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Roderick S. Speer

Byron and the Scottish Literary Tradition



It has been over forty years since T. S. Eliot proposed that we consider Byron as a Scottish poet.¹ Since then, anthologies of Scottish verse and histories of Scottish literature seldom neglect to mention, though always cursorily, Byron's rightful place in them. The anthologies typically make brief reference to Byron and explain that his work is so readily available elsewhere it need be included in short samples or not at all.² An historian of the Scots tradition argues for Byron's Scottishness but of course cannot treat a writer who did not use Scots.³ This position at least disagrees with Edwin Muir's earlier argument that with the late eighteenth century passing of Scots from everyday to merely literary use, a Scottish literature of greatness had passed away.⁴ Kurt Wittig, in his more comprehensive view of the Scottish tradition, takes the bold but merely suggestive position that "We shall not finally arrive at a full understanding of the work of Byron...until we have considered certain aspects of it in the light of Scottish tradition."⁵ No significant studies have been conducted along these lines: the most determined so far, that of Nannie Katherine Wells, is idiosyncratic and lacking in system.⁶ The standing verdict remains that of David Craig, that "Efforts to trace Scottish influences on Bryon never seem to have found anything tangible."⁷ The purpose of the present essay is to put these

efforts into perspective and to propose a model for the inclusion of Byron in a Scottish literary tradition.

The problem with conjunctions of Byron and the Scottish tradition is, first of all, that they seldom get beyond biographical statement.⁸ We know that his boyhood to the age of ten was spent in Aberdeen; that he affected Scottish themes in some of his early poetry ("Lachin y Gair," "I Would a Careless Child," "When I Roved a Young Highlander"); that after initial misunderstanding, a friendship with Walter Scott ripened into the most cherished of Byron's life; that late in his life he could finally assert that he was "half a Scot by birth, and bred a whole one" (*Don Juan*, X.xvii); and in his last full work could declare for the formative nature of his early Scottish experience:

...nourished amidst Nature's native scenes,
Loved to the last, whatever intervenes
Between us and our Childhood's sympathy,
Which still reverts to what first caught the eye.
He who first met the Highland's swelling blue
Will love each peak that shows a kindred hue...

The infant rapture still survived the boy,
And Loch-na-gar with Ida looked o'er Troy,
Mixed Celtic memories with the Phrygian mount,
And Highland linn with Castalie's clear fount.
(*The Island*, II.xii.276-81, 290-93)⁹

Eliot's purpose, and his theory of the depth psychology of the poet, led him to overlook Byron's awareness of his Scottishness. In comparing Byron to Scott, he declared in the 1937 essay that "Possibly Byron, who must have thought of himself as an English poet, was the more Scotch of the two because of being unconscious of his true nationality." Eliot apparently thought better of the matter, and removed this sentence from a later edition of the essay.¹⁰ Indeed, Byron was highly conscious of his nationality: Scottishness is the only national affiliation he ever claimed. This biographical background, however, proves little in itself and provides only an opening for attempting to discriminate critically the Scottishness of Byron's writing.

The second problem with previous attempts at this theme has been their erring to extremes of specificity or generality. To know that "We'll go no more a roving" is based on an old Scottish ballad proves nothing for the whole of Byron's poetry. Likewise, to seek reference to matter of Scotland is to discover a negligible quantity of Byron's poetry. In fact, when he came to *Don Juan*, Byron seems to have heeded Lockhart's advice

that Sir Walter "has Scotland all to himself," and that Byron should write of what he now knew best, English society.¹¹ Going to the other extremes, Byron's share of Scottish literary characteristics is often treated with such generality that it fails of critical precision: the recklessness, indecorousness, and madcap independence of the late satires are touched upon, not explored, and not related to the rest of Byron's work.¹² Or the "gloomy Calvinism" of his boyhood serves as background for his Byronic Hero, but leaves the later satires out of account.¹³ Both extremes of approach leave us with a fragmented Byron.

