BYRON AND CASTELNAU'S *HISTORY OF NEW RUSSIA*

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(First published as *Byron and Castelnau's* History of New Russia*, Keats-Shelley Review* October 1994, pp. 48-70. Reproduced with permission.)

(Quotations from *Don Juan* are given by Canto, Stanza, and Line, thus: VIII, 23, 2. Quotations from Castelnau are given by volume and page: the edition used is the second one: Paris, 1827)

It is not clear to me that Byron read any more of the Marquis Gabriel de Castelnau's *Essai sur L'Histoire Ancienne et Moderne de la Nouvelle Russie* (source for much of *Don Juan* Canto VII and VIII) than he absolutely had to.[1] The Dedication alone would probably have deterred him:

> A SA MAJESTÉ L'EMPEREUR ALEXANDRE I^er^.
>
> SIRE,
>
> La récompense la plus flatteuse de mon travail, est la permission que m'accorde Votre Majesté impèriale de lui en faire hommage.
>
> Ce n'est pas à moi qu'il appartient de célébrer le Souverain auguste qui vivifia la Nouvelle Russie: les Éloges d'un historien contemporain sont suspects à la posterité; elle veut ne pronocer sur des faits. Ce sera d'après eux, SIRE, que la reconnaissance universelle parlera plus éloquemment que les phrases les mieux soignées.
>
> Puisse Votre Majesté impèriale jouir bien long-temps des acclamations de tant de peuples divers!
>
> Je suis
>
> SIRE,
>
> Avec le plus profond respect
> DE VOTRE MAJESTÉ IMPERIALE.
> Le très-humble et très-obéisaant serviteur
> LE MARQUIS GABRIEL DE CASTELNAU.[2]

A familar chime would have started at once in Byron's mind had he read such stuff:

> Conqueror, Deliverer, Friend of humankind,
> The free, the happy Island welcomes thee!
> Thee, Alexander, thee, the Great, the Good,
> The Glorious, the Beneficent, the Just!
> Thee to her honoured shores
> The mighty Island welcomes in her joy.[3]

Southey's *Ode to His Imperial Majesty Alexander the First, Emperor of all the Russias* – the poetic quality of which is fairly represented by this, its final stanza – had been published in 1814 as part of *Carmen Aulica*, one of the Laureate's most enthusiastic productions. An important motive in Byron's borrowing from Castelnau may be missed if we do not see that he is doing with the Frenchman's prose what he had done with Southey's verse in the final stanza of *Don Juan* Canto I, or in *The Vision of Judgement*: taking material already treated in the public domain in a right-wing

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The text of *Don Juan* has been edited by me from the rough drafts and fair copies, where these are available. I have not been able to work in detail from the rough draft of Canto VIII, which is at Texas, and which is published in photocopy by Garland at *Manuscripts of the Younger Romantics, Byron XI* (1997), edited by Cheryl Fallon Giuliano.

1: He makes no reference to it outside of the Preface to *Don Juan* VI, VII and VIII.

2: Castelnau, *Essai* ... Dedication.

3: Southey, *Poetical Works* (1845) p. 196.

perspective, appropriating it, and re-moulding it via his own pacifist, republican, facetious and misanthropic talent.

Who exactly Castelnau was is mysterious. E.H.Coleridge writes that he was *ancien surintendant des théâtres* under the Emperor Paul,[4] assassinated in 1800; he may be presumed an exile from the French Revolution, although whether he stayed in Russia or returned to France after 1815 is not clear. *The Dictionnaire de Noblesse* tells us that the family dates back to the thirteenth century, and is named after the fortress of Castelnau in the Pyrenees – but has no reference to the Marquis, whose chief claim to fame seems thus to be that he provided Byron with a prose source for *Don Juan.*

Southey was, however, in addition to being a servile poet, a conscientious historian, even of themes he found antipathetic. His *Life of Wesley*, composed in part as polemic, with the intention of alerting inert Anglicans to the beast within their gates, remains to this day a necessary text for students of English nonconformity: but I doubt whether the Marquis de Castelnau is of much interest to anyone other than students of historians – and students of Byron.

Byron was familiar with certain aspects of Russian history, at least, from his reading of Voltaire's *Histoire de Charles XII* and *Histoire de la Russie sous la règne de Pierre le Grand,* for both are ur-texts to *Mazeppa*.[5] He also had a copy of Karamzin's *Russian History*, in Italian translation: as the 1827 Sale Catalogue[6] shows; although this was a translation from the French, and Karamzin himself told Byron's associate John Bowring that there were at least two hundred errors in the first volume of the French translation itself.[7]

Castelnau's bleached version of Mazeppa's story would have caused Byron to blink (my italics in the following):

> Né dans la Petite Russie, Mazeppa sut, dans sa jeunesse, tirer parti d'une figure distinguée et gagner les bonnes grâces du beau sexe: s'il fut heureux, il ne sut pas se tirer. Page du roi de Pologne, il fit la conquête d'une dame attachée à la reine. Son intrigue ne pouvait rester cachée; l'amour-propre et l'imprudence qui en est la suite, la divulgèrent: il se repentit bientôt d'avoir trop parlé, et, *comme il existait dans ces temps-là un reste de respect pour les moeurs, il fut obligé de fuir et de se retirer parmi les Kozaks*. Intelligent et brave, il fit son chemin et se distingua. (II, 5-6)

