

## The Aesthetic of Imperial Ruins: The Elgins and John Bowring

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**Q. S. Tong**

All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.  
—Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illumination*

Bentham . . . up to the end of his life stood as an adversary of the colonial system: when he became a Radical, his economic objections were reinforced by political objections against a system which handed over the colonists to the mercy of functionaries sent out by the metropolis. Yet England was preserving a part of her colonial empire and founding new colonies. Were Bentham and his disciples going to demand that all the colonies should be abandoned? Colonization is a fact before which their logic capitulated; and besides the logic of their system is double: in so far as their philosophy advocates the artificial and despotic identification of interests, might they not be

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tempted to consider the colonial empire as a vast field for experiment in philanthropy and reform?

—Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*

Speaking of the emergence of neo-imperialism “as the progressive answer to problems of planetary disorder,” John Newsinger has in mind the striking similarities between recent international military conflicts and the *Arrow War* (1857–1858, 1860), “one of the most important, but least known, British conflicts of the nineteenth century.” The extraordinary amount of violence unleashed and the massive destruction brought about by such a “progressive answer” do not seem to have bothered at all those who believe in their civilizational superiority. “As bombs rain down on the civilian populations of Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, or Palestinians are buried in their homes,” the defenders of “Operation Enduring Freedom” complain only about the avoidance of “collateral damage” as almost pedantic.<sup>1</sup> The bombing of Canton and the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan in Beijing were supported and defended by those with a similar vision of international order during the *Arrow War*, or the Second Opium War, as it is known in Chinese historiography, which broke out less than two decades after Hong Kong was ceded to Britain in 1842 in the First Opium War.

Today, no visitor to Hong Kong can fail to note the rich variety of its colonial residua. Is the monumentalization of “Elgin” as a street name in the central part of Hong Kong, for example, an act of remembrance for the rapacity of British imperialism during the Second Opium War in the mid-nineteenth century? In what ways can we meaningfully relate this to the “Elgin Marbles” housed in the British Museum? John Bowring, the governor of Hong Kong at the time of the Second Opium War, was a “philosophic radical,” a disciple of Jeremy Bentham, whose principle of utility, or the “greatest happiness principle,” John Stuart Mill considered to be the “foundation of morals” and “the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth”: “To do as you would be done by, and to love your neighbor as yourself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality.”<sup>2</sup> But it is the same John Bowring who acted as

1. John Newsinger, “Elgin in China,” *New Left Review* 15 (May–June 2002): 119.

2. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. F. E. L. Priestley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), x, 210, 218. Such terms as *utilitarianism*, *Benthamism*, and *philosophic radicalism* were used as synonyms in the nineteenth century; “by the mid-century one finds them being applied to any outlook which was militantly liberal, logically coherent, and indifferent to the historic past.” See William Thomas, *The Philosophical Radicals: Nine Studies in Theory and Practice, 1817–1841* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 4.

a driving force behind the British administration's decision to launch a second war against China. Even though he claimed to be an "ardent lover of peace," Bowring's defense of the barbarity of British imperialism is resonant with the progressive language of utilitarianism: "with barbarous . . . nations, the words of peace are uttered in vain."<sup>3</sup>

The heyday of the British Empire in the nineteenth century was also the most formative time of Benthamite utilitarianism. Edward Said, in "Secular Criticism," directs our attention to the role "philosophic radicals" played in British colonial rule in India. With reference to Eric Stokes's *The English Utilitarians and India*, Said reminds us of "how a relatively small body of thinkers—among them Bentham, of course, and both Mills—were able to argue and implement a philosophic doctrine for India's governance."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the limits of the British "philosophic radicals" are nowhere more manifest than in their attitude toward Britain's imperial ambitions and colonial missions overseas. As Elie Halévy observes in his classic study *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*, "Colonization is a fact before which their logic capitulated."<sup>5</sup> The complicity between utilitarianism and imperialism in the nineteenth century still has lessons to teach today.

The British Empire was built, expanded, and maintained by those who had faith in it, by those who both amassed the empire's interests and benefited from its global operations. Within and beyond the imperial metropolis, whether in the sphere of intellectual production or in the experience of commercial adventurism, either for imperial glory or for personal vanity, imperial agents have defined what the empire meant to them and to the world. Across its vast territorial expanse and within the enormous scope of its myriad life, the continuity and contiguity of the empire's experience as a whole tend to be obscured by a slew of seemingly disparate operational units or apparently unconnected moments. Indeed, as Uday Singh Mehta observes, the empire "was a complex phenomenon," a discursive movement operating in different locations and spheres, involving a whole range of commitments, motivations, and contributions. The iron wheel of the British Empire was driven forward by "the multiple purposes of power, commerce, cultural and religious influence, and the imperatives

3. John Bowring, *Autobiographical Reflections of Sir John Bowring* (London: Henry S. King and Co., 1877), 217–18.

4. Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 13.

5. Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*, trans. Mary Morris (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1949), 510.

of progress, along with the myriad subsidiary motives of pride, jealousy, compassion, curiosity, adventure, and resistance.”<sup>6</sup> Whether they contradict, complement, or complete one another, these purposes, imperatives, and motives discursively and collectively created the British Empire.

Hong Kong’s experience of the Second Opium War brings together some apparently disparate imperial moments and seemingly unrelated colonial agents that contributed to the British Empire in diverse forms and in various locations. Let me start, however, from a time before the colonization of Hong Kong.

### The Elgin Marbles

In March 1817, John Keats, accompanied by Benjamin Robert Haydon, visited the British Museum to view the Elgin Marbles; a product of his visit was the sonnet “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles.” Some of the most sentimental, and perhaps most silly, poetic lines Keats ever wrote must be contained in this sonnet. Majestic yet inexplicable, powerful but mysterious, the beauty of the marbles was beyond the poet’s mind, and their effect on the poet was so powerful that he found himself and perhaps all modern poets and artists so imperfect in their mortal human form, sickly, impotent, debased, and radically flawed, that an early death would seem to be the only appropriate response to the perfect beauty of the Greek sculptures.

My spirit is too weak—mortality  
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,  
And each imagin’d pinnacle and steep  
Of godlike hardship, tells me I must die  
Like a sick Eagle looking at the sky.<sup>7</sup>

Musing over transient and disappearing charms of modern art, Keats celebrates the immortality of the aesthetic embodied and exemplified by the marbles. The “Grecian grandeur,” mingled “with the rude / Wasting of old Time—with a billowy main—/ A sun—a shadow of a magnitude,”<sup>8</sup> catapults Keats into a realm of aesthetic trance, which, however, instantly sinks into a

6. Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1. I am obliged to Aamir Mufti for directing my attention to this book.

7. John Keats, “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” in *The Complete Poems*, 3rd ed., ed. John Barnard (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 99.

8. Keats, “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” in *The Complete Poems*, 100.

state of poetic and intellectual paralysis. The imagery in the poem, confused and confusing, is symptomatic of a deep fear of poetic castration, a fear of losing the object, a fear that can be confirmed only by a willingness to lose the self for the sake of the object.<sup>9</sup> Keats knew his impotence. In another sonnet dedicated to Haydon, he confesses:

forgive me that I cannot speak  
Definitively of these mighty things;  
Forgive me that I have not eagle's wings,  
That what I want I know not where to seek. . . .<sup>10</sup>

Under the fatal aesthetic spell of "these mighty things," Keats would continue to sing about Hellenic beauty in his romantic innocence.

