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Byron and the Eastern Mediterranean: *Childe Harold* II and the ‘polemic of Ottoman Greece’

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 yellow light! . . .
On old Aegina’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.

(*The Corsair*, III.1-4, 7-10)

In these opening lines of the third canto of *The Corsair* (1814), Byron sets the mood for his narrative of the tragic death of Conrad’s faithful wife Medora, by means of a sunset evocation of Greece, as the radiant sun of antiquity sinks over a land no longer consecrated to the antique spirit. The fact that Byron ‘borrowed’ the bravura sunset passage in its entirety (1-54) from his ‘unpublished (though printed) poem’ (*CPW*, III, 448), *The Curse of Minerva*, suggests that he was particularly wedded to the sublimity of sunset as a melancholy symbol of modern Greece. In the latter poem, the same lines introduce another betrayed female, the battered and insulted goddess Minerva, who curses Lord Elgin for despoiling her temple, as the shades of evening lengthen over the plundered ruins of the Parthenon. Byron’s recycling of his lines suggests a conscious connection between the values of Conrad’s apolitical love for the ‘housewifely’ Medora, and the philhellenic ideology flagged by Minerva.

The sunset melancholy of philhellenism also permeates the second canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, best exemplified in stanza 73’s lines: ‘Fair Greece! Sad relic of departed worth! / Immortal, though no more; though fallen great!’ (in political terms, this adds up to the resignation of stanza 76; ‘But ne’er will freedom seek this fated soil, / But slave succeed to slave through years of endless toil’) (*CHP*, II.76.8-9). Even in Byron’s most militant statement of philhellenism, the anthem ‘The Isles of Greece’ sung in *Don Juan* Canto III (albeit one heavily ironised by the fact that the verses

are sung by the 'trimmer poet'), he returns to the sunset metaphor in evoking a Hellenic glory now noticeably absent from the islands; 'Eternal summer gilds them yet, / But all, except their sun, is set' (*Don Juan*, III.86–7). Like Hegel's more famous owl, Byron's Minervan muse seems to take flight at dusk.

In this chapter, however, I want to suggest that the romantic image of sunset is far from exhausting Byron's poetical account of the Eastern Mediterranean. In the lines I've quoted from *The Corsair*, the shadows which lengthen over the tombs of Greek heroes, metonymically evoking the death of Medora, also symbolise the death of Conrad's chivalric idealism, the 'one virtue' which mitigates his 'thousand crimes' (*The Corsair*, III.696). In the symbolic economy of Byron's poems, as Caroline Franklin has indicated, the shift from 'passive' to 'active' heroine figures a transformation of the whole Byronic value system.¹ As *The Corsair* relates, Medora's death is symbolically instigated by Gulnare, the Turkish concubine whom Conrad rescues from the blazing Harem, and who in her turn saves the captive from the Ottoman Pasha Seyd's bloody vengeance. In return the 'unsexed' Gulnare exhorts from the pirate leader one single, over-determined kiss, at once the agent and exponent of his betrayal of Medora, and by extension of the ethical values supposedly distinguishing Hellenic/European civilisation from its Oriental 'other'. Whereas the efficacy of Conrad's action against the Pasha is compromised by his adherence to an aristocratic code of chivalry, Gulnare's 'oriental' assassination of her sleeping master is at once all too effective as an act of revolutionary liberation, and at the same time, transgressive of Conrad's 'occidental' system of values.

My point in dilating upon the allegorical function of Byron's heroines in these Levantine poems is to suggest two rival perspectives underpinning Byron's writings which (in deference to the allegorical importance of Byron's heroines) I characterise as the 'Medoran' and the 'Gulnarean' respectively. Whilst the abject, sepulchral Medora in *The Corsair* ('the only pang my bosom dare not brave, / Must be to find forgetfulness in thine', *The Corsair*, I, 357–58) personifies sentimental philhellenism, the orientalist 'regicide' of Gulnare aptly represents Byron's experiential insight into the contemporary culture and politics of the region which he encountered during his 'Levantine Tour' of 1809–11. While the 'Medoran' perspective was undoubtedly a major selling point of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, I argue that the 'Gulnarean' view actually shaped Byron's critique of conventional ideology. Although quite uncharacteristic of Romantic Hellenism in general, 'Gulnarean' discourse also paradoxically empowered Byron's later involvement in the Greek War of Independence.

Ottoman Greeks and European philhellenes

The extraordinary story of the philhellenic intervention in the Greek War of Independence which provides the background to Byron's death has been well treated by scholars. Less has been said about Byron's fashionable 'grand tour' to the Eastern Mediterranean (my deliberate geographical vagueness here avoids the necessity of denominating the contested region 'Turkey' or 'Greece') in the company of his friend John Cam Hobhouse. Their travels between September 1809 and July 1810 through Epirus, Albania, Acarnania, the Morea, Attica, on to Smyrna in Asia Minor, culminating on the shores of the Hellespont and the Ottoman capital Istanbul, were minutely described in Hobhouse's massive, 1,154-page travel account, *A Journey through Albania, and Other Provinces of Turkey in Europe and Asia* (1813). Byron remained in Greece (Athens and the Peloponnese) for a further year after Hobhouse's departure: his travels provided material for the first and second cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) begun during the tour, as well as the spate of 'Turkish Tales' which sprang from his pen during the years of fame.