Castelnau writes exclusively of the Ukraine and of the Crimea. His book forms an apologia for Potemkin's work in settling and reorganising New Russia (that is, roughly, the western part of modern Ukraine) and in annexing the Crimea, in the 1770s and 1780s; he is thus at liberty to ignore whole epochs of earlier Muscovite history. The Mongol invasions are alluded to only; and no-one would be well-advised who relied solely on Castelnau's discreet glance at the character of Ivan IV. The merest paraphrase-account of Ivan's nature and habits was to be sufficient to a later French commentator on Russia, the Marquis de Custine, to render the Tsardom irredeemable for all time;[8] but Castelnau has to treat only of one episode in Ivan's career, the capture of Kazan, and of the Tsar's entirely uncharacteristic chivalry there:

4: *The Works of Lord Byron. Poetry* Vol. VI, ed. E.H.Coleridge (John Murray 1924) p. 264.
5: See *Lord Byron the Complete Poetical Works*, volume IV, ed. McGann (Oxford 1986) p. 493.
6: 1827 Sale Catalogue, reprinted at *Lord Byron the Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Nicholson (Oxford 1991) p. 249.
7: John Bowring, *Specimens of the Russian Poets* (1821) p. xvin.
8: See Marquis de Custine, *Letters from Russia*, tr. Buss (Penguin 1991) pp. 186-205.

> Le czar avait l'âme ardente, le génie actif: exécuter était chez lui la conséquence immédiate de ses conceptions. Il donne des ordres, il arme, il fait des marches forcées et prend Cazan. Ivan s'exposa en brave soldat, se conduisit en capitaine expérimentale, et vanquait en souverain. Dix milles femmes vêtues de leurs plus beaux habits s'étaient réfugiées dans le palais; on craignait qu'elles ne fussent exposées à la rage des soldats, et victimes de leur brutalité: le czar sut les faire respecter. Cet effort de la discipline mérite d'être rapporté; il paraît incroyable sous un prince aussi cruel. (I, 257-8)

Karamzin, though no less of a Tsarist than Castelnau, drew on a wider historical canvas, and was much more honest about Ivan's cruelties.

An innocent reader would derive further from Castelnau none but the most correct idea of Catherine's relationship with Potemkin (who was merely "résolut de placer une couronne de plus sur la tête de sa souveraine" (II, 164). The Empress herself (Alexander's grandmother, after all) is a figure of fairy-tale:

> Partout où la souveraine s'arrêtait [in her progress through the newly-conquered Crimea], elle gagnait les coeurs: Catherine possédait au suprême degré cet air de douceur, de bonté, de sensibilité qui tempère l'éclat de la grandeur; on ne l'avait vue qu'un instant, on se retire charmé. (II, 166)

Compare *Don Juan*, Canto VI, Stanza 92, couplet:

> In Catharine's reign, whom glory still adores,
> As greatest of all sovereigns and w——s.

La Nouvelle Russie is in three volumes, and its narrative divides the history of the Ukraine into three *Époques*. The first dates from primitive times to 1477; the second from the late fifteenth century to 1792, and the conclusion of the Second Russo-Turkish War, when, by the Treaty of Jassy, the Ukraine and Crimea were finally ceded to Russia; and the third – shortest – *Époque* is the present, glorious one, under Alexander the First. In the book's first twenty-four chapters Castelnau describes the history of the Scythians and the Taurians, of their exploitation by the Venetians and Genoese, and of their conquest by the Huns and Turks. The next section climaxes in seven chapters (XXIV-XXX: pages 154-219 of the second volume) giving brief and respectful accounts of Potemkin (who annexed the Crimea to Russia in 1783) of Catherine's 1787 progress through the Crimea, of Suvorov (who, even Castelnau has to admit, was a personality *très-singulier* – II, 176) of the siege of Otchakov, and finally of the battle for Ismael. The third section starts with a long description of the development of Odessa under the duc de Richelieu (whom, E.H.Coleridge writes, Castelnau knew.[9] Byron appears to show familiarity with this in the Preface to *Don Juan* Cantos VI-VIII:

> The details of the Siege of Ismail in [two of] the following Cantos (i.e. the 7th. & 8th.) are taken from a French work entitled "Histoire de la Nouvelle Russie." – Some of the incidents attributed to Don Juan really occurred – particularly the circumstance of his saving the infant – which was the actual case of the late Duc de Richelieu then a young volunteer in the Russian service - and afterwards the founder and benefactor of <Od> Odessa – where his name and memory can never cease to be regarded with reverence.[10]

9: E.H.Coleridge, op. cit., p. 264.

10: Byron, *Don Juan* Preface to Cantos VI VII and VIII. I have edited the text from the manuscript in the John Murray Archive, where it is bound in with Mary Shelley's fair copy of the three Cantos. My thanks are due to John Murray and Virginia Murray for their assistance.

Jerome McGann takes this praise to be ironical,[11] but I find nothing in either the poem, the preface, or the source history, to invite such a reading: rather the reverse, for Richelieu would seem to have been highly successful as both soldier and as civil administrator - to have had, indeed, a career that Byron might have envied, had it been in a service other than the Russian. Richelieu had assisted Admiral Ribas (*known in Russian Story* - VII, 35, 3) in the 1789 conquest of Odessa, then called Hadgi-Bey. Under his governorship, given him by Alexander in 1803, the population rose from eight thousand to forty thousand (III, 16); and Castelnau spends several sections itemising the *temples ... hôpitaux ... Casernes ... Gymnase et Institut ... théâtre ... salle de bal ... jardin public* and so on, which he built (III, 29-36).

