Byron in the Archives: 
Modern Greek Print Culture and Byronic Philhellenism

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Traveling throughout Greece from 1809 to 1811, Lord Byron had a unique opportunity to learn about Modern Greek literature and language. In his “Note III,” a prose piece which was later adjoined to Cantos I and II of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, and in *Remarks on the Romaic or Modern Greek Language, With Specimens and Translations*, Byron provides his readership with a detailed, and immensely positive, account of Modern Greek literary works and the Romaic language.\(^1\) Indeed, as Peter Mackridge relates, Modern Greek had by the late eighteenth century obtained a level of prestige as it became “the language of commerce, education, and the new learning” (69). And in his *Νεοελληνικός Διαφοτισμός (The Hellenic Enlightenment)* K. Th. Dimaras suggests that print was an important tool for enlightening Greeks both within and outside of the boundaries of Ottoman Greece (29) and notes that a greater number of books (and not only of a religious nature, the most popular book type) were being published as the eighteenth century progressed (30). It was these kinds of advances in Greek print and literature that Byron was responding to upon his first visit to Greece.

In this paper, I want to explore the implications of Byron’s “Note III” and *Remarks* and, specifically, to discuss how these works acted as a response to an *Edinburgh Review* article which begins as a fairly even-handed analysis of Modern Greek literature and language before turning into a disparagement of Greek literature in general.

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\(^1\) Although “Note III” and *Remarks* are presented as two separate works in the first edition of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, *Remarks* is actually an appendix to “Note III.” In “Note III” Byron makes this clear when he writes that “The reader will find a fac simile of the handwriting of a good scribe, with specimens of the Romaic, in an appendix at the end of the volume” (101); the fac simile and the specimens of Romaic are both found in *Remarks*. In this paper, I will treat “Note III” and *Remarks* as two separate works.
and the Romaic (vernacular) Greek language in particular. Examining Byron’s championing of Modern Greek language and literature in these works, I suggest, helps us get better insight into the poet’s early knowledge of modern Greece and his later philhellenic commitments. In addition, assessing Byron’s involvement with Modern Greek print culture, I contend, allows us to re-examine Byron’s Hellenism and to, more generally, expand our understanding of Romantic Hellenism.

In his article “Byron and the Eastern Mediterranean: Childe Harold II and the ‘polemic of Ottoman Greece’,” Nigel Leask writes “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)” (100). While Leask is right to note that Byron inserted himself into the debate between classical purists and vernacularists with his “Notes” and Remarks, the poet was not in fact “foreshadowing a later debate,” as the critic suggests. Instead, I propose that “Note III” and Remarks demonstrate that Byron was well-informed about contemporary language debates taking place while he was in Greece between 1809-11 (debates which were in fact precursors to the later major one between supporters of katharevousa and demotiki) and, significantly, that he had at this early part of his career decided to take the side of the vernacularists. In turn, Byron’s defence of vernacular Greek literature and language in his “Notes” and Remarks, I argue, represents a position on Modern Greece that differed markedly from what was becoming the

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predominant philhellenic discourse of the early nineteenth century—namely, that of a “Hellenic Modern Greece.”

I am not suggesting that either Byron’s “Note III” or Remarks constitutes a fully articulated manifesto on the Modern Greeks—his mind was very much not made up about the Greeks, as a critic like Peter Cochran reminds us. Rather, I am proposing that his approach to writing about Modern Greece in these works is an explicit rejection of the classicizing impulse shared by many European writers (even, periodically, Byron himself), including, as we shall see, the critic for the Edinburgh Review to whom the poet responds. Simply put, Byron wants to move away from a representation of Greece that depends upon recourse to the past and far-flung comparisons between Ancient and Modern Greeks. As he writes in “Note II” of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage I & II: “But instead of considering what they have been, and speculating on what they may be, let us look at them as they are” (96).

