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Translating Philhellenism Comments on the Movement of a Movement

Gail Holst-Warhaft's paper in this collection bears the title "Figures in a landscape". While Greece's material environment, shot through with the ideal nature of what ostensibly characterizes Greekness, is a strong, and shared, concern of European philhellenism, I would like to shift the focus on the figures that render that environment a landscape: the figures of philhellenism. To be sure, accounts of philhellenism as a movement are often the accounts of individuals and their writings, of their political or literary engagement and their movements across space. When we look at accounts of philhellenism, be it writings of the philhellenes or later writings on and studies of them, we notice a strong biographical and teleological tendency: whether this concerns those individuals' stories, or whether this accounts for Philhellenism as an unfolding life with a natural beginning, middle and end. This should cause some reflection. Where does our preoccupation with figures, with authors and with biography come from? How is it that the study of philhellenism has often been linked with the biography of national literature(s), especially in the case of Greece? One reason, I would like to suggest, is that the expression of European philhellenism largely coincided with the expressive range of a romanticism and historicism that used notions of the developing self and of inter-personal contact as a fundamental and fertile way to articulate what it was about.

Philhellenism, for many good – even if often insufficiently defined – reasons, continues to be mentioned in the same breath as romanticism; one link I want to explore here is that of movement and 'translation' as their constitutive elements. Romanticism, across Europe, crystallized as a concept and movement through mutual observation and description, as much as by self-definition. In the process, the claim to the transgressive and unifying potential of romantic production became a condition for staking out national and individual variance.

In this paper I want to speculate on the framework of philhellenism both as a national and an international phenomenon, as a movement deriving its motion from what is 'own', what is shared or common, and what is foreign.¹ Approaching the period on its own terms, therefore, seems to me preferable to using the terminology of what is original and what is derivative, especially when it comes to the responses and reactions to both philhellenism and romanticism across Europe. The seventeenth to the nineteenth century is a period of increased nationalization but also one of awareness and examination of how those individual units are linked. The grand theme of unity and disunity (which is repeated as a

¹ For what is one's own and what is foreign (*das Eigene* and *das Fremde*) as key themes of especially German romanticism, see Berman 1992.

core theme of philhellenism), and of relative dependence is not just played out on the political stage, but is essential to the preoccupation with the two movements' own structure. In other words, this is a call for making the avenues of contact and their role as a constitutive, programmatic part of romantic philhellenism more visible. To map (literary) philhellenism as a movement, it is necessary to study its routes and pathways, the in-between, the transitions; no less, this should ultimately extend to its shared space with other discourses (e.g. scholarship; translation; political writing) and their respective workings, for which internal and external perception play an equally important role.

In the last decades, the interrelations between national romanticisms have moved more prominently into the limelight.² Let me give you an example of how the concept of European romanticism is the result of a deliberate and reflective act of observation, of looking across the fence to those considered foreign friends:

Around the early 1800s, Germaine de Staël travels through Germany, seeking and making the acquaintance of those circles soon to be known across Europe as the German Romantics, largely because she created the term – even if that includes writers, such as Schiller and Goethe, who would not have considered themselves as such. By 1810, de Staël is ready to put the manuscript of *De L'Allemagne* onto the market. When her publisher puts the printed volume to the censorship agency it does not pass muster, the first edition is pulped and she is asked to leave the country within 24 hours. It is not a first exile either: she had been exiled under Napoleon in 1803 already, settling in Coppet near Geneva (which she establishes as a European Romantic meeting place), and traveling in Germany. The first publication and success of her work she will witness from London in 1813. In 1810, however, General Savary writes to her: "Your exile is the natural consequence of the direction which you have taken for several years now. It appears to me as if you did not suffer the air of our country any longer; yet, we have not gotten to the state where we should look for models among the peoples you admire. Your last work is not a French work and I have prohibited it going to print"³ (Stendhal 1958:5f).