The third part continues with the account of a *Voyage en Crimée*, which Castelnau evidently undertook himself; he visits Balaclava, Sevastopol, Cherson, Inkerman, and spends several pages in minute description of the Palace of Bakhchisarai (or Batchi-Saraï, as he transliterates it) including the great Fountain, to be immortalised, soon after his history was published, by Pushkin, whose poem *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* was written in 1823, and published in 1824. Lastly Castelnau describes the plague which Odessa experienced in 1812, and the book ends with tentative suggestions as to the origins of such pestilences.[12]

That part of the book of which Byron makes use (Volume II, pages 201-19, Chapter XXX of the section *Deuxième Époque*, consisting in part of Richelieu's memoirs) is no peripheral digression, but has an important role in the structure of the work: the battle constitutes, in its darkness and horror (which Castelnau does not wholly underplay) the last throes of barbarism before the final advent of enlightened Russian civilisation, and of Alexander the First (for Byron's opinion of whom, see *Don Juan*, VII Stanzas 93-4). In the 87-Stanza Canto VII, Byron uses Castelnau from Stanza 11 through to 53; then, more selectively, in the 141-Stanza Canto VIII, from Stanza 6 through to 127. Once Juan and Johnson have entered the drama in Canto VII, Byron temporarily jettisons his source; but he returns to it frequently in Canto VIII. Each *departure* from it there is worthy of analysis, which I shall try and provide. The relationship between French prose and English ottava rima is highly complex, and quite different in its varied and subversive games from the simple cannibalism to which Byron subjects Dalyell's *Shipwrecks and Disasters* at Sea in Canto II, or *"Tully's Tripoli"* in Cantos III and IV. Often he does merely versify, and, without jest, improve poetically upon the book at his elbow:

> A peine eut-on parcouru l'espace de quelques toises au-delà des batteries, que les Turcs, qui n'avaient point tiré pendant toute la nuit, s'apercevant de nos mouvemens, commencèrent de leur côté un feu très-vif, qui embrasa le reste de l'horizon; mais ce fut bien autre chose lorsque, avancés davantage, le feu de la mousqueterie commença dans toute l'étendue du rempart que nous apercevions. Ce fut alors que la place parut à nos yeux comme un volcan dont le feu sortait de toutes parts. Un cri universel d'*allah*, qui se répétait tout autour de la ville, vint encore rendre plus extraordinaire cet instant, dont il est impossible de se faire une idée. (II 209 - Castelnau is quoting from Richelieu's memoirs)

The column ordered on the assault, scarce passed

11: See *Lord Byron the Complete Poetical Works*, volume V, ed. McGann (Oxford 1986) p. 719, note to Preface 9-11.

12: For an amusing depiction of Odessa under Alexander I, see Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, rejected stanzas; Nabokov's translation (Routledge, 1964) places them at Vol. I pp. 340-5.

Beyond the Russian batteries a few toises,
When up the bristling Moslem rose at last,
Answering the Christian thunders with like voices;
Then one vast fire, air, earth, and stream embraced,
Which rocked as 'twere beneath the mighty noises;
Whilst the whole rampart blazed like Etna, when
The restless Titan hiccups in his den.

And one enormous shout of "Allah!" rose
In the same moment, loud as even the roar
Of War's most mortal Engines, to their foes
Hurling defiance; city, stream and shore
Resounded "Allah!" and the clouds which close
With thickening canopy the conflict o'er,
Vibrate to the Eternal name; Hark! through
All sounds it pierceth, "Allah! Allah! Hu!" *

NOTE: * Allah Hu! is properly the war cry of the Mussulmans, and they dwell long on the last syllable, which gives it a very wild and peculiar effect. (VIII, 7-8 and n)

The prosaic *la place parut à nos yeux comme un volcan dont le feu sortait de toutes parts* is aptly, and much more vividly, conveyed by *the whole rampart blazed like Etna, when / The restless Titan hiccups in his den*; Castelnau (or rather, here, Richelieu) never indulges in classical allusions, yet, Byron demonstrates, the narrative can easily support even light ones. In addition, it being only a step from Castelnau to the world of Byron's earlier tales, some serious Oriental sensationalism is by no means out of place either: the prose note would ask us to compare the effect in Stanza 7 with that at *The Giaour*, 734, or at *The Siege of Corinth*, 668.[13] Part of Byron's intention being pro-Islamic, it's fitting that he can make us hear in its completeness the war-cry to which Castelnau only gestures in conventional horror. A note, even, reinforces his aim.

