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Heroism and history: *Childe Harold* I and II and the Tales

For generations of readers, the experience of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* has been caught up with a reading of Byron's psychology, for the poem has commonly been seen as the expression of an incompletely repressed *alter ego* to be read in parallel with Byron's own life and expressed opinions. It therefore finds itself firmly placed within the bounds of an interpretative frame whose constant reference point is the concept of a flawed and melancholic psyche. Within this, approving critics may note the perspicuity of the poem's dark opinions, or the fascination of its psychology, while disapproving critics might censure the indulgence of high Romantic self-expression or dramatisation. These approaches, and their approving or disapproving reflexes are not misreadings. In many ways, they constitute a meta-narrative which is historically continuous, amply echoing the response of Byron's contemporary audience, which enjoyed the poem precisely because it seemingly alluded to the authentic experience of its author. But in general, such a view is likely to eclipse other of the poem's achievements, for it tends to reinforce the Romantic cult of introversion wherein the isolation of the private poet is seen as a necessary condition of a gifted perception. I will argue here for an understanding of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* I and II as a profoundly public work written in a style designed to appeal to a new audience sympathetic to its coherent and anti-teleological explorations of history, politics and contemporary affairs. It is an ambitious poem which constructs a world-view for the modern – that is to say 'Romantic' – post-revolutionary intellectual, a view which in turn produces the psychology of the Byronic hero as a dramatisation of its effects. Significantly, its perspective is European, discarding orthodox or nationalistic understandings of history and empire, in favour of an all-embracing scepticism, which interrogates ideals of civilisation's progress and nationhood through a series of meditations around posterity's judgements on heroism, fame and achievement. I will argue that the verse tales that followed the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* may be read in continuity with it, but that the nature of this continuum

constitutes displacements, in which the significance of history is at best vestigial. The reading offered here is not radically disruptive of established views, but it does require the reader to look again at *Childe Harold's* most familiar characteristics – its scepticism, and its vision of a devastated Europe – and regard them darkly, as if they were being seen for the first time.

The publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1812 marks a defining moment in literary history. It is the point at which, effectively, second-generation Romanticism took root in the culture of the age, and it is the moment at which the best-seller poem gave notice that it had emphatically arrived. The poem inaugurated a fresh rage for poetry which exceeded even that of Scott's highly popular romantic narratives. Byron capitalised on his popularity in the rapid publication of the poems commonly known as the Turkish Tales (1812–16) and his fame in these years was such that it led to the streets being blocked because of the multitude's eagerness to catch a glimpse of him, and to his publisher, so flushed with the success of *Childe Harold*, offering him 1,000 guineas for a sequel.¹ This period was an era which saw the commodification of literature increase at an unprecedented rate, one in which literature came to be regarded as a profession, and in which success, fame and regard were attributed not by literary coteries, but by the combination of sales, marketing and the influence of the powerful reviewing journals. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* successfully negotiated this complex of influences to become an outstandingly popular poem on account of its novelty, and its innovations were both influential and important in their establishment of poetry's civic function.

Byron's poem gave a distinctly new turn to the movement that we now know as Romanticism and, simultaneously, it interrupted the modes of the popular poetry of the day. First, its style and location were markedly unusual. Above all else, *Childe Harold* is a rhetorical *tour de force*, in which the artistry of declamation assumes primacy. While the poem develops a meditative dimension, its style of thinking is a long way from the ruminative introversion of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Byron's interest in contemplation is not that it might lead to some inner wisdom, vision or higher morality greater than those inhabiting the common frames of thought: it is vitally concerned with the position of the individual in the world ('the world' at that time meaning largely, but not exclusively, Western Europe). Where the early Romantics' poetry constructed for itself a domestic landscape, in which the home figured large, Byron's poem announced an utterly different location and stimulation for the poet's ideas, in which the settled traditions of domesticity figured not at all. This is a poem of unconventional travel and exile, a poem whose scenery is that of Europe, and more particularly a Europe defined by two distinct features: its history, and its boundaries. The first two

cantos of *Childe Harold* construct a world riven by political and military strife that is bounded by regions of wilderness and exotic barbarism. This is a new world for the Romantic poet, or indeed the popular poet of the opening decade of the nineteenth century, and it was one that Byron made his own, and in a way, never left. Indeed, his rejection of Romantic metaphysics is announced here no less forcefully than in *Don Juan*, even if that announcement is implicit rather than declared in *Childe Harold's* modern, first-decade assumption that to be in the world is primarily a political and not an ontological matter.

The poets that are commonly placed alongside Byron as second-generation Romantics, Shelley and Keats, owe more to this defining moment than is commonly acknowledged. Neither of these authors wrote anything like *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, but their poems have important genealogical roots here. For Shelley is a poet whose identity is more European than English, and his position as an exile whose perspective on the norms of British society is sceptical, atheistic and informed by theories of history, owes much to the political and civic precedents created by Byron's poem. In another region entirely, Byron's creation of a poetic voice that is strongly inflected by what was seen at the time as a form of sickness or morbidity and simultaneously able to acknowledge the sensual regions of human experience may be very different in tone to anything found in Keats, but its emotional or affective structures are replicated there. In so many of his poems, Keats depends heavily on the interchange between satiety and the incapacity to feel on the one hand and the stimulation of dream, sexuality and excess on the other. That dynamic has its foundation in the emotional spectrum of *Childe Harold*, and even more significantly perhaps, *Childe Harold's* fostering of the public's taste for liberal, yet polite (as opposed to 'vulgar' or radical) poetry.

It is as well to acknowledge that *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* I and II is a difficult poem, particularly for the modern reader. This difficulty inheres not so much in the devious archiving of hidden meanings, as in its surface, and it is compounded by a current (and late twentieth-century) interpretative habit which has a strong preference for the discovery or creation of subtexts. The poem's originality, and its political and historical relevance, are ironically too readily obscured by its allusive, topical difficulties on the one hand, and the distractions offered by the emerging figure of the Byronic hero on the other. In addition, the poem's complex movements back and forth through time, place and mode initially militate against the clarity of its abiding concerns. Frequently seen as a medley (or 'a hodgepodge', as a recent critic has put it),² it is, in fact, as I will argue, a consistent engagement with a series of connected themes and ideas revolving around a fascination with

the making of history: war, empire, tradition, loyalty, heroism and, perhaps above all, the judgements of posterity. These topics are not simply convenient romantic themes for a young poet; they are the subjects which this poem is reviewing and re-evaluating in the political chaos of Europe at the end of the nineteenth century's first decade. It is the extent of that political chaos, and its devastating consequence for the significance of history, that presents the appearance of a medley or formlessness, for it distends the poem, wrenching it away from the stable structure of a travelogue into something less neat, more ambitious and more distorted, an irregular procession of declamations which deny the ordinance of reasoned argument, but present together a disillusioned evacuation of history's significance, the status of heroism and the historical agency of great men. At the same time, these declamations effectively dramatise the disappointment that attends such a loss.

When Byron left England to travel to the Peninsula and the Levant in 1809, Europe was in a state of turmoil. 'The Continent is in a fine state!' he wrote to his mother shortly before leaving Falmouth, 'an insurrection has broken out at Paris, and the Austrians are beating Buonaparte, the Tyrolese have risen' (*BLJ*, I, 206). His journey through Spain and Portugal was to take him to countries which perhaps exemplified more than any other the chaotic state of European international affairs. The recent history of both nations was strewn with broken treaties and internal and external treacheries. Some understanding of this is necessary if we are to appreciate the nature and tone of much of the political commentary that the poem embodies.

Since 1792, when the French Assembly required Spain either to form a close alliance with France or to enter into open hostilities, Spain's position had been strongly compromised by the political intrigues of its monarchy and Prime Minister, Manuel de Godoy.³ Charles IV of Spain was a conservative Bourbon king, who had staunchly supported Louis XVI and had gone to war with France in 1793 after Louis's execution. After significant defeats and the ascent of Godoy to a position of greater influence (he was also the Queen's lover), Spain had signed the Treaty of Ildefonso in 1796, effectively an offensive alliance with France against England. The succeeding years were disastrous for Spain and the country's relations with Portugal. Napoleon ruthlessly exploited Godoy's compliance, and Spain suffered continuous defeats in the war with England, while being constantly under threat of French invasion. Godoy attempted to create a principality for himself in southern Portugal, paying Napoleon 24 million francs for the privilege, before realising that he was being played along, at which point he tried to form an alliance with England. This was rebuffed, and incurred Napoleon's displeasure. When Portugal refused to declare war on England in 1807 to

reinforce the continental blockade at Napoleon's behest, the French took the opportunity to agree with Godoy that they could march across the Pyrenees through Spain into Portugal. Having installed a brutal and exploitative government of generals in Portugal, Napoleon's troops then invaded Spain, and the ensuing struggle resulted finally, after Charles IV's farcical abdication and reclamation of the throne, in Napoleon's capturing of the crown for his brother, Joseph Bonaparte. On 2 May 1808, the day after the monarchy departed for safe havens in France, the Madrid populace rose in revolt, a rising that not only proved to be a turning point in the history of Spain, but also led eventually to Napoleon's downfall. Portugal and Spain united against the French invaders, bringing the British generals Wellesley (shortly to become the Duke of Wellington after the victory at Talevera) and Moore into the Peninsula. After a series of terrible battles and the controversy over the Convention of Cintra (in which Britain's agreement with Napoleon sacrificed the Spanish popular cause), France was driven out of Portugal, and Wellington advanced up through Spain, taking Madrid in 1812, and then marching on to France. Within fifteen days of the last French defeat in Spain, Napoleon abdicated to Elba in April 1814.

Byron left England on 2 July 1809, arriving in Lisbon four days later. He was in Portugal and Spain for no more than a month, leaving Lisbon in mid-July, and riding horseback quickly to Cadiz, and then by boat to Gibraltar. His presence in the Peninsula followed the popular risings, and coincided with Napoleon's successes at Saragossa and Corunna. By the spring of 1810, Cadiz was besieged. It is hard to imagine a more politically volatile location for Byron's travels, and the poem that granted him fame, than Portugal and Spain in 1809, and Byron's journey was a long way from the conventional Grand Tour commonly undertaken by the aristocratic gentlemen of the eighteenth century upon coming of age. His original plan, to travel to Constantinople via Malta was thwarted by his having missed the boat to Malta from Falmouth, and he and his travelling companion, John Cam Hobhouse, took the alternative route to Lisbon, travelling thereafter overland through Portugal and Spain to Gibraltar, and then on to Malta, Albania, Greece and Turkey. Reading Byron's letters from this brief period (he was in Spain and Portugal for around five weeks) provides only a partial view of his reactions to his journey. Political and military affairs are given relatively scant attention ('This country is in a state of great disorder, but beautiful in itself, the army is in Spain, and a battle is daily expected' (*BLJ*, I, 214–15) he writes casually from Lisbon to his solicitor, John Hanson, in July 1809); more prevalent are remarks on manners, personalities and the appearance of Spanish women (*BLJ*, I, 216–19). Yet almost the whole of the first canto of *Childe Harold*

is given over to a retrospective meditation on Spain, in which, alongside the descriptions of the landscape and the people, the current condition of the country is related to its history, and to the common condition of a Europe ravaged by war. Spain may have been an unexpected detour for Byron's travelling schedule, and he may have lost no time in passing through it, but this projection into the unstable and bloody theatre of European warfare forces the poet to confront the momentous subject of national histories, and develop forms of poetic utterance equal to the challenge of historical commentary. There is no doubt that when Byron came to write the first canto between October and December 1809, he recognised Spain as the *locus* of European chaos ('the land of war and crimes' (*BLJ*, II, 16)) in which a recent history of continuous betrayal, imperial ambition and popular resentment provided the context for a revision of international affairs to be rendered on behalf of – in the terms of the poem's epigraph – a citizen of the world, whose extensive, sceptical views are not constrained by national boundaries or patriotic affiliation.

