

## Byron, Hobhouse, Thorvaldsen and the Sculptural Sublime

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Article abstract

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Le buste de Bertel Thorvaldsen et la statue commémorative de Byron sont les oeuvres d'art les plus distinguées qui soient associées au portrait du poète, et ont été créées par un artiste bien en vue du milieu artistique en Europe. Cet article place la commande du buste par Hobhouse et l'engagement de Byron au processus dans le contexte du débat entre la forme naturaliste et sublime, débat dans lequel s'entremêlaient les préoccupations esthétiques des disciples du néoclassicisme, de Burke et du romantisme à l'égard du napoléonisme et des politiques de l'ère post-révolutionnaire. La discussion portera également sur les lettres écrites par Hobhouse à Thorvaldsen en 1829 (en français), jamais publiée dans aucune autre étude sur Byron, dans lesquelles on peut lire une description physique de Byron par Hobhouse.

## BYRON, HOBHOUSE, THORVALDSEN AND THE SCULPTURAL SUBLIME

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### Résumé

Cet article, accompagné d'illustrations, aborde l'approche de Byron à la sculpture. Malgré ce qu'il pouvait penser de son aptitude en arts visuels, je montrerai que Byron avait un engagement très informé à l'endroit de l'esthétique qui régissait la sculpture à son époque, surtout en ce qui a trait au débat entre le naturalisme et l'idéalisation. Ce débat est passé au premier plan en Angleterre à partir de 1807 surtout, lorsque le Lord Elgin amenait en Angleterre les marbres du Parthenon dans l'espoir de les vendre au gouvernement britannique. Au début de 1816, un rapport parlementaire sur l'achat éventuel des marbres fait une distinction entre le naturalisme des figures de la collection d'Elgin et l'Apollon du Belvédère, « la représentation la plus élevée et la plus sublime de la forme idéale et de la beauté que n'a jamais concrétisé la Sculpture<sup>1</sup> ».

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français), jamais publiée dans aucune autre étude sur Byron, dans lesquelles on peut lire une description physique de Byron par Hobhouse.

This paper considers Byron's and Hobhouse's involvement with the changing aesthetics of sculpture in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century and offers three small novelties of Byron scholarship: first, what seems to be a previously unregarded source for the ideas in the well-known stanzas about St. Peter's in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* canto 4; second, a suggestion about the whereabouts of one of the busts of Byron produced by Bertel Thorvaldsen in the early 1820s; and third, the text of letters to Thorvaldsen from Hobhouse, not published since the nineteenth century, which were written when Hobhouse was commissioning the Byron memorial sculpture in 1829, and which include Hobhouse's description of Byron's appearance.

In 1821 Byron castigated the English for being "as capable of Sculpture — as the Egyptians are of skating." Byron's satire is part of his general cynicism about the Earl of Elgin's claim that his primary aim in removing the Parthenon Marbles from Athens and bringing them to England had been to "instruct" and civilize his countrymen in and through ancient art.<sup>2</sup> Although, however, Byron's attack on English sculptural ignorance and incompetence might have been justified at the time when the statues were first removed from Athens (between 1799 and 1803), by the 1820s such hyperbole was out of place. In the interim — in the first and second decades of the century — there had been an intense raising of consciousness in Britain about sculpture and ancient art.

This was sparked by two factors: first, Napoleon's removal of the finest ancient sculptures from Rome in 1800, his transportation of them to Paris and installation of them in the Louvre (renamed the Musée Napoleon), where they remained until after the Emperor's defeat in 1815.<sup>3</sup> Second, the arrival and exhibition in London from 1807 of the Parthenon Marbles, and the ongoing debate about whether the British Government should purchase them from Lord Elgin. This debate — to which, of course, Byron himself was a major contributor through his attacks on Elgin — was intensely argued all through Byron's years in London and

reached its crescendo in 1816, just before Byron left England for the last time. In February that year a Parliamentary Commission began taking evidence from a wide range of people about Elgin's sculptures. The Commissioners investigated not only whether or not Elgin had rightfully obtained the Marbles, but also their authenticity and their value in financial and — importantly — in aesthetic terms.

The Commission's *Report* was published early in April 1816, but speculation about its findings had been rife for weeks before this. In particular, Benjamin Robert Haydon, the artist and friend of Keats, who was indignant that he had not himself been called to give evidence, published an impassioned letter in the major newspapers in February praising the beauty and importance of the sculptures. As a professional artist, Haydon wanted to assert the value of his own judgement against that of the connoisseur and leader of the powerful Dilettanti society, Richard Payne Knight. Payne Knight had consistently been extremely unenthusiastic about the Marbles, suggesting they dated from the time of Hadrian (i.e. the second century AD). The conclusions of the Commission in 1816 vindicated Haydon and other professional artists and completely discredited Payne Knight, and as a result Payne Knight was excluded from the Royal Academy exhibition that year and lampooned in the *Examiner* for valuing a granite Egyptian beetle more highly than the famous horse's head from the Parthenon frieze.<sup>4</sup>

