

The new Prometheus: why Byron went to fight in the Greek Revolution

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There's nowhere better to start than with Byron's first visit to Greek lands. He first saw Greece in the autumn of 1809, aged just 21. Altogether, his travels in what was then called European Turkey took him to Preveza, Ioannina, Tepelena, Vostitsa (Aigion), Patras, Athens, Smyrna, Ephesus, Troy, Constantinople, and Athens again. The longest time he spent in Athens. From August 1810 until he left Greece in April 1811, he lodged at the Capuchin monastery that in those days occupied Plateia Lysikratous in Plaka. The year and a half that he spent in that part of the world represent the most formative single experience of Byron's life. As he himself declared many years later, on the eve of his return:

I was happier in Greece – than I have ever been before – or since and if I have ever written [poetry] (as the world says I have) but which they will pardon my doubting) – it was in Greece or off Greece.

The poetic career simply couldn't have happened without the second canto of *Childe Harold*, which describes these travels. Generations of readers have thrilled to lines such as these, addressed to the Greek landscape:

And yet how lovely in thine age of woe,

Land of lost gods and godlike men! art thou! ... (II
801-2)

Yet are thy skies as blue, thy crags as wild ... (II
819)

Where'er we tread, 'tis haunted, holy ground... (II
828)

Byron was one of the first European travellers to perceive Greece and its people not just as relics of a distant past, but as a present-day problem that in the future could call for a political resolution.

This realisation brings him to contemplate the political reality and prospects for the Greeks. What Byron thought at the time of that first visit, and shortly afterwards when he published the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, is not at all what you might expect. On the political prospects for Greece he had this to say:

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

As for *ancient* Greece, Byron thought of ruins as reminders of human mortality. A metaphor that is memorably

expressed in that same canto compares the ruins of ancient Greek civilisation to the grave or relic of a loved person:

Cold is the heart, fair Greece! that looks on thee,
Nor feels as lovers o'er the dust they lov'd.

The metaphor itself was not new. But Byron returned to it while his poem was in press. Quite suddenly, and within a few months of each other, several people close to him died. They included his mother and a younger male friend from Cambridge days. These events caused him to add some stanzas to the poem, that extend the conventional metaphor and add a real emotional depth:

There, thou! – whose love and life together fled,
Have left me here to love and live in vain –
Twin'd with my heart, and can I deem thee dead,
When busy Memory flashes on my brain?
Well – I will dream that we may meet again ...

These lines were written in October 1811, while *Childe Harold* was being prepared for press. From that time on, a fundamental preoccupation of Byron's poetry is mortality. Again and again throughout the rest of his life, he would return to the idea of Greece – at once as the place where he had lived life to its fullest, and as the grimmest of all reminders, in the form of the ancient ruins, that everything in human life passes away.

The year after *Childe Harold* was published, Byron returned to the metaphor of the ruins of classical Greece as a corpse, but this time he gave it an original and macabre twist. In the fragmentary narrative poem ‘The Giaour’ (1813), the poet-narrator speaks near the beginning:

’Tis Greece – but living Greece no more!
 So coldly sweet, so deadly fair,
 We start – for soul is wanting there.
 Hers is the loveliness in death,
 That parts not quite with parting breath;
 But beauty with that fearful bloom,
 That hue which haunts it to the tomb –
 ...
 Spark of that flame – perchance of heavenly birth –
 Which gleams – but warms no more its cherish’d
 earth!

What would it mean for that heavenly spark to be rekindled? The prologue to ‘The Giaour’ meditates on the possibility of a Greek revival. But the conclusion is pessimistic: “this will be a mournful tale” (165). Then, in a later episode of the same poem, Byron imagines all too vividly what might be the consequence if the “coldly sweet... deadly fair” corpse of once-living Greece were actually to be brought back to life. The Christian protagonist of the title is cursed by a Muslim mourner for a fellow-Muslim, whom the giaour has killed:

But first, on earth as Vampire sent,
 Thy corse shall from its tomb be rent;
 Then ghastly haunt thy native place,
 And suck the blood of all thy race,
 There from thy daughter, sister, wife,
 At midnight drain the stream of life;
 Yet loathe the banquet which perforce
 Must feed thy livid living corse ...

