This story begins with two deaths, separated by six months, in 1822. On 15 February, in Pisa, Byron learned that his mother-in-law, Lady Noel, had died on 28 January. A week after learning the news, after a relatively emollient, even generous, initial reaction, he wrote to Kinnaird in London: ‘I am determined to have all the monies I can’ (BLJ 9.114: 23 Feb). This seems at first to have been little more than a knee-jerk reaction – an afterthought to the acquisition of the Noel title, that he appropriated instantly. His letters of the first half of 1822 that touch on Lady Noel’s death are often ill-tempered, and seem to be more about damage-limitation than serious acquisition. It wasn’t until after the second death, that of Shelley, at sea off Viareggio on 8 July, that Byron began seriously totting up the sums in his correspondence with Kinnaird. In September, in the course of a flurry of exchanges on the subject, and in the weeks immediately following the cremation of Shelley’s remains on 16 August, he seems for the first time to have begun reflecting on what the Noel inheritance would mean to him financially – just as he was also beginning to think, for the first time since the failure of the Carbonari a year and a half before, of taking an active role in a revolution.

On 29 August, in a postscript to his letter to Moore in which he gave his only known account of the obsequies for Shelley, Byron declared: ‘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…’ (BLJ 9.198). Then on 12 September, the day after
adding up the surplus income that, for the first time in his life, he reckoned he could count on, in a letter to Kinnaird, he wrote to the same recipient again:

In short – Doug. – the longer I live – the more I perceive that Money (honestly come by) is the Philosopher’s Stone[…] [M]y avarice – or cupidity – is not selfish … I have no violent expences - but I want to get a sum together to go amongst the Greeks or Americans – and do some good… (BLJ 9.208-9)

Byron’s notorious avarice, that took in Trelawny and that alienated witnesses to whom he in fact was generously disposed, such as Leigh Hunt and Mary Shelley, had a clearly articulated purpose. And that purpose, so far as we can tell from the evidence, was the one that had begun seriously to crystallise with the death and cremation of Shelley that summer. It had been within days of Shelley’s death that Byron had set down in verse the newfound political determination that he puts into the mouth of his alter ego, the narrator of Don Juan:

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 this newly discovered political principle:

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.

His new wealth was going to become the means to achieving this.

That Byron was serious – and purposeful – about his newly acquired vice of avarice, is evident from the poetry that he wrote during October and November, after
he had arrived in Genoa. *The Age of Bronze* is a bit of a rant, its politics are
distressingly broad-brush, and Byron actually got the significance of the Congress of
Verona quite wrong. (The last of the post-Vienna congresses, this one marked the
beginning of the end of the Quadruple Alliance. And ironically enough, Castlereagh
before his suicide had actually briefed the Duke of Wellington to block concerted
action against the Spanish revolutionaries and to recognise the Greeks as belligerents
– both steps of which Byron would have approved, if he had known about them.)

From a political point of view, the most interesting parts of this intemperate
poem are sections 14 and 15. Beginning with a tirade against Tory landlords
profiteering from the Napoleonic wars, the poem’s hectoring voice turns against
Jewish bankers, and accuses them equally of propping up the morally bankrupt
monarchies of Europe and inveigling the new political experiments of post-
revolutionary America and constitutionalist Spain into a burden of debt that threatens
their vitality. By the standards of today, the outburst is more notable for its rampant
anti-semitism than for the kernel of a new economic awareness that is, in a poem by
Byron, actually more remarkable. This new awareness may be summed up in the
single line: ‘’Tis Gold, not Steel, that rears the Conqueror’s arch.’ (AB 687)

The long digression that begins Canto XII of DJ, that was written at the same
time as *The Age of Bronze*, elaborates on the same theme. Here we really can speak of
the ‘poetry of politics’, because the poem’s ironic refractions break up the monologic
certainties of the letter to Kinnaird or *The Age of Bronze* into what Browning might
have termed ‘prismatic hues’. The poetry, no doubt, lies in the interplay of subject
positions which leaves the reader delightedly undecided whether to take the political
statements seriously. But the political statements, if one chooses to read the poem this
way, are there:
Who hold the balance of the World? Who reign
O’er Congress, whether royalist or liberal?