Romanticism, as a movement and as a recognizable phenomenon is born from observation, from moving to something else: de Staël's work is censored for "not being French"; for, in fact, looking toward Germany head-on de Staël proposes a very idiosyncratic account of German intellectual life and writing, making what

² See, for example, the steadily growing field studying the relations between German and English romanticism. Some collections have been edited on European romantic relations (e.g. Porter and Teich 1988; Maertz 1998) and on romantic themes as they span Europe (Pfau and Gleckner 1998). More studies of the routes and kinds of transmission of literary texts to Greece, by way of Italy in particular, are still needed.

³ "[M]ais votre exil est une conséquence naturelle de la marche que vous suivez constamment depuis plusieurs années. Il m'a paru que l'air de ce pays-ci ne vous convenait point, et nous n'en sommes pas encore réduit à chercher des modèles dans les peuples que vous admirez. Votre dernier ouvrage n'est point français; c'est moi qui en ai arrêté l'impression."

she outlines as German romanticism into a close but foreign blueprint for a French response. Propagating what she believes to be the universal aspirations of (German) romanticism, de Staël extracts the individual, national differences to integrate them into a newly formulated global framework of European romanticism. Once that umbrella is established, under which the several anti-classical currents of her period can be combined, she is able to assert the character of France as individual yet also as obeying the same quasi-organic pattern whereby romanticism seeks to rely on the intuition of a native character and literature, whereby culture is shaped by geography. Under that umbrella, she can become known as the pioneer of a European romanticism that allows her to trace a future path for France.

Romanticism is born out of the observation of others. I am the last to deny the crucial importance of personal networks and contacts in this, or any other period. What is telling though is that the personal or autobiographical voice, and with it the account of the 'foreign friends', becomes a privileged mode of discourse and self-definition in the same period that sees the full impact of literary and political philhellenism. If it is a dominant mode of talking about movements, it follows its own rules and is therefore also open to scrutiny and analysis. If romanticism is constituted through translation and movement, something similar is happening with philhellenism. On the one hand, de Staël's non-French account would provoke the censors just as much as the philhellenic enthusiasm did. On the other hand, philhellenism's ostensible universality seemed above the national rivalry and suspicion that condemned *De L'Allemagne* to be pulped. Greece is translated home, and serves as the foreign yet close model to define what is particular at home and about 'home', by postulating philhellenism as a universal concern, especially one voiced elsewhere. Philhellenism becomes a locus of identity, a promise, and a frame. Greece itself becomes that which shows us who we are. There are many examples of philhellenism as a way to comment on the own nation (Germany for sure, I show this for Müller elsewhere). Like romanticism then, philhellenism comes to be considered a shared code, a medium of communication. While both romanticism and philhellenism are relational, I suggest that we still tend to follow too patiently the finger, which the romantics themselves point at their strategies of personalization.

The example I want to consider briefly here is that of Byron, surely the star competitor, if anyone is, in the list of philhellenes and one, if not the household name of European philhellenism. What makes Byron such an appropriate model is that his figure exercises so many of the translations involved in the project of philhellenism. One is the translation of the knowledge about ancient Greece into knowledge about ourselves. Related is the translation of ancient Greece onto modern Greece, or, in other words, the translatability between hellenism and philhellenism.⁴

⁴ The dividing lines in the nomenclature are not always clear, and in fact they are historically permeable, and depend also on the (scholarly) context where they are used. For the present

What do I mean by the translation of ancient Greece into modernity? In brief, the new hellenism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw *Bildung* as the development and progress of the individual in which the knowledge of Greece, valued for its beauty and culture, played an instrumental, privileged part: knowing about the past helps to define modernity. At the same time, both an art historical interest, compounded by the imagination of incipient historicism, represented Greece as the figure of the desirable youth within the life story of mankind and modernity. This explains both the appeal and the necessary remoteness of ancient Greece, but it also importantly helps to explain the ease with which Greece as a personified figure became part of the circle of friendship that linked the hellenists as much as the philhellenes. When Greece, from the mid-late eighteenth century and especially in the first decades of the nineteenth century, enters the stage of European hellenism as a material reality (materiality and survival are now given pride of place), she immediately takes on anthropomorphic, allegorizing shape again. This time, however, coupled with the personnel and imagery of Romanticism, for which Byron acts as a major catalyst to view and subsequently represent Greece in a personified way.