As *The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, and *The Siege of Corinth* make clear, the region through which Byron and Hobhouse travelled was the front line between Islamic Turkey and Christian Europe. Ottoman victory in the late-sixteenth century had brought much of the region under the control of the Sublime Porte, although its inhabitants remained – then as now – a collection of different ethnic and religious groups. Ottoman Greeks, who traced their cultural roots back to Byzantium, the old Eastern Roman Empire, rather than to Hellenic antiquity, described themselves as 'Romaioi' (Romans) rather than Hellenes, at least those three million (out of a total of thirteen million-odd Orthodox Christians in the Empire), who spoke Romaic or modern Greek rather than Turkish, Albanian, Serbian, Bulgarian, or Macedonian.² Hence the justice of Hobhouse's claim that 'the Greeks, taken collectively, cannot, in fact, be so properly called an individual people, as a religious sect dissenting from the established church of the Ottoman Empire'.³ Although Christians were more heavily taxed than Muslims and were forced to parade their ethnic and religious difference, the Sultans patronised the Greek Orthodox church, and its Patriarch (inheritor of the Byzantine emperors) was 'ethnarch' of thirteen million Christians, roughly a quarter of the population of the entire Ottoman empire. Moreover, by the early nineteenth century, the Greek merchant marine (based on islands like Idra, Spetsas and Psara), benefiting from the decline of Venetian power and increased European trade with the Levant, had established a commercial empire in the Mediterranean

and the Black Sea, so that ‘Greeks as traders, just as the Greeks as Christians, formed a kind of state within the Turkish state.’⁴

Costly military defeats of the Ottoman armies by expansionist Russia, and the increasing ‘balkanisation’ of the empire in the eighteenth century (witness the rise of regional magnates like Ali Pasha – of whom more below – in Epirus and Albania), as well as competing European interests in the eastern Mediterranean in the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, provided a stimulus and opportunity for Greek independence. Despite the opposition of the ‘Fanalite’ Greek aristocracy which had for generations materially benefited from service to the Ottoman empire, after 1780 an increasingly nationalistic Greek identity began to emerge, especially amongst the diasporic Greek intelligentsia based in Russia or Western Europe, associated with figures like Adamantios Korais, Lambros Katsonis, and the ‘jacobinical’ patriot Rhigas Velestino. In these decades the Greeks turned successively to Russia, Napoleonic France, and Britain for help against their Ottoman masters, even making common cause with the refractory Ali Pasha, scourge of the local Greek *kleftes* (bandits). At least after 1814, it became clear that British foreign policy, dictated by a triumphalist Tory government, would be dedicated to shoring up Ottoman power and containing Russian influence in the region, turning a blind eye to the plight of the Greeks themselves. But official intransigence was qualified by ‘philhellenic’ enthusiasm in Britain, especially amongst liberals and philosophical radicals, consolidated by the formation of the London Greek Committee in 1818 and the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence in 1821. The fact that the Greek Committee’s representative ‘in the field’ died of marsh fever in Missolonghi in April 1824 meant little in itself; the fact that he was none other than the celebrated Lord Byron did much to galvanise British and European support for the Greek cause.

The Levantine tour

Byron’s poetical representations of the region are in many ways inseparable from the cultural practice and discourse of the Levantine tour, and even the generic form of *Childe Harold* embodies a particular critique of, and engagement with, the enormously popular contemporary discourse of travel about the Eastern Mediterranean. Conversely, the tour played a crucial role in the formation of the ‘Byron phenomenon’: the poet’s early biographers insisted that ‘travel conducted . . . to the formation of his poetical character’ (Tom Moore)⁵ and that ‘the best of all Byron’s works, the most racy and original, are undoubtedly those which relate to Greece’ (John Galt).⁶

Although travel to Ottoman Greece had been hazardous in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the dawning sense that Greece was the mother of Roman art and civilisation nevertheless attracted the more intrepid antiquarian travellers. George Wheler and Jacob Spon visited and described the ancient sites in 1676, Richard Pococke followed in the 1730s, and, perhaps most significant of all, James Stuart and Nicholas Revett were commissioned to draw the antiquities of Athens by the Society of Dilettanti in 1751–3. Oxford Don Richard Chandler (a major authority for Byron and Hobhouse) had revisited the classical sites in the following decade, publishing his *Travels in Asia Minor* in 1775. It was Cambridge University which was particularly well represented in the region between 1790 and 1810, however, and Cambridge graduates Byron and Hobhouse were conscious of following in the footsteps of earlier ‘Cambridge Hellenists’ like John Morritt, James Dallaway, John Tweddell, Edward Daniel Clarke, William Wilkins, Edward Dodwell, and William Gell.⁷

The dominant concern of all these travellers was with classical topography, the practice of identifying the modern locations of ancient sites, and describing and measuring the ruins of classical antiquity. Each traveller attempted to correct the errors of his predecessors, from classical geographers like Strabo and Pausanias to more recent seventeenth- and eighteenth-century antiquarians; in other words, they ‘temporalised’ Ottoman Greece – that is to say, viewed the modern reality through the spectacles of the classical past, more or less oblivious to the contemporary state of the country. Whilst most castigated the Turks as barbarous tyrants oblivious to the splendours of the Hellenic classical heritage, Byron’s notes to *Childe Harold* lamented the antipathy to modern Greeks which was commonplace amongst European residents and tourists. In this respect they resembled the British public school boys who, Byron complained, wore themselves out studying ‘the language and . . . the harangues of the Athenian demagogues in favour of freedom, [whilst] the real or supposed descendants of these sturdy republicans are left to the actual tyranny of their masters’ (CPW, II, 202).

This sort of ‘temporalisation’ – the prototype of Byron’s ‘Medoran’ perspective – was cognate with the common eighteenth-century trope of the ‘ruins of empire’, pioneered in the Whig account of the *translatio libertatis* – the translation of liberty – from Italy to Britain in works such as James Thomson’s *Liberty* (1735–6).⁸ As Byron wrote (on the eve of his departure) in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, ‘doubly blest is he whose heart expands / With hallow’d feelings for those classic lands; / Who rends the veil of ages long gone by, / And views their remnants with a poet’s eye!’ (*English Bards*, lines 873–6). ‘Temporalisation’ of Italy and Greece was initially committed to representing the irrecoverable nature of the classical past, precisely

because liberty was thought to have migrated westwards to Whig Britain or republican America, depending on one's political persuasion. Applied to the case of Ottoman Greece this sentimental, 'Medoran' perspective might be described as 'weak philhellenism', because it held out no prospect for the revival of the classical values of the past.