In accordance with this wider view, one of the strongest features of this poetry is its consistent attempt to insert the consequences of present and past times into a context governed by the judgements of posterity. These judgements are offered as hypotheses (since posterity is always in a state of impending arrival) and, simultaneously, as verdicts filtered by historical perspectives informed by distance and better understanding. Thus, the Childe ruminates on the Convention of Cintra and expostulates, 'How will posterity the deed proclaim! / Will not our own and fellow-nations sneer', and throughout both cantos there is a sustained concern with the gaining and status of fame and notoriety, ranging from that of the ancient heroes and writers to the degenerate infamy earned by such as Lord Elgin, whose deeds make Europe 'blush' (*CHP*, II.13.2). Byron uses the spectre of posterity as a means of censoring the degraded politics and actions of the present day, but the device is more than a satirical trick, for the vision of *Childe Harold* is one concerned to situate the modern liberal mind contemplating the imperial ambitions of France and other nations in an historical perspective. Posterity is Byron's rhetorical means of imagining the future judgements of history. It is also realised as the active agent in contemporary revisions of previous actions and ideologies.

This poem has a ubiquitous concern with a re-reading of the historical landscape through which its wanderer proceeds. The crosses by the roadside (1.xxi.2) are not 'devotion's offering' but marks of the continuous violence in a land where 'law secures not life'. The Catholic Church at Mafra, which Byron describes as 'superb' in his notes to the poem, is interpreted as an emblem of Catholicism's bloody history:

But here the Babylonian whore hath built
A dome where flaunts she in such glorious sheen,
That men forget the blood which she hath spilt
And bow the knee to Pomp that loves to varnish guilt.

(*CHP*, I.29.6–9)

The better view of posterity is rendered more conventionally in the re-reading of another edifice in the landscape in the apostrophe to William Beckford (*CHP*, I.22–3), in which Beckford's wrecked hopes of 'paradise' are to be recognised in the deserted halls of his one-time residence, now the classic image of mutability with its overgrown passages and 'gaping portals'. At the simplest and most orthodox level, *Childe Harold* deconstructs the illusory permanence of architectural ambition through the readily available motif of decay, and advances, similarly, the view that Time ('accursed time' (*CHP*, I.66.1)) rules over all things. The poem moves a long way beyond this, however, in its attempt to apply historical perspectives to the overwhelming events of contemporary Spain.

The sceptical interrogation of grandeur is repeated, with more weight and immediate topical reference in Canto I, stanzas 40 to 44, in which the great battles of Talavera and Albuera are invoked. Here, famously, Byron casts the renown of victory in the longer perspective provided by the history of imperial ambition's folly, acknowledging the honour attending the dead ('Yes, Honour decks the turf that wraps their clay') but simultaneously reading this as a 'vain sophistry' through which the dead may be recognised as 'ambition's honour'd fools'. The battles of Talavera and Albuera were indeed successes for the British, but they incurred massive, unprecedented casualties on both sides. The losses at Albuera, together with the tactical failures of the Spanish after Talavera, made both battles pyrrhic victories, even while they remained landmarks in the liberation of the Peninsula and the eventual defeat of Napoleon. In its representation of these battles, *Childe Harold* evolves a polyphonic register capable of simultaneously evoking the heroic and the satiric:

By Heaven! it is a splendid sight to see
(For one who hath no friend, no brother there)
Their rival scarfs of mix'd embroidery,
Their various arms that glitter in the air!
What gallant war-hounds rouse them from their lair,
And gnash their fangs, loud yelling for the prey!
All join the chase, but few the triumph share;
The Grave shall bear the chiefest prize away
And Havoc scarce for joy can number their array.

Three hosts combine to offer sacrifice;
 Three tongues prefer strange orisons on high;
 Three gaudy standards flout the pale blue skies;
 The shouts are France, Spain, Albion, Victory!
 The foe, the victim, and the fond ally
 That fights for all, but ever fights in vain,
 Are met – as if at home they could not die –
 To feed the crow on Talavera’s plain,
 And fertilize the field that each pretends to gain.

(*CHP*, 1.40–41)

There is a lot of movement here, as Byron mobilises a vocabulary which can invoke the pageant of warfare as well as its patriotism, while steadily working the stanza towards a withdrawal of the values it seemingly endorses, in a manner that predicates *Don Juan*’s mastery of the technique. But like that later poem, the poetry is not concerned simply to undermine itself through such qualifying ironies. While there are moments which effectively cancel out the heroic statements, *Childe Harold* also operates in an oxymoronic frame of reference, to hold opposites in suspension, as in the phrase ‘Oh, Albuera! glorious field of grief!’ (*CHP*, 1.43.1), or indeed, in its broad historical vision, which recognises the competing claim of the immediate and the contemporary within the great span of time and the judgements of the future.

So deeply suffused is the long view of posterity that even poetry is vulnerable to its penetrating scrutiny:

Childe Harold was he hight: – but whence his name
 And lineage long, it suits me not to say;
 Suffice it, that perchance they were of fame,
 And had been glorious in another day:
 But one sad losel soils a name for aye,
 However mighty in the olden time;
 Nor all that herald rake from coffin’d clay,
 Nor florid prose, nor honied lies of rhyme
 Can blazon evil deeds, or consecrate a crime.

(*CHP*, 1.3)

Rhetoric is given a very uncertain status here. Its capacity to deceive, Byron suggests, is countered by the more lasting effects of criminality, which cannot be erased. *Childe Harold* may be a poem that invests heavily in its own declamations, but it is also a poem consistently informed by its own suspicion of rhetorical propagandas and the metaphors of fame and reputation. There is a sense, therefore, in which the poem is founded upon a conflict between

its medium and its message but, for the most part, such a conflict is avoided by way of a consistently articulated scepticism which requires its readers to look beyond the facades of grandeur or patriotic rhetoric to the wider view.

The first canto of the poem ends in an extravagant development of Spain's allegorical significance which, taken together with the opening of the second canto, offers the widest view of all, in the form of the history of civilisation as Byron knew it. Not only is Spain the epitome of contemporary political chaos, in which 'They fight for freedom who were never free, / A Kingless people for a nerveless state' (*CHP*, I.86.2–3), it also defines the very condition of imperial warfare and struggle in its incorporation of all previous histories of violent struggle (*CHP*, I.87.1–4).

Even more startling perhaps is the poem's vision of Spain as an Armageddon. Its 'reeking plain' and 'bleach'd bones, and blood's unbleaching stain, / Long mark the battle-field with hideous awe' (*CHP*, I.88.7–8) and yet are, in a sense, only the beginning, as Napoleon's campaign took the sheer numbers of men engaged in European battle to unprecedented heights:

Nor yet, alas! the dreadful work is done,
Fresh legions pour adown the Pyrenees;
It deepens still, the work is scarce begun
No mortal eye the distant end foresees.

(CHP, I.89.1–4)

Byron has brought his readers to the borderlands of contemporary civilisation, here mapped as the dire conflation of imperial expansion, political intrigue and barbarism. It is no coincidence therefore, that the opening of the second canto traces this rhetoric on to the history of Greece to redefine classical civilisation within a history of barbarism before crossing the borders to enter the undiscovered regions outside the Europe which defines modern experience. What is found there is identical, but – in a way – it assembles itself the other way round.

The pilgrimage of the poem, it turns out, is to the Parthenon at Athens, the origin of civilisation which, in the conventional Whig accounts of the eighteenth century, spread through an imperial expansion justified by an enlightened understanding of civic freedom. Athena, apostrophised here as the origin of all things in the scriptural phrase 'The Ancient of days' (*CHP*, II.2.1) and also as Homer's 'blue-eyed maid of heaven' (*CHP*, II.1.1), stands as the emblem of human potential that, in the context of *Childe Harold's* new history, is now unrealisable. The goddess of wisdom has inspired, in this retrospective view, no mortal songs (*CHP*, II.2.2), and her temple bears the marks of 'war and wasting fire'. Worst of all, it stands now in the Ottoman Empire ('men who never felt the sacred glow'), its ruined grandeur ironically

enclosed by an imperial power whose ideology is diametrically opposed to that attributed to the Greek Republic. At the centre of these two cantos, the irony of the poem's title is most deeply marked. Here is a poem which announces itself as an indulgent and sacred journey into the arcane and quaint, a poem which will perhaps withdraw into the past, but, of course, the opposite proves to be the case. The 'pilgrimage' forces a radical revision of the liberal historical view. Greece is not the beginning of a gradual and progressive spread of freedom, but only a false dawn, a 'wonder of an hour' in a longer, continuous history of tyrannies. The opening stanzas of the second canto condemn the conventional understanding of Greece's afterlife as fully as the subsequent stanzas deny Christian immortality. *Childe Harold* has come to the beginning of things only to find the end: the apocalypse of Spain is succeeded by the 'sepulchre' (*CHP*, II.3.3) of Greece. He stands at the edge of Europe, and the end of history, with nowhere to go but across the border.

The poem's entry into Albania leaves its reader in no doubt about the liminal nature of this experience.⁴ The landscape itself denotes a region of wilderness bereft of familiar sights, customs and values:

Morn dawns; and with it stern Albania's hills,
 Dark Suli's rocks, and Pindus' inland peak,
 Rob'd half in mist, bedew'd with snowy rills,
 Array'd in many a dun and purple streak,
 Arise; and, as the clouds along them break,
 Disclose the dwelling of the mountaineer:
 Here roams the wolf, the eagle whets his beak,
 Birds, beasts of prey, and wilder men appear,
 And gathering storms around convulse the closing year.

Now Harold felt himself at length alone,
 And bade to Christian tongues a long adieu;
 Now he adventur'd on a shore unknown,
 Which all admire, but many dread to view:
 His breast was arm'd 'gainst fate, his wants were few;
 Peril he sought not, but ne'er shrank to meet,
 The scene was savage, but the scene was new;
 This made the ceaseless toil of travel sweet,
 Beat back keen winter's blast, and welcom'd summer's heat.

(*CHP*, II.42-43)

These two stanzas announce a number of symbolic transitions. A new morning finds a dark, obscure and largely dehumanised landscape in which predatory nature and an even wilder form of human life are revealed. A closing

year, marked out by storms, accompanies a new condition of isolation, and a frontier whose novelty is welcomed alongside the anticipation of seasonal change. This, then, is a very different place from the Europe which defined Harold's modernity within its history. For here, momentarily at least, the weight of history is lifted (Harold passes through 'lands scarce noticed in historic tales' (*CHP*, II.46.4)) and the cosmopolitan environment of the citizen of the world is equally remote ('Ne city's towers pollute the lovely view' (*CHP*, II.52.1)). The Childe's travels have brought him to a kind of no man's land. Byron's editor rightly remarks that the poet's apostrophe to the river of Hades ('behold black Acheron!' (*CHP*, II.51.6)) indicates an intention to place this section of his poem in parallel with the epic descent to the underworld.⁵ At the same time, this is a place of excessive delight ('pure pleasure' (*CHP*, II.1.6)), and hence the odd reversal:

Pluto! If this be hell I look upon,
 Close sham'd Elysium's gates, my shade shall seek for none!
 (*CHP*, II.51.8-9)

And it is in this landscape, this strange ahistorical place of otherness, that Byron presents to his readers the Court of Ali Pasha, whose exotic inhabitants are of no fixed country or place. The poem makes much of what it describes as the 'strange groups' gathered here:

Some high-capp'd Tartar spurr'd his steed away:
 The Turk, the Greek, the Albanian, and the Moor,
 Here mingled in their many-hued array,
 While the deep war-drum's sound announc'd the close of day.