Byron was intensely aware of how detrimental comparisons between the Ancient and Modern Greeks could be—the Modern Greeks were always doomed to be regarded as “second rate” as compared to their forebears. This kind of condescending attitude toward the Modern Greeks and, specifically their literature and language, is exhibited in

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3 The idea of a “Hellenic Modern Greece” gained currency in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as Europeans learned more about Ancient Greece and Modern Greeks, as Greeks became better informed about European nationalism, and, perhaps most importantly, when Greece made its bid for independence in 1821. Roderick Beaton explains that Greece had to “create its own past, that is, to select and endorse those elements of earlier Greek history which retrospectively could claim to have made the present existence and future aspirations of the nation inevitable” (“Romanticism in Greece” 99). Artemis Leontis adds that one of the goals of Greek leaders before the war was to convince Greeks and foreigners that “The territory of Hellas could exist for rebelling Greek-speaking Ottoman subjects as the sacred land of historical restitution, if only Greeks would inform themselves of their glorious ancestry” (19).

the April 1810 edition of the *Edinburgh Review*. In this volume, an anonymous critic—whom Byron later believed to be Charles James Blomfield (Marchand 102)—provides a review of Adamantios Korais’s *Geographie de Strabon*, a French translation of the Ancient Greek geographer Strabo’s work. Korais (or Coray) was by the time of this review one of the best-known Greek writers in European literary circles, having gained a reputation for himself as a great scholar in Paris, where he lived from 1788 until his death in 1833 (Mackridge 102). Indeed, the *Edinburgh Review* writer begins his review by acknowledging the fact that the journal’s “attention was first directed to this publication, by the celebrity of the reputed translator” (55).

Before he offers his assessment of Korais’s translated work, however, the *Edinburgh Review* critic first provides his readers with a brief overview of recent developments in Modern Greek literature. According to the reviewer, “The state of literature in modern Greece, is a very interesting subject; and we have to regret that the works, which contain the principal information on the subject, are both few in number, and difficult to be met with” (56). Despite the writer’s claim that Modern Greek literary sources are scarce and that these few works are largely unavailable to readers outside of Greece, the article does mention that Greeks are eager to become educated. Proof of this thirst for knowledge can be seen, the reviewer suggests, by noting that the Greeks have begun to pursue studies at universities throughout Europe and to establish printing presses in Trieste and Vienna “for the purpose of multiplying books in Romaic Greek” (57). The reviewer purports that, because Greeks in Trieste and Vienna have put forth an effort to proliferate Modern Greek texts, it is in these two cities and in Venice (another
Greek intellectual hub) that “the most intelligent of the modern Greeks are to be met with” (57).

In his article, the writer for the *Edinburgh Review*, perhaps expectedly, frames his discussion of Modern Greek literature in the context of contemporary Greek politics. The reviewer is interested in examining what the production and diffusion of literature amongst the Greeks can tell readers about their national character and whether, importantly, the Modern Greeks can become educated and civilized enough to earn their freedom from the Ottoman Empire. In short, the writer for the *Edinburgh Review* wants to determine whether literary production can affect any real political and social change for the Greeks.

Although the reviewer is sympathetic toward the plight of the Greeks, he is nevertheless not convinced that the current state of their literature signals a significant change for the people. “While circumstances remain as they are,” he writes, “we doubt whether the meritorious efforts of Coray, and a few of his enlightened countrymen, will be able to counteract in any considerable degree, the intellectual torpidity which their political condition naturally occasions” (57). It is important, I think, to note two things here. The first is that the reviewer makes a connection between knowledge and freedom; and the second, related to the first, is that he believes a country must first obtain its liberty before becoming an educated nation. Of course, this view ignores the intellectual advancements the Greeks had made in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, of which Byron would have been made aware during his time in Greece. By suggesting that Korais and his fellow writers—Greeks living outside of Greece, we should be reminded—do very little to help their fellow countrymen overcome their “intellectual
torpidity,” the reviewer effectively neutralizes the political function of Modern Greek literature, or indeed any other value it may have had. In fact, after adducing that there can be no intellectual culture without national freedom, the writer’s focus shifts from a consideration of Modern Greek literature with respect to Greece’s political condition, to a discussion of Romaic in relation to classical scholarship.