The *Report* itself included verbatim accounts of the evidence of sixteen eminent sculptors and artists — including Francis Chantrey, John Flaxman, Benjamin West and Sir Thomas Lawrence. They all emphasized the great aesthetic value of the Athenian sculptures and confirmed that they were certainly by the great fifth-century BC sculptor Phidias. The artists were specifically asked to compare the Parthenon Marbles with the sculptures which had until then been the most famous and well-regarded of the ancient world, such as the *Apollo Belvidere*, the *Laocoon* and the *Venus de Medici*. In particular, they were asked whether the Athenian sculptures had more or less of "ideal beauty" than the *Apollo Belvidere*, which the Commissioners described as "the highest and most sublime representation of ideal form, and beauty, which Sculpture has ever embodied, and turned into shape" (qtd. in Harrison 1159). The artists examined by the Elgin Commission in 1816 all questioned this view in

one way and another; and Sir Thomas Lawrence, for example, boldly stated that the Parthenon Marbles were of “a higher class than the Apollo Belvidere, because I consider that there is in them a union of fine composition, and very grand form, with a more natural expression of the effect of action upon the human frame, than there is in the Apollo, or in any other of the most celebrated statues” (1161). Views such as these created a public sensation and helped to bring about what William St Clair has called “a revolution in taste” in Britain in this period (254).

What of Byron's part in all this? Many of us are happy nowadays to applaud Byron's opposition to Elgin as a principled stand against the imperialist despoiler of the culture of a powerless country (although, incidentally, we might notice that Byron did not rise to the same indignation about the way Napoleon's imperial army had appropriated and removed the art treasures of a similarly helpless Italy in 1800). The theme is familiar from *Childe Harold* canto 2, published in 1812:

Cold is the heart, fair Greece! that looks on thee,  
Nor feels as lovers o'er the dust they lov'd;  
Dull is the eye that will not weep to see  
Thy walls defac'd, thy mouldering shrines remov'd  
By British hands, which it hath best behov'd  
To guard those relics ne'er to be restor'd.  
Curst be the hour when from their isle they rov'd,  
And once again thy hapless bosom gor'd,  
And snatch'd thy shrinking Gods to northern climes abhorr'd!  
(15)

Byron's sentiments here seem to align him with republicanism, political radicalism and the downtrodden, and — since we tend to interpret Byron's tastes and allegiances by the standards of our own, contemporary agendas — we feel that, by extension, he should have welcomed the new spirit of naturalism and freedom from perceived rules and neoclassical formulas, which the Athenian sculptures appeared to offer.

This, however, was not the case. Despite his politically-founded and perhaps personally-biased championship of them, at this stage Byron

considered the Marbles to be of little aesthetic importance or value. In *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809) he demotes them to “Phidian freaks / Misshapen monuments and maimed antiques” (1029-30). This refers in particular to the statues’ fragmentary and unrestored condition: and although his own poetic narratives of this period (in, for instance, *The Giaour*, 1813) seem to make deliberate use of fracturing and fragmentation, Byron, like most of his contemporaries, considered sculptures of which parts were missing as incomplete and inferior. It is interesting to compare the attitudes of Rome’s two greatest living sculptors of the early nineteenth century on this point. Antonio Canova had great admiration for the Parthenon sculptures, of which he commented in 1815 that, “There is nothing mannered or exaggerated about them; nor is there anything hard or anything that could be described as geometrical or conventional. . . . these works of Phidias are true living bodies, that is to say, beautiful nature.”<sup>5</sup>

Canova was asked by Elgin but declined to restore the Marbles, partly because, as he remarked to Elgin, “it would be sacrilege for any man to presume to touch them with a chisel,” and partly because he wanted to assert his own independence from ancient tradition. His stance undoubtedly contributed in a major way to the growing appreciation of sculptural fragments, and no doubt influenced the stance of the British artists quoted above.<sup>6</sup> Bertel Thorvaldsen, on the other hand, made extensive restorations to the Aegina Marbles, which were “discovered” at about the same time, and are now in Munich, causing the loss of many important features.<sup>7</sup> In Byron’s *The Curse of Minerva* (1811) the contents of Elgin’s “stoneshop” at his house in Piccadilly are presented as nothing more than a sight-seeing opportunity for “sauntering Coxcombs,” “brawny brutes,” and “languid maids” who come to draw slightly salacious comparisons between the generous physical proportions of the ancient statues and those of their own puny menfolk. “Lord Elgin would fain persuade us that all the figures, with and without noses, in his stoneshop are the work of Phidias! ‘Credat Judeaus!’ ” Byron added in a derisory footnote, which referred both to his contempt for the damaged state of the sculptures and also to the state of Elgin’s own nose, eaten away by disease. At this stage Byron’s taste in sculpture was fundamentally conservative, reflecting the interests of his own, Grand-Tour-going, class.<sup>8</sup> Byron knew Payne Knight socially, dining with him

on at least two occasions, and up to 1815 he was enthusiastically endorsing the position that Payne Knight and the academic critics had taken against the aesthetic value and Phidian authenticity of Elgin's imports.<sup>9</sup>

