

# WALKING TO BYZANTIUM

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**ABSTRACT.** The present paper aims at highlighting the connection between artistic call and the quest for spirituality, as reflected in the lives and works of three significant British artists and travelers. Edward Lear in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Patrick Leigh Fermor and Bruce Chatwin in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, respectively, travelled in Greece and experienced both the beauty and the monastic environment of Mount Athos. Each of them was attached to the mental collective of their times, and their response differed accordingly. They followed an itinerary marked by touches of the picturesque, of the sublime and eventually of the divine. Edward Lear, the mature visual artist and traveler, had an agenda pertaining to Victorian and imperialist values. The very young Patrick Leigh Fermor was closing at Athos a journey that had carried him throughout a Europe shining in its Golden Age between the two World War Wars. Bruce Chatwin, *l'enfant terrible* of British travel writing, ended his quest in the 1980s near a Byzantine basilica, as a result of having benefited from a life-changing moment of revelation while at Mount Athos. The artists' works and letters are also employed in order to emphasize the relation between text and private epitext.

**KEY WORDS:** travel writing, text and epitext, picturesque, sublime, divine

## **Introduction. From a Poet Laureate**

In a short letter to Patrick Leigh Fermor from February 15, 1979, Sir John Betjeman, the then Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, after having congratulated Paddy for a recent poem – “Your ingenious lines in that gloriously complicated metre have cheered me up a lot” –, complained about the awful winter weather in the capital of Great Britain and expressed his friendly envy for the location of Fermor’s house in the spiritual climate of mediterranean Greece – “What a life you and Joanie have had, and how wisely and well you have spent it, where the orthodox saints look down with olive shaped eyes from the walls of the basilica” (JB, letter from February 15, 1979).

By the time of Betjeman’s letter, Paddy had for some years finished the long and complicated process of building a house in Kardamyli, one of the oldest settlements in the Peloponneses, on a plot first spotted in 1962 – “a little headland between two valleys ending in crescent-shaped beaches” (Cooper 2013: 322). Acquired in March 1964, the little headland saw the flourishing of a construction where “no line was dead straight, no two

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openings exactly the same” (Cooper 2013: 332), yet Paddy was enchanted as it gave the place “a live and home-made look” (as quoted in Cooper 2013: 332).

Somehow, it resonated to the spirit of the Greeks, as captured in his 1966 book *Roumeli*, in which he had delineated between its two major features, the ancient Greek and the Byzantine one. He had noticed that “the architecture of nineteenth century Athens” was indebted to both ages and cultures (Cooper 2013: 333), something that was pervasive even in the twentieth century. One should read *Hellene* for the first feature, in the sense of preceding and passing the torch of the ancient Greek culture. And *Romaic*, the term employed in *Roumeli*, stood for “the splendours and the sorrows of Byzantium, above all, the sorrows” (quoted by Cooper 2013: 333).

The same John Betjeman had given Paddy the opportunity to insert, in a 1977 *TLS* article, a long and enthusiastic paragraph on “a modern translation of the whole of Edward Lear into Romanian” (Fermor 2004: 221). The book had been brought by the Poet Laureate “from a tour of Moldavian monasteries”, and for Paddy had proved to be “an exotic and marvellous surprise” (Fermor 2004: 221). One of the two “lone scholars [translators]”, who definitely “deserve a salute from their country and from us” (Fermor 2004: 221), Ștefan Stoenescu, in a 2016 message to us, remembered to have given a copy of the Romanian edition to John Betjeman while the latter was visiting Romania and that the poet himself had written something about it.

Paddy must have come across Betjeman’s note sometime later and, due to his knowledge of Romanian, although rusty as he used to complain in letters to friends from the area, he was able to appreciate the “isolated, trend-free, unsponsored and a work of love, [a] task (...) magnificently carried out” (Fermor 2004: 221). The book had been published in 1973, by Albatros in Bucharest, under the title *Rime fără noimă*, as translated by Constantin Abăluță and Ștefan Stoenescu. According to the latter, Betjeman had been impressed by the fact that Romanian scholars had decided to translate the work of one of his favourite poets.