What is needed, then, for references to Byron's Scottishness to be convincing is, first, a critically incisive account, one which explains features of his work which do not fit an English tradition but do fit a Scottish one--for the fact remains that Byron has been an anomaly in the English tradition in tone and theme. Second, this account should aim at comprehensiveness, explaining the darker as well as lighter qualities of Byron's poetry.

In what follows, I propose a "Scottish" model for Byron's work, based on standard accounts of the Scottish literary tradition and on comparisons with quintessentially Scottish writers, notably Dunbar and Burns. Byron's poetry reveals (1) a belief in human fatedness, the pressure of this belief finding outlet in (2) a self-assertive exuberance and extravagance, and resulting in (3) an ambivalent appreciation of the antithetical nature of man. These points outlined, some observations can be made on a phenomenon in which Byron shares, that of the Scottish writer in English literature.

(1) Fatalism. It has been said that a "vision of human weakness in the face of unmanageable forces lies behind all of Byron's work...it is the outside limiting factor, like the 'fate' of the Greeks, that nothing can be done about."¹⁴ Better yet, it is like Scottish fatalism. The trauma of the Scottish struggle with a harsh climate, a poor land, and a powerful England gave the Scottish literary tradition a vision of fatedness, of life as a losing battle, and was in time (after Dunbar, of course) to make a theology of damnation fitting:

Death followis life with gapend mouth
Devouring fruit and flowering grans.

(Dunbar, "All Erdly Joy Returnis in Pane")¹⁵

Dunbar's poetry is filled with this wintry sense of mortality and disadvantage, and his sad refrains are probably the best-known feature of his work: "*Timor mortis conturbat me*," "For

in this world may none assure," "All erdly joy returnis in pane."¹⁶ Dunbar expresses the earthly course of things.

Yisterday fair up sprang the flouris,
This day thai ar all slane with schouris...
(*"Of the Changes of Lyfe"*)

and Burns,

But pleasures are like poppies spread,
You seize the flower, its bloom is shed...
(*"Tam O'Shanter"*)¹⁷

For Burns, life was a trap designed by the Devil, a "spider snare/O' hell's damned waft" (*"Poem on Life"*) in which "fore-sight may be vain" (*"To a Mouse"*): "Nae man can tether time or tide" (*"Tam O' Shanter"*).

While recent scholarship has disparaged Calvinism as the dominating force of Byron's vision and stressed other intellectual currents such as the pessimist historians of the eighteenth century, it has perhaps been unduly narrow in understanding this general Scottish background. In fact, in his earliest poetry Byron gives a Scottish historical setting for heroism. Reflecting on "chieftans long perished," on "the forms of my fathers," Byron reveres their futile struggle:

'Ill-starred, though brave, did no visions foreboding
Tell you that fate had forsaken your cause?'
Ah! were you destined to die at Culloden,
Victory crowned not your fall with applause...
(*"Lachin y Gair"*)

Here, in "The steep frowning glories of dark Loch na Garr," do we not find the roots of Byronic Heroism? All his works show us heroes doomed by the laws of God or man, except possibly for Don Juan, but Juan cherishes no expectations and is worn by experience in the course of that work. Heroism for Byron was human persistence in a losing battle with dark spirits which, as *Manfred* shows us, are the ones we most directly confront in this life. His most characteristic utterance was "There's not a joy the world can give like that it takes away." This is not a Shelleyan deploring the inferiority of earthly delight, but the regret of a man, sensually appreciative of those delights after the manner of a Dunbar or Burns, over their loss.

These poets did not linger in sheer pessimism, however. "There is that within me which shall tire torture and time," Byron asserted, and we find all these great poets elaborating

unique modes of protest against the nature of things.

(2) Exuberance and Extravagance. In Scottish literature we find a self-assertive exuberance and extravagance asserted vigorously in response to the restrictions of life. It may take the form of excoriating abusiveness or puckish, idiosyncratic humor: in either case, the writer opposes his own vitality--"my internal spirit cut a caper" (*Don Juan*)--to the forces hedging him in.

