Romance in Ruins: Ethnography and the Problem of

Modern Greeks

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When Hiram Powers' sculpture, The Greek Slave, debuted in Britain at The Great Exhibition of 1851, visitors were offered a series of Victorian obsessions with sensational results. The Greek girl, clutching onto a plinth shrouded in an oriental drapery, casts her eyes away from her Turkish master, who exists just off the stage of the dramatic scene; chains offer her only modesty. Her hands are tied, and the only promise appears to be that when the chains are undone, so will she. The Greek slave's milky skin and allusions to Classical sculpture make sure the viewers were in no doubt about the racial purity of the heroine. The dramatic tension of this scene was, of course, already familiar. From Byron's poetry which is littered with Greek women on the verge of being sexually compromised, or dead, to writers like Sydney Owenson whose novel, Woman, or Ida of Athens (1809), presents a young Greek woman who throws herself on the mercy of an Englishman when threatened with a harem and a prospective marriage to a Turk, there was enduring fascination with the enacted or threatened fall of Greece to the Orient. For

the dramatic tension to work, the Greek woman had to look as if she had stepped off a nearby plinth, embody some Classical virtue (though what this meant was not always clearly defined), and exist in some state of terror when faced with whatever influence was being deemed Oriental. The Greek Slave functioned metonymically for the consuming threat of the Orient politically, in terms of Ottoman expansion into Europe, and figuratively, in the racial and sexual compromise of the descendants of Ancient Greece.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (LZW) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Fig 1. Hiram Powers, The Greek Slave (1851)

A figure of visual pleasure, the overriding interest of Greece in Victorian culture was in a state of petrified antiquity, not in the young kingdom of Greece, which was the domain of British politics. Part of the sensational impact of the sculpture, however, rested in its ability not only to evoke a series of established discursive contexts, from the conventions of harem literature to the aesthetic engagement with antiquity, but its ability to implicate and entwine these discursive patterns, to render them somehow vital. The Orient and the Classics belonged to other times, came from other places, but in The Greek Slave they were rendered simultaneous: the Classical past, and the Oriental present of Greece were inscribed in the body and context of enslaved Caucasian womanhood. There were some other vital questions raised by The Greek Slave: were the Greeks of today really the descendents of the ancients? Or had centuries of decay, indolence and miscegenation caused the modern Greeks to irrevocably lose their rights to a glorious inheritance (invariably referring to Periclean Athens)? To put it rather crudely, does The Greek Slave have the right skin colour, and does she even speak Greek?

If the educated British gentleman could rescue and emancipate a Greek slave, and even teach her how to speak

Greek, British women's access to this civilising influence was more problematic. With Oxford and Cambridge not awarding degrees to women until 1928 and 1948 respectively, the formal study of the Classics consistently posited women as second-class citizens. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's allusion to 'lady's Greek' in her poem *Aurora Leigh* (1864) - 'lady's Greek' being Ancient Greek without the diacritical marks - pointed not only to the poor education of women in men's subjects, but suggested that women were only capable of learning Greek without the accents.¹ George Eliot's Middlemarch (1871) explored Dorothea's desire for knowledge through her sterile relationship to her husband, who when confronted with her uncle's offering of the latest book of Greek travels, politely withdrew from company. There was no doubt that a knowledge of Greece came from Classical scholarship, not the derivative and peripatetic output of travelogues about modern Greece. Exploring another relationship to Greek characters in her 1925 essay, "On Not Knowing Greek", Virginia Woolf approached Ancient Greek as an alienating symbol of patriarchal power, a symbol which has been most recently discussed by critics such as Isobel Hurst and Shanyin Fiske. In addition to the women learning about Greece, and what it may mean to know or, indeed, be Greek, there were growing numbers of women

in the nineteenth century who went after a more personal touch and encountered real, breathing Greek women, with the intent to produce authoritative ethnographical accounts of their social and cultural condition.

To one extent, this was a way for a small group of British women to enact their own purchase on the Classics: they may not be experts in Ancient Greek, but perhaps they could read Greek women, offering a unique insight into their lives and cultural practices. Yopie Prins identifies a community of women working on Greece through a feminist lens that used the dissonance of Lady's Greek as a critical imperative. For many of these women though, modern Greece remained a terra incognita, a site radically divorced from their own national and sexual refiguring. However, for the first British women producing ethnographical accounts of Greece, the modern Greeks were at a unique crossroads between ancient and modern, East and West, Islam and Christianity, where the landscape and the people bore the marks of these apparently contradictory figurations. For them, the Classics were a set of references and a cultural benchmark; an aesthetic that could be easily reduced to a series of statues and ruins, rather than an arena for study. Just as The Greek Slave found its cultural and commercial success through the admixture of a variety of

discursive contexts that mobilized temporal disjuncture and simultaneity, ethnographical descriptions by British women were refracted through a series of debates and contexts that were perhaps more pertinent to a discussion of *The Greek Slave*, than modern Greek womanhood.