Patrick Leigh Fermor also liked Edward Lear, on whom he was happy to write almost an entire page actually, and make it a part in his review of a book by his Greek friend George Seferis. More than a review and less than a study, Paddy’s article, “The Art of Nonsense”, dealt in a dynamic and yet subtle way with the concept of the absurd, the art of translation and with the kind of paradoxical language authors from different countries have in common, the one “that single out [Lewis] Carroll and Lear and make them memorable and perennially strange” (Fermor 2004: 221).

### **A Perennially Strange Artist: the Picturesque?**

That Fermor loved Edward Lear as a “perennially strange artist” was also highlighted by Deborah Devonshire in her portrait of Paddy, when introducing their book of correspondence, *In Tearing Haste*, published in 2008. Deborah Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire (1920-2014), was an English aristocrat and socialite, and a good friend of Patrick Leigh Fermor, with whom she entertained a very affectionate yet platonic relation. Her friend’s “formidable scholarship and prodigious memory” were a real treat even for children, as he was “able to spout Edward Lear or ‘There was an Old Woman as I’ve heard tell, who went to market her eggs for to sell’ for them” (*ITH* 2008) with the ease with which he would quote from Shakespeare.

In the same book there was another reference to Lear, this time by Paddy, when remembering, in a “rough travel diary”, his 1972 expedition in Northern Greece, where he had been accompanied by Deborah’s husband. In one of the sequences of his report, he mentioned the “wonderful Turkish bridge which crosses the Aoös River like a rainbow” (*ITS* 2008: 124), praised the spectacular landscape and pointed to the fact that the bridge had been “once painted by Edward Lear” (*ITS* 2008: 124).

Whether Edward Lear had painted the famous Konitsa Bridge, among other bridges of similar aperture, was probably of less relevance than his being more than a poet of the absurd. Just like Paddy, Lear was an obstinate (yet arduous) traveller, concerned with the beauties of the landscapes he was travelling through, so he would keep diaries, make exquisite drawings and write nonsense poems that would touch both on the picturesque and on the sublime. “In his drawings and nonsense verses, Lear combined his love of Dürer’s straight line”, stated one of his scholars, “with some aspects of the picturesque to create a hybrid form which immediately swept England and its colonies” (Olson, *VT* 1993: 357). One would easily recognize Lear’s love of Dürer’s straight line in the drawings and paintings inspired by his visit to Mount Athos from August to September 1856. Perhaps many touches of the sublime could be felt as well, especially for readers and viewers with a Greek Orthodox background, attuned to the Eastern European sense of Christian spirituality. Lear had been prevented from getting there, in his previous attempts, by illness, bad weather and quarantines. But this time he had made it and the result proved spectacular.

At the end of the journey, on October 8, he was in Corfu, as he had got there on a boat coming from the Dardanelles, where there was a plague, so authorities in Corfu placed all passengers, regardless of their point of departure from Greece, in quarantine. So, from there, he was writing to his sister Ann, pointing to the moment he had made his last sketch of the Holy Mountain – “The sun rose as we were close to Lavra [monastery] & I could see every one of the eastern monasteries, so that for an hour, it was like reading

the heading of a chapter, or the index of the last 3 weeks of my life” (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856). And at the end of the year, again from Corfu, in another letter to Ann, he expressed his satisfaction for “a very singular year” during which he had gathered “a perfect collection of Athos monasteries” and, last but not least, “besides time spent in travelling, & a large correspondence” (E. L. site, letter from December 31, 1856).

