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# "The very first of his Art": Reading Burns Through Byron

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“The very first of his Art”:  
Reading Burns Through Byron

In “Resolution and Independence,” written in 1802, Wordsworth encapsulates two of the principal ideas behind what we normally understand to be the Romantic reading of Burns:

I thought of Chatterton, the marvelous Boy,  
The sleepless Soul that perished in its pride;  
Of Him who walked in glory and in joy  
Behind his plough, upon the mountain-side:  
By our own spirits are we deified;  
We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;  
But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand is the parallel with Chatterton: the young genius blighted by misery and tragically lost too early. On the other hand is the “heaven-taught ploughman,”<sup>2</sup> the uneducated “Child of Nature” who wrote inspired poetry

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<sup>1</sup>*William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 1990), p. 262.

<sup>2</sup>This famous phrase is from Henry Mackenzie’s unsigned essay in *The Lounger*, No. 97 (9 December 1786); repr. in Donald Low, ed., *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston, 1974), pp. 67-71. Henceforth *RBCH*. But according to Skoblow it is “only a short hop” from Burns’s own “self-representation” in the Preface to *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*—see Jeffrey Skoblow, “Resisting the Powers of Calculation: A Bard’s Politics” in Carol McGuirk, ed., *Critical Essays on Robert Burns* (New York, 1998), p. 25.

from the heart and articulated the experience of the common man. One or both of these notions inform the responses to Burns not only of Wordsworth, but also of Coleridge, Scott and Keats.<sup>3</sup>

Byron too was influenced by the “ploughman” image of Burns as *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* demonstrates,<sup>4</sup> but I suggest he also saw a very different Burns from Wordsworth *et al.* For when we view Burns through key elements of Byronic, rather than Wordsworthian, ideology the result is not a tragic, heaven-taught ploughman-genius who looks forward to the achievements of Romanticism. Rather, we see a politically engaged poet in the Augustan Whig tradition who is to be valued not only for the democratic satires so often ignored, watered down, criticized or dismissed during the Romantic period,<sup>5</sup> but also for putting the traditional folk song and sentimental lyric to work in the fight against tyranny. This Byronic reading of Burns gives us another “Romantic” Burns to place alongside those created by the other Romantics. In doing so, it offers further insights into the ways in which Burns could be read, situated, understood and, perhaps, appropriated in the early nineteenth century.

Byron’s comments about Burns’s poetry, while few, are fulsome in their praise of Burns’s art:

of what “order” according to the poetical Aristocracy are Burns’s poems?—There are his “opus magnum” “Tam O’ Shanter” a tale—the Cotter’s Saturday night—a descriptive sketch—some others in the same style—the rest are songs. —So much for the *rank* of his *productions*,—the rank of *Burns* is the very first of his Art.

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<sup>3</sup>See Coleridge’s “To a Friend [Charles Lamb] who declared his Intention of writing no more Poetry”; Donald Low’s discussion of Scott’s attitudes to Burns in *RBCH*, pp. 30-3; Scott’s review of R. H. Cromek’s *Reliques of Robert Burns* in *The Quarterly Review*, 1 (February 1809), 19-36; Keats’s letters to Tom Keats (3 July 1818) and J. H. Reynolds (11 July 1818), in *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford, 1987), pp. 118, 122.

<sup>4</sup>See lines 776-7: “Swains! quit the plough, resign the useless spade: / Lo! BURNS ....” All quotations from Byron’s poetry are taken from *The Complete Poetical Works of Lord Byron*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford, 1980-1993), I, 253. Henceforth *BCPW*.

<sup>5</sup>See James Currie, “Criticism on the writings of Burns,” in *The Works of Robert Burns, with an Account of his Life, and a Criticism on his Writings*, ed. James Currie, 4 vols. (Liverpool, 1800) I, 267-336; Francis Jeffrey’s unsigned review of Cromek’s *Reliques* in *The Edinburgh Review*, 13 (Jan. 1809), 249-76; Scott’s review of Cromek, cited above; Wordsworth’s reading of “Death and Dr Hornbook” in *Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns* (London, 1816), pp. 24-5; William Hazlitt, “On Burns and the Old English Ballads” in *Characters of Shakespear’s Plays and Lectures on the English Poets* (London, 1908), pp. 382-3.

