# Byron, Greece, and guilt

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Byron was above all an ironist, a player of games, a self-parodist so skilful that most of his nearest and dearest were fooled by him. "If I am a poet," he is said to have said to Trelawny, "it is the air of Greece which has made me one" (a statement quoted, for example, by Elizabeth Longford).[1] In fact what Trelawny says he said is this:

> If I am a poet – Gifford says I am; I doubt it – the air of Greece has made me one. I climbed the haunts of Minerva and the Muses. – He leered at me with an ironical smile.[2]

It's true that the air and light, the history and heroes of Greece called forth some of his most characteristic early poetry:

> SLOW sinks, more lovely ere his race be run,
> Along Morea's hills the setting sun;
> Not, as in Northern climes, obscurely bright,
> But one unclouded blaze of living light!
> O'er the hushed deep the yellow beam he throws,
> Gilds the green wave, that trembles as it glows.
> On old Ægina's rock and Idra's isle,
> The god of gladness sheds his parting smile;
> O'er his own regions lingering, loves to shine,
> Though there his altars are no more divine.
> Descending fast the mountain shadows kiss
> Thy glorious gulf, unconquered Salamis!
> Their azure arches through the long expanse
> More deeply purpled meet his mellowing glance,

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[1] Elizabeth Longford, *Byron's Greece* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson 1976), p. 8.

[2] E. J. Trelawny, *Records of Shelley, Byron and the author*. Edited with an introduction by David Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1973), p. 83.

> And tenderest tints, along their summits driven,
> Mark his gay course, and own the hues of heaven;
> Till, darkly shaded from the land and deep,
> Behind his Delphian cliff he sinks to sleep.

The air, light, and history of Greece: not the contemporary politics or the present population.

Byron is the most European of English writers, and it seems that everyone in Europe – in sharp distinction to everyone in Britain, for most of whom he's an uncategorisable nuisance – wants a piece of him. His borrowings from French, German and Italian cultures are well known; Pushkin's indebtedness to him is so great that it still has to be thoroughly written about; there are Byron societies in addition in Poland, Holland, Albania, Belgium, Romania, and last but in no way least, in Greece.

When we turn to Greece, the picture develops. In that country Byron, as I'm sure you all know, is a major icon. It was the Mayor of Missolonghi who in 1973, when the Byron Society laid a wreath to him in the Garden of Heroes, said, "But he is not your Lord Byron, he is *our* Lord Byron."[3] No town is complete without its statue of him and its important street carrying his name. You find Byron tavernas, Byron hotels, Byron cigarette cards, and Byron phone cards. Greek children are taught how he died fighting for their country's freedom, and (or so I'm told) how he sold Newstead Abbey to finance the Greek War of Independence. It's true that when asked what they think of his poetry, they may answer, "What poetry?" Unless I'm wrong, the main Greek translation of his complete works (a book hard to come by in any case) is not of his complete works, and is done into free verse from a Greek prose version of an early nineteenth-century French translation.[4]

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[3] Longford, *Byron's Greece*, p. 7.

[4] The book is Λόρδου Βύρωνος, *Ποιητικά έργα*. Έμμετρη μετάφραση Μαρία Ιω. Κεσίση (Athens: Spanos 1974), which contains parts of *The Giaour, Parisina, The Siege of Corinth, The Bride of Abydos, The Curse of Minerva, Mazeppa* and *The Corsair*. The translations are based on

There may be an insuperable culture barrier here. To the frivolous and mindless Brits, Byron signifies kinky sex: to the serious and moral Greeks, he signifies heroic self-sacrifice. The question you may ask is, "Shouldn't there be room for both?" My answer is, "There should be room for neither"; but the barriers to the eradication of both images seem insuperable.

The historical Byron is as well documented as anyone of his time – probably better documented, for everyone who knew him wrote down their impressions and kept his letters, and he kept nearly every letter he received. There are many biographies, and thorough editions of his poetry, prose, and correspondence. There was even last year a very good TV mini-series, though it's true it had to be put on a bit late on account of the sodomy and the incest. Byron should be one of the best-known figures in history. But there's something about him which resists the commonsense approach, and prevents a consensus forming: "He is *our* Lord Byron, not *yours*."

I have even heard a member of the London Greek community deploring in public Byron's status as a freedom fighter, implying as it did that Byron had left-wing sympathies. *His* Byron, the gentleman made clear, would support the establishment, whatever nationality or persuasion it might be.

The problem is seen at its most cynical in the advertisement placed by the Greek National Tourist Organisation in the *Byron Journal*. The ad parades a quotation from *The Isles of Greece*, from *Don Juan* III. The original runs:

> The Isles of Greece – the Isles of Greece!
> Where burning Sappho loved and sung,
> Where grew the Arts of War and Peace –
> Where Delos rose, and Phoebus sprung!
> Eternal Summer gilds them yet,
> But All, except their Sun, is set.

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those of G. Politis, whose 3-volume edition was published in Athens 1867-71.

The Greek National Tourist Organisation reduces this to:

> The Isles of Greece, the isles of Greece
> Where grew the arts of war and peace
> Where Delos and Phoebus sprung!
> Eternal Summer gilds them yet

When you're marketing yourself, it's best to cut references either to the sexually ambivalent and morally dubious Sappho, or to the fact that when your culture icon, Byron, wrote, the sunsets were the only good feature of the holiday location.

