Trophies, triumphs, tourism, and the topography of history : Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage and its contexts

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Trophies, Triumphs, Tourism, and the Topography of History

Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and Its Contexts

When Lord Byron first visited the Mediterranean in 1809–11, he was travelling through a heavily contested landscape. Not only were the sites of his travels areas of conflict among the Napoleonic and Ottoman Empires and other European powers, but they were also the focus of controversy about the treatment of historical landscapes by British and European visitors. These controversies intensified during the next several years, taking the form of very public debates over the seizure of artworks and artefacts from the Mediterranean countries, most notably by Napoleon, but also by other agents and entrepreneurial travellers acting on their own behalf or for royal or aristocratic patrons. Of particular relevance to Byron were the actions of Thomas Bruce, seventh Earl of Elgin and British ambassador to Constantinople, who removed large fragments of statuary, friezes, and bas-reliefs from the Acropolis in Athens and shipped them to London beginning in 1801. The debate over Elgin's motives and justification – whether he had rescued the sculptures from certain destruction in Ottoman-occupied Greece, or whether he had himself destroyed the temple of Athena Parthenos by his crude removal of the marbles – was further complicated by the contemporaneous activities of Napoleon in plundering occupied Italy. From 1796 onward, French agents transported paintings and classical sculptures from Rome, and elsewhere in the growing French empire, to Paris for display in the Louvre. In the case of France, the plunder of artworks was a deliberate imitation of imperial behaviour, consistent with the self-representation of revolutionary France as a new Roman republic and Napoleon's self-construction as the new Augustus. The arrival of the largest shipment of artworks in Paris in July 1798 was accordingly celebrated by a public triumphal procession in the style of

ancient Rome. After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815, these artworks were restored to Italy. The widespread public debate over their restoration thus coincided exactly with the debate over the British Parliament's purchase of the Elgin Marbles, which was concluded in 1816.

Byron responds directly to the affair of the Elgin Marbles in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the poem that made his name and heavily influenced readers' perceptions of European topography when it was published in 1812. Byron's rhetorical and figurative strategies reflect contemporary debates about the appropriation of historical topography, but also turn these debates in a new direction. Byron asks his readers to compare the seizure of treasures from occupied Mediterranean countries to the ancient Roman practice of seizing trophies and celebrating their arrival in the imperial capital with public triumphs. Invoking this paradigm repeatedly in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and in his annotations to the poem, Byron characterizes Elgin's activities as a debased version of it. *Modern* trophies, epitomized by the Elgin Marbles, are obtained by negotiation and bribery, commodified as souvenirs or museum pieces, and publicized through modern media practices. While critiquing Lord Elgin directly in his annotations to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron simultaneously proposes a superior method of "bringing home" historical landscapes by recasting the topography of Europe as an imaginative and aesthetic experience for readers of his poem.

The significance of Byron's rhetorical and figurative strategies emerges when they are compared with alternative responses by some of his contemporaries. The late-Romantic poet Felicia Hemans wrote extensively about the seizure of artworks by the Napoleonic and the British Empires, developing different ideological positions on Napoleon and Lord Elgin in the poetry she published in 1816 and 1817. If Hemans represents the perspective of a poet who was intensely interested in the topography of Europe even though she never travelled to Greece or Italy herself, the opposite perspective might be attributed to John Galt, the Scottish writer and businessman who toured the Mediterranean at the same time as Byron. Galt, who not only witnessed the removal of the Elgin Marbles firsthand but almost became personally involved in their purchase, turns his experiences into autobiographical narrative and satirical verse. Positioned between the two poles of Hemans's aesthetics and Galt's pragmatism, Byron's poetry

represents a serious attempt to oppose the removal of antique ruins and offer an alternative aesthetic experience by way of his own poetry. Yet, I will argue, Byron also intuits his own complicity in the structures of desire and commodification that characterize nineteenth-century economic imperialism as well as the attitude of the Romantic tourist.

