

Byron and the Olympic Spirit

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N15.1 Eris

*Your old philosophers
Beheld mankind, as mere spectators of
The Olympic games. When I behold a prize
Worth wrestling for, I may be found a Milo.
[Lord Byron The Deformed Transformed part II, ii, 55-58]*

*'What then will be the right way to live? A man should
spend his whole life "at play"'. Plato The Laws VII 803.*

*'I [Wisdom - Sophia] was with him forming all things and
was delighted every day, playing before him at all times.
Playing in the world and my delights were to be with the
children of men' Proverbs VIII, 30]*

*'Struggle and the joy of victory were recognised—and
nothing so distinguishes the Greek world from ours as
much as the colouring, so derived, of individual ethical
concepts, for example Eris and envy.' Nietzsche Homer's
Contest.*

Napoleon is supposed to have said at the end of his life: 'il n'y a que deux puissances dans le monde, le sabre et l'esprit...à la longue, le sabre est toujours battu par l'esprit' ('there are only two forces in the world, the sword and the spirit, and in the end, the sword is always conquered by the spirit.') At the end of his life, Lord Byron took up the sword in order to awake and to serve the spirit of Greece. He was a man of the sword and was, and is, more powerfully, a spirit. Hero and poet. He was also a scholar of languages including Greek and knew that words have histories.

My talk today has been translated into Greek by Professor Byron Raizis and it will come out a little differently despite Byron Raizis's brilliance as a translator. 'Spirit', for instance, is 'pneuma' in Greek. This key word for the conference has a complex history. For the ancient Greeks, pneuma was not immaterial but, as it were, something diaphanous, breath, wind, but still material in some sense. You could not use it, for instance, of the dead and it was not as high a word as psyche, soul. But then the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in Alexandria, and the word chosen to translate the Hebrew word ruakh was pneuma. Ruakh itself originally meant something material but it had become applied to the inner life of man and of the available terms, it was the highest; nephesh, a kindred word was a lower term and it was this word that became translated as psyche. The Septuagint was, of course, the text of the Old Testament used as a reference throughout the New Testament, hence when St Paul meditates on the human person, he produces an opposition between living in, for, and by the spirit, pneuma, rather than the flesh, sarx, which would not have been possible for an Ancient Greek. In the same way, St Paul thinks of the human person as made up of body (soma), soul (psyche) and spirit (pneuma). 'Spirit' is now the highest word of the three and lends itself to extended metaphoric use. It is this extended sense that becomes general via Christianity. Napoleon therefore, without thinking too hard about it, could elevate the power of the 'spirit' above the sword. Hence it is that we, too, can talk meaningfully about 'the Olympic Spirit' just as Byron had a similar usage when talking in English Bards and Scotch Reviewers (888) of 'The Glorious Spirit of the Grecian Muse' or when he says of Haidee's father, Lambro, in Canto III (434) of Don Juan:

*But something of the spirit of old Greece
Flash'd o'er his soul a few heroic rays.*

Byron here, like St Paul, elevates spirit above the soul on which it flashes. The Ancient Greeks who went to the Olympics would not know what we were talking about if we talked, like Byron, of 'the spirit of old Greece' or, as we have throughout the conference, of 'the Olympic spirit', for they had a different vocabulary and a different theology from that of St Paul. But as we will see, there are links between them.

I find it very hard to know what the spirit of the original Olympic Games quite was. We do not think of Games or athletics or competition as religious in themselves but the Ancient Greeks did and St Paul and the ascetic tradition picked up these ideas and transferred them to a life of heroic virtue and asceticism leading to a crown of glory rather than to a victor's laurel wreath (Philippians). This indeed is what spiritual life— life according to the spirit— is for Orthodox and Catholic tradition. The heroes of the Olympic Games whose fame is sung by Pindar and whose physical beauty doubtless inspired the sculpture of Phidias and Praxiteles are displaced by, and yet are the prototypes of, the immortal beauty of the saints of the Church, those spiritual athletes whose holy icons we see all around us in Greece.

Byron was lame in one leg and would certainly have been excluded from the original Olympic Games (his only chance of winning a wreath would have been as owner, or even rider, in a chariot- race) and, of course, Byron was no saint either. How then can we relate Byron to the Olympic Spirit? It has been the problem for all of us in this Conference and yet perhaps we have not found it to be such a problem after all.

