**The Politics of Altruism**

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

‘Altruism’, as a word, looks old and respectable. In fact, it is a nineteenth-century coinage, from the French of Auguste Comte, the founder of sociology and positivism. It reached English in 1852 (*OED*, 3rd. ed.). The term, from its inception, and by its linguistic form, exists in a clear relation to ‘egoism’. That is, ‘altruism’ is always predicated on its apparent opposite. Its pre-history is, inevitably, clouded. David Konstan has argued that Aristotle already has ‘a full-fledged concept of altruism, comparable to the modern ideal’ [[1]](#footnote-1). While from the Stoics of the fourth century BCE to specialists in evolutionary biology in the 21st century CE, we find a series of attempts to look at issues that could, loosely, be grouped under the heading of ‘altruism’. This very pluralism, of course, inevitably makes the term a difficult one to work with.

Recent research into altruism has been helpful for anyone interested in the questions raised by the trajectory of Byron’s life, or by attempts to read his actions outside the context of romantically-inflated or self-destructive paradigms. Most significantly, there has been a notable willingness to recover the term ‘altruism’ from an impossible absolutism. Some recent scholars argue that, as Matthew Christ puts it, ‘we do not need to take into account an agent’s motivations in identifying altruistic behaviour because outcomes are more important than motivations’.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is helpful because motivation is, in the end, more or less impossible to decode (why did Byron go to Mesolongi?), and because the existence of what one might call ‘pure altruism’ can now be relegated to the status of a theoretically interesting but pragmatically unhelpful--because unattainable--ideal. The more modern (and more modest) goal lies in identifying behaviours that are relatively unselfish, or more other-oriented than egotistical.

This retreat from the unworkable absolute to a more pragmatic relativism is, of course, characteristic of the fate of many terms in the contemporary world. The general retreat has, in terms of Byron’s reputation, been greatly to his advantage. Fifty years ago, it was easy to pour scorn on the apparent naivety of Byron’s expressions of political commitment: for example, in the letter to Douglas Kinnaird (*BLJ*  9.207-8: 12 September 1822), where he writes ‘I have no violent expences—but I want to get a sum together to go amongst the Greeks or Americans—and do some good’. Such expressions now sound much less problematic. In Matthew Christ’s *The Limits of Altruism in Democratic Athens*, we find a desire to replace the term ‘altruism’ (even though it figures prominently in the title of his book) by the expression ‘helping behavior’, as being more in keeping with the modest, relativist nature of what he seeks to investigate. The gap between ‘helping behavior’ and doing ‘some good’ is eminently bridgeable and the bridging works entirely in Byron’s favour.

The retreat from the absolute and the systematic has had similarly positive effects on Byron’s reputation in other areas. Nostalgia for the ‘organic whole’ is now nowhere fashionable, and this makes Arnold’s famous reservations about Byron’s poetry seem very distant to us: ‘his poetic work could not have first grown and matured in his own mind, and then come forth as an organic whole; Byron had not enough of the artist in him for this, nor enough of self-command’. [[3]](#footnote-3) While in the political sphere, to which I shall shortly return, the retreat from ideologically-driven politics has hugely affected the way in which Byron’s own contributions in that area might be measured.

Altruism is now most simply defined in terms of the recognition of the needs of others and, generally, a willingness to act on that recognition. As the *OED* puts it: ‘Disinterested or selfless concern for the well-being of others, esp. as a principle of action’. It’s worth recalling how much of an innovation this attitude is in human affairs. The standard account of citizenship in democratic Athens stressed the importance of citizens leaving each other alone as free and equal people, rather than engaging in mutual support. Citizens should refrain from harming each other, but Athenian public discourse does not suggest that they are obliged to help their fellow citizens in distress. [[4]](#footnote-4) Hobbes, Locke, and Jefferson all saw human rights as a means of preserving a private sphere where people were free to develop their own desires and to enrich themselves. A reflection of this attitude can be found in Byron’s approach to freedom, even as late as 1822: in Canto 9 of *Don Juan*, he writes:

It is not that I adulate the people…

… I wish men to be free

As much from mobs as kings—from you as me. (*DJ* 9. 193, 199-200)