It was due to this correspondence or to what has been left of it, and to the drawings and paintings, that we can build an image for ourselves of the time he spent at Athos. Unfortunately, the diary he kept while being there, unlike his other travelogues, was lost. It is interesting, in this respect, the other dimension one could get, through the letters, about the monastic environment – “Simonopetra is by way of atonement – *picturesque* [italics ours] in the extreme; it looks like a giant cage (...) I am happy to say I had not to stay at this place”, he admitted to Ann, “for unless I had had eau de Cologne or some scent, I would have succumbed...” (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856).

The topic of *picturesque* had been addressed from the very beginning of the journey, in a letter from Larissa, in which he had underlined the privileged location of the mount, never “in the way of war or disturbance” (E. L. site, letter from August 21, 1856), so the monasteries founded by various rulers had reached over the years huge dimensions and riches “& you may conclude are very picturesque” (E. L. site, letter from August 21, 1856). But what really seemed to add to the last item was a prohibitive rule that “no female creature is allowed within the holy ground, let it be woman, no she cat, no hen, no she ass, or mare, etc!!!” (E. L. site, letter from August 21, 1856)

As a result, the broth made by his servant in a later stage of the journey, to help Lear recover from fever, had to be made from a cock, brought from “an unwilling old monk who used the brute as a clock” (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856). And, in a letter dated September 23 in Saloniki, Lear remembered noticing the absolute absence of dogs in the territory; however, he remarked that one “would be amply repaid for this want by the overwhelming population of Tom Cats.” Apart from the mystery of the formidable reproductive power of tomcats, the gender privileged or gender biased environment at Athos could be the topic for a very peculiar essay on the *picturesque*. “However wondrous and picturesque the exterior & interior of monasteries”, Lear was writing from his Corfiot quarantine to his friend Chichester Fortesque, on October 9, 1856, “and however abundant & exquisitely glorious & stupendous the scenery of the mountain”, this time pointing to the *sublime* perspective of his adventure, “I would not go again to the Holy Mountain for any money, so gloomy, so shockingly unnatural.” He had found the rule discriminating on women’s access to the site. His harsh criticism of the banning of “half of our species which it is natural to every man to cherish & love best” was even more amplified by the behavior of the monks, whom he

had found “muttering, miserable, mutton-hating, manavoiding, misogynic, morose & merriment marring, monotoning...” (E. L. site, letter from October 9, 1856), and a series of m-words completed the comic-apocalyptic list.

No such hard feelings were made transparent from the sketches, as if the artist had wanted to separate the discourse of the letters and of the (lost) diary from that of his/its visual representations. When writing about Alfred Lord Tennyson’s assessment of the end-products of Lear’s Greek travels, Richard Maxwell stated that the poet “[valued] Lear’s pencil over his pen, his sketching over his writing” (*VT* 2010: 79), and that he “[showed] little or no interest in Lear’s narrative of his journey (though various clues suggest that he did read it carefully)” (*VT* 2010: 79), at least from the letters sent mostly to Emily Tennyson. The scholar also underlined that although Tennyson seemed to appreciate Lear’s artistic accomplishments, his attitude in what regarded travel books and their discourse was a condescending one, as if they were “the special delight of those who try not to stir abroad, preferring short walks or nearby quarried downs” (*VT* 2010: 80). The paradox there was that Tennyson himself belonged to that category, of *flâneurs* probably, but what we would like to add is that, perhaps unknowingly, Lear might have also made the same distinction, therefore leaving more room for the sublime in his drawings than in the written text of his diaries and letters.

Richard Maxwell believed that “*Illustrations*’ treatment of Athos finds its own way to register both picturesqueness and entrapment” (*VT* 2010: 88), the last word actually highlighting Lear’s dilemma. And that dilemma could be overcome by the visual and traveler artist capable to “do the work of the poet and the frazzled wanderer of the visionary stay-at-home” (*VT* 2010: 91) through the sketch medium. And a last, but not the least, means to overcome entrapment could be a moment of nonsense, which “accompanies every judgment of picturesque and sublime...” (Olson, *VT* 1993: 356). Ann Colley thought that, through limericks, certain artistic perspectives that used to inform Lear’s watercolours and oils were gone, just like the “picturesque point of view exercised by Lear in his travel journals” (see page 289 as quoted by Olson 1993: 358).