...there *is* a nobility of thought and of style—open to all Stations—and derived partly from talent—& partly from education—which is to be found in Shakespeare—and Pope—and Burns—no less than in Dante and Alfieri.<sup>6</sup>

On what grounds does Byron base his critical judgment of Burns? There is too little in his comments on Burns's poetry to answer this question quickly or simply, and to piece together Byron's criteria for judging poetry would be too massive a task to undertake here. But one famous point of entry into Byron's thinking opens up some possibilities. This point of entry is the notion of mobility:

I am not sure that mobility is English, but it is expressive of a quality which rather belongs to other climates, though it is sometimes seen to a great extent in our own. It may be defined as an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions—at the same time without *losing* the past; and is, though sometimes apparently useful to the possessor, a most painful and unhappy attribute.<sup>7</sup>

Let us begin with the phrase “an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions.” For Byron, this susceptibility leads to sincerity: “for surely they are most sincere / Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest” (XVI, ll. 822-3). Byron famously claimed to “hate things *all* fiction,”<sup>8</sup> and wanted a fiction mixed with, or infused with, some sort of fact/truth.<sup>9</sup> The idea of capturing his own “susceptibility of immediate impressions” in verse promised a way of achieving this: it promised a kind of writing in which the creation of fiction is, as he wrote to John Murray, accompanied by “direct manifestations of mind” (BCMP, p. 134). The mind creates fictions, but is also susceptible to them—“acted on” by them—and a fiction like *Don Juan*, that attempts to dramatize, in its immediacy, not only the mind of its author in the act of imagining, but also that mind being acted upon by its own imaginings is, for Byron, not merely fiction but one way of manifesting “something of actual life which cannot belong to any part of inanimate nature” (BCMP, p. 134).

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<sup>6</sup>Letter to John Murray Esq., Ravenna, 7 February 1821, in *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford, 1991), pp. 150, 159. Henceforth BCMP.

<sup>7</sup>Note to *Don Juan*, XVI, 820, in BCPW, V, 769. Further references to *Don Juan* will be to canto number and line number.

<sup>8</sup>Letter to John Murray, 2 April 1817, in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie Marchant, 12 vols. (London, 1973-94), V, 203. Henceforth BLJ.

<sup>9</sup>For Byron these two terms can be synonymous: “And fact is truth, the grand desideratum” (*Don Juan*, VII, 642).

For Byron, this “something of actual life” is lacking in the “strained Invention” and “fantastic fopperies” of, say, Keats or Hunt.<sup>10</sup> But we can see numerous dramatizations of mental susceptibility in Burns and can ascribe to Burns’s poetry a desire to say in touch with fact/truth not unlike that of Byron’s. Take, for example, the following stanzas from the song “For a’ that and a’ that”:

Is there, for honest Poverty  
That hings his head, and a’ that;  
The coward-slave, we pass him by,  
We dare be poor for a’ that!  
For a’ that, and a’ that,  
Our toils obscure, and a’ that,  
The rank is but the guinea’s stamp,  
The Man’s the gowd for a’ that.—

What though on hamely fare we dine,  
Wear hoddin grey, and a’ that.  
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine,  
A Man’s a Man for a’ that.  
For a’ that, and a’ that,  
Their tinsel show, and a’ that;  
The honest man, though e’er sae poor,  
Is king o’ men for a’ that.—

Ye see yon birkie ca’d a lord,  
Wha struts, and stares, and a’ that,  
Though hundreds worship at his word,  
He’s but a coof for a’ that.  
For a’ that, and a’ that,  
His ribband, star and a’ that,  
The man of independant mind,  
He looks and laughs at a’ that.—<sup>11</sup>

If we read this poem not as a direct statement of Burns’s sentiment, but as a lyric dramatization of a mind acted upon by a certain kind of attitude and rhetoric—drawn from Paine but heading towards one sort of Jacobinism—what we see is a demonstration of mental susceptibility to this kind of rhetoric and the attendant dangers of such a susceptibility.