Freedom here is the heart-felt desire to be left in peace, free from the pressures and claims of others. It is the place where the singer of ‘The isles of Greece’ in *Don Juan* takes refuge at the very end of the poem, weary of the complexities of freedom, action, and engagement, longing for the retreat from ‘we’ to ‘I’:

Place me on Sunium’s marbled steep,

Where nothing, save the waves and I,

May hear our mutual murmurs sweep; (*DJ* 3.779-81)

This modality of freedom has an echo in *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, where Rousseau writes of the attraction of an extremely passive, but resistant, form of freedom: ‘Je n’ai jamais cru que la liberté de l’homme consistât à faire ce qu’il veut, mais bien à ne jamais faire ce qu’il ne veut pas’ (end of *Sixième promenade*). [[5]](#footnote-5) ‘I have never believed that man’s freedom consisted in doing what he wants to do, but rather in never doing what he does not want to do’.

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

From here, it is a short step to viewing Byron as the subject of an entirely closed politics. Malcolm Kelsall’s 1987 book, *Byron’s Politics*, is the best account I know of this position. While it may seem tendentious to try to summarise the argument of so complex a book, it has something of the following logic to it: the Whigs, in Byron’s time, were confined by an oppositional politics that was in the process of collapsing under its own contradictions. As the inheritor of Whig values, Byron’s position in relation to politics in general, and to the history of freedom, in particular, was inevitably locked into the broader narrative of Whig historical failure. Leslie Mitchell puts the Whig dilemma in the following terms: ‘As very specialised animals, [the Whigs] needed a parliamentary environment free of democratic constraints. There was a moment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries between autocracy and democracy that might be called the parliamentary period. It alone provided the oxygen which Whigs could breathe freely’. [[6]](#footnote-6) So Byron would be one of those ‘very specialised animals’, caught in an historical moment ‘between autocracy and democracy’, with nowhere to go.

The Byron who fails is a potent and, it must be said, thoroughly romantic, image. Malcolm Kelsall writes: ‘The simple fact is that Byron, the man, failed at Missolonghi. The real British liberators of Greece were the guns of the fleet at Navarino. Byron also had failed as a Carbonaro in Italy, his revolutionary activity snuffed out before it had begun. His career as a would-be statesman in the House of Lords in London likewise terminated in nullity…The life of Byron is of no political significance’ [[7]](#footnote-7). And yet such a position sits awkwardly with the testimony of men like Mazzini, who knew something of the problems of unification struggles, and who wrote in 1835: ‘The day will come when Democracy will remember all that it owes to Byron’. [[8]](#footnote-8)

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

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

When a man hath no freedom to fight for at home.

Let him combat for that of his neighbors;

Let him think of the glories of Greece and of Rome,

And get knock’d on the head for his labours. (*LBCPW* 4.290).

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

To do good to mankind is the chivalrous plan,

And is always as nobly requited;

Then battle for freedom wherever you can,

And, if not shot or hang’d, you’ll get knighted.

The lines draw our attention, once again, to the extraordinary nature of the altruistic. Why would anyone, at the risk of death or humiliation or simple absurdity, go and fight someone else’s battle? Byron suggests here that the only motivation must be negative: the desire for public recognition (‘you’ll get knighted’); elsewhere, he fears, as Pietro Gamba suggests, the self-indulgence of the adventurer: Byron had, Gamba says, ‘a great dread of being taken for a searcher after adventures’. [[9]](#footnote-9) The twenty-first century has behind it a long history of debates about ‘humanitarian wars’, military interventions justified on human rights grounds. It is easy to forget how strange the commitment to the Greek War of Independence was on the part, not just of Byron, of course, but of a whole international generation. Not until the Spanish Civil War would there be a comparable internationalisation of commitment. The ‘Garden of the Heroes’ in Mesolongi is today a monument to this internationalism, with the statue of Byron at the end of the path that leads from the entrance, and then, all around, the monuments to the Greeks of the Independence War and to those many non-Greeks who also gave their lives in the struggle.

I would like to make the case for Byron’s altruism in two parts. Firstly, from the perspective of what we can know about his actions in Greece in 1823-4. Here we are enormously advantaged by the publication of Roderick Beaton’s recent book, *Byron’s War*, which must forever change perceptions about what Byron did in Greece, what he thought, and what he might have achieved had he been there longer. Secondly, I want to look at the question of the symbolic value of Byron’s presence in Greece, its role in creating and perpetuating an international consensus about the importance of modern Greece to the rest of the world.

