that are not available to biographers and critics. Obviously in narrative biography some degree of speculation is inevitable and biographers are often rather unfairly castigated for speculations different from those of their reviewers, but no biographers dare go beyond certain limits, more or less permitted by the evidence. There are only three things that can unsettle existing biographical authority: completely new information which had been lost or withheld, a significant change in the climate of opinion or belief which enables new readings of existing information, and fiction, which allows otherwise unaskable questions to be posed and insecure answers to be given with enough air of truth to free the imagination and permit the expansion of our sense of the individual under scrutiny. I will address a few specific instances of such questions and answers in Prokosch's fiction, trying to show how

they free our imagination, thus, even when they are dubious, enlarging the range of other Byrons available to us.

Most of the questions Prokosch implicitly asks are about people and here he is both illuminating and misleading – the novel covers almost all of Byron’s significant encounters with great and small – itself no small feat in a book of 338 pages. I shall look at Prokosch’s versions of Byron’s relationships with Tom Moore, with Shelley and with his wife. And I’ll touch on the representation of John Edleston and Prince Mavrocordato.

Here is Byron on Moore in 1813:

There is nothing Moore may not do, if he will but seriously set about it. In society, he is gentlemanly, gentle, and, altogether, more pleasing than any individual with whom I am acquainted. ... He has but one fault – and that one I daily regret – his is not *here*. (*Journal* Nov. 22, 1813) (Marchand, 2, 215)

And here is Prokosch’s Byron remembering Moore in his last days:

I have never quite decided how I felt about Moore. He was amiable, even charming, but there was something oily in his amiability. He was handsome but there was something rather sleek about his looks. He had talent but there was something rather gratuitous, even vulgar in his poetry. He was a dandy, but his clothes (all bought in Paris) has *parvenu* look to them. His lips were full and luscious, his chin was dimpled, his complexion rosy. His face had the look of an over-ripe peach. (203)

Here Prokosch has entered into that competition for ownership of Byron that started during his lifetime. He has asked the question that biographers must ask – did Byron

really admire Tom Moore? But he has asked it differently – he imagines that because he himself can't admire Moore and because he does admire Byron, that there must be something factitious about Byron's professions. He feels much, I suppose, as Hobhouse must have felt, when he made his bad-tempered remarks in the margin of his copy of Moore's Byron. If Byron did indeed say, "Tommy loves a Lord," it seems clear to anyone who doesn't have vested interest in believing otherwise, that at least one Lord loved Tommy back. Yet even Prokosch's *misrepresentation* has a kind of virtue in forcing a reassuring rescrutiny of the evidence, in a way that could not be otherwise achieved. The determined downgrading of Moore imitates in an illuminating way the jealous love Byron's friends felt for him.

The rather high-falutin' diction makes the literary exchanges with Shelley also seem more like a licensing of Prokosch's obsessions than of Byron's. But once more the freedom of the novelist may permit some reclamation of a subterranean Byron, that the fidelity to known fact disallows. Prokosch's novel was published in the same year as John Buxton's *Byron and Shelley: the History of a Friendship* and they were reviewed together in the *TLS* (by Sylva Norman, Edmund Blunden's wife). She acknowledges the advantage of Prokosch's novelist's freedom in allowing Byron's mind to explore the uneasiness at the heart of his relationship with Shelley:

Shelley's mind was the opposite of mine, yet an undercurrent of harmony existed between the two of us ... He was far more intelligent than I: he was capable of deep concentration, and he moved from thought to thought with an effortless coherence ... And still in spite of his sincerity I found him unfathomable. He was tinged with an inner ghostliness. ... Him alone I adored unselfishly and him alone I loved without fleshliness. But then why, after a while, did I come to resent the man? (151-2)

Byron also has a few irritating high-falutin' conversations with Annabella Millbanke. But there are two little touches in the delineation of his feelings for his wife that catch a note of piercing veracity. Annabella pronounces rather oracularly that "true passion exists in secrecy."

"And you? Are you capable of passion?"

"Only in secrecy," said Annabella.

I glanced at her face, which seemed enclosed in parenthesis, and the drab, expressionless features were suddenly brightened by a cat-like glitter. And at that moment, for only a moment, I fell in love with Annabella. It was only a moment: then it was over. But it was love. Yes, it was love.

