

From Ancient to Modern: Byron, Shelley, and the Idea of Greece

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For what is poesy but to create
 From overfeeling good or ill; and aim
 At an external life beyond our fate,
 And be the new Prometheus of new men,
 Bestowing fire from heaven ...

Lord Byron, *The Prophecy of Dante* (1819), IV 11–15

Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.

P. B. Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry” (March 1821)

Introductory Summary

Byron’s *Childe Harold* (1812) popularized a view of Greece as not merely a site of classical splendour but of a downtrodden present and a problematic future. This new focus for interest in Greece quickly found its place in the emerging, and closely interlinked, ideologies of Romanticism in the arts and liberalism and nationalism in politics. Radical liberals, such as the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, admired classical Athens as a pioneer of a liberal political constitution, as well as for its aesthetic and philosophical achievements. Byron, who had been lukewarm about the prospects for Greek independence in 1812, belatedly discovered in the Greek Revolution of 1821 an outlet whereby the liberal/nationalist politics of his poetry could be transformed into political action.

A careful reconsideration of Byron’s writings and actions from his first Grand Tour (1809–1811) to his death at Missolonghi in April 1824 suggests that his decision to commit himself to the cause of Greek freedom was the culmination of a poetic and ideological development that had consistently sought to break through the limiting barrier of *words* (a perennial dilemma for Romantic artists) so as to change the course of *things* in the world of real politics and action. “Words are things,” Byron wrote in a number of different contexts over the last ten years of his life.

His final commitment seems to have been consciously and deliberately to give up the vocation of a poet (“words”), when in June 1823 he committed himself to going to Greece to take part in the Revolution (“things”). Thereafter, Byron’s letters, and the absence of any significant poetry, reveal an overwhelming dedication to what he called the “Cause,” and a remarkably clear-sighted determination that the future for a reborn Greece must lie in a liberally constituted nation-state. In this way, Byron’s last months in Greece, and his political contribution to the outcome of the Revolution, can be seen as the culmination of a defining quest for European Romanticism, that lies at the root of Modernity as it has come to be understood since: to transform words into things, ideals into action. The success of this quest is demonstrated by the fact that as early as 1830, three decades before Italy and Germany, “modern” Greece came to be recognized as the first of the newly constituted nation-states of Europe—thus establishing a precedent which continues to prevail throughout the continent, and indeed much of the world, today.

1. Ancient Greece and the Romantic Traveller

When the young Lord Byron first set foot in Greece, at the end of September 1809, he was following a well established tradition for well-to-do Englishmen. The “Grand Tour” in those days occupied something of the position of the “gap year” for today’s students. But the world into which the young itinerant was supposed to be initiated by the experience was not that of contemporary foreign people, but of the classical past.¹ Ever since the Renaissance, the ideals to which education and the arts aspired had been those of ancient Rome and, increasingly, of ancient Greece. This elevation of Greece, in particular, to the status of an ideal reached its peak during the first half of the nineteenth century, under the dominance of Romanticism. In Britain a decisive factor in the ascendancy of classical Greece was, ironically enough, the depredations to the Acropolis of Athens by Lord Elgin, and the acquisition, in 1817, of the “Elgin Marbles” by the British Museum, whose neoclassical, temple-like buildings date from the same period (St Clair 1998; King 2006). In Germany the

¹ This section is indebted to Woodhouse 1969:13–65, although I take issue with his presentation of Byron as the exemplary philhellene.

process had begun earlier, with the influential writings of the art historian J. J. Winckelmann (2006).

So what Byron might have been expected to find inspiring about his travels in antique lands were the ruins of the classical past. In the event he was relieved to be able to leave the antiquities to his more stolid companion, John Cam Hobhouse. In the second canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which he wrote while staying at the Capuchin Convent in Athens in the first months of 1810, Byron has much to say, certainly, about the unavoidable relics of the past. But his musings on the decline of ancient glory are conventional in content, even if memorably expressed (Spencer 1954:247–294). What marks out Byron's engagement with Greece from that of most other travellers up to this time is the vividness of his evocation of the contemporary landscape, his enthusiasm for the people who inhabit it (Souliots, Albanians, and Turks, as well as the many Greeks he met on his travels in Athens and the south of the country), and his thoughts about their political future.

This is not to say that Byron at this time was a philhellene. He had been impressed, certainly, by the patriotic spirit of some of those he met—in particular his teacher of the modern language, Ioannis Marmarotouris, in Athens; and the local chieftain and later hero of the Revolution, Andreas Londos, who entertained him in his home at Vostitsa (modern Aigion). But although he translated some harmless modern Greek love lyrics, and the “war song” which he confused with the more famous “Thourios” (war song) by Rigas Velestinlis (McGann 1980–1993:1.330–337), Byron in the wake of his Grand Tour was deeply ambivalent about the political prospects for the inhabitants of the land that he had found personally so liberating. A few months after his return to England he was writing to Hobhouse: “My own mind is not very well made up as to the Greeks, but I have no patience with the absurd extremes into which their panegyrists & detractors have equally run.”² And in the prose notes that he added to early editions of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1812, he was more negative still:

The Greeks will never be independent; they will never be sovereigns
as heretofore, and God forbid they ever should! ... To talk, as the

² Byron to Hobhouse, 3 November 1811 (Marchand 1973–1994:2.124–127; cf. Byron to Hobhouse, 14 October 1811 (Marchand 1973–1994:2.114s–115).