The Elgin Marbles journeyed not only through the vast expanse of time from a remote past but across a spatial distance from the borderland of the Orient. The translocation of the Elgin Marbles, now securely housed in the British Museum, is metonymic of the historical experience of a violent aesthetic dislocation and cultural destruction, and is "symptomatic of the rapacity of British imperialism from Ireland to India."<sup>11</sup> Keats must have known how these sculptures had been brought to Britain from Greece—they were known then as "Elgin Marbles," as they are now. He chose not to think about the marbles in these terms: for him, that was not relevant; or he was unable to see them in such terms: before his unarmed eyes were these "mighty things," these sculptural fragments on exhibition, nothing else.

The Elgin Marbles were presented and taken as an example par excellence of the romantic sublime and a source of aesthetic inspiration not just for Keats but for Britain, keen to locate and establish its cultural identity. Following the publication in 1765 of Henry Fuseli's translation of the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (1755), "the noble simplicity" and "tranquil grandeur" of Greek art became the aesthetic standard.<sup>12</sup> The Hellenic revival

9. Keats's fear of losing the object is partly manifested in his inability to release himself from his obsession with the sculptures: he kept returning to the British Museum and "would sit for an hour or more at a time beside [the Elgin Marbles] rapt in reverie." See W. J. Bate, *John Keats* (London: Hogarth Press, 1992), 247n13.

10. John Keats, "To B. R. Haydon, with a Sonnet Written on Seeing the Elgin Marbles," in *The Complete Poems*, 100.

11. Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 36.

12. See H. B. Nisbet, ed., *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Les-*

in Europe was coeval with the rise of the romantic revolt against the neo-classical dogmas and established taste for mechanized, regularized, and symmetrical ornamentalism. The art of Greek antiquity created the possibilities of a new aesthetic experience and a powerful counterdiscourse; like the rude Chinese garden, the sculpture of the Greeks inspired and defined romantic sentiments as well as popular taste, everyday aesthetics, and dilettante connoisseurship of art in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>13</sup>

The Elgin Marbles had their origins in a frivolous personal undertaking of pseudo-aesthetics and a domestic project of cultural vanity. When he was appointed British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in 1795, Robert Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin, must have been excited, not only because this was a crucial career development but also because it afforded a rare opportunity to carry out his desire to turn his family residence, Broomhall, into a Grecian palace. Posted in Constantinople, Lord Elgin was now in a privileged position to do something about Greek antiquities—he was there, firsthand, on the doorstep of the “original site” of Western civilization, in a land once inhabited by mythological gods and goddesses but now under the imperial rule of the Ottoman Empire.

If the Turks had not yet been “enlightened” by the emergent romantic taste in Western Europe and were unable to appreciate the “Grecian grandeur,” Lord Elgin knew the value of Greek antiquities. He employed several hundred workmen to dismantle the sculptured marbles from the Parthenon on the Acropolis and arranged for the transportation of these pieces, which filled up two hundred chests, to Scotland to adorn his mansion. The marbles were cut into pieces to accommodate their transportation to Scotland; some were broken into smaller pieces during the process. The extensive damage Lord Elgin did to the Parthenon remains visible to contemporary visitors to the Acropolis.

At the time the sculptures were still being removed from the Parthenon in 1810, Lord Byron was in Athens.<sup>14</sup> Parts of his *The Curse of Minerva*

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*sing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, and Goethe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 42.

13. For a study of the influence of the Chinese garden on European romantic taste, see Arthur Lovejoy, “The Chinese Origin of a Romanticism,” in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961).

14. Byron saw shiploads of the marbles being carried away: “[When] they carry away three or four shiploads of the most valuable and massy relics that time and barbarism have left to the most injured and most celebrated of cities, when they destroy, in a vain attempt to

were drafted near the site. Elgin feared the young poet. When word spread that Byron would publicly condemn him again, Lord Elgin wanted to meet with Byron in an attempt to soften and soothe the rage of the young poet.<sup>15</sup> But he failed. Byron's scathing denunciation of Elgin, an ambassador from a supposedly civilized nation, is exemplary of his recalcitrant temperament and his determined efforts to combat what he saw as gross injustice and aesthetic philistinism. In a mock pagan ritual idiom, and in the voice of Minerva, Byron blasts dazzling curses at Elgin:

"First on the head of him who did this deed  
My curse shall light, — on him and all his seed:  
Without one spark of intellectual fire,  
Be all the sons as senseless as the sire. . . .

Oh, loath'd in life, nor pardon'd in the dust,  
May Hate pursue his sacrilegious lust!"<sup>16</sup>

Byron was relentless and nearly cruel: Lord Elgin's only son with his first wife died young—at the age of forty—"after a long period of what was described as tortured imbecility."<sup>17</sup> Decorated with sculptural fragments, Lord Elgin's "grand" saloon was turned into "a general mart" and a "stone shop."<sup>18</sup>

This is Byron's "dearly loved Greece": "the land of azure skies and incomparable landscapes that were the ultimate contrast to England's foggy shores."<sup>19</sup> Byron's love for Greece was never merely a poetic one, and his deep emotional attachment was not just aesthetic but rooted in his repulsion

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tear down, those works which have been the admiration of ages, I know no motive which can excuse, no name which can designate, the perpetration of this dastardly devastation." Byron, note to *Child Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto II; quoted in Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: John Murray, 2002), 113. See also Sydney Checkland, *The Elgins, 1766–1917: A Tale of Aristocrats, Proconsuls, and Their Wives* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), 87–88.

15. Byron had already publicly condemned Lord Elgin in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809).

16. Lord Byron, *The Curse of Minerva*, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 1:325–27.

17. William St. Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles: The Controversial History of the Parthenon Sculptures* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 41.

18. Lord Byron, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, 1:261; Byron, *The Curse of Minerva*, 1:326.

19. See MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend*, 109.

toward Turkish colonial rule. "I dream'd that Greece might still be free";<sup>20</sup> this "original site" of Western civilization had been violated by Christians and was now being raped by the colonial oppression of the Ottoman Empire, under whose auspices Lord Elgin staged his horrendous act of open theft.

"So let him stand, through ages yet unborn,  
Fix'd statue on the pedestal of Scorn. . . ."<sup>21</sup>

### **"The New Elgin Marbles"**

About half a century later, the name of Elgin acquired another level of infamy, but this time it had more to do with a state action than a personal whim. James Bruce, now the 8th Earl of Elgin, following his father's footsteps, entered a colonial career. The outbreak of the Second Opium War in 1856 led to the appointment, by the British Government, of a "Special Mission to China" headed by Lord Elgin. One task of this mission was to settle "existing differences [between Britain and China] and if possible . . . [to place] our relations with that Empire upon a new and enlarged basis."<sup>22</sup> Entrusted with all the authority and power to settle the dispute over the "Arrow incident," Lord Elgin went to China with five thousand troops. The full action to settle the China problem was delayed by the eruption of the Sepoy Rebellion, which the British call the Indian Mutiny. Led by his "sound" judgment and sense of duty to the empire, Lord Elgin decided to dispatch his men to rescue a falling India, an unplanned course of action that, however, won him a great deal of respect and gratitude at home. After a period of ineffective clashes between British and Chinese sides in the early stage of the Arrow conflicts, Elgin was finally ready to order a full-scale assault on Canton.

The bombardment of the city began "shortly after daylight" on December 28, 1857, and "continued without intermission for twenty-seven hours" (*EM*, 120). At the cessation of the bombing, Laurence Oliphant, Lord Elgin's personal secretary, cast his first gaze over the city from the vantage point of a hilltop: "200 feet below lay the city, mapped out before us; a vast

20. Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, 5:189.

