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English Bards and Scotch Biography:

John Galt's *Life of Lord Byron*

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ABSTRACT

John Galt's *Life of Lord Byron* has never fully recovered from the withering criticism that greeted its publication in 1830, but it deserves to be better recognized. It offers some of the finest eye-witness accounts available of Byron in the Levant in 1809-10. It examines a number of striking parallels between Galt's work and Byron's, including Galt's fascination with the Byronic hero. Most intriguingly, it highlights Byron's knowledge and experience of Scotland, and the ways in which he was shaped by its oral traditions, landscapes, history, literature, religion, and language. While more recent biographers have mainly portrayed Byron as unproblematically 'English' or 'British', Galt's *Life* throws searching light on nineteenth-century constructions of his identity, and establishes the framework for 'considering Byron as a Scottish poet', as T. S. Eliot put it in 1937, more than one hundred years after Galt.

John Galt set great store by his one-volume *Life of Lord Byron* (1830), going so far as to claim that 'what I have said of him may be the only thing by which as a literary man I shall hereafter be remembered'.¹ Critics, however, have long damned the book. Nathaniel Parker Willis was one of many contemporaries who thought that Galt had been unforgivably candid, and that his revelations about Byron's egotism, petulance, and pride constituted 'a stab at the dead body of the noble poet'.² Other commentators were similarly severe, and for varying reasons. Thomas Moore, himself the author of a rival 1830 biography, denied that Galt had known the poet well enough to write his life. 'He raves of a bard he once happen'd to meet', scoffed Moore.³ Leigh Hunt, whose own *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries* had

appeared in 1828, complained that Galt had borrowed from him without proper acknowledgement. 'He helps himself to what he pleases out of [my] book', Hunt protested, 'in order to make up his own'.⁴ In *Blackwood's Magazine*, John Wilson ridiculed Galt for his impertinence. 'It seems never for one moment to have occurred to him that he was in all things – mind, manner, body, and estate – immeasurably inferior to the mighty creature of whom he keeps scribbling away'.⁵ Concluded the *Edinburgh Literary Journal*: Galt was "almost the last person" who ought to have undertaken the biography of Byron', for 'incapacity', 'want of authentic information', 'swaggering pretence', and 'unamiable feelings' mar his book at every turn.⁶

Several of these criticisms have endured. Doris Langley Moore resurrected Galt's humble origins as a reason to dismiss his biography, for 'he had no other standards at all for the interpretation of character than those of a class-conscious provincial who is rejoiced whenever he sees pride take a fall'.⁷ Leslie Marchand dismissed Galt's *Life* as 'undistinguished', while Fiona MacCarthy labelled it 'long-winded and often inaccurate'.⁸ Most recently, Paul Douglass distinctly echoes the earliest critics when he observes that Galt 'cribbed two-thirds' of his material from Moore 'and the other books published to that date', and that the 'remaining third of the book focused on Galt's short personal acquaintance with Byron in 1809-10, amounting to perhaps seven weeks of contact'.⁹ To this list of complaints, moreover, might be added the disconcerting number of autobiographical anecdotes in Galt's biographical study, to the point where it is sometimes not quite clear whether he is writing Byron's life or his own. In recounting the poet's departure from Smyrna for Ephesus in March 1810, for example, Galt remarks that 'as I soon after passed along the same road, I shall here describe what I met with myself in the course of the journey'.¹⁰

Yet despite its eccentricities and gaps, Galt's *Life* is far more valuable than has been commonly acknowledged. Byron and Galt were on friendly terms for more than four years, and while their personal relationship broke down in late 1813, they continued to read and praise each other's work. Galt's biography contains several first-hand accounts of the poet both in the period leading up to his immense celebrity as the author of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and in the months that followed, when both men lived in London. It reveals a number of parallels between Galt's work and Byron's, and represents Byron as both an exile and a cosmopolite, an identity that Galt himself cultivates in works such as *Voyages and Travels, in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811* (1812) and *Letters from the Levant* (1813). Most strikingly, it highlights the profound impact of Scotland on Byron. More than a century before T. S. Eliot suggested that Byron is perhaps best considered as a Scottish poet, Galt recognized the complicated nature of Byron's nationality, and was the first to demonstrate the various ways in which, though he is commonly regarded as 'one of the stars of the English poetic galaxy', Byron as a Scottish writer is 'arguably a more defensible proposition', as Brean Hammond has observed.¹¹