Although Felicia Hemans never travelled outside of Britain, much of her poetry addresses the history and topography of Mediterranean Europe, while it participates in contemporary debates about art and empire. Her 1816 poem "The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy" joins in the widespread outrage at Napoleon's acts of plunder. Napoleon, unnamed in this poem, appears only under the pejorative epithet "the Spoiler" (line 134). In a series of ekphrastic descriptions, Hemans celebrates, one by one, the most famous of the art treasures that are returned to Italy after his defeat: the bronze horse on the dome of Venice's San Marco Cathedral, the Apollo Belvedere, the Venus de' Medici, and the Laocoon. Conveniently overlooking the fact that some of these works came to Italy in the first place as trophies of Venetian conquests in the Eastern Mediterranean, Hemans instead focuses on the contrast between temporal political power and the eternal value of art. Above all, her poem celebrates the fact that the restored treasures will now inspire young artists in Italy to create new works of genius. The forward-looking, re-creative potential of antique models reappears with even greater emphasis when Hemans turns her attention to the Parthenon marbles.

Notwithstanding her condemnation of Napoleon as "the Spoiler" in "The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy," one year later, in her poem "Modern Greece", Hemans endorses the decision to remove the Parthenon statues from the Acropolis and bring them to Britain. Now it is not the agent who removed the artworks, but the inhabitants of the Greek peninsula, the apathetic modern Greeks and the hostile Turks, who are condemned as "spoilers of excellence and foes to art" (line 872). Left among them, the Parthenon would quickly have decayed into "classic dust" (line 880). Hemans affirms that England is now a more fitting environment for these treasures, because England, not Athens, now stands for republican freedom. Most importantly, rather than causing the poet to reflect on the ancient past, the Elgin Marbles here symbolize potential for the future. Although, in 1816, "The *Restoration* of the Works of Art to Italy" was

cause for celebration because the restored masterpieces would provide inspiration for the future, Hemans's 1817 poem celebrates the *removal* of works of art from modern Greece for exactly the same reason. Translated to London, the Parthenon statues will provide models for young geniuses who might otherwise never have seen them. Hemans represents this event as a new beginning for British art:

> And who can tell how pure, how bright a flame,
> Caught from these models, may illume the west? –
> What British Angelo may rise to fame,
> On the free isle what beams of art may rest? (lines 981–4)

Although Hemans's defence of the Elgin Marbles on the grounds of their aesthetic value to Britain is conventionally nationalistic, her poem ends with an intriguing innovation on the theme of *translatio imperii*, the transfer of imperial power from Orient to Occident. The poem culminates in a double act of salvation: not only have Elgin and the British government saved the Parthenon statues from destruction, but the presence of the statues in London will save Britain from the negative tendencies of her own imperial ambitions. To Hemans, art is the only realm in which Britain has not yet achieved excellence, since the nation has neglected its cultural development in its preoccupation with building an empire on economic domination: "thou hast fondly sought, on distant coast, / Gems far less rich than those, thus precious, and thus lost," she admonishes the nation (lines 999-1000). Now, however, the inspiring presence of the Parthenon statues will allow British artists to develop their genius, thus providing a much-needed balance between economic and cultural development. With a remarkable projection of the *translatio imperii* theme into an imagined future, Hemans ends the poem by suggesting that, even in some future day when the British empire will have been superseded by another, Britain will have triumphed because she will then leave behind the same grandiose ruins that Athens now offers:

> So, should dark ages o'er thy glory sweep,
> Should *thine* e'er be as now are Grecian plains,
> Nations unborn shall track thine own blue deep,
> To hail thy shore, to worship thy remains;

> Thy mighty monuments with reverence trace,
> And cry, 'This ancient soil hath nurs'd a glorious race!' (lines 1005–10)

Felicia Hemans's vision of the Elgin Marbles looks forward to a new aesthetic flowering that is British rather than Greek – and then, even beyond that, to a new decline and fall and potential re-birth from a kind of British Acropolis. The imagined post-imperial London of the future becomes, like the Athens of the present, a monument to artistic grandeur. By the end of the poem, the referent of Hemans's title "Modern Greece" thus undergoes a notable shift: the actual landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean has been left behind, and "Modern Greece" designates, instead, a future Britain.

