# Immortalised in Marble:
## *Lord Byron portrayed by Bertel Thorvaldsen*

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*In 1817, the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen executed by request a plaster bust of the young poet Lord Byron in his studio in Rome. It became one of the most celebrated portraits of Byron, and a number of plaster and marble copies of the bust are to be found in museums and private collections in Europe and North America today. Some years after the modelling of the bust, after Byron's premature death in Greece, Thorvaldsen accepted yet another commission: a full-size marble statue of the poet, meant to be erected in his commemoration in Westminster Abbey, London. Thorvaldsen accepted, and work began promptly. Whilst making his preparations for this full-size marble portrait of Byron, he executed two plaster models – the bodies identical, but with different heads. The head of one of them, the one that would later be executed in marble, was a replica of the 1817 bust; only minor changes were made before Thorvaldsen began carving the marble statue in 1831. This article provides a closer look at four full-size statues of Byron in their current contexts: two plaster models in Denmark, a plaster cast in Greece, and the final marble monument in England.*

On September 18th, 1848, Thorvaldsens Museum in Copenhagen opened its doors to the public, revealing a unique collection of artworks from the European Neoclassical period. Bertel Thorvaldsen, born in 1770 in Copenhagen, had spent almost forty years of his life in Rome, studying, working, and living. Last but not least he had collected ancient artefacts as well as astonishing pieces of contemporary art that are now exhibited in the museum.[1]

A scholarship from the Art Academy in Copenhagen, which Thorvaldsen had entered at the age of 11, had taken him to Rome. He was supposed to stay for three years to further his education, but had his breakthrough in 1802-3 with his model for a statue of Jason with the Golden Fleece, praised even by his contemporary Antonio Canova; later in 1803, the relief of Achilles and Briseïs was modelled.

The following years were to be very busy for the sculptor; orders kept coming in, the workshop expanded, and several assistants were hired. Thorvaldsen's love of antiquity was obviously reflected in his own artwork, but mythical creatures, ancient gods, goddesses, and genii were not the only subjects to be immortalised in Thor-

1 Most objects in the collections can also be viewed in the online database; visit www.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk [accessed 1 September 2013] for more information.

valdsen's marble; several of his contemporaries, including good friends, members of Royal families, politicians and many more wished to be portrayed by this new star on the European art scene.[2]

## 1. Mad, bad, and dangerous to know

Lord Byron, born in 1788 in England, was a much celebrated English Romantic poet, well known both then and now for being of somewhat questionable character. Since a full biography would take years for the research alone, and so much has been written about his life already, this article will only present a short summary.

As a poet, Byron's most memorable works are considered to be the narrative poems *Don Juan* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the latter presumably semi-autobiographical. His early life had been turbulent, mainly because of the abusive relationship between his parents, which left his mother in great debt.[3] His father died in 1791, and in 1798, when his uncle passed away, the now 10-year-old boy became the 6th Baron Byron of Rochdale and thus inherited Newstead Abbey in Nottinghamshire. He showed melancholic and depressive tendencies at an early age, and later earned a reputation for being eccentric, extravagant, charismatic, and sometimes difficult, as he suffered extremes of temper – though at the same time he was deeply loyal to his friends and inspired the same in them. His school years were difficult, too, as he lacked discipline and cared little for authority. This had not changed by the time he entered Trinity College in Cambridge, England, where he showed some disregard for rules.[4] It has been widely debated that Byron had sexual relations with his peers both before and at Trinity – peers of both sexes, which was highly compromising at the time.[5] Despite having taken a seat in the House of Lords in early 1809, Byron spent the years from 1809-11 travelling around the Mediterranean and Levant with a friend for educational purposes.[6] At this time he already owed great debts, and his mother, still residing in Newstead Abbey, lived in constant fear of his creditors.[7]

He returned from his travels and in 1815 married the intelligent and gifted Anne Isabella Milbanke with whom he had one daughter, Augusta Ada. It was not a happy marriage, and the couple separated after a little over a year.[8] Anne Isabella was the cousin of the already married Lady Caroline Lamb, a member of the British aristocracy and a gifted novelist. Only a few years previously, she and Byron had had a scandalous and dramatic affair, known to and detested by the British public, which was broken off by Byron, leaving Lady Caroline in a miserable state.[9] Many a spiteful poem was written in the following years, and she is famously known for having described the poet as "mad, bad, and dangerous to know".[10]

Byron had moved on to form loose relationships with numerous other women, and the marriage to Anne Isabella did not seem to break this habit. It was even said that he had had an incestuous affair with his own half sister, Augusta Leigh. Not long after the divorce, Byron – perhaps to escape these venomous rumours and his debts – decided to leave England, and thus began another journey to the Mediterranean from which he never returned.[11]

## 2. The acquaintance

It is unknown exactly when Byron visited Thorvaldsen in his studio, or how many times. The biographer J.M. Thiele notes that Thorvaldsen had been warned beforehand about the visit, rejecting the assertion that Byron had caught the artist off guard with his first visit;[12] the

2 For a general account of Thorvaldsen's life and the history of his museum, see Jørnæs 2011.

3 On his relationship with his mother and early childhood, see for example *unknown author* 1898.

4 This is reflected in his many letters and journals, see for example Marchand 1982.

5 One of the most discussed issues is that of his sexuality, see for example Jackson 2010.

6 Gross mentions Byron's doubts about becoming a successful politician as well as poet – and that he might have had difficulty gaining respect from his colleagues in the House of Lords because of the rumours about his rather chaotic personal life; see Gross 2000, 21.