The vampire, or *vrykolakas*, is of course very much part of the modern Greek oral tradition. We know that Byron heard such stories while he was in Greece and was deeply impressed by them. He read, and quoted, in his notes to this poem, what the French traveller Tournefort had written on the subject. But here the traditional horror-story takes on a political dimension. Supposing that the dangerously fresh, 'fair' corpse of classical Greek civilisation *could* be brought back to life in the modern world, would not the result be a kind of living death, a monster like the *vrykolakas* of modern Greek superstition?

It's not, I think you will agree, the most philhellenic of sentiments. But Byron's philhellenism was of a very particular sort, and was arrived at by a roundabout, complex route.

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The vampire tradition makes a spectacular reappearance in Byron's biography, and also in the history of English Romantic literature, three years after 'The Giaour' was published. The

summer of 1816 Byron spent near Geneva, in Switzerland, in close proximity with the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, who would shortly become the second Mrs Shelley. Famously, during a summer of unseasonal rain, thunder and storms, on the shore of Lake Geneva, Byron, Shelley and Mary talked about ghosts and vampires. The most famous product of that summer's conversations was one of the classic horror stories of all time: *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, published a year and half later in 1818. The story has been told too often to repeat now, of how the assembled company spent the evenings reading ghost stories, until Byron decreed that they would each write one of their own. Less well known is that Byron, too, started a ghost-story. For setting he chose a place remembered from his Greek travels; the 'ghost' will turn out to be a *vrykolakas*. Obviously, in the conversations of those long rainy evenings, the modern Greek superstition about the living dead played its part.

Frankenstein has been read ever since as an awful warning against the presumption of modern science. But in the context of the conversations among Byron and the Shelleys during that summer of 1816, it may be that Mary was also giving terrifying form to an idea that the three of them must surely have discussed: suppose the long-dead civilisation of ancient Greece were miraculously to be restored to life, what would this 'modern' Greece be like? An awful warning, if so, also to the

philhellenes that both Byron and Shelley would become only a few years later.

Mary gave to her novel the subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*. There is no reference in the story to either Prometheus or to ancient mythology. But in this way, Mary subtly was able to indicate that her story is an updating, for the world of her own time, of the ancient myth in which the titan Prometheus creates the first human beings out of inanimate clay [Jean-Simon Berthelemy, 1802]. There are also plenty of hints in the novel itself that its hero, Victor Frankenstein, is modelled on both Shelley and Byron. Byron himself thought highly of the novel when he read it in Venice, where he had moved in the meantime. Not long afterwards, he took over the idea of the ‘modern Prometheus’ and applied it to himself, in the first political poem that he dedicated to his newly adopted country of Italy.

The poem is called ‘The Prophecy of Dante.’ It was written in June and July 1819 at Ravenna, where Dante is buried. Here for the first time, through the mouthpiece of the medieval Italian poet, Byron envisages a role for the poet as a prophet of national revolution: “Who toils for nations may be poor indeed / But free.”

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 ...

To “be the new Prometheus of new men” means to *create*, through poetry, a new generation of human beings. In context, that means a generation that will rally to the newly emerging cause of the emancipation of modern nations. The poet takes on the dangerous role of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, to become a ‘modern Prometheus’ and create new life – that is, a new generation of human minds attuned to a new way of political thinking, that today we call nationalism.

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I won’t take time, now, to explore the details of Byron’s involvement, over the next year and a half, in the political cause of Italian nationalism. In February 1821, after a build-up lasting almost a year, the prospects for revolution in Italy suddenly collapsed. Byron’s disillusionment was profound. In the bitterness of the immediate aftermath of February 1821, Byron does not seem even to have noticed other news, that began arriving in Italy early in April: news of another outbreak of revolution, this time in Greece. He must have learned of Ypsilantis’ rising in the Danubian principalities at the latest in early April, when news certainly reached Livorno and Pisa. Revolt in the Peloponnese was being reported in the western European press by the end of the month, if not before. We know that Byron was scouring all available newspapers, in several languages, for reports of the unauthorised stage production of

his play *Marino Faliero* in London. But it was not until 20 May that he so much as mentions the outbreak of revolution in the country that had once meant so much to him and would again. Tucked in among other news, he writes to his friend John Cam Hobhouse on that day, recalling the fact that they had once travelled together in Greece:

Our Greek acquaintances are making a fight for it – which must be a dilemma for the Allies – who can neither take their part (as liberals) nor help longing for a leg or a wing & bit of the heart – of Turkey.