The wild Albanian kirtled to his knee,
 With shawl-girt head and ornamented gun,
 And gold-embroider'd garments, fair to see;
 The crimson-scarfed men of Macedon;
 The Delhi with his cap of terror on,
 And crooked glaive; the lively, supple Greek;
 And swarthy Nubia's mutilated son;
 The bearded Turk that rarely deigns to speak,
 Master of all around, too potent to be meek.

Are mix'd conspicuous . . .

(*CHP*, II.57.6-59.1)

This passage accomplishes a number of effects. It is clearly a fetishising of the exotic and, as such, it belongs to the commodification of the East, a major effect in Byron's poetry. At the same time, it belongs to the literature of encounter, in which the orthodox view (here that of the reader) is

confronted with a scene of marvellous unfamiliarity which has the effect of disturbing and perplexing orthodox assumptions. Here those assumptions are those of nation and nationhood, religion and culture, gathered together in a 'conspicuous mixture'. Along with the rich novelty of this section of the poem – the 'many things most new to ear and eye' and the luxury of 'Wealth and Wantonness' – it is tempting to read the Kingdom of Ali Pasha as serving the function of a conventional eighteenth-century satiric utopia, wherein all the follies of the European nations might be exposed by way of the more civilised mores of an ostensibly barbaric culture, and, indeed, Childe Harold's symbolic passage across the frontier into this new world would give precedent to such a reading. But of course this is not the case. Byron is using the symbolic crossing of frontier ironically, for all that is discovered here is, in a way, a mirror image of that left behind. Thus, the virtues of Albanian loyalty, courage and friendship are extolled, and, famously, Ali Pasha himself is marked as a man of violence and bloodshed with 'a tyger's tooth'.

Although the poem's depiction of the Suliotes exploits the trope of the noble savage, it does so without idealism. Childe Harold notes that the hospitality and generous protection offered him by Ali Pasha is in contrast to that which might be offered by 'less barbarians' or 'fellow-countrymen . . . aloof' (*CHP*, II.66.8), but such kindness blinds neither him nor the narrator to the carnage which is an integral part of Ali's life and history. In Albania, as in Europe, courageous deeds and heroic actions may be found, but they are actions and deeds without cause or principle. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the Childe's benign regard for the spectacle of the Albanian warrior dance is succeeded by the famous meditation on Greece, which moves beyond its opening lament ('Fair Greece! Sad relic of departed worth!' (*CHP*, II.73.1)), and its romantic questing for great men ('Who now shall lead thy scatter'd children forth' (*CHP*, II.73.3)) to confront without delusion the baleful facts of recent imperial history. Thus, while the struggle for power may bring down the Ottoman Empire in Greece, this will not be a liberation ('not for you will freedom's altars flame' (*CHP*, II.76.6)), but only one more chapter in the continuous cycle of repressive regimes. Childe Harold's experience in Albania has returned him to the ruination of empires, and the double defacing, by history, and by pillagers such as Elgin, of the Greek landscape where the vestiges of its glory still remain. In the light of the broad sceptical history that *Childe Harold* develops, there is no prospect of an improved future, and no heroes or great men to bring it forward.

Childe Harold's discovery of the border of Europe and its history may be regarded as a precedent for Byron's turn to narrative in the Turkish Tales.

The change of location represented in the Tales is another border-crossing: a move into a geographical and historical paradigm, which, as will be seen, resists incorporation into Western models. This intractable otherness limits the possibilities of reading the Tales as allegories, yet this will, in a strongly modified way, be part of my intention in the argument that follows. First, it is necessary to provide a description of the Tales, noting their distinction from *Childe Harold*, so that we can better understand the metamorphoses they effect in Byron's representations of history and heroism.

In some ways, the Turkish Tales are discontinuous with the poetry of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Where *Childe Harold* is a thoroughly modern poem with intellectual ambitions, the Tales are novel, but not original, and without pretension for the most part. They demonstrate Byron's understanding of popular taste in their oriental setting and in their exploitation of heroic stereotypes, and they also tell us something about his developing interest in, and experiments with, narrative verse. Up until this time, Byron had been a writer of lyrics and satire. *Childe Harold* might be seen as a poetic structure combining these genres while touching on narrative in its travelogue. But the Tales are completely different, being primarily narratives. And while they all tell much the same tragic, swashbuckling story, they do it in different ways: in *The Giaour* we discover a narrative constructed through fragmentary points of view in octosyllabic verse; *The Bride of Abydos* is a paragraphed third-person narrative with an irregular oscillation between iambic pentameter and octosyllabics; *The Corsair* and *Lara* are rendered in more regular heroic iambs with a proliferation of dramatised speech; *The Siege of Corinth* and *Parisina* return to the octosyllabic line. Although the tales are to some extent formulaic, and while they undoubtedly pander to the public taste through such repetition, they also show Byron's expert facility as a teller of stories, as a poet determined to move beyond his proven success in lyric and satire, the genre of his previous publications as well as the genealogical source of the idiom of *Childe Harold*. Like Shelley, Byron's early career demonstrates a determination to develop a series of different forms and modes; and in parallel again, these encounters produce not virtuoso performances, but certainly remarkable facility in the production of poetry. Yet there is something more here too, for in such experimentation, we might detect the precedents for the extraordinary narrative of *Don Juan*, not only in the developing technique of telling stories, but also in the consciousness of the overbearing presence of a consuming public. Of course, there is little evidence of the self-conscious irony that produces and protects the comic vision of Byron's masterpiece.

A form made popular by Walter Scott and Robert Southey, the verse-tale commonly sustained a lengthy narrative of exotic adventure, and while Byron

was always careful never to make large claims for his own tales, the mode bears something of an epic ambition about it. These are all poems about heroes. There have been attempts to read them as allegories, or as works with a profound philosophical undercurrent but, in the first instance, it is more profitable to read their surface rather than their imagined depths, for here we can realise more of their historical significance, the nature of their allegorising, and understand better the culture that fostered heroic exotica. These aspects are not discrete: what we are concerned with here is the new environment of the 'modern' poet, an environment that is commercially sophisticated in its marketing and consumption of cultural commodity; one that is concerned with the importation of exotic stories as part of an expanding horizon of such cultural (and colonising) expansion; and one that is historically ripe for a redefinition of the poetic constructions of modern heroism.

With the exception of one or two lyric interludes, asides or oblique commentaries, these poems do not aspire to the political or historical sonority of *Childe Harold*, neither do they overtly embrace its modernity, its sense of being of the European moment. They are, as it were, written from the 'other side' of *Childe Harold's* border, where the fantasy of the end of history may be temporarily indulged in the strangeness of the other place. And, until the last decade or so, they were rarely seen as poems of political content or relevance, and were read largely within the critical story of the Byronic hero, as thematic revisions of Gothic or Shakespearean themes, or dismissed, perhaps, as bad poems, evidence of Byron's equivocal exploitation of an audience.

In recent years, there have been allegorical reclamations of the Tales that are rather more subtle. The interventions of historicist critics have argued against reading the Tales with political innocence, demonstrating their politically disruptive treatment of gender, for example, or their deeply engaged intertextual relations which place them centrally in the cultural discourse of imperialism. My argument here will, to some extent, concede to these readings (the most important of which are summarised below), but with a qualified regard for the notions of allegory they implicitly propose, and in a modified theoretical frame. For, in the context of the reading of *Childe Harold* I have offered, there is no rationale for the implied political unconscious that such radical, allegorical readings propose. While it is clearly the case that any writing may be considered to bear (in some encoded way) the politics of the period, there are specific questions which arise in Byron's case. The most obvious, and urgent, is this: why, given the political extroversion of *Childe Harold*, and its highly conscious engagement with history and politics, should these preoccupations suddenly be driven underground in the

Tales? What is the instrument or apparatus of repression that intervenes at this point, to produce either a subversive Byron who consciously encodes his stories in these ways, or a remarkably unconscious Byron who fails to recognise the political relevance of his own work?

Part of the answer may be seen to lie in the nature of *Childe Harold's* success. Received by the public as an autobiographical poem with a developed psychological dimension, its historical dimension was effectively sidelined. The reviewers compounded this effect by their relatively gentle admonition of the poem's political and religious heterodoxies alongside a broad endorsement of its topological descriptions and its 'manly' strength and impetuosity, which Jeffrey, for one, read as stern medicine for what he regarded as the sickly affectations of the day.⁶ The poem's centre (its discourse of history and politics) was thus displaced to its margin, but in the name of a certain masculine authenticity, located in the immediacy of the poem's present tense, its rhetorical power, and in its sense of place. *Childe Harold* represented itself, and was duly read, as the poetry of experience and, more, it offered to the reader a vicarious appeal in its engagements with the exotic. This emphasis on experience is one that is entirely consistent with Byron's ambitions and his aesthetics. As is well known, he set much store by his poetry's accuracy, and by its veracity grounded in the first-hand experience of a travelled man of the world. The Tales offered him the further opportunity of experimentation in the limits of fiction bounded by the voice of experience, through which he was to become the symbolic cultural representation of occidental and oriental relations. His poetry was that which encountered the other place, the strange region of unfamiliar mores, and it did so not through the transports of the imagination, but with the authenticity of ethnographic experience.

The new arguments about the Tales begin from the well-founded proposition that the broad frames of reference in which the poems are situated – those of empire, tyranny, despotism, struggle, revolution, freedom and so on – were of particular volatility in the period 1812–1816. Marilyn Butler and Caroline Franklin after her have both noted that 1813, the year of *The Giaour's* publication, was the year in which attitudes to the conduct of the British Empire in India changed by way of a legitimation of proselytising Christianity.⁷ This, in turn, was sanctioned by a refutation of the indigenous status of Hinduism, now recast as an historical and oppressive imposition to be contested by a liberating Christianity. Butler argues convincingly that such proselytising had substantial literary endorsement in Southey's popular poem, *The Curse of Kehama*, wherein the culture of the East is represented as a form of barbarism in need of the better knowledge of Christianity. She reads *The Giaour* as an emphatic *riposte* to the assumptions of Southey's

poem and its style of Orientalism, noting that Byron's poem, far from setting up one religion as more enlightened than another, condemns the oppressive tyrannies of Christianity and Islam. In common with other historicist critics such as Kelsall, Butler has revealed that the ideology of empire in the period is shot through with a series of complex relations, and, in particular, the relations between notions of empire and ideas of liberty were of a vexed kind. Following the Whig version of the history of British liberty, to which I have referred above, Britain was viewed by many as the most recent incarnation of political formations whose constitution and practice exemplified the progressive spread of freedom, standing in a line of inheritance moving from Greece, through Rome to Venice. Its imperial ambitions were thus also viewed, in such a perspective, as embodying the potential for liberty's further expansion. Yet, in the sphere of international affairs, Napoleon's campaigns were seen as testimony to a tyranny endemic in imperial systems, and such a view was ratified by the Turkish Empire's subjugation of Greece, a tyranny easily represented (as in Byron's work) with all the resonances of a symbolic history. Historiography also contributed to such thinking: both Gibbon and Volney had given strong intellectual endorsement, in their different ways, to a sceptical regard for imperialism. Thus, while the British Empire in India was beginning to relocate its ideological justifications, the whole question of empire and its relation to the principle of liberty was being questioned (and not least, in the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*). In such an unstable matrix, it is not possible to model Byron's Tales as the cultural embodiment of a particular political view. They cannot be read, for example, simply as the cultural equivalent to a form of political colonisation, any more than they can be seen as championing native liberties over Ottoman oppression.⁸