7 For more information on this, see Galt 1832, chapter 1.

8 Galt 1832, 184-91.

9 Galt 1832, 182-4.

10 Castle 1997, 1.

11 For a more detailed account of Byron's life than can be provided here, see Marchand 1957. Byron's involvement in the Elgin Marble debate is furthermore discussed in Atwood 2004, Kenyon Jones 2005, and St Clair 1967.

12 Barnard 1865, 97.

unlikely, but seductive story goes that – without having given any previous notice – the poet turned up in the studio with a mantle wrapped around his shoulders and a mystifying facial expression, ordering Thorvaldsen to sculpt his bust.[13] However, a letter from John Cam Hobhouse to Thorvaldsen,[14] unfortunately undated, suggests otherwise. It is highly probable that the letter was sent shortly after Byron's arrival in Rome on 29 April 1817, and as he left Rome on 20 May that same year, their acquaintance must have been brief. It has even been remarked that Thorvaldsen found Byron's attitude in their first meeting somewhat distasteful.[15]

It is clear that the two gentlemen never became close, and it is likely that there were only one or two sittings for the portrait. From Thorvaldsen's good friend, the poet H.C. Andersen, we are left with a few amusing words on the sculptor's experience of working with the poet:

'Oh, that was in Rome,' said he, 'when I was about to make Byron's statue; he placed himself just opposite to me, and began immediately to assume quite another countenance to what was customary to him. Will you not sit still? said I; but you must not make these faces. It is my expression, said Byron. Indeed? said I, and then I made him as I wished, and everybody said, when it was finished, that I had hit the likeness. When Byron, however, saw it, he said, 'It does not resemble me at all; I look more unhappy.' 'He was, above all things, so desirous of looking extremely unhappy,' added Thorvaldsen, with a comic expression.[16]

## 3. In commemoration of a dear friend

The initiative for the execution of the portrait had come from the abovementioned John Cam Hobhouse,[17] a close friend and admirer of Byron. They had met at Trinity College in Cambridge when they were still students, and later Hobhouse had accompanied Byron on some of his many travels. When Byron separated from his wife, Anne Isabella, Hobhouse had stayed close to him as a most loyal friend.[18]

Byron had dedicated the fourth canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, published between 1812 and 1818, to Hobhouse, and when the poet died at a young age in 1824, Hobhouse's great desire was to see that his close friend was properly honoured.[19] Wishing to have a marble monument erected in the poet's honour, he set up a monument committee and did everything in his power to raise the necessary funds. The project suffered, however, from considerable difficulty, and there is reason to believe that Thorvaldsen was not the first choice for the job.[20] After meeting with the subscribers to the fund, which took place in May 1829, twelve years after the sitting for Byron's bust, Hobhouse addressed two letters to Thorvaldsen; both can be found in The Thorvaldsen Museum Letter Archive today.[21]

The first one, dated 22 May 1829, reads as follows:

Monsieur,
Comme président du Comité des Souscripteurs pour le monument de Lord Byron je prends la liberté de vous demander si nous pouvons nous flatter de l'esperance d'avoir un ouvrage de votre façon –
Vous avez bien connu Lord Byron et le buste, maintenant chez moi, ressemble parfaitement à la figure de ce grand poëte –
Le Comité a determiné que le monument consistera d'une seule statue de la grandeur ordinaire, c'est a dire de huit pieds environ, placée sur un piedestal assez simple dans l'eglise métropolitaine de Londres ou dans l'Abbaye de Westminster. Nos fonds ne sont pas encore considerables, et ce que j'ose vous demander c'est si mille livres sterlings (1000 £) seroient suffisantes pour la depense d'un tel ouvrage –

13 Another artist, William Edward West, had a similar experience when Byron sat for a painted portrait in 1822. This is discussed briefly in Kenyon Jones 2005, 104-5.
14 http://brevarkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/breve/m51817,nr. 57?highlight=hobhouse [accessed 1 September 2013].
15 Barnard 1865, 170-1 and Beevers 1995, 65.
16 Andersen 1847, 170.
17 On Hobhouse's choice of sculptor, see Beevers 1995.
18 They exchanged many letters, see Marchand 1982.
19 See Beevers 1995, 63.
20 Beevers 1995, 70.
21 http://brevarkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/breve/m141829,nr. 73?highlight=hobhouse and http://brevarkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/breve/m141829,nr. 134?highlight=hobhouse [both accessed 1 September 2013].

Je parle de la statue seule, car les frais de port, de la douane, du piédestal &c monteront a 500 £ d'avantage –
Il y a peu de mois que j'étois à Rome quand j'ai laissé ma carte de visite à votre porte mais je n'ai pas eu le bonheur de vous voir. J'espere Monsieur que vous me ferez l'honneur d'une reponse a cette lettre et je suis avec la consideration la plus parfaite Votre serviteur très humble
John. C. Hobhouse.