So, to the first of these issues. As late as Fiona MacCarthy’s biography of Byron (2002), the portrait of the poet in Mesolongi is the traditional one of the famous man, out of his depth, lost in a confusion of unrequited love (Lukas Chalandritsanos), uncontrollable, ‘swaggering’ Suliotes, monetary disputes, and generally unprepossessing colleagues. His problem, MacCarthy suggests, was how ‘to formulate any useful strategy’, [[10]](#footnote-10) and the impression she leaves is that this was a largely pointless task, given the political and economic circumstances. Fred Rosen, in his book *Bentham, Byron and* *Greece* (1992) states bluntly: Byron was ‘entirely out of his depth in military matters, finding the acceptance of responsibility burdensome and boring…He lacked ideological commitment in a setting that required it, if any progress (of whatever value) was to be made’. [[11]](#footnote-11) He adds that, by comparison, men like Blaquiere and Stanhope, ‘were able to act largely because they worked from within frameworks carefully defined by ideas oriented to practice’. While Malcolm Kelsall believes, as we have seen, that ‘Byron, the man, failed at Missolonghi’.

Not the least of the virtues of Roderick Beaton’s recent book is that turns the traditional story of romantic failure upside down. It is a quiet celebration of a very different kind of politics from that implied by all three of the observers I have just quoted. Byron wrote to Blaquiere, on arriving in Kefalonia on 3 August 1823: ‘Here am I—but where are *you*?...what ought I to do?’ (*BLJ*, 11: 15), which must be the least impressive of all political beginnings. What we can now see, however, is that this unpromising beginning to an adventure was, in fact, the prelude to a process of personal and political development. Byron begins with something that looks like (but is not) a kind of *tabula rasa*. He *wants* to do something for the Greeks; he has no idea, at this stage, what that something might usefully be; and so, in reality, he falls back on a politics of lofty neutrality.

While in Kefalonia, Byron used whatever means he had to gain information about the current state of Greek politics. That such information remained partial and confusing was inevitable, given the conditions in Greece and the difficulty in establishing where power lay, at a time of civil war amongst the Greeks themselves. Byron’s initial approach was to try and impose the illusion of an even-handedness. Where there was confusion, the only sensible way forward was to remain above the confusion. The ‘Cause’, as he liked to call it, was, in that sense, an almost abstract entity, something outside and beyond the messiness of the everyday realities of Greek politics. One of the most important developments in Byron’s thinking was the move away from this Olympian approach to the crisis, towards something more practical, more in keeping with what he observed than with what he hoped to impose.

In my own work, I have tried to chart the general chronology of this development. Roderick Beaton has been able to identify more or less the precise moment at which the change occurred. In quoting from a letter that no-one, to my knowledge has ever noted before, Roderick Beaton underlines the extreme importance, both in terms of realist politics, but also in terms of political symbolism, of the position Byron had reached by the beginning of December 1823. The letter, from Praidis, Mavrokordatos’s right-hand man, notes that: ‘it is now his [Byron’s] purpose to come to the aid of Greece, not once he has seen in place a Government and laws that are respected, but in order to secure the position of the Government and respect for its laws…’. [[12]](#footnote-12) This move is much more interesting than Byron’s original position, so often quoted by biographers: ‘As I did not come here to join a faction but a nation…’ (*BLJ* 11.32: ‘Journal in Cephalonia’). Recognising after a few months that there was as yet no Greek nation for him to join, Byron’s commitment became an act of choice, the taking of sides. This is an altruistic shift, taking Byron away from the self-reassuring commitment to a principle of neutrality towards a much less easy, because less predictable and less controllable, politics of engagement.