... 

Who keep the world, both new and old, in pain –
Or pleasure – what make politics run glibber all?
The Shade of Buonaparte’s noble daring? –
Jew Rothschild and his fellow Christian Baring.

(At least this time Byron manages to be even-handed.)

Those, and the truly liberal Lafitte
Are the true Lords of Europe – every loan
Is not a merely speculative hit,
But seats a Nation, or upsets a throne; (IX sts 5-6)

‘Yes’, the same voice concludes in stanza 12, ‘ – ready Money is Aladdin’s lamp.’

And two stanzas later:

Cash rules the Grove, and fells it, too, besides;
Without Cash, Camps were thin, and Courts were none –

The author-narrator has the luxury of declaring, after 24 stanzas of this: ‘But I am sick of politics’. Still, the canto ends with a joky promise, which apart from its gratuitously introduced rhyme-word, could be read as a serious premonition of what Byron, in the real world, would go on to do next:

But my best Canto, save one on Astronomy,
Will turn upon ‘Political Economy.’ (XII st 88)

Byron was still thinking along those lines at the beginning of March 1823. He had recently received a letter from Hobhouse (now lost), telling him about the arrival
of Edward Blaquiere from Spain and plans in London to form a new committee in aid of the revolution in Greece. To Kinnaird, Byron wrote on 1 March:

If my health gets better and there is a war – it is not off the cards that I may go to Spain – in which case I must make all “sinews of War” (monies that is to say) go as far as they can – for if I do go – it will be to do what I can in the good cause.’ (BLJ 10.114)

Cicero in the Philippics (5.2) had called the *nervos belli, pecuniam infinitam* (the sinews of war, infinite money). Byron had gone all the way back to his classical education to find confirmation of his new political discovery. He would use the same expression again (‘the sinews of war’), writing to the same recipient from Missolonghi, but now referring to his own contribution to the Greek cause (BLJ 11.117, 21 Feb 1824)

By the end of November 1823, sitting it out from the distance of Cephalonia, Byron had come to the end of an extraordinary learning curve. From a starting-point of almost wilful ignorance about the political realities of the revolution in Greece, since committing himself to the ‘Cause’ (with capital letter) in June, he had concluded that it was no good trying to be even-handed among the competing Greek factions. On 13 November, in the lazaretto of Argostoli, he had signed over £4,000 of his own money to the emissaries of the aristocratic civilian leader Alexandros Mavrokordatos. At the same time he had given his personal blessing to the plan to raise a huge loan for Greece from private speculators in London. This plan had been approved by the Greek Provisional Government several months before; but its chief architect and promoter was Mavrokordatos. Byron’s own money was advanced as a loan, repayable out of this much larger sum, and as earnest of his commitment to the success of the
deputation on its way to England. From now on, in Greece Byron would be Mavrokordatos’ man. His political objectives from this time on would chime closely with those of his social equal, the Phanariot from Constantinople who spoke and wrote eight languages and who in Pisa had been the close friend of Percy and Mary Shelley.

Foremost among those political objectives was to lay the foundations of what today we would call an economic policy for the fledgling Greek state. The pronouncement by the narrator of Don Juan, ‘Cash rules the Grove, and fells it, too, besides’, was about to be put to the test. By mid December, 1823, Mavrokordatos had arrived at Missolonghi with a fleet of armed merchantmen from the islands. The money that Byron had signed over in November was intended to pay the wages of this fleet. It travelled with him, in Spanish dollars that would be carried ashore in 20 barrels, when he arrived on 5 January 1824. (The famous painting by Theodoros Vryzakis, done in 1861 but drawing on portraits of real people who were there, turns Byron into a civilian – in reality he wore a scarlet military-style cloak – and suppresses the barrels of silver entirely.) Shortly after arriving, in addition to the £4,000 that he had already given as a loan, Byron gave half as much again outright, to pay the colourful Souliot soldiers who would soon make up the ‘Byron Brigade’.

