The Politics of Altruism

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‘Incredible el primer animal que soñó con otro animal’. ‘Incredible the first animal that dreamed of another animal...’ The opening words of the 1975 novel Terra Nostra by the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes. The words remind us that ‘altruism’ has a pre-history and that it is, among the varied aptitudes of humankind, one of the strangest. This talk is concerned with the quiet revaluation of Byron’s politics that has been taking place over recent years, a revaluation that offers a counterweight to more dramatic, perhaps more traditional, perhaps even more emotionally satisfying, accounts of Byron’s apparent failures and egoism.

‘Altruism’, as a word, looks old and respectable. In fact, it is a nineteenth-century coinage, from the French of Auguste Comte, founder of sociology and positivism. It reached English in 1852. The term, from its inception, and by its linguistic form, exists in a clear relation to ‘egoism’. That is, ‘altruism’ is always predicated on its apparent opposite. Its pre-history is, inevitably, clouded. One recent critic has argued that Aristotle, in books 8 and 9 of the Nicomachean Ethics, already has ‘a full-fledged concept of altruism comparable to the modern ideal’. From the Stoics of the fourth century BCE to specialists in evolutionary biology in the 21st century CE, we find a series of attempts to look at issues that could, loosely, be grouped under the heading of ‘altruism’, but this very pluralism inevitably makes the term a difficult one to work with.

The most recent research into altruism is extremely helpful for those interested in the sort of questions which are raised by the trajectory of Byron’s life. Most significantly, there has been an attempt to recover the term ‘altruism’ from an impossible absolutism that threatened to render it almost useless. Some recent scholars argue that, as Matthew Christ puts it, ‘we do not need to take into account an agent’s motivations in identifying altruistic behaviour because outcomes are more important than motivations’. This is helpful because motivation is, in the end, more or less impossible to decode (why did Byron go to Mesolongi?), and because the existence of what one might call ‘pure altruism’ can now be relegated to the status of a sort of unattainable ideal. It is doubtful whether it would ever be possible to prove the existence of pure altruism, or to define what it might look like, and the more modern (and more modest) goal lies in identifying behaviours that are relatively unselfish, or more other-oriented than egotistical.

This retreat from the unworkable absolute to a more pragmatic relativism is, of course, characteristic of the fate of many terms in the contemporary world. The retreat has, in terms of Byron’s reputation, been entirely to his advantage. Fifty years ago, it was easy to pour scorn on the apparent naivety of Byron’s expressions of political commitment: for example, in the letter to Douglas Kinnaird (12 September 1822), where he writes ‘I have no violent expenses—but I want to get a sum together to go amongst the Greeks or Americans—and do some good’. Now, in one of the most recent works on altruism, by Matthew Christ (The Limits of Altruism in Democratic Athens, 2012), we find a desire to replace the term ‘altruism’ (even though it figures prominently in the title of his book) by the expression ‘helping behavior’, as being somehow more in keeping with the relativist nature of what he seeks to investigate.
The retreat from the absolute and the systematic has had similarly beneficial effects on Byron’s reputation in other areas. The nostalgia for the loss of a unified culture, so tragically evoked in Eliot’s ‘Waste Land’, has given way, in the late twentieth century, to a much more common celebration of the virtues of pluralism. Nostalgia for the ‘organic whole’ is now nowhere fashionable, and this makes Arnold’s famous reservations about Byron’s poetry seem very distant to us: ‘his poetic work could not have first grown and matured in his own mind, and then come forth as an organic whole; Byron had not enough of the artist in him for this, not enough of self-command’. While in the political sphere, to which we shall shortly return, the retreat from ideologically-driven politics has hugely affected the way in which Byron’s own contributions in that area are measured.

Altruism is now most simply defined in terms of the recognition of the needs of others and, generally, a willingness to act on that recognition. As the OED puts it: ‘Disinterested or selfless concern for the well-being of others, esp. as a principle of action’. It’s worth recalling how much of an innovation this attitude is in human affairs. The standard account of citizenship in democratic Athens stressed the importance of citizens leaving each other alone as free and equal people, rather than engaging in mutual support. Citizens should refrain from harming each other, but Athenian public discourse does not suggest that they are obliged to help their fellow citizens in distress. Hobbes, Locke, and Jefferson saw human rights as a means of preserving a private sphere where people were free to develop their own desires and to enrich themselves. A reflection of this attitude can be found in Byron’s approach to freedom, even as late as 1822: in Canto 9 of Don Juan, he famously writes:

It is not that I adulate the people...