The Tales draw on a semiology of the Orient that resonates powerfully with the discourse of despotism, but unlike *Childe Harold*, they do not participate directly in political commentary, neither is there much room here for overt political commentary. For the Tales' engagement with the East is of an anthropological kind: their setting is so overtly another place that connections with European history seem irrelevant. This anthropological neutrality or innocence has been read by Saree Makdisi as the effective construction of a discursive space that is agnostic to contemporary British assumptions. Makdisi understands Byron as remote from the dominant tradition of British imperial philosophy. Arguing with specific reference to the early *Childe Harold*, he reads the journey to the East as a refutation of a modernist tendency to homogenise histories into a Western diachronic model, and a recognition of the East's alterity: 'indeed, he [Byron] could conceive of the

Orient as a spatial alternative to Europe precisely because he sees European and Oriental histories as distinct – as synchronic *histories*, rather than one diachronic *History* narrated and controlled by Europe'. This alterity places Occident and Orient in parallel relations, not hierarchies, and is therefore entirely compatible with the anthropological caution found in Byron's letters, or indeed, in the Notes to *Childe Harold*. For Makdisi, Byron's notions of imperialism are riven and complex, but the poetry offers to preserve the East as non-Western, anti-Modern, and a place therefore, of 'liberatory possibilities for the critique of . . . Western concepts'.⁹ Such a reading is consonant with that of Caroline Franklin, who achieved the first thoroughgoing re-reading of the Tales in her study of Byron's heroines. Franklin interprets the Tales as powerful revisions of gender politics working in a number of different directions. Thus they may offer women as passive victims of heroic romance, but they also make vigorous claims for female sexual autonomy. They may demonstrate the barbarism of Eastern tyrannies and inequalities, but they also disrupt Western patriarchal assumptions through implicit critiques of the verse romance structure, as well as through active heroines who serve as antidotes to the feudalism of Scott, or the imperialism of Southey.¹⁰

If we are to take Byron at his word, he placed a higher premium on his anthropological veracity than his poetry in his representations of the East. Writing to the distinguished Eastern traveller, Professor E. D. Clarke, who had complimented him on his accuracy, he remarked:

Your very kind letter is the more agreeable because – setting aside talents – judgement – & ye. 'laudari a laudato' &c. *you* have been on ye spot – *you* have seen and described more of the East than any of your predecessors – I need not say how ably and successfully – and (excuse the *Bathos*) *you* are one of ye very few who can pronounce how far my *costume* (to use an affected but expressive word) is correct. – As to poesy – *that* is – as 'Men Gods and Columns' please to decide upon it – but I am sure that I am anxious to have an observer's – particularly a *famous* observer's testimony on ye. fidelity of my *manners & dresses*.
(BLJ, III, 199)

Where 'poesy' is subject to critical fashion and the shifting tastes of posterity, the 'fidelity of . . . manners & dresses' can only be authenticated by the experienced traveller's eye, and especially when (as here) such experience is underpinned with scholarly expertise. It is clear that Byron set great store by such accuracy, which served as a constant touchstone for his judgement of self and others. Further, his understanding of this 'fidelity' extends to a refusal to assume, or incorporate, the Other into Western stereotypes or

better knowledge. He would have interpreted such a reflex as an amateur response. We may see Byron's pride in this aspect of his poetry as something which sits comfortably alongside these new political readings of the Tales by recognising in them those qualities of anthropological narrative which James Clifford has argued are 'inescapably allegorical'. For Clifford, all ethnographic texts tell at least two stories: that of the surface or intended description, and that which is inherent in the act of narration itself, which necessarily embodies structures of meaning that make sense of difference by way of the familiar.¹¹ He regards the quality of allegory as a deep structure in the narrative; it consists of the familiarity in the act of telling. This does not transfer directly into the mode of the Turkish Tales, but it has a partial, and an important purchase there. Going back to the surface of the tales with which I began, and casting them again as representations of heroic exotica for an historically specific reading public, we can recognise Byron's act of telling as one that is primed by his audience's familiarity with such texts as the *Arabian Nights* on the one hand, and tales of epic heroism on the other. These mediations intervene strongly, I suggest: they do not permit us to ignore the form in which those concerns with history or heroism are concealed. The quality of allegory here, then, is not so much a deep structure, but a shimmering presence in the narrative. It can be seen in the peripheral vision, but it disappears when subjected to full scrutiny.

To render this more specific, we can assert that Byron's narratives are politically encoded at least in part by way of the allegorical structure which drags the otherness of the East back to revisions of epic heroism. The extent to which this happens in the Tales is different in each case. In a Tale such as *Lara*, which Byron claimed was set 'on the moon', the revision of heroism has no real purchase in the contemporary debate. The poem is, like Keats's 'The Eve of St Agnes', deliberately ahistorical: the vague references to baronial history have the effect of unmapping and dehistoricising human and political relations, so that the narrative is played out on the level of psychology, sexuality and desire. Here the redefinition of heroism has a dual aspect, comprising Kaled's loyalty (through which is asserted the greater value of woman's love (*Lara*, II.1158)), and Lara's heroic championship of the oppressed. A crude allegory pertaining to contemporary political events could, of course, be made of this, but the stronger allegorical axis is to be located in the disruption of conventional gender roles in heroic romance. But in *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos* or *The Siege of Corinth*, that concern with the redescription of heroism is immediately inserted into the unstable chemistry of Occident and Orient or, indeed, the reading of historical events, and it is this far more allusive context which provides the precedent for political interpretation.¹²

The Tales address a similar problematic to that realised in the troubled scepticism of *Childe Harold*: how, in recent and contemporary history, are we to regard the place of agency, and in particular that apogee of agency – the making of history by great men? How, in the confused ethics of a post-revolutionary, Enlightenment Europe, are we to see the conventional virtues of epic heroism operating in relation to the affairs of the world? In these Tales, the question is displaced out of contemporary history into a more abstract, cross-cultural context, but one that is not so remote as to occlude references or parallels.¹³ In *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos*, the answer is tied into the romance plot, so that each hero, and heroine, is admired for his or her loyalty to his or her own nature, or what he or she sees as his or her own ineluctable task. Thus, famously, the Giaour admits within his confession that he stands outside morality, understanding Hassan's execution of his lover as a necessity – 'Faithless to him – he gave the blow; / But true to me – I laid him low' (*The Giaour*, 1064–5), and the poem seemingly celebrates this integrity. In *The Bride of Abydos*, Selim reveals his true nature, and his enduring love, and dies in a manner that testifies to both: glancing round at Zuleika in battle, he is fatally wounded. Yet despite this consistency, found equally starkly in *The Corsair* and *Lara*, the Tales also incorporate equivocal representations of heroism in their use of the device of disguise or masks. These heroes and heroines are never quite who we think they are and, what is more, they seemingly operate in an anarchic universe of their own making, eschewing connections with states, nations, ethics or family.

The Siege of Corinth, however, presents a break with the predominant pattern, while also developing this sense of anarchism. Here Alp's loyalty to his own creed is based on a 'deep, interminable pride' (*Corinth*, 609); his hatred of the Venetian state originates in the defiling of his name rather than some deeper principle. Similarly, Minotti's denial of him might be read as a form of religious intolerance, and the ghost of Francesca's pleading, as a further instrument of such intolerance.¹⁴ The poem incorporates all the features of heroic romance (courage, loyalty, undying love) but it seemingly denies their value or effect in its apocalypse. Indeed, the conflagration with which the poem ends symbolically represents the destruction of political freedom itself. The poem is set in 1715, when Venetian control of Corinth was lost to the Turks; it was written in 1815, after Venice had been incorporated into the Napoleonic Empire. With the exception of the Ottoman Empire, each of the regimes and nations here had strong symbolic associations with liberty (Greece, Venice, post-revolutionary France) and, tellingly, the poem is haunted by the ghost of Francesca, whose figuring clearly alludes to the Goddess of Liberty.¹⁵ The narrative seems set on denuding these states of their ancient virtues:

From Venice – once a race of worth
 His gentle Sires – he drew his birth;
 But late an exile from her shore,
 Against his countrymen he bore
 The arms they taught to bear; and now
 The turban girt his shaven brow.
 Though many a change had Corinth passed
 With Greece to Venice' rule at last;
 And here, before her walls, with those
 To Greece and Venice equal foes,
 He stood a foe, with all the zeal
 Which young and fiery converts feel,
 Within whose heated bosom throngs
 The memory of a thousand wrongs.
 To him had Venice ceased to be
 Her ancient civic boast – 'the Free';

(*Corinth*, 70–85)

Alp's condition seems designed precisely to deconstruct the conventional political allusions in the symbolism of Greece and Venice, and the centre of the poem is occupied by his wandering and musing, within sight of Delphi's eternal shroud, upon the 'mighty times' (*Corinth*, 345) of Greek freedom and heroism, and the 'glorious dead / Who there in better cause had bled' (*Corinth*, 349–50). His journey takes him only to the dogs of war tearing the corpses apart under Corinth's walls, and the graphic descriptions of their mauling shocked Byron's contemporary readers (Gifford, for example, struck the lines out).¹⁶ But this is an important part of the poem. It charts the journey of the course of freedom from its mythological beginnings to the chaotic carnage of modern imperial warfare, and in this poem, eventually, to the apocalypse of Minotti's blowing up of Corinth itself, a monument, perhaps, to the combined histories of Greece and Venice. *The Siege of Corinth* fights shy of attributing heroic virtues to its actions, and ends with an apocalyptic conflagration of republican freedom.

It might be thought that the opening words of *Don Juan's* first canto ('I want a hero: an uncommon want, / When every year and month sends forth a new one') announce a new turn in Byron's poetry, a reversal into a quizzical and sceptical mode. But there is no doubt that, from the beginning, Byron had questioned the notion of the heroic in his verse, and *Childe Harold* is the prime example of this interrogation, which commences with the sceptical accounts of the carnage of modern warfare, and proceeds from there to repudiate teleological, imperial accounts of the progress of liberty, and to doubt the future possibility of histories made by great men. It is

thus a post-revolutionary poem impelled not by the disillusion which leads to conservatism, but by a late-Enlightenment scepticism that is liberal, cosmopolitan and representative of a new freedom of thought. The Childe, or the Byronic hero, so uncertainly sketched by Byron in the poem, is perhaps best read as the psychological consequence of this alienation from the meaningful progress of history, a piece of self-fashioning which, however equivocal and awkward, represents a detached and wounded psychology that Byron understands as appropriate to the modern condition of historical and political bafflement. The Tales offer a further displacement of this condition, projecting it into exotic, unmapped and partially ahistorical locations where heroes and heroines contest extreme forms of prejudice and tyranny, their great acts remaining, for the most part, outside history, emptied of direct contemporary political reference, yet defiantly full of *potentia*, and generously suggestive of broad allegorical allusion. Taken together, *Childe Harold* I and II and the Tales may be seen as Byron's great engagement with the intellectual and historical crisis of his time. The pilgrimage represents the will to discover history's consequence and the manner of its continuous defeat in the face of a devastated Europe; the Tales represent the precarious afterlife of this desire in heroic acts evacuated of historical significance. In this period of Byron's writing there are no structural possibilities for history, and heroic acts are rendered ever more remote from the goal of civilisation's improvement.

NOTES

1. Samuel Smiles, *A Publisher and his Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the Late John Murray*, 2 vols. (London, 1891), I, 215.
2. Jerome Christensen, *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 76.
3. See Byron's reference at *BLJ*, I, 508.
4. For an interesting discussion of this border and its significance in *Childe Harold*, see Saree Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 124–8.
5. Jerome J. McGann, *CPW*, I, 288.
6. Francis Jeffrey praised the poem for exhibiting a 'plain manliness and strength of manner, which is infinitely refreshing after the sickly affectations of so many modern writers', *Edinburgh Review* (February 1812), 19, 466–77, in Andrew Rutherford, *Byron: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), p. 39.
7. Marilyn Butler, 'Byron and the Empire in the East', in Andrew Rutherford (ed.), *Byron: Augustan and Romantic* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 70–1. Caroline Franklin, "'Some samples of the finest Orientalism': Byronic Philhellenism and Proto-Zionism at the Time of the Congress of Vienna', in Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson (eds.), *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780–1830* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 222–4.