Fanny Blunt's The People of Turkey: Twenty Years' Residence Among the Bulgarians, Greeks, Albanians, Turks and Armenians, Volume II (1878) and Lucy M.J. Garnett's The Women of Turkey, Volume I (1890) were amongst the most sustained descriptions of the life of Greek women on offer to the British reading public. The daughter of an East India Company representative in Constantinople, Fanny Blunt spent over twenty years of her life in various regions of the Ottoman Empire. Lucy Garnett had assisted Blunt in the writing and researching of her volume, and would later become an expert in folklore study. The vast majority of the Greek women they encountered were in territories that still belonged to the Ottoman Empire, though cities like Thessaloniki were only a few decades away from being finally integrated into Greece. Although the majority of their work focuses on documenting the rituals and practices of everyday life for Christian and Islamic women living in the Ottoman Balkans, Greek women are paid special attention because of the difficulty in placing them comfortably in an

Oriental taxonomy. Turning to science for a structuring methodology to solve their problem, they examined the bodies of Greek women, from their skeletal structures to their flesh and dress, in order to accurately locate their subjects. If the soul was too intangible to map, the body and dress became the crucial measuring tools for plotting Greece's cultural trajectory.

Both Blunt and Garnett liberally and uncritically used the popular pseudo-science of phrenology to underpin the authority of their observations. While travelers to Greece stood at the Acropolis struggling to realize the antique scene before them from the ruins scattering the scene, Blunt and Garnett used observations based on phrenological data to explore their desire to see the aspect of the Ancient Greeks in features of the moderns, on a literal and allegorical level. For the archaeologist Annie Speck, a resident of the American School at Athens in 1890s, the 'face of Greece' offered an accurate index to its cultural orientation between the East and West:

Hitherto Greece has lain beyond the route of ordinary travel. Of the thousands who yearly seek Italian skies, hardly one in a hundred crosses over to the land of Plato and Pericles. In comparison with Italy, Greece is, therefore, almost a terra incognita.

Though situated in Europe and not far from Italy, it somehow appears more remote than its distance from the Italian peninsula would seem to warrant. This is not, however, without reason, for Greece, as it were, faces the East, most of its cities and harbors lying on that side; while Italy, on the contrary, faces the West. The two peninsulas lie back to back, and while Italy is a part of Western Europe, Greece belongs to the Orient. Its people evidently recognize this fact; as, in Athens, when one speaks of going to France or England, he says, as we do, that he is going to Europe, as if he lived in Asia or in Africa. (Speck 3)

Using Greece's geography to mark its cultural orientation, Speck abstracts Greece's geographical properties into a phrenological narrative: marked on the aspect of Greece is apparent and irrefutable evidence of its Eastern orientation. Through phrenology mankind could be organized in a panorama of progress, with even liberal empiricist and progressionists beginning to maintain that each race had a capped capacity in their ability to develop; the suggestion was not only that non-white races were behind those of Western Europe, but their ability to develop was constrained by their physiology.² The

caricatures and types that emerged in racial profiling were examples of visualism par excellence: for the ethnographer in the field, visual evidence could be made to correspond to a racial type, which in turn, had a particular set of dispositions that were manifest not only in individual behavior, but corresponded to a rigid racial profiling of types.

Separated from their Italian neighbors by their occupation by the Ottoman Empire, the Greeks offered a type of racial limit-point between the Oriental odalisques that comprise the Greek women in Byron's poetry, and the descendants of statues embodying idealized, and very white, bodies in British museums. Caught somewhere between a harem and a museum, Blunt and Garnett looked Greek women straight in the face for an answer to their real origins and current conditions:

In feature and build the modern Greek still possesses the characteristic traits of his ancestors.

Scientific researches and anatomical observations made upon the skulls of ancient Greeks are said to prove that if art glorified to a slight extent the splendid models of statues, it could not have strayed very far from the originals. Such pure and perfect types are constantly met with at the present day in the modern

Greeks who, as a rule, possess fine open foreheads, straight noses, and fine eyes full of fire and intelligence, furnished with black lashes and well-defined eyebrows; the mouths are small or of medium size, with a short upper lip; the chin rather prominent, but rounded. The entire physiognomy differs so essentially from the other native types, that it is impossible to mistake it. In stature the Greek is rather tall than otherwise, well-made and well-proportioned; the hands and feet are small in both sexes. The walk is graceful, but has a kind of swagger and ease in it, which, although it looks natural in natural costume, seems affected in European dress. (Blunt 50-1)

Art, did, it appears, copy or derive its examples from nature: the skulls of the ancients compare favorably with the ancient statues that contain perfect proportions.³ Measuring the alignment of the forehead, nose and chin, the statues of the Ancient Greeks offered dimensions that corresponded to a highly intellectual, creative and artistic race, and diametrically opposed to the negro skull, in other words, it was the most human, and humane.