Galt was thirty years old, and Byron twenty-one, when they met for the first time in the military garrison library at Gibraltar on a hot day in mid-August 1809. Both had passed their early lives in Scotland. Both were published authors. Both had lived for a time in London. Both were disaffected and anxious to be abroad. Galt was travelling as an entrepreneur hoping to discover a way of circumventing Napoleon's embargo in order to smuggle British goods into Europe. Byron, with John Cam Hobhouse, was making a grand tour of the Iberian Peninsula and the Levant. Galt was already in the library reading when the younger man entered, and while he did not know him, 'something in his appearance attracted' Galt's

attention. ‘His dress indicated a Londoner of some fashion’, he remarked, ‘partly by its neatness and simplicity, with just so much of a peculiarity of style as served to show, that although he belonged to the order of metropolitan beaux, he was not altogether a common one’.¹²

On the following day, 16 August, Galt, Byron, and Hobhouse boarded the *Townshend Packet* sailing for Sardinia, and over the next two and a half weeks the three fellow-travellers had ‘an excellent opportunity of judging’ each other.¹³ Galt watched Byron closely. During the day he could sometimes be sociable, as when he supplied pistols for shooting at bottles, or joined the captain in a small jolly-boat that was lowered over the side during the calms. But in the evening Byron preferred to be alone, not in the cabin but up on deck. ‘He made himself a man forbid’, Galt recollected in one of several vignettes in which he brings Byron as a brooding isolate vividly into view two and a half years before Byron began to publish poetic representations of himself in this same guise, though Byron’s powerful self-portraits, and Galt’s own subsequent fascination with them, also undoubtedly shaped the way Galt represented the poet in the biography.¹⁴ After eight days aboard the *Townshend* the travelling companions reached Cagliari on the southern coast of Sardinia, where they dined with the British ambassador, the sybaritic William Hill, and then went to the theatre. Galt sat with Hobhouse while Byron joined the ambassador in a box with the Sardinian Royal Family. When the performance concluded, Byron thanked Hill for the evening so effusively that Hobhouse mocked him as they made their way back to their lodgings. The two friends exchanged harsh words and Hobhouse walked on ahead, ‘while Byron, on account of his lameness, and the roughness of the pavement’, took hold of Galt’s arm, ‘appealing to me, if he could have said less, after the kind and hospitable treatment we had all received’. Galt

thought ‘pretty much as Mr Hobhouse did’, but ‘of course’ he ‘could not do otherwise than civilly assent’ to Byron’s view. ‘From that night’, he averred, ‘I evidently rose’ in Byron’s ‘good graces’.¹⁵

The three men reached Malta on 31 August, and Byron soon formed his well-known attachment to Constance Spencer Smith, though Galt did not take the relationship seriously: ‘he affected a passion for her; but it was only Platonic’.¹⁶ After about a week, Galt departed by himself for Sicily, but wrote to Byron from Palermo in October to say that he could engage a painter there if Byron wanted to hire one.¹⁷ Galt rejoined Byron and Hobhouse in Athens four months later, and the three men spent a further two weeks together, talking, reading, sight-seeing, and riding. On 5 March 1810, Galt parted reluctantly from Byron and Hobhouse. ‘One may travel long enough’, he wrote, ‘and come many times even to Athens without meeting with any company equal to theirs’.¹⁸ Within a month, however, he had rejoined his friends in Smyrna for a third visit, though on this occasion Byron was in a very bad mood, ‘a Captain Grand’, Galt reported, who moped and insisted on deference to his rank to the point that some observers began to wonder if he was mad.¹⁹ Evidently Byron and Hobhouse had the same thoughts about Galt, who talks ‘in a manner that makes me suspect him to be deranged’, Hobhouse wrote to Byron in July. Three months later, Byron received a large package from Galt containing a letter, a poem entitled the ‘fair Shepherdess’, and ‘something not very intelligible about a “Spartan state paper”’, all of which appeared to Byron ‘to be damned nonsense’. ‘Now, Hobhouse’, he quizzed, ‘are you mad? or is he?’²⁰

