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Donald A. Low

Byron and Burns

Byron's intelligence and humanity are present in almost all of his scattered remarks on Burns. He inherited an influential—and inaccurate—biographical tradition that Burns drank himself to death, as can be seen in a journal entry of 16 November 1813:

Read Burns to-day. What would he have been, if a patrician? We should have had more polish—less force—just as much verse, but no immortality—a divorce and a duel or two, the which had he survived, as his potations must have been less spirituous, he might have lived as long as Sheridan, and outlived as much as poor Brinsley. What a wreck is that man! and all from bad pilotage; for no one had ever better gales, though now and then a little too squally. Poor dear Sherry!¹

Less than a month later, another Journal entry shows the degree to which his curiosity had been awakened:

Allen . . . has lent me a quantity of Burns's unpublished, and never-to-be-published, Letters. They are full of oaths and obscene songs. What an antithetical mind!—tenderness, roughness—delicacy, coarseness—sentiment, sensuality—soaring and grovelling, dirt and deity—all mixed up in that one compound of inspired clay!²

¹*Lord Byron: Selected Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (Cambridge, MA, 1982), p. 85.

²*Ibid.*, p. 93.

As a student of human nature, Byron was intrigued by the incongruity of polite sentimental letters to which Burns had added postscripts containing obscene snatches of prose and bawdy songs. He returns to the subject in a letter of February 1821 to John Murray, a spirited contribution to the W. L. Bowles controversy over Pope. On this occasion, he ends with a brief tribute to the Scottish poet: "the rank of *Burns* is the very first of his art."³ The justice of this single remark is striking; but so also is the fact that his earlier summing-up of Burns could be applied with fair accuracy to Byron himself. "What an antithetical mind!—tenderness, roughness—delicacy, coarseness—sentiment, sensuality—soaring and grovelling, dirt and deity—all mixed up in that one compound of inspired clay!" Perhaps he understood Burns because he knew himself.

There are of course very real differences between the two poets. One was of high birth, and accustomed to social privilege; he went to Harrow, then kept his bear in the turret of a decidedly imposing Cambridge college. Later, he travelled widely. The other was the son of a poor farmer, and had to make the most of little schooling and no college at all except that of life in the Ayrshire countryside. When literary success brought him temporary prosperity, he toured the Scottish Borders and Highlands, but for the rest had little opportunity to travel, and crossed the border into England only once in his life in the summer of 1787.

Differences in social background, educational opportunity, and travel experience count for much. Then there is the fact that Byron and Burns contribute to quite distinct literary traditions. It is true, of course, that many of Burns's poems are written in English, but they are seldom his best poems. His first spoken language was Scots. T S Eliot pigeon-holed him, just a trifle patronizingly and reductively as the "decadent representative of a great alien tradition."⁴ "Decadent" in this context is certainly a loaded word. However, it can be conceded that Burns inherits and contributes to a different tradition from that in which Byron did his best work. The apparently casual production of poised verse about society owes something to the mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease in seventeenth century, and more to Byron's enjoyment of Italy. Incidentally, Burns makes fun of the Grand Tour in the opening poem in his first published collection, the Kilmarnock edition. In this poem, "The Twa Dogs," he pictures a young sprig of the nobility

³*Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Donald A. Low (London & Boston, 1974), p. 326.

⁴*The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Cambridge, MA, 1933), p. 98.

At Operas an' Plays parading,
 Mortgaging, gambling, masquerading:
 Or maybe, in a frolic daft,
 To HAGUE or CALAIS takes a waft,
 To make a *tour* an' take a whirl,
 To learn *bon ton* an' see the worl'.

There, at VIENNA or VERSAILLES,
 He rives his father's auld entails;
 Or by MADRID he takes the rout,
 To thrum *guitarres* an' fecht wi' *nowr*;
 Or down *Italian Vista* startles,
 Wh-re-hunting amang groves o' myrtles . . .⁵

Not that there is any close connection between this spirited, even envious caricature and Byron's highly individual lifestyle in Venice . . .