21. Byron, *The Curse of Minerva*, 1:327.

22. Laurence Oliphant, *Narrative of the Earl of Elgin's Missions to China and Japan in the Years 1857, '58, '59*, with a new introduction by J. J. Gerson, vol. 1 (1859; repr., Hong Kong, New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 1. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *EM*.



expanse of roofs, a labyrinth of intricate lanes, in a vain attempt to follow the windings of which the eye was bewildered;—a pagoda here, there a many-storied temple, or the successive roofs of a yamun embowered in luxuriant foliage, above which towered a pair of mandarin poles,—beyond all, the tapering masts of our own ships” (*EM*, 129–30).

This was the Orient: its labyrinthine incomprehensibility bewildered not only the Western eye but also the mind. The intrigue and mystery of the Orient were not entirely lost under what would be a typical Orientalist gaze in a different context. Beyond the expanse of “windings” and structural chaos of the city, however, was the threatening and menacing presence of the British warships. What was “peculiar and exciting” about the “scene” viewed from Magazine Hill, on which Oliphant was standing, was the “death-like stillness” in the city after the bombardment. The “striking element” of the city, continues Oliphant, “was that impressive silence, that absence of all movement on the part of a population of a million and a half, that lay as though entombed within the city walls, whose every pulsation seemed arrested by the terrors of the night before, and whose only desire, if they could think at all, appeared to be, that the bare fact of their existence should be forgotten by the conquerors” (*EM*, 130). The Orientalist gaze is imperceptibly transformed into an imperialist gaze, on the massive expanse of life, or rather *nonlife*, below. The deathliness of the city was a confirmation of not only the overwhelming power of a modern imperial army but the very illegitimate existence of the city’s population and what the city represented. This was the moment for “the conquerors,” the moment for the empire.

Oliphant would soon observe for himself the destructive forces of the bombardment. Having entered the city, and “[a]s we turned along the south wall, we observed terrible evidence of the destructive effects of the bombardment. The south gate had been totally destroyed by fire, and a broad scar of burnt houses extended towards the centre of the city. Yeh’s yamun was a heap of ruins; the wall behind it was battered and breached, and every house-roof was perforated with shot-holes” (*EM*, 137). An apparently informal account of the casualties in action could only accentuate the conquerors’ satisfaction derived from the military success: “In the entire British force, consisting of 5000 men, the result of the two days’ operations was eight killed and seventy-one wounded, including among the former one killed by our own shot, and one waylaid and murdered by villagers. The French, out of a force of 900, lost only two men killed and thirty wounded” (*EM*, 135). The siege and bombardment of the city of Canton and the report

of the casualties, as described here, are uncannily evocative of the recent U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, which were accompanied by news briefings on military progress and casualties as a standard practice. Oliphant's detailed account of the capture of the Imperial Commissioner Yeh, who had been identified as the one to have violated the international diplomatic norms, completed the glory of imperial conquest.

The Second Opium War ended for the time being with the signing of the Treaty of Tientsin. Lord Elgin's brother, Frederick Bruce, now Britain's minister to China, was responsible for the ratification of the treaty. On their way to Beijing in June 1859, however, the British men-of-war were fired upon when they reached the Taku Forts, and the British flagship *Plover* was almost sunk. In this military encounter, 89 British marines and soldiers were killed, and 349 were wounded.<sup>23</sup> Despite his reluctance to go to China again, Lord Elgin, urged by Lord Palmerston, the prime minister of Britain at the time, embarked on his second journey to China, this time with 30,000 troops plus a French contingent of 10,000, a formidable display of European military might. His order was to bypass Canton and march directly to Beijing. The mission concluded with devastating consequences.

Entering Beijing on October 17, 1860, the British and French forces sacked the imperial palace Yuan Ming Yuan, the Garden of Perfect Brightness, which Father Attiret, "artist-priest" at the court of the Emperor Qian Long, had called in 1743 "a veritable Paradise on earth."<sup>24</sup> About the size of the city of Dijon, its "luxury" was beyond the imagination of the British and French soldiers entering the palace, and its "splendor" was indescribable.<sup>25</sup> Lord Elgin himself described the palace, with typical British understatement, as "really a fine thing, like an English park—numberless buildings with handsome rooms, and filled with Chinese *curios*, and handsome clocks, bronzes, etc."<sup>26</sup> "Everyone was wild for plunder," General Charles Gordon wrote in a letter to his mother. And to "rationalize" looting, soldiers were ordered to pass on the stolen articles to be sold at auction. "One man bid 16 shillings for

23. See Checkland, *The Elgins*, 165.

24. Father Attiret, Letter written to M. D'Assaut, quoted in Hope Danby, *The Garden of Perfect Brightness: History of the Yüan Ming Yüan and of the Emperors Who Lived There* (London: Williams and Norgate Ltd., 1950), 70. In the same letter, he wrote of the garden thus: "I have seen nothing similar elsewhere" (69).

25. See Young-Tsu Wong, *A Paradise Lost: The Imperial Garden Yuanming Yuan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 139.

26. Lord Elgin, *Letters and Journals of James, Eighth Earl of Elgin*, ed. Theodore Walrond (London: John Murray, 1872), 361.

a string of pearls which he sold next day for \$500," Gordon recorded. Some of the treasures were brought back to England and presented to Queen Victoria: "among her share was a Pekinese dog, the first to appear in the West: Her Majesty called her new pet 'Looty.'"<sup>27</sup> While looting was still going on, the order to destroy Yuan Ming Yuan was given. "It was a clear autumn day, with a cloudless sky. But soon the heavens were blotted out as great columns of black clouds rose thickly in the air. The atmosphere was so still that the smoke stayed poised, like a canopy over the pleasure. Increasing with each passing moment the canopy changed to a vast black pall, heavy like that of mourning. It was such a solemn sight that witnesses spoke, with awe, of its tragic and melancholy appearance. The whole vault of the skies bespoke doom and vengeance."<sup>28</sup>

Having seen with his own eyes how the palace was plundered and devastated, Lord Elgin, who found war to be "a hateful business," wrote in his diary, "The more one sees of it, the more one detests it."<sup>29</sup> But still, the destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan, for him, "was not an act of vengeance but of justice, and I cannot regret the part I took in counselling the execution."<sup>30</sup> Lord Elgin was said to be a man who "loved righteousness and hated iniquity" and whose "moral nature revolted against the immorality of approach to eastern life."<sup>31</sup> Before the imperial imperatives, however, his morality and his liberal conservatism capitulated.

Yuan Ming Yuan was destroyed in its entirety; its ruins now stand in the suburbs of Beijing as a collective figure haunted by historical memories.

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Each of the two Elgins has left his mark on the history of nineteenth-century Britain, especially the history of the empire. The logic of placing side by side the two Elgins is not just based on their common genealogy or on a common public career they, as members of the Scottish aristocracy, pursued, though it is worth noting that a diplomatic career in nineteenth-century Britain was a profession that was largely created and made more available by the need to respond to its rapid and effective overseas expansion.

