

# ‘MONUMENTS OF MORTAL BIRTH’: PUBLIC RUINS AND PERSONAL GRIEF IN BYRON’S RECOLLECTIONS OF GREECE

MARK SANDY

UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM

Byron’s representation of Greece is driven by complementary but contradictory impulses, one which realises her past history as a ‘living page’ and the other which acknowledges her present fallen state as ‘a deathless age’ (*The Giaour*, 125-6). Byron’s double-edged poetic response to Greece may be a product, as Timothy Webb notes, of his conflicted feelings that were torn between a philhellenism and a passion for Augustan literary models.<sup>1</sup> But it is also equally suggestive about how the monuments of the past and the monumental events of history—which are publicly recorded for posterity, are intimately connected with personal recollection and private feeling. These creative tensions between personal memory and public history, between a sense of national loss and private grief, shape the governing dynamic of Byron’s response to the passing glory of a ravished and subjugated Greece.

Some fifty years or so after Byron’s death in the Greek War of Independence, Nietzsche, meditating on the purposes of history, writes of the exilic and emigrant ‘antiquarian man’ that ‘the history of his city becomes for him the history of himself; he reads its walls, its towered gate, its rules and regulations. Its holidays, like an illuminated diary of his youth’ replete with ‘his judgement, his folly and vices’.<sup>2</sup> In Nietzschean spirit, autobiographical reflections and the records of public history, for Byron, are inseparable from one another. Byron’s act of poetic remembrance of a ‘long forgotten Greece’ (*The Siege of Corinth*, IX 221) is as much about recalling her own public history as it is revealing about his story of private sentiment and grief.

At the close of Canto I the reader is advised to look forward to ‘find some tidings in a future page’ (I, 93. 445) of Harold’s further adventures and, simultaneously, invited to glance backwards to a time ‘Ere Greece and Grecian arts by barbarous hands were quell’d’ (I, 93. 453):

Ye who of him you may further seek to know,  
Shall find some tidings in a future page,  
If he that rhymeth now may scribble moe.  
Is this so much? Stern Critic say not so:  
Patience! And ye shall hear what he beheld  
In other lands, where he was doomed to go:  
Lands! That contain the monuments of Eld,  
Ere Greece and Grecian arts by barbarous hands were quell’d. (CHP I st.93)

With mock seriousness Byron trivialises his art, lays bare the fictional workings of his poetry, and exposes the recording of history as a fictional process. What here, as Byron insists, ‘we may further seek to know’ (I, 93. 444) lies somewhere between a yet unwritten ‘future page’ of Harold’s autobiography and the yet to be re-told (or re-imagined) past of Greece. Byron’s explicit reference to the ‘future page’ points to a self-conscious awareness that the volumes of public recorded chronicles of history and privately recollected memoirs are both elaborate works of fiction. Byron’s sense of historical public record and personal recollection as types of fiction points to the provisional nature of the knowledge that we might obtain from reading what, in Byron’s eyes, is solely dependent on the arbitrary ‘scribble moe’ of the historian or writer.

Byron recognises the tickle nature of the recorder of monumental public history and entrusts the legacy of Greece to the poetic imagination which, at least, has the power to Stave off her moment of downfall and re-imagine her glorious past. Byron achieves this imaginative feat within the charmed temporal circle he creates at the close of Canto I between Harold’s unwritten future and the unreality of Greece’s past:

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:

---

1: Timothy Webb, ‘Romantic Hellenism,’ *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), pp.148-76. Rpt. *Romanticism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, eds. Michael O’Neill and Mark Sandy (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 168-194; p.179.

2: Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, (1874), *Untimely Meditations* (1983), tr. R.J.Hollingdale, int. J.P.Sterne, CUP (1995), p.73.

First in the race that led to Glory's goal.  
 They won, and pass'd away—is this the whole?  
 A school-boy's tale, the wonder of an hour!  
 The warrior's weapon and the sophist's stole  
 Are sought in vain, and o'er each mouldering tower,  
 Dim with the mist of years, grey flits the shade of power (CHP II, st.2)

Anticipating Byron's depiction of the fallen republic of Venice as the 'fairy city of the heart' (IV, 28, 2), in Canto IV, Greece is caught between a tale told and an incomplete story; between memory and history; between fragment and whole; between nature and cultural artifice. Byron's representation of Greece's heyday is both historical and unhistorical, hovering as it does between those records of the historian's pen and the inspired muse of the poetic imagination, which seeks to preserve Greece's 'ancient days' and her triumphant attainment of 'Glory's goal'.