*The Isles of Greece* is, in the myth, Byron's most famous call to action. It is, in the myth, the point where he insists that life and poetry are co-extensive, and that what a poet does, having committed the word to paper via ink, is to commit himself to the world via sweat and blood.

I'd like to examine *The Isles of Greece*. It was written at the end of 1819, before the Greek War of Independence began. It is sung by an unnamed, changeable and opportunistic poet, whom Haidee and Juan seem to have hired to recite to them and their guests at a non-stop party they're having, on the island which Haidee thinks she's inherited from her father, the pirate Lambro. Lambro isn't dead, but is on the island, and will in the next canto disrupt their party, arrest Juan and sell him into slavery. Haidee will die of grief. The poet who declaims it is a strange mixture of Byron and his enemy Southey. He's a prostitute-poet, one who can change his style to suit his audience, as Byron had during his Years of Fame and as – so Byron asserted – Southey, the Poet Laureate, did all the time. Except that this poet can do it in any language he likes:

> 86.
> In France, for instance, he would write a Chanson;
> In England, a Six-Canto Quarto tale;
> In Spain, he'd make a ballad or romance on
> The last war – much the same in Portugal;
> In Germany, the Pegasus he'd prance on

Would be old Goethe's (see what says de Stael)
In Italy, he'd ape the "Trecentisti";
In Greece he'd sing some sort of hymn like this t'ye:

The rhymes signal, I hope you'll agree, that whatever the song is like, there's something suspect about the singer.

1.
The Isles of Greece – the Isles of Greece!
Where burning Sappho loved and sung,
Where grew the Arts of War and Peace –
Where Delos rose, and Phoebus sprung!
Eternal Summer gilds them yet,
But All, except their Sun, is set.

This is a song to be sung at a party – I would suggest, from the last line here, to be sung at the end of the party, when everyone's exhausted and melancholy. The next five verses contrast Greece's heroic past with the degeneracy of her present. All a poet can do today is muse, dream, blush, and weep. Action of the ancient Greek heroic kind is not an option.

2.
The Scian and the Teian Muse,
The hero's harp, the lover's lute,
Have found the fame your Shores refuse;
Their place of birth alone is mute
To Sounds which Echo further West
Than your Sires' "Islands of the Blest." –

3.
The Mountains look on Marathon –
And Marathon looks on the Sea;
And musing there an hour Alone,
I dreamed that Greece might still be free;
For standing on the Persian's Grave,
I could not deem myself a Slave. –

4.
A King sate on the rocky brow
Which looks o'er Sea-born Salamis,

And Ships by thousands lay below,
    And Men in Nations – All were His!
He counted them at Break of day –
And when the Sun set – where were They? –

5.
And where are they? – and where art Thou,
    My Country? On thy voiceless shore
The Heroic lay is tuneless now –
    The Heroic bosom beats no more!
And must thy Lyre, so long divine,
Degenerate into hands like mine? –

6.
'Tis Something, in the dearth of Fame,
    Though linked among a fettered race,
To feel at least a Patriot's Shame,
    Even as I sing, suffuse my face –
For what is left the Poet here?
For Greeks a blush – for Greece a tear. –

In stanzas 7 and 8 the voices of the ancient Greeks are heard; but the modern Greeks have no response to them:

7.
Must *We* but weep o'er days more blest? –
    Must *We* but blush? – Our fathers bled.
Earth! render back from out thy breast
    A Remnant of our Spartan dead!
Of the three hundred Grant but three,
To make a new Thermopylæ!

8.
What silent still? and silent All?
    Ah! No – the Voices of the dead
Sound like a distant Torrent's fall,
    And answer – "Let one living head,
"But one, arise – We come, We come!"
'Tis but the Living Who are dumb. –

In stanza 9 the poet makes a call, not for action, but for more wine, and, it appears, his audience agree with him:

9.
In vain – in vain – Strike other Chords –
Fill high the Cup with Samian Wine!
Leave battles to the Turkish Hordes,
And shed the blood of Scio's Vine!
Hark! rising to the ignoble Call,
How answers each bold Bacchanal! –

In stanzas 10, 11, and 12, he tries to turn his audience's enthusiasm for drink into one for patriotic nostalgia: perhaps if they get more drunk they'll become more brave. Yet as he muses himself, all he can think of are past Greek tyrants. The song here alternates between determination and anticlimactic pessimism – will we, if we defeat the Turks, merely replace them with tyrants of our own on the ancient model?