Nietzsche disliked the rather saccharin image of the Ancient Greeks as Enlightenment goody goodies which had become not uncommon by the end of the eighteenth century. Nietzsche insisted, on the contrary, that we could not understand the Greeks unless we understood the importance to them of the concept of 'eris' or 'strife'. It was strife between rival goddesses induced by the goddess Eris herself that led to Paris's choice of Aphrodite and so to the choice of Helen, and so in turn to the nine-year strife of the Trojan War sung in the Iliad, which led to the strife of Odysseus against Poseidon to return to Ithaca and to conquer the suitors—the strife sung in the Odyssey—and to the strife arising out of that other great returner from the Trojan war—Agamemnon whose murder and its cycle of revenge led to Aeschylus' Oresteia. Such strife is terrible but the pulse of Ancient Greek Art and of that whole magnificent culture beats to it. After all, Aeschylus entered his tragedies into a competition—a form of eris—to win a prize in a kind of aesthetic Olympics. The Booker Prize for the Best Novel of the Year is its diminished descendant. Nietzsche, rather sneeringly, sets up this model of heroic and energetic culture in order to do down that of Christianity which is founded on the Passion of the humble Christ rather than on the action of heroes, and, I suppose, that he is partly right. But if we read that great and founding text of Western culture, the Rule of Saint Benedict, we find that Benedict talks of a both a bad and good zeal and that his monks should strive to outdo one another in obedience and love. Zeal or 'zelos' was one of the retainers of Zeus. The phrase Benedict uses— 'certatim impendant'— derives from certatio, a word meaning to strive or combat as in a battle or in an arena.

The Olympic Games are parent both of Nietzsche's idea of heroic strife as the foundation of culture and also of the ascetic and ethical imperatives of Saint Benedict whom Pope Paul VI declared patron of Europe. Olympia stands closer to Mount Athos than we might at first think. It is because the Games are, in a way, parent of both these strands in European culture that we can find both of them in Lord Byron. For the Games mediate between War and Peace and the values we attach necessarily to both.

The Olympic Games, most seem to agree, originated in practice for the arts of war. And yet Games are not war and the condition of the early Olympics was a declaration of peace throughout all Greek-speaking territories: a truce which the modern Olympics is trying to revive. The Games mediated—in a manner which is difficult for us to comprehend—between a humble religious acknowledgement of the power and majesty of

the Gods and a celebration of human beauty and spirit. The gods do not play games amongst themselves though they occasionally intervened in human ones. They do not need to. We need to because in Games, as in Art, we momentarily enter a godlike space where the customary opposition between order and freedom wholly disappears. As Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, has recently observed in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*: 'play, though it has a meaning, does not have a purpose'. In another way, despite the freedom which they celebrate as their condition, the Games are rooted in a sense of the holiness of a particular place and time (for the Greeks indeed measured their time from the First Olympics) but they acknowledge a transcendent sense of the luminosity of Being and a parallel, if shadowed, brightness in human beings; for the Olympics are in some measure a showing of what the best amongst us mortals can achieve in the sight of the Immortals in a space of freedom comparable to theirs. The modern Olympics are mainly for the spectators but the true spectators of the original Games were the gods themselves seeing and delighting in a human best—and that best still lives as spirit in the words of Pindar and the still surviving relics of that incomparable ancient sculpture. It lives too in the words of Lord Byron.

Perhaps the first thing to point to in the person and life of that very extraordinary man, Lord Byron, is his capacity to mediate, to stand in the midst of mediations of all kinds, and most especially perhaps, those between body and spirit. We all know of his prowess at swimming, and boxing, and pistol-shooting, and riding. They seem minor things to which biographers, in their anxiety to make psychological guesses at Byron's interior, do not pay much attention, but they are not. It is these activities which provide a bridge between the Byron the poet and Byron the hero. If we think of Byron sweeping down on horseback in the late afternoon along the beach of the Venetian Lido alone or with Shelley or some other companion, as he had done in Athens and was to do here in Missolonghi too, then we should recall Shelley's tribute to Byron's conversation as he rode and remember that he must have worked out on those horse-rides the substance of what he was going to write (*Don Juan* for instance) in the small hours of the morning later on. When he reviewed his Suliotes in Missolonghi on horseback, the poet and the hero are one. Pindar would have understood this but I am not sure that we do. In the same way, we can understand Byron's intense love of peace, his horror of the horrors of war and yet his obvious delight in accounts of ancient and modern battles and his identification with the Greek military cause and find no contradiction here if we recall that Athena's war-like stance and habitual helmet (the prototype of the great helmet that Byron took to Greece with him) are not opposed to her emblem and gift to men—the olive tree which is the emblem of peace.