The tensions that strained the relationship between Galt and Byron, however, had apparently receded by the time the two men returned from the Levant and settled in London, Byron in July 1811 and Galt a short while later. In the months that followed, Byron ‘in going

to the House of Lords...frequently stopped to inquire if I wanted a frank', Galt recollected. The two friends dined 'together at the St Alban's', and Galt at this time seems especially to have enjoyed Byron's conversation, which was 'milder' than it had been on their recent travels, and typically 'light and playful'.²¹ Yet Galt also saw a much sadder side of the poet, who talked to him 'of his affairs and perplexities' as if Galt was 'much more acquainted with them' than he had 'any opportunity of being'. Byron, too, mentioned the recent death of his mother, which was clearly bothering him. 'Notwithstanding her violent temper and other unseemly conduct, her affection for him had been so fond and dear, that he undoubtedly returned it with unaffected sincerity', Galt confirmed. Lady Caroline Lamb's 'insane attachment' to Byron was also a central feature of these months, and erupted into violence in July 1813 when, finding 'herself an object' of his 'scorn', she 'seized the first weapon she could find – some said a pair of scissors – others more scandalously, a broken jelly-glass, and attempted an incision of the jugular'. Galt and Byron were together only a few days after this explosive scene, when the poet showed him a picture of Lady Caroline, laughed at the absurdity of her outburst, and bestowed on her 'the endearing diminutive of vixen, with a hard-hearted adjective that I judiciously omit'.²² In his *Life*, Galt makes it plain that his friendship with Byron encompassed recreational banter, stylish courtesies, and convivial evenings out, but that it also included more intimate conversations about Byron's private life, and his experience of fame, love, travel, obsession, and grief.

In the second half of 1813, Galt's visits with Byron 'became few and far between', though they remained on friendly terms.²³ Byron could already wax nostalgic about the freedom and adventure they had enjoyed together in the Mediterranean. 'I do not know how other men feel towards those they have met abroad', he confessed to Galt in December; 'but

to me there seems a kind of tie established between all who have met together in a foreign country'.²⁴ Byron at this time was 'not at home' to many visitors, but his door remained open to Galt. 'We are old fellow-travellers', he confided to his journal, 'and, with all his eccentricities, he has much strong sense, experience of the world, and is, as far as I have seen, a good-natured philosophical fellow'.²⁵ Yet a week later the personal relationship between the two men collapsed. On 13 December, the recently married Galt visited Byron in his rooms and provocatively rehearsed the rumours swirling around his torrid entanglements with women such as the notoriously promiscuous Jane Harley, Countess of Oxford. Byron 'reddened and became seriously offended', Galt declared, 'soon after which I took my leave, glad to have given him a rap on the knuckles'.²⁶ The two men did not see each other again.

Byron, at least, let bygones be bygones, and in 1823 spoke in glowing terms of Galt to Lord and Lady Blessington (though their own friendship with Galt may have influenced what Byron said or how the Blessingtons recorded it). The poet acknowledged that there had been friction in his relationship with Galt, but he now took the blame to himself. 'When I knew Galt, years ago, I was not in a frame of mind to form an impartial opinion of him', Byron conceded, for 'his manner had not deference enough for my then aristocratical taste, and finding I could not awe him into a respect sufficiently profound for my sublime self...I felt a little grudge towards him that has now completely worn off'.²⁷ It was also in 1823 that – for the first time in a decade – Galt wrote directly to Byron when he supplied an anonymous friend with a letter of introduction to the poet, and spoke warmly to him of their past relationship. 'I cannot but remember with pleasure...nor feel without pride the advantage of having known your Lordship so intimately', declared Galt.²⁸ But a year later Byron was dead, and Galt spoke more candidly. The 'most attached' of Byron's friends 'will not deny, that an

“‘intense selfishness’ often rendered him extremely disagreeable’, he asserted in a carping *Blackwood’s* review of Thomas Medwin’s *Conversations of Lord Byron*, though Galt went on immediately to add that ‘the feeling was ever momentary; for there was something constantly about the man awakening commiseration and sympathy’.²⁹ By 1829, however, Galt told Blackwood that he ‘felt compunction for having written so partially of Lord Byron’, and submitted another paper to the magazine that was ‘better and more correct’. Blackwood did not publish it, but Galt was undeterred, and over the next several months he laboured on the book-length biography of Byron that appeared in August 1830.³⁰