In the end, it’s always possible to say that Byron chose Mavrokordatos because he was the kind of man the Whig in Byron was always destined to choose. The aristocratic man committed to the higher public service, ‘their Washington’ (which, of course, Mavrokordatos could never be). But this is a reductive account. Politics, as Byron came to understand, is about making limited choices within a constricted situation, and in backing the Mavrokordatos view of the Greek revolution, he gambled on the chance that was most likely to succeed. The singer of the ‘isles of Greece’ fragment in *Don Juan* may confidently say:

Trust not for freedom to the Franks—

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

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

I conclude with something less tangible, which has to do with the symbolic value of Byron’s commitment. For this enables us to place two kinds of politics in the balance. On the one hand, an ideologically-driven politics that knows where it starts and carries with it the baggage to evaluate its achievements; in terms of this kind of politics, Byron will inevitably fail. But, on the other hand, there is a politics which allows for mess, imprecision, for finding your way towards a goal which often redefines itself as you move. It’s on this reading of politics that Byron’s altruism scores heavily. He explains precisely what he seeks to do in the lines that follow the ‘isles of Greece’ passage in *Don Juan*. The earlier lines have taken us into a tangle of contradictions, about public and private, the rhetoric of patriotism against the self-indulgence of inner compulsions, the troubling language of high freedom in the mouth of a paid entertainer, a language constantly redefined and made slippery.

And yet, ‘right or wrong’, as Byron notes, the poem about Greece has feeling; feeling makes others feel; and, finally, the ‘small drop of ink,/Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces/That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think’ (*DJ* 3.793-95). The passage from feeling to thinking is what redeems the poem from a charge of simple propaganda, though, of course, the poem remains the most celebrated of all Byron’s propaganda gifts to Greece. The poet of the ‘isles of Greece’ may be flawed as a human being, but he is a Greek, someone with a point of view that reflects the troubling contradictions of an unfree country. In political terms, the poem celebrates a defusionary view of how a revolutionary politics might work in practice, a view that is always potentially vulnerable, open to the vagaries of chance, but one which challenges, by implication, other more ideologically-driven, evolutionary views. The small drop of ink, as it falls, spreads and oozes in unpredictable ways. A trust in this unpredictable process is also part of the legacy of altruism.

And it is legacy that is underlined in countless ways. Consider the item which appeared in the London *Times* on Saturday 29 July 1826. It advertised a forthcoming performance at Astley’s Royal Amphitheatre, the circus that had opened in 1773, and where Pablo Fanque, the first black circus proprietor in Britain made his London debut in 1847 (he’s remembered in the Beatles’ song ‘Being for the Benefit of Mr Kite!’). The news of the fall of Mesolongi on 10/22 April 1826 had reached London around 15 May. Now, on 29 July 1826, in its classified advertising section, the *Times* carried the announcement of a ‘new grand spectacle of THE SIEGE OF MISSOLONGHI: or, The Massacre of the Greeks…The whole to conclude with PAUL PRY ON HORSEBACK’. Or here is the *Times* for 3 July 1826, in its news section: ‘It appears that an extraordinary sensation has been excited in the Swiss Cantons by the fall of Missolonghi, and that large subscriptions are making by all classes for the relief of the Greeks. The same feeling very generally prevails in France…’

There is no need to be literal here, to suggest that Byron, by his sacrifice, somehow directly generated the spectacle of Paul Pry on horseback, or a sudden excitement in the Swiss Cantons. Or Delacroix’s famous painting of 1826 (‘Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi’), with its allegorical figure of a woman representing Greece, arms outstretched in supplication. [[13]](#footnote-13) But the fact remains that, in the London *Times*, there is only one mention of Mesolongi before Byron went there, while after he’d been, and particularly after his death, the name recurs dozens of times. The so-called Exodos of 1826, when the inhabitants of Mesolongi tragically attempted to break a Turkish siege, created such a huge emotional and political wave across Europe partly because Mesolongi was the place where Byron had died; it became, in the European imagination, a place where the self-sacrifice of the inhabitants, in their attempt at survival, connected with a vision of Byron’s symbolic self-sacrifice, in the name of Greek freedom.

It would be foolish, I think, to say that Byron went to Greece with the express intention of dying there, though some still subscribe to a version of that story. It is equally foolish, however, to suggest that he did not, by going to Greece, put his life on the line. That is altruism, by almost any definition. The old narrative of a Byron lost and helpless in Greece, a depoliticised victim of events he neither foresaw nor understood, looks increasingly like a romantic fiction, sustainable only at the margins. Of course, Byron was at times lost, helpless, and confused—but that is part of what it means to be a political actor, as we can see by reading between the lines of almost any political autobiography. It is partly in this broad sense that it is reasonable to talk of the poetry of politics, because politics as *practice* is always to a degree an imaginative process that lies beyond the control and the consciousness of its practitioners; a source of creative anxiety, of fantasies, and impossible narratives.