With the rise of the Greek movement for independence during the global crisis precipitated by the Napoleonic wars, however, 'temporalisation' increasingly came to serve as a template for a restored Greek state, or 'strong philhellenism'. William St Clair has described how European philhellenes sought to 'regenerate' modern Greece by purging its oriental elements and 'restoring' a Hellenic state that was itself largely a construction of European classical scholarship, rather than a reflection of the actual cultural identity of modern Greeks.⁹ In his controversial study *Black Athena*, Martin Bernal describes the early-nineteenth century replacement of an 'ancient model' of Greek civilisation deriving from Phoenician or Egyptian roots, by an 'Aryan hypothesis' whereby the Dorians were identified with northern, Teutonic tribes.¹⁰ Percy Shelley's pronouncement in the notes to his lyrical drama *Hellas* (1821) that 'we are all Greeks', and his establishment of classical Greece as a transcendent ideal for contemporary republicanism is often taken to exemplify 'strong philhellenism' in this sense.

French occupation of Italy meant that the traditional 'beaten track' of the Grand Tour was off limits to Britons, but travel in the Levant (for those who could afford it) was facilitated after 1799 by Britain's political alliance with Ottoman Turkey in the wake of the French invasion of Egypt. Hence the justice of Byron's claim that 'the difficulties of travelling in Turkey have been much exaggerated, or rather have considerably diminished, in recent years' (*CPW*, II, 209). For elite British and French travellers, the pursuit of classical topography and removable antiquities also normally went hand in hand with diplomacy and *de facto* intelligence-gathering in a period of European war. Even the unpatriotic Byron's visit to the court of Ali Pasha at Tepalene (to which I return below), as well as his presentation to the Waiwode of Athens and the Ottoman Sultan himself, was not without its political motives given the contemporary importance of British influence in the region.

The gradual replacement of Augustan neoclassicism by a more 'primitivistic' Hellenism in eighteenth-century British culture (partly the result of the researches of the aforementioned travellers and antiquarians, together with the influential writings of German antiquarian Johann Winckelmann) had given a new kudos to the classical remains of Greece and Asia Minor. Lord Elgin's removal of the Parthenon marbles to London in 1807 can be seen as the act of a patriotic British virtuoso to establish London as the modern Athens, replete with objects of 'pure' Hellenic, rather than the

derivative Romano–Grecian taste on display in the Napoleonic Louvre. As British ambassador to the Ottoman Porte, Elgin had acquired a firman from the Sultan at a time when the Ottoman authorities were anxious to encourage their British allies: his detractors, with some justice, accused him of abusing his public office in ‘acquiring’ the Parthenon frieze and other classical monuments. Athens became the site of heated competition between Elgin’s agent Lusieri and the French Consul Fauvel for the best marbles, a rather sordid aesthetic reprise of the global war currently raging between British and French armies.

The Parthenon marbles were undoubtedly just as controversial in Byron’s day as they are now, as the savage lampoons on Lord Elgin in *The Curse of Minerva*, and stanzas 11–15 of *Childe Harold* II remind us. Byron was by no means alone in attacking his luckless compatriot for despoiling the ruins of Athens (*CHP*, II, 11–15). However, as William St Clair points out, most of the Levantine tourists who attacked Elgin in the travelogues they published upon returning home were not averse to helping themselves to some choice fragments whenever they could lay their hands on them.¹¹ For example, Byron’s friend Edward Daniel Clarke, future Professor of Mineralogy at Cambridge, described in his bulky *Travels in Various Countries of Europe, Asia and Africa* (1810–23) how he had witnessed Elgin’s agents destroying part of the wall of the Acropolis whilst removing a metope – part of a Doric frieze – as the local Disdar shed impotent tears.¹² Yet elsewhere Clarke described how he had himself overcome strenuous local resistance to remove a beautiful statue of Ceres from Eleusis, which he deposited in the Cambridge University Museum: this in the very same volume which contained Clarke’s condemnation of Elgin’s ‘lamentable operations’.¹³

Byron announced in a letter to Dr Valpy that ‘my researches, such as they were, when in the East, were more directed to the language & the inhabitants than to the Antiquities’ (*BLJ*, I, 134). In an August 1811 review of William Gell’s *Geography and Antiquities of Ithaca* (1807), and *Itinerary of Greece* (1810), Byron’s Cambridge friend Francis Hodgson (apparently with Byron’s assistance) complained of the illusory ‘transparency’ of classical topography which pedantically described modern ‘Mainotes’ as ‘Eleuthero-Lacones’, and preferred giving ancient rather than modern names for the region.¹⁴ ‘Though there have been tourists and strangers in other countries, who have kindly permitted their readers to learn rather too much of their sweet selves [a veiled allusion to the unpublished *Childe Harold*], yet it is possible to carry delicacy, or cautious silence, or whatever it may be called, to an opposite extreme.’ ‘We like to know’, Hodgson continued, perhaps in vindication of his noble friend, ‘that there is a being still living who describes the scenes to which he introduces us; and that it is not a mere translation from Strabo or

Pausanias that we are reading.’¹⁵ Hodgson’s critique of Gell is fully in accord with Byron’s own satire (in *English Bards*) on Lords Aberdeen and Elgin’s ‘misshapen monuments and maim’d antiques’, and his summary resolution ‘Of Dardan tours let dilettanti tell, / I leave topography to rapid Gell’ (*English Bards*, 1030, 1033–4). The egotism of Byron’s *Childe Harold* should be seen, therefore, as a ‘modernist’ break with the antiquarian tradition, whilst the notes to his poem poured scorn on the rapacity of topographical travellers.