If Modern Greek literature cannot help change the political and social climate of Greece, the modern language argues the reviewer, can still be of value to scholars studying Ancient Greek. He writes,

The advantages of an acquaintance with the modern Greeks, are perhaps more extensive than is generally imagined. They are not confined to the traveller or foreign merchant; but may prove a powerful auxiliary to the classical scholar . . . Many scarce and curious words, too, retain their primitive signification in the present corrupt state of the language; and many valuable words can never be properly understood without knowledge of the modern idioms. (59)

In abrupt fashion, then, the *Edinburgh Review* critic has in the course of a couple pages gone from examining the nature of early nineteenth-century Greek literature and its potential for liberating the Greeks, to determining that Modern Greek is only valuable insofar as it can help scholars better understand Ancient Greek, a language that is, according to the reviewer, “in its pure state” (59).

And if the *Edinburgh Review* writer’s judgment of Romaic as a “corrupt” language seems sudden considering his attempt to understand genuinely Modern Greek
literature only a few pages earlier, so too does his assessment of Modern Greek writers, like Korais, who translate Ancient Greek works:

[I]t may perhaps be thought, that no persons are so likely to understand the writers of ancient Greece as the scholars of modern Greece . . . Yet we are inclined to think, that the very reverse of this is the case; and that the circumstance of the vulgar Greek being his native tongue, so far from abiding him in his pursuits, must rather prove an embarrassment. (59)

The portrait of the Modern Greeks that emerges by the end of the *Edinburgh Review*’s survey of Modern Greek literature is one of a people who have, in the main, been left intellectually torpid as a result of their enslavement by the Ottoman Empire—even someone as influential and respected as Korais does not escape the review unscathed. The Modern Greek language too is degraded with the journal’s critic deeming it “a motley assemblage of Greek, Latin, Turkish, French, and Italian words” (58).

In his “Note III” and Remarks, Byron demonstrates that, contrary to the *Edinburgh Review*’s claims, Greece has a thriving print culture (despite its political condition) and that Romaic is more than just a corrupted form of Ancient Greek. Byron’s explicit objective is to illustrate how culturally ignorant and insensitive the *Edinburgh Review* is in its assessment of Modern Greek language and literature. As someone who was in Greece, and who had access to Romaic texts, Byron was in an ideal position to contradict the *Edinburgh Review*.

In his article “The Image of Greece in Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage and Don Juan,” Stephen Minta argues that Byron’s perspective of Greece shifts between writing the first two cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Minta characterizes this change as
one in which Byron goes from trying to comprehend Greece as an “outsider” to understanding it as an “insider.” When Byron first travels to Greece, his view of the country is conventional and the present-day country is “a mere backdrop to the glories of what is long gone” (Minta 179). Byron, Minta suggests, is at first unable to describe Greece without making recourse to his classical education. This changes, however, once the poet familiarizes himself with the country. Minta writes,

In Canto II we find some development in the depiction of Greece . . . The attitude of the interested, cultivated, traveller and poet gives way to an emotional identification . . . Where, in the beginning, a sense of cultural loss simply ties back into England and a public school education, the materiality of Greece, the heat and dust, the reality of sexual liberation, the physical confrontation with the literary debris of the classroom: all of this creates a glowing emotional attachment, and a search for appropriate ways of rendering that attachment. (185)

Once Byron had situated himself in Greece, the poet strove to understand “the materiality” of contemporary Greece apart from the Ancient world, which involved becoming educated about the social, political, cultural, and sexual realities of the Ottoman-controlled territory.

The shift that Minta observes in Byron’s poetry is also reflected in his “Notes” to *Childe Harold II* and *Remarks* in which the poet focuses predominantly on the material reality of Modern Greek culture; indeed, there are discernible shifts in Byron’s thoughts about Greece from one note to the next, which were often written months apart. In dismantling the *Edinburgh Review*’s inadequate evaluation of Modern Greek literature
and language, Byron depends upon his experiences traveling throughout Greece and, naturally, the more time that has passed, the better able he is to draw from his knowledge of Greece’s contemporary reality and to move away from a classicized vision of Greece (to which the Edinburgh Review writer ascribes). So, when the *Edinburgh Review* claims that Modern Greek works are “few in number” or that the country’s political condition prevents intellectualism, Byron can draw from his acquaintanceships with learned Greeks and his own research at the Capuchin Convent in Athens to discount these claims.