Finally, it’s important to try to link Byron’s political development to his poetry. Often the fact that he wrote little after going to Greece appears to sanction a radical decoupling of man and work, poetry and action. Sometimes we still hear the implication voiced that the world would have been better served had Byron finished *Don Juan*, instead of embarking on a frivolous adventure that cost him his life. But the man who acts and the man who writes are the same. The reasons for going to Greece may be complex and, in the end, unclear, and there was certainly an important element of chance in Byron’s decision. But the Byron who goes to Greece does not suddenly arise, discrete and differentiated from the man who wrote *Don Juan* or who gave the ‘Frame Work Bill Speech’ in the House of Lords in 1812. The representation of freedom in Byron’s poetry, for example, has an inevitable relationship to the development in his political thinking that we have been discussing here. When Byron and Hobhouse stood by the fort of Phyle and looked down at Athens on Christmas Day 1809, the word freedom evoked the debris of an English public-school education (‘Spirit of freedom! when on Phyle’s brow/Thou sat’st with Thrasybulus and his train…’ (*CHP*, 2. 702-3); while the famous apostrophe to freedom in *CHP* 4 (‘Yet, Freedom! yet thy banner, torn, but flying,/Streams like the thunder-storm *against* the wind’, *CHP 4*, 874-5) is self-dramatising, as the exclamation mark suggests, the invocation of something that belongs to a personal mythology, something reassuringly distanced by metaphor (‘trumpet voice’, the tree that ‘hath lost its blossoms’, ‘the sap’, etc). By comparison, the ‘isles of Greece’ passage takes us into a world in which freedom is no longer an empowering abstraction, but an element in the complex and often incoherent or competing claims of others.

Altruism, however precisely or imprecisely defined, remains an extraordinary element in human affairs, as my initial quotation from Carlos Fuentes suggests. In a recent article in the *Guardian* newspaper (3 April 2015), Martin Kettle writes: ‘One of the most valuable virtues in modern politics…is the ability to give the impression that you can see the world from the other person’s point of view’. An immediate response to this might be ‘obviously’, yet it is far from obvious. Seeing someone else’s point of view, whether through genuine identification or conscious dissimulation, is always complex, and, in a specifically *political* context, it is a process inseparable from the rise of democracy. Byron disliked what he thought he knew about democracy as *system*, but he never moves in straight lines. His dedication to Greece is, in the end, part of a resistance to the systematic, to the satisfying wholeness of ideological self-positioning. It is in the gaps created by such resistance that a modern altruism can most easily breathe.

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1. Konstan, D. (2000), ‘Altruism’, *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 130: 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Christ, M. (2012), *The Limits of Altruism in Democratic Athens*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press: 4-5. Cf Konstan (2000): altruism, he suggests, is not ‘in the first instance, a question about behavior but rather about the interpretation of behavior’: 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Arnold, M. (1888), *Essays in Criticism: Second Series*, London: Macmillan: 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Christ (2012): 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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10. MacCarthy, F. (2002), *Byron: Life and Legend*, London: Murray: 494. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Rosen, F. (1992), *Bentham, Byron, and Greece: Constitutionalism, Nationalism, and Early Liberal Political* *Thought*, Oxford: Clarendon: 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Beaton, R. (2013), *Byron’s War: Romantic Rebellion, Greek Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 197. Praidis to Mavrokordatos, 22 November/4 December 1823. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. From 1885 to 1964, the painting was mistakenly called ‘Greece Expiring on the Ruins of Missolonghi’. See Johnson, L. (1981), *The Paintings of Eugène Delacroix: A Critical Catalogue 1816-1831*, 2 vols, Oxford: Clarendon, I: 69-71. Johnson notes that it ‘has been suggested Delacroix painted this canvas as a memorial to [Byron]’, and that the hand which emerges from the ruins in the painting may have been influenced by the dead Selim’s hand in *The Bride of Abydos* (2.607-8). But Johnson concludes that ‘there is no firm evidence for believing that this picture was intended to be more than a tribute to Greece alone, conceived in much the same circumstances as Picasso’s *Guernica*, under the shock of recent catastrophic war news’. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)