Figure 2. 'The Heads and Skulls of Apollo, A Negro and a Chimpanzee Compared' (1854)

It was not necessary for Blunt to justify why these cranial measurements corresponded to 'pure and perfect types', the popular discourse of phrenology and its contribution to racial categorization, worked with discourses of a commonsense and popular Hellenism to ensure the validity of her statement. Its 'essential' difference from the racial types that surround it (namely, the more 'Oriental' races of the Turks, Bulgarians and Albanians) is crucial for maintaining an uncontaminated survival of ancient types. However, despite their ideal aspect, there seems to be a deficient gap between the signifying potential of their bodies (as representatives of the ancients), and their

ability: their confident 'swagger' only works when they wear 'native costume', in European dress, they become incongruous and 'affected'. Not quite able to carry off European drag, the modern Greeks may have the bodies of the ancients, but did not belong to the same representational plane as Blunt: she was the observer, and they were an object of study. Garnett's description of the modern Greeks, with specific reference to Greek women, takes the issue further:

We come next to the Greek women of Turkey.

Physically, as well as mentally, the Greek women of to-day often exhibit the more characteristic traits of ancient Hellenic types, and forms of almost classical purity are to be met with, not only in free Hellas, but also in all parts of the Ottoman Empire. There still may be seen the broad, low forehead, the straight line of the profile, the dark lustrous eye and crimson lip (the lower one slightly full), the firm chin, and rounded throat. The figure is usually above the middle height, if not "divinely tall;" the carriage erect and graceful; the hands are small, and the feet often exhibit the peculiarity noticeable in the ancient statues of the second toe being the same length as the first. In certain localities, and more

particularly in Macedonia, the Greek type has much deteriorated from the admixture of Slav and other elements. (Garnett, Women of Turkey 30)

Following in the vein of Blunt, Garnett praises the modern Greeks for physically demonstrating antiquity, especially in their ability to live up to the dimensions of statues, but Garnett also alludes to the degenerative force that has been at work through the centuries, contaminating the purity of the Greeks, in other words, the other racial types of the Balkans. What Garnett identifies is one of the major strategies in being able to at once identify the Greeks as descendants of a perfect physiological form, that, at the same time, had somehow degenerated. Both were still interested in constructing a homogeneous racial type for the Greeks that, rather than being based on nationality or language, was based on the comparison with an altogether different kind of ethnographical data, namely, Classical statues. Covering these Classical skeletons were the sinews, flesh and skin of subjects that were consistently couched in the language of decay, admixture and miscegenation.

The relationship has an analogue in the descriptions of Greek scenery produced by British travelers: the

skeleton of Greece (its ruins and the promise of what lay beneath the surface) struggles to perforate the contemporary scene - half remains of buildings and statues scatter the landscape out of context, out of time, and out of place. The attempts to 'realize' the antique scene, to reconstruct the glory imaginatively from the fragments was a trope that had become hackneyed even by the beginning of the nineteenth century, but its potency as a way of thinking about Greek landscape did not wane. The landscape of free Hellas was being steadily evacuated of all Oriental signifiers from the 1830s, and excavations began in earnest to uncover the glories of the past: modern Greece would be restored to its rightful position in Europe through the restoration of the past. Access to modernity, paradoxically, would begin by erasing the Modern from Modern Greece, allowing it simply to become, Greece.⁴ And this is reflected in ethnographical accounts of Greek women: Blunt and Garnet consistently turn to skeletal structures, attempting to excavate them from their subjects. If only they can dig beyond the Oriental flesh, there beneath, like a series of ruins, waits an essential Greek self waiting to be restored and reconstructed by the ethnographer turned archaeologist. If archaeology promised to reveal hidden and insensible depths to the touch and eye

of the observer, then Blunt and Garnett deployed metaphors of depth and the unseen in order to create a rationalized category of difference for modern Greek women. They may be culturally like their Oriental sister, but they were structurally different. This, however, was simply one of a number of rhetorical devices that allowed them to at once sound the antique depths of Greek women, while mapping out the customs that orientated daily life. Blunt, and especially Garnett's, interest in gathering folklore and songs from Greek women distinguished their accounts from the mundane conflict of past glory and present decay that characterized so much travel based writing by British women about Greece in the period. As Stathis Gourgouris observes, 'unlike archaeology, folklore garners its antiquarian character not merely from the discovery of the past as relic but from the evidence of the past as present' (148). It was as a Greek folklorist that Garnett eventually made her reputation, especially through her extensive experience of women's oral culture, an oral culture that often had elements that were seemingly identical to other Balkan or Ottoman women.