Dunbar's great contribution here is *flyting*, a form of lusty vituperation which Eliot found, in the "exhilarating" abusiveness of the Dedicatory stanzas of *Don Juan*, to set Byron's satire within a Scottish rather than an English tradition. Wittig gives this general account of the technique:

Flyting and extravagance run like a red thread through the literature of Britain's whole Celtic fringe. True flyting, as we saw it in Dunbar, has little in common with satire and social criticism. It is essentially an act of revolt, primitive and unashamed, against all socially-imposed restraint; it revels in the sensuous as such; and in seeking to assert its own stubborn individualism it is quite prepared to let everything else "gang tapsalteerie," or to the Devil if need be.¹⁸

Here is Dunbar attacking Kennedy:

Iersch brybour baird, vyle beggar with thy brattis,
Cuntbitten crawdoun Kennedy, coward of kynd,
Evill farit and dryit, as Denselman on the rattis,
Lyke as the gleddis had on thy gule snowt dynd;
Mismaid monstour, ilk mone owt of thy mynd,
Renunce, rebald, thy rymyng, thow bot royis,
Thy trechour tung has tane ane heland stryng;
Ane lawland ers wald mak a bettir noyis.

Byron hurls Regency obscenity at Southey in the Dedication to *Don Juan*, depicting his literary impotence ("Fall, for lack of moisture, quite a-dry, Bob!"), and excoriates Castlereagh: "Cold-blood, smooth-faced, placid miscreant!/Dabbling its sleek young hands in Erin's gore..." It is only in "The Curse of Minerva," however, that Byron explicitly uses *flyting* in its pure, alliterative style: "Each breeze from every foggy mount and marshy plain/Dilutes with drivel every drizzly brain." But in "Curse," *English Bards*, and *Don Juan*, it is perhaps the vehemence and comprehensiveness of Byron's attack, going beyond the conventional limits of wit, which reminded Eliot of *flyting*.

Byron's satire is certainly not "primitive," but it does represent a libertarianism rare in English, in the service of an extreme individualist.

Turning from the concept of *flyting* as applied to Byron's satire, one sees that extravagance remains a factor in Byron's style: the sensational qualities of so many of his heroes, obsessed as they are with sins of seemingly superhuman significance; the grotesque incongruities of the shipwreck episode in *Don Juan*; the flippant treatment of love in *Beppo*, of royalty in *The Vision of Judgment*, and of everything in *Don Juan*. Eliot speaks of Byron's "reckless raffish honesty," suggesting that his plunge to extremes serves a serious realistic purpose. Walter Scott found the apt comparison for Byron's kind of recklessness in Burns:

Burns, in depth of poetical feeling, in strong shrewd sense to balance and regulate this, in the *tact* to make his poetry tell by connecting it with the stream of public thought and the sentiment of the age, in *commanded* wildness of fancy and profligacy or recklessness as to moral and *occasionally* as to religious matters, was much more like Lord Byron than any other person to whom Lord B. says he had been compared.¹⁹

Indeed, we find Burns going so far, in attacking rigid Calvinist orthodoxy in "Address to the Devil," as to suggest that Satan might "still hae a stake," might still be redeemed. And Byron, in *Cain*, can show the dullness and sanctimoniousness of Abel and make Cain a hero. Yet such iconoclasm is coupled with a madcap spirit which suggests a controlling comic perspective on life, what may be called the antithetical vision.

(3) The Antithetical Mind. The embracing of extremes has long been observed to be characteristic of Scottish literature. G. Gregory Smith observed of the "Two Moods" of the Scottish Muse and cited other writers on its "polar twins...intermingledons...clean contrair spirit...oxymoronic essence...Caledonian antisyzygy."²⁰ Dunbar had declared that life was an affair of alternating opposites:

The stait of man dois change and vary,
Now sound, now seik, now blyth, now sary,
Now dansand merry, now like to dee...