    I wish men to be free

As much from mobs as kings—from you as me. (DJ, 9, stanza 25)

Freedom here is the heart-felt desire to be left in peace, free from the pressures and claims of others. It is the place where, in that marvellously contorted poem on freedom, ‘The isles of Greece’, the singer apparently takes refuge at the very end, after all the meditations on action and engagement:

Place me on Sunium’s marbled steep,

    Where nothing, save the waves and I,

May hear our mutual murmurs sweep; (DJ, 3, lines 779-81)

This modality of freedom has an echo in Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire, where Rousseau writes of the attraction of an extremely passive, but resistant, form of freedom: ‘Je n’ai jamais cru que la
liberté de l'homme consistât à faire ce qu’il veut, mais bien à ne jamais faire ce qu’il ne veut pas’ (end of Sixième promenade). ‘I have never believed that man’s freedom consisted in doing what he wants to do, but rather in never doing what he does not want to do’.

So there is here an immediate challenge to any notion of a Byronic altruism. ‘No one can be more sick of—or indifferent to politics than I am—if they let me alone (BLJ, 7, 44: letter to John Murray 21 February 1820).’. ‘it is difficult to say whether hereditary right—or popular choice produce the worst Sovereigns...It is still more difficult to say which form of Government is the worst—all are so bad.—As for democracy, it is the worst of the whole—for what is (in fact) democracy? An Aristocracy of Blackguards.—’ (BLJ, 8, 107; Journal, Ravenna, 1 May 1821). Remarks like these confirm a sense of a private world of immense privilege, in which the very idea of thinking for others, still less of acting for them, is unimaginable. It is the distrust of government and politics that is the province of those for whom all government is potential imposition, of those who have no need of government because they already have all they require and the only problem is how to defend it.

From here, it is a short step to viewing Byron as the subject of an entirely closed politics. Malcolm Kelsall’s 1987 book, Byron’s Politics, is the shrewdest account I know of this position. While it may seem tendentious to try to summarise the argument of so complex a book, it has something of the following logic to it: the Whigs, in Byron’s time, were confined by an oppositional politics that was in the process of collapsing under its own contradictions. As the inheritor of Whig values, Byron’s position in relation to politics in general, and to the history of freedom, in particular, was inevitably locked into the broader narrative of Whig historical failure. Leslie Mitchell puts the Whig dilemma in the following terms: ‘As very specialised animals, [the Whigs] needed a parliamentary environment free of democratic constraints. There was a moment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries between autocracy and democracy that might be called the parliamentary period. It alone provided the oxygen which Whigs could breathe freely’. So Byron would be one of those ‘very specialised animals’, caught in an historical moment ‘between autocracy and democracy’, with nowhere to go.

The Byron who fails is a potent and, it must be said, thoroughly romantic, image. Malcolm Kelsall writes: ‘The simple fact is that Byron, the man, failed at Missolonghi. The real British liberators of Greece were the guns of the fleet at Navarino. Byron also had failed as a Carbonaro in Italy, his revolutionary activity snuffed out before it had begun. His career as a would-be statesman in the House of Lords in London likewise terminated in nullity...The life of Byron is of no political significance’ (p.2). And yet such a position sits awkwardly with the testimony of men like Mazzini, who knew something of the problems of unification struggles, and who wrote: ‘The day will come when Democracy will remember all that it owes to Byron’.