B to Hobhouse, 20 May 1821

Realpolitik meets the language of the nursery dinner table. Two weeks later, he would add this, apparently as an afterthought, in a letter to his friend the Irish poet, Tom Moore: ‘The Greeks! what think you? They are my old acquaintances – but what to think I know not. Let us hope howsomever.’ There are no more references to Greece, in Byron’s surviving correspondence of that summer, until September. ‘What thinkst thou of Greece?’ he would ask his publisher, John Murray – without saying anything more on the subject. What *Byron* thinks of Greece there is no knowing.

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By that time, Byron had already been visited in Ravenna by his friend Shelley. The visit happened during August 1821, and its immediate consequence was that Byron was persuaded to move

from Ravenna to Pisa, where the Shelleys were living at the time. There, Shelley and Mary had been introduced at the end of 1820 to a Greek 'prince,' Alexandros Mavrokordatos. Shelley called him 'our turbaned friend.' Mavrokordatos was three years younger than Byron. Born near Constantinople into a privileged Phanariot family, he had served for a number of years as secretary to his uncle, Ioannis Karatzas, the hospodar of Wallachia. The family had fallen foul of the Ottoman authorities in 1818, and since the following year had established themselves at Pisa. Later Mavrokordatos would distinguish himself as one of the foremost political leaders of the Greek Revolution, with whom Byron would become closely associated in the last months of his life.

For six months Mavrokordatos had become a daily visitor to the Shelley household. He taught Mary Greek and she taught him English; they corresponded with some degree of intimacy. Shelley was inspired during the same months to compose his verse tragedy *Hellas*, an updating of Aeschylus' *Persians* to celebrate the revolution in Greece. He dedicated it to Mavrokordatos.

By the time Byron arrived on this scene, Mavrokordatos had already packed his bags for Greece. Mavrokordatos left Pisa at the end of June 1821; Byron arrived there at the beginning of November, and moved into the Casa Lanfranchi overlooking the river Arno in the centre of town. Shelley at once did his best to

introduce Byron to Greeks of his acquaintance, though the evidence suggests that Byron was still resistant. Byron never devoted a poem to the subject of the Greek Revolution, as Shelley had done with *Hellas*. Even during the months at Pisa his letters are silent on the subject. An early biographer who knew both poets in Pisa speculates: "It is impossible to tell how much this drama [*Hellas*] and the enthusiasm of Shelley, influenced the determination of Byron to devote his energies to the sacred cause." Shelley's influence on subsequent events is unmistakable, not least in Byron's firm adherence to Mavrokordatos among the rival contenders for the leadership of the 'cause' in Greece itself when he got there. But ironically what may have precipitated Byron into action was not anything that Shelley said, but the accident of Shelley's death by drowning off Viareggio on Monday 8 July 1822.

What happened next is one of the most bizarre episodes in English literary history. Shelley's body was washed ashore almost two weeks after the accident and immediately buried in quicklime on the orders of the quarantine authorities. Exactly whose idea it was to exhume the remains of Shelley and his companion on the fatal voyage and cremate them on the shore is oddly mysterious. The whole business was stage-managed by another larger-than-life character, Edward John Trelawny, an adventurer and fantasist who would go on to have a colourful career in Greece and over many years would retell the story of

that August day in 1822 with varying degrees of embroidery. One of the most interesting things about these narratives, it seems to me, is that Trelawny never claims the credit for having *conceived* the bizarre ritual, only its implementation. If he had thought he could have claimed the idea for his own, and have got away with it, he would certainly have done so. I think that means that the idea had to be Byron's.

Byron decided that his friend and fellow-poet would leave the world surrounded by the obsequies for a Homeric hero. As a result, the quarantine laws were duly observed, but in a way probably not seen on that shore since antiquity. As the bodies burned, wine was poured and spices scattered; it was in every particular a reconstruction of an ancient Greek warrior's funeral. So far as is known, this is the only account that Byron ever gave of the event, written to Tom Moore eleven days afterwards:

We have been burning the bodies of Shelley and Williams... You can have no idea what an extraordinary effect such a funeral pile has, on a desolate shore, with mountains in the back-ground and the sea before, and the singular appearance the salt and frankincense gave to the flame.