Byron's most immediate response to the Elgin Marbles affair, in the satirical poem "The Curse of Minerva", also ends with a scene of London in ruins, but the ideology behind his apocalyptic vision is exactly the opposite of Hemans's. Whereas Hemans imagines the England of the future as a glorious ruin that testifies to the artistic achievements inspired by the Elgin Marbles, Byron imagines the ruin of England as a punishment called down by the curse of Minerva/Athena, the goddess whose temple Lord Elgin destroyed. Byron's *ad hominem* satire ends with a "column of ascending flames, / Shak[ing] his red shadow o'er the startled Thames" (*CPW* 1: 330). This is the punishment for Elgin's violation of the Parthenon, but also, more generally, for Britain's complicity in the ravages of empire through her actions in India and Ireland, and during the Napoleonic Wars. Elgin's activities are condemned in this poem as an individual act of desecrating a relic of classical antiquity, but those activities also come to stand for the destruction wrought by modern militaristic-imperial ambitions in general. In the end, Elgin and his nation literally go down in flames.

Probably because of its inflammatory *ad hominem* content, Byron elected to print only a few copies of "The Curse of Minerva" for private circulation, although pirated versions began appearing in London periodicals and in the United States by 1815. The poem nevertheless introduces rhetoric and imagery that will reappear in Byron's more public poetic treatment of the Elgin affair in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. According to Byron's rhetoric, it is neither Napoleon nor Turkish soldiers (as in Hemans's poetry) who appear as the "spoilers" of classical art, but rather Lord Elgin – a "spoiler worse

than both" Turks or barbarian Goths, as the goddess Minerva herself affirms (lines 97–8). Elgin is "worse" than other plunderers, moreover, because he does not even assert his claim to the spoils through bold military deeds, but by stealth. More barbarian than the barbarian king Alaric, who sacked ancient Rome, Elgin "basely stole what less barbarians won" (line 112).

"The Curse of Minerva" contrasts with Hemans's "Modern Greece" not only in the poet's condemnation of the Elgin Marbles, but in his first-person perspective. Whereas Hemans takes her reader through an imaginary travelogue of Mediterranean and Oriental landscapes that she herself would never see, Byron situates himself, with intense physical immediacy, where he actually stood in 1811: on the Acropolis amidst the ruins of the Parthenon, "within the walls of Pallas' fane" (line 55). His embodied experience of the ravaged antique temple brings on a vision of the past in which Minerva herself appears and speaks to him; their dialogue, and the curse that Minerva pronounces on Elgin and Britain, make up the majority of the poem. Byron's suggestion that the direct experience of the Greek historical landscape can induce an affective response so strong as to constitute a supernatural vision corresponds to the value he places on the intersection of topography and personal subjectivity throughout his writing. His first-hand experience of Mediterranean topography – a defining feature of all his travel poetry and Oriental tales – is inseparable from the immense popularity of his poetry among English readers. Byron advertises the eyewitness component of the experience prominently by citing the date and location "Athens: Capuchin Convent, March 17, 1811" directly below the title "The Curse of Minerva" – an annotation that is all the more significant in light of manuscript evidence that much of the poem was actually written in November 1811 after his return to England (*CPW* 1: 445–6). Byron nevertheless needs to affirm that he was, indeed, there on the spot when the Parthenon statues were being shipped out of Greece, living at the Capuchin Monastery at the foot of the Acropolis. This sense of place is crucial to understanding his rhetorical, ethical, and aesthetic response to the affair of the Elgin Marbles. "Being there" is the challenge Byron sets against Elgin's "taking away" – and against Hemans's endorsement of Elgin in "Modern Greece", a poem Byron later dismissed as "Good for nothing – written by some one who has never been there" (*Byron's Letters and Journals* 5: 262). The alternative

that Byron offers is that the poet – as pilgrim or tourist – may embody the spirit of historical places and translate it into language, rather than translating actual historical objects from their proper landscape into a foreign museum. Yet the poetry in which Byron enacts this alternative, I will suggest, depends on a commodification of antiquity that is strikingly similar to the very behaviour he condemns.