Walter Scott met both Burns and Byron, and knew the poetry of each well. In his view they had a good deal in common. He wrote twice on the subject. On the first occasion, he pointed to intellectual resemblances which impressed him more than did incidental differences in social rank between the two:

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.

A gross blunder of the English public has been talking of Burns as if the character of his poetry ought to be estimated with an eternal recollection that he was a *peasant*. It would be just as proper to say that Lord Byron ought always to be thought of as a *Peer*. Rank in life was nothing to either in his true moments. Then, they were both great Poets. Some silly and sickly affectation connected with the accidents of birth and breeding may be observed in both, when they are not under the influence of 'the happier star.' Witness Burns's prate about independence, when he was an exciseman, and Byron's ridiculous pretence of Republicanism, when he never wrote sincerely about the Multitude without expressing or insinuating the very soul of scorn.⁶

⁵"The Twa Dogs," ll. 153-164. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford 1968), I, 142.

⁶Undated MS note by Scott. *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 259-60.

With regard to the final comments here, I need only remind you that Scott was a lifelong Tory. No Whig or radical critic—like, say, William Hazlitt—could possibly accept his downgrading of Byron's political integrity; and even today Scott seems to treat less than objectively Burns's commitment to the idea of independence. An instinctive subversive spirit of radicalism is present in both Byron and Burns. But the first part of Scott's criticism stands. Byron and Burns do indeed resemble each other as poets; first of all in their "depth of . . . feeling" and "strong shrewd sense"; next, in possessing an instinctive awareness of how to reach out to the public, a quality which Scott refers to as "the tact to make [their] poetry tell by connecting it with the stream of public thought and the sentiment of the age"; and further, in commanded or controlled "wildness of fancy . . . or recklessness as to moral and *occasionally* as to religious matters". It is no more than the simple truth that rank in life was "nothing to either in his true moments." Lady Blessington for one made too much of Byron's consciousness of rank, just as James Currie and others tended to insist too much on Burns's feelings of disadvantage.⁷ What matters altogether more than incidentals of this kind about Byron and Burns is that in their true moments, as Scott claims, "they were both great Poets."

Scott again links the two poets in his Journal, in a note written on 10 February 1826:

This was the man [Byron]—quaint, capricious, and playful, with all his immense genius. He wrote from impulse never from effort and therefore I have always reckoned Burns and Byron the most genuine poetical geniuses of my time and half a century before me. We have however many men of high poetical talent but none of that ever-gushing, and perennial fountain of natural water.⁸

Given the extent of Scott's reading, and in addition his wide range of personal contacts with living writers of the British Isles, the claim he makes in his Journal is remarkable both in content and in its decisive tone. These two poets, he suggests, stand out from the rest and somehow belong together as "the most genuine poetical geniuses of my time and half a century before me." Scott was born in 1771, which makes it reasonable to assume that he means Pope set a standard of spontaneous poetic creativity matched since only by Byron and by Burns. Dryden, after all, died in 1700.

⁷See *Lady Blessington's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton, 1969); and *The Works of Robert Burns: With An Account of His Life*, ed. James Currie, 4 vols. (Liverpool, 1800).

⁸*Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*, p. 260.

How far this perception is from the baseline orthodoxy of modern academic criticism! Thanks to the fine work of Leslie Marchand, Jerome McGann, and others Byron is increasingly given room in university syllabuses. Even today, though, one senses that Byron is quite often tolerated somewhat grudgingly as a delinquent outsider rather than granted parity of esteem with the more solemn poets of his time. As for Burns, he remains the "decadent representative of a great alien tradition." The fact of his Scottishness is an easy excuse for leaving him well alone or consigning him to a Caledonian ghetto. So far from receiving the level of attention Scott's enthusiastic comments might suggest he deserves, Burns is to all intents and purposes out in the cold, at least as far as formal criticism and higher education are concerned. Here are two pieces of evidence from the United States. In 1939 J. De Lancey Ferguson, who did good work on Burns over many years, complained that his various publications had been greeted only by "an almost passionate apathy."⁹ More than a generation later, Raymond Bentman observed in an essay entitled "Robert Burns's Declining Fame" published in 1972, "Wherever one looks in the scholarship and criticism of the past twenty-five years, Burns is given little or no attention."¹⁰ Things have improved a little since 1972, but I daresay if today one were to run a computer check over the number of times Burns is cited in learned books and articles or for that matter included in mainstream literature courses on either side of the Atlantic, the general position would be found not to have changed very much.¹¹