In the paragraph of the letter that immediately precedes this, Byron had described how he went swimming while the burning of the remains was going on, and got badly sunburned: "mid-day, under a broiling sun, the consequence has been a feverish

attack, and my whole skin's coming off... my shoulders and arms were equally St. Bartholomewed..." In other letters of the time, Byron refers again to his sunburn while swimming, but not to the cremation that was going on at the same time. In the letter to Moore, the sunburn comes first, then the cremations of Shelley and Williams. The association is unmistakable in the language: broiling, skin coming off, St Bartholomewed (the saint according to tradition was flayed alive). Byron identifies *himself* with the corpse in the fire. A postscript to the same letter contains the first reference to the Greek revolution in Byron's surviving correspondence for almost exactly a year: "I had, and still have, thought of South America, but am fluctuating between it and Greece. I should have gone, long ago, to one of them..."

I believe that this was the moment when Byron first began mentally preparing himself to go and fight in Greece. It was something he owed to the dead Shelley, who had himself idealised Greece. He had given his friend a hero's funeral, in the ancient manner. Imaginatively, Shelley had become an ancient Greek. Byron, who had been looking for so long for a cause beyond poetry that he could believe in – and who until now had been practically oblivious to current events in Greece – was at last beginning to find one.

In stanzas of his great comic epic, *Don Juan*, written within days after the cremation of Shelley's remains, Byron began to declare his new, emerging commitment:

And I will war, at least in words (and – should
My chance so happen – deeds) with all who war
With Thought...

He goes on to announce his 'downright detestation / Of every despotism in every nation', and then to articulate the newfound political principle that he had been grappling with, and had never until now been able to come to terms with, since at least his *carbonaro* days:

It is not that I adulate the people;
Without *me*, there are Demagogues enough ...
I wish men to be free
As much from mobs as kings – from you as me.

Byron's tribute to Shelley, finally, will be not a poem, but a war; a tribute not of words but ('should ... chance so happen') of deeds. *Against* the enemies of 'Thought.' *For* a new kind of freedom, that will somehow not be just a change of masters. This will be the essence of the war that, when the time finally comes, Byron will go to wage in Greece.

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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 – and he afterwards claimed that his hand had been forced because the chairman of the London Greek Committee had seen fit to publish part of his letter of support. But in fact the Committee was asking him for nothing more than “your kind and moral support in this good cause.” As late as 11 June, that is just over a month before Byron sailed from Genoa, the Committee’s expectations of his expedition were still extremely modest. The idea of going to fight in the revolution himself was all Byron’s.

In the final weeks before his departure from Genoa for Cephalonia on 16 July, a ship, the brig *Hercules*, was chartered for the voyage. Companions were gathered, including the picturesque and unreliable Trelawny. Three ceremonial helmets were commissioned, in what passed at the time for Homeric style. Whether or not this was consciously planned, Byron’s decision to fight in Greece was effectively the end of his poetic career. From now on, he would be a man of political action. In his letters and journals he writes like one. One of the most remarkable things about Byron during the remaining ten months of his life, is how consistent he was, how clear-sighted his grasp of the political issues at stake, of what it would actually take for the Greek “Cause” to triumph in the world of post-Napoleonic

Europe. From this time, he almost always referred to ‘the Cause’, with capital C.

What Byron did, once he got to Greece, what he thought, and how his intervention may have helped determine the outcome of the revolution, is another story, for another time. I’d like to end now by reflecting on the question I started with: why did he do it?

By the summer of 1823, Byron had cast himself in the role of the ‘new Prometheus.’ He, Byron, will succeed where Mary Shelley’s ‘modern Prometheus’, Victor Frankenstein had been doomed to heroic failure – just as so many ‘byronic’ heroes in his own poems had been doomed. He, Byron, will become the ‘new Prometheus of new men’ in Greece. He will act politically to engineer the birth of a new, and free, political entity: Modern Greece, upon the long-dead ruins of the old. Up to now, he has defied mortality as a poet. Now he needs to go beyond poetry and defy mortality in the real world, of action and politics. As a plan it is breathtaking in its arrogance and ambition. This is the essence of Romantic poetry translated into politics. No longer the old ‘*poetry* of politics’ from his Italian days – that was just game-playing. This would be the politics inherent in the poetry that Byron had been writing all his life: Romanticism in action.

That, finally, is why this story matters for an understanding of the history of Greece, too. What we call

Modern Greece was in part shaped by that gigantic Romantic ambition that came from western Europe: to defy natural processes and human limitations and build new life upon the 'sad relic' of an ancient civilisation in the modern world.