Greeks themselves do, of their rising again to their pristine superiority, would be ridiculous; as the rest of the world must resume its barbarism, after re-asserting the sovereignty of Greece (McGann 1980–1993:2.201–202).

But at least he *cared* about the modern Greeks. The enormous overnight success of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold*, when they were published on 10 March 1812, meant that what Byron reported and thought about Greece was read by many more readers than all the travel books taken together. *Childe Harold*, its translations into European languages, and the cult of the “celebrity” that began with that runaway success, all ensured that from 1812 onwards Greece entered the consciousness of western Europeans as a living landscape inhabited by contemporary people, whose political future was beginning to be recognized as a problem to be confronted.

2. “We are All Greeks”

The first poetic response in English to the outbreak of the Greek Revolution in 1821 came not from Byron but from his younger contemporary and friend, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Closer in temperament to the idealising tendency of the German Romantics, whose work, unlike Byron, he knew at first hand, Shelley had long seen in what he had read of ancient Greece the proof of the perfectibility of the human race. The possibility of Greece as contemporary and actual had probably never even occurred to Shelley before he met Byron in 1816. Then during the first half of 1821, while living in Pisa, Shelley and his wife Mary made the acquaintance of another exile, the Greek “prince” Alexandros Mavrokordatos (or Mavrocordato, as he signed himself in French and Italian). Mavrokordatos would soon depart from Pisa to claim a role for himself among the foremost political leaders of the Greek Revolution. But for six months before that, he had been close to the Shelleys, and particularly to Mary, whose close interest in the unfolding events of the Revolution is evident from a series of letters to her from Mavrokordatos, several of them unpublished.³

³ Bodleian MS Abinger 516/5 c. 45 contains seventeen letters in French from Mavrocordato to Mary Shelley, dated between 3 April and 25 June 1821, and containing a great deal of up-to-the-minute information, not all of it accurate, reported from Greece. Eight of these letters are included in Shelley 1882:3.581–647.

Shelley's personal response to "our turbaned friend," as he termed Mavrokordatos, was correspondingly muted, but there can be no doubt about his enthusiasm for the Greek cause, or that he, too, was exceptionally well informed about the progress of the Revolution during its first months.

In the autumn of 1821, while he was waiting for Byron to join him and his circle of friends in Pisa, Shelley rapidly wrote the "lyrical drama" *Hellas*, which he dedicated to Mavrokordatos. "We are all Greeks," he wrote boldly and memorably in the preface to the poem, and went on to explain: "Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece." It is to Greece that modern Europeans "owe their civilisation." This Shelley had always believed. But now, with the outbreak of the Revolution, he had to contemplate "the astonishing circumstance" of the modern descendants of those ancient Greeks "rising as it were from the ashes of their ruin."⁴

For Shelley, the prospect held out by the Greek Revolution was much more than a return to the past. A radical in politics, although he was also by nature a pacifist, Shelley was an admirer of revolution anywhere. He saw at once the radical nature of the revolt in Greece; it was natural to him to associate it in his mind with the achievement of classical Athens in establishing the world's first democracy. As he put it, in a passage of the Preface to *Hellas* excised by his publisher and not printed until seventy years after his death:

This is the age of the war of the oppressed against the oppressors....
[A] new race has arisen throughout Europe, nursed in the abhorrence of the opinions which are its chains, and she will continue to produce fresh generations to accomplish that destiny which tyrants foresee and dread.⁵

The Ottoman Sultan Mahmud in the poem stands for autocrats and monarchs throughout the world, whose power the radical Shelley believes must be similarly doomed. In this way Greece, from having been an *ancient* ideal to which the present looks back in emulation, has become transformed into an ideal to be achieved, through struggle, in the *future*.

⁴ Shelley, preface to *Hellas* (Leader and O'Neill 2003:549).

⁵ Shelley, preface to *Hellas* (Leader and O'Neill 2003:550–551, 806).

“Poets,” Shelley had declared in a justly famous essay, just before news of the Greek Revolution reached him in Pisa, “are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.”⁶ The idealist Shelley never clearly explained how this was to come about. But the shift from past to future, from words to action, is clear in his poetry and thinking in 1821.