We have here an interesting juxtaposition of two irreconcilable positions. On the one hand, there is an affirmation of politics as a closed system, in which people are defined in terms of class, gender, and a range of other more or less unchangeable attributes. It is only within such a systematically functioning model that the idea of failure can exert a logical hold on us. Byron can only fail against some set of values or challenges that is coherent, systematic. On the other hand, there is the kind of politics which is resistant to the systematic, more open to the value of the symbolic, and which allows political agents to assume positions, and to achieve influence, which are not formally constrained by their own limitations, either as human beings or as political thinkers. In terms of the first kind of politics, Mazzini’s point is absurd: we know, do we not, that Byron hated democracy, so
how could democracy ever owe anything to him? In terms of the second kind of politics, though, the symbolic value of Byron’s achievement allows precisely for the sort of remark that we find associated with experienced political observers like Mazzini.

Byron was acutely aware of the aura of absurdity and self-importance that always threatens the practice of altruism:

When a man hath no freedom to fight for at home.
Let him combat for that of his neighbours;
Let him think of the glories of Greece and of Rome,
    And get knock’d on the head for his labours. (CPW, 4, 290).

These lines, written in 1820, come out of Byron’s experience of Italian politics. All actions that do not have a motivation in self-interest risk appearing, and, indeed, being, mere protestations of self-importance, reflecting a desire on the part of the actor to join in a self-dramatising narrative of commitment, the end result of which may well be a pointless death. For some biographers of Byron, this is far too close to the bone. The second stanza of the poem continues:

To do good to mankind is the chivalrous plan,
    And is always as nobly requited;
Then battle for freedom wherever you can,
    And, if not shot or hang’d, you’ll get knighted.

These lines draw our attention, once again, to the extraordinary nature of the altruistic. Why would anyone, at the risk of death or humiliation or simple absurdity, go and fight someone else’s battle? Byron suggests here that the only motivation must be negative: the desire for public recognition (‘you’ll get knighted’); elsewhere, he fears, as Pietro Gamba suggests, the self-indulgence of the adventurer: Byron had, Gamba says, ‘a great dread of being taken for a searcher after adventures’ (Gamba, 33). The twenty-first century has behind it a long history of debates about so-called humanitarian wars, military interventions justified on human rights grounds. It is easy to forget how strange the commitment to the Greek War of Independence was on the part, not just of Byron, of course, but of a whole international generation. Not until the Spanish Civil War would there be a comparable internationalisation of commitment. The ‘Garden of the Heroes’ in Mesolongi is today a monument to this internationalism, with the statue of Byron at the end of the path that leads from the entrance, and then, all around, the monuments to the Greeks of the Independence War and to those many non-Greeks who also gave their lives in the struggle.
I would like to make the case for Byron’s altruism in two parts. Firstly, from the perspective of what we can know about his actions in Greece in 1823-4. Here we are enormously advantaged by the publication of Roderick Beaton’s recent book, Byron’s War, which must forever change perceptions about what Byron did in Greece, what he thought, and what he might have achieved had he been there longer. Secondly, I want to look at the question of the symbolic value of Byron’s presence in Greece, its role in creating and perpetuating an international consensus about the importance of Greece to the rest of the world.

So, to the first of these issues. As late as Fiona MacCarthy’s biography of Byron that appeared in 2002, the portrait of the poet in Mesolongi is the traditional one of the famous man, out of his depth, lost in a confusion of unrequited love (Lukas Chalandritsanos), uncontrollable, ‘swaggering’ (508) Suliotes, monetary disputes, and generally unprepossessing colleagues. His problem, MacCarthy suggests, was how ‘to formulate any useful strategy’ (494), and the impression she leaves is that this was a largely pointless task, given the political and economic circumstances. Fred Rosen, in his book Bentham, Byron and Greece (1992) states bluntly: Byron was ‘entirely out of his depth in military matters, finding the acceptance of responsibility burdensome and boring…He lacked ideological commitment in a setting that required it, if any progress (of whatever value) was to be made’. He adds that, by comparison, men like Blaquiere and Stanhope, ‘were able to act largely because they worked from within frameworks carefully defined by ideas oriented to practice’ (193). While Malcolm Kelsall believes, as we have seen, that ‘Byron, the man, failed at Missolonghi’ (2).