Universities and academic criticism have a natural bias in favor of what Matthew Arnold called high seriousness. A bias, moreover, in favor of intellectual theories and a framework of conceptual argument, over against random thoughts or insights picked up along the way from mere personal experience. The preference is far what is susceptible to certain types of systematic analysis. Inevitably, this recurrent tendency on the part of the academy leads to the production of learned studies by the score of poets and other writers judged to be intellectually serious, not to say respectable, and to a corresponding disdain of those who refuse to subscribe to the premise that writing is above all an activity to be treated with due solemnity. In this con-

⁹J. De Lancey Ferguson, *Pride and Passion: Robert Burns* (New York, 1939), p. ix.

¹⁰Raymond Bentman, "Robert Burns's Declining Fame," *Studies in Romanticism*, 2, no. 3 (Summer 1972), 207-9.

¹¹Two valuable recent studies are *Burns and Tradition*, by Mary Ellen Brown (Urbana & Chicago, 1984); and Carol McGuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens, GA, 1985).

text of the attitude shown by orthodox academic criticism towards poets like Byron and Burns who dare to be funny, we might apply a remark of the Newfoundland dog Caesar in the poem from which I have already quoted, "The Twa Dogs":

But then, to see how ye're negleket,
 How huff'd, an' cuff'd, an' disrespekot!
 L--d man, our gentry care as little
 For *delvers*, *ditchers*, an' sic cattle;
 They gang as saucy by poor folk,
 As I wad by a stinkan brock.¹²

As I expect you have noticed, incidentally, the two poets I am discussing both responded very positively to the Newfoundland—Caesar as I have mentioned is a Newfoundland—although of course Burn's own dog Luath was a collie.¹³

To turn, though, to the qualities which lead me to bracket the names of Byron and Burns today. In the first place, I associate each poet with a speaking voice. Byron's is a poetry of experience, and a similar claim can confidently be made for Burns.

One aspect of "voice" in their work is that each poet gives us characters who speak distinctively and memorably. For instance, Burns's Holy Willie is placed in a particular context, that of private prayer which happens to be overheard. Formally, "Holly Willie's Prayer" is a satiric dramatic monologue in which Willie unwittingly condemns himself out of his own mouth. Interestingly, Burns quotes a line from Pope as epigraph

And send the Godly in a pet to pray

and also follows Pope's example in supplying the poem with a prose head-note.¹⁴ What could be more Augustan—in clarity, balance, and apparent objectivity—than the first and last sentences of his wickedly apt Argument?

Holy Willie was a rather oldish batchelor Elder in the parish of Mauchline, and much and justly famed for that polemical chattering which ends in tippling Orthodoxy, and for that Spiritualized Bawdry which refines to

¹²"The Twa Dogs," ll. 87-92. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, I, 140.

¹³On Byron and dogs, see Michael Foot, *The Politics of Paradise: A Vindication of Byron* (London, 1988), pp. 395-6.

¹⁴*The Rape of the Lock*, iv. 64.