3. The New Prometheus

Byron arrived in Pisa on the same day that Shelley inscribed his dedication of *Hellas* to Mavrokordatos, 1 November 1821. At this time Byron seems to have had no thought of taking part in the Greek Revolution. Indeed, the few references to events in Greece in his correspondence until well into 1822 are terse and studiously offhand.⁷

There is little direct evidence that Byron and Shelley talked about Greece while they were together in Pisa, during the early months of 1822. The surmise of an early biographer, who knew both men at the time, is probably correct: that the enthusiasm of Shelley (in fact of both the Shelleys), as well as the poem *Hellas*, may have helped to direct Byron’s thoughts and energies in that direction (Medwin 1913:354–355). The time would certainly have been ripe. Byron had for the past two years been increasingly involving himself in the Italian revolutionary movement of the *carbonari*. Revolt in Naples in the summer of 1820 had raised his hopes that what he called a “row” would soon break out all over Italy; before leaving Ravenna for Pisa he had been taking part in clandestine meetings, helping to store arms, and conspiring with his aristocratic Italian friends. But what Byron tellingly at one point called the “*poetry* of politics” was never wholly serious on his part—and in his turn he often doubted the seriousness of those alongside whom he was preparing to

⁶ Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” written February–March 1821, published 1839 (Leader and O’Neill 2003:701). Cf. “A Philosophical View of Reform” (written 1820, not published until 1920), cited and discussed in Holmes 2005:585.

⁷ E.g. Byron to Hobhouse, 20 May 1821 (Marchand 1973–1994:8.122); Byron to Murray, 4 June 1821 (Marchand 1973–1994:8.135).

fight.⁸ When the Austrian army passed through the neighbourhood of Ravenna in February 1821, on its way to crush the revolt in Naples, without a shot being fired, Byron suddenly and finally lost all interest in the political hopes of Italy. His flirtation with revolutionary politics in the congenial aristocratic environment of Ravenna had been shown up for the make-believe it was. Byron in 1822 was still in search of a cause to which to devote himself.

On 8 July 1822, Shelley drowned while sailing off Viareggio. After the body had been washed ashore, it seems to have been Byron's idea to give his friend a heroic send-off, after the manner of the ancient heroes he had so much admired. In a bizarre reenactment of an ancient ceremony, the badly decomposed body was burned on a specially constructed pyre on the beach, in front of a shocked and fascinated crowd of onlookers, while the celebrants sprinkled wine and spices on the flames.⁹ In the only written account that he ever gave of that event, in a letter written soon afterwards, Byron also gives an early hint of his still unformed idea of going to Greece.¹⁰

After Shelley's death Byron moved to Genoa. His letters from there show the idea of Greece gaining ground. When a deputation arrived in Genoa, on 5 April 1823, from the newly formed London Greek Committee, and asked him to give public support to the cause of the Greeks, Byron was ready for them. He still took time to make up his mind. It was probably not until mid-June that the die was fully cast. What the Committee expected of him was still no more than

to go up to Greece at once for the sake of showing, in the most positive manner, the interest the English take in their cause—and for

⁸ Byron, *Ravenna Journal*, 18 February 1821 (original emphasis) (Marchand 1973–1994:8.47); cf. among many other instances Byron to Murray, 16 April 1820 (Marchand 1973–1994:7.77).

⁹ The best-known account, though not to be trusted in its details, is Trelawny 2000:300–302. For corrective see St Clair 1977:216–217; Marchand 1952; Langley Moore 1974:332–360.

¹⁰ Byron to Moore, 27 August 1822 (Marchand 1973–1994:9.197).

the sake also of getting certain information on which they can depend....¹¹

The idea of going to fight in the revolution himself was all Byron's.

Many explanations have been proposed for this decision and its timing, including several by Byron himself. Was it an empty gesture of the moment? Had it been long premeditated? Was it the result of despair, perhaps of a loss of confidence in his writing, or at least in his reputation with his public? Was it a grandiose way to commit suicide—a kind of counterpart to the obsequies he had already devised for Shelley? To a fellow philhellene into whose company he would be thrown at Missolonghi, the young doctor Julius Millingen, Byron would confide:

Heartily weary of the monotonous life I had led in Italy for several years; sickened with pleasure; more tired of scribbling than the public, perhaps, is of reading my lucubrations; I felt the urgent necessity of giving a completely new direction to the course of my ideas; and the active, dangerous, yet glorious scenes of the military career struck my fancy, and became congenial to my taste (Millingen 1831:6–7).

This sounds like authentic Byron, but Byron's authentic voice rarely declares the whole truth, especially when the subject is himself. We shall never know with certainty. But it is my belief that Byron's delayed commitment to Greece was the culmination of a long process, whose earlier traces can be followed through his poetry and other writings of more than ten years. Although politically far less radical than Shelley, Byron had a more developed sense of history. What Shelley proposed could be achieved by the "unacknowledged legislators of the world" through writing poetry and philosophy, Byron was determined to go further and act out in the real world.

Byron carried this aspect of his Romantic poetics all the way to its conclusion, as few others did. But he was by no means alone in thinking in this way, and the consequences are still very much with us in the early twenty-first century. As a study of America's post-2001 "war on terror" puts it, "The Romantics were thinkers

¹¹ Hobhouse to Byron, 11 June 1823 (Graham 1984:332).

who felt compelled to translate their thoughts into actions. And the actions often took the form of armed conflict” (Fletcher 2002:16).

4. Words and Things

Byron attributed “the saying ... that *words are things*” to Mirabeau, whose political stance as a moderate supporter of the French Revolution he also praised.¹² The first appearance of the idea in a poem dates from the summer of 1816. It comes near the end of the third canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, at a rare moment (for Byron) of positive affirmation about his fellow human beings. It is still tentative at this point:

I do believe,
Though I have found them not, that there may be
Words which are things ...

canto III, stanza 114, lines 1059–1061

Byron could often be disparaging about his own craft. But here he moves towards faith in the poet as a maker. Even if he does not claim to have achieved this himself, he is prepared to believe that words have power in the world.