Byron envisages Greece as both a past 'august' state and a present former 'shade of her political, cultural, and military 'power'. Even as a spectral 'shade' of her past cultural glories and political strength, the fallen state of Greece remains a lingering presence and finds a curious affinity with the success of past times that are 'Gone', but persist in 'glimmering through the dream of things that were'. Greece has not simply passed into the world of dreams of that 'dim ... mist of years' as it transpires that her past achievements were themselves once the stuff of dreams. In every sense, then, Greece's past glory—even if obscured by 'the mists of years'—is as much a part of the fable and myth that haunts about each 'mouldering tower' in the present just as her former historical triumphs belong to the 'dream of things that were'. These lines are perfectly poised between the unreality of Greece's glorious past dream and the nightmarish reality of her inglorious present. This fabled unreality of Greece's past glory and present ignominy permit a telescoping of her monumental history into the single perfected 'wonder of an hour' of 'a school-boy's tale'. Byron's mention of 'a school-boy's tale' may seem casual in the context of the national tragedy and turmoil of Greece. But this reference hints at a personal tragedy which is the decisive event that Byron's representation of a declining Greece both constantly conceals and returns to. Byron's reference belies his own profound personal grief over the tragic death of his close friend, John Edleston, from his student days at Cambridge.

In Canto II such half-told school-boy tales provide a rejoinder to the narrator's question ('is this whole?') and preserve the myth and reality, the idea and the ideal of Greece, through their half-telling. These unfinished stories—like the fragments of Grecian monuments described as 'remnants of thy splendour past' (II, 91. 855)—extend from the present into a future moment the possibility of completion and restoration of Greece's heroic past, whose 'immortal tongue / will fill with thy fame the youth of many a shore' (II, 91. 859-60). For Byron those broken Grecian monuments have the creative potential to be perpetually whole again, but Greece is also imaginatively for ever on the verge of final architectural, cultural, and political ruination:

Fair Greece! sad relic of departed worth!  
 Immortal, though no more! Though fallen, great!  
 Who now shall lead thy scatter'd children forth.  
 And long accustom'd bondage uncreate? (CHP II, 73. 693-6)

Byron's response to Greece's 'fallen' glory both admits the possibility of her ruin as a cultural and political power and yet imaginatively postpones the moment of her final demise, for though 'sad relic' she once had and may still retain some residual 'worth', 'though fallen' she is 'great' (III, 73. 2). The implied possibility of renewal here, in stanza 84, re-emerges in a hopeful list of conditionals that centre on a renewed heroic bloodline of Greece: 'when Athens' children are with hearts endued, / When Grecian mothers shall give birth to men' (II, 84.794-5). This list culminates in a rhetorical question, one born of both bravado and self doubt. 'when / Can man its [Greece's] shatter'd splendour renovate, / Recall Its Virtues back, and vanquish Time and Fate?'

On one level, the question serves as a clarion call to liberty for Greece to rise up and overthrow her oppressor and, on another, suggests that Byron's poetic fiction may be the only means, no matter how precariously, to preserve Grecian 'virtues' against the decrees of 'time and fate'. Paradoxically, such any act of preservation depends upon re-imagining Greece's darkest historical moment as an intensification of her past historical and mythical glory:

And yet how lovely in thine age of woe,  
 Land of lost gods and godlike men! art thou!  
 Thy vales of ever-green, thy hills of snow  
 Proclaim thee Nature's varied favourite now:  
 Thy fanes, thy temples to thy surface bow,

Commingling slowly with the heroic earth,  
Broke by the share of every rustic plough:  
So perish monuments of mortal birth.  
So perish all in turn, save what well-recorded Worth; (CHP II, st.85)

Even as those crumbling Grecian 'monuments of mortal birth' are 'commingled ... with [the] heroic earth', we are reminded that these ruins are extensions of the worth of Greece's 'hero sires' (II, 83. 791) and as such find favour with Nature who will 'perish all in turn, save [her] well-recorded Worth' (II, 85. 809). Those Grecian relics, which merit recording for posterity, are listed in a line that cuts across the stanza break, perhaps, suggesting a resistance to the prospect of being consigned to the past:

Save where some solitary column mourns  
Above its prostrate brethren of the cave:  
Save where Tritonia's airy shrine adorns  
Colonna's cliff, and gleams along the wave;  
Save o'er some warrior's half-forgotten grave.  
Where the grey stones and unmolested grass  
Ages, but not oblivion, feebly brave,  
While strangers only regardless pass,  
Lingering like me, perchance, to gaze, and sigh 'Alas!' (CHP II. st.86)