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<sup>10</sup>*English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, I. 851; note to “Some Observations Upon an Article in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Review*” (1820; in *BCMP*, p. 113).

<sup>11</sup>*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), II, 762-3. Henceforth *Poems*.

Take, for example, line three. Are we to read this as Burns's considered opinion—those who don't fight for their own freedom will be left to slavery by those who do? Byron's definition of "mobility" suggests a very different reading. The line highlights what the poem sees as one of the dangers of Jacobin rhetoric, namely, that it encourages inhumanity and dogmatism, destroys any sense of shared oppression and rejects victims in favor of a revolutionary ideology. The line highlights this danger by dramatizing one mind's "susceptibility of mediate impressions" at the moment at which it is being powerfully "acted upon" by that rhetoric.

The second stanza does something very similar. The dismissal of luxury by the independent common man sounds very laudable, but a hierarchy of values is being set up here that is potentially oppressive. To claim that the man wearing "hoddin grey" is as much a man as he in "silks" is one thing, but the claim that he "Is king o' men" is quite another. The phrase inadvertently reinscribes the hierarchies it claims to level and suggests not so much equality as a straightforward exchange of roles that leaves underlying social structures and inequalities intact: if the "honest man" in "hoddin grey" is to become "king o' men," then he must have subjects.

Once again, Byron's notion of mobility offers a distinctive way of understanding what is going on here. Burns is not employing a radical rhetoric of equality that he doesn't quite have under control. He is dramatizing a mental susceptibility to the power of that rhetoric in order to highlight its potential dangers.

Stanza three continues this dramatization, but offers further insights not just into the power and danger of this kind of Jacobin rhetoric, but also into the causes of the susceptibility to it which the poem dramatizes. In the phrase "Wha struts, and stares" we catch a glimpse of something other than ideology—on the one hand, the direct, immediate experience of the arrogance of the gentry and their contempt for the poor, and on the other, a deep resentment against, and hatred of, the "strut" and "stare" it describes. Both experience and resentment, in other words, are ready and waiting for a rhetoric that offers a vision of social redemption, but where experience might simply look for change, resentment pushes for something more—revenge.

In dramatizing one mind's susceptibility to a particular kind of Jacobin rhetoric, Burns is highlighting a much larger, potentially explosive, social situation and hinting at the revolutionary violence that might result from that situation. But while his speaker is being drawn into a revolutionary fervor, his poem is not. Rather it is dramatizing the clear and present danger generated by a rhetoric of violence and a population highly susceptible to it.

Like Byron's poetry, however, Burns's poem also looks to offer "something of actual life" in a lyric "manifestation" of a "mind" being "acted upon." There are obviously differences between Byron and Burns here. We can argue, for instance, that Burns's speaker is a fiction created for poetic purposes and not a dramatization of Burns's own "mobility." Burns's poem, neverthe-

less, attempts to stay in touch with fact by trying to catch in literary form the same "something of actual life"—the mind's "susceptibility of immediate impressions"—that Byron values in his work.

This is only part of the picture, for Byron also stresses the importance of "at the same time without *losing* the past." Byron's own poetry is powerfully informed by the past—especially by historical fact.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Burns's poetry is rooted in the poet's Scottish cultural past—as instanced by his use of traditional Scottish tunes and Scots, and his frequent references to Queen Mary, William Wallace and Robert Bruce. Equally important is the fact that Burns, like Byron,<sup>13</sup> never loses sight of his own past. Burns's fictions never lose touch with immediate, known, fact, as poems like "Elegy on the year 1788" testify. Here Burns insists on his own local, rural, working-class, Scottish world in the face of seemingly more important political events. As Carol McGuiirk comments, "During the year Burns memorializes, the King of Spain had died (13 December) and George III had been declared insane; the Prince of Wales and his mentor Fox were squabbling openly with the Prime Minister (Pitt) over the Regency Bill, which established an interim government."<sup>14</sup>