Here are his last thoughts on Annabella's suffering at his hands:

What is strange is that her suffering, while it maddened me at the time, did eventually produce in me an equivalence of suffering. Slowly and secretly and invisibly she created her own revenge. I cannot think of Annabella without a twist of pain in my heart, and it is strange that in this desert of pain and humiliation a tiny flower did finally grow, and that this flower is still alive in me. (125)

Byron's early choir-boy friend John Edleston fares less happily. Prokosch unfortunately chooses to elaborate Marchand's famous misreading of the passage in Hobhouse's dairy: "a letter from Hodgson to B – tales spread – the *Edleston* is accused of indecency." This has been corrected to "the *Collection* is accused of indecency." Prokosch invents, rather vulgarly, I think, an incident where Edleston is

caught by a watchman *in flagrante* with a groom in an inn yard. Prokosch also elaborates on Byron's ambivalence towards Mavrocordato who becomes "an insidious, very cruel little man," rather like one of the Asiatics from his first novel, who pops in of an evening to enjoy a brandy and a "recital of some new peccadillo" usually of a homosexual nature. The feelings and exploits related by the Prince perhaps exceed the proper limits of fictional licence. We can see why Prokosch needs to make something up for the Missolonghi sections of his novel, since Byron's letters are largely concerned with financial detail and his general frustration – Prokosch doesn't edit out money and irritation but he obviously feels it needs to be spiced up by more than just a few references to Byron's longing for Luke (Loukas). Prokosch can, then, be said to have defamed Edleston and Mavrocordato.

Nevertheless, although a good deal of the detail of Byron's present in Missolonghi and of his past in the fictive journal is wholly made-up, I found it necessary to keep checking against the journals, letters and biographies. Somewhat in the manner of Magic Realism, Prokosch's account works to complicate what is "true" and what is "fictional" and in this way forces a reappraisal of existing versions of the Byron story. For example, the Pisan Affray or Masi affair which as Fiona MacCarthy puts it "created disruption and farce" (418) is given some special Prokosch grace-notes: Shelley vomits into a copper bowl; Mary "as calm as a turtle" ... "regards the rest of us with sibylline disdain." These extras are persuasive, and serve to highlight the implausibility of the whole affair.

Finally Prokosch gives Byron an attachment to places, to the natural world that is a plausible version of Byron's visual and emotional sensibility. Prokosch's Byron presents much more finished scenes than we get in the letters and journals but

the finish is convincingly given as an effect of the shaping activity of imaginative memory. Here he is interrogating his memories of Diodati:

Do I imagine tiny details which never existed? ... what we recapture is only an emblematic fragment which is suited to our emotional demands at the moment. ... I know that [these details] existed but their actual texture I conjure out of nothingness. And thus we are forced into falsity by our very search for the truth. ... The chrysanthemums lost their petals and the air grew crisp and burnished. At night I could hear the crab-apples falling into the grass. Autumn came and the visitors moved away from their villas. Tufts of pine-smelling smoke rose from the cottages of the shepherds. (152-3)

So, why should we bother with Prokosch's Byron? It must be clear to you that I do not think *The Missolonghi Manuscript* is a great novel: it has its vulgarities and *longeurs*. But it does offer Byron something that we might all have wished him – the opportunity to take stock, to try to get his life and work into some kind of shape. And the Byron that responds to this offer is one that we can admire. Whatever the coarsenesses that Prokosch exploits, and I think he has to be coarse or he would have been accused of sanitising Byron, his Byron tries to make amends, tries to do some justice to those he feels he has wronged while at the same time he comes to recognise the fragility of all memory and desire.

Importantly the Byron of *The Missolonghi Manuscript* does not repudiate what we probably all understand as the twin commitments of Byron's work – to the transcendent and to the everyday – “the breakfast, tea and toast.” But these last minute reappraisals also permit Prokosch to suggest that Byron's metamorphoses were not over – he still had places to go, other Byrons to be and Prokosch wittily makes this the

justification for the “other” Byron he presents: “this plethora of memories has finally succeeded in changing my character – colours have changed. I used to like apples. Now I prefer oranges. I used to like blue, now I definitely prefer crimson. I used to laugh at ghosts. Now I am wheedled into believing in them. Is it the air of Missolonghi?” (179).

Of course, all writing about Byron seems bound to make his death in Missolonghi his destiny: the Blessington conversations with Byron insist on his presentiment of death in Greece but they were written, after all, after that death; even Fiona MacCarthy, who concedes that he may have been bled to death, plucks consolation out of the disaster: “Lord Byron old, rheumatic, hair thinning, maybe toothless? He had lived exhaustively. Perhaps he died at the right time” (521). But Prokosch’s novel reveals a Byron who still had a few miles to go. It is a paradox that the biographer’s commitment to objectivity and truth is imperative but that it may, nevertheless, be a strait-jacket. Prokosch’s fictional method at least liberates a believable Byron and who is to say which Byron is the true one. It is perhaps only in writing one’s own Byron and a Byron for one’s own time that glimpses of a Byron for all time may be achieved. And out of the accumulation of these glimpses the poet and his work continue to live and grow.

Dorothy McMillan, 2008

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