Somewhat more subtly than in the privately circulated "Curse of Minerva", Byron critiques the actions of Lord Elgin again at the beginning and end of canto two of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Multiple perspectives on history intersect in Byron's condemnation of Elgin. In the background is the eighteenth-century British fascination with ruins and the fall of empires, which Byron evokes in his first reference to Elgin in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. While canto two begins with a generalized reference to Athena's ruined temple, Byron's prose annotation to the first stanza lays the blame for this ruination on "certain British nobility and gentry": "We can all feel, or imagine, the regret with which the ruins of cities, once the capitals of empires, are beheld; the reflections suggested by such objects are too trite to require recapitulation. [...] [Athens] is now become a scene of petty intrigue and perpetual disturbance, between the bickering agents of certain British nobility and gentry" (*CPW* 2: 189). Meditations on the "ruins of cities" in imitation of Gibbon or Volney pale into "trite" reflections next to the particular form of decadence that Byron finds manifested in the Elgin affair, a decadence that is characteristic of modernity. What disgusts Byron about Elgin's activities is their "littleness" and "vanity"; Elgin's tactics of semi-legitimate diplomatic negotiation and bribery have made Athens into "a scene of petty intrigue." A few lines further on in the same note, Elgin reappears in a veiled reference to "the paltry Antiquarian" with his "despicable agents." Byron's sardonic repetition of the derogatory term "agents" underlines the decline of ancient empire based on heroism and conquest into a modern imperialism that relies on the acquisition of desired objects through petty competition and underhanded negotiation.

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage repeatedly contrasts the practices of ancient and modern empire by juxtaposing Elgin's removal of the Parthenon marbles with plunder obtained through military conquest. As in "The Curse of Minerva", Lord Elgin is referred to by the epithets "plunderer," "spoiler," "robber," and "violator"; the Elgin

Marbles are the "last poor plunder" (2.13),[1] the two adjectives emphasizing the contrast between the heroic spoils of ancient conquests and their petty modern counterpart. Modern plunder purports to mitigate forcible conquest with more acceptable forms of desire: the curiosity of the antiquarian, the appreciation of the connoisseur, and the tourist's longing for souvenirs that testify "I was there." Throughout *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, not only in reference to Elgin and Greece but also when dwelling on the decayed empire of Venice and the ruins of ancient Rome, Byron often alludes to "trophies," "triumphs," and "spoils." These allusions merit further attention for the way they expose Romantic antiquarianism as a modern form of plunder.

The etymologies of "triumph" and "trophy" both lead, by way of Latin, to terms and concepts that are Greek in origin. In the course of their translation from Greek to Latin to modern languages, both words oscillate between abstract and concrete significations, thus calling attention to the relation between the act of asserting power, and the material manifestations of this act. "Triumph," now used abstractly to designate a successful event and the emotion associated with it, was, in its Latin form *triumphus*, a material fact: the official procession in which a victorious commander marched his army, trophies, and captured slaves into Rome and up the Capitoline hill. Before that, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the Greek original of the word (*triambos*) designated a text, a hymn to Bacchus. In the word "trophy," the semantic evolution from material to action goes in the other direction. Now, as in ancient Rome, "trophy" refers to a tangible symbol of victory (Latin *trophæum* is "a structure [...] consisting of arms or other spoils taken from the enemy," [OED]); but its Greek original, from *tropē*, referred to the victor's act of "turning" or putting to flight an enemy army.

Images of triumphs and trophies are remarkably frequent in the literature of the Napoleonic age, whether on the Elgin Marbles or more general subjects. Madame de Staël's re-writing of the Roman triumphal procession to the Capitoline hill as a celebratory procession

1 Throughout this essay, quotations of poetry from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* are identified by canto and stanza number and cited from Byron's *Complete Poetical Works* (= *CPW*).