“There was an old person of Athos” is the beginning of an unpublished limerick, to be found nowadays in Houghton Library, at Harvard University. “Whose voice was distinguished for pathos”, continued the little poem, but we have to ask ourselves to what extent Edward Lear allowed pathos into both his life and artistic work. “That exceptional person of Athos”, according to the very last line, or *persona*, seems more like somebody who fought to create the impression that he had everything under control. His friend, Lord Tennyson, might have been right when, after having been given a copy of Lear’s *Journals*, in the second stanza of his thanks poem, “To E. L., on His Travels in Greece”, he wrote the lines that were eventually inscribed on

Lear's headstone. They pointed to the artist's quest for the Holy Grail of divine equilibrium. On the headstone, two words from the first line did not make it, and one of them was "Athos":

all things fair.  
 With such a pencil, such a pen.  
 You shadow'd forth to distant men,  
 I read and felt that I was there.

### **A Later and Much Younger Traveller: the Sublime?**

On January 24, 1935, almost eighty years after Lear's drawing expedition, a much younger traveller started his voyage from Salonika to the Holy Mount, three weeks after having reached Constantinople, the ultimate goal of his crossing-of-Europe adventure, which he had set off in December 1933. The reasons for not turning his notes, on the former Byzantine and later Ottoman capital, into a draft at least, remained obscure for the editors of Patrick Leigh Fermor's posthumous third part of his intended trilogy about the European walk. The manuscript stopped while the traveller was still in Burgas, a few days from Constantinople, on which there were just notes, however "largely cheerful" (Fermor 2013: 266).

The editors wondered why the entries had been all cursory and why Fermor had not contacted Thomas Whittemore, the American scholar who had been working for four years already to uncovering the mosaics in Hagia Sophia. Whittemore "would have given Paddy an unparalleled insight into the Byzantium that was starting to fascinate him" (Fermor 2013: 265). The lapses in the diary *covered* a period of ten days until January 23, when Paddy had already left Constantinople and was preparing to take a boat to Mount Athos, where, "for the first time, his diary [became] fully written" (Fermor 2013: 267).

"That's why I've urged you all along to start on Athos (given that really good diary)", his later friend and guru from Budapest, Rudolf Fischer, would advise Paddy in a 1986 letter, while trying to find the most suitable option for the editing of the third part, "& then go on with Constantinople & your arrival there" (RF, letter from September 9, 1986). Rudi had seen the potential of the Mount Athos diary, practically a mini-book in itself, and used to comment frequently on it during their extensive correspondence. "As I expected more & more is revealed at every reading of your Mount Athos diary. Before re-reading again I shall reread *The Station*. Much more will fall into line then" (RF, letter from March 3, 1985).

*The Station: Athos Treasures and Men* is a work by Robert Byron, published in 1928, an author whose 1937 *The Road to Oxiana* was going to be considered one of the best travel books in the pre WWII era. His name would be frequently invoked by Paddy in his journal, along others of eminent travel

writers, art historians, philhellènes and Byzantine scholars, such as David Talbot Rice, Mark Ogilvie-Grant and the already mentioned Thomas Whittemore. *The Station* was lent to Fermor on his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, while at the St. Panteleimon monastery on Mount Athos, much to his delight when recognizing some of the characters – “I kept breaking into laughter, making the cloisters echo with solitary mirth, and it was amusing to read a description of Father Charalampi, while he laid my lunch before my eyes” (Fermor 2013: 319).