10.
You have the Pyrrhic dance as yet –
Where is the Pyrrhic Phalanx gone?
Of two such lessons, why forget
The nobler and the manlier one?
You have the letters Cadmus gave –
Think Ye he meant them for a Slave? –

11.
Fill high the bowl with Samian wine!
We will not think of themes like these!
It made Anacreon's Song divine;
He served, but served Polycrates,
A Tyrant; but our Masters then
Were still, at least, our Countrymen. –

12.
The Tyrant of the Chersonese
Was Freedom's best and bravest friend;
*That* Tyrant was Miltiades! –
Oh! that the present hour would lend

Another Despot of the kind!
Such Chains as his were sure to bind. –

The poet now brings the song into the present day. Parga, referred to next, had just been sold by the English to Ali Pasha – the event was greeted with disgust by many liberal-minded people. Byron may have been misled, by an article about it which Ugo Foscolo had published in the *Edinburgh Review*, into thinking that the outrage had brought out some old heroic traits in the Pargiots:

13.
Fill high the bowl with Samian Wine!
On Suli's Rock, and Parga's Shore,
Exists the remnant of a line
Such as the Doric Mothers bore;
And there perhaps some Seed is sown
The Heracleidan blood might own.

Stanza 14 warns the Greeks against trusting the promises of western Europeans. It echoes some ideas in Foscolo's *Edinburgh Review* article, and ends pessimistically:

14.
Trust not for freedom to the Franks –
They have a king who buys and sells;
In native swords, and native ranks,
The only hope of Courage dwells;
But Turkish force, and Latin fraud,
Would break your Shield, however broad. –

We may assume that by now the poet is drunk. As he contemplates the beauty of Greek women, he certainly becomes maudlin:

15.
Fill high the bowl with Samian Wine!
Our Virgins dance beneath the Shade –
I see their glorious black Eyes shine;
But gazing on each glowing Maid,
My own the burning tear-drop laves,
To think such breasts must suckle Slaves. –

The last stanza, in everything but the penultimate line, sees the poet losing contact with his song's supposed theme. The last line is not a call to stop drinking and to take up arms – it's a call to dash your wine glass down, and fill up another (at least, that's one interpretation: if the cup still has Samian wine in it, you drink it first and dash it down afterwards):

16.
Place me on Sunium's marbled Steep,
Where nothing save the Waves and I
May hear our mutual murmurs sweep;
There, Swan-like, let me sing and die –
A land of Slaves shall ne'er be mine –
Dash down yon Cup of Samian Wine! –

Lest we should still, despite the evidence, think the poet is a war-poet, a Tyrtaeus, Byron resumes his disillusioned and anti-climactic tone as he resumes the narrative, and makes clear his suspicion of all poetry:

87.
Thus sung, or would, or could, or should have sung,
The modern Greek, in tolerable Verse;
If not like Orpheus quite when Greece was young,
Yet in these times he might have done much worse:
His Strain displayed some feeling – right or wrong;
And Feeling, in a Poet, is the Source
Of Others' feeling – but they are such liars,
And take all colours – like the hands of Dyers.

A real man doesn't sing, doesn't write poetry – a real man acts. A year after *The Isles of Greece* was published the Greek War of Independence started; I think no one in Greece had read *Don Juan*, however. Shame at the message of *The Isles of Greece* was not one of their motives.

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In 1924, the centenary of Byron's death, the Greek Minister Demetrius Caclamanos gave two addresses in England. Near the end of the second one he said the following:

> In many a letter and discourse, which reveal in him [Byron] an acute political sense, did he advocate tolerance, concord, co-operation among all Greeks. By the gift of his help, of his youth [*Byron would have been delighted to hear that – "youth"!*], of his life, he showed that his counsels of wisdom issued from a heart passionately devoted to the Greek people – which, at the time of Byron's sacrifice, symbolised the struggle of the spirit of liberty itself against the dark forces of oppression.
>
> While still only a schoolboy, Byron fought always for the small and weak, and I think it was this very sentiment that brought him to Missolonghi. He wrote, too, somewhere, that he liked Robert Rushton because, like the latter, he felt himself to be a "friendless animal". He attached himself to Greece because Greece, too, was friendless, and "friendless nation" and "friendless poet" were to become the best of friends.
>
> Since we had Byron as our friend, we have been fortunate enough to earn the friendship of others of whom we are as well proud. But Byron's friendship remains with us, nevertheless, the tenderest of all. He is to us as the first-love which one never forgets. What Mary Chaworth was to Byron, Byron is to Greece.
>
> The sacrifice which ennobled his life and rendered his name forever immortal is engraved upon our hearts in ineffaceable characters. He was the Crusader of Liberty. He was the Soldier of Greece; the "Stratiot," to use his own word in his appeal to the Suliots:
>
> Up to battle! Sons of Suli,
> Up and do your duty duly!
> . . . . . .
> Up and charge my Stratiotes
> Bouwah! Bouwah! Suliotes![5]

[5] *The Centenary of Byron's death in England: two addresses delivered by Demetrius Caclamanos.* Privately printed (London 1924), pp. 38-42.

Most modern Greeks, I suspect, would concur with this: the urge to mythologize Byron overcomes all barriers. But Robert Rushton was, according to Caroline Lamb (though not according to the new *ODNB* entry), Byron's boyfriend, his sexual partner, a young victim of his lust. And "Mary Chaworth was to Byron" a source of acute misery. She would have nothing to do with his romantic approaches, and preferred marriage to a boorish Tory squire called Jack Musters, who was a Master of Hounds and a persecutor of Luddites. When her marriage failed, she cast an optimistic eye on Byron, now her ex-admirer, who had become the most glamorous figure in the country, and tried to make contact with him; but they never met again, and she went out of her mind. She was not in any case Byron's first love: that was Mary Duff. In addition, we object, there were many philhellenes before and besides Byron. I shall return to this poem "A Song for the Suliots".