Thorvaldsen's reply was informal and positive. He accepted the Committee's offer of £1000 for the monument – to be executed in Greek marble, of course – and offered to include a bas-relief for the plinth. The generous offer was accepted by the Committee in November 1829 and, as promised, Thorvaldsen began work swiftly thereafter.[22]

Thorvaldsens Museum is in possession of three roughly drawn sketches of the statue as well as a sketch depicting the bas-relief of the Genius of Poetry that was to decorate the plinth of the monument. A 51.5 cm tall plaster model, a *bozzetto*, was executed in 1830 before the actual work on the monument could take place. The head of this *bozzetto*, however, faces forwards, resembling the 1817 bust (Fig. 1). When Thorvaldsen executed the two full-size plaster models, he chose to have Byron turn his cheek on the observer by bending his neck to the right.[23]

Thorvaldsens Museum is also in possession of the original 1817 plaster bust, but it is unlikely that the museum's marble copy was the first to be executed after the plaster version was finished.[24] Several marble copies of the bust exist today, but their number and the exact whereabouts of a few of them – some are primarily known through correspondences from Thorvaldsen's time – is unfortunately unknown.[25] Considering the quite noticeable differences between the ones we do know about, it is also likely that some of the marble copies were indeed executed by other artists in possession of a plaster cast of the original 1817 bust, and thus were not modelled by Thorvaldsen's own hands – or, for that matter, in his workshop.[26] Regarding the full-size statues, the two plaster models in Copenhagen and the final monument in Cambridge can with certainty be attributed to Thorvaldsen.

## 4. The portrait

There are not many striking differences between the four statues discussed in this article; they are, of course, all meant to portray the same person, and with the one exception of the earliest executed plaster model that has a different head (which Thorvaldsen ultimately decided against), they are almost similar. There are only small differences in the hair, the eyes, the ears, and the mouth. I will therefore describe the overall appearance of the statues briefly.

It should also be mentioned here that another copy of the full-size statue exists. It was made much later and not by Thorvaldsen's hands; it came from an Italian workshop named Volterrani e Pisetti, located near Pietrasanta.[27] This portrait can be found in exquisite surroundings in the Villa Borghese Gardens in Rome, Italy. It was executed in Carrara marble and given to the city of Rome from England through the British Embassy in 1959 and is popular and well-visited.[28]

The portrait was flatteringly described as early as 1831 when the German composer and pianist Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy wrote the following to his family after having visited Thorvaldsen in Rome in 1830:

22 See Beevers 1995, 70-1.

23 Images of these sketches can be found in the online database at www.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk.

24 See Sass 1963-65, 324 for further information.

25 Some of them are mentioned in Kenyon Jones 2005, 105-7.

26 This is debated elsewhere; see for example Sass 1963-65, 330-40. Copies were not only modelled in marble; as Adams (1995, 4-9) mentions, the American Edward Everett ordered one marble copy and six plaster copies of the bust in 1818-19, though it is unknown whether or not the plaster copies were actually delivered. Since the records are imprecise, we cannot know exactly how many busts – marble or plaster – were ordered, or by whom. The letters from Edward Everett to Thorvaldsen can be seen here: http://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/dokumenter/m51818,nr. 87?highlight=everett and http://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/dokumenter/m61819,nr. 1?highlight=everett [accessed 1 September 2013].

27 The workshop changed its name around 1962-63 to Balduini Flora e C.

28 For further information regarding Thorvaldsen's works worldwide, see www.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk

**Fig. 1.** "Mad, bad and dangerous to know". *The already married Lady Caroline Lamb characterised Lord Byron in this unflattering manner after he had broken off their scandalous relationship only to court her sister, Anne Isabella Milbanke, whom he later married and, eventually, divorced.*

*The original plaster bust of Lord Byron modelled in Rome in 1817. (Thorvaldsens Museum. Photo by Jonals Co.).*

In der letzten Zeit bin ich wieder etwas in den neueren Ateliers gewesen. Thorwaldsen hat eben eine Statue von Lord Byron in Thon beendigt; er sitzt auf alten Ruinen, mit den Füßen auf einem Säulencapitäl, und sieht hinaus, im Begriff etwas auf die Schreibtafel zu schreiben, die er in der Hand hält. Er hat ihn nicht im römischen Kostüm, sondern im einfachsten heutigen dargestellt, und ich finde, daß es sehr gut und gar nicht störend ist. Das Ganze hat wieder die natürliche Bewegung, wie sie in allen seinen Statuen so wunderbar ist, und doch sieht er sinster und elegisch genug aus, und sogar nicht affektirt. Vom Aleranderszug müßt ich einmal einen ganzen Brief schreiben; denn solchen Eindruck hat mir die Skulptur noch gar nicht gemacht, wie da. Ich gehe alle Woche hin, und sehe mir nur das an, und ziehe mit ein in Babylon [ … ][29]

From this description, we are left in no doubt that Mendelssohn was moved by the portrait and found that it did the poet justice.