The polemic of Ottoman Greece

Byron’s wide reading in the orientalist archive of Knolles, Cantemir, D’Herbelot, Rycaut, and De Tott has been well documented by scholars, but most have overlooked the fact that his understanding of the region was also informed by a contemporary *logomachia* – a literary dispute – which I will denominate ‘the polemic of Ottoman Greece’. Although numerous European ‘authorities’, including luminaries like Voltaire and Gibbon, had contributed to the polemic which an exasperated Byron later dismissed as ‘paradox on one side, prejudice on the other’ (*CPW*, II, 203), the most significant adversaries were the relatively unknown figures of William Eton and Thomas Thornton.

In his 1798 *A Survey of the Turkish Empire*, Eton, a former British consul in Turkey, showed his ‘strong philhellenism’ in lauding the modern Greeks, whilst violently attacking Ottoman ‘despotism’. Eton ‘temporalised’ the Greeks by insisting (against the available evidence) that ‘their ancient empire is fresh in their memory; it is the subject of their popular songs, and they speak of it in common conversation as a recent event’.¹⁶ In conformity with his violently anti-Jacobin political sentiments, Eton advocated Russian intervention to liberate the Greeks and expel from Europe the Turks, whose empire he vilified as ‘sui generis, a heteroclite monster among the various species of despotism’.¹⁷ Eton had no doubt that the modern Greeks were thoroughly *occidental*, not oriental: ‘an European feels himself as it were at home with them, and amongst creatures of his own species, for with Mahometans there is a distance, a non-assimilation, a total difference of ideas’.¹⁸

Eton was answered in 1807 by a British Levantine merchant called Thomas Thornton, whose influential book, *The Present State of Turkey*, was based on fifteen years’ residence at Pera, the European mercantile quarter of Istanbul. Thornton’s only point of agreement with Eton concerned the unreliability of travellers as regional experts, for ‘in his eagerness for information [the traveller] cannot expect to penetrate beyond the surface: the folds of the human heart cannot be distinguished by a transient glance’.¹⁹ But Thornton was an unabashed partisan of the Ottoman Empire, distinguishing Ottoman

rule as both rational and legitimate, a modified feudal polity rather than an 'oriental despotism', and citing Sir William Jones's 'Dissertation on Oriental Poetry' in praise of the rich literary and cultural legacy of modern Turks.²⁰ (Contrary to Edward Said's influential argument, this shows that European opinion could be pro-Ottoman and anti-Greek as well as philhellenic and 'orientalist' in Said's specialised sense of that word.)²¹ Making hay with Eton's Turkophobia, Thornton demolished his rival's orientalist stereotypes by describing the Turkish character as a 'composition of contradictory qualities' 'brave and pusillanimous, gentle and ferocious; resolute and inconstant; active and indolent . . . delicate and coarse; fastidiously abstemious and indiscriminately indulgent'.²²

Thornton was not, however, without his own prejudices, and made it clear that he had little time for modern Greeks whom he dismissed as 'a low, plodding, persecuted and miserable race'.²³ He denied any genealogical connection between them and 'the families which have immortalised Attica and Laconia',²⁴ 'blushing' over Eton's panegyric on the 'pirate' Lambros Katsonis, celebrated for having taken up arms against Turkish shipping in the wake of the Russo-Turkish war of 1788. For Thornton this was merely 'the devastation of banditti, and wholly undeserving the notice of history'.²⁵ In the notes to *Childe Harold*, Byron protested that it was 'very cruel' of Thornton to deny the persecuted Greeks 'possession of all that time has left them; viz. their pedigree' and suggested that his residence at Pera had given him no more insight into modern Greece than 'as many years spent at Wapping into that of the Western Highlands' (*CPW*, II, 203). (Byron tactfully avoided mentioning Hobhouse here, who described the modern Greeks as 'light, inconstant, and treacherous . . . remarkable for a total ignorance of the propriety of adhering to the truth'.)²⁶

More significant for my present argument about Byron's shift from a 'Medoran' to an orientalist, 'Gulnarean', view of the region, however, is the fact that Thornton struck at the heart of philhellenic ideology by a form of 'counter-temporalisation' which argued that 'the nations of antiquity [i.e. Greece and Rome], if compared with modern Europe, will be found to possess many of those peculiarities which we have chosen to consider as exclusively characteristic of the Asiatics'.²⁷ In ethical terms, this correlation between ancient Greeks and modern Turks turned out to be highly equivocal in its focus on ideologies of gender. Following Scottish enlightenment philosophers like William Robertson and John Millar, Thornton regarded the condition of women as an index of the progress of any civilisation, insisting (conventionally) that the principal cultural distinction between modern Europeans and Orientals lay precisely in their attitude to women; for 'where the women are degraded from their rank in society, the European sinks into

the Turk'.²⁸ For Thornton, the marker of European social progress was chivalry, the invention of the Gothic middle ages, absent both in the classical world and the modern orient. But Thornton went on to problematise his argument by suggesting that European men had paid a high price for the civilising manners of chivalry; 'we triumph in our acknowledged superiority over the Asiatics, but we must, in justice, lay down our laurels, like the heroes of chivalry, at the feet of our mistresses'.²⁹ The consequence of chivalry, he complained, was 'petticoat rule', also a recurrent complaint in Byron's peevish remarks on the cultural influence of Bluestockings from *The Blues to Don Juan*.

In his chapter entitled, 'Women and Domestic Economy', Thornton cited the authority of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in arguing that women in the 'unchivalric' Ottoman world in fact enjoyed a certain agency, such as the possession of private property and the social anonymity of the veil, which supposedly more 'progressive' European women lacked.³⁰ Although Byron was as critical of Thornton's prejudice against the Greeks as he was of Eton's against the Turks (*CPW*, II, 201), he warmly praised his account of Turkish manners (*CPW*, II, 210). Hobhouse also accepted Thornton's defence of Ottoman political institutions,³¹ and was particularly interested in his equation of modern Turkish attitudes to women with those of ancient Athens and Rome, on the grounds that chivalry, derived by Europeans from 'our German ancestors', was 'entirely unknown to the great nations of antiquity'.³² We will see below that Byron in 'Gulnarean' mood, notwithstanding his sympathy for the modern Greeks, was evidently also influenced by Thornton's remarks on chivalry and the hypocrisy of Western 'sexual orientalism'.