for her poetess-heroine Corinne in *Corinne, or Italy* was followed by a series of English poems, by Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon among others, that present Corinne's coronation as the modern, feminized, aesthetic version of the ancient triumph. The plunder of Athens and Rome by the Visigoth king Alaric is a recurrent topic in late-Romantic poetry (e.g., Hemans's "Alaric in Italy"), and P. B. Shelley uses the triumphal procession as a metaphorical frame in his "The Triumph of Life". Byron is thus drawing on a common fund of poetic diction, but his references to trophies and triumphs in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* are notable for the way they reconfigure the shift between materiality and abstraction that is already evident in the etymologies of both words. Typically, he calls attention to the seizure of material objects, but then de-materializes them by evoking the vanity of military victories and the evanescence of captured treasures. "Where is the rock of Triumph [...] Did the conquerors heap / Their spoils here?" the poet asks rhetorically on the Capitoline Hill (4.112). When he views the place where Roman emperors celebrated their victories, "Where the car climb'd the capitol" (4.80), he does so from the perspective of Rome's defeat, reminding the reader that invading "barbarian monarchs" later rode up the same steep slope in place of Roman champions. Two stanzas further on, Byron laments the lost glory of the "trebly hundred triumphs" (4.82) of classical Rome, as chronicled by ancient and modern historians from Orosius to Gibbon. Writing two years after the Battle of Waterloo, finally, he likens the triumphs of Napoleon to those of the Caesars, ironically because of the ultimate vanity of both: "For *this* the conqueror rears / The arch of triumph!" (4.92). The *longue durée* of history, in all these cases, causes material triumphs to vanish into abstraction.

Numerous other mentions of triumphs and trophies in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* draw the image into another kind of abstraction, by translating it from a military-historical into an aesthetic sphere. Byron observes that the Rome he visits in 1817, even with its ruined monuments, can claim a new kind of victory in which "Art" (i.e., the artistic heritage of the eternal city) becomes the conqueror that vanquishes modern transalpine tourists, who are drawn through Rome as if enslaved to her: "Chain'd to the chariot of triumphal Art, / We stand as captives" (4.50). Conversely, after describing the decayed grandeur of Venice, Byron counters, "Ours is a trophy which will not decay / With the Rialto" (4.4). "Our" trophy, in this case, is the heri-

tage of great poetry – by Shakespeare, Otway, and others – that Venice has inspired among the English. In contrast to the city's crumbling palazzi, and in contrast to any material spoils that conquerors or tourists might take away, this literary heritage is eternal: (English) texts metaphorically replace (Venetian) monuments.

The metaphorical structure of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* thus offers at least three ways of reflecting on the ancient Roman triumph and relating it to modernity – all three of which place Lord Elgin in a negative light. First, Rome's military triumphs are vain in the context of a history that leads inexorably to the Empire's decline and fall. Secondly, if the triumphs and trophies of the Roman Empire ultimately prove ephemeral, Elgin's spoils are even worse, because they are not acquired through any initial act of heroism, but by the petty negotiations of bickering agents. In place of this decadent modern plunder, Byron suggests (thirdly) that the concept of trophies needs to be abstracted and aestheticized – and this is exactly what he does in his poetic treatment of monuments and ruins. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* lays claim to an alternative form of trophy-taking and a superior mode of cultural preservation. Leaving monuments and ruins within their geographical surroundings, the poem translates their historical aura into poetry in order to bring it home to the English reader.

Byron's poetic revivification of ancient ruins is a characteristic technique of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* from the outset, but it becomes more conscious and more fully realized over the years that he wrote successive instalments of the poem. His stanzas on the Roman tomb of Cecilia Metella in canto four offer an important, if difficult, example:

> I know not why – but standing thus by thee
> It seems as if I had thine inmate known,
> Thou tomb! and other days come back on me
> With recollected music, though the tone
> Is changed and solemn, like the cloudy groan
> Of dying thunder on the distant wind;
> Yet could I seat me by this ivied stone
> Till I had bodied forth the heated mind
> Forms from the floating wreck which Ruin leaves behind[.] (4.104)

The poet's presence at the tomb, sitting by its "ivied stone," makes possible an imaginative intimacy with its long-dead inhabitant that is all the more remarkable because the monument is that of a Roman

matron about whom nothing at all is known. Even though everything about Cecilia Metella has been lost to the "floating wreck" of history, Byron suggests in the syntactically difficult line "Till I had bodied forth the heated mind / Forms" that the intensity of thought and feeling he experiences in the immediate presence of the tomb causes his mind to "body" her "form" (i.e., produce her in bodily form) – as he has just done in the preceding stanzas by imagining Cecilia Metella's physical appearance and lifestyle. The conjunction of body and imagination in these lines is typical of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*; indeed, the binary opposition between what Byron calls "beings of clay" and "beings of the mind" counts as a pervasive structuring principle of the poem.