8. Franklin rightly notes that Byron 'has proved a trickier writer to fit into the binary model of Said's thesis than government polemicists like . . . Southey', 'Some samples', p. 221.
9. Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism*, pp. 123–34.
10. Caroline Franklin, *Byron's Heroines* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
11. James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Allegory', in James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 99–100, 120–1.
12. The Tales differ considerably in the manner of their historical allusions. *The Giaour*, for example, makes no direct reference to a particular historical moment in the narrative itself, but the poem's detailed Preface sets the date of the poem's action 'shortly after 1779' and it is quite particular in this regard (McGann, *CPW*, III, 415).
13. See Jeffrey's review of the Turkish Tales (*Edinburgh Review* (April 1814), 23, 198–229), in Rutherford (ed.), *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 53–64: 57.
14. Franklin, *Byron's Heroines*, p. 70.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
16. *CPW*, III, 485. See also Rutherford, *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 70–1, for Gifford's note on Byron 'outdoing' Caravaggio, and Byron's wasting himself in 'rank growth'.

6

NIGEL LEASK

Byron and the Eastern Mediterranean: *Childe Harold* II and the ‘polemic of Ottoman Greece’

Slow sinks, more lovely ere his race be run,
Along Morea’s hills the setting sun;
Not, as in Northern climes, obscurely bright,
But one unclouded blaze of yellow light! . . .
On old Aegina’s rock and Idra’s isle,
The god of gladness sheds his parting smile;
O’er his own regions lingering, loves to shine,
Though there his altars are no more divine.

(*The Corsair*, III.1-4, 7-10)

In these opening lines of the third canto of *The Corsair* (1814), Byron sets the mood for his narrative of the tragic death of Conrad’s faithful wife Medora, by means of a sunset evocation of Greece, as the radiant sun of antiquity sinks over a land no longer consecrated to the antique spirit. The fact that Byron ‘borrowed’ the bravura sunset passage in its entirety (1-54) from his ‘unpublished (though printed) poem’ (*CPW*, III, 448), *The Curse of Minerva*, suggests that he was particularly wedded to the sublimity of sunset as a melancholy symbol of modern Greece. In the latter poem, the same lines introduce another betrayed female, the battered and insulted goddess Minerva, who curses Lord Elgin for despoiling her temple, as the shades of evening lengthen over the plundered ruins of the Parthenon. Byron’s recycling of his lines suggests a conscious connection between the values of Conrad’s apolitical love for the ‘housewifely’ Medora, and the philhellenic ideology flagged by Minerva.

The sunset melancholy of philhellenism also permeates the second canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, best exemplified in stanza 73’s lines: ‘Fair Greece! Sad relic of departed worth! / Immortal, though no more; though fallen great!’ (in political terms, this adds up to the resignation of stanza 76; ‘But ne’er will freedom seek this fated soil, / But slave succeed to slave through years of endless toil’) (*CHP*, II.76.8-9). Even in Byron’s most militant statement of philhellenism, the anthem ‘The Isles of Greece’ sung in *Don Juan* Canto III (albeit one heavily ironised by the fact that the verses

are sung by the 'trimmer poet'), he returns to the sunset metaphor in evoking a Hellenic glory now noticeably absent from the islands; 'Eternal summer gilds them yet, / But all, except their sun, is set' (*Don Juan*, III.86–7). Like Hegel's more famous owl, Byron's Minervan muse seems to take flight at dusk.

In this chapter, however, I want to suggest that the romantic image of sunset is far from exhausting Byron's poetical account of the Eastern Mediterranean. In the lines I've quoted from *The Corsair*, the shadows which lengthen over the tombs of Greek heroes, metonymically evoking the death of Medora, also symbolise the death of Conrad's chivalric idealism, the 'one virtue' which mitigates his 'thousand crimes' (*The Corsair*, III.696). In the symbolic economy of Byron's poems, as Caroline Franklin has indicated, the shift from 'passive' to 'active' heroine figures a transformation of the whole Byronic value system.¹ As *The Corsair* relates, Medora's death is symbolically instigated by Gulnare, the Turkish concubine whom Conrad rescues from the blazing Harem, and who in her turn saves the captive from the Ottoman Pasha Seyd's bloody vengeance. In return the 'unsexed' Gulnare exhorts from the pirate leader one single, over-determined kiss, at once the agent and exponent of his betrayal of Medora, and by extension of the ethical values supposedly distinguishing Hellenic/European civilisation from its Oriental 'other'. Whereas the efficacy of Conrad's action against the Pasha is compromised by his adherence to an aristocratic code of chivalry, Gulnare's 'oriental' assassination of her sleeping master is at once all too effective as an act of revolutionary liberation, and at the same time, transgressive of Conrad's 'occidental' system of values.

My point in dilating upon the allegorical function of Byron's heroines in these Levantine poems is to suggest two rival perspectives underpinning Byron's writings which (in deference to the allegorical importance of Byron's heroines) I characterise as the 'Medoran' and the 'Gulnarean' respectively. Whilst the abject, sepulchral Medora in *The Corsair* ('the only pang my bosom dare not brave, / Must be to find forgetfulness in thine', *The Corsair*, I, 357–58) personifies sentimental philhellenism, the orientalist 'regicide' of Gulnare aptly represents Byron's experiential insight into the contemporary culture and politics of the region which he encountered during his 'Levantine Tour' of 1809–11. While the 'Medoran' perspective was undoubtedly a major selling point of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, I argue that the 'Gulnarean' view actually shaped Byron's critique of conventional ideology. Although quite uncharacteristic of Romantic Hellenism in general, 'Gulnarean' discourse also paradoxically empowered Byron's later involvement in the Greek War of Independence.

Ottoman Greeks and European philhellenes

The extraordinary story of the philhellenic intervention in the Greek War of Independence which provides the background to Byron's death has been well treated by scholars. Less has been said about Byron's fashionable 'grand tour' to the Eastern Mediterranean (my deliberate geographical vagueness here avoids the necessity of denominating the contested region 'Turkey' or 'Greece') in the company of his friend John Cam Hobhouse. Their travels between September 1809 and July 1810 through Epirus, Albania, Acarnania, the Morea, Attica, on to Smyrna in Asia Minor, culminating on the shores of the Hellespont and the Ottoman capital Istanbul, were minutely described in Hobhouse's massive, 1,154-page travel account, *A Journey through Albania, and Other Provinces of Turkey in Europe and Asia* (1813). Byron remained in Greece (Athens and the Peloponnese) for a further year after Hobhouse's departure: his travels provided material for the first and second cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) begun during the tour, as well as the spate of 'Turkish Tales' which sprang from his pen during the years of fame.

As *The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, and *The Siege of Corinth* make clear, the region through which Byron and Hobhouse travelled was the front line between Islamic Turkey and Christian Europe. Ottoman victory in the late-sixteenth century had brought much of the region under the control of the Sublime Porte, although its inhabitants remained – then as now – a collection of different ethnic and religious groups. Ottoman Greeks, who traced their cultural roots back to Byzantium, the old Eastern Roman Empire, rather than to Hellenic antiquity, described themselves as 'Romaioi' (Romans) rather than Hellenes, at least those three million (out of a total of thirteen million-odd Orthodox Christians in the Empire), who spoke Romaic or modern Greek rather than Turkish, Albanian, Serbian, Bulgarian, or Macedonian.² Hence the justice of Hobhouse's claim that 'the Greeks, taken collectively, cannot, in fact, be so properly called an individual people, as a religious sect dissenting from the established church of the Ottoman Empire'.³ Although Christians were more heavily taxed than Muslims and were forced to parade their ethnic and religious difference, the Sultans patronised the Greek Orthodox church, and its Patriarch (inheritor of the Byzantine emperors) was 'ethnarch' of thirteen million Christians, roughly a quarter of the population of the entire Ottoman empire. Moreover, by the early nineteenth century, the Greek merchant marine (based on islands like Idra, Spetsas and Psara), benefiting from the decline of Venetian power and increased European trade with the Levant, had established a commercial empire in the Mediterranean

and the Black Sea, so that ‘Greeks as traders, just as the Greeks as Christians, formed a kind of state within the Turkish state.’⁴

Costly military defeats of the Ottoman armies by expansionist Russia, and the increasing ‘balkanisation’ of the empire in the eighteenth century (witness the rise of regional magnates like Ali Pasha – of whom more below – in Epirus and Albania), as well as competing European interests in the eastern Mediterranean in the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, provided a stimulus and opportunity for Greek independence. Despite the opposition of the ‘Fanalite’ Greek aristocracy which had for generations materially benefited from service to the Ottoman empire, after 1780 an increasingly nationalistic Greek identity began to emerge, especially amongst the diasporic Greek intelligentsia based in Russia or Western Europe, associated with figures like Adamantios Korais, Lambros Katsonis, and the ‘jacobinical’ patriot Rhigas Velestino. In these decades the Greeks turned successively to Russia, Napoleonic France, and Britain for help against their Ottoman masters, even making common cause with the refractory Ali Pasha, scourge of the local Greek *kleftes* (bandits). At least after 1814, it became clear that British foreign policy, dictated by a triumphalist Tory government, would be dedicated to shoring up Ottoman power and containing Russian influence in the region, turning a blind eye to the plight of the Greeks themselves. But official intransigence was qualified by ‘philhellenic’ enthusiasm in Britain, especially amongst liberals and philosophical radicals, consolidated by the formation of the London Greek Committee in 1818 and the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence in 1821. The fact that the Greek Committee’s representative ‘in the field’ died of marsh fever in Missolonghi in April 1824 meant little in itself; the fact that he was none other than the celebrated Lord Byron did much to galvanise British and European support for the Greek cause.

The Levantine tour

Byron’s poetical representations of the region are in many ways inseparable from the cultural practice and discourse of the Levantine tour, and even the generic form of *Childe Harold* embodies a particular critique of, and engagement with, the enormously popular contemporary discourse of travel about the Eastern Mediterranean. Conversely, the tour played a crucial role in the formation of the ‘Byron phenomenon’: the poet’s early biographers insisted that ‘travel conducted . . . to the formation of his poetical character’ (Tom Moore)⁵ and that ‘the best of all Byron’s works, the most racy and original, are undoubtedly those which relate to Greece’ (John Galt).⁶

Although travel to Ottoman Greece had been hazardous in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the dawning sense that Greece was the mother of Roman art and civilisation nevertheless attracted the more intrepid antiquarian travellers. George Wheler and Jacob Spon visited and described the ancient sites in 1676, Richard Pococke followed in the 1730s, and, perhaps most significant of all, James Stuart and Nicholas Revett were commissioned to draw the antiquities of Athens by the Society of Dilettanti in 1751–3. Oxford Don Richard Chandler (a major authority for Byron and Hobhouse) had revisited the classical sites in the following decade, publishing his *Travels in Asia Minor* in 1775. It was Cambridge University which was particularly well represented in the region between 1790 and 1810, however, and Cambridge graduates Byron and Hobhouse were conscious of following in the footsteps of earlier ‘Cambridge Hellenists’ like John Morritt, James Dallaway, John Tweddell, Edward Daniel Clarke, William Wilkins, Edward Dodwell, and William Gell.⁷

The dominant concern of all these travellers was with classical topography, the practice of identifying the modern locations of ancient sites, and describing and measuring the ruins of classical antiquity. Each traveller attempted to correct the errors of his predecessors, from classical geographers like Strabo and Pausanias to more recent seventeenth- and eighteenth-century antiquarians; in other words, they ‘temporalised’ Ottoman Greece – that is to say, viewed the modern reality through the spectacles of the classical past, more or less oblivious to the contemporary state of the country. Whilst most castigated the Turks as barbarous tyrants oblivious to the splendours of the Hellenic classical heritage, Byron’s notes to *Childe Harold* lamented the antipathy to modern Greeks which was commonplace amongst European residents and tourists. In this respect they resembled the British public school boys who, Byron complained, wore themselves out studying ‘the language and . . . the harangues of the Athenian demagogues in favour of freedom, [whilst] the real or supposed descendants of these sturdy republicans are left to the actual tyranny of their masters’ (*CPW*, II, 202).