By early 1816, of course, Byron had things on his mind other than fine art and aesthetics. But even amid the disintegration of his marriage and his plans to go abroad, he can hardly have been unaware of the intense debate about the Marbles, the Parliamentary Commission, the artists' unanimous views about the value of the sculptures and the disgrace of Payne Knight. What I want to do here is to show that Byron did react to and engage in this debate through his poetry and other writing in the years following, particularly as he came into contact with the sculptural masterpieces of ancient and modern Italy and Hellenistic Greece. I shall demonstrate how Byron processed his reactions to the changing aesthetic of art, particularly in *Childe Harold* canto 4, through an exploration of and engagement with different kinds of sublimity. Additionally, I shall measure Byron's attitudes to sculpture against those of his friend and travelling companion John Cam Hobhouse, as these are revealed in the discussion about the commissioning of Byron's bust from one of Europe's most distinguished contemporary sculptors, Bertel Thorvaldsen and, after Byron's death, in Hobhouse's correspondence with Thorvaldsen about the statue of Byron intended for Westminster Abbey.

E. H. Coleridge observed that

As the "delicate spirit" of Shelley suffused the third canto of *Childe Harold*, so the fourth reveals the presence and co-operation of Hobhouse. To his brother-poet [Byron] owed a fresh conception, perhaps a fresh appreciation of nature; to his lifelong friend, a fresh enthusiasm for art, and a host of details, "dry bones . . . which he awakened into the fullness of life." (2: 315)

*Childe Harold* canto 3 experiments with Shelleyan Platonic certainties ("The One remains, the many change and pass"), and the Shelleyan take on the Burkean natural sublime ("The awful shadow of some unseen

Power / Floats though unseen amongst us”), as the balm for hurt pride and a broken heart:

And when, at length, the mind shall be all free  
From what it hates in this degraded form,  
Reft of its carnal life, save what shall be  
Existent happier in the fly and worm, —  
When elements to elements conform,  
And dust is as it should be, shall I not  
Feel all I see, less dazzling, but more warm?  
The bodiless thought? The Spirit of each spot?  
Of which, even now, I share at times the immortal lot?  
(74)<sup>10</sup>

The rhetorical question at the centre of Byron’s stanza betrays, however, the lack of conviction which he brought to this attempt at nature-therapy and to what he called the “Wordsworth physic” with which he said Shelley had “dosed” him in Switzerland (Medwin 11). In the years which followed Byron deployed the Wordsworthian or Burkean “natural” sublime with less and less conviction, and by the time of his entry into the Pope Bowles controversy in 1821, in the form of his “Letter to John Murray Esqre,” it was to champion art and architecture over “any part of inanimate nature:”

Nature, — exactly, simply, barely, Nature, will make no great Artist of any kind — and least of all a poet — the most artificial perhaps of all Artists is [i.e. “in”?] his very essence. With regard to natural imagery the poets are obliged to take some of their best illustrations from *art*.  
(CMP 137; my interpolation)

This process begins when in *Childe Harold* canto 4 the pilgrim moves down from the mountains to the cities of the plain, and turns largely away from nature to ruminations on the literary and antiquarian sites, artworks and classical topoi eagerly pointed out to Byron by Hobhouse. Still searching for an escape from what he called “the nightmare of my own



delinquencies” (BLJ 5: 165), Byron tried out the consolations of art, and succeeded so well in presenting a heightened and inspirational view of Italian culture that his verse came to represent not only the apogee of “Grand Tour” responses to Italy, but also a blueprint for the tourism of the new, more bourgeois travellers of the post-Napoleonic age.

The uplifting extracts that were used in Murray’s guidebooks told only half the story, however, and the rhetoric of this canto in fact takes the psychological form of a continuing cycle of self-assertion followed by alienation. There is a constant reaching after Platonic ideals — beauty, love, “the beings of the mind” (CHP 4. 37) — that actually elude the grasp of flawed humanity, which falls to earth again unsatisfied, wounded and more despairing than ever. Works of sculpture are the primary location for both the yearning and the despair: the *Venus de Medici* which allows the “veil / Of heaven” to be “half undrawn” but eventually makes the “weight / Of earth recoil upon us” (49, 52); the gladiator modelled on the statue of the “Dying Gaul” in the Capitoline Museum (140-1) and the *Laocoon* (160), both sculptural studies of agonized death, and the *Apollo Belvidere*:

a dream of Love,  
Shaped by some solitary nymph, whose breast  
Long’d for a deathless lover from above,  
And madden’d in that vision —  
(162)

The Apollo passage tells the same story, but reverses the sexes of the lovers as they are evoked in the earlier stanzas on Egeria, which focus on “nympholepsy” — the condition under which a mortal lover was believed to go mad with love after glimpsing an immortal nymph. The Egerian Grotto which Byron visited seems not actually to have contained a statue, but he endows it with one anyway, conceiving the mortal lover’s famous despair again in sculptural terms:

Of its own beauty is the mind diseased,  
And fevers into false creation: — where,  
Where are the forms the sculptor's soul hath seiz'd?  
In him alone. Can Nature show so fair?  
Where are the charms and virtues which we dare  
Conceive in boyhood and pursue as men,  
The unreach'd Paradise of our despair,  
Which o'er-informs the pencil and the pen,  
And overpowers the page where it would bloom again?