Byron first travelled to Greece and the Levant in 1809, following the Grand Tour trail that, with the Napoleonic Wars, had been redirected from the Continent and Italy to the Eastern Mediterranean; on the heels of this journey Byron ostensibly translates some of his experiences into poetic narratives, among them the series of Oriental tales, and especially *Child Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-1818). When he famously returns to Greece, now in the grip of the War of Independence, in 1823, he does so from Italy, to which he had exiled himself several years earlier. It is in Italy that he begins to engage with the complex and unresolved Greek political developments, and it is there that he is sought out by the London Greek Committee, who suggest he sail to Greece acting as their famous (and moneyed) representative. After sojourns on the Ionian Islands, Byron settles in Missolonghi, where he dies in April 1824 from the complications of a fever.

How does Byron navigate the translation between ancient and modern Greece? In the context of his first Greek travels, Byron is more than willing to point out his revulsion for his classical schooling and the cold drills of Greek grammar he was subjected to as a schoolboy at Harrow. To him, his form of attention to modern Greece, experiencing it as a material spot, served effectively as an alternative to traditional hellenism – as well as an alternative to the antiquarianism of his travel-companion John Hobhouse, whose devotion to classical monuments he is happy to deride. As a result, although Byron is quick to distance himself both from reliance on the imagination alone and from a 'tradi-

purpose, I take philhellenism to be, in its most technical sense, a partisan position favourable towards modern Greece. Hellenism I understand to mean the valuing of classical Greek culture, whose understanding is considered relevant to the present and effective for its improvement. However, in the period in question, hellenism includes in its horizon a modern, contemporaneous Greece and it is thrilled, if at times unsettled, by the very fact of its materiality.

tional' travel experience that is limited by the horizon of classical schooling, his own approach is no less unprecedented: to seek the materiality of Greece, and to experience its nature and landscape, with or without figures, had in the early 1800s been a topos with a respectable pedigree.⁵ To make sense of Greece to his reader, therefore, Byron capitalizes on his actual presence on Greek soil, and rewrites the tales he claims to have picked up there into his own writing. Through their success in the years after his return, he introduces figures into the landscape: the figures of orientalized lovers, characterized by their fatal identities.

The fact that these tales, such as *The Giaour* (1813), *Lara*, or *The Corsair* (both 1814) are all set on recent Greek soil and all end in death is not only part of compliance with the expectations of romantic imagery. Greece, in the figure of the beautiful modern Greek, is part of a fatal logic that threatens the relation between present and past. Already during his first visit in 1809, Byron is quick to voice his misgivings about the Greeks and about the degenerate state of modern Greece in contrast to the promise of ancient grandeur (expressed both in notes, prose and letters and the poetry); no careful reading can overlook the level of Byron's ambivalence, to say the least, toward 'living' Greece, even if the catch phrase of "Fair Greece! sad relic of departed worth" (*Childe Harold*, canto ii, 73) and its companion lines – "'Tis Greece, but living Greece no more" (*The Giaour*, l. 91) – became instant textbook quotations in the endeavour to trace Byron's shining path to active political philhellenism. What is usually (still) overlooked is the necessity for Greek imperfection on which the argument for the value of hellenism and modernity to the civilized West rested. Greece as a place intimating the past is of necessity partaking in the loss of that past, just as the romantic image, the symbol in particular, never fully represents and signifies more than it is. Disillusionment, therefore, was not simply the side effect of an over-charged idealism or arrogance arising from it (although there were plenty of symptoms of it), but a topos with a forceful internal logic, which no active measure of Greek self-improvement could have resolved or made superfluous.