Paddy’s reaction to a book the monks themselves seemed to like and approve said something about the changes that had intervened between Lear’s mule-and-servant 19<sup>th</sup> century expedition and Fermor’s 1935 walking and hiking. Lear had constantly complained about the unhealthy sanitary condition in most of the monasteries. While at *Koutloumoushi*, although he had “made [his] acquaintance with the finest reception room [he] had seen – very large, square; a matting over the centre” (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856); he couldn’t help noticing that the low sofas and divans were “covered with beautiful (but dirty) carpets” (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856). Eighty years later, following his kind reception by the monks at *Koutloumousiou*<sup>1</sup>, Fermor was led to a similar “guest chamber, the luxury of whose appointment is in striking contrast to the austerity of the stone cloisters and chill passages outside” (Fermor 2013: 279). He too noticed the beautiful furniture and decorating – “The long windows are curtained with rich stuff, and all round the walls runs a wide low seat, hung with cloth down to the floor” (Fermor 2013: 279), which were generating an exotic effect, “and richly cushioned and spread with bright tapestry” (Fermor 2013: 279).

Lear had not trusted his hosts as “they spread a bed – but I only allowed it to remain there till they were gone out of the room, when my own capote & blankets & sheets were a better substitute” (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856). Paddy, who was travelling light, paid less attention to such details, as his hosts – “immediately lit the stove, made up a bed on the divan, and laid the table for an evening meal” (Fermor 2013: 279).

Meal was another issue the British travellers had to put up with, and again the 20<sup>th</sup> century hiker seemed to be luckier. Lear’s first meal in an Athos monastery was “with the abbot – but generally alone; in 2 or 3 convents the fare was pretty good; in some very particularly beastly; in others all fish & cheese, etc. etc.” (see E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856). So a poor menu, not exactly cheap, and a poor company. Even Paddy would have his bouts of medium luck, also at *Koutloumoushi/ Koutloumousiou* – “Of this I could hardly eat a mouthful, as it consisted entirely of vegetables, cooked and soaked in oil, so I ate lots of bread and sugar, and several oranges” (Fermor 2013: 279). His final solution would follow the pattern schoolboys adopt when not being

1 Through italics we wanted to point to the difference in spelling of the names of the same Greek locations by the two English travelers from different centuries.

happy with their packed sandwich – “Not wishing to offend the monks I wrapped most of it up in paper, and clandestinely disposed of it later” (Fermor 2013: 279).

Even at the top monasteries such as the Great Lavra, Lear’s criteria could not be met, although he acknowledged the complex beauty of the site and the hospitality of the abbot. He spent five days there “drawing it all round; poking about the sea shore or into the hermitages among the half witted old filthy Caloyeri [monks]” (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856). As for the company of the abbot Melchisedec, it appeased nothing but, on the contrary, turned into an epitome of the lack of hygiene – “for it must be said in truth that filth was at least as remarkable a characteristic of my friend’s menage as charity & kindness of his own character” (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856).

For Lear, with an eye so keen on visual details, even the meals must have been an ordeal at Lavra, where he could “vow that the table cloth daily laid was not less than  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch thick in substantial ancient dirt” (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856). More of this was to be added to his list of monasteries, as unfolded in the the letter to his sister. At Philotheo, a very small monastery and number 5 on the list, “there was nothing but bad bread & very salty cheese to be got there & moreover it was dirty over particularly” (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856). And at *Karacallas*, number 6, to the usual lack of hygiene, the lack of hospitality astonished him as an exception:

to all the convents; they seem very poor and filthy, and more like dead men than any I have yet seen; & they would not take my letter to the abbot because he was asleep – nor did they give me even any rhum & jelly. (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856)

Nothing of the kind in Paddy’s account of the time spent at Lavra, the oldest monastery of Mount Athos. As for references to meal, they are scarce – “a young brother brought me supper” (Fermor 2013: 305); or, when being offered a “plate of limpets for supper” (Fermor 2013: 308), he managed to produce an ambiguous statement, in the beginning, “they tasted like nothing on earth” (Fermor 2013: 308), to cover his ambiguous feelings towards the dish, “and I had to eat them, to save his feelings” (Fermor 2013: 308). The person referred to in the last sentence was the monk who was looking after him, who proved to be one of the kind for whom “solicitude (...) towards their guests” had already been embedded in their code of behaviour.