At other times the French history does give Byron the opening for some mild jokes:

Un bastion de pierres, ouvert par une gorge très-étroite et dont les murailles sont fort épaisses, a une batterie casementée et une à barbette; il défend la rive du Danube. Du côté droit de la ville est un cavalier de quarante pieds d'élévation à pic, garni de vingt-deux pièces de canon, et qui défend la partie gauche. (II, 202, quoting Richelieu)

But a Stone Bastion with a narrow gorge,
And Walls as thick as Most Skulls born as yet,
Two batteries, cap-à-pé as our Saint George,
Casemated one, and t'other "a barbette",
Of Danube's bank took formidable charge;
While two and twenty Cannon duly set
Rose o'er the town's right side in bristling tier,
Forty feet high, upon a Cavalier. (VII, 12)

The two similes *thick as Most Skulls born as yet* and *cap-à-pé as our Saint George* are comical addenda: but the numbers and dimensions are translated precisely, and even the mildly figurative *in bristling tier* could be explained as an equivalent to the French

13: Compare *The Giaour*, 734: *At solemn sound of "Alla Hu!"* or *The Siege of Corinth,* 668: *God and the Prophet - Alla Hu!*

garni. However, much more elaborate jokes than these are possible - ones which do not merely pad out the source, but take over from it:

> Le prince de Ligne fut blessé au genou, le duc de Richelieu eut une balle entre le fond de son bonnet et sa tête ... le brigardier Markow, insistant pour qu'on emportât le prince blessé, reçut un coup de fusil qui lui fracassa le pied. (II, 209-10)

The Prince de Ligne was wounded in the knee;
    Count Chapeau-Bras too had a ball between
His cap and head, which proves the head to be
    Aristocratic as was ever seen,
Because it then received no injury
    More than the cap; in fact the ball could mean
No harm unto a right legitimate head –
"Ashes to ashes" – why not lead to lead?

Also the General Markow, Brigadier,
    Insisting on removal of the Prince
Amidst some groaning thousands dying near,
    All common fellows, who might writhe, and wince,
And shriek for water into a deaf ear;
    The General Markow, who could thus evince
His sympathy for rank, by the same token,
To teach him greater, had his own leg broken. (VIII, 10-11)

The way the first English verse line here mimicks the very rhythm of the corresponding French prose phrase might seem mere luck; but the way Byron translates the participle *insistant* into its precise English equivalent, and gives it an entirely new context, critical of the *ancien régime* priorities which Castelnau takes for granted, shows excellent judgement. The way he then returns to Castelnau, and makes so much more of the breaking of Markov's leg (or foot) than Castelnau would ever wish to, shows genius. (Note that by substituting the invented *Count Chapeau-Bras* for *Richelieu*, Byron deflects his joke away from Juan's historical *alter ego*, the founder of Odessa.)

Elsewhere, the poetic commentary is (at least for those with the French handy) more overt still:

> Les succés multipliés de Souvarow, sa bravoure à toute épreuve, la confiance que le soldat avait en lui, produisirent un enthousiasme général: une salve des batteries du camp et de la flotte célébrèrent son arrivée, et l'espoir du succès ranima les esprits. Les choses prennent le même jour une autre tournure; le camp se rapproche et s'établit à la portée du canon de la place; on prépare les fascines, on construit des échelles, on établit des batteries nouvelles, et l'on envoie sommer la place. (II, 206)

But to the tale: Great Joy unto the Camp!
    To Russian, Tartar, English, French, Cossacque,
O'er whom Souwarrow shone like a Gas lamp,
    Presaging a most luminous attack;
Or like a Wisp along the marsh so damp,
    Which leads beholders on a boggy walk,
He flitted to and fro, a dancing light,
Which all who saw it followed – wrong or right.

But certes, Matters took a different face;
    There was Enthusiasm and much applause;
The fleet and Camp saluted with Much grace,
    And all presaged Good Fortune to their cause;
Within a Cannon-shot length of the place
    They drew; constructed ladders, repaired flaws
In former works, made new; prepared fascines,
And all kinds of benevolent Machines. (VII, 46-7)

Castelnau is critical of Suvorov in small details (Byron half-shares his distaste for the General's habit of drilling raw recruits in person: compare Castelnau II 207-8, with *Don Juan* VII 51-3 and author's note). However, the inspiration which the Russian army derives from his presence is seen by Byron in a way quite different from Castelnau's. The two similes here (*like a Gas lamp* and *like a Wisp along the marsh so damp*) echo others in the poem (see VIII, 32, 5) and give Suvorov a dangerous and spectral unreality, which would be still more out of place in the chronicle than jokes about Generals having their legs broken. The heavy irony in *benevolent Machines* is cunningly and deceitfully prepared-for by the previous lines in the Stanza, which so successfully evoke the hypnotic effect of Suvorov's presence that one is tempted really to see the machines as benevolent.

It is hard to know whether Byron, in advertising publicly (for the first time) his indebtedness to such a source, means us to read the French in parallel: he certainly never insisted on its being printed, although nearly all editions do print it – but never either in quite enough detail, or in enough proximity to the poem, to make comparisons easy.[14] For instance, it is hard typographically to juxtapose the following passages in such a way as to make clear exactly what's going on:

> La première attaque était composée de trois colonnades, commandées par les lieutenants-généraux Paul Potiemkin, Serge Lwow, les généraux-majors Maurice Lacsy, Théodore Meknop. Ces trois colonnes étaient fortes de cinq mille sept cent hommes. / Trois autres colonnes, destinées à la seconde attaque, avaient pour chefs le comte Samoïlow, les généraux Élie de Bezborodko, Michel Koutousow; les brigardiers Orlow, Platow, Ribaupierre. Dix milles trois cents combattans composaient celles-ci. / La troisième attaque par eau n'avait que deux colonnes, sous les ordres des généraux-majors Ribas et Arseniew, des brigardiers Markoff et Tchépéga. Ces deux colonnes réunissaient six milles sept cent hommes. (II 207)

The Russians now were ready to attack –
    But oh, ye Goddesses of War and Glory!
How shall I spell the name of each Cossacque,
    Who were immortal, Could one tell their Story –
Alas! What to their Memory can lack?
    Achilles' Self was not more grim and gory
Than thousands of this new and polished Nation,
Whose names want nothing but – Pronunciation.