Byron is indeed sat on building fragments, perhaps those of a temple – depictions of an owl and a lyre can be seen on either side of the poet, resembling in style depictions known from ancient coinage, but in this case the blocks should probably be interpreted as representing fragments of temple friezes. On his left side, a human skull is placed at ground level. In his right hand he is holding a pen; the tip is placed at his dimpled chin, his head is slightly turned towards his right, emphasising the large muscle in his neck, and he has on his face a stern expression of concentration, of mystery, perhaps even of melancholy, whether forced or not. His curls are neatly fashioned, his forehead and brows stern, nose straight, and full lips somewhat suggestive. This face is a riddle; it expresses both an unattractive grumpiness and exceptional male beauty. On his left knee, he rests his left hand in which he is holding a book open with one finger between the pages; its cover reads "*Childe Harold*". His right leg is slightly stretched out towards the viewer, while the left foot is resting on an Ionic fluted column fragment. The marble statue in Trinity College, Cambridge and the plaster model on the upper floor of Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen allow the visitor to walk around to the back of the portrait and admire the dramatic, heavy drapery of the riding cloak that covers the shoulders: perhaps not a simple garment to conjure from cold stone, but perfectly suitable and not overly ornate clothing, which could have – as Mendelssohn mentions above – somewhat disturbed our overall understanding of the person portrayed.

## 5. The poet, the war hero, the person

Placing Lord Byron in this context of Greek building fragments underscores the poet's love for the Greek

29 http://brevarkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/letters/ea5856?highlight=bartholdy [accessed 1 September 2013].

people, cultural heritage, and civilisation – a love that he undoubtedly shared with Thorvaldsen. Having left England for Greece in 1823, Byron dedicated both his time and money to the movement for Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire, and not infrequently did he touch upon the topic of the ancient Greek world in his poetry. We are reminded of this in the sculpture by the pen and book in his hand.

His strong and athletic appearance, accentuated by his bared neck and his choice of clothing, reminds us of his heroic deed: his self-sacrifice in the Greek War of Independence. But what truly overwhelms the observer is the strong imagery of Lord Byron as the great *poet*; it is likely, too, that this is how most Europeans would recognise him today. Outside Greece, he is more often referred to as one of the great Romantic poets rather than as a war hero.

The book and pen hardly belong in a battle scene. Their presence takes us back in time to the years when *Childe Harold* was written, many years before Byron left England to participate in the Greek war. The person seated on this plinth is also mirrored in the bas-relief below. He is the master, the genius of the art of poetry, the art of Apollo himself.[30] The grandeur of the scenery and the significance of the attributes surrounding the poet are not washed out by the presence of the skull, which at first glance seems oddly misplaced. It surely is not something one expects to see in a Thorvaldsen monument; clearly, this one attribute cannot be considered part of the scenery of the Greek building fragments. One could say that its presence is not to be understood in a physical sense. Its downgraded position does not mean that it should go unnoticed, though; it must be taken into account in the overall impression of the portrait. Here, its value is purely symbolic and serves to remind us of human mortality. As a beautiful and meaningful detail, Thorvaldsen let a corner of the poet's heavy riding cloak drape over the top of the skull. There seems to be a strong symbolism also in how Thorvaldsen let Byron, now immortalised in marble, turn his noble head away from this symbol of the mortality of the flesh.

Another remarkable feature in the portrait is Byron's right foot. The foot had from his birth caused him much physical as well as psychological pain. He was very self-conscious about his unfortunate limp, which – despite painful treatment in his early childhood – only decreased slightly over the years. He sometimes wore fitted shoes to hide the misshapen foot, but allegedly refused to wear braces or the like.[31] In Joseph-Denis Odevaere's 1826 oil painting depicting Byron on his death bed, which can be seen today in Groeningemuseum in Brugge, Belgium, the laurel-crowned poet is laying on his back, his right hand is placed just below his chest, while the left hangs limp by his side, resting on a lyre, attribute of Apollo, which is placed on the floor. The poet is apparently undressed, but draped from the waist in a large, white cloth or sheet that elegantly covers his right leg and foot, but leaves the left foot bare. This image is strikingly heroic, taking into account the ideal nudity, the laurels, and the scenery. In Thorvaldsen's portrait, however, it is the *right* foot that is stretched out towards the viewer – it even sticks out further than the base of the marble block on which he rests his heel! He wears similar shoes on both feet – there is no visible shame, no attempt to hide the disadvantage that caused Byron to name himself *le diable boiteux,* meaning "the limping devil".[32] It almost appears as if Thorvaldsen wishes to draw attention to how unashamed the poet is of his physical appearance in this very moment.[33]

The foot is a mystery, and has caused some debate in the past.[34] While some claim that the limp was hardly visible, Hobhouse recalls that a friend of Byron's, having inspected his corpse after its arrival in England,[35] would not have recognised the poet had it not been for his right foot and characteristic earlobes,[36] indicating that the de-

30 Whether Byron would have liked this is another story. There is speculation on this subject in Kenyon Jones 2005, 111.

31 For further reading on this matter, see Galt 1832, chapter 3.

32 Eisler 1999, 13.

33 Thorvaldsen was advised by Hobhouse about the sensitive matter of Byron's foot when the monument intended for Westminster Abbey was ordered, see Kenyon Jones 2005, 110.