Childe Harold II and 'weak philhellenism'

As a handsome quarto volume, beautifully printed on heavy paper, at thirty shillings on the expensive side, *Childe Harold* certainly did not look too different from the average prose travelogue when it was published in March 1812, inevitably inviting comparison with Hobhouse's *Journey* when it issued from the press the following year. Although written 'on the spot', one major difference between Byron's poem and Hobhouse's travelogue, however, was his employment of 'a fictitious character . . . for the sake of giving some connexion to the piece . . . Harold is the child of imagination' (*CPW*, II, 4). Byron's experiment involved the adoption of a 'narrator' and the fictionalised 'Harold', both of whom, despite autobiographical connections with their author, were not simply reducible to any stable 'Byronic' voice. Moreover, its series of lengthy prose notes often qualified the poem itself, especially salient in the notes on Levantine culture appended to the second canto,

which were sometimes at odds with the poetic text they purportedly glossed. Byron's innovative grafting of poetical romance onto the conventions of travel narrative had the paradoxical effect of making his poem more rather than less powerful as an intervention in public debate about the regions which it treated. Francis Jeffrey captured this achievement in his 1818 review of *Childe Harold* IV when he wrote, 'All the scenes through which he has travelled, were, at the moment, of strong interest to the public mind, and the interest still hangs over them. His travels were not . . . the self-impelled act of a mind severing itself in lonely roaming from all participation with the society to which it belonged, but rather obeying the general motion of the mind of that society.'³³

Canto II opens with the familiar 'sunset' apostrophe to Minerva; 'Ancient of days! august Athena! where, / Where are thy men of might? thy grand in soul? / Gone – glimmering through the dream of things that were' (*CHP*, II.2.1–3). The narrator's gloomy misanthropy in these opening stanzas, however, endorses the political critique of British antiquaries which follows:

But worse than steel, and flame, and ages slow,
Is the dread sceptre and dominion dire
Of men who never felt the sacred glow
That thoughts of thee and thine on polish'd breasts bestow
(*CHP*, II.1.6–9)

Byron's footnote to the last line facetiously undercuts the melancholy of the verse in stating 'we can all feel, or imagine, the regret with which the ruins of cities, once the capitals of empire, are beheld: the reflections suggested by such objects are too trite to require recapitulation' (*CPW*, II, 189). Nevertheless, the hackneyed comparison of ancient and contemporary Athens is lent a new pathos in the light of the depredations of rapacious antiquaries. By the phrase 'men who never felt the sacred glow', Byron does not mean the Ottoman rulers of modern Greece, but rather men like the 'dull spoiler' Elgin who 'rive[s] what Goth, and Turk, and Time hath spar'd' (*CHP*, II.12.2). Harsh as Ottoman rule might have been, the Greeks had not really known the full 'weight of Despot's chains' (*CHP*, II.12.9) until the arrival of British antiquaries. For Byron (unlike Hobhouse, who expressed qualified support for the removal of the marbles to London),³⁴ the ruins of antiquity were part of the 'poetry' of the Greek landscape, which could never be recovered in a metropolitan museum.³⁵ In contrast to Elgin's rapacity, Byron's poetic persona indulges in a Yorick-like contemplation of a skull wrested from an ancient sarcophagus, 'Look on its broken arch, its ruin'd wall, / Its chambers desolate, and portals foul' (*CHP*, II.6.1–2). Notably, whilst Hobhouse brought back the customary marble fragments as souvenirs of his tour, Byron

was content with (amongst various live animals and trinkets) “Four ancient Athenian Skulls[”] dug out of Sarcophagi’ (*BLJ*, II, 59).

Perhaps the most notable instance of ironic interplay between Byron’s poetic philhellenism and his polemical critique of such a sentimental ‘Medoran’ view is contained in the three long footnotes which gloss the stanzas beginning ‘Fair Greece! Sad relic of departed worth!’ (*CHP*, II.73.1). Byron’s third note in particular suggests a climate of cultural renewal, centred on his defence of the modern Greek scholar Adamantios Korais’s translation of Strabo against the recent strictures of the *Edinburgh Review*.³⁶ Byron dilates on the linguistic revival of modern Greek, the foundation of modern schools and the existence of a substantial body of modern poetry, which is discussed in considerable detail. Modern Greeks are given agency and voice in their ability to represent their own plight and forge an identity not based on classical texts, and their position within the Ottoman empire is subversively compared to the plight of Britain’s Catholic Irish subjects. As an appendix to this note, Byron subjoined a long list of Romaic authors, a translation from a ‘satire in dialogue’, and a contemporary Greek translation of part of a drama by the Venetian dramatist Goldoni (*CPW*, II, 211–17). In a way Byron’s defence of modern Greek language and literature foreshadows the later debate in independent Greece between the partisans of *katharevousa* (classical purists) and *dimotiki* (supporters of the vernacular as it was spoken). In the twentieth century, demotic became the ‘official language’ of the Greek Communist Party, and later, in 1970 after the fall of the Colonels’ regime, of the country itself.³⁷

A journey through Albania

Hobhouse’s *Journey through Albania* and *Childe Harold* II share a common emphasis on Albania as an exotic, uncharted land, with a fresh romantic appeal not easily elicited by the latter-day tourist from the ‘beaten track’ of classical Greece. The short title of Hobhouse’s book and over 200 pages of the text are dedicated to the Albanian itinerary, with digressions (in the conventional travelogue manner) to provide historical, geographical, and political information about the region. Stanzas 36–72 of *Childe Harold* II, in some respects the canto’s dramatic and picturesque core, describe Harold’s progress from Previsa, the main port of Epirus, overland to the capital Yanina, onwards to Ali Pasha’s court at Tepalene, southwards via Acarnania to the Peloponnese, and thence to Attica. Both travellers cited Gibbon’s opinion that Albania was less familiar to Europeans than the backwoods of America, elevating their status from tourists to travellers breaking new ground. In fact (as their critics pointed out) both were to some extent

dependent upon information gleaned by the French resident Francois Pouqueville, who had in 1805 published an influential travelogue entitled *Voyage en Moree, a Constantinople, en Albanie . . . 1798–1801*.