Still I'll record a few, if but to increase
    Our Euphony: there was Strongenoff, and Strokonoff,
Meknop, Serge Lwow, Arseniew of modern Greece,

14: Wright and Coleridge place their selections at the page-bottom; DJV puts its selections in a different volume from its text; DJP gives nothing; CPW is alone in printing the entire chapter, but puts it in its notes at the end, and, according to the second edition, at least, gives page numbers one behind the real thing. No editor comments in detail on the use to which Byron puts Castelnau.

And Tschitsshakoff, and Roguenoff, and Chokenoff,
And others of twelve Consonants apiece;
And more might be found out, if I could poke enough
Into Gazettes, but Fame (capricious Strumpet!)
It seems, has got an ear, as well as trumpet,

And cannot tune those discords of Narration,
Which may be names at Moscow, into rhyme;
Yet there were several worth Commemoration
As e'er was Virgin of a Nuptial Chime;
Soft words too fitted for the Peroration
Of Londonderry, drawling against Time,
Ending in "-ischskin," "-ousckin," "-iffsky," "-ouski,"
Of whom we can insert but Rousamouski.

Scherematoff, and Chrematoff, Koklofty,
Koclobski, Kourakin, and Mouskin Pouskin –
All proper Men of weapons, as e'er scoffed high
Against a foe, or ran a sabre through skin;
Little cared they for Mahomet or Mufti,
Unless to make their kettledrums a new skin
Out of their hides, if parchment had grown dear,
And no more handy substitute been near.

Then there were foreigners of much renown,
Of various Nations, and all Volunteers,
Not fighting for their Country or its Crown,
But wishing to be one day Brigadiers,
Also to have the sacking of a town,
A pleasant thing to young men in their years;
'Mongst these were several Englishmen of pith –
Sixteen called Thomson, and nineteen named Smith. (VII, 14-18)

What's at once evident here is neither the fidelity, nor the jokiness, but the entirely treacherous nature of the poem's relation to the history. Only three of the supposedly unpronounceable names appear in Castelnau *(Meknop, Serge Lwow* and *Arseniew*); seven entirely fictitious ones (*Tschitsshakoff, Roguenoff, Chokenoff, Strongenoff, Strokonoff, Koklofty*, and *Koclobski*)[15] are chosen because to English ears they seem to involve ludicrous and even obscene puns (does Byron have the same intention with regard to *Chrematoff* and *Arseniew*? the scansion suggests so in the latter case) and four authentic Russian names (*Scherematoff, Kourakin, Mouskin Pouskin* and *Rousamouski*) aren't listed by Castelnau as having been at Ismael at all.[16] A further nine Russian

15: *Koklofty* may be a derivation from the name of John Hely-Hutchinson (1757-1832) 1st Baron of Alexandria and Knocklofty (for whom see *The Journal of Mrs Arbuthnot*, ed. Francis Bamford and the Duke of Wellington, Macmillan 1950, I 21; *Koclobsk*i may derive from the name of Colonel Cobley, for whom, see the quotation from the 1791 *Annual Register*, printed on page 14 above. Both names thus reinforce the anti-English satire elsewhere in the Canto. For Russians' haphazard ways with the name *Byron*, see Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* (Routledge 1964) II 479.

16: Byron could have got nearly all his Russian names either from Castelnau, or from two books by William Tooke: *History of Russia*, and *Life of Catharine II*. The only ones he may have concocted from nothing are *Roguenoff, Chokenoff, Koklophti*, and *Koklobski*. A "Countess Mouskinpouskin" is recorded by Polidori (*Diary*, ed. Rossetti, 1911, p. 139) as having been at Geneva in 1816, as is a Countess "Breuss" (ibid, pp. 139-141) who is probably the Countess Bruce, intimate of Catherine the Great and rumoured to have served her, along with Miss Protasoff, in the "mystic office" of Eprouveuse. Polidori says she has one husband in St. Petersburg and one in Venice. It seems

generals who were at Ismael aren't mentioned, neither are one Frenchman (*Ribaupierre*) or one Neapolitan/Spaniard (*Ribas* – Byron atones for these two omissions later). And as for *Sixteen called Thomson, and nineteen named Smith*, Castelnau mentions absolutely no Englishmen at this point (one – authentic – English naval officer is killed much later, at VIII Stanzas 80-1). In vain does the researcher protest that the ordinary Russian soldiers were all peasant conscripts, and that the English government's hostility to Russian designs on the Mediterranean made it forbid British mercenary officers to fight in the Russian navy, at any rate, in the early 1790s:[17] Byron wishes to implicate his humbler countrymen as tools of Russian imperialism, and will use any *legerdemain* to do so, making it seem as though Castelnau is his unimpeachable source for the information.