Three years later, in Ravenna, in the summer of 1819, Byron wrote his most overtly political poem on an Italian theme. *The Prophecy of Dante* proposes a view of Italian history that looks forward to the future liberation of the nation. “Who toils for nations,” he makes Dante anachronistically declare in canto IV, “may be poor indeed / But free” (lines 91–92). Canto II had ended with a rousing call to the Italians of the future to avoid “Division” that “sows the seeds of woe” and instead “with *one deed—Unite!*” (lines 134, 145). In very similar terms, but in prose and with a practical object, Byron would in future address the leaders of the Greek Revolution. In the poem, it is supposedly the long-dead Dante who is speaking,

¹² Marchand 1973–1994:4.74 and editor’s note. For a different inference drawn from some of the citations from Byron discussed in this section, see Keach 2004:40–45, who also notes, “I have been unable to trace the source [for the ‘saying’ attributed him by Byron] in Mirabeau’s writings or speeches” (Keach 2004:166); cf. Foot 1988:21, 185 for references to Burke and Hazlitt. For Byron’s approval of Mirabeau’s politics, see Byron to Hobhouse, 22 April 1820 (Marchand 1973–1994:7.80–81).

prophetically, from the perspective of the early fourteenth century, when he recalls “days of Old, / When words were things that came to pass” (canto II, lines 1–2). The *Prophecy of Dante* is a call to future action, grounded in the speaker’s belief in a prelapsarian world in which the separation between words and things had not yet taken place. But that is not the world in which either the imagined Dante or Byron himself live. As a result, the call to the Italian people to a war for political liberation cannot go beyond inspiring words.

A few months after writing that poem, Byron returned to words and things, but this time in a context that has more to do with Greece. This is in canto III of his mock-epic poem *Don Juan*. The hero has been shipwrecked on a Greek island. The daughter of its piratical ruler has fallen in love with him, and during her father’s absence the lovers enjoy a riot of entertainment, which culminates in a song: the famous “Isles of Greece.” Read out of context, these lines in which the poet “dream’d that Greece might still be free” seem like a moving statement of philhellenism.¹³ But Byron goes out of his way to make this lyrical affirmation of a future freedom for Greece problematic. The famous lines are supposed to be improvised by a professional rhymester, a “sad trimmer” who earns his living by flattering whatever audience he happens to be addressing. Just when it seems that Byron-as-author has demolished this figure, and therefore, it would seem, completely undermined the sentiments of the inserted poem, he turns serious:

But words are things, and a small drop of ink,
 Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces
 That which makes thousands, perhaps millions think...

canto III, stanza 88, lines 792–4

The thought is familiar by now. But this time it leads into a meditation that lasts for several stanzas and develops in a different direction from the expected one. It turns out that Byron is thinking not about words as the *motive* for action, but rather more subtly, that history is all in the telling. Even the most heroic or inspired action is given meaning through being memorably told. The nub of the matter is that a

¹³ *Don Juan III*, “The Isles of Greece,” stanza 3, lines 701–704; for a sceptical reading, see Cochran 2005:65–71.

person's glory owes more to "the historian's style" than to any intrinsic quality of the individual or the actual deed he has done. In that case, even a trimmer-poet can rise to the occasion and "agree to a short armistice with truth" (line 664). In a remarkably postmodern manoeuvre, Byron has undermined his own undermining. Words may lead to heroic action, and in that sense become "things." But heroic action itself is vindicated by the *words* that commemorate and preserve it. Action only exists as a "thing" through being monumentalized in words. This mutual dependency of words and things brings us close to the heart of Byron's commitment to Greece.

When those lines were written, that commitment was still some years in the future. Something of the same idea appears again, in 1820, near the close of the drama *Marino Faliero*. The play is set in medieval Venice, and in it Byron makes a rather contorted attempt to understand and justify the kind of political action he was contemplating for himself at the time in Italy. The hero, like all Byronic heroes, fails at the end. Refusing to justify his actions before his execution, he gives as his reason:

... for true *words* are *things*,
 And dying men's are things which long outlive,
 And oftentimes avenge them....

Act V, scene 1, lines 288–290, original emphasis

Once again, words are more than "mere" words, they have the tangibility of things, the power of deeds. But things are also words, in the sense that what outlives the man of action, and may have power in the future, is not his deeds directly, but the *words* that record them.