This sort of ‘temporalisation’ – the prototype of Byron’s ‘Medoran’ perspective – was cognate with the common eighteenth-century trope of the ‘ruins of empire’, pioneered in the Whig account of the *translatio libertatis* – the translation of liberty – from Italy to Britain in works such as James Thomson’s *Liberty* (1735–6).⁸ As Byron wrote (on the eve of his departure) in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, ‘doubly blest is he whose heart expands / With hallow’d feelings for those classic lands; / Who rends the veil of ages long gone by, / And views their remnants with a poet’s eye!’ (*English Bards*, lines 873–6). ‘Temporalisation’ of Italy and Greece was initially committed to representing the irrecoverable nature of the classical past, precisely

because liberty was thought to have migrated westwards to Whig Britain or republican America, depending on one's political persuasion. Applied to the case of Ottoman Greece this sentimental, 'Medoran' perspective might be described as 'weak philhellenism', because it held out no prospect for the revival of the classical values of the past.

With the rise of the Greek movement for independence during the global crisis precipitated by the Napoleonic wars, however, 'temporalisation' increasingly came to serve as a template for a restored Greek state, or 'strong philhellenism'. William St Clair has described how European philhellenes sought to 'regenerate' modern Greece by purging its oriental elements and 'restoring' a Hellenic state that was itself largely a construction of European classical scholarship, rather than a reflection of the actual cultural identity of modern Greeks.⁹ In his controversial study *Black Athena*, Martin Bernal describes the early-nineteenth century replacement of an 'ancient model' of Greek civilisation deriving from Phoenician or Egyptian roots, by an 'Aryan hypothesis' whereby the Dorians were identified with northern, Teutonic tribes.¹⁰ Percy Shelley's pronouncement in the notes to his lyrical drama *Hellas* (1821) that 'we are all Greeks', and his establishment of classical Greece as a transcendent ideal for contemporary republicanism is often taken to exemplify 'strong philhellenism' in this sense.

French occupation of Italy meant that the traditional 'beaten track' of the Grand Tour was off limits to Britons, but travel in the Levant (for those who could afford it) was facilitated after 1799 by Britain's political alliance with Ottoman Turkey in the wake of the French invasion of Egypt. Hence the justice of Byron's claim that 'the difficulties of travelling in Turkey have been much exaggerated, or rather have considerably diminished, in recent years' (*CPW*, II, 209). For elite British and French travellers, the pursuit of classical topography and removable antiquities also normally went hand in hand with diplomacy and *de facto* intelligence-gathering in a period of European war. Even the unpatriotic Byron's visit to the court of Ali Pasha at Tepalene (to which I return below), as well as his presentation to the Waiwode of Athens and the Ottoman Sultan himself, was not without its political motives given the contemporary importance of British influence in the region.

The gradual replacement of Augustan neoclassicism by a more 'primitivistic' Hellenism in eighteenth-century British culture (partly the result of the researches of the aforementioned travellers and antiquarians, together with the influential writings of German antiquarian Johann Winckelmann) had given a new kudos to the classical remains of Greece and Asia Minor. Lord Elgin's removal of the Parthenon marbles to London in 1807 can be seen as the act of a patriotic British virtuoso to establish London as the modern Athens, replete with objects of 'pure' Hellenic, rather than the

derivative Romano–Grecian taste on display in the Napoleonic Louvre. As British ambassador to the Ottoman Porte, Elgin had acquired a firman from the Sultan at a time when the Ottoman authorities were anxious to encourage their British allies: his detractors, with some justice, accused him of abusing his public office in ‘acquiring’ the Parthenon frieze and other classical monuments. Athens became the site of heated competition between Elgin’s agent Lusieri and the French Consul Fauvel for the best marbles, a rather sordid aesthetic reprise of the global war currently raging between British and French armies.

The Parthenon marbles were undoubtedly just as controversial in Byron’s day as they are now, as the savage lampoons on Lord Elgin in *The Curse of Minerva*, and stanzas 11–15 of *Childe Harold* II remind us. Byron was by no means alone in attacking his luckless compatriot for despoiling the ruins of Athens (*CHP*, II, 11–15). However, as William St Clair points out, most of the Levantine tourists who attacked Elgin in the travelogues they published upon returning home were not averse to helping themselves to some choice fragments whenever they could lay their hands on them.¹¹ For example, Byron’s friend Edward Daniel Clarke, future Professor of Mineralogy at Cambridge, described in his bulky *Travels in Various Countries of Europe, Asia and Africa* (1810–23) how he had witnessed Elgin’s agents destroying part of the wall of the Acropolis whilst removing a metope – part of a Doric frieze – as the local Disdar shed impotent tears.¹² Yet elsewhere Clarke described how he had himself overcome strenuous local resistance to remove a beautiful statue of Ceres from Eleusis, which he deposited in the Cambridge University Museum: this in the very same volume which contained Clarke’s condemnation of Elgin’s ‘lamentable operations’.¹³

Byron announced in a letter to Dr Valpy that ‘my researches, such as they were, when in the East, were more directed to the language & the inhabitants than to the Antiquities’ (*BLJ*, I, 134). In an August 1811 review of William Gell’s *Geography and Antiquities of Ithaca* (1807), and *Itinerary of Greece* (1810), Byron’s Cambridge friend Francis Hodgson (apparently with Byron’s assistance) complained of the illusory ‘transparency’ of classical topography which pedantically described modern ‘Mainotes’ as ‘Eleuthero-Lacones’, and preferred giving ancient rather than modern names for the region.¹⁴ ‘Though there have been tourists and strangers in other countries, who have kindly permitted their readers to learn rather too much of their sweet selves [a veiled allusion to the unpublished *Childe Harold*], yet it is possible to carry delicacy, or cautious silence, or whatever it may be called, to an opposite extreme.’ ‘We like to know’, Hodgson continued, perhaps in vindication of his noble friend, ‘that there is a being still living who describes the scenes to which he introduces us; and that it is not a mere translation from Strabo or

Pausanias that we are reading.¹⁵ Hodgson's critique of Gell is fully in accord with Byron's own satire (in *English Bards*) on Lords Aberdeen and Elgin's 'misshapen monuments and maim'd antiques', and his summary resolution 'Of Dardan tours let dilettanti tell, / I leave topography to rapid Gell' (*English Bards*, 1030, 1033–4). The egotism of Byron's *Childe Harold* should be seen, therefore, as a 'modernist' break with the antiquarian tradition, whilst the notes to his poem poured scorn on the rapacity of topographical travellers.

The polemic of Ottoman Greece

Byron's wide reading in the orientalist archive of Knolles, Cantemir, D'Herbelot, Rycaut, and De Tott has been well documented by scholars, but most have overlooked the fact that his understanding of the region was also informed by a contemporary *logomachia* – a literary dispute – which I will denominate 'the polemic of Ottoman Greece'. Although numerous European 'authorities', including luminaries like Voltaire and Gibbon, had contributed to the polemic which an exasperated Byron later dismissed as 'paradox on one side, prejudice on the other' (*CPW*, II, 203), the most significant adversaries were the relatively unknown figures of William Eton and Thomas Thornton.

In his 1798 *A Survey of the Turkish Empire*, Eton, a former British consul in Turkey, showed his 'strong philhellenism' in lauding the modern Greeks, whilst violently attacking Ottoman 'despotism'. Eton 'temporalised' the Greeks by insisting (against the available evidence) that 'their ancient empire is fresh in their memory; it is the subject of their popular songs, and they speak of it in common conversation as a recent event'.¹⁶ In conformity with his violently anti-Jacobin political sentiments, Eton advocated Russian intervention to liberate the Greeks and expel from Europe the Turks, whose empire he vilified as 'sui generis, a heteroclite monster among the various species of despotism'.¹⁷ Eton had no doubt that the modern Greeks were thoroughly *occidental*, not oriental: 'an European feels himself as it were at home with them, and amongst creatures of his own species, for with Mahometans there is a distance, a non-assimilation, a total difference of ideas'.¹⁸

Eton was answered in 1807 by a British Levantine merchant called Thomas Thornton, whose influential book, *The Present State of Turkey*, was based on fifteen years' residence at Pera, the European mercantile quarter of Istanbul. Thornton's only point of agreement with Eton concerned the unreliability of travellers as regional experts, for 'in his eagerness for information [the traveller] cannot expect to penetrate beyond the surface: the folds of the human heart cannot be distinguished by a transient glance'.¹⁹ But Thornton was an unabashed partisan of the Ottoman Empire, distinguishing Ottoman

rule as both rational and legitimate, a modified feudal polity rather than an 'oriental despotism', and citing Sir William Jones's 'Dissertation on Oriental Poetry' in praise of the rich literary and cultural legacy of modern Turks.²⁰ (Contrary to Edward Said's influential argument, this shows that European opinion could be pro-Ottoman and anti-Greek as well as philhellenic and 'orientalist' in Said's specialised sense of that word.)²¹ Making hay with Eton's Turkophobia, Thornton demolished his rival's orientalist stereotypes by describing the Turkish character as a 'composition of contradictory qualities' 'brave and pusillanimous, gentle and ferocious; resolute and inconstant; active and indolent . . . delicate and coarse; fastidiously abstemious and indiscriminately indulgent'.²²

Thornton was not, however, without his own prejudices, and made it clear that he had little time for modern Greeks whom he dismissed as 'a low, plodding, persecuted and miserable race'.²³ He denied any genealogical connection between them and 'the families which have immortalised Attica and Laconia',²⁴ 'blushing' over Eton's panegyric on the 'pirate' Lambros Katsonis, celebrated for having taken up arms against Turkish shipping in the wake of the Russo-Turkish war of 1788. For Thornton this was merely 'the devastation of banditti, and wholly undeserving the notice of history'.²⁵ In the notes to *Childe Harold*, Byron protested that it was 'very cruel' of Thornton to deny the persecuted Greeks 'possession of all that time has left them; viz. their pedigree' and suggested that his residence at Pera had given him no more insight into modern Greece than 'as many years spent at Wapping into that of the Western Highlands' (*CPW*, II, 203). (Byron tactfully avoided mentioning Hobhouse here, who described the modern Greeks as 'light, inconstant, and treacherous . . . remarkable for a total ignorance of the propriety of adhering to the truth'.)²⁶

More significant for my present argument about Byron's shift from a 'Medoran' to an orientalist, 'Gulnarean', view of the region, however, is the fact that Thornton struck at the heart of philhellenic ideology by a form of 'counter-temporalisation' which argued that 'the nations of antiquity [i.e. Greece and Rome], if compared with modern Europe, will be found to possess many of those peculiarities which we have chosen to consider as exclusively characteristic of the Asiatics'.²⁷ In ethical terms, this correlation between ancient Greeks and modern Turks turned out to be highly equivocal in its focus on ideologies of gender. Following Scottish enlightenment philosophers like William Robertson and John Millar, Thornton regarded the condition of women as an index of the progress of any civilisation, insisting (conventionally) that the principal cultural distinction between modern Europeans and Orientals lay precisely in their attitude to women; for 'where the women are degraded from their rank in society, the European sinks into

the Turk'.²⁸ For Thornton, the marker of European social progress was chivalry, the invention of the Gothic middle ages, absent both in the classical world and the modern orient. But Thornton went on to problematise his argument by suggesting that European men had paid a high price for the civilising manners of chivalry; 'we triumph in our acknowledged superiority over the Asiatics, but we must, in justice, lay down our laurels, like the heroes of chivalry, at the feet of our mistresses'.²⁹ The consequence of chivalry, he complained, was 'petticoat rule', also a recurrent complaint in Byron's peevish remarks on the cultural influence of Bluestockings from *The Blues to Don Juan*.