About ten years ago they released a film – a Greco-Russian co-production – called *Byron, Ballad of a Demon*. It depicted him as a bald, sweaty person, unhealthy and unattractive, and his death at Missolonghi as the culmination of a career devoted to self-hatred and self-destruction. It attempted to demythologize him, but was clearly motivated by the most intense dislike, and so could easily be ignored. Everyone in Greece hated it; and so did I. I hope this lecture will help, in a more sympathetic way, towards Byron's demythologization.

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In a letter dated from 21 June 21/3 July 1823, Metropolitan Ignatius of Arta, a priest then temporarily resident in Pisa, wrote to Byron (I translate from his French):

> You will find, my Lord, that the land you are visiting is much more devastated than it was on your first voyage there; but by contrast you will find its inhabitants to be worthy sons of their ancestors, and worthy once more to be called sons of Greece. The Greeks have been awaiting the moment to show the world

> that the blood of their fathers flows still in their veins; and now that the moment has arrived they have shown us that their exploits are as sublime, as noble, as great, as those of the heroes led by Themistocles, Miltiades, and Leonidas. In the midst of this greatness, my Lord, you will find confusion and disorder as well; but your goodness will know to excuse them, and to attribute their cause, partly to ignorance, partly to that spirit of independence proper to the Greek character, and partly to the novelty of their state. But order in society is only created by time, and it is to time that we must leave the creation of order. You will have occasion, my Lord, to see our fleet, which, I hope, will attract your attention, and from amongst our heroes I must especially recommend to you Marcos Botsaris and his Souliots.[6]

Metropolitan Ignatius spoke with forked tongue. To Mavrocordatos he wrote, on 29 July 1823:

> I recommend Lord Byron to you; he must have arrived at Zakynthos by now. [...] Do whatever you can to please him, not so much because he can spend and really help, but more so because if he's dissatisfied he could do more harm than you have bargained for [...].[7]

A certain mistrust, perhaps of the supposed amateur on the part of one who thought himself a professional, can be seen here.

When he was at Missolonghi, Byron got to know the Suliots of Marcos Botsaris, whom Ignatius recommends. He didn't meet Botsaris, who was killed in battle in August 1823. He wrote this song for them, quoted inaccurately in his 1924 address by Demetrius Caclamanos. I don't think the poem took Byron very long to write, but, in his best manner, it manages to be at once empathetic and ironical:

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[6] John Murray Archive, National Library of Scotland.

[7] Quoted by Nora Liassis, "... 'a cult of Lord Byron' in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*", in: Marios Byron Raizis (ed.), *Byron: a poet for all seasons* (Missolonghi 2000), p. 220.

Up to battle! Sons of Suli –
Up, and do your duty duly –
There the wall – and there the Moat is –
Bouwah! – Bouwah! – Suliotes!
There is booty, there is Beauty –
Up, my boys, and do your duty. –

By the sally and the rally
Which defied the arms of Ali –
By your own dear native Highlands
By your children in the Islands –
Up and charge my Stratiotes!
Bouwah! – Bouwah! – Suliotes!

As our ploughshare is the Sabre
Here's the harvest of our labour –
For behind those battered breaches
Are our foes with all their riches –
There is glory – there is plunder –
Then away in spite of thunder. –

How different from the passage from *The Corsair* which I read at first: there, he celebrates the air, light, and ancient heroes of Greece. Here, he celebrates her modern heroes. The poem's sloppiness is not uncharacteristic. Byron had actually rhymed "booty" with "beauty" at lines 77 and 81 of the third canto of *The Prophecy of Dante,* a poem written at greater leisure than this. But the song still makes grim reading, given the warm way in which Metropolitan Ignatius had recommended the Suliots. In line 13, Byron refers to Isaiah 2, 4: "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks." The Suliots, it seems, reverse this dictum, beat their ploughshares into sabres, and, by implication, their pruning-hooks into spears. In the last line, Byron quotes *Macbeth* IV i 86: "That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies, / And sleep in spite of thunder." As Macbeth has just decided to kill Macduff, which is the second biggest mistake he makes after killing Duncan, this is another unfortunate echo. Byron had found at Missolonghi that the three hundred or so supposed Suliots there were mostly not Suliots, and in many cases

not even Greeks. He had paid them: but they demanded that half their number should be promoted, and thus be paid more. In so far as he had had any illusions about them, he lost them now, and three months before his death wrote the following:

> Having tried in vain at every expence – considerable trouble – and some danger to unite the Suliotes for the good of Greece – and their own – I have come to the following resolution. –
> I will have nothing more to do with the Suliotes – they may go to the Turks or – the devil [–] they may cut me into more pieces than they have dissensions among them, sooner than change my resolution –
>
> For the rest I hold my means and person at the disposal of the Greek Nation and Government the same as before.[8]

Booty and beauty were the main objectives of the so-called Suliots; greed and lust their motivation. Of patriotism they knew nothing, having no homeland. The idea of a Greek homeland was in any case a foreign idea: a Frankish idea. Helen Angelomatis-Tsougarakis, a carefully disinterested writer, reports that Frankish travellers

