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Our Alumni

Re-Grafting “Apollo’s Laurel Bough”: Byroniana at the Gennadeion and Revival of Tradition

We may sometimes reflect on old traditions surrounding laurels beyond Delphi, where Apollo himself was wreathed in ancient art on vases and coins, along with his Pythian Oracle and priests and where Pythian games victors were wreathed. Elsewhere Apollo’s temples may have also been often graced by laurel groves in mythic honor of the nymph Daphne. In humility we may even attempt to revive laureate traditions.

In 1984, I was a graduate student, and in Athens our ASCSA Summer Session II group visited the Gennadeion where great moments in modern Greek history intersperse with more ancient artifacts. One of the Gennadeion librarians was our inspiring guide. Her face shone as she took us around, proudly showing us Greek treasures.

After the tour I thanked the Gennadeion librarian and, other than as a Muse, I wish I could recall her name to give her proper credit. I remarked how certain items stood out for me personally and was invited back to look more closely. When I returned to the Gennadius Library at a later time for an appointment, she was there with rings of keys to cabinets and museum cases. She surprised me by asking what I wished to hold in my hands. After only a moment’s hesitation I made my choice. One treasure was more sacred to me than anything else: a box with Byron’s posthumous laurel wreath.

In 1824, when Lord Byron died in Greece, his body was returned to England by sea on the brig *Florida*. In some contemporary accounts, throngs of mourners lined the streets of London as Byron’s black-draped coffin and catafalque went to Lord Knatchbull’s house on Great George Street where it lay in state seven days until burial.

Although details are sometimes contradictory, one narrative states the Greeks of Missolonghi had this laurel wreath made for Byron’s coffin, not least because Byron had been something of a freedom fighter in Greece and was also a champion of preserving Greek monuments in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. After a long refusal to bury him there, ultimately a small marble plaque monument was erected for Byron in Westminster Abbey and expanded to a full monument much later in 1969 in Poet’s Corner at the Abbey. This same laurel wreath of Byron was eventually duly returned to the people of Greece, possibly by John Gennadius himself, a major collector of Byroniana. In its old box, all dusty, faded and dried out, yet still intact and said to date from 1824, was this incredible treasure, poetic but real. I will never forget that this box was then placed in my hands.

That inspiring Gennadeion moment has followed me for decades. I wrote a collection of poetry that summer of 1984 in Greece, *Wings Over Hellas*, some of which have been published variously in the U.S. and Britain, and I was further inspired to write other poems and an opera, *Byron in Greece*.



DELPHI

Apollo’s temple landscape rises vertical to emphasize his preference for sky, framed by peaks, sun pierced clouds, columned light, deeper vales, dusky ravens crying overhead.

Breezes strum his woods like strings stirring Muses from their dreams, Castalia’s only sacred citizens, where water sculpts each stone so slowly no one hears a sound.

Lovingly he plants young laurel trees around his temenos, wanting only holy aromatic leaves. If thus he slyly now has Daphne embracing him instead, somehow this nymph so honored stays.

Patrick Hunt, 21 February 2009



Byron's wreath wrapped carefully in its display box.

I have also always held in high regard Masaccio's and Ghirlandaio's paintings of Dante crowned with laurel wreath, as Dante followed Virgil and Virgil echoed Homer. Poet Laureates are often honored globally now, whether posthumously or in their lifetimes. Always fond of Homer's description of the Garden of Alkinous in *Odyssey* VII.113 ff, merely trying to imagine it was not enough. So, over a decade I lovingly replicated as much as possible this garden on a more modest scale in our California yard. Olive, fig, grapevines, apple, pomegranate, pear and flowers were planted, including perennial flowers such as cyclamen and anemones among the rocks. After a long search we found a nursery in Oregon that grew young laurels, European but originally from Greece. So pride of place in our garden now goes to a young laurel tree (*Laurus nobilis*) planted in 2000.

In a Stanford course I taught in 2007, partly on Greek traditions, I wove olive wreaths and a laurel wreath from the trees in my garden. To underscore the long history of poet laureates, I invited Al Young, then Poet Laureate of California from 2005–2008, to class on a certain day and he accepted. He told the students he had taught poetry many years earlier at Stanford. He recited a few poems from his latest book to much appreciation. To highlight his visit, I brought out a fresh laurel wreath and, as he stood beaming his assent, placed it on his head. Over the course I reminded students that ephemeral plant wreaths might carry a message about the transience of victory, and that even laurels will fade like the mortals who are thus crowned, although remembrance may last eons as in Pindar's *Nemean Ode* 6.1-5.

Reviving ancient tradition in some small way, this laurel wreathing has been repeated quite often at Stanford or in our "Homeric" garden. Several poets — visiting faculty like British poet Richard Davis and Stanford poet Ken Fields — and other writers have been wreathed.

At last summer's Sun Valley Writers Conference 2008, we held a special ceremony wreathing poets W. S. Merwin and Ted Kooser. Merwin had been long honored with the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, Tanning Prize and Bollingen Prize, among others. Kooser was U.S. Poet Laureate from 2004-06, also earning a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, among others. It was totally quiet when the two poets stood, only a little surprised, and I doubt a writer there missed the import of such a venerable tradition, however different in modernity than antiquity. The two poets sat together at that writers' dinner wearing their fresh laurel wreaths from our tree. Who would blame some of us for imagining their wreaths looked astonishingly in place as if Apollo had just bathed them in light?

We plan to bring a newly rooted sapling branch from our California scion of a Greek laurel back to Athens shortly. We will plant this laurel, in the Gennadeion garden in hope that it will in future supply wreaths for Greek Poet Laureates and visiting U.S. Poet Laureates alike, from "Apollo's laurel bough." Thus, for me personally, akin to Blake's holding "infinity in the palm of your hand", one brief moment at the Gennadeion in 1984 has been an inspiration for life for this poet.

Ed. Note: Patrick Hunt has successfully followed several of his life-long dreams – archaeologist, writer, composer, poet, art historian – while teaching the last sixteen years at Stanford University. A poem from that first collection, *Wings Over Hellas*,

entitled "Kithairon" was just republished in the *Penguin Book of Classical Myths* (2008). A volume of poetry, *House of the Muse*, was also published in 2005 and another collection of poems on Classical themes is almost completed. Since 2005 Patrick has also been writing an opera, *Byron in Greece*. Some arias from the opera-in-progress have already premiered in London, Switzerland, Stanford and elsewhere.

For more on Patrick Hunt see <http://www.patrickhunt.net>

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In Greece: ASCSA, 54 Souidias Street, GR-106 76, Athens, Greece

Telephone: (+30) 210-72-36-313 / Fax: (+30) 210-72-50-584 / [Contact Via E-mail](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

In US: 6-8 Charlton Street, Princeton, NJ 08540-5232, USA

Telephone: (+1) 609-683-0800 / Fax: (+1) 609-924-0578 / [Contact Via E-mail](#)