34 See for example Marchand 1957, 1238.

35 This event is described in detail in Marchand 1957, 1256.

36 This is not the first time we hear about Byron's ears; he mentions them himself in a letter to Henry Drury as early as 1810 after being told by Ali Pacha – he was in Turkey at the time – that his small hands, ears, and curly hair had ensured him that Byron was a man of rank, see Marchand 1982, 36.

formity must have been quite visible.[37] One of the physicians even mentioned, on inspecting the corpse, that *both* legs seemed misshapen.[38]

The earlobes in Thorvaldsen's portrait are indeed characteristic; if this portrayal is true to nature, it is interesting that Byron's sister, Ms. Augusta Leigh, to whom the poet had indeed been very close, noticed the ears as the one faulty feature in a portrait that was otherwise a very good likeness.[39] Byron's contemporaries had varying opinions on the subject of its likeness – unsurprisingly, as it was in his interest to have delivered to him a particularly fine portrait worthy of Westminster Abbey, Hobhouse was indeed very pleased with the result, and he wrote the following in a letter to John Murray, Byron's publisher:

> It is a masterpiece by Thorwaldsen, who is thought by most judges to surpass Canova in his branch of sculpture. The likeness is perfect; the artist worked *con amore*, and told me it was the very finest head he had ever under his hands.[40]

It is of course no coincidence that the four aforementioned statues today reside in Denmark, Greece, and England. Byron, a man of versatile intellect, played many different roles in his life, some resulting in public nuisance, others in public adoration. Whatever the impression we are left with when observing the portrait as it was executed, the different contexts of display provided by the three locations are of massive consequence to the observer's reading, and should be taken into account.

**Fig. 2.** *The first plaster model of the full-size statue with The Genius of Poetry, executed in marble, on the plinth. The portrait is exhibited on the ground floor of Thorvaldsens Museum. The head is a different one; the look is more youthful, the expression not nearly as grave as in the original bust. Thorvaldsen later decided against this model and executed a new one. (Thorvaldsens Museum. Photo by Sophus Bengtsson).*

## 6. Capturing Copenhagen

The first full-size plaster model was executed in Rome in 1831, and it is today on display on the ground floor of Thorvaldsens Museum (Fig. 2). The poet sits apparently gazing out into nothingness, his face turned towards the stream of natural light cascading from the one window in the small gallery. The bas-relief of the Genius of Poetry on the plinth is executed in marble.

Displayed in the same gallery, just opposite the full-size plaster model, is a marble bust executed after the 1817 plaster bust,[41] when Byron sat for Thorvaldsen in his studio. A plaster cast of this bust, with its noble expression, was used for the second full-size plaster model, whose body is a cast of the plaster model on the ground floor. Once Thorvaldsen had pieced it together, he decided that this second plaster model was the better of the two, and that this was the one to be executed in marble. Today,

37 Sass 1963-65, 324.
38 Marchand 1957, 1231-2.
39 Sass 1963-65, 324.
40 Cited in Sass 1963-65, 326.
41 It is unknown exactly when it was executed; it could have been as late as the 1830s. See Sass 1963-65, 336 for further discussion.

**Fig. 3.** *After Thorvaldsen had decided against his first plaster model for the Byron monument, he executed a new model with a different head – a plaster cast of his original 1817 bust. This seems to have been a wise choice, and the curious details of this attractive face – such as the dimpled chin and the characteristic earlobes – are irresistibly charming, even if the portrait also expresses gravity and melancholy. This model can be seen on the upper floor of Thorvaldsens Museum. (Photo by Peter Mills).*

this second plaster model is on display without a plinth on the upper floor of the museum (Fig. 3). It is to be found in the South corridor, overlooking Thorvaldsen's grave in the central court. The two plaster models, both roughly worked in some areas, share the same destiny as all other plaster statues in the museum: pollution, coal dust, and dirt from the air have settled in them; in faces, ears, collarbones, and drapery. The dirt emphasises some features, and blurs others. The sensitive material cannot easily be cleaned without being damaged. For this reason, some facial features known from the marble bust, which is very white, sharp, and clean still, appear somewhat blurred, as the material has become tinted with grey over time.

Even seen through this distorted lens, however, the imagery is solid; the two plaster statues in Copenhagen display the beloved poet splendidly when observed individually. The natural light in both cases varies depending on season and time of day, ensuring the poet a curiously new expression whenever the weather changes – it is largely up to these circumstances to decide the observer's interpretation of the direction of his glance, and the emotions expressed in his face.

It is natural for an observer to attempt eye contact with a statue, as one would when faced with a human being, though the true expression of a portrait statue is hardly to be found in the eyes. In the case of the plaster sketch

on the ground floor of the museum, it is not even possible to make eye contact. The elevated position of the statue due to the height of the plinth and elegant turn of the neck prevents such contact. For this reason, the person portrayed seems emotionally isolated, introverted, unreachable, longing for something or someone – he is fascinatingly busy in thought. These interpretations are perhaps induced by the somewhat softer facial features in this portrait, which differs slightly from the rest; Byron appears younger, his lips are parted as if he is eager to speak, his features are not very sharp – one could be tempted to say that his face seems fuller in this portrait, and he perhaps even has an air of elusive, youthful innocence about him.

The plaster model on the upper floor – the body a cast of the first plaster model, the head a cast of the 1817 bust – portrays a person who at first glance appears somewhat more emotionally available to us, as he is physically closer. The observer may walk around to the back of the statue, which is in shadow; this creates a more intimate atmosphere. This model is displayed in the long Southern corridor, and is last in a line of several other plaster statues – it is not displayed in quite as elegant a position as the plaster model on the ground floor. Visitors can step directly in front of the statue, entering the almost intimate floor space between it and the neighbouring statue. This corner space is very quiet. It is bright, too, as a wide window nearby is situated quite low, and with the right side of the statue placed alongside the wall, the angle only just allows the poet to peer through the window. The gaze of the eyes is fixed upon something undeterminable, something outside; it, too, avoids eye contact with the observer. As in the other statues, the back is turned on the skull at ground level, but in this case, the head is turned towards the calm symbolically decorated central courtyard, where Thorvaldsen's grave, another symbol of death, is to be found.