I have set up two terms. One is *eris* or strife. It is the face of the Olympic Games which derives from and is still in close proximity with war and its heroisms. Here we find Byron the hero. The other term is play. Following Huizanga's famous book *Homo Ludens*, let us call this *ludus*. It is the face of the Olympic Games which links it to the reconciliation of order and freedom in Art's inherently self-sufficient playfulness. Here we find Byron the poet. Curiously Art here comes close to worship or *liturgeia* which, as Romano Guardini noted, has elements of play in it, and by this strange route we can again understand, or almost so, the religious nature of the original Games. By another paradox, *ludus* which involves freedom as its condition of operation, links naturally with what the strife of Byron as a hero was directed towards—freedom in general and especially the freedom of Hellas. Politics and poetry share common ground. If we ask this conference's question then about Byron and the Olympic Spirit, we will find our answer in these two words, Greek and Latin, from the East and from the West—*eris* and *ludus*. Let us begin with *eris* and some words of Byron on Homer :

*Next rose the martial Homer, Epic's prince,
And Fighting's been in fashion ever since; (Hints from Horace, 679-80)*

Byron here burlesques the strife of heroes and its association with poetry from the beginning but we know of course that this is only half the story. Byron liked a good scrap. He did so out of the oppositional energies of his life-flow from his earliest years but also out of his conscience and sense of justice. You can hear both of these in these celebrated lines from Don Juan (IX, stanza 23, 185-89):

*And I will war, at least in words (and---should
My chance so happen---deeds) with all who war
With Thought;---and of Thought's foes by far most rude,
Tyrants and Sycophants have been and are.
I know not who may conquer:*

Byron says that he will war 'in words (and should /My chance so happen—deeds)'. He sees poetry itself sometimes as a sort of eris and within the arena of poetry he often shows combats of various kinds—man against bull in Cadiz, man against man in the Coliseum or in the battles that he necromantically conjures up in Thrasimene, Ismael, and Corinth, and fictionally imagines in The Giaour and at the end of Lara, or that he sees everywhere around him as Childe Harold travels through the Spanish Peninsular at war. His poetical eris with Southey and with Wordsworth, and his critical eris with Bowles over the status of Alexander Pope, matches his political eris with Wellington and Castlereagh or even with the Tsar of all the Russias whom he calls 'the bald-coot bully Alexander' (XIV, 83, 657). There is yet another kind of eris in the strife, albeit polite, between the Archangel Michael and Lucifer for the soul of George III.

Byron is intensely interested, too, in that other kind of strife which transforms the Olympic games into the ascetic warfare of the spirit against daemons and 'cogitationes'. Byron puts both words together in his phrase 'the demon Thought' in 'Song to Inez' (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage I). Thus in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage (III, 33-34 lines 296-301) he says:

*'Tis Solitude should teach us how to die;
It hath no flatterers---Vanity can give
No hollow aid; alone---man with his God must strive:*

*Or, it may be, with Demons, who impair
The strength of better thoughts, and seek their prey
In melancholy bosoms---*

Byron's Tasso, in his 'Lament of Tasso', is persecuted by a demon and of course Manfred is the great spiritual athlete of the entire Romantic movement who has the power to triumph over the demons who subdue Faust. Manfred is no Christian but he is unintelligible if we have no sense of his kinship with the hermit whom Byron describes in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage (I 235-36):

*More blest the life of godly Eremite,
Such as on lonely Athos may be seen*

Manfred, of course, does not lead a blessed life and kneels not to God for he says: (II iv, 41-2)

*I sunk before my vain despair, and knelt
To my own desolation.*

Yet would not one of those hermits who still live in Moses's wilderness by the ancient Orthodox monastery of St Catharine in the Sinai desert and climb the mountain daily as a spiritual exercise, understand Manfred when he says(II, ii, 60-63):

*with the thoughts of men,
held but slight communion; but instead,
My joy was in the wilderness,---to breathe
The difficult air of the iced mountain's top,*

This yearning to be tested in the wilderness or the holy mountain is spiritual eris and Byron understands it more than most poets for, though 'a citizen of the World', Byron too knows how to find his 'joy in the wilderness.' Manfred describes himself as one who 'champions human fears'. The word 'champion' means one who fights in an arena. Manfred and spiritual athleticism may seem a long way from the spirit of the Olympic Games but, if we understand the tradition of spirit, they are not.

If we turn from eris to ludus we might expect a simple opposition. But Byron is rarely simple. We find the two vocabularies, and the two attitudes mixed together in his poetic thinking. For example, when he describes the bull-fight, which is after all an occasion of strife between man and beast, he says of the bull (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage II, 823):

And now the Matadores around him play,

There is undoubtedly bitterness in this sense of ludus carried into eris. Bitterer still, of course, is the death of the gladiator in the Coliseum who, as he dies, imagines his children in Dacia (Rumania) (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage IV, 1265-7):

*There were his young barbarians all at play,
There was their Dacian mother---he, their sire,
Butchered to make a Roman holiday.*

His children are in the freedom of play in his dying imagination whilst he himself is dying in another involuntary game designed to entertain the Romans as a holiday ludus. Byron is clearly making us bear the here unacceptable proximity of ludus and eris. At times, he almost seems to come close to a not dissimilar bitterness when he talks about his writing of Don Juan (XIV, 8,58-64):