The importance of Ali Pasha's Albania for both Byron and Hobhouse represents another break with the tradition of classical topography, and an attempt to establish an alternative framework for viewing the vexed politics of the region. In stanza 46 Byron represents Albania as a scene of nature rather than culture, its picturesque beauties offering a relief from the heavily associative topography of Greece: Childe Harold 'pass'd o'er many a mount sublime, / Through lands scarce noted in historic tales: / Yet in fam'd Attica such lovely dales / Are rarely seen' (CPW, II, 58). The climax of this passage is the description of the travellers' entry into Ali's stronghold, which, according to Byron's letter home of 12 November 1809, evoked 'Scott's description of Bransome Castle in his lay [of the last Minstrel], & the feudal system' (BLJ, I, 227). As if to capitalise on the literary fashion for Scott's feudal Highlanders, Byron's note proclaimed that 'The Arnouts, or Albanese, struck me forcibly by their resemblance to the Highlanders of Scotland, in dress, figure, and manner of living' (CPW, II, 192–3). But the comparison with Scott's dashing clansmen (upon whose warlike virtues and chivalric nobility the 'wizard of the north' was currently constructing Britain's ideological crusade against Napoleonic France) is arrested by Byron's claim that 'the Greeks hardly regard [the Albanians] as Christians, or the Turks as Moslems; and in fact they are a mixture of both, and sometimes neither' (CPW, II, 193). The hybrid Albanian, in other words, short-circuits the cut-and-dried cultural difference which fuelled the polemic of Ottoman Greece, offering a more reliable picture of the complex, multi-ethnic society of the modern Levant. In this respect Albania takes central place in Byron's 'Gulnarean' critique of weak philhellenism.

Byron's picture of Albanian manners also dilates upon the key question of homosexuality. In a June 1809 letter to Drury in which he had mocked Hobhouse's 'woundy preparations' for his travel account, Byron facetiously declared that he would contribute only a single chapter to the book, on 'the state of morals and a further treatise on the same to be entitled "Sodomy simplified or Paederasty proved to be praiseworthy from ancient authors and modern practice"' (BLJ, I, 208). Although Byron's 'chapter' never materialised, remarks in his correspondence from the Levant often read like a series of 'queer' footnotes to Hobhouse's travelogue, in which the celebrated predilection for homosexuality amongst Albanians, Greeks, and Turks is tersely glossed over during a discussion of Albanian misogyny. Despite the fact that Byron waited until the disapproving Hobhouse left for England before cultivating his boy lovers, Eustathios Georgiou and Nicolo Giraud,

his interest in Levantine homosexuality was not just the *frisson* of the sexual tourist, but an integral part of his interest in comparing Eastern and Western manners. After all, in the 'Addition to the Preface' of the second edition of *Childe Harold*, Byron defended Harold's 'unknightly' (for which read 'effeminate' in its ambiguous contemporary sense) behaviour, as an integral part of his attack on Burkean chivalry as the ascendant ideology of counter-revolutionary Tory Britain.³⁸ The homosexual orientalism which the travellers sought out in Ali Pasha's court, and elsewhere in the Levant, represented a 'Gulnarean' antithesis to 'Medoran' chivalry, with its dedication to heterosexuality, matrimony, and the idealisation of women.

If Ali's masculinist feudal polity is described as being inimical to women (st. 61), it does provide a haven of homosexual gratification, as Byron hints in the (suppressed) lines following stanza 61:

For boyish minions of unhallowed love
 The shameless torch of wild desire is lit
 Caressed, preferred even to woman's self above,
 Whose forms far Nature's gentler errors fit
 All frailties mote excuse save that which they command.
(CPW, II, p. 63)

The absence of women permits Byron himself to adopt a feminised role, as in his letters home describing his flirtatious relationship with the Pasha, and noting Ali's admiration of his 'small ears, curling hair, & little white hands' (*BLJ*, I, 227). Homosexuality is another feature of oriental culture which maps onto 'Greek love', the homosexual strain of the classic Hellenic tradition, in stark contrast to European heterosexual chivalry. The bisexual Byron thus paradoxically finds himself closer to the spirit of ancient Greece in 'oriental' Albania, than all the philhellenes and antiquarians, with their sentimental idealism concerning the 'glory that was Greece'.

Byron's note to stanza 74 admits the difficulty of venturing opinions on the Turks 'since it is possible to live amongst them twenty years without acquiring information, at least from themselves' (*CPW*, II, 210): most of his positive examples of Turkish manners were in fact derived from his encounters with Albanians like the sixty-year-old Ali Pasha, his son, Veli, and his precocious grandson, Mouctar. Byron's description of Ali's court at Tepalene (more significant as a source of personal experience of Ottoman culture than his later sojourn in Asia Minor or Istanbul) supports Thornton's case for regarding Turkish rule as feudal rather than despotic; 'there does not exist a more honourable, friendly, and high-spirited character than the true Turkish provincial Aga, or Moslem country gentleman'. In establishing a positive image of the provincial Ottoman ruling class in terms of the gentlemanly ideal of Whig

political discourse, Byron dispels the stereotype of oriental despotism and theocratic central government from Istanbul. Moreover, as the recent revolution against Sultan Selim II attests, Ottoman political culture enshrines the venerable Whig political principle of the ‘right of resistance’: ‘[The Turks] are faithful to their sultan till he becomes unfit to govern, and devout to their God without an inquisition.’

