Lord Byron's Mediterranean World

Naji Oueijan

"The greater part of Greece is already my own, so that
I shall only go over my old ground, and look upon
my old seas and mountains, the only acquaintances
I ever found improve upon me."
(Lord Byron, *L&J*, II, 9)

About twenty years ago, my good friend, Prof. Byron Raizis, gave the theme, "Byron and the Mediterranean World," to the Twentieth International Byron Conference, Athens, 1994. I attended the conference but wished its title were "Byron's Mediterranean World," a title I use for my presentation for this 10th anniversary of the International Byron Student Conference, as it implies, if anything, that Lord Byron possessed rather than encountered the Mediterranean. I sincerely wish Prof. Raizis could attend our meeting; but somehow I feel his presence and send him a warm greeting from this sacred city of Messolonghi, which he loved not only because of Byron but also because of its people, especially Mrs. Rosa Florou or Mother Athena, as she has become known for her wisdom and strength!

Frederick Garber asserts: "In seeking to possess the world we come to possess an Other and then, in our turn, to be that which is possessed" (52). For Lord Byron, the Mediterranean was this Other. He possessed and was possessed by this marine Other which invaded his childhood dreams and later seasoned his literary career. For Byron, the Mediterranean World not only constituted a platform where cultures and civilizations blend to form the basis of Western civilization but also a living book of spiritual and intellectual healing and fulfillment. For many British and Western thinkers and scholars, the Mediterranean climes constituted an object of scholarly study and investigation. Dr. Samuel Johnson rightly claims: "The grand object of travelling is to see the shores of the Mediterranean. On those shores were the four great Empires of the world; the Assyrian, the Persian, the Grecian, and the Roman.—All our religion, almost all our law, almost all our arts, almost all that sets us above savages, has come to us from the shores of the Mediterranean" (Boswell's *Life of Johnson*). Upon visiting the peasant houses along the slopes of the Vesuvio and the Pompeian ruins, Wolfgang Goethe lived more the essence of the ancient Greek Civilization than after he read its Homeric books. Eighteenth century scholars' were eager to investigate and study the Mediterranean, while some 19th century scholars and

artists reverberate Byron's eagerness to blend with and live this Other, in person and in their works. To Byron and his fellow Romantics, the Mediterranean represented inspiring living muses which enabled Self through meditation and contemplation to cultivate the core layers constituting it. Wordsworth's dream of the Arab Bedouin in "Book V" of *The Prelude*, Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," Shelley's "Allastor: the Spirit of Solitude," and Keats's "The Grecian Urn" imply, if anything, the highest celebration of the Mediterranean muses.

Byron's determination to breathe the Mediterranean climes, especially those of Greece and Italy, cogitated his genuine eagerness for a new baptism, a spiritual and intellectual baptism beyond his Christian, Scottish, and British Self. His Mediterranean climes represented abodes for Self's regeneration and reformation and for liberation and self-fulfillment, all the reason why most of his poetic aquamania heroes, such as Childe Harold, Don Juan, and Corsair, are committed by design to sail the Mediterranean waters and breathe its climes.

Lord Byron's search for self-fulfillment and enlightenment involved a movement towards exploration of Self, Bernard Blackstone contends.[1]M.H. Abrams perceives this movement as inexorable to Self's formation and development through a drive along a spiral course in the world of Other and back to Self to rest on higher perceptive levels than the ones it has started with (183-187). The German thinker Hegel believes: "The spirit is this movement of becoming something other for itself" (qtd. Abrams, 183). Self's movement, then, outside its national terrains is necessary to perceive reality as limitless realities, which later are mirrored in a text, a poem. Albert Gerard contends:

> Romantic poetry and thought have their starting-point in the poet himself, in his aspirations and in his experience: on the one hand, his aspiration to a certain fullness of being, to a certain purity of spiritual life, to harmony and unity, a yearning toward the absolute…; on the other hand, a visionary experience which responds to this aspiration, and which assures the soul of the validity of its dream and of its hope. (260).