Liquorish Devotion . . . On losing his Process, the Muse overheard him at his devotions as follows—¹⁵

In terms of achieved quality as satire, "Holly Willie's Prayer" challenges comparison with the best of Pope. It is written in "Standart Habbie," Burns's favorite stanza, the role of which in his work can be compared with Byron's use of *ottava rima*. That is something to which I will return. For the moment, I know you will be interested in something said about Burns and this verse form by a man judged by many to be the best poet writing in English. In an interview for a student newspaper which he gave at Stirling University in 1986, Seamus Heaney paid tribute to Burns's poetic verve and *brio*. He said,

Burns is hard-headed: knowing is too demeaning a word. The Standart Habbie . . . that stanzaic form is very exhilarating. There is a social voice, but there's some kind of wild release in it too, a devil-may-care, debonair thing that outstrips the civic or social verse. It's a very up-and-away freed kind of writing, and you sometimes long for poetry that's fierce-sensible and kind of wild-acting the eejit in a totally salutary way, and most poetry today disappoints you—I suppose I'm speaking here as a reader—because it ends up being very obedient and good writing. We're talking about talent and genius basically now. What you would love to see would be someone coming along like a big express train, like Dryden—and then you wouldn't feel you were reading poetry but reading, not good sense, but some Artesian quality of sanity and energy and display and showing off. When you speak about insularity, you feel that in English poetry there's no big talent letting loose.¹⁶

I find it of considerable interest that in this very perceptive passage about the uninhibited energy he finds in Burns and that he alleges is missing from modern English poetry, Heaney employs an image—"some Artesian quality of sanity and energy and display and showing off"—which directly parallels "that ever-gushing, and perennial fountain of natural water" in Scott's Journal comparison of Byron and Burns.

Just as Burns creates a revolutionary dramatic monologue in "Holy Willie's Prayer," so Byron makes original ironic use of the form also. One example which nicely illustrates his debt to Augustan poetry, even when developing a post-Augustan theme, is *Mazeppa*. Professor McGann refers us to Byron's primary source, Voltaire's *Histoire de Charles XII*, but it is also

¹⁵"Holy Willie's Prayer," epigraph. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, I, 74

¹⁶Seamus Heaney interviewed by David MacLean, *Brig*, Stirling University Students' Association Magazine (November 1985), p. 15.

worth recording that the setting of the poem deliberately and explicitly recalls a celebrated passage in Johnson's *Vanity of Human Wishes*:

On what foundation stands the warrior's pride?
 How just his hopes let *Swedish Charles* decide;
 A frame of adamant, a soul of fire,
 No dangers fright him and no labours tire . . .
 "Think nothing gain'd", he cries, 'till naught remains,
 "On Moscow's walls till Gothic standards fly,
 "And all be mine beneath the polar Sky."
 The march begins in military state,
 And nations on his eye suspended wait;
 Stern Famine guards the solitary coast,
 And Winter barricades the realms of frost;
 He comes, not Want and cold his course delay;—
 Hide, blushing Glory, hide Pultowa's day:
 The vanquish'd hero leaves his broken bands,
 And shows his miseries in distant lands;
 Condemn'd a needy supplicant to wait,
 While ladies interpose, and slaves debate.
 But did not Chance at length her error mend?
 Did no subverted empire mark his end?
 Did rival monarchs give the fatal wound?
 Or hostile millions press him to the ground?
 His fall was destin'd to a barren strand,
 A petty fortress, and a dubious hand;
 He left the name, at which the world grew pale,
 To point a moral, or adorn a tale.¹⁷

There are subtly drawn connections between the autobiographical tale which Mazeppa tells and this earlier poetic portrait of Swedish Charles. In *Mazeppa*, as elsewhere, Byron is keenly interested in the theme of survival—I think of Bonnivard, and also of Juan, who of course has to get out of all sorts of life-threatening scrapes caused by his habit of falling in love. Mazeppa is a likeable fellow, one of Byron's wryly self-aware survivors. His tale shows unflagging narrative energy, as well as engaging candor and absence of regrets about the love affair which nearly cost his life. On the retreat from Pultowa it is clearly very much a matter of the survival of the patient. In view of all he has come through earlier, we feel that he earns the right to impart a message at the end of his story:

¹⁷ On Voltaire see *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford, 1986), IV, 493. The passage quoted is from Samuel Johnson, "The Vanity of Human Wishes. The Tenth Satire of Juvenal Imitated," ll. 191-222, see *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford, 1984), pp. 319-20.