The last reference to words and things in Byron's poetry comes in the ninth canto of *Don Juan*, in stanzas on which he was working in the immediate aftermath of Shelley's death (Steffan 1957:289; BCPW 5.736), that is, at the very time of the ancient funeral obsequies on the shore near Viareggio—the catalyst, as we saw, for Byron's newfound interest in going to revolutionary Greece. Speaking in his own person, the author-narrator declares his purpose:

And I will war, at least in words (and—should

My chance so happen—deeds) ...

canto IX, lines 185–6

For once the implication is clear: the poet is contemplating going beyond words and taking direct action. As he goes on to make clear, the action he will take is dictated by a political conviction which is not everyone's. Driven, as he declares, by "detestation / Of every despotism in every nation," he is "of no party" and therefore accepts that "I shall offend all parties:—never mind!" Sandwiched between these lines is the subtlest and at the same time most serious statement of political conviction that Byron ever made: "I wish men to be free / As much from mobs as kings—from you as me."¹⁴

From the moment that he finally took the decision for Greece, in Genoa in June 1823, Byron in effect ceased to be a poet. *Don Juan* was abandoned suddenly, a few stanzas into its seventeenth canto. He never returned to it. A few fragments of verse and one completed short poem are all the poetry he wrote thereafter (McGann 1980–1993:7.77–83). It is impossible to tell whether it was a conscious decision to turn his back on his art, as Shakespeare did after *The Tempest*, and as Arthur Rimbaud famously would do almost a century later. But for Byron there were to be no half measures. For the poet to become a man of action, to overstep the bounds of words and begin to shape things in the world, he had to cease being a poet. In Greece, there would be no room for the "poetry of politics," as he had gleefully described his involvement with the *carbonari* (McGann 1980–1993:8.47, emphasis mine). For the remainder of his life, Byron would dedicate himself to the politics that had always been inherent in the poetry he had been writing up till now. This would be Romanticism translated into action.

5. Byron in Greece

The story of all that Byron did and said during the last eight months of his life, after he left Genoa, first in Cephalonia, and then at Missolonghi, has been told again and again. But there is a larger story that remains to be told: of how his actions and his

¹⁴ *Don Juan*, canto IX, stanzas 24–26; cf. McGann 1980–1993:5.739; Kelsall 2004:55.

words were received among the Greeks and how they may have contributed to the eventual outcome of the Revolution.¹⁵

It has often been said that Byron chose the worst possible moment to go to Greece. Between the summer of 1823 and the autumn of 1825, the progress of the Revolution was stalled; the energies of the Greeks in the regions that had been successfully liberated in 1821 and defended in 1822 were now directed towards internal conflict, often described as the first two (of three) civil wars that disfigured the course of the Revolution.¹⁶ Recently, some Greek historians have taken a different view. The period of civil war represents a “necessary, unavoidable, a *defining stage*” of the Revolution, in that sense comparable to the period of the Terror of 1793–1794 in France.¹⁷ These two bitterly fought internal conflicts, whose beginning coincided with Byron’s arrival in Greek waters in August 1823, were the crucible in which the future political shape of independent Greece would be forged.

Byron may have thought that he would be throwing his money and his prestige into combatting the Turks. In that conflict there would have been little practical difference that his personal contribution could have made, at this or at any other stage of the war. But to the *internal* conflict between competing interests and competing models of what “liberty” might mean, and how it might be protected, Byron had something very definite to contribute. He quickly came to adopt three basic principles, and despite provocations and prevarications by those around him, and his own vagaries of temper, he never substantially wavered from them. The first was essentially a prerequisite for the other two: a free Greece must be a centralized state with a constitutional government, in effect what today we would call a nation-state. Such a government, and only such a government, would be able, secondly, to secure and responsibly to disburse the economic support from outside that a successful revolution would require; and, thirdly, to reach an accommodation

¹⁵ So far discussed only by Minta 2006. The topic will be explored further in my ongoing project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust (UK) through a Major Leverhulme Fellowship (2009–2012), with the provisional title *Byron’s War: The Greek Revolution and the English Romantic Imagination*.

¹⁶ E.g. Finlay 1861:2.37; Brewer 2001:232–233, citing Gordon and Makriyannis.

¹⁷ Papanikolaou 2006:229, original emphasis, my translation; cf. 2006:227–228 and Rotzokos 1997:203–204.

through diplomacy with the Great Powers of the day, without which true independence would never be possible.

His fellow countrymen, then and since, have often been sceptical about Byron's political grasp of the situation in Greece.¹⁸ The first Greek historian of the Revolution, Spyridon Trikoupis, who as a young man had composed and delivered the funeral oration for Byron at Missolonghi, was more generous, and probably more accurate:

His policy in Greece was profound and judicious. Unlike many philhellenes, he had his feet on the ground. He was no dreamer of republican or anti-republican systems. Even a free press he considered premature. For him what mattered was the deliverance of Greece. To this end he exhorted the Greeks towards harmony among themselves and due respect for foreign courts. The organization of the army and the finding of means to maintain it were his primary concern. He was ambitious, but not vainly so.

Trikoupis 1853–1857:3.123, my translation

There is much more to be said about the detail of this picture, in order to substantiate Trikoupis's judgement. But I move on now to consider another aspect: what did Byron believe that he was fighting *for*?