("Lament for the Makaris")

And Burns had testified:

Dame life, tho' fiction out may trick her,
 And in peste gems and frippery deck her;
 Oh! flickering, feeble, and unsicker
 I've found her still,
 Ay wavering like the willow wicker,
 'Tween good and ill.
 ("Poem on Life")

Byron admired the quality of mind which entertained this perspective, for in 1813, when he was lent a quantity of Burns' unpublished letters, he made this tribute:

What an antithetical mind!--tenderness, roughness, delicacy, coarseness--sentiment, sensuality--soaring and grovelling, dirt and diet--all mixed up in that one compound of inspired clay!²¹

It was a compound Byron was to achieve, but only after suffering from some of its anguishing implications:

How beautiful is all this visible world!
 How glorious in its action and itself!
 But we, who name ourselves its sovereigns, we,
 Half dust, half deity, alike unfit
 To sink or soar, with our mixed essence make
 A conflict of its elements...
 (*Manfred*, I.ii.37-42)

Burns brought the variousness of human life into a formally controlled and fruitful antithesis, what Wittig has called "antithetical juxtaposition."²² Burns' technique applies to incongruity of situation, for example a louse crawling over a fine lady's bonnet, to point up social pretentiousness ("To a Louse"); or of behavior, as in Holy Willie's selfishness and profanity and his professed humility and orthodoxy ("Holy Willie's Prayer"); or of presentation, as in the affectionate statement in "To a Mouse" of man's bleak condition. In the crowd scenes of "The Holy Fair," we find concise antitheses of human behavior:

Here, some are thinkan on their sins,
 An' some upo' their class...

 There's some are fou o' *love divine*;
 There's some are fou o' *brandy*.

Byron's *ottava rima* masterpieces mark his emergence as a great "antithetical mind" of the Burnsean cast. The structure

and content of his artistic achievement is the juxtaposing of opposites in a "versified Aurora Borealis," as he called *Don Juan*: the sacred jostles with the profane, the sublime with the ridiculous, the tragic with the comic.

There's nought, no doubt, so much the spirit calms
As rum and true religion.

They grieved for those who perished with the cutter,
And also for the biscuit-casks and butter.

For both Burns and Byron, antithesis serves to deflate pretension, to remind that the ideal is absurd when it forgets the real. Antitheses reveals the "skeptical, ironic downrightness" which, David Craig asserts, is "the standard idiom of Scottish poetry."²³

(4) Internationalism. It is a curious fact that up through the nineteenth century, the writers in English who had the greatest influence on the continent (disregarding Shakespeare, always an exception) were all Scottish in origin: Burns, Ossian, Scott, Byron, and Carlyle. And certainly in the Romantic period this was the case: as Arnold Hauser has observed, Byron and Scott alone of British Romantics "set intellectual traffic flowing backwards and forwards between the countries of Europe."²⁴ While Continental literary scholars have traditionally regarded Byron and Scott as the central Romantics produced in English literature, the English have seen them as off-center.

Their Scottish origins, the sense of coming from outside the literature to which they were contributing, may be a significant factor here. T. S. Eliot felt that

Byron's satire upon English society, in the latter part of *Don Juan*, is something for which I can find no parallel in English literature. He was right in making the hero of his house-party a Spaniard, for what Byron understands and dislikes about English society is very much what an intelligent foreigner in the same position would understand and dislike.²⁵

Byron's outsideness with regard to English society was due to a combination of factors: his consciousness of his Scottish background was one, and that consciousness grew as other factors, social and political, came into play. "I have not loved the world, nor the world me" (*Childe Harold* III) was his defiant response to that public reaction to his amorous life which forced him abroad. Further, the anti-liberal spirit of the

British government in his time, a government secure in military victory by 1815, left little scope in England for Byron's political sympathies.