Who loves, raves — 'tis youth's frenzy — but the cure  
Is bitterer still, as charm by charm unwinds  
Which robed our idols, and we see too sure  
Nor worth nor beauty dwells from out the mind's  
Ideal shape of such; yet still it binds  
The fatal spell, and still it draws us on,  
Reaping the whirlwind from the oft-sown winds;  
The stubborn heart, its alchemy begun,  
Seems ever near the prize, — wealthiest when most undone.  
(122-3)

Byron's passages on sculpture — even when they open in an ostensibly celebratory tone — end by deploring the idealization which the neoclassical aesthetic demands, making the artwork a focus for despair rather than consolation. They deploy a classical topos, traceable to Quintilian and to Cicero, who recounted how the sculptor Zeuxis, in making a statue of Helen of Troy, both drew his inspiration from Homer, and combined the separate features of five different beautiful girls, in order to produce one image of ideal beauty.<sup>11</sup> The same theories formed the basis of the questions of the Elgin Commissioners in 1816. They rehearsed both the ancient, Platonic, view that the ideal beauty represented in the arts descends to earth from heaven by means of “poetical” inspiration, and also a variation on it, propounded by Sir Joshua Reynolds in his famous *Discourses* of 1769-78, whereby ideal beauty becomes an abstract idea formed by the artist after studying and comparing many different living human faces or bodies (41-53).

By pursuing this aesthetic of idealism, Byron suggests, we open ourselves to inevitable pain, disappointment and despair. It is possible to see in this viewpoint Byron's critique of the aesthetic values in which he had been raised and a questioning, similar to that of the artists who gave evidence to the Elgin Commission, of the whole basis of art's idealization and representation of the human form.

*Childe Harold* canto 4 offers no satisfactory alternative to this neoclassical aesthetic. The well-known passage on St. Peter's does, however, briefly present a less agonized approach to the sublime than that engendered by artworks in the rest of this canto. Stanzas 153-9 describe the basilica by pointing out how, on the visitor's first entrance,

its grandeur overwhelms thee not;  
And why? it is not lessened; but thy mind,  
Expanded by the genius of the spot,  
Has grown colossal, and can only find  
A fit abode wherein appear enshrined  
Thy hopes of immortality.  
(155)

I am not aware that it has been noticed before that the familiar trope here — the effect of the uniform large scale of St. Peter's making it appear smaller than it really is — is drawn by Byron directly from Payne Knight's *Analytical Inquiry*:

In the cathedral [sic] of St. Peter at Rome, all these [i.e. statues, foliage and other imitations of natural productions] are of a gigantic size, taken from a given scale, proportionate to that of the building, and I have often heard this rigid adherence to uniform production admired as a high excellence; though all allow that the effect of it has been to make the building appear much smaller than it really is; and if it be a merit to make it appear small, it certainly was extreme folly to incur such immense expense in building it large. (176-7)

Payne Knight was clearly in Byron's mind, and perhaps also in his luggage, when he visited the churches, museums and galleries of Rome in 1817. Here too, however, it is possible to discern Byron moving away from the connoisseur whose views on the Elgin Marbles he had first endorsed and then seen routed by the professional artists who advised the Elgin Commission. Whereas Payne Knight rather testily uses the idea of the uniform large scale of St. Peter's in order to criticize its builders for folly and expense, Byron deploys the viewer's gradual realization of its scale as an opportunity to celebrate the sublime, as the soul gradually expands to grasp the "glory" of the place, until

The fountain of sublimity displays  
Its depth, and thence may draw the mind of man  
Its golden sands, and learn what great conceptions can.  
(159)

At the end of the canto, however, the poet turns away from human works and back to nature again in search of the permanence which he despairingly seeks. In the end it is the sublimity of the ocean, rather than that either of terrestrial landscape or of artworks that Byron invokes: and the ocean's non-human and even anti-human, eternal qualities offer only ambivalent consolation to the pilgrim. Not until *Don Juan* canto 2 (published in 1819) does Byron assert a whole-hearted opposition to, and confidence in an alternative for, sculpture's neoclassical idealising aesthetic, when he describes Haidee as "one / Fit for the model of a statuary," and denominates sculptors

(A race of mere imposters, when all's done —  
I've seen much finer women, ripe and real,  
Than all the nonsense of their stone ideal).  
(DJ 2. 118)

Two years later, in 1821, his views come close to echoing Canova's and the British artists' enthusiasm for the natural qualities of the Parthenon sculptures, when he comments on the "higher works . . . of antient Greece still extant in the Country — or transported to England" that they are

as poetical as Mont Blanc or Mount Aetna — perhaps still more so — as they are direct manifestations of mind — & presume poetry in their very conception — and have moreover as being such a something of actual life which cannot belong to any part of inanimate nature.