Wherever he went, he was given the best room, like at *Karakallou*, “high up in the cloisters, overlooking the old stone courtyard and the manydomed chapel, over the massed roofs to the rocky tree-clad hillside” (Fermor 2013: 301). At *Xeropotamos*, his very first stop, Paddy’s kit had been taken, during his supper with a French-speaking monk, to “one of the cells reserved for

guests, a nice light one, with whitewashed walls, a big luxurious bed laid with clean sheets, a sofa, table and chair” (Fermor 2013: 275).

Actually, at *Xeropotámo*, number 12 on his list, even Edward Lear had been lucky, eighty years earlier, with the “grand newly restored convent by the sea, with wide views towards the opposite promontory of Sithonia” (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856). His host this time was a “facetious & clever abbot – & a clean one;”, and also “the rooms were clean”, much to his relief after having skipped staying at *Simòpetra*, number 11 on the list, which “although picturesque in the extreme”, had an “odiferous atmosphere” (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856). Patrick Leigh Fermor made no references to his lodging at *Simonopetra*, yet he remarked the air of decay as “many of the brothers seemed very poor, bowed with age, their monastic robes in tatters and their black caps collapsed out of all resemblance to rigid cylinders” (Fermor 2013: 312).

The truth is that the two British travellers, separated from one another in time up to almost a century, had a very different agenda, although both with an artistic emphasis. Edward Lear was the mature artist, and his journey was meant to be a programmatic one, in an age when the photographers had not taken over yet. People loved illustrated travel books, and Lear, who already knew Greece, had suffered earlier from not being able to cover through his drawings, due to various impediments, the mystical territory of the Holy Mount. Therefore, when mentioning Vatopedi monastery to his sister as the last on his list, after exclaiming “& here let me stop – oh my! I am so sick of convents!”, he found it naturally to boast about his achievements:

I could not but feel a great pleasure in having done all I had appointed to do – & in possessing some 50 most valuable drawings, for I believe no such collection of illustrations has as yet been known in England. (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856)

Patrick Leigh Fermor, by contrast, did not feel like having a programme or a mission. He was just a very young man in search of his own identity, individual and social and artistic as well. Thus his Mount Athos diary recorded experiences that were probably so genuine that he found it very difficult, towards the end of his long life, to catch up with the feeling as to render them properly for the last part of his intended trilogy. When closing his diary, in the Esphigmenos monastery, he seemed both content and melancholic:

Looking at my jolly room, with the clean sheets and everything arranged so neatly, and at the glowing stove piled high with logs, I feel a great deal of regret at leaving this quiet and happy life. This last month will be unbelievable memory when I’m back in England. I wonder when I shall be here again? (Fermor 2013: 349)

What Edward Lear had captured through images, Patrick Leigh Fermor succeeded to render in words. The Great Lavra appeared to him “a hallowed place perched between the white crag and the stormy sea, like an eagle’s nest” (Fermor 2013: 304). At Dionisiou, he met a Romanian monk who made sure that everything was fixed so that the traveller should work properly, while inspiring himself from the landscape – “My window overlooks the Aegean, gleaming under a new moon, which looks very frail and slender, surrounded with fidgeting stars” (Fermor 2013: 310). At Simonopetra, which Robert Byron had compared to the Potala of Lhasa, Paddy felt literally overwhelmed by the daring architecture:

it is the most unlikely-looking thing, shooting up to a dizzy height sheer above the rock in a magnificent sweep, tier after tier of wooden balconies running round the upper parts, supported above the drop of blank wall and the rugged bastions by diagonal props, seeming to spring from the wall’s face like the branches of a tree. (Fermor 2013: 312)

Such encounters with the sublime might instill in readers the curiosity whether any revelation or epiphany occurred to Fermor, something that definitely had not been the case with Edward Lear. The latter, the good British subject with an agenda, had done his job and remained proud with it in spite of the hardships he had intensely complained about. But when he acknowledged the powerful impression the landscape had had upon him, when mentioning the monasteries of *Pantokrátora* and *Stavronikétes*, for instance, he could not spiritually relate the “noble scenes” with the inhabitants of the sacred territory – “a lonely grandeur one hardly can understand till one has felt for days that none but these miserable solitaries occupy this strange land” (E. L. site, letter from October 8, 1856).