In addition to revealing a good deal about their private friendship, Galt in the *Life* highlights the remarkable number of ways in which he and Byron were in dialogue with one another as authors. During his stay in Athens in the spring of 1810, Galt wrote a mock-epic, *The Atheniad*, in which he attacked Lord Elgin (as ‘Brucides’) for abandoning his ‘public tasks, and trusts of state’ in order to pillage Grecian antiquities: ‘With ready gold he calls men, carts, and cords, / Cords, carts, and men, rise at the baited words’. The gods of Olympus witness the plunder and are outraged. Neptune and Venus take their revenge on Brucides, as does Minerva, ‘who of all the powers / That mourned indignantly their ravish’d towers, / Suffered the most’.³¹ Byron was with Galt in Athens as he wrote *The Atheniad*, and he read the completed poem in manuscript after the two had parted company, before returning it to Galt via Hobhouse.³² Byron’s response was *The Curse of Minerva*, which is angrier and more accomplished than Galt’s poem, as well as broader in scope, but which runs parallel to it in several ways, from its central theme of denouncing Britain’s opportunistic exploitation of Greece’s cultural resources down to close verbal echoes. Both satires, for example, mention Herostratus, the infamous madman who burned the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. In *The*

Atheniad, he is ‘the bold youth that fired th’ Ephesian dome’; in *The Curse*, ‘the fool that fired the Ephesian dome’.³³

Galt was unable to get Byron to acknowledge his debt to *The Atheniad*, and he felt similarly aggrieved three-and-a-half years later when, in late 1813, Byron sent him a copy of *The Bride of Abydos*, ‘with a very kind inscription on it’.³⁴ Galt read the poem and immediately wrote back to Byron ‘that there was a remarkable coincidence in the story, with a matter in which I had been interested’. Byron was at a loss. ‘The coincidence I assure you is a most unintentional & unconscious one nor have I even a guess where or when or in what manner it exists’, he promised Galt, who answered that the story he had in mind came from ‘*real life*, and not any work’.³⁵ Byron closed the correspondence between them on the issue by assuring Galt that he was satisfied there had been no ill-intention on either side, and his use of the story in *The Bride* did not prevent Galt from reusing it as the basis for his 1825 gothic tale, *The Omen*.³⁶ But the queries that passed back and forth between the two writers clearly caused hard feelings. For Byron, Galt’s suggestion that he had lifted an anecdote from him was preposterous. He was ‘almost the last person on whom any one would commit literary larceny’, the poet sneered in his journal on 10 December 1813. For Galt, Byron’s thieving was part of a larger pattern of denial and concealment. ‘It was, indeed, an early trick of his Lordship to filch good things’, he snapped in his biography.³⁷

Galt claimed yet another influence on Byron. During their passage together on the *Townshend*, he was at work on a poem called *Il Inconsuétto (The Unknown)*, which he was writing in Spenserian stanzas. His intention was ‘to describe, in narrating the voyages and adventures of a pilgrim, who had embarked for the Holy Land, the scenes I expected to visit’. Galt insisted that he was ‘in no way whatever intending to insinuate’ that his poem had

inspired *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which Byron began to write only a few months later. To give only one example, Galt declared, 'my hero was a kindly tuneful personage, and "'the Childe"' was, as Byron said himself, "a d—d bad character"''.³⁸ Yet Galt also found it hard to ignore the deep congruencies between the two poems. Byron 'knew what I was about' in writing *Il Inconsuétto*, he declared, before adding pointedly that 'it must be considered as something extraordinary, that the two works should have been so similar in plan, and in the structure of the verse'. Galt maintained that he had 'lost the manuscript' of *Il Inconsuétto* so it is not possible to tell how much of the poem he actually wrote, and to what extent – if any – it anticipated *Childe Harold*.³⁹ But the entrepreneur and the aristocrat, though in the Levant for different reasons and in pursuit of sometimes starkly different objectives, were drawn in a number of instances to the same opportunities, anecdotes, themes, and verse forms. Sometimes Galt represents these parallels as a source of irritation, as Byron denies his debts to him, and Galt irascibly advances a charge of plagiarism against him. In other instances, Galt seems quite content to report the facts as he sees them, especially as regards *The Atheniad*, where Byron clearly follows his lead. On still other occasions, Galt willingly acknowledges Byron's pre-eminence. He may have begun to write his Spenserian travelogue first, but 'beyond the plan and verse there was no other similarity' between *Il Inconsuétto* and *Childe Harold*. 'I wish there had been', Galt added ruefully.⁴⁰