*"Fling up a straw, 'twill show the way the wind blows";
And such a straw, borne on by human breath,
Is Poesy, according as the mind glows;
A paper kite, which flies 'twixt life and death,
A shadow which the onward Soul behind throws:
And mine's a bubble not blown up for praise,
But just to play with, as an infant plays.*

Play here is ambiguous—something delightful and revelatory but also something trivialising. Later he broadens this into a larger sense of play and a larger claim (XV, 473-80):

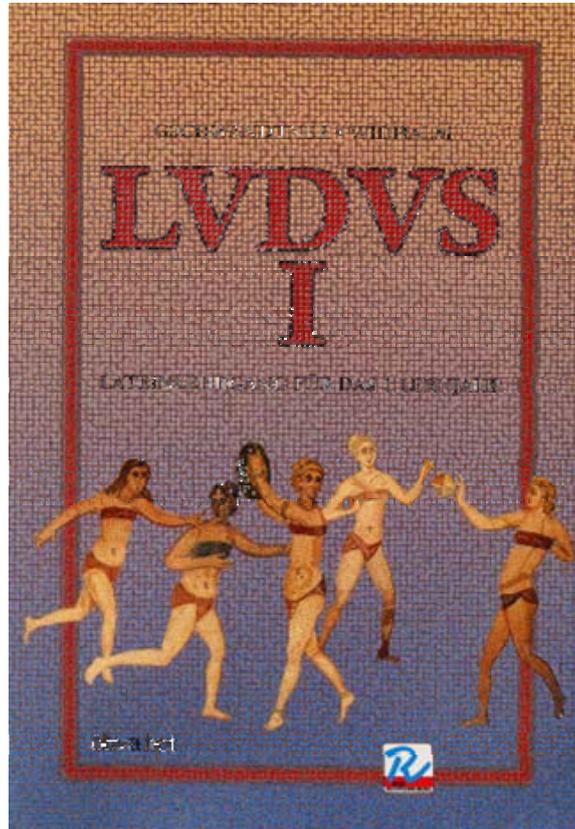
*I say, in my slight way I may proceed
To play upon the surface of Humanity.
I write the world, nor care if the world read,
At least for this I cannot spare its vanity.
My Muse hath bred, and still perhaps may breed
More foes by this same scroll: when I began it, I
Thought that it might turn out so---now I know it,
But still I am, or was, a pretty poet. Stanza 60*

A witty and thoughtful stanza. Byron is a pretty poet who plays upon the surface of humanity (for play knows only surfaces, that is why it delights us) but here the implication is that humanity is no more than its surface and that if Byron exposes this and thus does not spare the vanity of the world then ludus will turn into eris since his writing will gain him 'foes' against whom he must strive. Indeed he says that this is happening as he writes. 'I write the world' has here the eristic overtones of 'I write things as they are and I don't care what you think about me', in effect it means 'I take on the world'.

If we concluded here, we would get the emphasis wrong for the final point is that in the midst of such strife Byron claims to be 'a pretty poet' and, of course, that is exactly what he is. Ludus predominates over eris as it should, or rather transforms it into itself as

the Olympic Games do. He communicates a relaxed mastery in his self-consciousness of the effects his writing is having as he writes it ('this same scroll'); this is the idiom of a champion; his serious play upon the surface of humanity is vindicated by a different kind of play—'just to play with as an infant plays'. Byron is always in earnest but is never earnest. Great art never is. It is games that teach us this indispensable human art. Byron puts it like this (Don Juan 12, 95-96):

*In play, there are two pleasures for your choosing---
The one is winning, and the other losing.*



Might we call that 'the Olympic spirit'? Perhaps not quite. Ancient athletes had an intense desire to win and Pindar never praises those who come second. In poetry too as in the life of spiritual asceticism, only the best will do—we celebrate Homer or St John Climachus and we don't hear of the runners-up. And Byron, after all, never won a battle for the Greeks. He died unexpectedly in bed not in the midst of strife. Missolonghi itself was, not long after his death, ravaged and destroyed. And yet Napoleon was right: the sword is conquered by the spirit and the pneuma of Lord Byron was and remains Olympian. Byron did not fail the Greeks and the Greeks recognised their spirit in his spirit, in the freedom which attached to Byron's sense of play and to his sense of fair play, that ineradicable striving for justice which promotes what the ancient Greeks knew as eris agathon, a good strife— a version of Benedict's zelus bonus or 'good zeal'. Of Byron we can say using his own words: 'something of the spirit of Old Greece flash'd o'er his soul'. It is out of that intention to redirect the energies of eris within the creative peace of ludus that the Modern Olympic Games were reconstituted. It is good that we have held this conference on 'Byron and the Olympic Spirit' so close to the opening of the Olympics in Athens and I am honoured that you have invited me to give this lecture to it.