Two facts stand out. One is the entirely uncharacteristic dedication and consistency of purpose with which Byron devoted himself to serving the interests of Greece, from June 1823 until his death. Although his letters and journal often voice anger, frustration, even helplessness, in the face of the difficulties confronting him, he never seriously considers abandoning the struggle. In January he wrote to his banker, Charles Hancock in London, "I mean to stick by the Greeks to the last rag of canvas or shirt—and not to go snivelling back like all the rest of them up till now nearly—if it can be avoided, that is to say."¹⁹ There are many

¹⁸ E.g. Finlay 1861:2.22–26; Nicolson 1924:ix–x, 297; Kelsall 1987:194–195, but see, for a more positive evaluation, Minta 2006.

¹⁹ Byron to Hancock, 19 January 1824 (Marchand 1973–1994:11.97).

statements to this effect in the letters of his last months. But in none of them does Byron really account for this remarkable tenacity of purpose.

The second fact, which seems on the face of it to contradict the first, is Byron's often intemperate outbursts against the very Greeks for whom he was determined to give so much. On the *modern* Greeks his recorded comments are often blistering. It was commonplace at the time for foreign philhellenes to make unfavourable contrasts between the Greeks they encountered and the great achievements of their ancient forebears. But Byron, unusually, could be just as critical of the *ancients*, too. As he is reported to have remarked during the voyage to Cephalonia, "The Greeks are returned to barbarism; Mitford says the people never were anything better."²⁰ Byron's knowledge of ancient Greece came largely from *The History of Greece* by William Mitford, published in five volumes between 1784 and 1818. We know that Byron had these volumes with him in Ravenna in 1821, and also in Cephalonia two years later.²¹ Mitford had written, in language that closely anticipates Byron on the moderns, of the "piratical, thieving and murdering kind of petty war, to which the [ancient] Greeks at all times and in all parts were strongly addicted."²²

Even in his last months, then, while he was refusing to desert his post in Missolonghi, Byron was far from being a typical philhellene—or even perhaps a philhellene at all. What drove him at this point in his life seems not to have been any particular affection for the Greeks as a people, whether ancient or modern, but devotion to what he termed "the Cause." The nearest he came to explaining this was in a letter written a little over a month before he died:

I cannot quit Greece while there is a Chance of my being of any (even *supposed*) utility—there is a Stake worth millions such as I am——and while I can stand at all—I must stand by the Cause.——When I say this—I am at the same time aware of the difficulties—and

²⁰ Trelawny 2000:212, cf. 201. A similar statement is also recorded by Finlay, in a letter of June 1824 reproduced in Stanhope 1824:523.

²¹ For Ravenna, see Marchand 1973–1994:8.238; cf. 8.18; for Cephalonia, Finlay to Stanhope, 31 May 1824 (Stanhope 1824:511).

²² Mitford 1829:1.482. See also Miliori 1998:21–30.

dissensions—and defects of the Greeks themselves—but allowances must be made for them by all reasonable people.²³

Back in Italy, in his *carbonaro* days, Byron in his letters had often referred to Italian liberation as a “cause,” but without the capital letter. Whenever he refers to the Greek struggle, in his letters from Cephalonia and Missolonghi, it is always as a “Cause,” with the capital letter.²⁴

What Byron died for, then, was an *idea*: the liberation of Greece; the revival of an ancient civilization in the modern world; the principle, perhaps, although he would never have formulated it in this way, of the nation-state. Through Byron’s turn from poetry to action, from words to things, the idea of Greece became transformed in the modern imagination. No longer only ancient, Greece became a “Cause” to die for in the modern world.

6. Modern Greece: Paradigm Nation

In this way, Byron’s last months in Greece, and his political contribution to the outcome of the revolution, can be seen as the culmination of a defining quest for European Romanticism, that lies at the root of Modernity as it has come to be understood since: to transform words into things, ideals into action. This is not to exaggerate Byron’s personal role in the outcome. Rather, his high-profile example served to encapsulate something that was happening all around him. But he *did* exercise an influence, precisely because his public profile was so high, and also because his political judgements and his connections abroad lent weight to one faction in the Greek civil war of the 1820s against the other. Byron’s personality was instrumental in securing the first of the two loans for Greece raised by public subscription in Great Britain. Right from the first, he had urged that the conflict should be internationalized. This finally happened in July 1827, when a treaty signed by Britain, France, and Russia agreed the terms on which these powers would intervene in Greece (Finlay 1861:2.174). Three months later, in Navarino Bay, off the southwest coast of Greece, the decisive battle of the Greek Revolution would

²³ Byron to Samuel Barff, 10 March 1824 (Marchand 1973–1994:11.131).

²⁴ In addition to the letter just quoted, see Marchand 1973–1994:11.58, 76, 125, 140–141, 144, 147.

be fought on 20 October 1827. The belligerents were neither Greeks nor Turks, but the combined fleets of the three European powers and the viceroy of Egypt.

For three years after that, the representatives of the same three powers met at a standing conference in London, until on 3 February 1830 their ambassadors were ready to sign the “London Protocol.” Article 1 of the Protocol states: “Greece will form an independent State, and will enjoy all the political, administrative, and commercial rights attached to total independence” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1999:30, in French, my translation). Another two years would pass before a further Protocol would ratify the final terms of independence (30 August 1832), and the fledgling state would have to wait for its formal inauguration until February of the following year and the arrival of the future king, Otto, aboard a British warship.²⁵ But it is the text of 1830 that marks the defining moment. Not only had the military struggle against Ottoman rule been won, but so had the diplomatic effort that Byron had envisaged, and in aid of which he had supported the government faction against the “captains” of the Peloponnese.