From *Pantocrator*, Paddy would retain its “fortress-like” image “on a rocky headland reached by a winding, cobbled path, over crumbling bridges” (Fermor 2013: 284), whereas the surroundings of *Stavronikita* had impressed him from the “small whitewashed room, at the highest point of the monastery, which looked on to a dizzy void, dropping to the foreshortened jagged rocks, and the white foam, slow and lazy with distance” (Fermor 2013: 283). However, the meal was worse, an exception though, than in other monasteries, and the person who looked after him conveyed a feeling of disquietude, as if a remnant of Lear’s temporal frame of reference – “The shaggy monk who seems to be in charge of me is a fine chap, but he looks like a brigand” (Fermor 2013: 283).

Unlike Lear’s diary, which had been lost, Fermor’s was recuperated through almost miraculous circumstances. The Holy Mount diary was actually the only part fully written in a notebook filled with notes, of course, which had to be reconsidered for publishing. Notes that covered the entire walk

across Europe, and the recovery of which ignited the project of a trilogy, eventually resembling to a bildungsroman, a project that consecrated Fermor's already increasing reputation as a travel writer.

For the third part, with the final Mount Athos pocket, he kept overwriting and rewriting, and as a result, delaying what his readers had been expecting since the publication of the second, *Between the Woods and the Water*, his 1986 book on Hungary and Transylvania. When published, in 2013, two years after his death, and due to the efforts of his literary executors, *The Broken Road* was met with positive reviews, as reader could recognize the touch of the Grand Master.

### **Conclusions: the Touch of the Divine?**

In May 1985, another British famous travel writer and a friend of Paddy's, Bruce Chatwin, visited Mount Athos, not before having persuaded another friend, more familiar with the monastic environment, to accompany him. "I was slightly apprehensive because he was a great complainer", remembered the friend, as quoted in Nicholas Shakespeare's biography of Chatwin (Shakespeare 2000: 450). Probably, just like Edward Lear, his 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessor, Chatwin travelled a lot and complained a lot. "I thought he'd find the monks smelly or the beds hard or that the loos stank" (Shakespeare 2000: 450), continued the friend, but to the total surprise, and not only of his, what Chatwin underwent at Stavronikita was more than a revelation.

Nicholas Shakespeare published his Bruce Chatwin biography in 1999, ten years after the death of the writer. In order to cover all the essential experiences of his protagonist, Shakespeare followed the latter's tracks from his native places in England to Patagonia, driving across Argentina with Chatwin's wife, to get a true feeling of what had been rendered in the writer's first unusually successful book. Then he travelled to Australia in order to enjoy a similar experience, this time related to Chatwin's most famous book, *The Songlines*. Yet, as he confessed in "Journey's End" – "in all the travels I had undertaken, there was one significant journey I overlooked." – *i.e.* Chatwin's travel to Athos.

At the beginning of 1985, Chatwin had visited Patrick Leigh Fermor in Kardamyli, as he wanted an isolated enough place to work on his book about the Australian nomads. In a letter to Rudolf Fischer, Paddy mentioned the younger writer, who looked up Fermor as a mentor, and underlined how much Chatwin enjoyed being with him and Joan. Bruce "came to stay for two weeks, and liked it so much that he has taken rooms nearby, dining with us every night" (PLF, letter to RF from January 9, 1985). They undertook many walks together, yet Paddy did not remember Bruce as ever approaching the subject of religion. "There was never, not a word talked about God", said Paddy (as quoted by Shakespeare 2000: 450), and "I'd always assumed he

was agnostic or atheist. Religion was understood to be a corollary to his attitude to life” (Shakespeare 2000: 450).