We are therefore, if we read innocently, at the simultaneous mercies of Byron's desire for his epic to seem authentic, and his instinct to depart from his authenticating source whenever artistic whim dictates. Epics, he insists, are and always have been untrustworthy as chronicles. The seeds of such doubt have been sown in our minds in *Don Juan* from as early as Canto IV (I print the Stanzas with Byron's alternative readings intact):

There, on the green and village-cotted hill is,
  Flanked by the Hellespont and by the Sea,
Entombed the bravest of the brave, Achilles;
  They say so (Bryant says the contrary)
And further downward tall and towering still is
  The tumulus of whom? – Heaven knows – 't may be
Patroclus – Ajax – or Protesilaus;
  if living still }
All heroes who (alive perhaps) would slay us. }
  if still alive }

High barrows without marble or a name,
  mountain-skirted }
  A vast, untilled, and mountain-bounded plain,
  mountain-outlined }
And Ida in the distance still the same,
  And old Scamander (if 'tis he) remain;
The situation seems still formed for fame,
  fight }
  A hundred thousand Men might meet again }
With ease; but where I sought for Ilion's walls,
The quiet sheep feeds, and land-tortoise crawls; }
  and the }

Troops of untended horses; here and there
  Some little hamlets with new names uncouth,
Some Shepherds (unlike Paris) led to stare
  A Moment at the European Youth
  schoolboy feelings }
Whom to the spot their learned Researches bear, }
  A Turk with beads in hand and pipe in mouth

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evidence that Byron's interest in, and intimate knowledge of, Russia, could have stemmed from much earlier than 1822. For more on Mouskin Pouskin, see Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin,* II 477-8.

17: See Isabel de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (Yale 1981) pp. 400-1.

Extremely taken with his own religion,
Are what I found there, but the devil a Phrygian. ———— = (IV 76-8)

As with Bible-study, so with classics: Byron is at once tormented and intrigued by the idea that Troy, like Eden, may never have been; that Homer is a mere gazeteer, and as such, as unreliable as Castelnau or ... as Byron. At VII, 80, 4, *The Iliad* is described as a *Greek Gazette*. At VIII, 18, 7-8, gazettes are impugned – from Byron's personal experience – for their inaccuracy even in recording surnames. At I, 1, 3, they are described as being *cloyed* with *cant*; and at IX, 81, 4, history itself – the summary of all gazettes ever - is termed a *grand Liar*. Yet Byron needs Homer – he needs man and history to possess the dignity and beauty which epic confers on their squalor. In the Canto IV Stanzas above, the tug is between, on the one hand, Byron's *schoolboy feelings* (or *learned Researches*, a later product of the same thing) his yearning for the security which myth provides, and on the other, the mundanities whereby *Bryant says the contrary*, whereby it is impossible to tell whose *tumulus* is whose, the doubt whether the river be Scamander or not, and the dull evidence of the *troops of horses*, the *quiet sheep* feeding, the *land-tortoise* crawling, and so on (Byron brought some tortoises back with him from Troy, presumably as living reminders of his doubt).[18] Beneath all is the greater worry: that if Achilles had ever been alive, he would have been at once recognisable simply as a killer. Suvorov, Johnson, and Juan, may really be in his tradition – in his historical tradition, as well as his literary one.

What is remarkable about *Don Juan* Canto VIII is its inexhaustibly inclusive capacity for every style of narrative, and the way in which Byron can swing readily from the heroic, via the factual, to the horrible and the compassionate, before ending with the downright mendacious:

But let me put an end unto my theme –
    There was an end of Ismail – hapless town!
Far flashed her burning towers o'er Danube's stream,
    And redly ran his blushing waters down;
The horrid war-whoop and the shriller scream
    Rose still; but fainter were the thunders grown;
Of forty thousand who had manned the wall,
Some hundreds breathed – the rest were silent all! (VIII, 126)

The tone is here that of *Childe Harold*; but it is followed at once by

In one thing, ne'ertheless, 'tis fit to praise
    The Russian army upon this occasion,
A virtue much in fashion nowadays,
    And therefore worthy of commemoration –
The topic's tender, so shall be my phrase –
    Perhaps the season's chill, and their long station
In winter's depth, in want of rest and victual,
Had made them chaste – they ravished very little.

Much did they slay, more plunder, and no less
    Might here and there occur some violation
In the other line; but not to such excess
    As when the French, that dissipated nation,

18: See Lord Byron *The Complete Letters and Journals*, ed. Marchand (John Murray 1973) II 94.

Take towns by storm; no causes can I guess
    Except cold weather and commiseration;
But all the ladies, save some twenty score,
Were almost as much virgins as before.

Some odd mistakes too happened in the dark,
    Which shewed a want of lanthorns, or of taste –
Indeed the smoke was such, they scarce could mark
    Their friends from foes – besides, such things from haste
Occur, though rarely, when there is a spark
    Of light to save the venerably chaste;
But six old damsels, each of seventy years,
Were all deflowered by different Grenadiers.

But on the whole their continence was great,
    So that some disappointment there ensued
To those who had felt the inconvenient state
    Of "single blessedness" – and thought it good
(Since it was not their fault, but only fate
    To bear these crosses) for each waning prude
To make a Roman sort of Sabine wedding,
Without the expence and the suspense of bedding.