> could not easily pretend that they ignored the aspirations of the Greeks, who made their sentiments quite clear. Yet, some travellers disputed their precise nature and sincerity. The reason was twofold. In the first place, they hardly considered these debased people able to entertain such noble sentiments. Then, these aspirations interfered with their own political analysis, interests, and tactics.
>
> Thus, [Frederic] Douglas wrote that the young Greeks used to sing patriotic songs, but to them the word "πατρίς"[,] father-land, bore an indeterminate meaning, affixed to no precise idea. Moreover, those who expressed a deep hatred for their oppressors and pity for their country could be seen joining the

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[8] *Byron's letters and journals.* Edited by Leslie A. Marchand. 13 vols. (London: John Murray 1973-94), vol. XI, pp. 111-12 (hereafter *BLJ*).

> usual intrigues in order to acquire an office from the authorities.[9]

Every man knew that his allegiance was to his church, and to his clan chief, his warlord: to whoever would feed him. The idea that Greece was a nation was strange. What was a "nation" anyway?

The idea of Greek nationhood had much stronger roots in the thinking of the merchants and writers of the Greek diaspora, in Vienna, where the *Logios Hermes* was published, or in Paris, where Adamantios Korais lived and wrote, than it had in Greece. Byron's friend Hobhouse, co-founder of the London Greek Committee (I *think*: his diary's not clear), had met the editor of the *Hermes* in Vienna in 1814, and had met Korais in Paris in 1815. Byron may have held his means and person at the disposal of the Greek Government – but where and what was the Greek Government, and was it any improvement on the Suliots? The man who wanted above all others to form a constitutional government – Mavrocordatos – was on the run. The rest of those who might have been members of such a government were divided as much from one another as they were from the Turks. Parts of Greece were still controlled by Mavrocordatos; parts by Colocotrones; parts by the brigand Odysseus Androutses (soon to become Trelawny's hero); and parts by no one at all except the local inhabitants. When the Turks left (or were massacred), the Greeks turned on each other. Richard Clogg quotes General Makriyannis at this point: "I took an oath to fight against Turks, not Greeks!"[10]

Many young Frankish idealists came to Greece to assist what they understood to be a repetition of the Persian wars of the fifth century, were disillusioned (for no-one wanted them), and many died. One Prussian officer who managed to return put up a placard

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[9] Helen Angelomatis-Tsougarakis, *The eve of the Greek revival: British travellers' perceptions of early nineteenth-century Greece* (London: Routledge 1990), p. 96.

[10] Richard Clogg, *A concise history of Greece*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1992), p. 35.

in Marseilles, warning others not to do what he had done, not to yield to the Greek ideal with which they'd been educated. It read:

> The Ancient Greeks no longer exist. Blind ignorance has succeeded Solon, Socrates and Demosthenes. Barbarism has replaced the wise laws of Athens.[11]

* * *

Why did Byron go on his second, unhappy journey to Greece? Teresa Guiccioli, his Italian mistress, puts one reason in a characteristic tone:

> He felt that he was born for a life of action, and indeed for the world of politics; but he was alienated from political activities as they were carried on in England then. A selfish Toryism prevailed there, with Castlereagh as its very soul and embodiment. Lord Byron was estranged from that kind of politics, because, although he had a practical mind and rejected any utopias, he did not accept, in political any more than in private life, that self-interest should take the place of generosity, honesty, conscientiousness, and fair play.[12]

The absence of logic and commonsense here is typical of Teresa. If self-interest took the place of generosity, why couldn't a right-minded man such as Byron stay at home in England and fight it, and make generosity replace self-interest? After all, a mere eight years after his death, Hobhouse assisted in the passing of the Great Reform Bill of 1832, one of the most far-reaching acts of legislation in British history. The answer was that for Byron such a course, involving compromise and committee-work, was too boring. He would never wait eight years for anything: he

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[11] David Howarth, *The Greek adventure: Lord Byron and other eccentrics in the War of Independence* (London: Collins 1976), p. 81.

[12] Teresa Guiccioli, *Lord Byron's life in Italy*. Trans. Michael Rees, edited by Peter Cochran (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press 2005), p. 391.

never, after all, took Horace's advice, and waited nine years before publishing a poem. Parliamentary politics was for drones and losers like Hobhouse. Early in 1814 an unfortunate man in the Debtors' Prison had asked Byron to present a petition to the Lords on behalf of the inmates. He recorded in his diary:

> I have declined presenting the Debtors' Petition, being sick of parliamentary mummeries. I have spoken thrice; but I doubt my ever becoming an orator. My first was liked; the second and third – I don't know whether they succeeded or not. I have never yet set to it *con amore*; – one must have some excuse to one's self for laziness, or inability, or both, and this is mine. "Company, villainous company, hath been the spoil of me;" –[13]

Lord Holland presented the petition instead. For Byron, revolutions were more romantic than prosaic petitions. Hobhouse could sit on committees, and go to jail. Byron found that funny. He would go to Greece.