In fact, the major source of Byron’s knowledge about Modern Greek writers were the archival texts Byron had access to in the Capuchin Covent, and namely Meletius’s *Ecclesiastical History*. In *Remarks*, Byron concludes from his archival research that Greece’s intellectual culture is impressive, especially considering its political condition:

> Amongst an enslaved people, obliged to have recourse to foreign presses even for their books of religion, it is less to be wondered at that we find so few publications on general subjects, than that we find any at all. The whole number of the Greeks, scattered up and down the Turkish empire and elsewhere, may amount, at most, to three millions; and yet, for so scanty a number, it is impossible to discover any nation with so great a proportion of books and their authors, as the Greeks of the present century.

(341)

Here, Byron suggests that, even though Greece may have “few publications” as compared to other European nations, if the relatively small number of Greek subjects is taken into consideration, their literary output is in fact quite remarkable. Byron even counteracts the anticipated rebuttal by those who might note that most of these texts are religious tracts,
and therefore “good for nothing,” by claiming that, unlike the British or French, “A Greek must not write on politics, and cannot touch on science for want of instruction; if he doubts, he is excommunicated and damned” (341). It might be true that, of the 55 writers catalogued in Meletius’s *Ecclesiastical History*, “not above fifteen should have touched on any thing but religion” (341), but this was not in the end so important to Byron. The point was that Greeks produced many texts, thus proving that intellectuality was alive and well amongst them. As Byron writes of a student of his acquaintance Athanasios Psalidas: “There is now in Athens a pupil of Psalida’s, who is making a tour of observation through Greece: he is intelligent, and better educated than a fellow-commoner of most colleges. I mention this as a proof that the spirit of inquiry is not dormant amongst the Modern Greeks” (“Notes” 100-1).5

It was precisely because Byron had become familiar with Greek intellectual culture while in Greece that he could dismantle the *Edinburgh Review*’s account of Modern Greek literature. Particularly offensive to the poet—who had by the time of his riposte felt himself an “insider” in Greece—was the journal’s claim that Korais, an “outside Greek,” was the best representative of Modern Greek literature. Byron in fact takes a few calculated hits at Korais in “Note III” that are more so about rejecting the *Edinburgh Review*’s framing of Modern Greek literature and language than about

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5 Although Byron does not name this student, his travels interestingly coincide with the development of Psalidas’s vernacular language reform program. Peter Mackridge writes that “Around 1811, a new development was taking place for the first time in what was later to become part of the Greek state. This was a radical new educational and linguistic reform project, which has come down to us in the form of unpublished correspondence between a number of enlightened men, though their letters were copied and sent or read out to a larger circle. The reforms were proposed chiefly by two men in Yanina, the capital of the increasingly independent province of the Ottoman empire governed by Ali Pasha from Tepelene in Albania. These were Athanasios Psalidas (Yannina 1767-1829), the headmaster of one of the local Greek schools, and Vilaras, whose travels on campaign to various parts of Greece as personal physician to Ali’s son Muhtar Pasha had brought him into close contact with the popular culture of rural Greece” (145). Although Byron does not say so, one wonders if he knew anything about this correspondence.
slighting the Greek writer. Byron writes that Korais “is not considered by his countrymen equal to some who lived in the last two centuries” (99) and “That Coray may err is very possible; but if he does, the fault is in the man rather than in his mother tongue” (101). By claiming that Korais is not as popular in Greece as he is abroad and by suggesting that his skills as a translator should not be associated with the Romaic language, Byron effectively shifts the focus of the conversation about Modern Greek literature and language from “outside” to “inside” Greeks.