The dominant interpretation, which Byron received in his time, saw his writings as immediate manifestations of his emotional self (Elfenbein 1995), and so his travel experience was subsequently read into his immensely successful series of narrative poems. What are the consequences of such a standard reading that translates between literary figures and the author? Why are we (some at least) still looking for the "real" Maid of Athens? Byron himself, for sure, was highly aware of this tendency and its problems, but eventually makes it part of his authorial stance to comply and keep this form of translation and definition afloat. In a letter to Hobhouse prefacing canto iv of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron

⁵ The most prominent example of this way of seeing is probably Robert Wood, whose travel accounts of Palmyra and Balbec, and even more so his *Essay on the Original Genius of Homer* (1769), made famous the autopsy of the Greek land to gain an understanding of its ancient culture, particularly the poetry of Homer. Wood's works were translated quickly and circulated widely, especially in Germany and France (Constantine 1984).

expresses consternation at his readership's insistence to conflate author, narrator and protagonist:

With regard to the conduct of the last canto, there will be found less of the pilgrim than in any of the preceding, and that little slightly, if at all, separated from the author speaking in his own person. The fact is, that I had become weary of drawing a line which every one seemed determined not to perceive ... it was in vain that I asserted, and imagined, that I had drawn a distinction between the author and the pilgrim; and the very anxiety to preserve this difference, and disappointment at finding it unavailing, so far crushed my efforts in the composition, that I determined to abandon it altogether – and have done so. (Byron 1997:145-48)

With ostensible begrudging, he suggests to give in to public pressure that demands he do away with separation entirely. To the same extent that Byron's personality outweighs literary artifice, the personification of Greece seems to be equally affected by him, assuming under his shadow the same personalistic, corporeal shape. It has been argued that it is Byron's portrayal of subjectivity combined with eroticism in a confessional mode that accounts for the default reading of his fictions as expressions of his self (Elfenbein 1995). This approach suits well my own interpretation of the immensely successful imagery of a personified and eroticized Greece in the context of Byron's reception, as much as in the context of philhellenic writing.

The stardom of Byron across Europe hinged on the cult of his personality going hand in glove with the understanding of his writing, and it focused on the demonic, the amoral and eventually the heroic. The Greek campaign, and the tweak it gave to Byron's reputation, reinvigorated the by then flagging success of his poetry in the 1820s. But more importantly, the immediate involvement with Greece continued to be seen in the context of his erotic persona that remained a factor in the evaluation of his work for a long time to come (if it has stopped at all). By the same token, the model and the plot of the Byronic hero, conflating the fatal lover of the Oriental tales with the freedom fighter, became a staple of the philhellenic literature written under the impression of Byron's Greek involvement. The personnel of philhellenism is translated into literary narrative, while literary figures colour the image of the philhellene.

Across Europe, the claim to follow Byron's example made clear that the universality of emotion and the particularity of the subject tied the discourses of hellenism, of philhellenism and of Byron's perceived life together. Like Hellenism itself, Byron is thought to be "universal" on the one hand, but also particular and allowing for individual or national claims on the other. Byron's death at Missolonghi raised his stature across Europe almost immediately. In fact, it