Once he arrived at Missolonghi, Byron struck up an effective working relationship with Mavrokordatos. Neither man was a soldier by training – though Mavrokordatos had distinguished himself at the end of 1822 with his resourceful defence of Missolonghi, and Byron seems to have enjoyed drilling his kilted Souliot ‘brigade’ in preparation for an attack on the nearby fortress of Lepanto. But everybody knew the attack on Lepanto would be no more than a feint. The Muslim Albanian-speakers inside the fortress were in cahoots with the Christians in
Missolonghi whom Byron knew as ‘Souliots’. A deal had been struck, and the fortress would be surrendered in return for the arrears of wages the defenders were due from their own side. Once again it was cash that would fell this grove too – and of course the cash was Byron’s. He sent to Zante specially for it. When the campaign had to be abandoned in mid-February Byron was at once furious and chagrined – not because he had seriously expected to lead those troops into a glorious battle, but because of what he saw as a personal betrayal by some of their countrymen to whom he had first given protection and had since gone over to the side of the warlord Kolokotronis.

The key to all that Byron did and tried to do during his hundred days at Missolonghi comes down to money, and to the political creed that he had begun to articulate, first in canto IX of *Don Juan* (‘And I will war…’) and then in canto XII (‘political economy’). The single new addition to the known corpus of Byron’s letters that comes from my own researches in Greece, is addressed to Mavrokordatos and shows these principles in action. The Greek Provisional Government had asked, via Mavrokordatos, for an additional loan of between four and six thousand pounds sterling. Byron replied in writing on 16 January – and with a fine political ambiguity that he must already by that time have learned from Mavrokordatos. Gamba, who had seen this letter, understood it as a refusal. But Mavrokordatos told the Greek government that Byron had agreed. There seems to have been no end to Byron’s willingness to fund the Greek ‘Cause’ – even after the ships that he had paid for sailed away without achieving anything other than minor acts of piracy against their compatriots flying the flag of the Ionian Islands, an act that aroused Byron’s ire. (But that was after the letter was written.)
The strategy on which Byron and Mavrokordatos seem to have agreed was to keep their distance from the hostilities that were beginning to break out in the Peloponnesian between the legitimate government and the local warlords, until the loan arrived. The news that £800,000 had been pledged, and the first instalment was on its way to Greece, reached Missolonghi on 22 March. Byron was named as one of the commissioners for its disbursement.

Even then, the risk of all-out civil war would be very real. To the controversial ‘firemaster’ at Missolonghi, William Parry, Byron confided:

Much is expected from the loan, … but I am apprehensive this foreign assistance will be looked on by each of the chiefs, as a prize to be obtained by contention, and may lead to a civil war. The government, which has contracted for the loan, looks with no favourable eye on Colocotroni and Ulysses, and yet they are probably, two of the bravest and most skilful of the military chieftains. I have advised Mavrokoordato to recommend the government to supply these chiefs with money, but to keep them as short as possible. (William Parry, *The Last Days of Lord Byron* (London, 1825), pp. 181-2)

This last solution was what Colonel Napier had advised, back in Cephalonia. Interestingly, Mavrokoordatos did not include this piece of advice in his account, written for the Provisional Government, of his first conversation with Byron about how the loan should be used, written on 23 March.

What Mavrokoordatos did report was that both men were agreed: ‘this alone can put our affairs in order, because our navy can put to sea and the Government can have troops of its own, when it pays their wages regularly…’ In this way the threat of
‘disorder and anarchy’ would be avoided. Byron, Mavrokordatos went on to report, was already proposing an expedition to the Dardanelles:

His Lordship’s idea is... that the sailing of the fleet must be brought forward; and if not needed yet for the Hellespont, for two squadrons to set sail, one against the [Ottoman] fleet stationed here [i.e. at Patras, across the Gulf from Missolonghi] and the other against the Egyptian fleet stationed off Crete.