In this stanza, Byron's listed exceptions include a secluded location 'Where some solitary column mourns' (II, 86) and 'some warrior's half-forgotten grave' (II, 86. 814) awaits discovery. This poetic language of personal grief permeates Byron's earlier rendering of Greece's public political and cultural demise in Canto II of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Byron's sense of loss is present elsewhere in his allusions to Slavery's 'mournful pane' (II, 75. 719), the exchange of the Grecian 'robe of revel for the shroud!' (II, 82. 781), the wearing of 'sackcloth' (II, 78. 742), and the echoic voices of all those that 'mourn in vain' (II, 82. 778). These funereal references culminate in the image of the ruined Grecian columns and all but forgotten hero as both mourner and tombstone to the glory of the nation's past. These ruins and remnants of Greece, as Byron's imagery suggests, mourn their own decline and constitute a site, much like a graveyard, where others, even 'strangers' like the exiled Byron himself, come by chance to bemoan the fallen nation's plight and the death of her heroic sires. Whether the chance passer-by of this 'unmolested' dismal scene regards or remain 'regardless' of these ruins and remnants of Grecian glory is entirely arbitrary.

That the warrior's anonymous grave is only 'half-forgotten' recalls and is informed by Byron's response, in a letter in of late autumn 1811, to the news of the untimely, consumptive, death of John Edleston, where Byron writes that this tragic event 'sits heavy on my heart & calls back what I wish to forget'.<sup>3</sup> Byron's desire to 'wish to forget' biographical and historical circumstances, paradoxically, produces an imaginative capacity to remember. Those boundaries between private grief and monumental historical loss were, for Byron, readily dissolvable. But, as an author, he also genuinely shared in those misgivings—that he sought to contain—about the extent to which the whim of interpretation governs how those achievements of individuals or the collective cultural enterprise of a nation will be posthumously recorded in the annals of history or the artistic imagination. Poetic memory and reputation are, as Byron recognises with his insistence that 'history hath ... but *one* page' (IV, 108. 968-9), dependent upon strong readings—acts of wilful imaginative forgetting—of the historical past and personal memory to determine a nation's or individual's reputation for both the present moment and posterity.

Through such creative acts of forgetful remembrance we both discover and create, as Byron famously attests in Canto III, 'a being more intense, that we endow / With form our fancy, gaining as we give / The life we imagine' (III. 6. 46-7). This tension between self discovery and self-creation, forgetting and remembering, is the impulse behind Byron's poetic depiction of a troubled Greece occupying the mournful yet, ambivalently, charmed site of 'magic waste' (II 93, 874). Through Byron's poetic spell, Greece shimmers between mortality and immortality (those 'lost-gods and godlike men'), between past heroic feats and present humbled condition, between a man-made empire and a part of nature. Even in a state of subjugation with her ancient 'fanés' and 'temples' bowed low and humbled by the 'rustic plough', Greece finds nobility in her union with the natural world for, as Byron declares a few stanzas earlier, 'Art, Glory, freedom fail, but Nature still is fair' (II, 87. 827). Byron's poetic sleight of hand with his choice of adjective, 'fair', to describe this enduring aspect of Nature ensures deliberate verbal echoes of his earlier invocations of an oppressed and plundered

---

3: Quoted in Jane Stabler, ed., *Byron*, Longman Critical Readers series (Longman, 1998), p.127.

Greece in 'Cold is the heart, fair Greece! that looks on thee' (II, 15. 1) and 'Fair Greece! sad relic of departed worth' (II, 73. 1). So by verbal and imaginative association, at least within Canto II, Greece can never fully perish for she and her ruins are extensions of the eternity of 'fair' Nature itself.

Byron knew too well how tenuous such a poetic claim was for the endurance of Greece's glorious legacy and that all things in nature must pass away and give way to 'Glory's grave' (*The Giaour*, 104). In a darkly dazzling passage, from *The Giaour*, written about a year later than Canto II, Byron locates Greece within a similarly, though more explicitly intimate, ambiguous poetic space of 'magic waste' to draw a startling clear analogy between the precise moment of an individual's death look and the catastrophic demise of Greece's 'fair' isles:

He who hath bent him o'er the dead,  
Ere the first day death is tied:  
The first dark day of nothingness.  
The last of danger and distress;  
(Before Decay's effacing fingers  
Have swept the lines where beauty lingers;  
And mark'd the mild angelic air ...