The head of this statue is of a much more serious nature than that of the first full-size plaster model, and the poet seems slimmer and older; the dirt has settled in the plaster over the years, and has now left unfavourable dark circles under his eyes.

The direction of the poet's glance is uncertain in both cases, and therefore disturbingly mysterious; we cannot capture it, an experience which is in sharp contrast to how we feel when facing the 1817 bust. Here, not even the clean, white marble can disguise the blaze which is still to be found in the poet's eyes, and one wonders exactly who is observing, and who is being observed – he seems to be staring back at us with wild, piercing eyes. The stare is captivating and challenging. Even though the head of the last plaster model was cast from this bust, the slight turn of the neck in the full size plaster model is enough to break his powerful stare, making it indefinable and unreadable to us.

The two plaster models in Copenhagen can never be thought of as single artworks against a blank wall. The context – the patterns in the mosaic floors, the ceiling paintings, the bright colours, and the light, in Copenhagen more than anywhere else – demand just as much attention from the observer as the person portrayed. These two statues play no central part in the collection, and there is no actual Byron *monument* to be found here. The museum itself is a Thorvaldsen monument, and the encounter is with one work in a long line of artworks demonstrating the skill and success of the sculptor, of Thorvaldsen himself, rather than a memorial to a great poet.

## 7. Mission Missolonghi

In August 1937, the Danish architect and archaeologist Ejnar Dyggve enquired at Thorvaldsens Museum about the possibility of having a plaster cast of the full-size portrait of Byron executed as a gift to the Greek city of Missolonghi.

Dyggve himself, who lived from 1887-1961 and travelled Europe extensively from 1908 onwards,[42] had spent a couple of his summers in the 1930s not very far from Missolonghi – he had joined Konstantin Rhomaios and Frederik Poulsen's excavation campaigns in the Ancient city of Kalydon,[43] located just North of Evinochori, a small village approximately 11 km from Missolonghi. The campaigns focused mainly on the excavation of a Heroon

42 For further information about Dyggve, see *Weilbach's Danish lexicon of artists*, 4th ed., which is available online at https://www.kulturarv.dk/kid [accessed 1 September 2013].

43 For more information about the previous excavations of the Ancient city of Kalydon, see www.kalydon.net [accessed 1 September 2013].

and two temples – an Artemis Laphria temple and a smaller one, dedicated to the goddess' brother, Apollo. The construction of a large road in the 1960s revealed another large structure at the site – a theatre, first thought to be a bouleuterion, which was excavated from 2001 onwards by Greek–Danish collaborations.[44] The Thorvaldsen cast is by no means the only Danish presence in the area.

The cast was finished three years after Dyggve had placed his order, and 850 DKK were paid in January 1941. However, it was not until after the Second World War, in 1946, that the cast was sent by boat to the city.

Byron himself had arrived in Missolonghi on 29 December 1823, with a clear mission; he wished to join Alexandros Mavrokordatos, one of the leaders of the Greek rebels in the Greek War of Independence, and with him plan an attack on Turkish-occupied Lepanto at the mouth of the Gulf of Corinth.

As early as 1770, during the Orlov Revolt, the fleet of Missolonghi was defeated and taken by the Ottomans, but after a revolt in 1821, the city was won by the Greeks and soon became a stronghold of the rebels.[45] An Ottoman siege took place in 1822, but was unsuccessful, so the city was not under Ottoman rule when Byron arrived in 1823.[46] He had sailed to Cephalonia and then continued to Missolonghi after refitting the Greek fleet.[47]

Careful planning and preparation was obviously necessary for a mission such as the one planned by Byron and Mavrokordatos, and before the expedition was ready to sail from the Missolonghi harbour, Byron had fallen ill.[48] He never recovered, and soon developed a violent fever which caused him to become "constantly delirious" and eventually ended his life on 19 April that same year.[49] Despite his not exactly spotless image in his home country, his death came as a great shock to both the English and the Greek. But whereas the Greeks, now considering him a national hero,[50] were devastated with grief and eager to commemorate him with monuments and poems, the English were mostly still repelled by the shameless, scandalous nature of his works as well as his personal life,[51] and found that it would be inappropriate to commemorate him with a monument.[52]

Two years after Byron's death, in 1826, the city of Missolonghi fell under Ottoman rule. Ibrahim Pasha, oldest son of Muhammed Ali Pasha, Albanian military commander of the Ottoman army in Egypt, had been given an army and was sent to Greece.[53] He had most of the Peloponnese under Egyptian rule by the end of 1825, and in April of the following year, after years of countless, brutal attacks from the Ottoman-Egyptian forces and facing starvation, the inhabitants of Missolonghi could no longer withstand.[54] Many were killed in the slaughter that followed – others killed themselves to avoid being enslaved by the Ottomans.[55]

The city of Missolonghi is not very large,[56] but has played a considerable role in the history of Greece – mostly during the abovementioned uprising against the Ottoman Empire. The city is also known as the birthplace of a number of famous Greeks, including prime ministers, artists, poets, architects, historical persons, and many other notable people. When visiting it today, we are left in no doubt that the mark Byron has left on the city and its people is significant still. As in many other parts of Greece, the poet – and in this context, particularly *the war hero* – is commemorated extensively. His name is repeatedly seen