made Byron into a European possession, unifying strands of philhellenism, more than into a famed poet at home. In Germany, the cry of 'Byron belongs to all', for example, is heard loudly in a biographical sketch offered by Wilhelm Müller: "Many a voice of love and admiration has called after his soul when it left so early, not only in England, but also in France, Germany, Italy. For more than any other poet of his nation he belonged not to this small island but to the world" (Müller 1995 iv:282).⁶ Müller, a journalist and scholar of German literature, as well as a classical scholar, was a paradigm of literary philhellenism, most prominently in his series of several volumes of *Griechenlieder* (1821-1827).⁷ Müller also consistently co-opts the range of Classical allusions in circulation regarding the Greek War of Independence to refer to Byron's circle: Bot-saris becomes Leonidas, Byron is a new Tyrtaios, Missolonghi his Thermopylae. In fact, if mention is made of Thermopylae, it is self-understood that the talk is of Missolonghi. This new currency of classical allusions is in effect across Europe, and so the maps of Hellenism and Philhellenism, and of their figures, are superimposed to mutual effect. Interestingly, Müller also portrays Byron as the poet (not unlike the ideal scholar) who takes it upon himself to visit and study for himself the Greek sources: in this case these are the sources about the state of affairs in revolutionary Greece. This in turn aligns Byron closely with the ideal type of the academic-poet-hero Müller himself undoubtedly aspires to. It was of course the dual figure of activist and poet that made for Byron's appeal in post-Napoleonic Europe, a Europe of national movements in the restrictive climate of the Restoration.⁸

Müller continues: "The Greeks above all were eager to honour the memory of their noble benefactor in words and deeds" (1995:282).⁹ Greece indeed laid particular claims to him, and this brings us back to the space which Greece itself, and its philhellenism, inhabit in this landscape of philhellenism. In Greece, the tension between the universal and the particular, as much as between unity and discord, is especially prominent. Here the threads of biography and politics, of outsider observation and introspection come together in a particularly tight knot. The Byronic mode becomes a lasting model and ultimately a burden. A.R. Rangavis, for example, comments in 1867 on "Byronism", once it is established as a literary model, as a dangerous, dated and paralyzing tendency for Greek writing (see Güthenke 2003). The image of Byron's personality as a forceful power to

⁶ "Viele Stimmen der Liebe und der Bewunderung haben seiner so früh ausziehenden Seele nachgerufen, nicht allein in England, sondern auch in Frankreich, Deutschland, Italien. Denn er gehörte mehr als irgendein lebender Dichter seiner Nation nicht dem kleinen Insellande, sondern der Welt an."

⁷ On Müller's biography see the introduction to his recently edited complete works by Bernhard Leistner (Müller 1994). On his philhellenism, see Güthenke 2004.

⁸ On the translation of this ideal type of the fighter-poet into Greek writing, see Georganta 1998.

⁹ "Vor allen andern haben aber die Griechen gewetteifert, das Andenken ihres edlen Wohltäters in Worten und Werken zu ehren."

create identification and unity, has the same trajectory that eventually makes his shadow loom too dangerously large.

Many literary texts emerging from the framework of Philhellenism, and many studies in literary history, profess to narrate the biography of Greece and to give a teleological account of the natural history of Greek writing. We shouldn't be tricked though into studying forms of philhellenism only through the lens of a biographical, approach, but reveal the centrality of individual figures to be part of the romantic approach itself. In other words: just as we should acknowledge how Madame de Staël covers up her exile, her subjectivity and her 'invention' of romanticism by defining romanticism through simply narrating what seems a realistic description of its natural life story, we should likewise become aware how philhellenic writings themselves push us towards the attractively immediate figure of the individual, the author, the personality, glossing over the instability of their movements. The cult of personality renders romanticism and philhellenism "translatable", and it works extremely smoothly with the personification of Greece that creates immediacy, intimacy and naturalness.

To talk about the European-ness of philhellenism, means to talk about and study the modes of connectivity: the questions we should ask are of the fault lines and networks of philhellenism as a movement. In terms of the literature of philhellenism, it is a good time to steer away from models of center and periphery, or paradigm and influence, toward uncovering the spaces between those figures in the Greek landscape. Although friendship and unity as a code of romantic and philhellenic exchange are addressed in both discourses, displacement and difference, revealed and held in place through contact, are likewise part and parcel of them. In romanticism in particular, the difference between what is one's own and what is foreign becomes creative. To look for foreign friends is the daily bread of the romantic writer and the daily road that is taken to create the spaces of the romantic movement. If, like romanticism, philhellenism defines itself through relations, its map is also best drawn through the traces left in its landscape.

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