So Byron became a man living abroad, lending allegiance to national struggles outside Britain--in Italy, in Greece. He was like those Scottish soldiers who fought on the Continent when there was no fighting possible at home, and of whom the best fictional example is Scott's Dugald Dalgetty, a Thirty Years War veteran, in *A Legend of Montrose*. Byron made reference to Dalgetty when he thought of joining in the Italian agitation for a constitution in 1820: "they won't get it without some *fechtung*, as we Scottish say...if matters wax serious, I should not like to sit twirling my thumbs, but perhaps 'take service,' like Dugald Dalgetty and his horse, on the savage side of the question." With the Scottish fight for independence a thing of the past, alive only in Scott's novels which he constantly read and reread, and with English libertarianism effectively suppressed, Byron's support of the cause had to become international in scope. It was part of his ability to appeal to all men which has been characteristic of other great Scottish writers in English. We should not find it unusual to locate Byron within a Scottish literary tradition.

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NOTES

¹ "Byron" in Bonamy Dobrée, ed., *From Anne to Victoria: Essays by Various Hands* (London, 1937), pp. 601-19.

² E. G. Hugh MacDiarmid, ed., *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Verse* (New York, 1941); John MacQueen and Tom Scott, eds., *The Oxford Book of Scottish Verse* (London, 1966); Tom Scott, ed., *The Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (London, 1970).

³ John Speirs, *The Scots Literary Tradition* (2nd ed., London, 1962), p. 23.

⁴ *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (London, 1936).

⁵ Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh, 1958), p. 240.

⁶ Nannie Katherine Wells, *George Gordon, Lord Byron: A Scottish Genius* (Montreux, Switzerland, 1966).

⁷ David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People: 1680-1830* (London, 1961), p. 282, n. 1.

⁸ As in J. D. Symon, *Byron in Perspective* (n.p., 1924); and Armistead C. Gordon, *Allegra: The Story of Byron and Miss Claremont* (New York, 1926).

⁹ All Byron poetry citations from Ernest Hartley Coleridge, ed., *The Work of Lord Byron: Poetry* (London, 1898-1904). Byron's relation to Scott is studied in John Clubbe, "Byron and Scott," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* XV (Spring, 1973), 67-91; and in my "Byron and Scott: The Waverley Novels and Byron's Life and Works" dissertation (Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1974).

¹⁰ *From Anne to Victoria*, p. 602. Cf. *On Poetry and Poets* (London, 1957), p. 194.

¹¹ *John Bull's Letter to Lord Byron* (1821; ed. Alan Lang Strout, Norman, Okla., 1947), pp. 94, 96.

¹² Speirs, pp. 23-24, in his excellent comparison of Byron and Burns.

¹³ Eliot, *From Anne to Victoria*, pp. 603-04.

¹⁴ George M. Ridenour, "Byron in 1816: Four Poems from Diodati," in Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom, eds., *From Sensibility to Romanticism* (New York, 1965), p. 459.

¹⁵ Dunbar poetry citations from W. Mackay MacKenzie, ed., *The Poems of William Dunbar* (1932; rev. Bruce Dickins, London, 1960).

¹⁶ From "Lament for the Makaris," "None May Assure in This World," "All Erdly Joy Returnis in Pane."

¹⁷ Burns Poetry citations from James Kinsley, ed., *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* (London, 1968).

¹⁸ *Scottish Tradition*, p. 210.

¹⁹ From Rowland E. Prothero, ed., *The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals* (London, 1898-1901), II, 376, n. 2.

²⁰ *Scottish Literature: Character & Influence* (London, 1919), ch. 1.

²¹ *LJ*, II, 376-77, *Journal* for 31 December 1813.

²² *Scottish Tradition*, p. 297.

²³ *Scottish Literature*, p. 76.

²⁴ *The Social History of Art* (London, 1951), II, 703.

²⁵ *From Anne to Victoria*, pp. 617-18.