Garnett's discussion of Greek women in her later work Greece of the Hellenes (1914) draws heavily, in fact reproduces extensive sections from, The Women of Turkey

(1890); although her discussion of Turkey is divided into Christian, Semitic and Muslim women, a key context for describing the living conditions and social customs of Greek women at the beginning of the twentieth century still depended on an Oriental context. While travellers continued to be bemused at the apparent lack of Classical knowledge that the locals had, ethnographers like Blunt and Garnett were keen to trace survivals in women's accounts of their customs and ritual beliefs. From reading vampires as survivals and corruptions of earlier myths, to comparative accounts of the significance of owls, modern Greek folklore was steadily disassociated from Slavic and Turkish elements.⁵ To some extent this battle is literalised by Garnett through a more recent addition to popular women's folklore, namely, the role of women during the Siege of Messolonghi in 1825.

During the long siege of Mesolonghi, too, the women and girls aided the defender by bringing materials of every description to stop the breaches made by the Turkish artillery, directed - shameful to say - by European officers. In the course of the siege the leading women of the beleaguered town drew up and signed a petition which they addressed to the philhellenic ladies of Europe, praying them to use

their influence with their respective governments to prevent this partisanship of the strong against the weak and describing in touching terms the suffering of the brave defenders. "Most of us," they wrote, "have seen mothers dying in the arms of their daughters, daughters expiring in the sight of their wounded fathers, children seeking nourishment from the breasts of their dead mothers; nakedness, famine, cold and death are the least of the evils witnessed by our tear-dimmed eyes. Few are there among us who have not lost loved relatives; many are left destitute orphans. But, friends of Hellas, less profoundly have these evils touched our hearts than the inhumanity manifested towards a nation struggling for freedom by those who boast of being born in the bosom of civilised Europe." This touching appeal was, however, disregarded by "civilised Europe."

(Garnett, Greece of the Hellenes 204-5)

Under the section for 'Home Life and Women's Work', the extract from this anonymous letter, is the closest to any type of direct reply from a Greek woman on their lives and situation. Published belatedly, the appeal to the 'philhellenic ladies of Europe' appears as a document in an

ethnographical study, its original appeal apparently ignored, it becomes a de-radicalized text for the consumption of the very audience that overlooked it in its first incarnation. Erased of context, out of history and placed in the museum of Garnett's text, the Greek woman's appeal becomes another ethnographical display for the distanced consumption of an audience at home that did not have to be radicalized by contemporary Greek politics. At the heart of Garnett's account of Greek women's domestic life is another enacted fall to the Orient, another Greek slave displayed for a British audience who could rehearse a repetitive drama that struggled to locate the modernity of Greek womanhood without the compass of Victorian Hellenism. Present Greeks, rather than the cadavers, specters and brigands, proved to be the most troubling subjects for Blunt and Garnett. As Clifford Geertz has observed, 'doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of") a manuscript - foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries' (10). Excavating landscape was one thing, but digging out an animated Classical body was another. Although Blunt and Garnett's texts exhibit classic elements of Victorian Hellenism, their researches in the folklore circulating in communities of Greek women,

and their attempts to locate it, result in their ethnographical authority unwinding in a rich matrix of data and readings. Like women in Britain who used the their oblique purchase of the Classics to figure new kinds of national and sexual identification, Blunt and Garnett used their description of modern Greek women as another access point to a larger engagement the difficulty of knowing Greek(s). However, this was at a cost: the women described by Blunt and Garnett had few points of access to the discursive context of the ethnographical studies. Much like The Greek Slave, they were represented in a tantalizing and impossible bind.

1 See Prins for fuller implications of 'Lady's Greek'.

2 For a further discussion of phrenology in relation to Victorian theories of race see particularly, Stocking.

3 The debate around how 'Greek' the modern Greeks were raged throughout the century. J.P. Fallmerayer the Austrian historian claimed that most of the Modern Greeks were actually of Slav descent, an argument that was not very successful with the Philhellenes or the majority of accounts by British travelers. Interestingly enough, while the guidebooks Murray and Baedeker support Fallmerayer to the extent that they question the racial purity of the

Greeks, British women travel writers and ethnographers overwhelmingly see the modern population as rightful descendants of the ancients. As David Roessel states: 'Fallmerayer's book caused uproar in Greece, but neither his work nor the evidence presented by pro-Turkish travelers had much effect on English or American nineteenth-century literature' (Roessel 2002, 116-7).

4 This point is extensively explored in Leontis (40-66).

5 A discussion of how 'Greek' vampires is usefully outlined in Gelder.

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