27. See Checkland, *The Elgins*, 179.

28. See Danby, *The Garden of Perfect Brightness*, 201.

29. Lord Elgin, *Letters and Journals*, 362.

30. See Danby, *The Garden of Perfect Brightness*, 202.

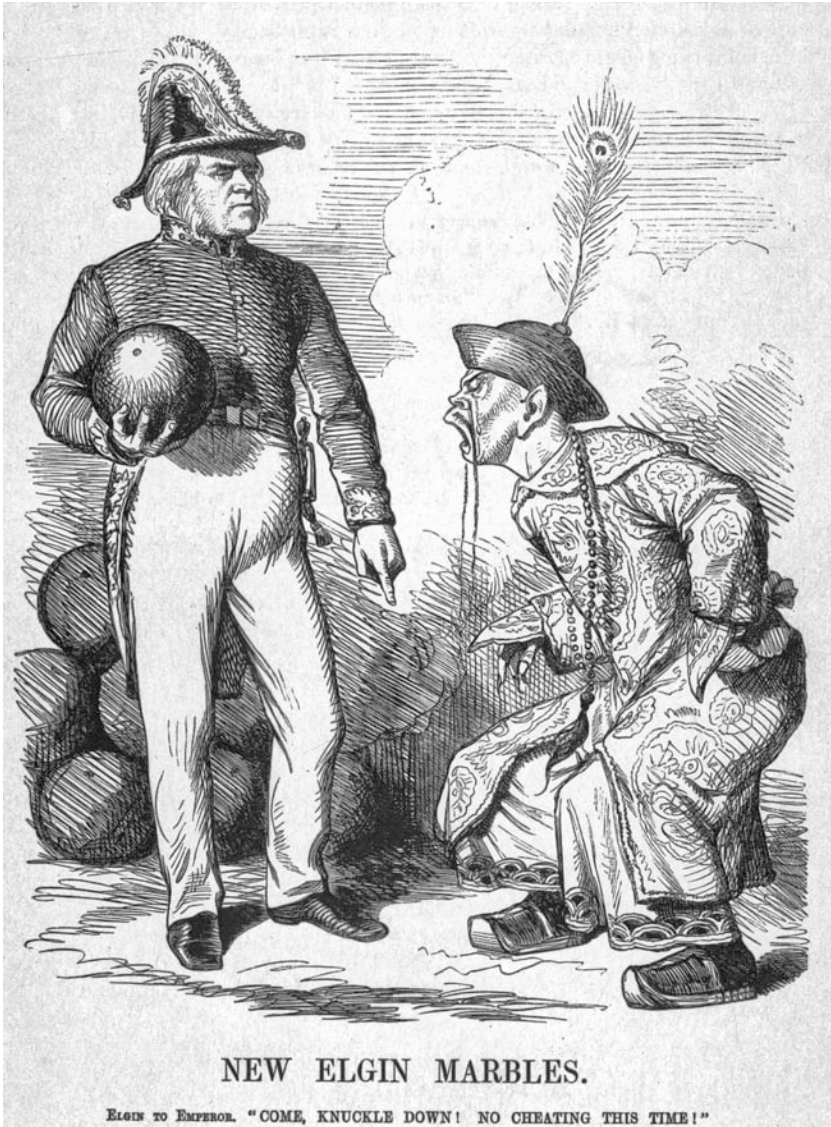
31. W. P. M. Kennedy, *Lord Elgin* (London and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1926), 221, 216.

sion. The father stole and vandalized arguably the finest sculptures in the world, and the son burned and ransacked probably the most beautiful garden on earth. Greece and China had a shared historical experience; both were subjected, wholly or partially, to imperialist coercion. The public was quick to identify the two Elgins, not just as father and son but as heroes who contributed to the common cause of the British Empire. Treasures from Yuan Ming Yuan as war booty were openly equated with the Elgin Marbles; they were “the New Elgin Marbles,” as a cartoon in *Punch* called them (Figure 1). Although the circumstances under which these barbarities were perpetrated were not the same, their similarities not only have shaped a family history that repeated itself but are also iconic of the larger history of the British Empire, whose iron wheel was driven by its compulsion to repeat its success in bringing home possessions from elsewhere. In the repetition of the imperial history, if the Grecian marbles were taken not without some embarrassment and apology, the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan was executed with no sense of immorality, not least because the action of the 8th Earl of Elgin was empowered, sponsored, and sanctioned by the policy and authority of a far more powerful, self-conscious, and confident empire.

### **Sir John Bowring and the Second Opium War**

The Second Opium War took place during Sir John Bowring’s governorship in Hong Kong. Bowring had served as consul at Canton before he was knighted and appointed governor of Hong Kong in 1854. As governor, he desired unrestricted access to the city of Canton but was repeatedly “frustrated” by the Imperial Commissioner Yeh, whose “obstinacy” was felt to be an insult to the dignity and honor of not just the British Empire but of Bowring himself. It would be irresponsible to trivialize the war itself as originating from Bowring’s vanity, but as generally acknowledged then and now, the *Arrow* incident was a pretext to wage a full-scale war to punish Yeh’s obstinacy. At the age of sixty, an age when one is supposed to be more mellow about things, Bowring felt strongly that Britain should engage in a second war with China; it was his strong recommendation to the British government that eventually brought Lord Elgin to Hong Kong and led to the bombing of Canton and the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan.

Bowring’s reputation as a colonial officer with an inflated sense of self-importance and as a warmonger was by no means achieved posthumously or retrospectively established by historians. At the time the matter was being deliberated in both Houses in London, Lord Derby in the House



**Figure 1.** A cartoon with the title “New Elgin Marbles,” from *Punch*, November 4, 1860.

of Lords was convinced that Bowring prioritized his vanity over Britain's national interests: guided by his "perfect monomania" to obtain "an official reception in the Yamun of Canton," Bowring "would consider any sacrifice too great, any interruption of commerce to be deplored, any bloodshed almost to be regretted." Lord Lyndhurst's scathing sarcasms found a fit object: "Sir J. Bowring . . . is a distinguished humanitarian as well as plenipotentiary (laughter). . . . Now, mark what he says: 'The vessel had no protection, but the Chinese do not know this. For God's sake do not whisper it to them.' . . . Was there ever conduct more abominable, more flagrant, in which . . . more false pretence has been put forward by a public man in the service of the British Government?" Bowring's "ambition was to procure what his predecessors had completely failed to effect—namely an entry within the walls of Canton." And, Lyndhurst continued, "to carry on offensive operations upon such a ground—upon such a pretence—is one of the most extraordinary proceedings to be found in the history of the world. . . ." Quoting Shakespeare, he concluded: "'But man, proud man, / Drest in a little brief authority, / Most ignorant of what he's most assured, / This glassy essence, like an angry ape, / Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven / As make the angels weep.'"<sup>32</sup> Beyond discursive jocularly and rhetorical narcissism characteristic of British parliamentary speeches and debates, there were more serious responses. Lord Grey demanded "the instant recall of Sir J. Bowring." And in the House of Commons, Richard Cobden "opened his speech with a solemn repudiation of his 'friend of twenty years' standing,'" and his Parliamentary motion on February 26, 1857, brought down the Palmerston administration.<sup>33</sup>

These speeches are quoted not from *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* but from one of Karl Marx's journalistic writings for the *New York Daily Tribune*. In "Parliamentary Debates on the Chinese Hostilities," having pre-

32. For details about these speeches, see Karl Marx, "Parliamentary Debates on the Chinese Hostilities," in *Collected Works*, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), 15:207–11. Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, act 2, scene 2.