Richard Eldridge believes this move is possible through the experience of "an other" (119).Thus, *movement* or *mobility* for the Romantics is synonymous with self-formation and growth. Wordsworth's mobility covered the Lake District and some parts of France; Coleridge's, the Lake District, Malta, and Italy; Shelley's, some parts of Europe but mainly Italy; and Keats's, Scotland and Italy. Only Byron ventured beyond the traditional tour of the

---

1. See Bernard Blackstone's *The Lost Travellers* (London: 1962): 106.

Continent to the Eastern Mediterranean. For with Byron, mobility is a “thing of temperament and not of art” (Canto XVI, Stanza XCVIL, *Don Juan*, 107).

Lord Byron spent around eight years in the Mediterranean countries: two in Greece and six in Italy. His Mediterranean quests transcend the “communia” to an “iconization” of the Mediterranean Self. His process of reconstructing Self is the way in which an individual turns against traditions in an effort to experience liberation. “Man must break out of the cycle of his present existence into the enduring vision of an integral and entirely human world,” asserts M.H. Abrams (p. 195); and this was inborn in Byron’s personality. The Mediterranean’s “rolling blue” was to our poet an “old friend” with whom he retained his feelings and passions for Nature and “partly soften[ed] or subdue[ed]” his “other passions and resist[ed] or endure[d] those of others” (See Letter to Isaac Disraeli, Montenero, Villa Dupuy, near Leghorn, June 10th 1822).

On his first tour in 1809, Byron left his native land for a period of two years during which he briefly toured the Continent and resided under the Mediterranean skies in Athens. He visited and lived with the Albanians, Turks, and Greeks. His first impression of the Easterners was not quite favorable as he was by nature more in tune with Nature than with people. Two years before he left England, he wrote: “I do not wish to explore in treatises, what I may read in every work of Nature”; and just a few days before he sailed from Falmouth, he noted: “Thus ends my first Chapter” (*L&J*, I, 108 and 211 respectively). Byron was then quite certain that a new chapter in his life would begin; and indeed his knowledge of the world and his literary career began a new phase the moment he left his homeland. In the Fall of 1809, Byron and his traveling companions visited and stayed in no less than thirty Eastern towns and villages and bore the agonies of constant movement in Albania and Greece; but he still had time to write his first canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* between October and December. John Drinkwater belives this poem which made Byron famous overnight “was the work of a great writer who [in the East] had discovered himself” (155). After touring Albania, meeting with Ali Pasha, and going through a few adventures, Byron wrote to his mother declaring his wish never to return to England “unless compelled by absolute want” (*L&J*, I, 230). Byron discovered his true identity through his adventures and feats, which strenghtened affinity with the Mediterranean climes. The Mediterranean sea, its magesty, and its power took hold of him and his poetry. As he and his travelling companions were sailing on a Turkish frigate, a sudden sea-storm hit the ship’s sails and split them; but the ship landed safely on the coast of Suli. While the captain and all on board were wailing and praying, Byron wraped himself in his Albanian cloak and sat on the

deck contemplating and philosophazing.[2] Another incident gave Byron a sense of fullfilment and augmented his admiration of the sea: his swimming accross the Hellespont from Sestos to Abydos. Byron's bio-power was generated, and his physical, spiritual, and mental control boosted the human vitality he was looking for by reliving a well-known Mediterranean epic, *Hero and Leander*. A few days after his feat, he noted: "The Mediterranean and the Atlantic roll between me and Criticism, and the thunders of the [The *Edinburgh Review* which ridiculed Byron's *Hours of Idleness*] are deafened by the roar of the Hellespont" (*L&J*, I, 239). If the above statement tells anything it exposes his eagerness to distance himself from his homeland to breathe the Mediterraean. Katherine Kernberger notes that Byron seems to give the ocean "a beneficent role as savior" (236). The Mediterranean evergreen climate and its crystal blue skies and waters drove Byron to write to his friend, Robert Dallas:

> All climates and nations are equally interesting to me; that mankind are every where despicable in different absurdities; that the farther I proceed from your country the less I regret leaving it, and the only advantage you have over the rest of mankind is the sea, that divides you from your foes; your other superiorities are merely imaginary. I would become a citizen of the world. (*L&J*, I, 248)