This combination leads to the kind of invention attractive to Byron—in-fused with and anchored in fact and so guarded against the elaborate and fantastical excesses he complained of in the poetry of his own time.<sup>15</sup> But Byron also holds onto a different kind of past—that described by Whig ideology as Britain's prolonged battle for liberty and against tyranny, and marked out by the Magna Charta, Habeas Corpus, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the Bill of Rights. Indeed, as Malcolm Kelsall's pioneering study of Byron's politics shows, the notion of Byron as the revolutionary liberation fighter is a

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<sup>12</sup>Historical references litter *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, for example, which is structured throughout by a series of real encounters with sites of historical importance. Similarly, many of Byron's other fictions are suggested by, or set against, historical events. *Don Juan* is an example here.

<sup>13</sup>Byron closes *Childe Harold* I and II with the deaths of John Wingfield (I, ll. 927ff), John Edleston (II, ll. 891ff) and his mother (II, ll. 904-5), and draws on his relationship with his sister in *Manfred*, includes a representation of his wife in canto I of *Don Juan* (ll. 73-144) and ends up at a version of Newstead Abbey in *Don Juan* canto XVI (ll. 432-577). Thus it is difficult to disentangle Byron's life from his fiction since he is so often projecting his life into his fiction.

<sup>14</sup>*Robert Burns: Selected Poems*, ed. Carol McGuiirk (Harmondsworth, 1993), p. 147.

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Byron's famous criticism of Keats's poetry (letter to Murray, 9 November 1820, in *BLJ*, VII, 225), and his satire on Wordsworth's fictional excesses in the Preface to cantos I and II of *Don Juan*.

“beautiful myth,” but a myth nonetheless.<sup>16</sup> For as Kelsall’s study powerfully demonstrates, Byron was, from his youth, of “the party of the Glorious Revolution” and “until his death, he maintained his loyalty to its traditions” (Kelsall, p. 7).

Burns’s politics are still very much a matter for debate.<sup>17</sup> However, there is plenty of evidence in his letters and poems to suggest a commitment to the Whig cause. Take, for example, the following, which Byron may well have encountered in the “quantity of Burns’s unpublished, and never-to-be-published, Letters” which Dr. John Allen, a friend of Lord Holland, let him in 1813:<sup>18</sup>

In my defence to their accusations, I said, that whatever might be my sentiments of Republics, ancient or modern, as to Britain, I abjure the idea.—That a Constitution which, in its original principles, experience had proved to be every way fitted for our happiness in society, it would be insanity to [sacrifice to] an untried, visionary theory.—That, in consideration of my being situated in a department, however humble, immediately in the hands of the people in power, I had forborne taking any active part, either personally, or as an author, in the present business of Reform.—But that, where I must declare my sentiments, I would say that there existed a system of corruption between the Executive Power & the Representative part of the Legislature, which boded no good to our glorious Constitution; & which every patriotic Briton must wish to see amended.—<sup>19</sup>

The accusations referred to here concern radical political beliefs, and this is the self-defense of a vulnerable man. For this reason we might suspect that Burns may be watering down his radicalism and taking cover behind the more

<sup>16</sup>Malcom Kelsall, *Byron’s Politics* (Brighton, 1987), p. 2. Henceforth Kelsall.

<sup>17</sup>For a range of conflicting views on Burns’s politics see Murray Pittock’s discussion of Burns in *The Invention of Scotland: The Stuart Myth and the Scottish Identity, 1638 to the Present* (London, 1991); Paul Scott, “Robert Burns, Patriot,” in Kenneth Simpson, ed., *Love and Liberty: Robert Burns: A Bicentenary Celebration* (Edinburgh, 1997), pp. 266-73 (henceforth Simpson); Christopher A. Whatley, “Burns and the Union of 1707,” in Simpson, pp. 183-197; Liam McIlvanny’s “‘Sacred Freedom’: Presbyterian Radicalism and the Politics of Robert Burns,” also in Simpson, pp. 168-82, which explores Presbyterian influences that may well have helped form Byron’s politics too.