(CMP 134)

One specific event which obliged Byron to review his attitude to sculpture was Hobhouse's proposal in the spring of 1817 that in Rome Byron should sit for his bust to the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen. In his "Detached Thoughts" a few years later Byron ruminated on the expense and apparent vanity of being immortalized in sculpture, and rehearsed his response to an imaginary critic:

*I would not pay the price of a Thorvaldsen bust for any human head & shoulders — except Napoleon's — or my children's — or some "absurd Womankind's" as Monkbarns calls them — or my Sister's. — If asked — why then I sate for my own — answer — that it was at the request particular of J. C. Hobhouse Esqre. — and for no one else. — A picture is a different matter — every body sits for their picture — but a bust looks like putting up pretensions to permanency — and smacks something of a hankering for public fame rather than private remembrance. —*

(BLJ 9: 21)

The debate about idealization in art which preoccupied Byron while he was writing *Childe Harold* canto 4 during this period was given a practical dimension by the decisions which had to be taken during the process of the bust's completion. On the one hand, there is Thorvaldsen's account of Byron's "posing" for his bust: the sculptor claimed that Byron "appeared . . . wrapped up in his mantle, and with a look which was intended to impress upon the artist a powerful sentiment of his character" (qtd. in Beevers 65). Similar behaviour is reported by William Edward

West, who painted Byron at Montenero in 1822, according to whom Byron “assumed a countenance that did not belong to him, as though he were thinking of a frontispiece for ‘Childe Harold’ ” (qtd. in Lovell 297). These sound as if they might be attempts to inject an element of sublimity into the artwork. The opposite is true, however, of Byron’s reaction to Hobhouse’s proposal that the sculptor should add a laurel wreath to the bust:

I protest against & prohibit the “laurels” — which would be a most awkward assumption and anticipation of what may never come to pass. . . . I won’t have my head garnished like a Xmas pie with Holly — or a Cod’s head and Fennel — or whatever the damned weed is they strew around it. — I wonder that you should want me to be such a mountebank.  
(BLJ 5: 243) <sup>12</sup>

Byron was clearly objecting to the idea of specifically poetic laureateship, but oddly enough Hobhouse (and, following him, other commentators) seems to have interpreted this as Byron’s fear “of being mistaken for a king or a conqueror,” as Hobhouse put it in a letter to John Murray (Smiles 1: 391). Hobhouse’s assumption that a laurel wreath indicated primarily military achievement may have been drawn from the iconography of the portraiture of Napoleon, and Thorvaldsen did in fact execute a bust of Napoleon in this style in 1830. As it happens, a sculpted portrait of Byron with a laurel wreath was also executed at about this time: probably without Byron’s knowledge by the German sculptor Rudolph Schadow, who had been a pupil of Thorvaldsen’s and may have modelled his bas-relief while Byron was sitting to the Danish sculptor. <sup>13</sup> Schadow’s portrayal makes Byron look rather like Napoleon, something that would no doubt have pleased the poet.

The first marble copy of the bust of Byron which Hobhouse commissioned from Thorvaldsen is now in the Royal Collection, having been bequeathed to King George V in 1914 by Hobhouse’s daughter Lady Dorchester. <sup>14</sup> Annette Peach lists several other artists’ copies in her catalogue published in 2000, although the imprecision of Thorvaldsen’s

records makes it difficult to tell exactly which other copies were made by the sculptor himself, by his studio, or elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> One early copy was certainly made by Thorvaldsen for the young American Thomas Coolidge, which Byron refers to in his “Detached Thoughts,” quoted above. Another copy by Thorvaldsen or his studio was executed for John Murray at Byron’s request, and is currently at the publisher’s headquarters in Albemarle Street in London; and a third — made by Thorvaldsen for his (and Napoleon’s) shoemaker, Anselmo Ronchetti — is in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan. A fourth copy by Thorvaldsen is the one in the Thorvaldsen Museum, Copenhagen, which illustrates this collection of essays.