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Another reason for him to go and support the Greek revolutionists was his disillusion with the Italian revolutionists. When, in late 1820 and early 1821, the Neapolitans had forced their Bourbon King to accept a constitution, the Austrians had invaded, and the Neapolitans had run from them without a shot being fired. Byron's two friends Ruggiero and Pietro Gamba – in theory, enthusiastic political activists – had contrived, just as the Austrians were massing, to be absent. Hobhouse recorded in his diary:

> Byron told me that Gamba, the son, and a friend went out shooting for several days at the very time they expected to rise and revolutionize Italy. It was represented to them that they should not be absent at such a conjuncture, but they resolved to

[13] *BLJ* III, 206.

> go, and did go where no letters could reach them. These are patriots – and Italy is to depend on them.[14]

No wonder Byron told Thomas Moore, after the Neapolitans had capitulated:

> As a very pretty woman said to me a few nights ago, with the tears in her eyes, as she sat at the harpsichord, "Alas! the Italians must now return to making operas." I fear *that* and maccaroni are their forte, and "motley their only wear". However, there are some high spirits among them still.[15]

Byron was *capo* of the Ravenna Carbonari, but had been naïve enough at first, in a literalist, Anglo-Saxon sort of way, to take their rhetoric seriously. He wrote the following in his journal for February 1821:

> Today I have had no communication with my Carbonari cronies; but, in the mean time, my lower apartments are full of their bayonets, fusils, cartridges, and what not. I suppose they consider me as a depôt, to be sacrificed, in case of accidents. It is no great matter, supposing that Italy could be liberated, who or what is sacrificed. It is a grand object – the very *poetry* of politics. Only think – a free Italy![16]

By 1823 he read Italian posture more accurately. As with Italian marriage ethics, so with Italian politics – you shouldn't expect the exterior appearance to conform with the practical reality. The Carbonari had hid their ammunition in his cellar, so that he'd get done for possessing it and they wouldn't. He might have known that the Greeks were no better, and even that their version of practical reality was much worse: but he knew above all that Italy was not a place where he could expect to make any political impact.

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[14] Quoted in Teresa Guiccioli, *Lord Byron's life in Italy*, p. 646.
[15] *BLJ* VIII, 105; letter of 28 April 1821.
[16] *BLJ* VIII, 47.

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A third reason to go was because he had to get away from Teresa. Hobhouse reports that at Pisa on 19 September 1822 "we had some talk of his liaison, which he does not wish to continue". Henry Fox, who was her lover after Byron's death, writes in his diary:

> In order to distress her, and also perhaps in hopes of making us quarrel, she [Lady Blessington] told T[eresa]. G[uiccioli]. of L[or]d Byron, in 1823, having said to me at Genoa that one of his reasons for going to Greece was to get rid of her and her family – which he meant, I conclude, by saying he wished to cut cables in Italy and go either to Greece or England in order to regain his liberty. Of course I denied it, tho' it is true. [17]

Mary Shelley was scathing about Byron's attitude to Teresa. On 23 July 1823 she wrote to Jane Williams:

> The Guiccioli is gone to Bologna – e poi cosa fara? Chi lo sa? Cosa vuol che la dica? He talks seriously of returning to her, and may if he finds none of equal rank to be got as cheaply – She cost him nothing & was thus invaluable.[18]

Even supposing Mary Shelley's cynicism to be accurate, Byron could not just walk out on Teresa, in part because their relationship was the longest he had ever had, and he felt loyal despite his indifference.

Moreover, Teresa's relationship with him had compromised not only her but her father, her brother, and their entire household. The fact that they were part of his entourage had brought down

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[17] *The Journal of the Hon. Henry Edward Fox (afterwards fourth and last Lord Holland) 1818-1830*, edited by the Earl of Ilchester (n.p.: Thornton Butterworth Limited 1923), p. 298.

[18] *The letters of Mary Woolstonecraft Shelley*, edited by Betty T. Bennett (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1980), Vol. I, p. 349.

upon them the persecuting wrath of the Vatican, the Austrians, the Tuscan government, of any authority who thought Byron a dangerous firebrand and irreligious radical. When the secret police heard that he was a "romantic", they assumed that the word's roots were "Roma antica", and that he was therefore a republican. He was too famous to be persecuted, and was an English milord to boot, so they persecuted his loved ones instead, to force him from their states. When Teresa's family had been banished from Ravenna in 1821, he stayed there ostentatiously (reading Walter Scott), in theory to show that he wouldn't be bullied, but in fact (I think) as a way of keeping away from her for a while.

Teresa was at once a strong personality, and a self-deceived sentimentalist. Only a Noble Cause, he knew, would do for an excuse to cover up the fact (which she could not not have sensed) that he was now bored by her. What Nobler Cause could there be than Fighting for Greek Independence? His decision to go to Greece might free her and her relatives from persecution. If this was his plan, it didn't work. Teresa's brother Pietro Gamba came with him to Greece, and eventually died there too. Her father, Ruggiero Gamba, was arrested and imprisoned for seven years.

Whether or not he was, as Fiona Macarthy's recent biography would have us believe, really homosexual, and only went to bed with those scores and scores of Venetian women just to fill in the time, we have to admit that it was some years since he had satisfied the other side of his sexual nature, and experienced what he certainly relished, namely, the adoration of young boys and young men, who formed his worshipping gang, his loving tribe, his loyal clan, of the kind he'd had at Harrow. In Greece, he thought, he'd be able to recapture the bliss that he had, in 1811, experienced with the pupils at the Capuchin convent in Athens. But...