Byron had rightly foreseen, in a letter to Mavrokordatos written shortly before he left Cephalonia for Missolonghi, that Greece at that juncture of the war had only three possible options: “to win her liberty, to become a Colony of the sovereigns of Europe, or to become a Turkish province.”²⁶ The example that Byron gave of the second of these was Italy, at the time still dominated by Austria; of the third, Wallachia, which had been reconquered by the Ottomans after the failure of the Greek campaign of 1821. Had he enjoyed the benefit of hindsight, he could have given an even more telling example. Serbia had rebelled against Ottoman rule as early as 1804, and again in 1815. Without the western intervention that would prove decisive in the case of Greece, the Serbs would be obliged to be content, in 1829, with a degree of autonomy that fell significantly short of full sovereignty. For more than half a century after their rebellion, the Serbs would remain nominally subject to the Ottoman Porte, until the Congress of Berlin in 1878 (Jelavich 1977:31–37, 55–58; cf. Glenny 1999:1–21). If Greece had not obtained the diplomatic support and

²⁵ For the relationship of the protocols of 1830 and 1832 see the editor’s comments in Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1999:27–28, 35–36.

²⁶ Byron to Mavrokordatos, 2 December 1823, Italian original and English translation (Marchand 1973–1994:11.70–71).

recognition (however grudgingly given) of the Great Powers, one or more principalities ruled by a local chieftain could have fought free of Ottoman control, but would still have remained politically and diplomatically subject to Turkey—as did in fact happen, exceptionally, on the island of Samos.

The “Cause” to which Byron devoted the last months of his life, whether or not he saw it himself in precisely those terms, was not just the removal of Ottoman rule from Greece, it was the cause of the modern nation-state. “I did not come here to join a faction but a nation,” he wrote in his journal, not long after arriving in Cephalonia.²⁷ Justly has it been said that Byron “was one of those who did most to make nationalism the religion of the last [i.e. the nineteenth] century.”²⁸ This meant that although he declared himself above factions, his real contribution was to strengthen very considerably the position of the constitutionalists in the struggle to define the nature of the liberty that would be won at the end of the Revolution.

Something else that Byron could probably not have foreseen was the enormous power that the idea of the nation-state would come to exercise over the political imagination of nineteenth-century Europe and beyond. Greece, recognized as sovereign and independent by the Protocol of 1830, would become the first of the new nation-states established in Europe after the end of the Napoleonic wars—followed by Belgium in 1831, Switzerland in 1847, Italy in 1861, Germany in 1871, and its neighbours in southeastern Europe even later, between 1878 and 1923.²⁹ The process has continued since 1989, with the break-up of unitary states such as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. The latest addition to the European “family” of nations has been Kosovo, recognized by most, though not all, European governments since February 2008; at the time of writing, the possibility that Belgium might break up into Flemish and Wallonian nation-states is being discussed in the media.

²⁷ Byron, *Cephalonia Journal*, 28 September 1823 (Marchand 1973–1994:11.32).

²⁸ Brinton 1966:154, a view challenged by Rosen 1992:301. See also St Clair 1972:184 (“Byron, by his death, unwittingly played a part in promoting nationalism to the position [long held by religion] of being the most divisive and destructive element in Western civilization.”)

²⁹ For fuller discussion see Beaton 2009.

Today the European Union has yet to achieve the legitimacy in the popular imagination that would enable it successfully to challenge the hegemony of nation-states in Europe. That hegemony, and the prevalence throughout much of the world of a form of polity born in Europe in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, can be understood as one consequence, at least, of the quest in which the poets Byron and Shelley played their distinctive parts, in their determination to transcend the bounds of language (“words”) and create a new world of things, in which we all live today.

The subsequent course of history has tended to obscure the significance of the 1821 struggle for Greek independence and its success in establishing a new model for a modern polity, a “paradigm nation” in the words of the political historian Paschalis Kitromilides (2009). But whether we realise it or not, the transformation of Greece, as an imaginative idea, from ancient arbiter of aesthetics to political ideal for the future, that took place in the early nineteenth century represents one of the foundation stones of what we have become accustomed to call Modernity.