Given his intense focus in the *Life* on the four years when he actually spent time in Byron's company, and given his insistence on the connections between the various literary works they were planning or producing, it is perhaps not surprising that Galt also champions the poetry that Byron wrote at this time, and shows little interest in later publications such as *Beppo*, *Don Juan*, and *The Vision of Judgment*.⁴¹ 'The best of all Byron's works, the most

racy and original, are undoubtedly those which relate to Greece', he asserts.⁴² More specifically, in his assessment of *Childe Harold*, Galt puts himself forward as an astute observer who was travelling in Byron's circle at the time he was writing the poem, and who is thus almost uniquely qualified to critique it. As a poet, Galt maintains, Byron possesses a powerfully 'creative originality' that entitles him 'to stand on the highest peak of the mountain'. Yet Galt, who had seen many of the landscapes and seascapes of *Childe Harold* first-hand, reports paradoxically that the poem offers faithful copies of the natural world rather than imaginative renderings of it. *Childe Harold*, he argues, demonstrates 'how little, after all, of great invention is requisite to make interesting and magnificent poetry'.⁴³

According to Galt, Byron was similarly indebted for the moody subjectivity of the poem's central character, which he derived not from his imagination, but from what he actually witnessed in the Mediterranean. 'The traveller who visits that region...will see there how little of invention was necessary to form such heroes as Conrad [of *The Corsair*]', Galt states, 'and how much the actual traffic of life and trade is constantly stimulating enterprise and bravery'.⁴⁴ Byron's literalness, however, does not prevent him from imbuing the poem and its anti-hero with an intensity that is new to literature. 'By *Childe Harold*, and his other poems of the same mood', Galt contends, Byron 'has extended the scope of feeling' and 'laid open darker recesses in the bosom than were previously supposed to exist'. Such convictions lead Galt inexorably toward *Manfred*, which he deems Byron's greatest achievement. 'There is a fearful mystery in this conception; it is only by solemnly questioning the spirits that lurk within the dark metaphors in which Manfred expresses himself, that the hideous secrets of the character can be conjectured'.⁴⁵ In *The Star of Destiny*, the 'dramatic spectacle' that Galt wrote soon after *Manfred* was published, he both exploited and reimagined the Byronic hero.

‘It seemed to me, that the sublimity of Byron’s beautiful drama was too refined and meditative for representation, and this notion emboldened me to fuse the mystery of Faustus again, and to mix it with baser stuff’, Galt declares in the prefatory note to the play.⁴⁶

As we have seen, Galt’s plans for a poetic account of his Mediterranean travels did not materialize. But he did publish two prose versions, the first of which, *Voyages and Travels*, appeared in early 1812, just weeks before Byron published *Childe Harold*. Byron soon possessed a copy of Galt’s book, probably compliments of Galt himself, and while he characterized it as ‘full of devices crude and conceitede’, he was anxious to help promote it, and wrote to Francis Hodgson in February asking him to review it. The author ‘is a well-respected esquire of mine acquaintance’, Byron explained to Hodgson, ‘but I fear will meet with little mercy as a writer, unless a friend passeth judgment’.⁴⁷ At this same time, too, Byron sent Galt a pre-publication copy of *Childe Harold*, ‘a favour and distinction I have always prized’, Galt recollected.⁴⁸ A year later, Galt published his *Letters from the Levant*, which was, in effect, a sequel to *Voyages*. Byron was far more impressed with this second book, or at least so he told Galt after receiving a complimentary copy from him. ‘Thank you for a volume on the subject of Greece – which has not yet been equalled – & will with difficulty be surpassed’, Byron declared in a letter of June 1813.⁴⁹

The romance of *Childe Harold* was different in tone, technique, and import from the decidedly more pedestrian observations and statistics of *Voyages* and *Letters*. Yet the poetic account runs broadly parallel to the two prose versions in terms of where the two men went, what they saw, and who they met. Further, all three works display a keen interest, not simply in the current state of the Levant, but in its people, its history, and its customs, and Byron himself emphasized that – especially in the *Letters* – Galt’s knowledge of the area, combined

with a prose style that sometimes reached lyricism, revealed to him dimensions within a scene that they had both witnessed but that Byron had overlooked. ‘I know nothing more attractive in *poetry* than your description of the Romaika’, he told Galt, ‘ – which I confess appeared to me the most *prosaic* of dances – on my second voyage I shall endeavour to view it with your eyes’.⁵⁰ In all three accounts, moreover, Byron and Galt report respectively on their experience of exile, imperialism, political conflict, and international commerce. But they also explore how they developed enduringly cosmopolitan affections for several of the places they visited, including Greece, where, Galt asserts in the biography, Byron formed ‘a personal attachment to the land’.⁵¹ From 1813 onward, Galt – like Byron – exploited Mediterranean and European settings, traditions, and characters in his writings, most especially in novels such as *The Majolo* (1816), *The Earthquake* (1820), and *Eben Erskine* (1833), in all of which he variously re-imagines aspects of his 1809-11 tour.