What mortal his own doom may guess?—
Let none despond, let none despair!

Although this moral is offered, by a final Byronic irony there are no royal words of thanks for Mazeppa:

And if ye marvel Charles forgot
To thank his tale, *he* wonder'd not,—
The king had been an hour asleep.¹⁸

But what matters more than Charles' having fallen asleep is that Mazeppa's first-person narrative has won the reader's sympathy and admiration. His vivid experiences live in the imagination. The entire poem is an outstanding example of what I have called Byron's poetry of experience.

Jerome McGann is right, in my view, to claim that "of all the romantic tales, *Mazeppa* is closest in spirit to *Don Juan*." Mazeppa was in many respects a positive young blade, with his heart in the right place; but a single illicit love-affair led to exile in the form of a desperate journey on horse-back towards almost certain death. Let me gently remind you that the poet of *Don Juan* differs from, say, the poet of *The Prelude* in that he chooses to write about sex as if it actually counts for something. We sense straightaway that *Don Juan* is going to be different from other literary works of its period: its subject is—or at least includes somewhere near its center—a representative selection of the possible absurd discoveries and varying degrees of happiness and misadventures of men and women falling in and out of love. Byron finds all aspects of his theme congenial. Now, here is another major similarity between Byron and Burns. It is not merely that each writes about love: it is that each stands out from other poets of his time in daring to write about love as if it matters.

It is chiefly, but not exclusively, in his songs that Burns writes about the subject nearest his heart. His achievement in the six volumes of *The Scots Musical Museum* (1787-1803), largely ignored in literary education and criticism, establishes him as the greatest of all Britain's song-writing poets; and love is overwhelmingly the predominant theme of his songs. Burns wrote for pre-existing tunes. It adds an essential dimension to listen to his songs in performance, but even without the music his words convey his meaning clearly, if incompletely. Clarity is a virtue he shares with Byron; it was an invaluable part of their Augustan inheritance in satire, and extends to song. Something Burns excels at is in convincingly depicting different moods expe-

¹⁸"Mazeppa," ll. 853-4, 867-9. *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, IV, 200.

rienced by lovers. There is for instance the wistful tenderness of preoccupied young love in "Mary Morison":

Yestreen when to the trembling string
The dance gaed through the lighted ha',
To thee my fancy took its wing,
I sat, but neither heard, nor saw:
Though this was fair, and that was braw,
And yon the toast of a' the town,
I sigh'd, and said amang them a',
'Ye are na Mary Morison.'¹⁹

In contrast to this, we have the pride and jauntiness of conquest in "Corn rigs":

It was upon a Lammas night,
When corn rigs are bonie,
Beneath the moon's unclouded light,
I held awa to Annie:
The time flew by, wi' tentless heed,
Till 'tween the late and early;
Wi' sma' persuasion she agreed,
To see me thro' the barley.²⁰

and the world-famous expression of the sadness of parting in "Ae Fond Kiss":

Had we never lov'd sae kindly,
Had we never lov'd sae blindly!
Never met—or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.—²¹

Less well known outside Scotland, but no less characteristic, are fast-moving songs in the vernacular in which the comedy of married life is treated with scant respect. A good example is "Willie Wastle dwalls on Tweed." Willie Wastle is a skilled weaver, unhappily matched to a wife

¹⁹"Mary Morison," ll. 9-16, *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, I, 42.

²⁰Song, "It was upon a Lammas night," ll. 1-8. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, I, 13-14.

²¹Song, "Ae fond kiss, and then we sever," ll. 13-16. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, II, 592.

"was dour and din"—"Tinkler Madgie was her mither." Burns describes Willie's wife unflatteringly:

She has an e'e, she has but ane,
 Our cat has twa, the very colour;
 Five rusty teeth, forbye a stump,
 A clapper-tongue wad deave a miller:
 A whiskin beard about her mou,
 Her nose and chin they threaten ither;
 Sic a wife as Willie's wife,
 I wad na gie a button for her.—

. . .