In the meantime, now that the stupendous sum of £800,000 was on its way, there were more immediate, practical needs that could be addressed, at Missolonghi. Even while the rain came down, and the doldrums that produced Byron’s very last poems deepened, with the rising tide of mud and the floodwaters of the rivers Acheloos and Fidari, Byron received a calligraphic document on 29 March, signed by twelve of the most prominent citizens of Missolonghi. It conferred on him the freedom of their city. Accompanying it was a plea, with many more signatures on it, for him to come to their aid and save them from the enemy, with an advance of the loan due from London to restore the fortifications. Parry had already drawn up plans for this, at the request of Mavrokordatos, ‘without,’ as he scathingly reported, ‘possessing the means.’ These plans were now dusted off, probably on the last day of the month, ready to be put into effect. Things were starting to happen at last.

At last, too, there would be work for the Souliot troops who had had to be removed from Missolonghi after the disturbances of February. The campaigning season would open soon. During the last days of March, Byron and Mavrokordatos
drew up quite a detailed plan for a military expedition against an undisclosed target to the north. Byron’s contribution was closely costed, and the document drawn up by Parry. ‘Lord Byron’s brigade’ was to be brought up to strength by redeploying an additional fifteen hundred men – paid, for the first time, by the Greek government. ‘The brigade,’ the document ends, ‘with every material of war, should be ready to march by the 7th day of May for a particular service.’

Well before the end of his hundred days at Missolonghi, Byron had developed a very modern understanding of the power of economics in the affairs of nations. Diplomacy and recognition by foreign powers would be essential too, if the Greek revolution was to thrive. To his trusted lieutenant, Pietro Gamba, Byron at Missolonghi confided something of his long-term plans:

those principles which are now in action in Greece will gradually produce their effect, both here and in other countries. … I cannot … calculate to what a height Greece may rise. Hitherto it has been a subject for the hymns and elegies of fanatics and enthusiasts; but now it will draw the attention of the politician. (Pietro Gamba, A Narrative of Lord Byron’s Last Journey to Greece (London, 1825), pp. 121, 212)

The Greek Revolution, in Byron’s mind, was to be a testing ground for a new kind of politics – one that he intended others to emulate. The new country would not merely import a political system from somewhere else: it is the European politician whose attention is to be drawn to Greece, not the other way round. A new country, he explained to Parry, would require a new kind of government:

A system of government must and will arise suitable to the knowledge and the wants of the people… I would not recommend them [the Greeks] to follow implicitly any system of government now established in the world, or to
square their institutions by the theoretical forms of any constitution… (Parry, *Last Days*, pp. 173-4)

The result of the alliance between Lord Byron and Mavrokordatos, in 1824, was to crystallise the still-emerging concept of the nation-state, as we are familiar with it today, as the future for a revived Greece. Byron and Mavrokordatos, in 1824, already foresaw a free Greece as the first of a new kind of state in Europe, free of the old monarchical, feudal order, based on the idea of the nation, and supported by economic and geopolitical alliances within a changing balance of power in Europe.

In the event, it fell to neither Byron nor Mavrokordatos to play the decisive role in the creation of a free Greece that both had imagined for themselves. Byron’s death on 19 April 1824 led, instead, to the creation of a heroic legend that remains as much part of the worldwide Byron myth as it does of the national myth of modern Greece – to be upheld or debunked, but either way taken at face value and so perpetuated. The reality of what both men had been trying to achieve during those hundred days at Missolonghi has been overlaid ever since by the more potent myth. But if we are truly to understand Byron’s final transformation of himself – as much a part of his poetics, I contend, as anything that he wrote – or to acknowledge the true nature of his role in the making of the Greece that we know and love today, we have to look behind the myth to the motivations and actions of real people at a time when the history we take for granted today had not yet happened.

If he had lived beyond April 1824, it is likely that in a very real sense Byron’s ‘best Canto’ might indeed have turned out to be what he called ‘Political Economy’.