In “Note III” and Remarks, Byron goes to great lengths to teach his readers about current developments in Modern Greek literature and language happening in Greece. He describes the European print networks through which Greeks received their books (“Note III” 99); he discusses the “secret schools” where Greeks became educated without the Ottomans’ knowledge and explains that “In the Fanal, and in Yanina, the best Greek is spoken; in the latter there is a flourishing school under the direction of Psalida” (“Note III” 100); he provides a list of Romaic writers and excerpts from their writing to prove that there are intelligent Greeks in Greece (Remarks); and importantly, he chastises the Edinburgh Review for suggesting that Romaic Greek is merely “‘a powerful auxiliary’” for classical scholars, a position Byron claims serves to make the Modern Greek language useful “to every body except for the only person who can be thoroughly acquainted with its uses” (“Note III” 101)—ie. a Modern Greek. Just as he done with Lord Elgin in Childe Harold II when he deemed him “The last, the worst, dull spoiler” (94) and “Cold as the

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6 If we take into account the fact the Fanal and Yanina (Joannina or Ioannina) are both outside the periphery of Attic Greece, of which Ancient Athens was the centre, Byron’s comment here reads as a move away from classical conceptions of Greece. In fact, in a note to stanza 73 of Childe Harold II, the poet writes “‘Athens’, says a celebrated topographer, ‘is still the most polished city of Greece.’ Perhaps it may of Greece, but not of the Greeks; for Joannina in Epirus is universally allowed, amongst themselves, to be superior in the wealth, refinement, learning, and dialect of its inhabitants. The Athenians are remarkable for their cunning” (94).
crag upon his native coast” (102), here Byron censures another fellow-Brit for appropriating Greek culture. Except, for this time, instead of a diplomat plundering the Parthenon sculptures, we have a writer who suggests that classical scholars like himself can lay claim to the Modern Greek language to bolster their own work.

Byron’s “Note III” and Remarks were written at a crucial point in Modern Greek history, when questions about Greek national identity had come to the forefront in anticipation of the 1821 Greek War of Independence. “The period between the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth,” Mackridge writes, “is marked by the transition from the ‘genos of the Romaioi’ to the Hellenic ethnos” (52). The political dimension of Byron’s defense of the Romaic language and literature becomes clearer, I think, once we account for the ways in which language debates intersected with discussions about Modern Greek national identity in the years preceding the Greek War of Independence.

As Benedict Anderson has discussed in great detail in Imagined Communities, the late eighteenth century in Europe saw the emergence of the modern-day concept of nationalism, the development of which depended on the convergence between print-capitalism and strategic language policies. “These print-languages,” in turn, [L]aid the bases for national consciousesses in three distinct ways. First and foremost, they created unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernacular languages . . . Second, print-capitalism gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation . . . Third, print-capitalism created language-of-power of a kind different
from the older administrative vernaculars. Certain dialects inevitably were
‘closer’ to each print-language and dominated their final forms. (28)

According to Anderson, the combination of language and print allowed millions of
geographically-isolated people to feel an affinity through their shared reading, an
affiliation that eventually developed into an imagined national community. This imagined
community was especially pertinent to national liberation movements of the early
nineteenth century in which, unsurprisingly, “‘national print-languages’ were of central
ideological and political importance” (Anderson 41).

The Greek War of Independence is an ideal example of a national liberation
movement that depended upon the connectedness between language and print that
Anderson details. During the 1810s in 1820s in Greece, the two main national language
models fighting for ascendancy were Korais’s katharevousa (which eventually won out
and became Greece’s official language after the war) that looked to Classical Athens as a
linguistic example and Panayiotis Kodrikas’s model which instead privileged the
Byzantine linguistic tradition. The two models had at least two aspects in common. First,
each appealed to a specific power base: Korais’s to intellectuals and entrepreneurs
(Anderson 47) and Kodrikas’s to the Orthodox Church establishment (Mackridge 138).
Second, each rejected the everyday spoken language of the Greek people (Romaic) and
considered it an impossible candidate for Greece’s national language.