If Ali can be seen to serve as a synecdoche for some of the ‘Gulnarean’ values which attracted both Byron and Hobhouse, this was because he was in his own right a figure of considerable political importance for the whole region, a fact which quite possibly prompted the travellers’ visit to Tepalene in November 1809, in the first place. In the years after 1800, the conspiracy of the Greek *eteria* or secret fraternities had in fact become closely linked with the intrigues of Ali Pasha, who played off French and British interests in his bid to sustain the autonomy of the Pashalik which he had carved out for himself from the Ottoman Porte.³⁹ Major William Leake, as British resident at Yanina, had managed to persuade Ali to sign an alliance with Britain, whose invasion of Zante in October 1809, and subsequent annexation of the other Ionian islands (with the exception of Corfu) from France in 1809–10 altered the balance of power in the region in favour of Britain. Peter Cochran has plausibly argued that, underlying Byron and Hobhouse’s ‘touristic’ motives for visiting Albania, was a diplomatic imperative to ‘sweeten’ Ali Pasha in the wake of Britain’s annexation of the Ionian islands – islands which Leake had promised to Ali as a reward for supporting British interests against Napoleon.⁴⁰ Looking forward a few years, Ali’s declaration of war against Sultan Mahmoud in 1820 was encouraged by the British mission of Col. Charles Napier as part of a programme of Greek liberty, which promised to make him ‘independent sovereign, not only of Albania, but all Greece, from Morea to Macedonia’.⁴¹ In the event, Greek distrust of Ali’s plotting and the pasha’s own double-dealing prevented this happening, but the Greek insurgents used Ali’s revolt against the Porte as a smoke-screen to strike the first blow for freedom. Whatever his intentions, Ali Pasha was a crucial player in the politics of the region on the eve of the Greek War of Independence.

Byron commented on the ‘gentleness’ of Ali Pasha’s ‘aged venerable face’ which dissimulated ‘the deeds that lurk beneath, and stain him with disgrace’ (*CHP*, II.62.9), establishing a paradigm for Byronic hero/villains like the Giaour, Conrad, Seyd, and Alp. The fact that Byron held out some hopes for Ali (whom he described admiringly as ‘the Mahometan Buonaparte’, *BLJ*, I, 228) as a possible harbinger of independence for the oppressed Ottoman Greeks, as well as their Albanian neighbours, is suggested in his redaction of the ‘palikar’s war-song’ ‘Tambourgi!’ heard by the travellers at Utraikee on

their return journey, which closes the Albanian section of *Childe Harold* II. Hobhouse's narrative made much of the picturesque, gothic effect of the dancing Suliote warriors which 'would have made a fine picture in the hands of the author of the *Mysteries of Udolpho*'.⁴² But for Hobhouse the Suliotes were clearly banditti and not freedom fighters, and the song they sing ('Tambourgi! Tambourgi!) is punctuated by the chorus 'Robbers all at Parga!'; 'all their songs were relations of some robbing exploit', he emphasised.⁴³ By contrast, in Byron's version the Suliotes celebrate the military prowess of 'A Chief ever glorious like Ali Pashaw' and his victories against the French at Previsa in 1799, and of his son Mouctar against the Russians on the Danube (*CPW*, II, 66–8). The song in Byron's redaction has political rather than merely picturesque content: the image of Ali Pasha as an effective, albeit 'Gulnarean', protector of the Greeks against foreign adventurism militates against the romantic visions of European philhellenism in its 'strong' form.

Ali's rugged mountain fiefdom, and cruelly unscrupulous policy, might seem a far cry from the philhellenic ideal of republican liberty for Greece, but as Byron wrote in his *Journal* in November 1813, 'the Asiatics are not qualified to be republicans, but they have the liberty of demolishing despots, which is the next thing to it' (*BLJ*, III, 218). As the ideologically compromised politics of the heroes of Byron's *Tales* suggest, to Byron at least the 'despotism of a republic' under the sway of Ali Pasha seemed more attractive than the solution recommended by William Eton, namely the exchange of Turkish for Russian empire and the consolidation of Byzantine religious legitimacy.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the contemporary 'polemic of Ottoman Greece' played an important role in determining Byron's understanding of the cultural and gender politics of the Eastern Mediterranean. Byron in 'renegado' mood embraced Thornton's oblique critique of chivalry as the marker of Western superiority over 'orientals', a fact which strongly inflected his attitude to the question of Greece. As in his hopes for Ali Pasha's instrumentality in liberating the Greeks, effective resistance to tyranny is rather achieved by 'active heroines' like Gulnare and the transvestite page Kaled working upon 'orientalised' Western heroes – Conrad or Lara – who have resigned their stakes in the cultural economy of chivalry. Caroline Franklin has argued that Byron's critique of chivalry in the *Tales* and *Don Juan* is at once 'anti-feminist' (as a libertine 'voice of opposition to [the] bourgeois,

protestant ideology of [British] femininity')⁴⁴ and emancipatory inasmuch as it is critical of celibacy, the idealisation of women, and the sexual double standard characteristic of Christian chivalry. She persuasively argues that in *Don Juan*, Byron returned to his earlier attack on the 'sexual orientalism' of the West as a form of cultural hypocrisy, albeit in an anti-sentimental idiom.⁴⁵ As Byron expressed the matter in a later note defending his stance in *Don Juan*: 'Women all over the world always retain their freemasonry – and as that consists in the illusion of sentiment – which constitutes their sole empire – (all owing to Chivalry and the Goths – the Greeks knew better) all works which refer to the comedy of the passions – and laugh at sentimentalism – of course are proscribed by the whole Sect' (*BLJ*, VIII, 148).