Some voices of the buxom middle-aged
    Were also heard to wonder in the din
(Widows of forty were these birds long caged)
    "Wherefore the ravishing did not begin?"
But while the thirst for gore and plunder raged,
    There was small leisure for superfluous sin;
But whether they escaped or no, lies hid
In darkness – I can only hope they did. (VIII, 128-32)

Had Byron read the account of the Siege of Ismael in *The Annual Register* for 1791, he would have met with the following:

> [Colonel Cobley, an English mercenary with the Russian force] had the singular fortune and honour, as it may well be considered in such a scene of horror and confusion, to preserve the lives and to protect 300 beautiful Circassian ladies, belonging to the governor's haram, who were on the point of precipitating themselves into the Danube to escape the violation of the soldiers.[19]

It says much for Byron's misogynist intention that he makes no use of the *Register's* anecdote (the account there may have given him the cue for the comparison of Suvorov with Tamberlaine and Genghis Khan which he makes at VIII, 133, 2).[20] Of course he has finished with Harams in Canto VI, and wishes to get Juan off to St. Petersburg and into bed with Catherine the Great as quickly as possible: but he has already told us this, as well, only a few Stanzas earlier ...

All that the Mind would shrink from of excesses –

19: *The Annual Register* for 1791, p 201.

20: *It would almost seem as if that general* [Suvorov] *had his mind heated by newly reading the annals of those ancient ravagers and destroyers of his country (unless indeed he be himself descended from that people) Genghis Khan and Tamerlane – Annual Register* (1791) p. 198.

All that the body perpetrates of bad –
All that we read, hear, dream, of man's distresses –
All that the Devil would do if run stark mad –
All that defies the worst which pen expresses –
All by which Hell is peopled – or more sad
Than Hell, mere mortals who their power abuse –
Was here (as heretofore and since) let loose. (VIII 123)

... and Castelnau (quoting, at first, the memoirs of de Richelieu) had been, as elsewhere, the source he was faithfully following:

> <<La ville est emportée; l'image de la mort et de la désolation se représente de tour côtés; le soldat furieux n'écoute plus la voix de ses officiers, il ne respire que le carnage; altéré de sang, tout est indifférent pour lui.>> ... On égorgea indistinctement, on saccagea la place; et la rage du vainqueur, agissant en proportion de la résistance qu'il avait éprouvée, se répandit comme un torrent furieux qui a renversé les digues qui le retenait: personne n'obtint de grâce, et trente huit mille huit cent soixante Turcs périrent dans cette journée de sang. / Ici, on voit des vieillards égorgés, des femmes mutilées et dépouillées, des enfants palpitant encore sur le sein refroidi de leur mère; là, des soldats revêtus des plus beaux vêtemens de Turcs; plus loin, d'autres courbés sous le poid des sabres, des pistolets garnis en or ou en argent; ailleurs, des maisons dévastées, et les propriétaires étendus et nageant dans leur sang. L'ivresse du soldat n'était pas dans ce moment le sentiment de sa gloire, mais l'acharnement forcé à satisfaire sa vengeance et sa cupidité. / Détournons nos regards du spectacle affreux dont nous n'avons donné que l'idée; passons sous silence des actes de férocité pires que la mort; tirons le rideau sur des excès dégoûtans, et des crimes impossibles à empêcher quand la fureur du soldat ne peut être contenue. (II, 214 ... 216)

With this Stanza already written and this page before his eyes, we may wonder at the strength of Byron's obsession, that he must insist so facetiously on his favourite theme - the imperious nature of the female sexual appetite – at such a point. (It is worth noting, by the way, that the two diary entries of Sir Walter Scott,[21] relating the story of the disappointed victim of anticipated rape at Carlisle in 1745, both postdate the publication of *Don Juan* VIII).

Byron relies as much on Castelnau in most of Canto VIII as he did in the first half of Canto VII, even down to some surprising verbal details. One would not think that he would need prompting for such a phrase as *Then, being taken by the tail* (VIII, 76, 1): but it is straight from Castelnau's alors, *se trouvant prise en queue* (II, 213). At points he apes the Frenchman so precisely – even incorporating his notes – as to convince us – momentarily – that they share the same values:

Another column also suffered much;
And here we may remark with the Historian,
You should but give few cartridges to such
Troops as are meant to march with greatest glory on;
When matters must be carried by the touch
Of the bright bayonet, and they all should hurry on,
They sometimes, with a hankering for existence,
Keep merely firing at a foolish distance. (VIII, 78)

21: See Sir Walter Scott, *Journal* ed. Anderson (Oxford 1972) pp. 165-6 and p. 225. The entries are for June 30th and October 30th 1826.

L'autre partie de Kozaks, qu'Orlow commandait, souffrit de la manière la plus cruelle; elle attaqua à maintes reprises, fut souvent repoussée, et perdit les deux tiers de son monde. (NOTE: C'est ici le lieu de placer une observation que nous prenons dans les mémoires qui nous guident; elle fait remarquer combien il est mal vu de donner beaucoup de cartouches aux soldats qui doivent emporter un poste de vive force, et par conséquant où la baïonette doit principalement agir; ils pensent ne devoir se servir de cette dernière arme que lorsques les cartouches sont épuisées: dans cette persuasion, ils retardent leur marche, et restent plus longtemps exposés au canon et à la mitraille de l'ennemi.) (II, 213-14)

A junction of the General Meknop's men
    (Without the General, who had fallen some time
Before, being badly seconded just then)
    Was made at length with those who dared to climb
The death-disgorging rampart once again;
    And though the Turks' resistance was sublime,
They took the bastion, which the Seraskier
Defended – at a price extremely dear. (VIII, 79)

La jonction de la colonne de Meknop (NOTE: Meknop était un brave officier, très-intelligent et de la plus grande espérance; il fut mal secondé et tué) ne put s'effectuer avec celle qui l'avoisinait que lorsque celle-ci fait la plus grande partie du chemin: une fois réunies, ces colonnes attaquèrent un bastion et éprouvèrent une résistance opiniâtre; mais bientôt des cris de victoire se font entendre des toutes parts, et le bastion est emporté: le séraskier défendait cette partie ... (II, 214)