What Chatwin was really looking after was probably a place to grant him the serenity of the ultimate truth, a place charged with a profound spirituality, and he was capable to search for it in the most unexpected locations. Before suddenly leaving for Patagonia, in November 1974, he had been successfully working for two years as an adviser on art for *The Sunday Times Magazine*. Sudden leavings were going to be part of a pattern that would take him to remote places even within unsuitable circumstances. “Can’t help feeling though that Afghanistan is not the only place that makes a repeat of Robert Byron’s (and Chatwin’s later) journey untimely right now”, Rudolf Fischer was writing to Paddy in a letter from February 23, 1985.

Perhaps Chatwin was considering going to Afghanistan again, which made both Paddy and Rudi anxious, given the disastrous military conflict in the area. Anyway, a year later, in April 1986, he was in India when he heard about Penelope, former lady Betjeman’s death in Kulu. Chatwin had been close to Penelope so he attended her funeral and performed a part of the ritual – “Yesterday morning, her friend Kranti Singh and I carried her ashes in a small pot to a rock in the middle of the River Beas”, he was writing to Paddy and Joan, and ended his letter with plenty of information regarding his intended itinerary:

I said, months ago, that I’d go to Elizabeth’s sister’s wedding in Upstate New York on May 10. Since Delhi is about half way round the world, I’m going to stop off in Japan for a week (I have a Japanese publisher!), then to England – at last! I do hope this catches you before you leave and that I’ll find you both in London around 20 May. (BC, letter to PLF from April 24, 1986)

This hectic traveller was carrying with him both the burden of being ill with AIDS, which he would be diagnosed only later in August that year. What he also carried was the shock of his Athos epiphany, occurred on an afternoon after having walked to the monastery of Stavronikita. From where he stopped, he could see a black iron cross on a rock by the sea, which “appeared to be striving up against the foam” (Shakespeare, “Journey’s End”). His companion said the Chatwin had refrained from talking from that moment on, but he felt that the writer “had a spiritual experience that unfroze something in him” (Shakespeare 2000: 452). Back home, Chatwin’s wife Elizabeth also noticed the change, as Bruce confessed he had had no “idea it could be like that. It wasn’t like his other voyages of discovery. It was completely internal” (Shakespeare, “Journey’s End”).

When he fainted in Zurich, in August 1986, “one of his hallucinations was of a fresco of Christ on Mount Athos” (Shakespeare, “Journey’s End”) When he died, three years later, the memorial service was held in a Greek Orthodox

church in London, in front of an audience astonished to find out, from the bishop with whom Chatwin had several times discussed the possibility of being received by baptism on the Holy Mountain, that “Bruce (...) died before all of his journeys could be completed and his journey into Orthodoxy was one of his unfinished voyages” (Shakespeare, “Journey’s End”).

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The journey had to take one more step towards completion and it was Patrick Leigh Fermor who made sure that all the necessary duties had been performed. In a letter to Rudolf Fischer, he told to his Central European friend and kindred spirit that “it was Bruce’s dearest wish that his ashes should be buried beside a small church” close to Paddy’s place, “old (...) with fragments among the stone-and-tile Byzantine masonry” (Sisman 2016: 401). Paddy and Joan, together with Elizabeth Chatwin “emptied the casket, uttered silent paryers and pured on some wine as a libation” (Sisman 2016: 401).

The small church Bruce Chatwin had wanted his ashes to rest was dedicated to St Nicolas, just like the monastery of Stavronikita, in front of which he had stood, three years before, while gazing at the iron cross on a rock by the sea, while uttering the words “There must be a god” (Shakespeare, “Journey’s End”).

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