

Byron and the Greek Sublime

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This essay originally served to introduce an 8-minute film, "Byron's Messolonghi," directed by Rosa Florou and Yiannis Gianakopoulos. As the film begins, the camera approaches Messolonghi from the Gulf of Patras, as Byron would have in 1823. Against a backdrop of music by the Greek composer Skalcotas, it presents visual images of the town's natural setting and ecology, the region's archaeological remains, historical and cultural vestiges of pre-Exodos Messolonghi, and commemorations of Byron and of the Exodos. The film concludes with exterior and interior views of Byron House, a replica of Byron's residence during the last months of his life, which now serves as headquarters for the Messolonghi Byron society's Research Center with its library, collection of engravings, ethnic Greek costumes, and other memorabilia, and research and teaching spaces. "Byron's Messolonghi" can be viewed on the website of the Messolonghi Byron Society, <http://www.messolonghibyronsociety.gr>.

Edward Trelawny claims that Byron told him, "If I am a poet—Gifford says I am; I doubt it--the air of Greece has made me one. I climbed to the haunts of Minerva and the Muses."¹ Although Trelawny was not an invariably reliable reporter and the words of this supposed Byronic pronouncement, even if accurate, are somewhat more slippery than they at first might seem, there is palpable truth at its heart. The comment to Trelawny figures in a conversation during which Byron contrasts himself and his friend John Cam Hobhouse as Greek travelers. When the two arrived in Greece in 1809, they were much more alike than different as far as status and interests went: a pair of skeptical, adventurous young Cambridge graduates--sons of the ruling class but not particularly well connected in the circles of fashion or the corridors of power--politically interested liberals who had not yet made a mark in official Whig circles--deft versifiers, well trained at Harrow, Westminster, and Cambridge in classical *imitatio*, whose works had not yet made a deep impression on the English reading public. Back from their travels in 1811, Byron "woke up famous" (as his famous phrase goes) with the publication of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, his loco-descriptive Spenserian take on the tour. Hobhouse, laboring over minute linguistic and topographical details for A Journey through

Albania and other provinces of Turkey in Europe and Asia, to Constantinople,
during the Years 1809 and 1810, found that unglamorous “plain prose” was to be
his fate. Thus the picturesque polarity of scholarly consensus—sublimely soaring
homme fatal and and commonsensically down-to-earth wing-man—established
itself. And thus it has endured.

Something about the two friends’ different responses to being in Greece
seems to have played a crucial role in their diverging paths. Byron and Hobhouse
both were Philhellenes keenly alive to the wonders of a place incomparably rich in
sites sacred to myth and history, a landscape and seascape that they, like many
other Europeans, cherished as the cradle of their cultural heritage. But at the
time Hobhouse viewed Greece from a predominantly antiquarian vantage point.
Byron, more in touch with the spirit of the place than in search of facts about its
associations, opened himself to sublimity—and he received its gifts. For Byron in
Greece, the eye was window of the soul in a way that reverses the conventional
image: what he saw entered into a sensibility made receptive by classical
education and did not provoke scholarly or antiquarian questions but instead
stirred his creative spirit. On December 14, 1809, for instance, the view of Mount
Parnassus, sacred to Apollo and the Muses, gave Byron a more vital sense of the
poetry it inspired than all his classical reading had previously offered. The electric
thrill of having been on the spot is what spurred him to ask in a letter to Henry
Drury of their mutual friend the Cambridge tutor and poet Francis Hodgson, “what
would he give? To have seen like me the *real Parnassus*”?² Throughout his life
Byron cherished the memories having been at Delphi and having climbed the slopes
of Parnassus. Long afterward, he recorded his experience there in the “Detached
Thoughts” of 1821-22 and explicitly connected it with his poetic vocation:

Upon Parnassus going to the fountain of Delphi (Castrì) in 1809—I saw a
flight of twelve Eagles—(Hobhouse says they are Vultures—at least in
conversation)—and I seized the Omen.—On the day before, I composed the lines to

Parnassus—(in Childe Harold) and on beholding the birds—had a hope—that Apollo had accepted my homage... (BLJ IX, 41)

In Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Byron places so high a value on having seen the *real Parnassus* that his poem's narrator fast-forwards to that experience while Harold is still in Spain. Parnassus's rocky reality does not exclude its literary associations, but sublime actuality is what dominates. The mountain need not shelter the mythic Muses, for it serves as muse in its own right:

Oh, thou Parnassus! Whom I now survey,
Not in the phrenzy of a dreamer's eye,
Not in the fabled landscape of a lay,
But soaring snow-clad through thy native sky,
In the wild pomp of mountain-majesty!
What marvel if I thus essay to sing?
The humblest of thy pilgrims passing by
Would gladly woo thine Echoes with his string,
Though from thy heights no more one Muse will wave her wing. (l, st. 60)³

Voicing this response to the concrete presence of "mountain-majesty," Byron resembles his fellow Romantic poets who, however democratic their politics or however lofty their personal aspirations, come to accept the limited nature of the human senses and intellect as they submit to natural sublimity. Remember Wordsworth, befuddled in Book VI of the Thirteen-Book Prelude as he crosses the watershed of the Alps without being alerted by his unreliable physical senses to what his mind had imagined would be a memorable achievement, then blindsided by sublimity on his descent, as heights, chasms, cataracts, waterfalls, and winds delineate "Characters of the great Apocalypse,/ The types and symbols of eternity,/ The first, and last, and midst, and without end" (VI, 570-72).⁴ Or recall Wordsworth seven books later "in midst/ of circumstance most awful and sublime" (bk. XIII, l. 76; p. 514), befogged as he ascends Mount Snowdon and then moonstruck on the reaching the summit, which seems to be an island set in a silver sea of clouds. Or think of Shelley awed by the ideal power merely shadowed forth by "the everlasting universe of things" in his lyric "Mont Blanc." From the Romantic poet's vantage point, a sublime mountain experience is not something to

be managed by the rational mind seeking to order and control perceptions, as Hobhouse “would potter with map and compass at the foot of Pindus, Parnes, and Parnassus” (Trelawny I, 47). Instead it must be received, digested, and eventually re-membered.