<sup>18</sup>Journal entry for 13 December 1813 (in *BLJ*, III, 239). It is in response to these letters that Byron made perhaps his most famous comment on Burns: “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!” (*BLJ*, III, 239).

<sup>19</sup>Letter to John Francis Erskine of Mar, 13 April 1793, in *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), II, 208. Henceforth *LRB*.



respectable image of Whiggism. But the sentiments expressed are lent authenticity, later in the letter, by the request that:

when you have honoured this letter with a perusal, please commit it to the flames.— Burns, in whose behalf you have so generously interested yourself, I have here, in his native colours, drawn *as he is*; but should any of the people in whose hands is the very bread he eats, get the least knowledge of the picture, it would run the poor Bard for ever (*LRB*, II, p. 210).

This helps the letter read like a genuine confession, and far from revealing radical sentiments, the letter reveals a staunch Whig—its implied support for republics, especially for America, can be read as a Whig sentiment, but its emphasis on, and glorification of, the British Constitution and its stress on corruption and the need for reform, rather than revolution, are all orthodox Whig attitudes.

It was possible, then, for Byron to assume on Burns's part a commitment to the Whig cause and its view of what liberty meant and how it was to be safeguarded. And in looking at Burns from a Byronic rather than a Wordsworthian viewpoint, this is what is foregrounded. What emerges is not a poet of nature, but a politically alert, Whig thinker.

But Byron stresses Burns's art, and here we need to note that Burns did not simply hold certain political views which he kept out of his poetry:

Sir—

You see the danger of patronizing the rhyming tribe: you flatter the poet's vanity—a most potent ingredient in the composition of a son of rhyme—by a little notice; and he, in return, persecutes your good-nature with his acquaintance. In these days of volunteering, I have come forward with my services, as poet-laureate to a highly respectable political party, of which you are a distinguished member. The enclosed are, I hope, only a beginning to the songs of triumph which you will earn in the contest.—

I have the honour to be, sir,  
Your obliged and humble servant,  
R. BURNS<sup>20</sup>

This letter, probably to Richard A. Oswald (a liberal Ayrshire Whig), offers the poet's wholehearted support for the Whig cause at a moment of crisis. For while there seems to be some doubt as to whether Oswald was the addressee of this letter—G. Ross Roy follows Oswald's name with a question mark in the collected letters—it seems certain that the "party" referred to is the Whig party since the very next letter in the collection (written 24 April 1795)

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<sup>20</sup>Letter to Richard A. Oswald (?), Dumfries, 23 April 1795, *LRB*, II, 348.

encloses the Heron ballads—written in support of the Whig candidate, Patrick Heron, in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright by-election of 1795.<sup>21</sup>

Byron, too, took on the role of poet-laureate to the highly respectable Whig party, and his early political poems recall Burns's political poetry in some surprising ways. Byron's "Song for the Luddites" is very like "Scots Wha Hae" in both voice and rhetorical attitude, while his "The Devil's Drive" works in some of the same ways as Burns's "Address of Beelzebub." And, of course, both poets wrote poems on the Regent as the Whig's treacherous and untrustworthy friend.

Indeed, both poets, as self-appointed "poet-laureates" of the Whig party, follow in the tradition of Addison, Dyer and Thomson, and, again, looking at Burns through a Byronic filter revises some cherished Romantic assumptions. Far from appearing as a precursor to Wordsworth, Burns fits squarely into an Augustan and Whig literary tradition through which we can trace the changes in fortune—and rhetoric—of Whiggism from its early confidence to its final demise.

However, Byron came to maturity almost at the end of the Whig tradition and lived his adult life at a time when that tradition's final demise seemed increasingly inevitable. Indeed, the Whigs had been in decline at least since their ineffective opposition to the Tories after the Gordon Riots of 1780, but probably since the end of Tory exclusion in 1760. But wherever we fix the beginning of Whiggism's downward trajectory, their progressive loss of cohesion, authority and credibility is marked out by such events as: the defeat of the Fox-North alliance in 1783 and the rise to power of Pitt; the failure of the India Bills in 1783-4; the party's fragmentation in the face of the French Revolution and the Portland/Fox split of 1794; the secession of the Foxites from both houses of Parliament in 1797; Fox's death in 1806; the failure of the "Ministry of All the Talents" in 1807; the Prince Regent's abandonment of the Whigs in 1812.<sup>22</sup> Both poets, in other words, witnessed stages in the gradual erosion of the Whig supremacy and the corresponding recovery of the Tories. And as "Whig laureates" they are both writing on a behalf of a political tradition in almost perpetual crisis. But Byron characteristically viewed this process in much larger terms than simply national history. Looking at the Palatine in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* canto IV, he says:

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<sup>21</sup>For a biographical account of Burns's time as a "Whig laureate" see James MacKay, *RB: A Biography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1992), pp. 601-4.

<sup>22</sup>For useful discussions of this period in the history of the Whigs see: J. Steven Watson, *The Reign of George III 1760-1815* (Oxford, 1960); L. G. Mitchell, *Charles James Fox and the Disintegration of the Whig Party 1782-1794* (Oxford, 1971); F. O. Gorman, *The Whig Party and the French Revolution* (London, 1967); Michael Roberts, *The Whig Party 1807-1812* (London, 1965).

There is the moral of all human tales  
 'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past,  
 First Freedom, and then Glory—when that fails  
 Wealth, vice, corruption,—barbarism at last  
 And History, with its volumes vast  
 Hath but *one* page (*ll.* 964-969).

For Byron, the re-encroachment of the forces of tyranny in his own time, and the chaos it generated—the restoration of the *ancien régime*, the Luddite riots, Peterloo, the suspension of Habeas Corpus—are part of an inevitable, endlessly repeated pattern: any nation that rises to freedom and glory inevitably sinks again to barbarism.<sup>23</sup> The idea of such an inevitability seems to lead only into a kind of melancholic resignation, but, as Kelsall argues, for Byron,

If there be a way back to the light and to freedom out of the paralysed solitude of despair, that burden rests upon the isolated heroic individual, and especially upon the promulgators of the written word, who have the almost intolerable responsibility of carrying, often under persecution, the values of liberty in societies no longer free... So [in *Childe Harold IV*] we find Boccaccio described as 'republican, philosopher and free man', Machiavelli praised as a 'libertine', Alfieri as 'the bard of freedom', with Parini the 'first noble exception' to centuries of submission. Men of letters, Foscolo observed, are 'independent mediators between the government which applies to force alone, and has a natural tendency to despotism, and the people who have no less a natural inclination towards licentiousness'... 'Absolute monarchs hate the historian, and the poet and the orator' (Kelsall, p. 79).

Burns may well have struck Byron as just such a figure, situated as Burns is towards the beginning of the end for Whiggism and the kind of "liberty" it sought to protect. But not *just* in 1795 when Burns offers his services as a poet-laureate to the Whig party. Indeed, Burns fits the bill *most* towards the end of his life, when he seemingly retreated from any direct engagement with politics and turned to writing and collecting songs on non-political subjects.

Even here we can see a sustained effort, if not to insist on liberty, then to resist tyranny. Burns's interest in and use of subversive Scottish tunes is well documented. His use of Scots is clearly far from politically neutral: it insists on region in the first instance, and Scotland in the second—resisting centralization on London. But there is more, I think, to the political intent of the songs written or collected for James Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum* and George Thomson's *Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs*. A clue here lies in

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<sup>23</sup>As Kelsall puts it, the "attempt of the verse" is "to philosophise current politics as part of a greater paradigm" (p. 59). And as Kelsall goes on to demonstrate, the paradigm that asserts itself here is that of "the *translatio libertatis*" (p. 66) so frequently found, in more optimistic manifestations, in the Whig literary tradition of Addison, Dyer and Thomson (see pp. 57-67).

Burns's letters to Thomson where he stresses pathos as an essential feature of the song:

Apropos, if you are for *English* verses, there is, on my part, an end to the matter.—Whether in the simplicity of *the Ballad*, or the pathos of *the song*, I can only hope to please myself in being allowed at least a sprinkling of our native tongue.—English verses, particularly the works of Scotsmen, that have merit, are certainly very eligible (16 September 1792, *LRB*, II, 149).