Not the least of the virtues of Roderick Beaton’s recent book is that turns the traditional story of romantic failure upside down. It is a quiet celebration of a very different kind of politics from that implied by all three of the observers I have just quoted. Byron wrote to Blaquiere, on arriving in Kefalonia on 3 August 1823: ‘Here am I—but where are you?...what ought I to do?’, which must be the least impressive of all political beginnings. What we can now see, however, is that this unpromising beginning to an adventure was, in fact, the prelude to a process of personal and political development. Byron begins, not with a predisposition to this or that form of politics, but with a kind of tabula rasa. He wants to do something for the Greeks; he has no idea, at this stage, what that something might usefully be.

While in Kefalonia, Byron used whatever means he had to gain information about the current state of Greek politics. That such information remained partial and confusing was inevitable, given the conditions in Greece and the difficulty in establishing where power lay. Byron’s initial approach was to try and sustain the illusion of an even-handedness. Where there was confusion, the only sensible way forward was to remain above the confusion. The ‘Cause’, as he liked to call it, was, in that sense, an almost abstract entity, something outside and beyond the messiness of the everyday realities of Greek politics to which he had some vague access. One of the most important developments in Byron’s thinking was the move away from this lofty, Olympian approach to the crisis, towards something a great deal more pragmatic. In my own work, I tried to chart the chronology of this development. Roderick Beaton has been able to identify more or less the precise moment at which the change occurred. In quoting from a letter that no-one, to my knowledge has ever noted before, Roderick Beaton underlines the extreme importance, both in terms of realist politics, but also in terms of political symbolism, of the position Byron had reached by the beginning of December 1823. The letter, from Praidis, Mavrokordatos’s right-hand man, notes that: ‘it is now his [Byron’s] purpose to come to the aid of Greece, not once he has seen in place a Government and laws that are
respected, but in order to secure the position of the Government and respect for its laws…’. This move towards pragmatism is much more interesting than Byron’s original position, so often quoted by biographers: ‘As I did not come here to join a faction but a nation…’ (BLJ, 11, 32). Recognising after a few months that there was as yet no Greek nation for him to join, Byron’s commitment became an act of choice, the taking of sides, trying to get it right.

In the end, it’s always possible to say that Byron chose Mavrokordatos because that is the kind of man the Whig in Byron was always destined to choose. The aristocratic man committed to the higher public service, ‘their Washington’ (which, of course, Mavrokordatos could never be). But this is a reductive account. Politics, as Byron came to understand, is about choices and the choices in any given situation can be limited. What we can now see clearly is that in backing the Mavrokordatos view of the Greek revolution, Byron was supporting a coherent and politically sound perspective. While the singer of the ‘isles of Greece’ fragment in Don Juan may confidently say:

Trust not for freedom to the Franks—

They have a king who buys and sells… (DJ, 3, 767-8)

the political Byron was well aware that Greece had no chance without the Franks. Mavrokordatos, and, behind him, the rather shadowy figure of the Metropolitan Ignatios in Pisa, were seeking to construct a British-Hellenic axis that would deliver independence on suitably respectable terms, and would shelter the nascent Greek state from the profoundly unsympathetic political environment in Europe. Byron was useful in this project, both as an actor, in however limited a way, and as a symbol. Insofar as a centralised Greek state was weakened by the absence of hard cash. Byron’s presence at the heart of Greek affairs made raising large sums on the London market more plausible. We now know that Byron was fully aware of the nature of the project with which Mavrokordatos sought to identify him, and that Byron willingly gave his name and his reputation. This, by any account, is a mark of altruism.

I conclude, however, with something less tangible, which is the symbolic value of Byron’s commitment. For this enables us to place two kinds of politics in the balance. On the one hand, an ideologically-driven politics that knows where it starts and can measure the extent of its success in achieving its goals; by this standard, Byron will always fail. But, on the other hand, there is a politics which allows for mess, imprecision, finding your way towards a goal which often redefines itself as you move. It’s on this reading of politics that Byron’s altruism scores heavily. He explains exactly what he’s about in the lines that follow the ‘isles of Greece’ passage in Don Juan. The earlier lines have taken us into a tangle of contradictions, about public and private, the rhetoric of patriotism against the self-indulgence of inner compulsions, the language of freedom in the mouth of a paid entertainer, constantly redefined, made slippery and potentially insubstantial. And yet, ‘right or wrong’, as Byron notes, the passage has feeling; feeling makes others feel; and, finally, the ‘small drop of ink,/Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces/That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think’. This, as Byron makes clear, is the legacy of the flawed poet of the ‘isles of Greece’, and, in political terms, it is a defusionary view of politics that stands in marked contrast to the
ideologically-driven evolutionary view. The small drop of ink, if it falls in the right way, spreads and oozes in ways that are entirely unpredictable. This, too, is a legacy of altruism.