44 For more information about the project, visit the homepage of The Danish Institute at Athens, www.diathens.gr [accessed 1 September 2013].
45 On the Orlov revolt and the aftermath, see Svoronos 2007, 59.
46 On the Missolonghi sieges, see for example Paroulakis 1984.
47 For more information on Byron's travels to Greece, see Prell 2009.
48 For a detailed account of Byron's last days, see Marchand 1957, 1211-29.
49 See Marchand 1957, 1238.
50 Edgcumbe 1972, 185-90.
51 Because of his "questionable character", Byron was perhaps no longer considered an Englishman in his home country; see Marchand 1957, 1259.
52 As noted by Marchand (1957, 1259), the English may have *privately* applauded Byron's actions in Greece, but the British government remained neutral and could not give official recognition to a supporter of the rebel cause.
53 See Sayyid-Marsot 1984, 206.
54 See Howarth 1976, 195-6.
55 See Howarth 1976, 197.
56 The Municipality of Missolonghi has a population of 40,497 people, the city itself 21,407 people, according to the 2011 census.

in street signs, cafés, and restaurants,[57] and a monument to his honour is to be found in the Memorial Gardens, perhaps better known as the Garden of Heroes, where according to local tales his heart is buried. This large garden is not only a beautiful place; it also offers the guest an interesting and heartbreakingly real insight into the barbarism and suffering that took place in Missolonghi during the Greek War of Independence.

According to the abovementioned legend, the mourning Greeks were so shattered by the loss of Byron that they could not face giving up his remains;[58] they therefore buried his heart in the cenotaph in the Garden of Heroes, but returned the corpse to England upon embalmment.[59] The corpse was soon sent to Westminster Abbey in England.[60] The Abbey, however, refused to receive it, and the poet's physical remains are now buried at the Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Hucknall, Nottinghamshire.[61]

*To The Death of Lord Byron* was the title of a heartfelt poem written in 1824, the year of Byron's death, by the Greek national poet from Zakynthos, Dionysios Solomos, who tried to capture in words the sorrow and disbelief the Greeks felt after the tragic and unexpected loss of the poet.[62] In 1991, a Missolonghi Byron Society was founded and has since worked on promoting an understanding of Byron's life and poetry,[63] but also devotes itself to celebrating the many other historical figures that fought to defend the city.[64] Byron's popularity is of course not limited to the city of Missolonghi itself; Βύρων (Vyron), the Greek form of Byron, is today a popular male name in most areas of Greece, and one of the suburbs of Athens was named Βύρωνας (Vyronas) in the poet's honour. Another memorial – a statue of Lord Byron being crowned by a woman representing Greece, executed by the two Frenchmen Henri-Michel Chapu and Alexandre Falguière – is to be found outside the National Gardens in central Athens, though this monument is not related to Thorvaldsen's portrait.

It should also be mentioned that a number of other societies dedicated to Byron's life and works, apart from the one mentioned above, exist today, both in individual countries and internationally. These different Societies arrange conferences, lectures, plays, and other such activities, and they welcome new members. The International Association of Byron Societies also has an online forum.[65]

The Thorvaldsen cast is today exhibited in the Museum of the History and Art of the Municipality of the Holy City of Mesolongi, a two-storey house in Neoclassical style from 1931, centrally placed on the Markos Botsaris Square and previously the city's Town Hall. The museum is in possession of numerous handwritten documents, artefacts, paintings, reproductions, pieces of clothing, weapons, and other paraphernalia from the time of the Greek wars, and one room is dedicated solely to Byroniana. Many different artists, both Greek and of other nationalities, are represented here, and there are some truly exquisite artworks on display.

A main attraction is still the plaster cast of Byron, visible from the entrance hall of the museum. Unfortunately, the statue is now protected by a glass case as the plaster is fragile and easily absorbs dirt. The case has ensured that the plaster is still very clean and appears almost milky white, and despite some damage to the right hand – the index finger and pen are missing – the sculpture is in quite good condition. Due to the sensitivity of some of the exhibits in the room, the light source is electric and quite dim; it does not do the fine portrait justice. There is an abundance of objects in the museum from the time of the Greek wars – the collection is impressive due to both its

57 For further discussion, see Marchand 1957, 1236-7.

58 On Byron's popularity and status as a national hero, see Marchand 1957, 1236.

59 A strange document in Murray's possession, stating that some of Byron's physical remains (specifically his intestines) were left in Missolonghi before the body was returned to England, is discussed briefly in Marchand 1957, 1240-41.

60 Apparently, the body was inspected upon arrival in England, but the chests said to contain his organs were not opened; see Marchand 1957, 1255.

61 Henry H. Milman, Dean of St. Paul's, was displeased; he wrote to a friend of Byron's about the funeral, which he found pitiful. In his opinion, Byron's body should have remained in Greece; see Marchand 1957, 1259.

62 The poem can easily be retrieved online in Greek, and also in an English translation.

63 See http://rea.teimes.gr/byronlib [accessed 1 September 2013] for more information on The Messolonghi Byron Society and The International Research Center for Lord Byron & Philhellenism.

64 Since 2002, The Missolonghi Byron Society has played host to an annual International Student Byron Conference – for more information, visit http://rea.teimes.gr/byronlib.