"Yet could I seat me by this ivied stone," in the Cecilia Metella passage (4.104), echoes a line Byron had written in Athens seven years earlier: "Here let me sit upon this massy stone" (2.10). This "massy stone" belongs to the ruined temple of Jupiter Olympius at the Acropolis, and, after installing himself firmly in place upon it, Byron immediately turns to the subject of Lord Elgin, "the last, worst, dull spoiler" who removed the massy stones of the Acropolis to London. The materiality of the ruined Acropolis, or of Cecilia Metella's tomb, allows a juxtaposition of two opposed responses: seizing the objects and carrying them off, or transmuting them into imagination and poetry while touching them where they lie. Yet the juxtaposition does not remain as absolute or stable as Byron might wish. If his objection to Elgin's modern trophies motivates him to develop his own poetic practice of revivifying monuments within their historical-geographical topography and repackaging them as poetic experiences, Byron's poetry ironically participates in some of the same activities that he decries in the Elgin Marbles affair. In other words, Byron's condemnation of Elgin's activity as bickering, mischief, and paltry antiquarianism may betray his awareness of complicity, if not in the actual removal of artefacts, then in the emerging culture of tourism and commodification to which this practice both testifies and contributes.

Byron's perspective on the Elgin Marbles affair gains in complexity when compared with that of another on-the-spot observer: the Scottish writer and business agent John Galt, who also travelled through the Mediterranean in the years 1809–11. The enterprising Galt evidently grasped every opportunity to cross paths with Byron,

perhaps speculatively gathering material that would later appear in the biography of the "Noble Lord" that he published in 1830. Galt was simultaneously engaged in financial speculations on a large scale, and his pragmatic involvement with the Elgin Marbles contrasts strikingly with the aesthetically-oriented perspective seen in Felicia Hemans's poetry.

In his *Autobiography* of 1833, Galt recollects his own financial and literary involvements in the transactions concerning the Parthenon marbles. "The rape of the temples by Lord Elgin was at that time the theme of every English tongue that came to Athens," Galt recalls (1: 154). He witnessed first-hand the contest between English and French agents to acquire the sculptures for their respective nations. Galt's friend, the French consul, exerted himself to prevent Elgin's "atrocious robbery" – but only, Galt suggests, because the consul was hoping to acquire the statues for Napoleon and to "send them into the holy keeping of the emperor in Paris" (1: 158). Galt confesses – or boasts – that the marbles almost came into his own possession when Elgin's agent found himself unable to pay the shipping bills and turned to Galt for help. "The dilemma was trying," he recalls, "and I frankly confess my commercial cupidity obtained the ascendancy. Here was a chance of the most exquisite relics of art in the world becoming mine, and a speculation by the sale of them in London that would realize a fortune. The temptation was too great." (1: 159). Galt's "patriotic cupidity" was frustrated, however, when Elgin's agents came up with the needed funds after all, and Galt had to content himself with writing a mock-epic poem on the whole affair entitled "The Atheniad; or the Rape of the Parthenon." Filled with ironic echoes of Milton and featuring heavy-handed allegorical representations of Lord Elgin, his agent, and the goddess Athena, the poem rather clumsily ridicules and criticizes Elgin's actions. "The Atheniad" was eventually published in London in 1820 – but Galt carefully notes in his *Autobiography* that Byron already saw the manuscript of the poem while he and Galt were both in Athens, and he intimates an unacknowledged influence on Byron's "The Curse of Minerva."

John Galt's readiness to capitalize on the Elgin Marbles – both literally and literarily – helps to expose the strategies of commodification, speculation, and touristic souvenir-hunting that also formed part of Byron's experience in Greece. References, both serious and

ironic, to the opportunity for antiquarian tourists to buy large or small fragments of antiquity are frequent in nineteenth-century writing on the Elgin affair, including *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. In a note to canto two, Byron recalls how he was once offered the plain of Marathon for sale at a cost of about nine hundred pounds (*CPW* 2: 198). Indeed, there is ample evidence in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and its context that Byron is not completely innocent of involvement in the removal of relics, nor even from the transactions concerning the Elgin Marbles themselves. While in Athens, Byron shared accommodation at the Capuchin monastery with Elgin's agent, the Neapolitan painter Giovanni Battista Lusieri; he toured sites of antiquarian interest with Lusieri and had an affair with the painter's nephew. When he returned to London in 1811, Byron carried with him a letter from Lusieri to Elgin, together with the manuscripts of his own poems bitterly attacking Elgin, and he sailed as far as Malta on the ship that was carrying the last cargo of Parthenon statues. Like Elgin, Byron was known to scratch his own name on monuments, perhaps even on the Acropolis itself (Webb 86; Cheeke 26).