Auld baudrans by the ingle sits,
 An wi' her loof her face awashin;
 But Willie's wife is nae sae trig,
 She dights her grunzie wi' a hushian:
 Her waly nieves like midden-creels,
 Her feet wad fyle the Logan-water;
 Sic a wife as Willie's wife,
 I wadna gie a button for her.—²²

The joke, though, is sometimes at the expense of the husband: Burns mocks male and female impartially. In another song contributed to the same 1792 volume of the *Scots Musical Museum*, "The bairns gat out wi' an unco shout," a frustrated wife complains about her superannuated spouse, who has been attacked by the ducks in the farmyard:

The fien-ma-care, quo' the feirrie auld wife,
 He was but a paidlin body, O.—
 He paidles out, an' he paidles in,
 An' he paidles late and early, O;
 This seven lang year I hae lien by his side,
 An he is but a fusionless cartie, O.—²³

Despite his marvellous sense of humor, Burns did not laugh all the time. At different periods of his life he had spells of acute melancholy, just as Byron did. But cheerfulness kept breaking through. A neglected late song which he claimed gave an accurate picture of his own mind portrays him as happy-go-lucky and ready to meet life's challenge:

²²Song, "Willie Wastle dwalls on Tweed," ll. 9-16, 25-32. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, II, 640-41.

²³"The bairns gat out wi' an unco shout," *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, II, 652.

Contented wi' little, and cantie wi' mair,
 Whene'er I forgather wi' Sorrow and Care,
 I gie them a skelp, as they're creeping alang,
 Wi' a cog o' gude swats and an auld Scottish sang.

I whyles claw the elbow o' troublesome thought;
 But Man is a soger, and Life is a faught:
 My mirth and gude humour are coin in my pouch,
 And my FREEDOM's my Lairdship nae monarch dare touch.

He ends,

Blind Chance, let her snapper and stoyte on her way;
 Be 't to me, be 't frae me, e'en let the jade gae:
 Come Ease, or come Travail; come Pleasure, or Pain;
 My warst word is—'Welcome and welcome again!'²⁴

It is appropriate to compare with this positive outlook Byron's celebrated remarks in two letters to Moore: "I was not, and, indeed, am not even *now*, the misanthropical and gloomy gentleman he takes me for, but a facetious companion, well to do with those with whom I am intimate, and as loquacious and laughing as if I were a much cleverer fellow"; and "it is odd but agitation or contest of any kind gives a rebound to my spirits and sets me up for a time."²⁵ Neither Burns nor Byron took himself too seriously for very long. There is, too, a genuinely close parallel in the courage and sheer existential readiness to welcome adversity shown by both poets.

To go back to standart habbie and *ottava rima*. Burns was lucky enough to discover the verse form which emancipated his Muse early in his poetic career, when his energies and intellectual ambition as man and poet demanded self-expression. The discovery dramatically increased the range of what he could say in verse, allowing the natural man to speak. As you know, something similar took place when the already exiled Byron began to experiment with *ottava rima* in 1816.

You will recall Seamus Heaney's observation that standard habbie in Burns's hands is "a very up-and-away freed king of writing": "there is a social voice, but there's some kind of wild release in it too, a devil-may-care, debonair thing that outstrips the civic or social verse." Is this not true, also, of the verse form of *Beppo* and *Don Juan*? Heaney perhaps had in mind a

²⁴Song, "Contented wi' little, and cantie wi' mair," ll. 1-8, 13-16. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, II, 754-5.

²⁵Lord Byron: *Selected Letters and Journals*, p. 355.

passage such as this one, from the "Epistle to Lapraik," in which Burns mocks at polite views of poetry—and incidentally makes use of an idea borrowed from Rousseau:

I am nae *Poet*, in a sense,
 But just a *Rhymer* like by chance,
 An' hae to Learning nae pretence,
 Yet, what the matter?
 Whene'er my Muse does on me glance,
 I jingle at her.