In his chapter entitled, 'Women and Domestic Economy', Thornton cited the authority of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in arguing that women in the 'unchivalric' Ottoman world in fact enjoyed a certain agency, such as the possession of private property and the social anonymity of the veil, which supposedly more 'progressive' European women lacked.³⁰ Although Byron was as critical of Thornton's prejudice against the Greeks as he was of Eton's against the Turks (*CPW*, II, 201), he warmly praised his account of Turkish manners (*CPW*, II, 210). Hobhouse also accepted Thornton's defence of Ottoman political institutions,³¹ and was particularly interested in his equation of modern Turkish attitudes to women with those of ancient Athens and Rome, on the grounds that chivalry, derived by Europeans from 'our German ancestors', was 'entirely unknown to the great nations of antiquity'.³² We will see below that Byron in 'Gulnarean' mood, notwithstanding his sympathy for the modern Greeks, was evidently also influenced by Thornton's remarks on chivalry and the hypocrisy of Western 'sexual orientalism'.

Childe Harold II and 'weak philhellenism'

As a handsome quarto volume, beautifully printed on heavy paper, at thirty shillings on the expensive side, *Childe Harold* certainly did not look too different from the average prose travelogue when it was published in March 1812, inevitably inviting comparison with Hobhouse's *Journey* when it issued from the press the following year. Although written 'on the spot', one major difference between Byron's poem and Hobhouse's travelogue, however, was his employment of 'a fictitious character . . . for the sake of giving some connexion to the piece . . . Harold is the child of imagination' (*CPW*, II, 4). Byron's experiment involved the adoption of a 'narrator' and the fictionalised 'Harold', both of whom, despite autobiographical connections with their author, were not simply reducible to any stable 'Byronic' voice. Moreover, its series of lengthy prose notes often qualified the poem itself, especially salient in the notes on Levantine culture appended to the second canto,

which were sometimes at odds with the poetic text they purportedly glossed. Byron's innovative grafting of poetical romance onto the conventions of travel narrative had the paradoxical effect of making his poem more rather than less powerful as an intervention in public debate about the regions which it treated. Francis Jeffrey captured this achievement in his 1818 review of *Childe Harold* IV when he wrote, 'All the scenes through which he has travelled, were, at the moment, of strong interest to the public mind, and the interest still hangs over them. His travels were not . . . the self-impelled act of a mind severing itself in lonely roaming from all participation with the society to which it belonged, but rather obeying the general motion of the mind of that society.'³³

Canto II opens with the familiar 'sunset' apostrophe to Minerva; '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' (*CHP*, II.2.1–3). The narrator's gloomy misanthropy in these opening stanzas, however, endorses the political critique of British antiquaries which follows:

But worse than steel, and flame, and ages slow,
Is the dread sceptre and dominion dire
Of men who never felt the sacred glow
That thoughts of thee and thine on polish'd breasts bestow
(*CHP*, II.1.6–9)

Byron's footnote to the last line facetiously undercuts the melancholy of the verse in stating 'we can all feel, or imagine, the regret with which the ruins of cities, once the capitals of empire, are beheld: the reflections suggested by such objects are too trite to require recapitulation' (*CPW*, II, 189). Nevertheless, the hackneyed comparison of ancient and contemporary Athens is lent a new pathos in the light of the depredations of rapacious antiquaries. By the phrase 'men who never felt the sacred glow', Byron does not mean the Ottoman rulers of modern Greece, but rather men like the 'dull spoiler' Elgin who 'rive[s] what Goth, and Turk, and Time hath spar'd' (*CHP*, II.12.2). Harsh as Ottoman rule might have been, the Greeks had not really known the full 'weight of Despot's chains' (*CHP*, II.12.9) until the arrival of British antiquaries. For Byron (unlike Hobhouse, who expressed qualified support for the removal of the marbles to London),³⁴ the ruins of antiquity were part of the 'poetry' of the Greek landscape, which could never be recovered in a metropolitan museum.³⁵ In contrast to Elgin's rapacity, Byron's poetic persona indulges in a Yorick-like contemplation of a skull wrested from an ancient sarcophagus, 'Look on its broken arch, its ruin'd wall, / Its chambers desolate, and portals foul' (*CHP*, II.6.1–2). Notably, whilst Hobhouse brought back the customary marble fragments as souvenirs of his tour, Byron

was content with (amongst various live animals and trinkets) “Four ancient Athenian Skulls[”] dug out of Sarcophagi’ (*BLJ*, II, 59).

Perhaps the most notable instance of ironic interplay between Byron’s poetic philhellenism and his polemical critique of such a sentimental ‘Medoran’ view is contained in the three long footnotes which gloss the stanzas beginning ‘Fair Greece! Sad relic of departed worth!’ (*CHP*, II.73.1). Byron’s third note in particular suggests a climate of cultural renewal, centred on his defence of the modern Greek scholar Adamantios Korais’s translation of Strabo against the recent strictures of the *Edinburgh Review*.³⁶ Byron dilates on the linguistic revival of modern Greek, the foundation of modern schools and the existence of a substantial body of modern poetry, which is discussed in considerable detail. Modern Greeks are given agency and voice in their ability to represent their own plight and forge an identity not based on classical texts, and their position within the Ottoman empire is subversively compared to the plight of Britain’s Catholic Irish subjects. As an appendix to this note, Byron subjoined a long list of Romaic authors, a translation from a ‘satire in dialogue’, and a contemporary Greek translation of part of a drama by the Venetian dramatist Goldoni (*CPW*, II, 211–17). 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). In the twentieth century, demotic became the ‘official language’ of the Greek Communist Party, and later, in 1970 after the fall of the Colonels’ regime, of the country itself.³⁷

A journey through Albania

Hobhouse’s *Journey through Albania* and *Childe Harold* II share a common emphasis on Albania as an exotic, uncharted land, with a fresh romantic appeal not easily elicited by the latter-day tourist from the ‘beaten track’ of classical Greece. The short title of Hobhouse’s book and over 200 pages of the text are dedicated to the Albanian itinerary, with digressions (in the conventional travelogue manner) to provide historical, geographical, and political information about the region. Stanzas 36–72 of *Childe Harold* II, in some respects the canto’s dramatic and picturesque core, describe Harold’s progress from Previsa, the main port of Epirus, overland to the capital Yanina, onwards to Ali Pasha’s court at Tepalene, southwards via Acarnania to the Peloponnese, and thence to Attica. Both travellers cited Gibbon’s opinion that Albania was less familiar to Europeans than the backwoods of America, elevating their status from tourists to travellers breaking new ground. In fact (as their critics pointed out) both were to some extent

dependent upon information gleaned by the French resident Francois Pouqueville, who had in 1805 published an influential travelogue entitled *Voyage en Moree, a Constantinople, en Albanie . . . 1798–1801*.

The importance of Ali Pasha's Albania for both Byron and Hobhouse represents another break with the tradition of classical topography, and an attempt to establish an alternative framework for viewing the vexed politics of the region. In stanza 46 Byron represents Albania as a scene of nature rather than culture, its picturesque beauties offering a relief from the heavily associative topography of Greece: Childe Harold 'pass'd o'er many a mount sublime, / Through lands scarce noted in historic tales: / Yet in fam'd Attica such lovely dales / Are rarely seen' (CPW, II, 58). The climax of this passage is the description of the travellers' entry into Ali's stronghold, which, according to Byron's letter home of 12 November 1809, evoked 'Scott's description of Bransome Castle in his lay [of the last Minstrel], & the feudal system' (BLJ, I, 227). As if to capitalise on the literary fashion for Scott's feudal Highlanders, Byron's note proclaimed that 'The Arnouts, or Albanese, struck me forcibly by their resemblance to the Highlanders of Scotland, in dress, figure, and manner of living' (CPW, II, 192–3). But the comparison with Scott's dashing clansmen (upon whose warlike virtues and chivalric nobility the 'wizard of the north' was currently constructing Britain's ideological crusade against Napoleonic France) is arrested by Byron's claim that 'the Greeks hardly regard [the Albanians] as Christians, or the Turks as Moslems; and in fact they are a mixture of both, and sometimes neither' (CPW, II, 193). The hybrid Albanian, in other words, short-circuits the cut-and-dried cultural difference which fuelled the polemic of Ottoman Greece, offering a more reliable picture of the complex, multi-ethnic society of the modern Levant. In this respect Albania takes central place in Byron's 'Gulnarean' critique of weak philhellenism.

Byron's picture of Albanian manners also dilates upon the key question of homosexuality. In a June 1809 letter to Drury in which he had mocked Hobhouse's 'woundy preparations' for his travel account, Byron facetiously declared that he would contribute only a single chapter to the book, on 'the state of morals and a further treatise on the same to be entitled "Sodomy simplified or Paederasty proved to be praiseworthy from ancient authors and modern practice"' (BLJ, I, 208). Although Byron's 'chapter' never materialised, remarks in his correspondence from the Levant often read like a series of 'queer' footnotes to Hobhouse's travelogue, in which the celebrated predilection for homosexuality amongst Albanians, Greeks, and Turks is tersely glossed over during a discussion of Albanian misogyny. Despite the fact that Byron waited until the disapproving Hobhouse left for England before cultivating his boy lovers, Eustathios Georgiou and Nicolo Giraud,

his interest in Levantine homosexuality was not just the *frisson* of the sexual tourist, but an integral part of his interest in comparing Eastern and Western manners. After all, in the ‘Addition to the Preface’ of the second edition of *Childe Harold*, Byron defended Harold’s ‘unknightly’ (for which read ‘effeminate’ in its ambiguous contemporary sense) behaviour, as an integral part of his attack on Burkean chivalry as the ascendant ideology of counter-revolutionary Tory Britain.³⁸ The homosexual orientalism which the travellers sought out in Ali Pasha’s court, and elsewhere in the Levant, represented a ‘Gulnarean’ antithesis to ‘Medoran’ chivalry, with its dedication to heterosexuality, matrimony, and the idealisation of women.

If Ali’s masculinist feudal polity is described as being inimical to women (st. 61), it does provide a haven of homosexual gratification, as Byron hints in the (suppressed) lines following stanza 61:

For boyish minions of unhallowed love
 The shameless torch of wild desire is lit
 Caressed, preferred even to woman’s self above,
 Whose forms far Nature’s gentler errors fit
 All frailties mote excuse save that which they command.
(CPW, II, p. 63)

The absence of women permits Byron himself to adopt a feminised role, as in his letters home describing his flirtatious relationship with the Pasha, and noting Ali’s admiration of his ‘small ears, curling hair, & little white hands’ (*BLJ*, I, 227). Homosexuality is another feature of oriental culture which maps onto ‘Greek love’, the homosexual strain of the classic Hellenic tradition, in stark contrast to European heterosexual chivalry. The bisexual Byron thus paradoxically finds himself closer to the spirit of ancient Greece in ‘oriental’ Albania, than all the philhellenes and antiquarians, with their sentimental idealism concerning the ‘glory that was Greece’.