More generally, however: what exactly distinguishes Byron – an aristocratic tourist with a classical education from Harrow and Cambridge – from the "paltry Antiquarian" whom he scorns? A curious note of Byron's to canto three of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* brings this question into sharp focus. On his tour through Switzerland, Byron reflects on the 1476 Battle of Morat (or Murten) between the Swiss and the Burgundians. He notes that, on his visit to the site of the battle, he picked up some of the bones of dead soldiers and sent them back to his publisher in England. In doing so, he is, as he clearly admits in the note, imitating the behaviour of French travellers who carried bones back to France in order to repatriate them, and that of "Swiss postillions" who appropriated the bones as souvenirs and for profit, "to sell for knife-handles." "Of these relics," Byron continues, "I ventured to bring away as much as may have made the quarter of a hero, for which the sole excuse is, that if I had not, the next passer by might have perverted them to worse uses than the careful preservation which I intend for them" (*CPW* 2: 307). The ironic tone and the irreverent allusion to bones totalling a "quarter of a hero" are typical of Byron's annotations to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, but what is most notable is his echo of the excuses proffered by antiquarians like Lord Elgin: that *he* only stole relics in order to save them.

It would be easy, in other words, to mistake Byron for an antiquarian tourist – all the more so, because *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* was published with the heavy annotations that usually accompanied loco-descriptive poetry by classically-educated travellers, notes that record Byron's experiences as a Mediterranean tourist and his scholarly interest in the classical world. In this context, Byron needs to condemn, and even to curse, Lord Elgin in order to differentiate his own activity from Elgin's, to present his poem as an alternative antiquarianism that leaves the relics *in situ* and exhibits a *verbal* translation of their significance. He demonstrates this alternative quite explicitly in his lengthy prose annotations to canto two, which record samples of Romaic poetry, Greek inscriptions copied from monuments, and Albanian folk-songs written down phonetically on the basis of actual performances, all accompanied by English translations and extensive commentary. These literal instances of translation substitute for the physical objects "translated" by Elgin into an inhospitable northern climate, while matching Elgin's artefacts in their aura of exoticism and authenticity.

Yet there is a profound irony in the fact that the success of Byron's project to translate the historical topography of Greece for a modern English readership depends on the same touristic veneration of authenticity, and indeed on similar processes of marketing and branding, as those that motivated Lord Elgin's venture. Byron focuses his scorn on the desacralization of relics, their reduction to objects of trade and the competitive desire for acquisition of that which one's (French) neighbour does not have. He realizes that monuments, when forcibly fragmented and sold or collected as souvenirs, lose their historical context and even their aesthetic value, instead becoming commodities: objects of trade and financial speculation in a contest among modern imperial powers. Some now-familiar marketing strategies were at work by the time Lord Elgin maximized the scale of this souvenir hunt, including the practice of creating demand through advance publicity. Warned in advance that Byron was about to publish a poem condemning his activities, Elgin apparently reacted with unconcern. His private secretary, at least, was confident that no publicity is bad publicity. He wrote to Lord Elgin just before the publication of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, assuring him that Byron's poem "will create an interest in the public, excite curiosity, and the real advantage to this country and the merit of your

exertions will become more known and felt as they are more known" (St Clair 161). The public had already learned to associate Elgin's name with the Parthenon statues, and the phrase "Elgin Marbles" was in common use from the very beginning of the nineteenth century, even before it was stipulated by the British Parliament in 1816 that its newly purchased statues would be officially "distinguished by the Name or Appellation of '*The Elgin Collection*'" (Smith 345). A similar form of celebrity name-branding distinguished the artworks seized by the French empire when they were housed in a Louvre that was, in 1803, re-named the "Musée Napoléon."