Yet as Galt makes clear, his strongest and most revealing tie to Byron is not their shared experience of the Levant or their subsequent construction of transnational identities. Rather, it is their deep allegiance to Scotland, and the numerous ways in which it shaped them as writers, though their commitment to it as an internally colonized country also undoubtedly galvanized their respective pan-Europeanisms, as seen especially in Byron’s sponsorship of the nationalisms of smaller proto-nations: ‘He who first met the Highlands’ swelling blue / Will love each peak that shews a kindred hue’, as he characterizes it in *The Island* (1823).⁵² Byron left Scotland for good when he was just ten years ago, and as an adult he could vigorously berate it. Yet he was, as he famously declared in 1823, ‘Half a Scot by birth, and bred / A whole one’, and during his boyhood years in Aberdeen he wore the Gordon tartan, visited the Highlands to recuperate after a serious bout of scarlet fever, talked with a Scots

accent ('Dinna speak of it!' he exclaimed when he heard someone refer to his lame foot), and felt 'at home with the people lowland & Gael', as he declared after enthusiastically reading Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), which itself dramatises the conflicts between Lowlanders and Highlanders, the Scottish and the English.⁵³ 'My "heart warms to the Tartan" or to any thing of Scotland which reminds me of Aberdeen and other parts not so far from the Highlands as that town', he told Scott himself in 1822. But Byron could also submerge the regional divisions within the country in favour of a more generalized nostalgia. In November 1823, whilst living in Cephalonia, he was asked if he wore his tartan jacket 'from his love of Scotland'. 'Certainly, I do', he replied; 'we are all Scotchmen here'.⁵⁴

Galt had a much broader knowledge and experience of Scotland than Byron. Born in Irvine, a port on the Ayrshire coast, he was nine years old when he moved with his family to Greenock on the Clyde estuary, when he lived until he was twenty-five. From 1804 onward, he worked in London, travelled a great deal in both Europe and North America, and returned periodically to live in Scotland, before retiring to Greenock in 1834, where he died five years later. In his finest fiction, Galt offers a view of Scotland that is focused, not on the intellectual hub of Edinburgh, but on the distinctive life and culture of the western lowlands. Yet at the same time, 'Galt's fiction, as much as Scott's, articulates Britishness', declares Robert Crawford, in its presentation of Scotland as 'provincial', and in its portrait of characters who are strongly attached to Presbyterianism, to Glasgow as a centre of trade, industry, and commerce, and to the British empire rather than the Scottish nation.⁵⁵ Remarkably, Galt wrote his best novel, *Annals of the Parish*, in 1813, when he was living in London and still enjoying Byron's company, though he did not publish it until 1821, after which followed other 'Tales of the West', including *The Provost* (1822) and *The Entail* (1823). Byron enjoyed these

novels immensely. ‘What I admire particularly in Galt’s works...is, that with a perfect knowledge of human nature and its frailties and legerdemain tricks, he shows a tenderness of heart which convinces one that *his* is in the right place, and he has a sly caustic humour that is very amusing’, he told Lady Blessington. Byron thought ‘very highly’ of *Annals*, but his favourite was *The Entail*, which he read three times, and which he confessed made him cry. ‘Leddy Grippy’, he stated, ‘was perhaps the most complete and original that had been added to the female gallery since the days of Shakespeare’.⁵⁶