Byron's words indicate his deep understanding of mankind, his satisfaction with his Mediterranean quests, his rejection of his homeland identity—"your country"—his perception of the sea as a protector against his foes, and his aspiration to gain a universal identity. When his travelling companion, John Cam Hobhouse, left Athens and returned to England, Byron wrote to his mother on July 30th, 1810: "I am very glad to be once more alone, for I was sick of my companion (not that he was a bad one) but because my nature leads me to solitude… the greater part of Greece is already my own, so that I shall only go over my old ground, and look upon my old seas and mountains, the only acquaintances I ever found improve upon me" (*L&J*, II, 9). According to Stephen Minta, Byron here gives "an image of belonging[ness]" (70). Solitude was Byron's means for contemplation and intellectual enlightenment, and for one whole year and until he returned back to England, he possessed and was possessed by Greece, its Mediterranean, and its mountains, which became his muses and healing acquaintances. Later in his life, his Mediterranean appeared at the beginning of his address to the ocean in *Childe Harold IV*:

---

2. See *L&J*, I, 229.

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society, where none intrudes,
By the deep Sea, and music in its roar;
I love not Man the less, but Nature more,
From these our interviews, in which I steal
From all I may be, or have been before,
To mingle with the Universe, and feel
What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal.
(Stz. 178)

It is clear here that Byron's love for Nature, especially for the Mediterranean and its climes, transcends his love for man, for the pleasure it affords on its "lonely shore" is that of the soul and mind, both of which blend the poet in full ecstasy with the "Universe." In the rest of the poem, Byron recalls the event of the Turkish frigate when he writes:

Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean—roll!
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;
Man marks the earth with ruin—his control
Stops with the shore; upon the watery plain
The wrecks are all thy deed, nor doth remain
A shadow of man's ravage, save his own,
When, for a moment, like a drop of rain,
He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan,
Without a grave, unknell'd, uncoffin'd, and unknown.
(Stz. 179)

Byron ends his hymn expressing his ultimate love to the ocean:

And I have loved thee, Ocean! and my joy
Of youthful sports was on thy breast to be
Borne, like thy bubbles, onward: from a boy
I wanton'd with thy breakers—they to me
Were a delight; and if the freshening sea
Made them a terror—'twas a pleasing fear,

> For I was as it were a child of thee,
> And trusted to thy billows far and near,
> And laid my hand upon thy mane—as I do here.
> (Stz. 184)

The stanza above is considered by Bernard Blackstone and Jerome McGann a return to Byron's childhood simplicity and youthful imagination and phantasies; while Michael Gassenmeier claims, and I concur with him, that the use of the present perfect in the first line of this stanza, "And I have loved thee, Ocean!" "does indeed denote a love for the sea that is as warm today as it was in the days of the poet's early youth" (194-195). I even believe that Byron's "For I was as it were a child of thee" implies, if anything, that the ocean represents to our poet, who "trusted" the ocean's "billows far and near," a father figure, who could speak apothegmaticaly to him. To Byron, the sublime of the Ocean lies in its limitless power which places man on the top of excitement and ecstasy, or on the precipice of inspiring "terror" and "pleasing fear":

> I wantoned with thy breakers—they to me
> Were a delight; and if the freshening sea
> Made them a terror—'twas a pleasing fear.
> (*Childe Harold*, IV, 184, 1650-53).

Frederick Garber confirms that Harold's travels in the world of Other is an expression of his yearning to possess the world, "to take it up within himself in the process of reading it" and this "serve[s] in the end to show him possessing more of self. … because the self needs to find unlikeness so that it can realize itself more fully" (26-27). Robert Lance Snyder believes that "Byron utilizes the travelogue genre [in *Childe Harold*] to distance himself from the phantasmagoria of the 'world' and achieve a fresh perceptive on himself" (1980, 26). It is a known fact that Byron would not have achieved a sense of personal and poetic wholeness and universality had he not being possessed by the Mediterranean climes. John Drinkwater contends: "The intervening two years [he spent in the East] were the most equable of his life, the least involved in conflict, and spent more than any others in unvexed observation" (137). Stephen Minta discusses the significance of Greece in shaping Byron's life and career. He notes that for Byron the "prizes of travel were all internal; whatever discoveries were to be made lay within, not around the next corner" (69). Minta goes on: "Athens in 1810 to 1811 was undoubtedly one of the best periods of Byron's life. He was freer than ever been before.