> ... now at thirty years my hair is gray
> (I wonder what it will be like at forty?
> I thought of dyeing it the other day)[19]

[19] Byron, *Don Juan* I, 196 1-3.

In Greece he fell in love with the beautiful Loukas Chalandritsanos, dressed him in fine clothes, loaded him with presents, and worried about his safety: all to no avail. Loukas, even if he knew what was going on, gave him no inkling of affection. Lines from another poem tell it all:

> And when convulsive throes denied my breath
> The fainted utterance to my fainting thought –
> To thee – to thee – even in the grip of death
> My Spirit turned – Ah! oftener than it ought.
>
> Thus much and more – and yet thou lov'st me not,
> And never will – Love dwells not in our will –
> Nor can I blame thee – though it be my lot –
> To strongly – wrongly – vainly – love thee still. –[20]

Byron had failed as a father both to Ada and Allegra, and as a husband to Annabella. He had failed as a heterosexual lover to Teresa. In Italy he had failed as an Italian insurrectionist, being able to find no fellows to insurrect with. Here, in Greece, he faced failure as a Greek insurrectionist, and as a homosexual lover too. Is it any wonder that, when he became ill, his resistance was low? All he had left by March 1824 were drunken bouts with William Parry, the fire-master; cruel jokes played on his servants; and conversations with Lyon, his Newfoundland dog. Here is Parry:

> With Lyon Lord Byron was accustomed not only to associate, but to commune very much, and very often. His most usual phrase was, "Lyon, you are no rogue, Lyon;" or "Lyon," his Lordship would say, "thou art an honest fellow, Lyon." The dog's eyes sparkled, and his tail swept the floor, as he sat with his haunches upon the ground. "Thou art more faithful than men, Lyon; I trust thee more." Lyon sprang up, and barked and bounded round his master, as much as to say, "You may trust me, I will watch you actively on every side." "Lyon, I love thee,

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[20] Lord Byron, *The complete poetical works*. Edited by Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1980-93), Vol. 7, p. 82.

> thou art my faithful dog!" and Lyon jumped and kissed his master's hand, as an acknowledgement of his homage. In this sort of mingled talk and gambol, Lord Byron passed a good deal of time, and seemed more contented, more calmly self-satisfied, on such occasions, than almost on any other. In conversation and in company he was animated and brilliant; but with Lyon and in stillness he was pleased and perfectly happy.[21]

Small wonder then that when Drs Bruno and Millingen pressed him for the umpteenth time to be bled, he gave in. "Come:" he said. "I see you are a d——d set of butchers. Take away as much blood as you will; but have done with it."

He seems to be blaming them; but surely this is the reason why he had really come to Greece. He'd come to Greece in order to die. But he had hoped for a more magnificent death than this – dying of Mediterranean tic fever, an illness picked up from close proximity to dogs.[22]

* * *

There are several reports of the clinical manner in which Byron approached his supposed destiny in Greece. Lady Blessington records this:

> There is something so exciting in the idea of the greatest poet of his day sacrificing his fortune, his occupations, his enjoyments, – in short, offering up on the altar of Liberty all the immense advantages which station, fortune and genius can bestow, that it is impossible to reflect on it without admiration; but when one hears this same person calmly talk of the worthlessness of the people he proposes to make those sacrifices for, the loans he means to advance, the uniforms he intends to wear, entering into petty details, and always with perfect *sang froid*, one's admiration evaporates, and the action loses all its charms,

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[21] William Parry, *The last days of Lord Byron* (London 1825), p. 75.
[22] See Raymond Mills, "The last illness of Lord Byron", *The Byron Journal* 28 (2000) 56-7.

> though the real merit of it still remains. Perhaps Byron wishes to show that his going to Greece is more an affair of *principle* than of *feeling*, and as such, more entitled to respect, though perhaps less likely to excite warmer feelings. However this may be, his whole manner and conversation on the subject are calculated to chill the admiration such an enterprise ought to create, and to reduce it to a more ordinary standard.[23]

We have an amusing example of his "whole manner and conversation" in the following, which is from Trelawny, and is a three-way conversation between him, Fletcher, his valet, and Captain Scott of the *Hercules*, the ship which took him on his second voyage:

> "What is your master going to such a wild country of savages for? My mate was at Corfu, and he says an officer of the garrison crossed over to Albania to shoot, and was shot by the natives; they thought the brass buttons on his jacket were gold."
>
> "When I was there," said Fletcher, "the Turks were masters, and kept them down."
>
> CAPTAIN: What may the country be like?
>
> FLETCHER: Bless you! there is very little country; it's all rocks and robbers. They live in holes in rocks, and come out like foxes; they have long guns, pistols, and knives. We were obliged to have a guard of soldiers to go from one place to another.
>
> CAPTAIN: How did you live?
>
> FLETCHER: Like dogs, on goat's flesh and rice, sitting on the floor in a hovel, all eating out of one dirty round dish, tearing the flesh to pieces with their fingers; no knives, no forks, and only two or three horn spoons. They drink a stuff they call wine, but it tastes more of turps than grapes, and is carried about in stinking goat-skins, and every one drinks from the same bowl; then they have coffee, which is pounded, and they drink it, dregs and all, without sugar. They are all smoking

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[23] Marguerite, Countess of Blessington, *Conversations of Lord Byron*. Edited with an introduction and notes by Ernest J. Lovell, Jr (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1969), pp. 85-6.