33. See Marx, "Parliamentary Debates on the Chinese Hostilities," 15:211. Two years later, in a personal letter to Bowring, Richard Cobden still felt strongly about the role Bowring played in the war: "it will give me great pleasure to find on a personal explanation that I have been in nay way mistaken in my judgments of what took place under your auspices at Hong Kong. It would be affectation if I were to attempt to disguise my opinion that your course was ill advised & very much at variance with which we had long cherished in common, & on which indeed our mutual friendship was founded." Richard Cobden, letter to John Bowring on August 28, 1859; a copy of this letter is in the Special Collections, University of Hong Kong Library.

sented in great detail the debates in both Houses, Marx, with his distinctive rhetorical flare, asked:

Why, then, should Lord Palmerston, at a moment when his Government is tottering, when his way is beset with difficulties of all sorts . . . when he is conscious that the eyes of the House are “upon him more earnestly but less admiringly than ever before,” why should he single out just that moment to exhibit, for the first time in his political life, an unflinching fidelity to another man—and to a subaltern, too—at the hazard of not only impairing still more his own position, but of completely breaking it up? Why should he push his newfangled enthusiasm to such a point as to offer himself as the expiatory sacrifice for the sins of a Dr. Bowring?<sup>34</sup>

In asking these questions, Marx, ironically, seems to have forgotten his own great principle of historical materialism and had committed an error in attributing the cause of history to one or two individuals—he forgot, that is, that the policy and practice of the British Empire were carried forward by the iron wheel of its own logic and force.

### **Bowring and Byron**

At the time Byron was crying for the bleeding land of Greece, there was a gathering awareness in Britain of the need to support its cause of national independence from Turkish colonial rule. In the spring of 1822, Turks killed 25,000 people, as many as one-fourth of the total population in Chios, and the massacre generated an outcry in Europe and much sympathy for the Greek revolution.<sup>35</sup> A year later, in January 1823, the London Greek Committee was established to assist Greece in its fight for freedom. John Bowring became its honorary secretary. Byron’s love for and sympathy with Greece had been well known, not least because of his repeated invectives at Lord Elgin’s abuse of his official position and his removal of Greek treasures. The Greek Committee approached Byron for support—he was famous, he was a symbol, a public voice that would surely be of immense value for the work of the committee. Bowring urged Byron: “You should be a Star to guide & to gladden Greece & England alike.”<sup>36</sup> Although Byron, the young roman-

34. Marx, “Parliamentary Debates on the Chinese Hostilities,” 15:212.

35. See MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend*, 451.

36. See MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend*, 530.

tic hero, and Bowring, the future governor of Hong Kong, never met, through correspondence Bowring had some influence on Byron in his decision to go to Greece and fight for its liberation.

History is mysteriously replete with coincidences that, though not of its own design, afford one with much for musing. It is such an irony that Sir John Bowring must be brought together with Lord Byron in this context, even though Bowring's underlying motive to actively participate in the work of the Greek Committee has not gone unquestioned.<sup>37</sup> Striking is the contrast between, on the one hand, the young Bowring, who "in childhood had been trained to an intense love of liberty"<sup>38</sup> and, as a philosophical radical and a forceful proponent of liberalism, actively organized British assistance to the freedom of Greece, and, on the other hand, the older Bowring, who, as governor of Hong Kong, catalyzed a major imperial war against China, with his recklessness, his political chicanery, his lack of moral scrupulousness, mendacious in approach and devastating in consequence.

Bowring's intellectual reputation was largely built on his intimate relationship with Jeremy Bentham and on his involvement with a group of radical intellectuals gathered around the influential publication *Westminster Review*. John S. Mill described Bowring as "an assiduous frequenter of Mr. Bentham," an "ardent" admirer of Bentham, a "zealous" follower of Bentham's opinions, and "a powerful agent in spreading Bentham's fame and doctrines through all quarters of the world."<sup>39</sup> Bentham found in Bowring a "willing hearer," who "devoted his energies to carry out the principles inculcated by Jeremy Bentham."<sup>40</sup> The trust Bentham placed in Bowring was total, as clearly manifested in his support for Bowring to be, in 1824, the first

37. Bowring was just thirty-one years old at the time and "ought to establish himself as a public figure." Therefore, he "could see in the London Greek Committee (as in the newly established *Westminster Review*) a vehicle for greater public prominence." See F. Rosen, *Bentham, Byron, and Greece: Constitutionalism, Nationalism, and Early Liberal Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 249.

38. Lewin B. Bowring, "A Brief Memoir of Sir John Bowring," in John Bowring, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 3.

39. John S. Mill, *Autobiography*, ed. John Jacob Cross (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 64.

40. Lewin B. Bowring, "A Brief Memoir of Sir John Bowring," 3. The Benthamite school of thought, as some commentators noted, resembled that of "the ancient schools of Philosophy, which were formed and held together by an almost unbounded veneration for their master, and in which the disciples were content to place their glory in understanding the master's principles." See Ernest Albee, *A History of English Utilitarianism* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 169–70.



political editor of *Westminster Review*, which, funded by Bentham himself, was launched as a platform for the propagation of “the views of the so-called philosophical radicals.”<sup>41</sup> Bowring was then just a “merchant in the City,” and there were worries that he might not be up for the job.<sup>42</sup> However, *Westminster Review* proved to be a huge success. Bowring later recalled, not without some sense of pride and accomplishment, that the journal published radical views over a wide range of issues, from popular education to representation of people, from free trade to colonial government, and ushered in “an era in the history of political progress.”<sup>43</sup> Among contributors to the *Review* were James Mill and John S. Mill. And Bowring himself wrote for it articles on politics, language, poetry, and “other literary subjects.”<sup>44</sup> Bentham died on June 6, 1832, “in Bowring’s arms making him his executor, and leaving to his care for publication all his manuscripts.”<sup>45</sup> Bowring’s labor and effort in the compiling of a definitive edition of the works of Bentham, which, containing eleven volumes, came out in 1843, testified to his commitment to Bentham and Benthamite utilitarianism. A product of Bentham’s thought and “the pet disciple of Jeremy Bentham,” as Marx called him,<sup>46</sup> Bowring admitted that Bentham, apart from his parents, was one of the two people who had “exercised more than any others an influence on the formation of my character”: “Bentham was the admiration of my riper years.”<sup>47</sup> For Bowring, indeed, Bentham and Bentham’s utilitarianism were a profession, a career, and an industry.

Although he was perceived by his contemporaries as “[a] sort of Boswell to Bentham,” who “lickspitted himself into the good graces” of Bentham,<sup>48</sup> historians consider Bowring to be “a man of exceptional accomplishments” “by the standards of any age,” belonging with “a small number of

41. “About the year 1821 [Bowring] had been introduced to Jeremy Bentham, who conceived in 1824 the idea of starting the *Westminster Review* as an organ for making known the views of the so-called philosophical radicals, and advanced nearly £4000 towards its establishment.” See Lewin B. Bowring, “A Brief Memoir of Sir John Bowring,” 7.

42. James Mill was at first opposed to Bowring’s appointment. See John S. Mill, *Autobiography*, 64.

43. John Bowring, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 65.

44. Lewin B. Bowring, “A Brief Memoir of Sir John Bowring,” 8.

45. Lewin B. Bowring, “A Brief Memoir of Sir John Bowring,” 14.

46. Marx, “Parliamentary Debates on the Chinese Hostilities,” 209.

47. John Bowring, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 337.

48. See F. Rosen, “John Bowring and the World of Jeremy Bentham,” in *Sir John Bowring, 1792–1872: Aspects of His Life and Career*, ed. Joyce Youngs (Plymouth: Latimer Trend and Company Ltd., 1993), 19.

Europeans whose reputations at home were equal to their places in the history of East Asia." For Bowring is not just a practitioner of the colonial policy of the British Empire but has "his place in the history of England in the nineteenth century . . . as an intellectual and utilitarian reformer."<sup>49</sup> Sir John Bowring, we are told, was a polymath and a man of extraordinary talent and energy: a member of Parliament, a reformer, a hymnist, a writer, a translator, an editor, and the list can go on.<sup>50</sup> His writing covered wide-ranging interests: from prison reform to slavery, from free trade to public health, from education to the decimal system. He was said to be an exceptional "linguist," standing "at the head of the world's linguists" in his time.<sup>51</sup> Controversial as he was at different stages of his life and for different reasons, by virtue of his reputation as an active player in domestic public life, intellectual and political, Bowring was distinguished from other Hong Kong governors and colonial officers, diplomats, or military commanders in this part of Asia who, situated only in the peripheral and the outer zone of the British Empire's domestic life, unnoted and simply ignored, often suffered from a psychological imbalance derived from the contrast between their marginality at home and their centrality in the colonized spaces. So let us not speak of Bowring as a petty man, an insignificant and marginal figure, a brief and negligible footnote to the history of the British Empire.