This is not to say that advocates of Romaic Greek had not developed national
language models of their own. In fact, Psalidas (a teacher whom, we recall, Byron had
met in Ioannina) and his colleague Vilaras created a language and education reform
program in the early 1810s, one which promoted “a practical and secular education” that
would “be based on the spoken language” (Mackridge 146). However, this program remained unpublished during their lifetimes and, by the time the Greek war had begun, was not considered as a potential model for Greece’s eventual national language, as were Korais’s and Kodrikas’s programs. The reason for this, I suggest, relates to how Greeks came to think about their national identity during the early part of the nineteenth century.

Generally speaking, no official definition of Greek national identity existed in the late eighteenth century. Even in the early nineteenth century, the majority of Greeks referred to themselves as Romios, a term that connotated a speaker of Greek and an Orthodox Christian (Beaton, “Romanticism in Greece” 94) or, alternatively, identified themselves based on their immediate familial or tribal groups (Wallace 188). By defining themselves in these ways, Greeks were “able to identify their extraregional ties and to distinguish themselves from their Muslim leaders” (Leontis 6). However, during the early nineteenth century and with greater intensity during the Greek War of Independence, Greeks began to define themselves as Hellenes in order to emphasise their ancient ancestry. Roderick Beaton explains that during and after the war, Greece had to “create its own past, that is, to select and endorse those elements of earlier Greek history which retrospectively could claim to have made the present existence and future aspirations of the nation inevitable” (“Romanticism in Greece” 99).

Greek national identity in many ways became more exclusive and less negotiable as Greeks began to adopt Romantic ideas about what constitutes nationalism—including territory, people, language, custom, descent—and to harken back to their ancient past as a strategy to make Greek independence appeal to the rest of Europe. As Basil C. Gounaris

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7 As Henrik Mourtisen argues, Greece’s harkening back to a glorious past was not a uniquely Greek experience but, rather, a widespread phenomenon in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He
attests, “Defining Greek citizenship and identity in terms of language, religion, and education, the modernization of the future and Hellenization of the past were the basic requirements of the Greek national agenda in the nineteenth century” (145). Vernacular Greek, in turn, became discordant with the newly formed Greek state which “was presented as a rebirth of the ancient Greek civilization in a new and stronger political form” (Mourtisen 48). But before the war, when Byron was in Greece from 1809-11, the parameters of Greek nationalism were still shifting and were open to debate, and so the poet was able to think about Greek national identity apart from the ancient past and to focus on a thriving vernacular print culture that was distinctly Modern Greek.

Indeed, in “Note III” Byron explicitly rejects the Edinburgh Review’s attempt to compare Ancient and Modern Greeks:

I cannot but observe that the reviewer’s lamentation over the fall of the Greeks appears singular, when he closes it with these words: ‘the change is to be attributed to their misfortunes rather than to any “physical degradation”.’ It may be true that the Greeks are not physically degenerated, and that Constantinople contained on the day when it changed masters as many men of six feet and upwards as in the hour of prosperity; but ancient history and modern politics instruct us that something more than physical perfection is necessary to preserve a state in vigour and independence; and the Greeks, in particular, are a melancholy

writes that “From its first inception, the idea of the nation had a strong historical dimension. It was inextricably linked to the early development of historicism, which was the reinvention of the past as a continuous, ever-changing process of creation . . . The intimate connection between nation and history meant that the Romantic nation automatically found itself at the centre of a grand narrative that traced the stages of its development and—ideally—its steady progress towards perfection” (45). What was distinct about Greece’s appeal to the past, however, was how influential and pervasive the “classical model” became in helping to create Greek national identity.
example of the near connection between moral degradation and national
decay. (100)

Byron here takes to task those writers who suggest that Ancient and Modern Greeks are
physically (and therefore biologically) similar. For Byron, arguing this constitutes an
uninformed and unrealistic portrayal of Greece’s current political situation and does not
help to ameliorate the people’s deep-seeded societal and moral problems. By dismissing
simplistic analogies between Ancient and Modern Greeks, Byron was, I would like to
suggest, defending Romaic culture at a point when Romaic Greece was becoming
overwhelmed by a Hellenic model of Greece that both Greeks and Europeans were
beginning to rally behind en mass. If, as Roderick Beaton suggests, “the terms in which
the Greek sought to proclaim their own specific identity, as distinct from the rest of
Europe, were all adopted piecemeal from the west” (“Romanticism in Greece” 95),
Byron’s privileging of Romaic culture in “Note III” and Remarks can be read as an
attempt to stop European powers from dictating the conditions of Greek nationalism and
to suggest that the Greeks establish nationhood on their own terms.