Byron's alternative strategy for revivifying the classical past relies on many of the same mechanisms of supply and demand, marketing and publicity. His poetry appeared at exactly the right moment to draw on the notoriety of the Eastern Mediterranean as the site of ancient and modern imperial contests, and on the growing celebrity of the Byron name. The immediate popularity of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* when it was published in 1812 can be attributed in large measure to the desire of a new middle-class readership for authentic experience of exotic locales and the aesthetic origins of Western civilization. If the majority of Byron's compatriots could not visit these sites for themselves, especially during the turmoil of the Napoleonic Wars, they could experience them vicariously by way of Byron's carefully packaged responses to the Acropolis, the landscape of Albania, the palazzi of Venice, the Coliseum, or the Capitoline Hill. The class privilege that allows Byron, as a single male British aristocrat, the luxury of going to see the Parthenon marbles in Athens, rather than having to have them come to him in London, itself arouses a kind of wish-fulfilment fascination with his poetry among British readers. Recent work on early-nineteenth-century media, institutions, and reading audiences reveals the extent to which the immense popularity of Byron's poetry was due to the marketing strategies pursued by Byron himself, and by his publisher, to create a so-called "Brand Byron."[2] Like Elgin's name, only less negatively, Byron's name was constantly before the public as that of an aristocrat, traveller, writer,

2 Nicolas Mason, who coined this phrase, describes the publication of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1812 as "a key moment in the commodification of the aesthetic" (440).

and member of the House of Lords in the months before *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* appeared. And despite – or perhaps precisely because of – the fact that he really was there, in Athens, Albania, Venice, Rome, and the other locales whose very names roused desire among potential readers, his depictions of these places tend to become set pieces, poetic fragments to be excerpted, quoted, imitated, and used as travel guides by generations of later nineteenth-century tourists who literally followed in his footsteps. Byron's involvement with the Elgin Marbles is thus a more important catalyst than has been realized for the characteristic attitude toward place and history that he develops over the course of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Especially in the context of contemporaries like Felicia Hemans and John Galt, Byron's response to Elgin provides insight into some key differences between the figurations of empire in Greece or Rome, and their modern counterparts in Britain or France. Nineteenth-century imperialism replaces conquest, triumph, trophies, and fame with tourism, negotiation, souvenirs, and celebrity. These substitutions are rooted in the socio-economic foundations of nineteenth-century culture, which give rise to a desire for objects within a culture of commodity trade, a nostalgia for authenticity, and the self-justification provided by a powerful aesthetic ideology – tendencies that underlie the appeal of Elgin's marbles in much the same way that they guaranteed the appeal of Byron's poetry.

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Abstract

Anfang des 19. Jahrhunderts gab es hitzige Debatten in der englischen Politik, Presse und Literatur über die Ausbeutung historischer Landschaften und Altertümer, vor allem durch Napoleon und den britischen Lord Elgin. Mit dem vieldiskutierten Fall der *Elgin Marbles* setzte sich Lord Byron in seinem satirischen Gedicht "The Curse of Minerva" und im 2. Gesang von "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" auseinander, nachdem er selber die Ereignisse während seiner Reisen im Mittelmeerraum hautnah miterlebt hatte. Die rhetorischen und figuralen Strategien Byrons unterscheiden sich einerseits von der Darstellung der *Elgin Marbles* in den Texten der spätromantischen Dichterin Felicia Hemans, andererseits auch von der pragmatischen Perspektive des schottischen Schriftstellers John Galt. Byron vergleicht die Plünderung von Kunstschätzen mit der Erbeutung von Trophäen durch militärische Eroberung und der damit verbundenen Praxis festlicher Triumphzüge bei der Heimkehr; dagegen sind Elgins Handelstätigkeiten eine entwertete Form dieses klassischen Paradigmas. Obwohl Byron die Entfernung antiker Ruinen ablehnt und in seinem dichterischen Werk versucht, alternative Formen geschichtlicher und ästhetischer Erfahrung zu vermitteln, ist er sich doch zugleich seiner eigenen Komplizenschaft mit den Strukturen des Begehrens bewusst, die der modernen Tourismusindustrie entsprechen.