Your Critic-folk may cock their nose,
 And say, 'How can you e'er propose,
 'You wha ken hardly *verse* frae *prose*,
 'To mak a *sang*?'
 But by your leaves, my learned foes,
 Ye're maybe wrang.

What's a' your jargon o' your Schools,
 Your Latin names for horn an' stools;
 If honest Nature made you *fools*,
 What sairs your Grammars?
 Ye'd better taen up *spades* and *shools*,
 Or *knappin-hammers*.

. . .

Gie me ae spark o' Nature's fire,
 That's a' the learning I desire;
 Then tho' I drudge thro' dub an' mire
 At pleugh or cart,
 My Muse, tho' hamely in attire,
 May touch the heart.²⁶

The nearest parallel I know to the anarchic disrespect and freewheeling energy of this kind of controlled improvisation by Burns is to be found in those passages in which Byron gleefully sends up preconceived ideas about poetry—and other things. Such a passage, for instance, as this one from *Beppo*:

But I am but a nameless sort of person,
 (A broken Dandy lately on my travels)
 And take for rhyme, to hook my rambling verse on,
 The first that Walker's Lexicon unravels,

²⁶"Epistle to J, L*****k, An Old Scotch Bard," ll. 49-66, 73-78. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, I, 86-7.

And when I can't find that, I put a worse on,
Not caring as I ought for critics' cavils;
I've half a mind to tumble down to prose,
But verse is more in fashion—so here goes!²⁷

The final couplet could be compared with this from Burns's second Epistle to Lapraik:

Sae I gat paper in a blink,
An' down gaed *stumpie* in the ink:
.
.
.
In rhyme, or prose, or baith thegither,
Or some hotch-potch that's rightly neither,
Let time mak proof;
But I shall scribble down some blether
Just clean aff-loof.²⁸

Apart from anything else, they are as far as I know the only two poets of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who consciously draw attention to the playful role which rhyme can have in poetry.

I committed to print many years ago the view that "Blake apart, Burns was the first British poet of his century to stress as dynamic values freedom, both personal and national, simplicity and joy."²⁹ These qualities seem to me to anticipate Romantic artistic practice and Romantic values. I think of the wonderfully liberated self-expression achieved by Byron, especially in ottava rima, together with Burns's fluent candor in standart habbie and the revolutionary note achieved in certain of his songs, as disruptive of pigeon-holing critical convention. These highly individual forms of poetic self-expression strike me at times as profoundly Romantic in spirit, yet they remain strongly influenced by the Augustan literary inheritance. Alan Massie observes of Byron in *Byron's Travels*, "He thought as a Classicist; he felt as a Romantic. It was this division which supplied his poetry with so much of its nervous energy."³⁰ A similar summing-up might apply to Burns. Byron and

²⁷"Beppo," stanza 52. *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, IV, 145.

²⁸"To the Same," ll. 37-42. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, I, 90-91.

²⁹*Critical Essays On Robert Burns*, ed. Donald A. Low (London & Boston, 1975), p. 6.

³⁰Alan Massie, *Byron's Travels* (London, 1988), p. 102.

Burns share space as life-enhancing non-conformists. In the end, each is his own man, not to be pinned down by any mere labels of convenience.³¹

Stirling University

THE BURNS-GAELIC TRUST

A trust of considerable interest to all Burns enthusiasts and Gaelic-speakers, under the chairmanship of the internationally renowned singer Mary Sandeman, has been instituted with the aim of forging closer links between the two national cultures of Scotland. It aims to make the writings of Robert Burns more accessible to Gaels in their own language, and to recognize efforts made by individuals and organizations to achieve these goals.

For further details write to the Rev. Roderick Macdonald, Secretary, Mary Hill, Inch, Aberdeenshire AB52 6JR, Scotland.

³¹"Byron and Burns" is based on a paper read at an international seminar held at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1988 to celebrate the bicentenary of Byron's birth.