If it were possible to procure songs of merit, I think it would be proper to have one set of Scots words to every air,— & that the set of words to which the notes ought to be pricked.—There is a naïveté, a pastoral simplicity, in a slight intermixture of Scots words & phraseology, which is more in unison (at least to my taste, & I will add, to every genuine Caledonian taste,) with the simple pathos, or rustic sprightliness, of our native music, than any English verses whatever.—For instance, in my, *Auld Rob Morris*, you propose instead of the word, “describing”, to substitute the phrase “all telling”, which would spoil the rusticity, the pastoral, of the stanza.—(26 January 1793, *LRB*, II, 181).

Pathos is clearly valued highly here, but on purely aesthetic grounds? Possibly, but Byron's often obviously political use of pathos suggests another reading. Take, for example, this from canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:

I see before me the Gladiator lie:  
 He leans upon his head—his manly brow  
 Consents to death, but conquers agony,  
 And his drooped head sinks gradually low—  
 And through his side the last drops, ebbing slow  
 From the red gash, fall heavy, one by one,  
 Like the first of a thunder-shower; and now  
 The arena swims around him—he is gone,  
 Ere ceased the inhuman shout which hai'd the wretch who won.

He heard it, but he heeded not—his eyes  
 Were with his heart, and that was far away;  
 He reck'd not of the life he lost nor prize,  
 But where his rude hut by the Danube lay  
*There* were his young barbarians all at play  
*There* was their Dacian mother—he, their sire,  
 Butcher'd to make a Roman holiday—  
 All this rush'd with his blood—Shall he expire  
 And unavenged?—Arise! ye Goths, and glut your ire! (*ll.* 1252-1269)

This passage begins by stressing the excitement of the event, then quickly shifts to focus on the gladiator's heroic death. But the second of these stanzas stresses slavery and oppression, and does so by offering a pathetic picture of both the dying gladiator and the family he leaves behind, “Butcher'd to make a

Roman holiday.” The final anachronistic call to arms is a comment on, or warning to, contemporary societies built on oppression. But pathos here also works to win sympathy for the oppressed so that the passage proceeds, on the one hand, by pointing out the threat of violent revolt and, on the other, by trying to soften the attitude of those with power to those without. Both gestures are political—they seek to adjust social relations.

Reading Burns through Byron suggests the idea that implicit in the emphasis on pathos which underpins Burns’s song-writing and song-collecting project is a similar sense of the political power of pathos. And though the songs, in the first instance, solicit pity for individuals who suffer unrequited love, ill-luck, loss, seduction, when we view them together we can see that they solicit sympathy not just for individuals but for a whole section of society—they lyricise a poor, rural, Scottish section of British society that is only too vulnerable to the oppressive and repressive forces beginning to emerge in the 1780s and 1790s. Byron’s use of pathos may be more overtly political than Burns’s, but Byron’s practice encourages us to see in the pathetic treatment of vulnerable figures in poems like ‘The rowin ’t in her apron,’ “Sae far awa” and “The bonie lass made the bed to me” a desire to help counter, on a sentimental and emotional level, the oppression of a whole stratum of Scottish society.

By viewing Burns through various key elements of Byron’s political and poetic ideology we have brought to light a very different “Romantic” Burns from Wordsworth’s “poet of nature,” Keats’s genius ruined by misery, and Scott’s brilliant writer of insubstantial songs limited by his dependence on Scots. What we see is a Whig poet actively engaged in politics: an Augustan writer who does not look forward to Romanticism but attempts to hold onto an earlier eighteenth-century tradition. We also see a poet who retains a discipline and rootedness in fact and history that the Romantics, to Byron’s mind, forsook. Finally, we get a poet who in all his poetical production is seeking ways to subtly resist tyranny and oppression—formally, thematically and linguistically. In the songs, he does this in a quieter way, certainly, than Milton or Tasso, and employs primarily sentimental and emotional means, rather than overtly or aggressively political ones. But this still leaves us with the Byronic image of a lone torch-bearer for liberty in dark times.