65 See http://www.internationalbyronsociety.org [accessed 1 September 2013].

quantity and the quality of many of the objects, and the cast, which tells part of Missolonghi's tragic story, does indeed seem at home in these surroundings. There can hardly be any doubt that great pride is taken in exhibiting a copy of a fine portrait of a treasured hero in one of the most prominent buildings in the city.

## 8. Revisiting Trinity

The English aversion to Byron after his death was not restricted to his physical remains; upon Thorvaldsen's completion of the marble monument (Fig. 4), it was sent to England in 1834 and offered to Westminster Abbey, whose authorities refused it.[66] A string of documents from the following ten years – the statue did not find its home until 1845 – reveal that Hobhouse and his Committee probably could (and maybe even *should*) have contacted the authorities of several other locations in order to find a solution to this problem, but instead they insisted that the Abbey should take it, and thus made no real effort to persuade anyone else to do so. When Thorvaldsen passed away in early 1844, no satisfactory solution to the problem had been found.[67]

The situation was rather embarrassing for all parties; the stubbornness of Hobhouse in particular seems almost comical today. It was not until July 1844 that he finally gave up his fruitless battle with the Abbey and agreed to have the monument erected in Trinity College, Cambridge instead. The College had been very welcoming the year before when, for the second time, a graduate member of the college, Christopher De La Pryme, had proposed this alternative location for the monument.[68]

Trinity College, where Byron had formed his friendship with Hobhouse many years previously, would become the final stop for his monument, and perhaps the Wren Library provides a more suitable milieu than the Abbey could ever have done. It has not gone unnoticed that the sculpture has suffered some damage over the years, but the library – an architectural masterpiece, overwhelming in dimensions – displays the portrait exquisitely.

Natural light pours in from the high windows, and there is a light, elevated, and lively atmosphere created by a mix of the surrounding busts, books, and busy students – and this despite of the gravity in the poet's face. Even once one is aware of the disheartening story concerning not only the man, but the monument, too, there is still something encouraging about this sight. After so many years of neglecting the monument and therefore also the memory in the name of a moral high ground, we finally witness the appreciation Byron's genius deserves in his homeland. It must not be forgotten that the re-founding of The Byron Society in London in 1971

**Fig. 4.** *Unbeknownst to both the poet and his good friend, John Cam Hobhouse, the finished marble monument was to be erected in the beautiful Wren Library, Trinity College, and not Westminster Abbey as Hobhouse had wished. As can be seen here, the monument has suffered some damage over the past years. (Thorvaldsens Museum. Photographer unknown).*

66 Sinker 1891, 128-9.
67 See Sinker 1891, 126-32.
68 Beevers 1995, 73.

has played a significant role in assuring the poet renewed attention.

Today, a memorial to the poet can be seen in Westminster Abbey. It was finally placed there in 1969, having been sought after for many decades. As early as 1907, displeasure with the lack of proper commemoration was expressed in The New York Times:

> People are beginning to ask whether this ignoring of Byron is not a thing of which England should be ashamed [ … ] a bust or a tablet might be put in the Poets' Corner and England be relieved of ingratitude toward one of her really great sons.[69]

## 9. Conclusion

Thorvaldsen's Byron monument is *not* that of a heroic character; the sculptor has succeeded in enhancing the introvert character of the poet, the thinker, the *artist*, and let the hero's identity play a subordinate part – indeed, Byron is sitting on the ruins of the land he fought for. It is of course striking, then, that this statue can be equally at home in such different contexts. The cast in Missolonghi is of the statue only, not the plinth; the absence of the bas-relief of the Genius of Poetry of course has something to say in why the poet is less obvious here, but the surrounding museum artifacts, all relating to war and battle, also contribute to this. Here, we are constantly reminded of the role Byron played in this Greek tragedy that was the struggle for the Greek people's freedom. In altering the context, the tables have indeed been turned, and we see the idolised war hero before we notice the poet in him. Equally interesting is the understanding of the two Copenhagen plaster models as Thorvaldsen's artworks, more than portraits celebrating Byron. Exhibited in a museum dedicated to the sculptor only, resting among so many other impressive artworks, the statues naturally become part of the adoration of Thorvaldsen's, and the story they tell thus relates primarily to Thorvaldsen and the work process, not the person portrayed.

It is only in the case of the beautifully executed Cambridge marble monument that we truly see the essence of the poet's portrait supported by the superb surroundings of the Wren Library. However unwished for in the beginning, and perhaps not an overwhelmingly popular tourist attraction today, it fits in perfectly, as if it were always meant to reside here. Today, even if Poet's Corner at Westminster Abbey is a much more prominent place for such a monument, it is hard to understand Hobhouse's resentment towards this location, however well meant it was at the time.

It is testimony to the life of Byron that such a fine portrait should be executed by Thorvaldsen, a world-famous artist, then at the height of his powers, and experience such great demand that the actual number of copies is today unknown.

But it is equally testimony to the life and art of Thorvaldsen that he captured and immortalised in his portrait an image so precise, and at the same time so versatile, that it reflects not only the poet, but also the war hero and the *person* – the reckless self-contradiction who said about himself: "I am such a strange mélangé of good and evil that it would be difficult to describe me".[70] It seems, however, that Thorvaldsen skilfully succeeded in doing exactly that.

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69 Galbraith 1907.

70 Marchand 1957, 7.

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