Byron’s note to stanza 74 admits the difficulty of venturing opinions on the Turks ‘since it is possible to live amongst them twenty years without acquiring information, at least from themselves’ (*CPW*, II, 210): most of his positive examples of Turkish manners were in fact derived from his encounters with Albanians like the sixty-year-old Ali Pasha, his son, Veli, and his precocious grandson, Mouctar. Byron’s description of Ali’s court at Tepalene (more significant as a source of personal experience of Ottoman culture than his later sojourn in Asia Minor or Istanbul) supports Thornton’s case for regarding Turkish rule as feudal rather than despotic; ‘there does not exist a more honourable, friendly, and high-spirited character than the true Turkish provincial Aga, or Moslem country gentleman’. In establishing a positive image of the provincial Ottoman ruling class in terms of the gentlemanly ideal of Whig

political discourse, Byron dispels the stereotype of oriental despotism and theocratic central government from Istanbul. Moreover, as the recent revolution against Sultan Selim II attests, Ottoman political culture enshrines the venerable Whig political principle of the ‘right of resistance’: ‘[The Turks] are faithful to their sultan till he becomes unfit to govern, and devout to their God without an inquisition.’

If Ali can be seen to serve as a synecdoche for some of the ‘Gulnarean’ values which attracted both Byron and Hobhouse, this was because he was in his own right a figure of considerable political importance for the whole region, a fact which quite possibly prompted the travellers’ visit to Tepalene in November 1809, in the first place. In the years after 1800, the conspiracy of the Greek *eteria* or secret fraternities had in fact become closely linked with the intrigues of Ali Pasha, who played off French and British interests in his bid to sustain the autonomy of the Pashalik which he had carved out for himself from the Ottoman Porte.³⁹ Major William Leake, as British resident at Yanina, had managed to persuade Ali to sign an alliance with Britain, whose invasion of Zante in October 1809, and subsequent annexation of the other Ionian islands (with the exception of Corfu) from France in 1809–10 altered the balance of power in the region in favour of Britain. Peter Cochran has plausibly argued that, underlying Byron and Hobhouse’s ‘touristic’ motives for visiting Albania, was a diplomatic imperative to ‘sweeten’ Ali Pasha in the wake of Britain’s annexation of the Ionian islands – islands which Leake had promised to Ali as a reward for supporting British interests against Napoleon.⁴⁰ Looking forward a few years, Ali’s declaration of war against Sultan Mahmoud in 1820 was encouraged by the British mission of Col. Charles Napier as part of a programme of Greek liberty, which promised to make him ‘independent sovereign, not only of Albania, but all Greece, from Morea to Macedonia’.⁴¹ In the event, Greek distrust of Ali’s plotting and the pasha’s own double-dealing prevented this happening, but the Greek insurgents used Ali’s revolt against the Porte as a smoke-screen to strike the first blow for freedom. Whatever his intentions, Ali Pasha was a crucial player in the politics of the region on the eve of the Greek War of Independence.

Byron commented on the ‘gentleness’ of Ali Pasha’s ‘aged venerable face’ which dissimulated ‘the deeds that lurk beneath, and stain him with disgrace’ (*CHP*, II.62.9), establishing a paradigm for Byronic hero/villains like the Giaour, Conrad, Seyd, and Alp. The fact that Byron held out some hopes for Ali (whom he described admiringly as ‘the Mahometan Buonaparte’, *BLJ*, I, 228) as a possible harbinger of independence for the oppressed Ottoman Greeks, as well as their Albanian neighbours, is suggested in his redaction of the ‘palikar’s war-song’ ‘Tambourgi!’ heard by the travellers at Utraikee on

their return journey, which closes the Albanian section of *Childe Harold* II. Hobhouse's narrative made much of the picturesque, gothic effect of the dancing Suliote warriors which 'would have made a fine picture in the hands of the author of the *Mysteries of Udolpho*'.⁴² But for Hobhouse the Suliotes were clearly banditti and not freedom fighters, and the song they sing ('Tambourgi! Tambourgi!) is punctuated by the chorus 'Robbers all at Parga!'; 'all their songs were relations of some robbing exploit', he emphasised.⁴³ By contrast, in Byron's version the Suliotes celebrate the military prowess of 'A Chief ever glorious like Ali Pashaw' and his victories against the French at Previsa in 1799, and of his son Mouctar against the Russians on the Danube (*CPW*, II, 66–8). The song in Byron's redaction has political rather than merely picturesque content: the image of Ali Pasha as an effective, albeit 'Gulnarean', protector of the Greeks against foreign adventurism militates against the romantic visions of European philhellenism in its 'strong' form.

Ali's rugged mountain fiefdom, and cruelly unscrupulous policy, might seem a far cry from the philhellenic ideal of republican liberty for Greece, but as Byron wrote in his *Journal* in November 1813, 'the Asiatics are not qualified to be republicans, but they have the liberty of demolishing despots, which is the next thing to it' (*BLJ*, III, 218). As the ideologically compromised politics of the heroes of Byron's *Tales* suggest, to Byron at least the 'despotism of a republic' under the sway of Ali Pasha seemed more attractive than the solution recommended by William Eton, namely the exchange of Turkish for Russian empire and the consolidation of Byzantine religious legitimacy.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the contemporary 'polemic of Ottoman Greece' played an important role in determining Byron's understanding of the cultural and gender politics of the Eastern Mediterranean. Byron in 'renegado' mood embraced Thornton's oblique critique of chivalry as the marker of Western superiority over 'orientals', a fact which strongly inflected his attitude to the question of Greece. As in his hopes for Ali Pasha's instrumentality in liberating the Greeks, effective resistance to tyranny is rather achieved by 'active heroines' like Gulnare and the transvestite page Kaled working upon 'orientalised' Western heroes – Conrad or Lara – who have resigned their stakes in the cultural economy of chivalry. Caroline Franklin has argued that Byron's critique of chivalry in the *Tales* and *Don Juan* is at once 'anti-feminist' (as a libertine 'voice of opposition to [the] bourgeois,

protestant ideology of [British] femininity')⁴⁴ and emancipatory inasmuch as it is critical of celibacy, the idealisation of women, and the sexual double standard characteristic of Christian chivalry. She persuasively argues that in *Don Juan*, Byron returned to his earlier attack on the 'sexual orientalism' of the West as a form of cultural hypocrisy, albeit in an anti-sentimental idiom.⁴⁵ As Byron expressed the matter in a later note defending his stance in *Don Juan*: 'Women all over the world always retain their freemasonry – and as that consists in the illusion of sentiment – which constitutes their sole empire – (all owing to Chivalry and the Goths – the Greeks knew better) all works which refer to the comedy of the passions – and laugh at sentimentalism – of course are proscribed by the whole Sect' (*BLJ*, VIII, 148).

Byron's decision to embark for Greece in 1823 and fight for Greek independence, and his death the following year at Missolonghi, rightly enshrined his name in the heroic pantheon of Greek nationalism.⁴⁶ Yet despite his willingness to sacrifice his life for the Greek cause, Byron never allowed nationalist idealism to smother sceptical cosmopolitanism. His coadjutant Col. Charles Napier paid him the ultimate tribute when he wrote,

I never knew one, except Lord Byron and Mr Gordon, that seemed to have justly estimated [the Greeks'] character. All came expecting to find the Peloponnese filled with Plutarch's men, and all returned thinking the inhabitants of Newgate more moral. Lord Byron judged them fairly: he knew that half-civilised men are full of vices, and that great allowance must be made for emancipated slaves.⁴⁷

To the modern reader there is sometimes a sense of noblesse oblige in Byron's attitude to the Greeks, even allowing for his understandable frustration at their incessant internal feuding and the treacherous desertion of his Suliote troops before the attack on Lepanto. Perhaps a more lasting tribute to his ethical pragmatism is Byron's letter from Missolonghi to the Turkish commandant Yussuff Pasha of 23 January 1824, accompanying four released Turkish prisoners, desiring that the bitterness of inter-ethnic warfare might be somewhat mitigated by a civilised system for exchanging rather than butchering prisoners.⁴⁸

NOTES

1. Caroline Franklin, *Byron's Heroines* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), chs. 2 and 3.
2. Douglas Dakin, *The Greek Struggle for Independence* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1973), p. 9.

3. John Cam Hobhouse, *A Journey through Albania, and other Provinces of Turkey in Europe and Asia, to Constantinople, during the years 1809 and 1810*, 2nd edn (London: James Cawthorn, 1813), p. 596; henceforth *Journey*.
4. Dakin, *The Greek Struggle for Independence*, p. 22.
5. Thomas Moore, *Life, Letters, and Journals of Lord Byron* (London: John Murray, 1892), p. 119.
6. John Galt, *The Life of Lord Byron*, 3rd edn. (London, 1830), p. 124.
7. Brian Dolan, *Exploring European Frontiers: British Travellers in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 139–41. See also Nora Liassis, ‘Travellers versus Factors’ in *Lord Byron: A Multidisciplinary Forum*, ed. Terese Tessier (Paris 1999). My thanks to Peter Cochran for drawing my attention to this article.
8. Malcolm Kelsall, *Byron’s Politics* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1988), pp. 253–78.
9. William St Clair, *That Greece Might Still Be Free: The Philhellenes in the War of Independence* (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 13–22. See also Jennifer Wallace, ‘“We are all Greeks”?: National Identity and the Greek War of Independence’, in *Byron Journal*, 23 (1995), 36–49.
10. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation*, vol. 1 (London: Free Association Books, 1987).
11. William St Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles: The Controversial History of the Parthenon Sculptures*, 3rd rev. edn (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 180–200.
12. E. D. Clarke, *Travels in Various Countries*; 4 vols. (1810–1819; 2nd edn 1811–1823), IV, pp. 223–4.
13. Clarke, *Travels*, III, Part II, section 2, p. 465. His account of the Eleusinian Ceres is on pp. 772–90.
14. *Monthly Review* (August, 1811), in Moore, *Life, Letters, and Journals*, pp. 670–5.
15. Moore, *Life*, p. 678.
16. William Eton, *A Survey of the Turkish Empire, in which are considered 1. Its Government, 2. The State of the Provinces, 3. The Causes of the Decline of Turkey, 4. The British Commerce with Turkey and the Necessity of Abolishing the Levant Company* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1798), p. 342.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 340.
19. Thomas Thornton, *The Present State of Turkey; or a description of the political, civil, and religious, constitution, government and laws of the Ottoman Empire* (1807), 2 vols., 2nd edn, corrected with additions (London, 1809) I, p. x.
20. Cited in Thornton, *The Present State of Turkey*, I, p. 30.
21. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).
22. Thomson, *Present State*, I, p. 3.
23. *Ibid.*, II, p. 82.
24. *Ibid.*, II, p. 69.
25. *Ibid.*, II, p. 77.
26. Hobhouse, *Journey*, p. 598.
27. Thomson, *Present State*, II, p. 189.
28. *Ibid.*, II, p. 195.
29. *Ibid.*, II, p. 196.

30. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 229–67.
31. Hobhouse, *Journey*, p. 919.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 844.
33. *Edinburgh Review*, 30, 59 (June, 1818).
34. Hobhouse, *Journey*, p. 347.
35. ‘Letter to John Murray Esq’, in *CMP*, p. 133.
36. *Edinburgh Review*, 16 (1810), 55–62.
37. Roderick Beaton, ‘Romanticism in Greece’ in Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (eds.), *Romanticism in National Context* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 97–9.
38. ‘Effeminate’ could refer either to a form of masculinity enervated by an obsessive desire for women, or to a womanly man. See Lewis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in 19th Century England* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985).
39. Dakin, *The Greek Struggle for Independence*, p. 30.
40. Cochran, ‘Nature’s Gentler Errors’, *The Byron Journal* 23 (1995), pp. 22–35.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 50. ‘On Ali Pasha, see K. E. Fleming, *The Muslim Bonaparte: Diplomacy and Orientalism in Ali Pasha’s Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
42. Hobhouse, *Journey*, p. 196.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
44. Franklin, *Byron’s Heroines*, p. 119.
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 128–56.
46. E. G. Protopsaltos, ‘Byron and Greece’, in P. Graham Trueblood (ed.), *Byron’s Political and Cultural Influence in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1981).
47. Moore, *Life*, p. 607.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 618.