Bertel Thorvaldsen: *George Gordon, Lord Byron* (courtesy of The National Gallery of Scotland)

Another marble copy of this bust, which may have been executed by Thorvaldsen himself or his studio, but is not listed by Peach, is the one now in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, on loan via the National Gallery of Scotland from a private collection. This can be identified with a bust which is recorded as having been in the possession of Byron's friend Douglas Kinnaird in 1825. A lithograph belonging to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, entitled "LORD BYRON / Drawn on Stone by I DRAPER from a bust in the possession of / THE HON. DOUGLAS KINNAIRD," and dated March 1825, shows what certainly appears to be this bust, though it has been wrongly catalogued as an illustration of the bust of Byron by Lorenzo Bartolini.<sup>16</sup> It is possible on stylistic grounds that the Scottish Galleries' bust could be a copy of Hobhouse's original by the Scottish neo-classical sculptor Thomas Campbell, and a bust of Byron, said to be by Campbell, was lent by a later Lord Kinnaird for an exhibition in Glasgow in 1901.<sup>17</sup> However, in support of the hypothesis that the Scottish Galleries' bust was indeed executed by Thorvaldsen or at least in his studio, rather than copied in Scotland or England, I would cite the letter from Hobhouse to John Murray (mentioned above). Writing from Venice on 7 December 1817, Hobhouse offers the publisher an opportunity to apply for his own copy of the bust from Thorvaldsen, and mentions that "with the exception of Mr. Kinnaird, who has applied, and Mr. Davies, who may apply, no other will be granted" (Smiles 1: 391).<sup>18</sup> Both Douglas Kinnaird and his brother the 8th Lord Kinnaird were in Italy in 1817, and the natural reading of Hobhouse's letter is that Douglas Kinnaird commissioned a copy of the bust from Thorvaldsen at this time, while the evidence of the print shows that he owned such a bust in 1825.<sup>19</sup> According to Thorvaldsen's order book, a second marble was in production in 1818-19 for an unnamed customer, and although it has been proposed (Sass 1: 331-2) that this could be identified with a bust now at Chatsworth House and formerly belonging to Byron's friend Francis Hodgson at Eton, it is equally or more plausible that it could be the one Hobhouse mentions in 1817 as having been ordered from Thorvaldsen by Douglas Kinnaird.





Bertel Thorvaldsen: *George Gordon, Lord Byron* (courtesy of The National Gallery of Scotland)

In his letter to Murray Hobhouse described how, despite Byron's ban on a wreath for the bust, he planned to place "a golden laurel round it in the ancient style;" and although this might be thought of as an attempt to imitate the *Apollo Belvidere*, which wears a wreath, in fact the quality of "ancientness" that Hobhouse sought throughout his transactions with Thorvaldsen seems to have been conceived in terms of the realistic portrait bust characteristic of ancient Rome rather than the idealized sculptures of Hellenistic Greece, such as the Apollo. "Thorvaldsen . . . is thought by most judges to surpass Canova in this branch of sculpture," Hobhouse reported to Murray in the letter quoted above. "The likeness is perfect: the artist worked *con amore*, and told me it was the finest head he had ever under his hand."

The question of "likeness" and "realism," and the tension between idealization and naturalness in sculpture, arose once more when Hobhouse and Thorvaldsen were again in correspondence in 1829 about the Byron monument. This is the memorial statue which Hobhouse planned for Westminster Abbey, but was eventually placed in the Wren Library of Trinity College, Cambridge. Hobhouse's correspondence with Thorvaldsen, which is in French, has, as far as I'm aware, only been published once (in 1881, in *Notes and Queries*) and has never appeared in print since then.<sup>20</sup>

In the first letter, dated from London on 22 May 1829, Hobhouse tells Thorvaldsen that the subscribers to the Byron monument have decided to commemorate Byron through "a single statue of ordinary height, that is to say of about eight feet, placed on a simple pedestal either in the metropolitan church of London or in Westminster Abbey."<sup>21</sup> He remarks that the sculptor "knew Lord Byron well;" that his bust, "now at my house, perfectly resembles the face of this great poet," and goes on to ask "if £1,000 sterling would be sufficient for the cost of such a work."

In his second letter to Thorvaldsen, from London on 24 November the same year, Hobhouse gratefully accepts the sculptor's generous offer to sculpt a bas-relief for the pedestal, as well as the monumental statue itself, for the £1,000.<sup>22</sup> Towards the end of the letter he raises the delicate issue of Byron's deformed foot:

Je ne sais pas s'il sera nécessaire de vous avertir que le pied droit de Byron était un peu contrefait,

[I don't know whether it will be necessary to advise you that Byron's right foot was a little misshapen],

he writes, adding a brief verbal sketch to remind the sculptor about other aspects of Byron's appearance:

Du reste ses proportions étaient belles et grandes, surtout la poitrine et les épaules, comme vous aurez, sans doute, remarqué. Son portrait, grâces [sic] à vos soins, est mieux connu que tout autre du monde. J'en ai l'original de votre main. Les copistes y ont ajouté quelque chose, qui ne me plaît du tout. Je parle de la chevelure trop haute et bouclée, qui lui donne un air de petit maître et gâte la simplicité de votre buste.<sup>23</sup> Pardonnez, je vous prie, cette observation . . .

[Otherwise his proportions were handsome and large, especially the chest and the shoulders, as no doubt you noticed. His portrait, thanks to your efforts, is better known than any other in the world. I have the original of it from your own hand. The copyists have added something to it which doesn't please me at all. I speak of the hair-style which is too high and curled, and which gives him the air of a coxcomb and spoils the simplicity of your bust. I pray you to excuse this observation] . . .