Byron's decision to embark for Greece in 1823 and fight for Greek independence, and his death the following year at Missolonghi, rightly enshrined his name in the heroic pantheon of Greek nationalism.⁴⁶ Yet despite his willingness to sacrifice his life for the Greek cause, Byron never allowed nationalist idealism to smother sceptical cosmopolitanism. His coadjutant Col. Charles Napier paid him the ultimate tribute when he wrote,

I never knew one, except Lord Byron and Mr Gordon, that seemed to have justly estimated [the Greeks'] character. All came expecting to find the Peloponnese filled with Plutarch's men, and all returned thinking the inhabitants of Newgate more moral. Lord Byron judged them fairly: he knew that half-civilised men are full of vices, and that great allowance must be made for emancipated slaves.⁴⁷

To the modern reader there is sometimes a sense of noblesse oblige in Byron's attitude to the Greeks, even allowing for his understandable frustration at their incessant internal feuding and the treacherous desertion of his Suliote troops before the attack on Lepanto. Perhaps a more lasting tribute to his ethical pragmatism is Byron's letter from Missolonghi to the Turkish commandant Yussuff Pasha of 23 January 1824, accompanying four released Turkish prisoners, desiring that the bitterness of inter-ethnic warfare might be somewhat mitigated by a civilised system for exchanging rather than butchering prisoners.⁴⁸

NOTES

1. Caroline Franklin, *Byron's Heroines* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), chs. 2 and 3.
2. Douglas Dakin, *The Greek Struggle for Independence* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1973), p. 9.

3. John Cam Hobhouse, *A Journey through Albania, and other Provinces of Turkey in Europe and Asia, to Constantinople, during the years 1809 and 1810*, 2nd edn (London: James Cawthorn, 1813), p. 596; henceforth *Journey*.
4. Dakin, *The Greek Struggle for Independence*, p. 22.
5. Thomas Moore, *Life, Letters, and Journals of Lord Byron* (London: John Murray, 1892), p. 119.
6. John Galt, *The Life of Lord Byron*, 3rd edn. (London, 1830), p. 124.
7. Brian Dolan, *Exploring European Frontiers: British Travellers in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 139–41. See also Nora Liassis, ‘Travellers versus Factors’ in *Lord Byron: A Multidisciplinary Forum*, ed. Terese Tessier (Paris 1999). My thanks to Peter Cochran for drawing my attention to this article.
8. Malcolm Kelsall, *Byron’s Politics* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1988), pp. 253–78.
9. William St Clair, *That Greece Might Still Be Free: The Philhellenes in the War of Independence* (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 13–22. See also Jennifer Wallace, ‘“We are all Greeks”?: National Identity and the Greek War of Independence’, in *Byron Journal*, 23 (1995), 36–49.
10. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation*, vol. 1 (London: Free Association Books, 1987).
11. William St Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles: The Controversial History of the Parthenon Sculptures*, 3rd rev. edn (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 180–200.
12. E. D. Clarke, *Travels in Various Countries*; 4 vols. (1810–1819; 2nd edn 1811–1823), IV, pp. 223–4.
13. Clarke, *Travels*, III, Part II, section 2, p. 465. His account of the Eleusinian Ceres is on pp. 772–90.
14. *Monthly Review* (August, 1811), in Moore, *Life, Letters, and Journals*, pp. 670–5.
15. Moore, *Life*, p. 678.
16. William Eton, *A Survey of the Turkish Empire, in which are considered 1. Its Government, 2. The State of the Provinces, 3. The Causes of the Decline of Turkey, 4. The British Commerce with Turkey and the Necessity of Abolishing the Levant Company* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1798), p. 342.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 340.
19. Thomas Thornton, *The Present State of Turkey; or a description of the political, civil, and religious, constitution, government and laws of the Ottoman Empire* (1807), 2 vols., 2nd edn, corrected with additions (London, 1809) I, p. x.
20. Cited in Thornton, *The Present State of Turkey*, I, p. 30.
21. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).
22. Thomson, *Present State*, I, p. 3.
23. *Ibid.*, II, p. 82.
24. *Ibid.*, II, p. 69.
25. *Ibid.*, II, p. 77.
26. Hobhouse, *Journey*, p. 598.
27. Thomson, *Present State*, II, p. 189.
28. *Ibid.*, II, p. 195.
29. *Ibid.*, II, p. 196.

30. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 229–67.
31. Hobhouse, *Journey*, p. 919.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 844.
33. *Edinburgh Review*, 30, 59 (June, 1818).
34. Hobhouse, *Journey*, p. 347.
35. ‘Letter to John Murray Esq’, in *CMP*, p. 133.
36. *Edinburgh Review*, 16 (1810), 55–62.
37. Roderick Beaton, ‘Romanticism in Greece’ in Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (eds.), *Romanticism in National Context* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 97–9.
38. ‘Effeminate’ could refer either to a form of masculinity enervated by an obsessive desire for women, or to a womanly man. See Lewis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in 19th Century England* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985).
39. Dakin, *The Greek Struggle for Independence*, p. 30.
40. Cochran, ‘Nature’s Gentler Errors’, *The Byron Journal* 23 (1995), pp. 22–35.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 50. ‘On Ali Pasha, see K. E. Fleming, *The Muslim Bonaparte: Diplomacy and Orientalism in Ali Pasha’s Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
42. Hobhouse, *Journey*, p. 196.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
44. Franklin, *Byron’s Heroines*, p. 119.
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 128–56.
46. E. G. Protopsaltos, ‘Byron and Greece’, in P. Graham Trueblood (ed.), *Byron’s Political and Cultural Influence in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1981).
47. Moore, *Life*, p. 607.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 618.

5. Heroism and history: Childe Harold I & II and the Tales Philip W. Martin 6. Byron and the eastern Mediterranean: Childe Harold II and the 'Polemic of Ottoman Greece' Nigel Leask 7. Childe Harold III and Manfred Alan Rawes 8. Byron and the theatre Alan Richardson 9. Childe Harold IV, Don Juan and Beppo Drummond Bone 10. The Vision of Judgment and the Visions of 'Author' Susan Wolfson 11. Byron's Prose Andrew Nicholson. Part III. Literary Contexts: 12. Byron's lyric poetry Jerome McGann 13. Byron and Shakespeare Anne Barton 14. Byron, postmodernism and intertextuality