Bowring's participation in the enterprise of utilitarianism and his active involvement in the establishment of utilitarianism and its propagation

49. David K. Wyatt, introduction to *The Kingdom and People of Siam*, by John Bowring, vol. 1 (1856; repr., Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), v. Geoffrey Robley Sayer writes of him thus: "Sir John Bowring had, as Dr. Bowring, gained a European reputation, indeed (if we adopt the European connotation of the word) a 'world-wide' reputation, as a linguist, and was the author of many erudite publications." Sayer, *Hong Kong, 1841–1862: Birth, Adolescence, and Coming of Age* (1937; repr., Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 1980), 173.

50. Elie Halévy describes him as "a city merchant, a great traveler, a preacher of English free trade on the continent, a polyglot and polygraph, an economist and a poet, the friend of everybody" (*The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*, 479).

51. He is said to have had a speaking knowledge of eight languages, a reading and writing knowledge of seven, and a working understanding of a further twenty-five dialects. Thomas Hood wrote of him as a "man of many tongues," who is able "To tell you what's o'clock in all / The *dialects* of Babel. / Take him on 'Change; try Portuguese, / The Moorish and the Spanish, / Polish, Hungarian, Tyrolese, / The Swedish and the Danish; / Try him with these, and fifty such, / His skill will ne'er diminish, / Although you should begin in Dutch, / And end (like me) in *Finnish*." Thomas Hood, "Sir John Bowring," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hood*, ed. Walter Jerrold (London: Henry Frowde, 1906), 66.

are of special significance here. For the moment one considers the different aspects of his life, the question of the relation between British colonialism and utilitarianism inevitably arises, not just because he was intimately associated with the establishment of Benthamite utilitarianism or because his later career as a colonial ambassador could be traced to his years in London as a member of that radical philosophical group. More importantly, the most active period of British colonialism was also the time of utilitarianism and liberalism at their most influential, and they remain the most enduring legacy of British political philosophy.

What is puzzling and challenging is the issue of this apparent schizophrenia that seems to have split Bowring into two contradictory formations, oscillating between a liberal utilitarian, who was a member of the Peace Society and was considered by Lord Palmerston to be “essentially a man of people,” and a bellicose practitioner of colonialism, who would exhaust all means possible to wage an imperial war against China.<sup>52</sup> Is there a conflict between Bowring’s different personas? How should we understand this schizophrenia that has kept apart a political philosophy understood and practiced as a theoretical cornerstone of a modern liberal state and the colonial and imperial brutality sponsored or perpetrated by the very same state? Is there an innate link between Bowring’s advocacy of utilitarianism and his belief in the colonial order in Asia? Is there a continuity between Bowring’s political belief at home and his subsequent practice in Asia, a continuity, that is, between colonialism and utilitarianism?

### **Utilitarianism and Totalitarianism**

The principle of utility is built on the political ethics that a good government has as its only moral and legitimate goal the policy and practice that are meant for the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. Bentham’s teaching is simple: the moral foundation of the legal system and government policy is the understanding of the maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain for the majority; utilitarianism is, in its classic Benthamite form, a philosophical hedonism.

The danger of the principle of greatest happiness has been noted by many in political philosophy, not least because its vision of the collective happiness of a society reckons without the rights of minority groups. For to

52. E. D. Steele, *Palmerston and Liberalism, 1855–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 58.

direct attention to a special social group, whether on the basis of gender or race or class, is to privilege that group, and the Benthamite principle, predicated on the primacy of the happiness of the greatest number, is blind or at least insensitive to individual forms of happiness. The ethics of utilitarianism presupposes the importance of an organic social or communal collectivity and supports, therefore, various forms of collectivism. Karl Popper, speaking of hedonism and utilitarianism, warns that "it is not only impossible but very dangerous to attempt to maximize the pleasure or the happiness of the people, since such an attempt must lead to totalitarianism."<sup>53</sup> In practice, then, as utilitarian rationality encourages an assessment of certain policies "by weighing total gains and losses, it was possible on utilitarian grounds to justify policies that violated the basic rights of certain individuals or groups, or harmed them in some other way, so long as these costs were outweighed by greater gains elsewhere."<sup>54</sup> Although this is a familiar argument against totalitarian suppression of the interests or rights of minority groups within one and the same society, its moral force against utilitarian defense of ends should not be taken lightly.

The bloodless logic of the principle of utility, its formulaic relentlessness and ruthlessness, when put into practice, when translated into everyday experience and held as a moral guide for social, institutional, or collective conduct, is seriously consequential. A literary example of the dangers of the utilitarian rules of conduct is Dickens's famous creation of the programmed, robotized, and immoral Bitzer in *Hard Times*, who defines the horse as "Quadruped" and "Graminivorous."<sup>55</sup> In "his indictment of the idea which built and maintained Coketown," in which Bitzer thrived, Dickens almost certainly had in mind the most prominent Victorian proponent of utilitarianism, John S. Mill's *Political Economy* (1849), and "Mill's reaction . . . was the expressive 'that creature Dickens.'"<sup>56</sup> The kind of intellectual and

53. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), 304n62.

54. David Miller and Richard Dagger, "Utilitarianism and Beyond: Contemporary Analytical Political Theory," in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 451.

55. The full "definition" of the horse offered by Bitzer in chapter 2, "Murdering the Innocents," of *Hard Times* (London: Penguin Books, 1995) is as follows: "Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely, twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth" (12).

56. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), 105.

moral monstrosity of Bitzer was repellent indeed. Mill's own childhood education, however, was not all that much better. Under the strict supervision of his father and Jeremy Bentham, Mill, at the age of twelve, was already turned into an "intellectual" as mature as thirty, into a mind that was "violently over-developed" but emotionally "starved."<sup>57</sup> Mill's early education drove home for him the need to reform the principle of utility and, indeed, the whole theory. Dickens's portrayal of the other two dangerous aspects of utilitarianism in the same novel—the dehumanized Gradgrind, who knows nothing except "facts" and lives in an emotional and moral desert, and the hollowed Bounderby, whose utilitarian hedonism is reified and commodified in his "turtle soup and venison" that he enjoys with "a gold spoon"—should have sent shock waves across Mill's heart. No doubt, his experience of the inhumanity of utilitarian practice and his deeply felt dissatisfaction with the principle of pleasure that his father and Bentham tried out on him in his early years played an important role in his project to revise the principle of greatest happiness and to instill some life into utilitarianism. Mill's quiet subversion of the bloodless principle of utility has given the world his best-known work, *On Liberty*, which is enlivened with glows of human warmth.

To provide further evidence to show where the application of utilitarianism might lead us, it is pertinent to think of Bentham's famous Panopticon in relation to Michel Foucault's equally famous appropriation of it in his examination of what he calls the "disciplinary society": "The Panopticon is a marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogenous effects of power."<sup>58</sup> Central to Bentham's social engineering of control, which finds a distinct and vivid expression in his ingenious invention of the Panopticon, are supervision and examination. In its most routine and everyday execution, Foucault notes, the question is not why and how a task is performed or carried out, but what must be done and what mustn't, to be judged only by the constituted norms.