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Much of the primary material relating to Byron to which reference is made here, including poems, journals, and letters, can be found in an online edition-in-progress, with commentary, by Peter Cochran at:
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But at least he cared about the modern Greeks. The enormous overnight success of the first two cantos of Childe Harold, when they were published on 10 March 1812, meant that what Byron reported and thought about Greece was read by many more readers than all the travel books taken together. Childe Harold, its translations into European languages, and the cult of the "celebrity" that began with that runaway success, all ensured that from 1812 onwards Greece entered the consciousness of western Europeans as a living landscape inhabited by contemporary people, whose political future was beginning... After Shelley's death Byron moved to Genoa. His letters from there show the idea of Greece gaining ground. Although Byron was a descendant of an ancient aristocratic family, he sided with the progressive bourgeois democratic movements. His abhorrence of the gloomy realities of his time made him a romanticism. He opposed the reactionary policy of the British government and the brutal measures taken by it to suppress the movement of the Luddites; in a brilliant speech delivered in the House of Lords, he vindicated these rebellious workers and condemned the ruling classes for their oppression of the people. A few days after this, the first two cantos of Childe Harold's pilgrimage came off the press and the success of the poem gave Byron every right to write in his diary: "I awoke one morning to find myself famous". Byron eventually reached Greece in 1809. He truly loved the Balkans, having previously traveled in Albania, but Greece he liked the most. In the country known as the cradle of civilization, Byron visited many monumental, ancient sites. He also became acquainted with the Greek cause, well enough that his later contributions will forever remain in the annals of Greek history. That summer he spent at the Lake Geneva with Percy and Mary Shelley. The reception of Lord Byron at Missolonghi. Byron also established himself as a link between the Greek revolutionaries and the London Philhellenic Committee, a group of British philhellenes who channeled more money to support the Greek military. Statue of Lord Byron in Athens. Photo by Templar52. In book: *The Shelley-Byron Circle and the Idea of Europe* (pp.175-197). Authors: Paul Stock. Request full-text PDF. To read the full-text of this research, you can request a copy directly from the author. Although ancient Greece, Hugo's "Greece of Homer", and modern Greece occupy the same geographical space on the map, they are two distinct entities in the Western imagination. Modern Greece, constructed by the early 19th-century ideals and ideas associated with Byron, has been "haunted, holy ground" in literature for almost two centuries. This book analyzes how authors employ ideas about romantic nationalism, gender politics, shifts in cultural constructions, and literary experimentation to create variations of "Greece" to suit changing eras. View. Show abstract. Nothing that Byron ever did afterwards was able, more than briefly, to erase in Mary's mind this debt of gratitude, incurred during the happiest period of her life; and the recollection of Byron at Diodati, whose presence had restored Shelley to her and whose conversation, without making any demands upon her, had fathered the idea of her first novel, colored all her. When Mary, in an episode based on their Swiss sojourn in 1816, describes the chief characters living happily together in a sylvan retreat shortly after Mary-Lionel has married Shelley-Adrian and Byron-Raymond has married Claire-Perdita, only Shelley-Adrian "seemed destined not to find the half of himself, which was to complete his happiness."

George Gordon Byron Life – George Gordon Byron is an unconventional aristocrat and to many of his contemporaries, Byron's poetry and life embodied the romantic spirit. – Though rich and handsome, he had a handicap that consisted in a deformed foot. Nature: Shelley believed that Nature could express crucial concepts and that it had many strong symbols (wind = freedom). Nature is a veil that hides the eternal truth of divine spirit, but also a shelter where to hide from the disappointment and injustice of the ordinary world and it frees from the boundaries of society and civilisation. – He borrowed figures from ancient mythology to populate his poems, such as "Ode to Psyche" and "To Homer" (1818). – Shelley's idealisation of Greece informs crucial aspects of Laon and Cythna including description, theme and historical framework. Although the setting of the story is in modern Greece and Turkey, local colour is limited in favour of abstract representation to lend a universal character to the heroic idealism unfolding therein. The Shelley-Byron Circle and the Idea of Europe (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 99-115; Nigel Leask, British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 110-8. – glorious past and gloomy present. This sense of difference from the ancients leads him to realise the limitless potential of man: Such man has been, and such may yet become! Ay, wiser, greater, gentler, even than they. In Greece Byron began his epic "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," which he continued in Athens. Besides furnishing a travelogue of his wanderings through the Mediterranean, the poem expressed the melancholy and disillusionment felt by a generation weary of the wars of the post-Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras. Byron had become bored with the young countess and the quiet domesticity she espoused. His comfortable café society, known as the "Pisan Circle," had begun to dissolve, in large measure due to Shelley's anger with Byron over his treatment of Allegra and her subsequent death. The tragedy was compounded when Shelley and another member of the Pisan Circle, Edward Williams, drowned while boating near Lerici in the Gulf of Spezia. Byron and Shelley were good friends. Shelley was born into the minor aristocracy, and would have had "Sir" before his name if he had lived longer. Byron was raised in near poverty by a violently abusive mother, but as an adolescent he became a peer – link directly to the Romantic tradition and the valorization of nature-as-beauty. I don't think you can read either without reading Keats. There's a thoughtful reading of Oliver in a recent New Yorker review and profile. Byron eventually reached Greece in 1809. He truly loved the Balkans, having previously traveled in Albania, but Greece he liked the most. In the country known as the cradle of civilization, Byron visited many monumental, ancient sites. He also became acquainted with the Greek cause, well enough that his later contributions will forever remain in the annals of Greek history. That summer he spent at the Lake Geneva with Percy and Mary Shelley. The reception of Lord Byron at Missolonghi. Byron also established himself as a link between the Greek revolutionaries and the London Philhellenic Committee, a group of British philhellenes who channeled more money to support the Greek military. Statue of Lord Byron in Athens. Photo by Templar52.