> when not sleeping; they sleep on the floor in their clothes and shoes; they never undress or wash, except the ends of their fingers, and are covered with lice and fleas. The Turks were the only respectable people in the country. If they go, Greece will be like bedlam broke loose. It's a land of lies, and lice, and fleas, and thieves. What my lord is going there for the Lord only knows, I don't.
>
> Then seeing his master was looking, he said, "And my master can't deny what I have said is true."
>
> "No," said Byron, "to those who look at things with hog's eyes, and can see nothing else. What Fletcher says may be true, but I didn't note it. The Greeks are returned to barbarism; Mitford says the people were never anything better. Nor do I know what I am going for. I was tired of Italy, and liked Greece, and the London Committee told me I should be of use, but of what use they do not say nor do I see."[24]

Note the way in which Byron agrees with Fletcher even as he despises him. Parry reports that Byron said of the London Greek Committee, whom, indeed, he allowed to persuade him to go to Greece in the first place, that "All their deeds have been only talk and foolery."[25] Parry further writes of the Greek Loan of £800,000, raised by the Committee in February 1824:

> While the loan was negotiating, and after it was contracted for, he [Byron] frequently congratulated himself that he had never written a single line to induce his countrymen to subscribe to it; and that they must hold him perfectly guiltless, should they afterwards lose their money, of having contributed in any way to delude them.[26]

To Charles Napier, English Resident on Cephalonia, Byron wrote:

> ... fail or not fail I can hardly be disappointed – for I believed myself on a fool's errand from the outset – [27]

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[24] Trelawny, *Records of Shelley, Byron*, pp. 228-9.
[25] Parry, *The last days*, p. 192.
[26] Parry, *The last days*, p. 168.
[27] *BLJ* XI, 20.

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In whatever mindset Byron went to Greece in 1823, once he got there he became still more flinty-eyed. On Cephalonia he wrote, in his journal:

> Whoever goes into Greece at present should do it as M[rs] Fry went into Newgate – not in the expectation of meeting with any especial indication of existing probity – but in the hope that time and better treatment will reclaim the present burglarious and larcenous tendencies which have followed this General Gaol delivery. – When the limbs of the Greeks are a little less stiff from the shackles of four centuries – they will not march so much "as if they had gyves on their legs". – – At present the Chains are broken indeed; but the links are still clanking – and the Saturnalia is still too recent to have converted the Slave into a sober Citizen. – The worst of them is that (to use a coarse but the only expression that will not fall short of the truth) they are such d——d liars; – there never was such an incapacity for veracity shown since Eve lied in Paradise. – One of them found fault the other day with the English language – because it had so few shades of a Negative – whereas a Greek can so modify a No – to a yes – and vice versa – by the slippery qualities of his language – that prevarication may be carried to any extent and still leave a loop-hole through which perjury may slip without being perceived. – – –
>
> This was the Gentleman's own talk – and is only to be doubted because in the words of the Syllogism – "Now Epimenides was a Cretan". But they may be mended by and bye. –[28]

Whenever, in a letter or journal, Byron casts himself as Falstaff, we know he's stressed. The line about the Greeks walking as if they'd "had gyves on their legs" is from *Henry IV I*, IV ii 40 app.: "the villains march wide betwixt their legs, as if they had gyves on." It makes Byron into Falstaff, and the Greeks Falstaff's followers, "food for powder", of whom the jail has just

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[28] *BLJ* XI, 32-3.

been emptied. Not a dignified image. Not one to convey the idea of discipline or dedication.

One reason for the Greeks' deification of Byron was that it was (in addition to the Frankish vampire doctors who surrounded him) Greek mendacity, Greek greed, Greek dissension, and above all Greek indifference to the ideals which Greeks now claim he inspired in them, which lowered his resistance, drove him to despair and killed him. Their cult of Byron is a massive act of denial. Perhaps there's an element of atonement in it: but I don't think they'd admit that there was anything to atone for.

It may be argued that it's not a person's words and motives that make them worthy to be made into an icon, but what they do – but the problem in Byron's case is that, apart from spending a lot of money, he did nothing. He saw no action and enabled no political compromises. His gesture – for that was all his second Greek expedition was – had no tangible result except his elevation to the status of an icon.

There were other Englishmen who contributed a lot more to the Greek struggle than Byron. You have the three Cs. You have Church. You have Cochrane. Last but not least you have Codrington, whose combined allied fleet destroyed the Turkish fleet at Navarino and who set the seal on the whole affair. But none of them were sexy, none of them were poets, and none of them died at the correct time. Byron is to Greece what Princess Di is to us – a figure you worship because, as Byron puts it at the start of *Don Juan*, you "want a hero" – he's someone to whom you erect statues and lay out fountains because you can't think of a foreigner more suitable, and have no local characters whom all agree would fit the bill.