It is interesting to notice that, while Thorvaldsen did take account of some of Hobhouse's comments (he showed Byron with, for instance, distinctly muscular shoulders and chest, and flattened his curls) he completely ignored Hobhouse's point about the deformity of the right foot: giving it, indeed, a rather pointed perfection and prominence in the finished statue.

It is hard to know what Byron would have made of the statue. Given his absolute prohibition of “pens and books” from the Thomas Phillips oil portraits in 1814, he would certainly not have liked the pen laid on the chin and the book in the hand, showing the traditional pose of the poet waiting for the inspiration of the muse. But otherwise, despite the iconography of the fallen column, the gryphon and lyre of Apollo, the skull, and the owl of Minerva — which may perhaps be a reference to Byron’s defence of the Parthenon Marbles — there is an naturalness and realism about the statue which — given the deepening and change in his taste in sculpture in the last decade of his life — Byron might have been willing to categorize as sublime.

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<sup>1</sup> La traduction de Sonya Malaborza

<sup>2</sup> "Letter to John Murray Esqre," (1821) in CMP 133: "I opposed — and will ever oppose — the robbery of ruins — from Athens to instruct the English in Sculpture ... the ruins are as poetical in Piccadilly as they were on the Parthenon — but the Parthenon and it's [sic] rock are less so without them. — Such is the poetry of Art."

<sup>3</sup> Napoleon was a great admirer of sculpture and is reputed to have said, "If I weren't a conqueror, I should wish to be a sculptor" (Janson 14).

<sup>4</sup> See St Clair 255-60.

- <sup>5</sup> Letter from Antonio Canova to Quatremère de Quincy, 9 November 1815, after seeing the Elgin Marbles (qtd. in Harrison 1157).
- <sup>6</sup> See Lord Elgin, *Memorandum on the Subject of the Earl of Elgin's Pursuits in Greece*, (1815 edition) 39 (qtd. in St Clair 152). Byron viewed Canova as a modern exponent of the ancient classical tradition: "Such as the great of yore, Canova is to-day" (CHP 4. 55).
- <sup>7</sup> See James Hall, *The World as Sculpture*, 2nd ed. (London: Pimlico, 2000) 166.
- <sup>8</sup> See James A. W. Heffernan, "Byron and Sculpture," *The Romantic Imagination: Literature and Art in England and Germany*, ed. Frederick Burwick and Jürgen Klein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996) 289-300; Bruce Haley, "The Sculptural Aesthetics of CHP IV," *MLQ* XLIV (1983): 251-66; and Stephen A. Larrabee, *English Bards and Grecian Marbles* (New York: Columbia UP, 1943).
- <sup>9</sup> See BLJ 3: 247 & 6: 68.
- <sup>10</sup> "Adonais," (460); "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," (1-2), both quoted from *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts and Criticism*, ed. Donald H. Reiman (New York: Norton, 1977).
- <sup>11</sup> See Cicero, *De Inventione*, trans. H. M. Hubbell (London: Heineman, 1949) 167. The beginning of Book II is reflected in Byron's comments in his "Letter to John Murray Esqre" (CMP 136-7): "it is the great scope of the Sculptor to heighten Nature into heroic beauty — i.e. — in plain English, to surpass his model. When Canova forms a Statue — he takes a limb from one — a hand from another — a feature from a third — and a shape it may be from a fourth — probably at the same time improving upon all — as the Greek of old did in embodying his Venus."
- <sup>12</sup> It is just possible that Byron's conception of his own bust as a "Xmas pie" may have been influenced to Richard Payne Knight's suggestion that sculptures might be made out of plum pudding: "I am aware, indeed, that it would be no easy task to persuade a lover that the forms, upon which he dotes with such rapture, are not really beautiful, independent of the medium, passion, and appetite, through which he views them. But before he pronounces either the infidel or the sceptic guilty of blasphemy against nature, let him take a mould from the lovely features or lovely bosom of this masterpiece of creation, and cast a plum-pudding in it (an object by no means disgusting to most men's appetites) and, I think, he will not longer be in raptures with the form, whatever he may be with the substance" (185).
- <sup>13</sup> See David Blayney Brown, *Turner and Byron* (London: Tate Gallery, 1992) 75.
- <sup>14</sup> The original bust would have been modelled in clay and then cast in plaster, and marble copies would then have been taken from this by Thorvaldsen and his assistants. The plaster model of the Byron bust is in the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen.
- <sup>15</sup> Annette Peach, *Portraits of Byron*, reprinted from *The Walpole Society*, LXII (2000): 79-87. See also Bernard Adams, "The Thorvaldsen Bust of Byron," *Keats-Shelley Review* 10 (Spring 1996): 205-219, and Else Kai Sass, *Thorvaldsens Portraetbuster*, vols. 1 & 3 (København: n.p., 1965) 318-40 & 76-7.
- <sup>16</sup> The Victoria and Albert Museum's print shows what is certainly a version of the Thorvaldsen bust, not the Bartolini one. The oval of the chest and the circular pedestal shown in the drawing are exactly the same shape as those of the Scottish Galleries' bust. John Kenworthy-Browne alludes to this print in his article "Byron Portrayed: Sculptured portraits of the poet," *The Antique Collector* 45.5 (July 1974): 62, when he says, "Else K. Sass lists altogether eight marble copies, but more appear to have been made (one which she does not mention was in the possession of Douglas Kinnaird in 1825)."
- <sup>17</sup> Helen Smailes, Senior Curator of British Art, National Gallery of Scotland, personal communication to the author, 13 August, 2004, and copy of the "Fine Art" catalogue of the Glasgow International Exhibition, 1901, p. 116, item 198.
- <sup>18</sup> For some reason, Bernard Adams states that Hobhouse's letter "implies that it [Kinnaird's bust] was made in England" and concludes that "there is no record of its being made at Thorvaldsen's."