And it is legacy that is underlined in countless ways. Consider the item which appeared in the classified advertising section of the London Times on Saturday 29 July 1826. It advertised a forthcoming performance at Astley’s Royal Amphitheatre, the circus that had opened in 1773, and where Pablo Fanque, the first black circus proprietor in Britain made his London debut in 1847 (he’s remembered in the Beatles’ song ‘Being for the Benefit of Mr Kite!’). The news of the fall of Mesolongi on 10/22 April 1826 had reached London around 15 May. Now, at the end of July, the Times carried an advertisement for a ‘new grand spectacle of THE SIEGE OF MISSOLONGHI: or, The Massacre of the Greeks…The whole to conclude with PAUL PRY ON HORSEBACK’. Or here is the Times for 3 July 1826, in its news section:

It appears that an extraordinary sensation has been excited in the Swiss Cantons by the fall of Messolonghi, and that large subscriptions are making by all classes for the relief of the Greeks. The same feeling very generally prevails in France…

You don’t have to be literal here, or to say that Byron, by his sacrifice, generates the spectacle of Paul Fry on horseback, or a sudden excitement in the Swiss Cantons. Or Delacroix’s painting, with the figure in blue velvet, breast bare, arms flung wide, that, until the 1980s, was called ‘Greece Expiring on the Ruins of Missolonghi’, and which is part of the iconography of nineteenth-century Europe: the Greek War, Philhellenism, freedom fighters…That isn’t how the drop of ink can be traced. Forms of direct connection aren’t required in a defusionary mode of politics. But the fact remains that, in the London Times, there is only one mention of Mesolongi before Byron goes there, while after he’d been, and particularly after his death, there are dozens. The relationship here is clear, but porous. The Exodos of 1826 moved Europe because Mesolongi already carried a symbolic charge in the minds of millions, because Byron had died there. And not simply because he had died, but because of the circumstances of his death.

It would be foolish, I think, to say that Byron went to Greece with the express intention of dying, though some still subscribe to a version of that. It is equally foolish, however, to suggest that he did not, by going to Greece, put his life on the line. That is altruism, by almost any definition. It is important, too, that we recognise, as surely, now, we must and as this conference, I think, has already recognised, that the old narrative of a Byron lost and helpless in Greece, a depoliticised victim of events he neither foresaw nor understood, is an unsustainable fiction. Of course Byron was at times lost and helpless and confused—but that is part of what it means to be a political actor (read between the lines of almost any political autobiography that has any merit). This is why we can reasonably talk of the poetry of politics, because politics is a human activity, often messy, anxious, and unpredictable, not a process that can be reduced to the endlessly logical and significant.

Finally, it’s important to try to link Byron’s political development to his poetry. Often the fact that he wrote little after going to Greece appears to sanction a radical decoupling of man and work, poetry and action. Sometimes we still hear the implication voiced that the world would have been better
served had Byron finished Don Juan, instead of embarking on a frivolous adventure that cost him his life. But the man who acts and the man who writes are the same. The reasons for going to Greece may be complex and, in the end, unclear, and there is certainly an important element of chance. But the Byron who goes to Greece does not suddenly arise, discrete and differentiated from the man who, had he been someone else, might have stayed in Italy to complete Don Juan.

Connecting poetry to what we now understand of Byron’s politics is both challenging and frustrating. Because Byron never moves in straight lines. A simple look at the way terms like freedom are used in his poetry will tell us much, but we shall never be able to construct an intellectually satisfying evolutionary process. That, in the end, is Byron’s gift. It is in the resistance to wholeness that he is most emotionally satisfying. And it is in the gaps created by such resistance that a modern altruism can most easily breathe.

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