In the biography, Galt makes high claims for the importance to Byron of ‘the Aberdonian epoch’, for it was ‘richly fraught with incidents of inconceivable value to the genius of the poet’.⁵⁷ Invoking his own childhood, and the way he would sit and listen for hours to the neighbourhood ladies gossiping around his mother’s table, Galt writes that – like his own young mind – Byron’s was undoubtedly tinged ‘with the sullen hue of the local traditions’. For ‘to those who are acquainted with the Scottish character, it is unnecessary to suggest how very probable it is that Mrs Byron and her associates were addicted to the oral legends of the district and of her ancestors, and that the early fancy of the poet was nourished with the shadowy descriptions in the tales o’ the olden time’. It was in this context that the Byronic hero first began to take shape, in Galt’s view, as ‘it is to his mother’s traditions of her ancestors that I would ascribe the conception of the dark and guilty beings which [Byron] delighted to describe’.⁵⁸ Galt contends, too, that the Scottish landscape cast an enduring spell on Byron, for ‘although the sullen tone of his mind was not fully brought out until he wrote *Childe Harold*, it is yet evident from his *Hours of Idleness*, that he was turned to that key before he went abroad’. The ‘dark colouring’ of Byron’s mind ‘was plainly imbibed in a

mountainous region, from sombre heaths, and in the midst of rudeness and grandeur’, as Galt explains.⁵⁹

Scotland was also undoubtedly a topic of conversation during their time together in the Levant. Indeed, both Galt and Byron looked through a Scottish lens at the Mediterranean, each quite possibly encouraging this point of view in the other, and each perhaps prompted by ‘the conceivable commonality of derivation between “Alba”, the Gaelic word for Scotland and Albania’, as Brean Hammond asserts.⁶⁰ Byron, for example, in his notes to the second canto of *Childe Harold*, remarks that the Albanese ‘struck me forcibly by their resemblance to the Highlanders of Scotland, in dress, figure, and manner of living. Their very mountains seemed Caledonian with a kinder climate’. Galt, too, in his *Letters*, discerns a number of significant parallels between the two countries. ‘We had several Albanian songs’ which ‘resembled the Highland pibrochs’, he remarks, for ‘in their manners these mountaineers are not unlike our highland countrymen. They have the same skinless sense of honour, and between them and their followers the same kind of attachment’.⁶¹ Equally strikingly is that both Byron and Galt also view the two countries along a historical and cultural continuum in which Albania’s present is set against Scotland’s past. ‘Albania corresponded to the old, primitive Scotland which had almost totally disappeared by the time Byron and Galt travelled to the East’, Massimiliano Demata declares. ‘They considered Scotland to be a modern country which had shaken off the yoke of ignorance and superstition. By inference, they believed that Albanians were about to emerge from their dark age and to reach a more evolved stage in their social and economical structure’.⁶²

Scottish writers, moreover, had a decisive impact on Byron, and while Galt also compares him to English poets including Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, and Coleridge, his

Caledonian preferences are so pronounced that Thomas Moore dismissed Galt's biography as 'anti-English'.⁶³ According to Galt, James Macpherson in his Ossianic poems 'evidently influenced' Byron, 'by some strong bias and congeniality of taste, to brood and cogitate on topics of the same character as those of that bard'. William Falconer, poet and lexicographer, laid the scenes of his famous 1762 account of *The Shipwreck* amid the rocks on which stand the ruins of the temple of Minerva, and Byron in *The Giaour* was also inspired by the scene in his 'unequaled description of the climate of Greece'. In *Tam O'Shanter*, Robert Burns produces his 'celebrated catalogue of dreadful things on the sacramental table', but Byron in *The Siege of Corinth* bests him in his horrifying description of 'dogs devouring the dead'. 'It is true', Galt concedes, 'that the revolting circumstances described by Byron are less sublime in their associations than those of Burns', though Byron's appalling account remains 'an amazing display of poetical power and high invention'.⁶⁴ Henry Brougham published his scathing critique of *Hours of Idleness* in the *Edinburgh Review*, and Galt reprints it in its entirety. Its 'deep and severe impression' played a crucial role in the 'development' of Byron's 'genius and character', he maintains, and it is 'one of the most influential documents perhaps in the whole extent of biography'. James Kennedy, army surgeon and evangelical Christian, met Byron in Cephalonia in 1823, and attempted to convert him, as he documents in his *Conversations on Religion with Lord Byron* (1830). Galt's summary of the discussions between Kennedy and Byron constitutes the longest chapter in his biography, and brings Byron's Presbyterianism to the fore. 'I already believe in predestination', Byron told Kennedy, 'which I know you believe, and in the depravity of the human heart in general, and of my own in particular'. Elsewhere in the biography Galt himself notes that, 'whatever the laxity of [Byron's] religious principles may have been in after life, he was not unacquainted

with the records and history of our religion'.⁶⁵ And by 'our', of course, Galt means the Scottish Calvinism that he shared with Byron, and that so thoroughly marks the Satanic pride, tormented conscience, and deep damnation of the Byronic hero.