So fair—so calm—so softly seal'd  
The first—last look—by death reveal'd  
Such is the aspect of this shore  
'Tis Greece—but living Greece no more!  
So coldly sweet, so deadly fair,  
We start—for soul is wanting there.  
Hers is the loveliness in death,  
That parts not quite with parting breath;  
But beauty with that fearful bloom,  
That hue which haunts it to the tomb  
Expression's last receding ray.  
A gilded halo hovering round decay.  
The farewell beam of Feeling past away! (*The Giaour* 68-74; 88-100)

Tragically, the posthumous 'lines of beauty' lend both the deceased's visage and the fading 'aspect' of the crystalline Grecian shoreline a lingering sense of continued life, brilliance, and beauty when, in actuality, such signs of half-life and half-light are merely an illusory 'gilded halo hovering round decay'.<sup>4</sup> Death, like those despotic powers that have enslaved Greece, is all triumphant and any hope for the renewal of life at a national or individual life is extinguished like the 'Spark of that flame ... which gleams—but warms no more its cherished earth!' (*The Giaour*, 101-2). Byron's translation of a heartbreakingly intimate encounter with death (and its effects on the corpse) into a metaphor for the demise of the body politic of Greece, at the opening of *The Giaour*, reverses the movement towards an expression of personal grief at the close of Canto II of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

Focused through Byron's narrator of *The Giaour*, our eyes are directed outwards and upwards from the intimacy of personal grief to a panoramic view of the political, cultural, and physical geography of the fallen Greek isles. By contrast, the closing stanzas of Canto II rein in the field of vision from a panoptic sweep of the historical, mythological, cultural 'magic waste' that Greece has become. In them there is a deliberate narrowing down of Byron's poetic vision which moves from a plea on behalf of Greece as a nation—that we should 'Revere the remnants that nations once rever'd' (II, 93. 878)—to a personal declaration of the unworthiness of Byron's own 'too protracted song' (II, 94. 1). With a typically self-conscious flourish, Byron imagines a future moment when his own individual 'song' of 'inglorious lays' (II, 94. 83) dedicated to the downfall of Greece will be forever 'lost amid the throng / Of louder minstrels' (II, 94. 83-4). By dint of Byron's poetic logic, focus shifts from the public national loss of Greece and the legacy she will (or not) bestow to the world, to a professional anxiety over the survival of Byron's own posthumous poetic voice, and, finally, on an even more personal level, to the almost unbearable question of heartfelt grief and loss for a loved one:

Thou too art gone, thou lov'd and lovely one!  
Whom youth and youth's affection bound to me;  
No shrank from one albeit unworthy for thee.  
What is my being? Thou hast ceas'd to be!

---

**4:** See Christopher A. Strathman for a detailed discussion of these lines in this vein. Strathman, *Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative: Schegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp.70-2.

Nor stayed to welcome here thy wanderer home.  
Who mourns o'er the hours which we no more shall see  
Would they had never been, or were to come! (CHP II, 95. 891-7)

Public record and private sentiment intermingle, as Byron's public expression of regret for the 'magic waste' of the fallen, but somehow still charmed, Greece gives sway to Byron's private grief for the death of his close friend John Edelston. Perhaps, too, (in spite of Byron's claims to the contrary in his remarks about death on the battlefield in his own commentary to the lines in *The Giaour*), this same sense of personal loss, imaginatively, intensifies the tenderness of the 'first dark day of nothingness' and the reluctant passing of that 'mild angelic air' from the countenance of a corpse. Like Greece, exiled from her former self and past glories, the Byronic narrator is spatially and temporally displaced between those future 'hours' that will 'no more' be spent in his deceased friend's company and the rueful wish that those hours 'had never been, or were to come!'

Even if, at its best, Byron's poetic fiction can imaginatively preserve the glories of Greece for posterity, nothing, Byron recognises in darker moments, can prevent the obliterating effects of time and the public annals of history that ensure those living witness 'each lov'd one blotted from life's page' (II, 98. 920). Paradoxically, Byron's image of 'life's page' blurs those boundaries between life and literature to re-open the creative possibility of rewriting and re-reading—composing (and recomposing)—both the monumental events of public history and private recollection to re-inscribe into them the individual loss that Byron dreads time can and has obliterated to snatch 'the little joy that life had yet to lend' (II, 96. 908). Byron's poetic logic moves full circle to re-invest in the transience of individual 'life' which, ironically, 'lend[s]' meaning and purpose to the monumental and historical.

Verbally prefiguring Yeats's formulation and sense of those 'monuments of unageing intellect' (*Sailing to Byzantium*, 8). Byron's poetics attest to the fact that such meaning and purpose must ultimately originate in the natural and mortal world where all that is 'begotten, born, and dies' (*Sailing to Byzantium*, 6). Tragically, what Byron's own paradoxical phrase 'Monuments of Mortal Birth' (II, 85. 808) affirms is the inescapable interdependency of those lasting historical monuments on the ephemeral artisan that created them. It is then only, as Yeats also later concluded, in the 'complexities of mire or blood' (*Sailing to Byzantium*, 24) that monumental art and history is made comprehensible, because without those wasting generations of the Grecian Urn there is no-one to testify to the posthumous reputations of those 'Monuments of Mortal Birth,' their artisans, peoples, myths, culture, or even nationhood.