While Byron may have rejected European hegemony over Greece, he did not
however altogether dismiss Greece’s relationship with European nations, and namely
Britain; instead, he wanted to ensure that there was an even power balance between
European countries and Greece and to ensure that Greece’s associations with other
countries was beneficial to them. In fact, Byron’s discussion of Modern Greek language
and literature in his “Note III” and Remarks in a sense represents the beginnings of an
approach to Greek freedom that culminated in his voyage to Messolonghi in 1823-24 to
help rally British support for the Greeks in their bid for independence—a decision on the
poet’s part that in many ways connected Britain and Greece forevermore. Although Byron does write in his “Note II” that “To talk, as the Greeks themselves do, of their rising again to their pristine superiority, would be ridiculous” (95) and in a note to Stanza 73 that “The Greeks will never be independent . . . and God forbid they ever should be! but they may be subjects without slaves. Our colonies are not independent, but they are free and industrious, and such may Greece be hereafter” (95), I do not think we should confuse Byron’s refusal in “Notes” and in Remarks to make the obvious connection between Modern Greek print culture and national freedom as apathy for the Greeks. In fact, in the two works he considers Greek liberty at great length—in Remarks he even translates the Greek hero Rigas Velestinlis’s (Feraios) “Greek War Song”—and part of that discussion relates to Greece and Britain’s future relationship and how Britain’s learning about Greek culture can help reinforce it in the future.

“The fact is,” writes Byron to his readers, “we are deplorably in want of information on the subject of the Greeks, and in particular their literature, nor is there any probability of our being better acquainted, till our intercourse becomes more intimate or their independence confirmed” (97-8). Our being better acquainted; a more intimate intercourse; independence confirmed. Byron here seems to be gesturing toward a future relationship between Greeks and Brits in which the two nations would become more involved with one another as equals. And if Byron’s letters are any indication, teaching his readers about Romaic Greek literature and language would be one way in which this kind of relationship would develop. In a series of letters written to Hobhouse in 1811, after he had returned to Britain from Greece, Byron becomes fixated with his “Notes”

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and Remarks. He tells Hobhouse in one letter that his Romaic M.S.S. is to be “in labour of ‘Childe Harold’” and that he has “been sweating Notes to a large amount” (BLJ II 130). And in another letter, he tells Hobhouse “I am convinced that the more you say on the Romaic the better” (BLJ II 135). In over 20 letters to various correspondences from 1811 to 1814, Byron discusses Romaic culture and the importance of educating the public about the Modern Greek language.

We could perhaps argue that, in the end, Byron’s scholarship on Romaic literature and language did not matter. It was, after all, the image of a “Hellenic” Greece that came to dominate the European consciousness in the early nineteenth century, both inside and outside of Greece. In this respect, the Edinburgh Review article provides a more accurate reflection of the way in which Europeans and Greeks themselves regarded Romaic culture in the early nineteenth century. However, what Byron’s “Note III” and Remarks do reveal is a 23 year old poet who had his finger on the pulse of the times and who was aware of a non-classical Greek culture that would find greater popularity later in the nineteenth century with the help of supporters of the Demotic movement. A closer look at Byron’s commitment to Romaic culture allows us not only to understand more completely the poet’s unique lifetime attachment to Greece but also expand our perception of Romantic Hellenism in general. After all, it is in the period between Byron’s first and second trips to Greece that significant changes to Greek national identity occurred, changes which have influenced the way we interpret Romantic Hellenism even today.
Works Cited