It is all part of the same game of treachery, however: the source-book is only intermittently relied upon in this amount of detail – although, without Castelnau beside us or at the foot of the page, it's impossible to tell when he's the subtext and when he isn't, or in what way he's the subtext when he is. From the following paragraph, to take an extreme example, Byron creates an episode lasting sixteen Stanzas (104-19):

Le sultan périt dans l'action en brave homme, digne d'un meilleur destin; ce fut lui qui rallia les Turcs lorsque l'ennemi pénétra dans la place; ce fut lui qui marcha contre les Russes trop avides du pillage, et qui, dans vingt occasions différentes, combattit en héros: ce sultan, d'une valeur éprouvée, surpassait en générosité les plus civilisés de sa nation; cinq de ses fils combattaient à ses côtés, il les encourageait par son exemple; tous cinq furent tués sous ses yeux; il ne cessait point de se battre, répondit par des coups de sabre aux propositions de se rendre, et ne fut atteint du coup mortel qu'après avoir abattu de sa main beaucoup de Kozaks des plus acharnés à sa prise; le reste de sa troupe fut massacré. (II, 215)

Those who would tell us that the episode of the Tartar Khan and his five sons is derived from that of Latinus in *Gerusalemme Liberata* IX ignore two vital things: that the Khan is Moslem and happy to die, where Latinus is Christian and anxious to live and conquer; and that Latinus and his family are all fighting one man ("Soldan" of Turkey, in Fairfax's version)[22] where the Tartar Khan and his sons are fighting an entire regiment. It is more accurately to be seen as a case of life imitating art. Byron, rejoicing in such an honest opportunity to meditate on the virtues of Islam (mixed with further glances at female sexuality, in the anxiety of the houris to receive the Khan's eldest son: Stanzas 111-15) needs no high-minded Catholic epic for further inspiration. As elsewhere, he expands Castelnau – though, as is not the case elsewhere, it is with a view

22: Edward Fairfax, *Godfrey of Bouillogne*, ed. Lea and Gang (Oxford 1981) p. 295. CPW (V 734, n to 830) names the Tasso hero as Catinus.

to bringing out what is truly implicit in the original, rather than casting facetious doubt on what the original would have us understand.

One of the most memorable moments in Canto VIII is in Stanzas 83-6 (again, I print them with Byron's alternative readings in the text, not in the notes):

A Russian officer, in martial tread
    Over a heap of bodies, felt his heel
Seized fast, as if 'twere by the serpent's head
    Whose fangs Eve taught her human seed to feel;
In vain he kicked, and swore, and writhed, and bled,
    And howled for help as wolves do for a meal –
The teeth still kept their gratifying hold,
As do the subtle snakes described of old.

A dying Moslem, who had felt the foot
    Of a foe o'er him, snatched at it, and bit
The very tendon, which is most acute
    (That which some ancient Muse or modern Wit
Named after thee, Achilles) and quite through't
    He made the teeth meet, nor relinquished it
Even with his life – for (but they lie) 'tis said
To the live leg still clung the severed head.

However this may be, 'tis pretty sure
    The Russian officer for life was lamed,
For the Turk's teeth stuck faster than a Skewer,
    And left him 'midst the Invalid and maimed;
The regimental Surgeon could not cure
    His patient, and perhaps was to be blamed
More than the head of the inveterate foe,
Which was cut off, and scarce even then let go.

But then the fact's a fact – – and 'tis the part
    Of a true poet to escape from fiction
Whene'er he can, for there is little art
    In leaving verse more free from the restriction
Of truth than prose, unless to suit the Mart
    For what is sometimes called poetic diction,
And that outrageous appetite for lies
Which most of all doth Man characterize.

—
or
—

Which Satan angles with, for Souls, like flies. –

—
or
—

(The twigs which Satan limes for human flies.)

Byron's insistence that *the fact's a fact*, his implication that he is *a true poet*, and that other poets write (or lie) for Satan's benefit, could not be more disingenuous, for there is no reference to the heel-bite anywhere in Castelnau. I suspect it was the simultaneity of the Achilles' heel parallel and the implicit *Genesis* reference (*it shall*

bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel) which made Byron like the idea; convincing his readers that such a thing really occurred, and that he, Byron, was writing *Don Juan* in part in order to immortalise it, places him in the role of Satan, and makes his poem either a limed twig for sinners to perch on, or a bait for sinners to bite on, depending on which reading you take. However, the real Satan had the final joke, for what Byron did not know (Castelnau not having made use of all de Richelieu's memoirs) was that where his hero redeems himself by saving the Moslem girl in Stanzas 91-103 (the only "detail" of his borrowings to which he draws explicit attention in his Preface, quoted above) de Richelieu lost the girl he tried to save in the aftermath of the battle, and had to presume that she was killed.[23] Where the epic Juan is allowed to atone in part for his damnable enthusiasm for blood, his historical model was cheated of his opportunity by fate – and we may wonder whether founding and developing Odessa in the name of Alexander I was adequate atonent when de Richelieu's chances for bliss were being weighed-up.

23: See *The Works of Lord Byron. Poetry*, Vol. VI, ed. E.H.Coleridge (John Murray 1924) p. 359.