With panopticism . . . there would no longer be inquiry, but supervision and examination. . . . A constant supervision of individuals by someone who exercised a power over them . . . and who, so long as he exercised power, had the possibility of both supervising and constituting a knowledge concerning those he supervised. A knowledge that now . . . was about whether an individual was behaving as he

57. Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 175.

58. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 202.

should, in accordance with the rule or not, and whether he was progressing or not. This new knowledge was no longer organized around the questions: "Was this done? Who did it?" It was no longer organized in terms of presence and absence, of existence and nonexistence; it was organized around the norm, in terms of what was normal or not, correct or not, in terms of what one must do or not do.<sup>59</sup>

In the late twentieth century, we are, claims Foucault, in the age of "social orthopedics," living in a society that is under its own surveillance. Bearing in mind that such technique of social surveillance was first invented by a founding father of utilitarianism, we must ask how we should think of "social orthopedics" in the nineteenth century, in particular in relation to Britain's colonial practice. Bentham's Panopticon was never adopted by the British government in Britain itself, but his panopticism was no doubt put to full use outside Britain, and in a different sphere of experience and action defined by the empire's sense of the need to manage and order the world.

The second half of the nineteenth century was an age of imperial orthopedics and colonial panopticism. If "schoolteacher, foreman, physician, psychiatrist, prison warden" personify, for Foucault, the inhuman discourse of power in the late twentieth century, they are predated and prefigured by colonial officers, traders, diplomats, and missionaries, who were to execute, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, what for them had been constituted as the normal and universal, which would include, for Bowring, free trade and unrestricted access to Canton. Just a few years before the Second Opium War, in 1855, Bowring had successfully opened the markets of Siam, though not without a calculated threat of war.<sup>60</sup> The establishment of a system of free trade in Asia was a job that must be done, for "free trade," he said, "is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is free trade."<sup>61</sup> With regard to the cause of the Second Opium War, Bowring admitted that the "dispute" (over the *Arrow* incident) "was in fact regarded as *a means to an end*, that *end* being the free admission of foreigners to the city of Canton."<sup>62</sup> Like free trade, unrestricted access to Canton here was no

59. Michel Foucault, "Truth and Juridical Forms," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. James D. Faubion, vol. 3 (New York: New Press, 1994), 59.

60. Before his visit to Siam, he wrote the following to the king of that country: "I had a large fleet at my disposal, but that I would rather visit him as a friend than as the bearer of a menacing message." See John Bowring, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 243.

61. See <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing/stories/s496229.htm>.

62. See Lewin B. Bowring, "A Brief Memoir of Sir John Bowring," 24; my emphasis.

doubt understood as a normal part of the colonial world order that must be enforced. Although attributing the *Arrow* dispute to the “lamentable perversity” of the Chinese imperial commissioner Yeh, who refused to “hold intercourse with high European officials at his Yamun,” Bowring later admitted that the failure to find “a better cause of quarrel . . . than ‘Arrow’ affair” was “a subject of regret.”<sup>63</sup> Interesting to note is not only the colonial conscious or unconscious in his regret, but also the internalized utilitarian idiom in which he spoke and thought about the war that led to a series of the most savage and bloodiest of conflicts between Britain and China.

Indeed, in legitimating and justifying its cause of action, the deceptiveness of the principle of utility lies in its mask of state authority and in its argument for the ethical end of collective happiness. However, “[the] injunction to do whatever will produce the best overall consequences places no fixed limits on what people might do”; what utilitarianism may encourage is “a kind of cynicism in which nothing the state did could be described simply as morally intolerable, since it was always possible to find consequentialist reasons to justify what had been done.”<sup>64</sup> If “in the twentieth century of Stalin, Hitler and the Holocaust, this was no merely abstract consideration,”<sup>65</sup> the link between utilitarianism and colonialism in the nineteenth century has had more concrete manifestations, such as the brutality of the utilitarian logic we have seen in the nineteenth century in this part of the world—the Second Opium War, which, instigated by a prominent utilitarian follower, led to the burning and sacking of Yuan Ming Yuan. Isn’t it a holocaust in the original and true sense of the word that was carried out under the order of an imperial state, a holocaust that almost all major contemporary liberal thinkers failed to respond to? Much as the silence of the media and British government over the “English atrocities in China” at that time, the failure of the proponents of utilitarianism to present a forceful and sustained theoretical response to British imperialism at its most active and aggressive in the mid-nineteenth century was not an unintended theoretical silence.<sup>66</sup> Not only was the absence of such a critical response striking;

63. Lewin B. Bowring, “A Brief Memoir of Sir John Bowring,” 24.

64. Miller and Dagger, “Utilitarianism and Beyond,” 451.

65. Miller and Dagger, “Utilitarianism and Beyond,” 451.

66. Karl Marx, in another journalistic article for the *New York Daily Tribune*, wrote, “How silent is the press of England upon the outrageous violations of the treaty daily practiced by foreigners living in China under British occupation! We hear nothing of the illicit opium trade, which yearly feeds the British treasury at the expense of human life and morality. . . . We hear nothing of the bullying spirit often exercised against the timid nature of the Chi-

Bowring's direct participation in the colonial project of the British Empire testified to the very possibility of an ideological coalition between utilitarianism and imperialism, precisely because utilitarianism might be employed as "the liberal justification of empire."<sup>67</sup> Not just utilitarian tenets but, more generally, as Mehta argues, liberal assumptions about reason and social progress constituted a theoretical origin of British imperialism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>68</sup>

In practical terms, Bentham's contribution to the British Empire was considerable, even though he was considered to be "a Radical" and "a life-long adversary of the old Colonial system."<sup>69</sup> In defending Bentham's contribution to the building and consolidating of the British Empire and its influence across the globe, C. K. Ogden felt the need to rectify what he called "the conservative" historians' negligence of Bentham's important place in the history of the British Empire. "It is hardly too much to say," in Ogden's view, "that but for [Bentham's] influence all the reddest patches on the Map would long ago have gone as pale a pink as those of the United States."<sup>70</sup> Ogden collected compelling facts to evidence Bentham's "share in building up the British Empire" and his influence on the administering of the British colonies. In Australia, one of Bentham's collaborators in his educational projects, Edward Wakefield, secured from Bentham "a scheme for the formation of a joint stock Colonization Society," and "Wakefield's colonial enter-

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nese, or of the vice introduced by foreigners at the ports open to their trade. We hear nothing of all this and of much more, first, because the majority of people out of China care little about the social and moral condition of that country; and secondly, because it is the part of policy and prudence not to agitate topics where no pecuniary advantage would result. Thus, the English people at home, who look no farther than the grocer's where they buy their tea, are prepared to swallow all the misrepresentations which the Ministry and the Press choose to thrust down the public throat." Marx, "English Atrocities in China," in *Collected Works*, 15:234–35.

67. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, 2.

68. Mehta argues that "it is liberal and progressive thinkers such as Bentham, both the Mills, and Macaulay, who . . . endorse the empire as a legitimate form of political and commercial governance; who justify and accept its largely undemocratic and nonrepresentative structure; who invoke as politically relevant categories such as history, ethnicity, civilizational hierarchies, and occasionally race and blood ties; and who fashion arguments for the empire's at least temporary necessity and foreseeable prolongation" (*Liberalism and Empire*, 2).

69. C. K. Ogden, *Jeremy Bentham, 1832–2032; Being the Bentham Centenary Lecture, Delivered in University College, London, on June 6th, 1932* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1993), 20.