Fit and bronzed, a kind of sun-beaten idol to himself. Above all, young again in his imagination" (156). Indeed, under the Mediterranean sun, Byron was capable of possessing himself, of possessing the Mediterranean, and of being possessed by it. And after he reluctantly returned to England, Minta claims: "Greece was a memory of warm seas and blue skies. … In the East, it had all been so much easier. This nostalgia affected his whole sense of belonging, so that Greece remained latent within him as a possible return" (169).

Lord Byron did return to Greece. His second Mediterranean tour began on April 25, 1816, and ended with his death in Messolonghi, on April 19, 1824. He lived six years on the Mediterranean shores of Italy and wrote most of his great poems, *Manfred*, Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Beppo*, *Mazzeppa*, *The Prophecy of Dante*, *Marino Faliero*, *The Vision of Judgment*, *Sardanapalus*, *Cain*, *Heaven and Earth*, and most of the cantos of *Don Juan* besides other poems. The magnetic effect of the Mediterranean on him never subsided; this was clear in a letter to Thomas Moore from Ravenna, September 19, 1821, in which Byron confessed that his choice of Pisa as his residence rest on the fact that it is close to the Mediterranean, which he loved. In one of his letters, Byron confesses: "With those countries, and events connected with them, all my really poetical feelings begin and end" (*L&J*, V, 45).

Finally and in 1823, Byron sailed to Greece to join the Greeks in their revolution against the Ottomans. He offered them all the financial assistantship he could get; he risked his life to help liberate the land of the sun; and finally gave his life for its liberation. But the Greeks had already proclaimed him a Greek citizen before he expired in Messolonghi; only then his dream of gaining a universal identity and an eternal Mediterranean citizenship was fulfilled, after he buried his heart on one the Mediterranean shores, which was his nexus of true existence. Byron's Self transcended its national cultural boundaries to float all over this universe. Byron soul and spirit were not only Scottish or British, not only Western or Eastern, but also Mediterranean and universal.

References

Abrams, M. H. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973.

Byron, Lord, George Gordon.*Byron's Letters and Journals*, 12 vols., ed. Leslie A. Marchand. London: John Murray, 1973.

______. *Byron: Poetical Works*. Ed. Frederick Page and corrected by J. D. Jump. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970.

Drinkwater, John. *The Pilgrim of Eternity: Byron-A Conflict*. London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited: 1925.

Eldridge, Richard (1998) *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism, and Self-understanding*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Gassenmeier, Michael. "Lord Byron's Aquatic Experience or the Politics of Aquamania." *Byron and the Mediterranean World*.Ed. Byron Raizis. Athens: The Hellenic Byron Society, 1995: 189-199.

Gerard, Albert. "The Logic of Romanticism," in *Romanticism: Points of View*. Eds. Robert Gleckner and Gerald E. Enscoe. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974: 258-268.

Graber, Frederick. *Self, Text, and Romantic Irony: The Example of Byron*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988.

Kernberger, Katherine. "Sea Voyages in Byron: More than Plot Device in *The Island*." *Byron the Traveller*. Kyoto: The Japanese Byron Society, 2003: 235-243.

McGann, Jerome. *Byron and Romanticism*.Ed. James Soderholm.New : Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Minta, Stephen. *On a Voiceless Shore: Byron in* Greece. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998.

Ross, Marlon B. (1988) "Romantic Quest and Conquest," in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 26–51.

Snyder, Robert Lance (1980) "Byron's Ontology of the Creating Self in *Childe Harold* 3," *Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernisim*, ed. by Harry R. Carvin. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 19–39.