Most provocatively, Galt in his biography uses Scots on several occasions, creating a kind of hybridized language that is in dialogue with but different from standard English. Murray Pittock, in advancing a definition of 'a distinctively Scottish and Irish Romanticism', argues that linguistic registers which collide and coalesce, or tensions between 'metropolitan and local variants of Anglophone speech', indicate 'the presence of a national culture' – in this instance a biography of an English lord that is distinctly inflected toward a Scottish national culture.⁶⁶ 'The influence of the incomprehensible phantasma which hovered about Lord Byron, has been more or less felt by all who ever approached him', asserts Galt. 'That he sometimes came out of the cloud, and was familiar and earthly, is true; but his dwelling was amidst the murk', a word – according to the *OED* – 'rare outside Scots use in 18th and early 19th centuries', and meaning 'darkness' or 'gloom'.⁶⁷ Or, after witnessing a naval officer rebuke a haughty Byron during a dinner-party argument about 'the politics of the late Mr Pitt', Galt reported that Byron sulked for the rest of the evening, before concluding that 'I never in the whole course of my acquaintance saw him kith so unfavourably as he did on that occasion'. The *Monthly Review* pounced. 'What is the meaning of that word "kith"?' it demanded. 'It certainly is not English'.⁶⁸ Or again, Galt recalled one evening when he and Byron were aboard the *Townshend*, and he silently observed the young poet sitting alone 'in the tranquillity of the moonlight, churming an inarticulate melody'. Once again the *Monthly Review* objected. 'Churming', it repeated querulously. 'Where is that verb to be found?' As

late as 1961, Doris Langley Moore felt the same way. ‘Churming’ is ‘not a misprint’, and ‘seems to relate to the twitterings of birds’, as she rather condescendingly puts it.⁶⁹

In his great novels of Scottish provincial life, Galt uses words like ‘murk’, ‘kithe’, and ‘churming’, and his employment of them in his biography of Byron is to some extent simply a matter of writerly habit. But in using Scots to describe Byron, as Byron himself sometimes used Scots, Galt intensifies the distinctively Scottish inflection of the biography, indicates the nature of his most illuminating connection to Byron, and even opens up the possibility that he used Scots when writing of Byron because he and Byron used Scots when speaking to one another. Byron, Galt is suggesting, was at home in a Scottish context – *belonged* within a Scottish context – and an accurate account of his life needs to acknowledge the many enduring ways in which Scotland defined and revitalized him. Byron’s English lordship and English lordliness often made Galt bristle, but there were several other occasions when he penetrated past the poet’s aristocratic airs to connect with the outcast and fellow sojourner who came from the same country as he did, and with whom he shared an understanding of its oral traditions, landscapes, history, literature, religion, and language. It is probably their shared Scottishness that explains why, in 1813, when Galt called at Newstead Abbey in the hope of seeing Byron, one of the servants asked him if he was a member of the family.⁷⁰

In his most specific commentary on his own response to Scotland, Byron says that he initially loved it, then rejected it because of Brougham’s attack on *Hours of Idleness*, only to find that his ‘affection for it soon flowed back into its old channel’.⁷¹ This account ‘is true’, according to Bernard Beatty, ‘but the word “soon” may mislead’, as it is ‘only in 1822 that, for the first time, he sets a substantial part of a major poem in England whilst simultaneously admitting his half-Scottishness’.⁷² It seems improbable, though, that Byron’s affection for

Scotland took well over a decade to reassert itself, and much more likely that his emotions flowed back to it ‘soon’ after Brougham’s attack, as Byron himself characterized it. Galt seems to have played a leading role in this process. He and Byron met in the year following Brougham’s *Edinburgh* review, and while their friendship always involved discord, it probably also re-awakened Byron’s Scottish loyalties. ‘Leslie Marchand’s 1957 biography mostly sees Byron as an unproblematically “English” writer’, Pittock observes, ‘and this continues to be true of Marchand’s more popular inheritors, such as Fiona MacCarthy, who uses “English” and “British” more or less interchangeably in her 2002 account of the poet’s life’.⁷³ Long before such oversimplifications took hold, however, Galt advanced a view of the poet that put Scotland at the crux of his identity and achievement. Galt’s own intense identification with Scotland, and his alertness to Byron’s, throws searching light on the complicated question of Byron’s nationality, and lays the foundation for an understanding of Byron as a Scottish writer.

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