70. Ogden, *Jeremy Bentham, 1832–2032*, 21.



prises,” thanks to their link with Bentham’s name, received, from Bentham’s disciples, including John S. Mill, “the support which ensured their success.” Ogden asserts, not without some exaggeration, that “the foundation of the English Australasian colonies was primarily a Benthamite exploit.” In North America, French Canadians’ revolt in 1838 prompted the British government to send “a couple of Benthamites to advise on the situation.” “The result was,” Ogden tells us, “a Benthamite Constitution which solved all the difficulties of Canada.” How about Britain’s largest colony, India? “Macaulay, under the direct influence of Bentham, had introduced the Indian Penal Code, almost as Bentham would have drafted it; so that . . . Bentham, ‘who had failed to give a legal code to England, did actually become the posthumous legislator of the vastest of her possessions.’”<sup>71</sup>

My overreliance on Ogden for Bentham’s contribution to the British Empire is not meant to make a historical claim on the basis of this account by Ogden, who was, at best, an amateur historian as he was an amateur linguist. Ogden’s glowing praises of Bentham’s singular achievements and his contributions to the British Empire were delivered as the “Bentham Centenary lecture” to commemorate this master thinker, who, by no accident, inspired the project of Basic English, for which Ogden and his friend and rival I. A. Richards are remembered. As I discussed elsewhere, Basic English, another product of Benthamite utilitarianism in some sense, affords, in the domain of language, one more example of the totalitarian orientation of utilitarianism.<sup>72</sup>

## Epilogue

To return to where this essay started: although the Elgin Marbles as aesthetic objects inspired sensational responses from the British public, Elgin himself came under attack from Byron and others. Compelled by the need to protect his name, Elgin produced a “memorandum” and made, in a third-person voice, an appealing apology for his action. The Grecian sculptures, consummations of human creative genius, had been every

71. Ogden, *Jeremy Bentham, 1832–2032*, 21–23. Ogden is probably influenced by Halévy’s classic study *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*, in which Halévy discusses in greater detail the relations between Bentham, utilitarianism, and the colonial empire of Britain; see Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*, in particular, 510–11.

72. See my essay “The Bathos of a Universalism: I. A. Richards and His Basic English,” in *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations*, ed. Lydia H. Liu (Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 331–54.

day exposed to “very wilful devastation,” and even travelers “became possessed, each according to his means, of some relic, however small, of buildings or statues which had formed the pride of Greece.”<sup>73</sup> The Temple of Minerva, for example,

had been converted into a powder magazine, and was in great part shattered, from a shell falling upon it, during the bombardment of Athens, by the Venetians towards the end of the seventeenth century; and even this accident has not deterred the Turks from applying the beautiful Temple of Neptune and Erectheus to the same use, whereby it is still constantly exposed to a similar fate. . . . In addition to these causes of degradation, the ignorant Turks will frequently climb up the ruined walls, and amuse themselves in defacing any sculpture they can reach; or in breaking columns, statues, or other remains of antiquity, in the fond expectation of finding within them some hidden treasures.<sup>74</sup>

Following descriptions of the danger of all kinds the sculptures had been exposed to, Lord Elgin mounted a defense of and an argument for the legitimacy to remove them: “Under these circumstances, Lord Elgin felt himself irresistibly impelled to endeavour to preserve, by removal from Athens, any specimens of sculpture, he could, without injury, rescue from such impending ruin.”<sup>75</sup>

What Elgin presented here is a classic form of defense of colonial practice, classic because it would reincarnate in history and is employed in our time. Not only does it, in its various forms of articulation and for different contexts, continue to exert a strong influence on the popular understanding of the destructiveness of colonial agents in the past but it remains an effective piece of political rhetoric and still vibrates in postcolonial discourse and global politics today. Lord Elgin’s self-defense strikes a transhistorical chord with the views about utilitarian beneficial ends of colonial brutality as distilled in the problematic notion of “colonial modernity”—whatever one may have to say about Bowring and others in their practice of British colonial expansionism in the mid-nineteenth century, Hong Kong has maintained its prosperity and peace, just as the treasures of Greek art have been at least preserved, regardless of the barbarity of Elgin’s action. The colonization of India and

73. [Lord Elgin], *Memorandum on the Subject of the Earl of Elgin’s Pursuits in Greece*, 2nd ed. (London: Printed for John Murray, 1815), 6–7.

74. [Lord Elgin], *Memorandum*, 7–8.

75. [Lord Elgin], *Memorandum*, 8.

other parts of Southeast Asia has radically transformed these societies and left them a structure of modernity and a language in which that modernity is fully expressed as part of globalization. It is not too far a stretch to think of the defense of the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, which, we are told, though not justifiable in terms of the alleged Iraqi violation of the UN resolutions on its “weapons of mass destruction,” may be at least justified by what the war will have brought to the people of Iraq in the end: a democracy that would contribute eventually to the collective happiness of the majority of the Iraqis who could expect to live without the fear of a dictatorship.

Thinking of the fragmented grandeur of those Elgin Marbles in the British Museum or the auratic ruins of Yuan Ming Yuan, I feel there is a moral imperative to have a critical response to the utilitarian morality and rationality in the context of British colonialism. Lord Elgin’s defense of his removal of the sculptures worked in accordance with the temporal logic of utilitarianism: history would prove eventually that it was perfectly justifiable. However, what is wrong with his defense is not just its chauvinism but its total lack of morality. Its mendacity lies in its surreptitious ethical inversion, in which the immoral origin is overshadowed and glossed over by its apparent benign or beneficial coda. Its striking utilitarian logic is supplemented by an equally striking instrumental reason and utilitarian rationality, and its immoral a priori is replaced by an ethical telos.

How could one continue to discuss the aesthetic of the Elgin Marbles without at the same time being reminded of their history? Is it still possible to speak of “the noble simplicity” and “tranquil grandeur” of Greek art, as Keats did, in the presence of these “[m]is-shapen,” “maimed,” and “mutilated” Greek “antiques,” whose “aura” has been irrecoverably damaged since the very moment Lord Elgin’s “Phidian freaks” turned them into reified objects?<sup>76</sup> Tourists will, no doubt, continue to visit the British Museum and admire the Elgin Marbles on exhibition despite the deprivation of their “cult value”; but how many of them know or remember Byron’s “committed” poetry about these sculptures? Keats’s active forgetting of the history of the marbles and the conditions under which they were brought to Scotland and then to England is evidence of one of the most scandalous aspects of the romantic aesthetic, and, for that matter, of modern and contemporary formalistic critical practice, whose own politics is firmly rooted in its antisocial and antipolitical aesthetics.

Theodor Adorno’s poignant dictum—“it is barbaric to continue to

76. See Byron, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, 1:261.

write poetry after Auschwitz”—will be no less relevant for us in considering the aesthetic taste in the nineteenth century than it is for Adorno in his discussion of *l'art pour l'art* in the mid-twentieth century; for “it expresses, negatively, the impulse that animates committed literature.”<sup>77</sup> Adorno’s “committed literature,” as distinguished from *l'art pour l'art*, “works toward an attitude,”<sup>78</sup> not just the public’s but also ours, toward art and culture, toward history and society. In the moral desert of imperialism, in the field of cultural and aesthetic ruins, and in the current planetary disorder, is there any possibility for cultural criticism to escape “the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism”?<sup>79</sup>

77. Theodor W. Adorno, “Commitment,” in *Notes to Literature*, trans. S. W. Nichol森, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 87.

78. Adorno, “Commitment,” 79.

79. Theodor Adorno, “Culture Criticism and Society,” in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O’Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 210.