So assimilated, nature’s sublimity nourishes the poetic spirit in an uncontrolled but deeply sustaining way, as Byron understood when he gazed at Mount Parnassus, scribbled no notes, and posed no questions. Byron’s most overtly Romantic—and, one might say, least byronic—avowal of this sublime and subliminal truth comes in Book III of Childe Harold, with its record of the Swiss summer of 1816. Influenced by Shelley’s companionship and perhaps through him by Wordsworth’s ideas, Byron at that time could straightforwardly offer a narrator who professes “I live not in myself, but I become/ Portion of that around me; and to me/ High mountains are a feeling” (III, st. 72; CPW II, 103) and poses such rhetorical questions as “Are not the mountains, waves, and skies a part/ Of me and of my soul, as I of them?” and “...should I not contemn/ All objects, if compared with these...?” (III, st. 75; CPW II, 104-05). After the fact, Byron facetiously deprecated the third canto as “a fine indistinct piece of poetical desperation” and characterized himself as “half-mad during the time of its composition, between metaphysics, mountains, lakes, love unextinguishable, thoughts unutterable, and the nightmare of my own delinquencies.” (BLJ V, 165) But however sheepish he may later have felt for having fallen so fully and so eloquently under a spell like the one that bewitched and habitually inspired Wordsworth, the rugged landscape of Greece had long since worked upon his mind in a comparable way. In fact, its atmosphere had set him on his poetical path to sublimity if the reported claim concerning “the air of Greece” is to be trusted—and in light of what Byron says of the poetic omen that marked his Parnassian trek as a vocation, Trelawny’s report rings true.

As an elegantly symmetrical fate would have it, the first Greek landscape Byron viewed from terra firma was also the last his dying eyes would see: a mixture of craggy mountains and marshy flats spanned by a broad sky whose changing light was reflected in calm lagoon waters and the rougher seas of the Gulf of Patras. On September 26, 1809, his first day on Greek soil, Byron landed on the Peloponnesian side of the gulf and from there saw the fishing huts of the small community called Messolonghi, so named for its situation in the lagoon. Byron entered Messolonghi almost two months later, en route from the wilds of Albania to Athens. On January 4, 1824, Byron returned to Messolonghi, now the western center of the Greek revolution against the Ottoman Empire. This time, Byron set foot on mainland Greece as official representative of the London Greek Committee—no youthful Grand Tourist but a purposeful man who had come to devote his talents, fortune, and life to a cause. The humble town that he came to know well in the last months of his life is today mostly gone, destroyed in the heroically tragic Exodos of 1826. But the sublime landscape that may well have sustained Byron in dark times is essentially unchanged. Looking south and west from the Messolonghi waterfront, one can see the mountains of Morea and the Ionian islands of Cephalonia, Ithaka, and Zante that Byron could have viewed from his upper windows. Stark, cave-riddled Mount Varassova looms to the east. The chapel of the Virgin of the Palms, goal of Byron's habitual evening ride, reposes in tranquility on an isle in the lagoon that continues to mirror sunsets as rich as those Byron would have seen. The contours, colors, play of light, and vast expanses of stony mountains, water, and sky are now as they were in 1824: modern development has done comparatively little to interfere with the district's natural beauty and sublimity.

If we can appreciate much the same landscape that Byron saw as he first breathed the air of mainland Greece and as, expiring, he breathed his last, can we also experience it unmediated? Or has Byron's seeing Greece and saying what he

saw preempted a direct response to the myth-saturated landscape in subsequent generations of readers and travelers who come in his footsteps to savor the Hellenic sublime? Can the “fabled landscape of a lay” whose best if not last minstrel was Byron be simply seen for what it is? Perhaps not, and perhaps some pilgrims would not want it so. But perhaps the Greek sublime is such that even the most eloquent subjectivity is silenced, if not forgotten, in its presence. See for yourself. Test the truth of Henry Miller’s claim: “In Greece the rocks are eloquent: men may go dead but the rocks never.”⁵

Notes

- ¹ Edward Trelawney, Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author (New York and London: Benjamin Blom, 1878, reissued 1968), I, 48. Subsequent citation will refer to this edition and will appear parenthetically. Early in his memoir, Trelawney reports that Byron “often said, if he had ever written a line worth preserving, it was Greece that inspired it” (I, 37).
- ² Lord Byron, Byron’s Letters and Journals, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (), II, 59. Subsequent citations will refer to this edition, abbreviated BLJ, and will appear parenthetically.
- ³ Lord Byron, Complete Poetical Works, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), II, 31. Subsequent citations will refer to this edition, abbreviated CPW, and will appear parenthetically.
- ⁴ William Wordsworth, The Prelude: The Four Texts, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (New York: Penguin, 1995), bk. VI, ll. 570-72, p. 242. Subsequent citation providing book, line, and page number will refer to this edition and will appear parenthetically.
- ⁵ Henry Miller, The Colossus of Maroussi (New York: New Directions, 1941), p. 56.