In fact the evidence of Hobhouse's letter and the presence of the Kinnairds in Italy in this period point to the opposite in both cases.

- <sup>19</sup> Byron wrote to Murray from Venice on 12 October 1817: "Mr Kinnaird & his brother Lord K. have been here — and are now gone again" (BLJ 5: 267).

- <sup>20</sup> Beevers, 70-71 and 75, quotes Thorvaldsen's side of the correspondence, "from a transcription of the original in the John Murray archives." Doris Langley Moore, in *The Late Lord Byron* (London: John Murray, 1961) 213, uses translations of a few phrases from Hobhouse's letters without giving her source. She says that it was Kinnaird who had the idea of approaching Thorvaldsen, after Francis Chantrey had turned down the commission for a Byron memorial statue: another indication that Kinnaird may have had a direct connection with Thorvaldsen.

- <sup>21</sup> Mr. Sinker is quoting and, he says, slightly condensing, a narrative supplied by Mr. C. De la Pryme of Trinity College, described in the article as the son of a former professor of political economy at Cambridge who was also MP for the town of Cambridge and a friend of Hobhouse. The article also quotes the correspondence between Mr. De la Pryme the younger and Dean Whewell of Trinity and others about the placement of the statue there. Both letters are headed "Sir [sic — although in fact Hobhouse did not become 'Sir John' until 1831] John Hobhouse to Baron Thorvaldsen [sic]." My translations of Hobhouse's French.

- <sup>22</sup> "Londres, ce 24 Nov., 1829. M. Le Chevalier, — La première séance du comité des souscripteurs à la statue monumentale de Lord Byron a eu lieu le vendredi passé. Je leur ai lu votre lettre, et ils m'ont chargé de vous faire part de leurs sentiments très profonds de reconnaissance pour la sympathie généreuse et la rare libéralité qui ont dicté votre offre de nous donner la statue et même d'y ajouter un bas-relief, pour les mille livres sterling — somme, à la vérité, pas proportionnée au travail proposé. Nous avons appris, avec un plaisir infini, votre intention de vous mettre au plus vite à un ouvrage digne, comme il sera, du plus grand poète et du premier sculpteur du siècle. Peut-être, Monsieur, quand vous en aurez déterminé le modèle, vous aurez la bonté, si cela n'est pas hors de l'usage, de nous le communiquer, afin que nous puissions démontrer aux souscripteurs et au public, que nous avons fait notre devoir. La statue sera placée ou dans l'Abbaye de Westminster, ou dans la grande Cathédrale de St Paul, ou au Musée Britannique, ou à la Galerie Nationale. Vous verrez parmi les membres du comité les noms les plus distingués de l'Angleterre. Mr Louis Chiaveri en a la liste. Comme amis de leur patrie, du poète et de l'art, ils vous seront à jamais redevables pour le noble dévouement avec lequel vous avez bien voulu vous prêter à leur digne projet.

"Je ne sais pas s'il sera nécessaire de vous avertir que le pied droit de Byron était un peu contrefait. Du reste ses proportions étaient belles et grandes, surtout la poitrine et les épaules, comme vous aurez, sans doute, remarqué.

"Son portrait, grâces [sic] à vos soins, est mieux connu que tout autre du monde. J'en ai l'original de votre main. Les copistes y ont ajouté quelque chose, qui ne me plaît du tout. Je parle de la chevelure trop haute et bouclée, qui lui donne un air de petit maître et gâte la simplicité de votre buste. Pardonnez, je vous prie, cette observation, et agréez, Monsieur, l'assurance de la haute considération avec laquelle je me soussigne "Votre serviteur très-humble, John C. Hobhouse"

- <sup>23</sup> The fact that Hobhouse mentions having seen apparently more than one copy of the bust from Thorvaldsen's studio (those made by the "copistes" whom he implies were under Thorvaldsen's control), other than his own ("l'original de votre main"), again implies that he is referring to Kinnaird's copy in this category, in addition to the copy commissioned by John Murray, since it is unlikely he would have seen any of the other Thorvaldsen copies, which were in Italy, the United States, and (later) in Copenhagen.