

## **From Slogan to Clan: Three Fragments from the Evolving Scottish/Germanic Literary Relations of the Romantic Period.**

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As Scotland moved from an eighteenth-century largely feudal and agrarian society to a nineteenth-century industrial powerhouse of the Empire, how were the writings of Scots writers influenced by the Germans, and what influence did they exert in their turn? How, through cultural exchange, were literary tools and concepts refined to deal with an epochal shift in concern from the individual to the masses, the subject to the state, the hero to the mob, or in metaphorical terms here, the slogan to the clan?

Keywords: Romantic; fragment; slogan; individual; mob; Macpherson; Ossian; *Sturm und Drang*; Bards; Carlyle; germanise; Babylonian Dialect; Idealism; Robertson Smith; Freud; Semitic; sacrifice; Bible; totem; clan.

Relations between German nineteenth-century Romantic and Scottish literatures were of such a long, involved and multiform character that it would be difficult to attempt to summarise them in a short chapter. Key elements or exemplary moments are difficult to pin down and can have a deceptive complexity. As authenticity was a perennial question for that age, however, it seems appropriate to make use of a concept whose very name has a certain resonance in the literature: the fragment. Thus this chapter concentrates on fragmented aspects of three Scottish writers whose writing lives spanned more or less 150 years, and examines the ways in which they were influenced by, or exerted an influence upon, German writing. These literary exchanges and reciprocities may indeed allow the careful reader to perceive enduring and significant trends in Scottish culture at large which otherwise would not be apparent.

The fragments presented are from James Macpherson and the effect of the Ossian phenomenon in Germany from 1760 onwards; the influence of certain German writers on Thomas Carlyle in the 1820s and 30s; and from the 1880s the influence exerted by W. Robertson Smith in the field of social anthropology and on Freud, who called Smith a “genius” in his *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud 1964: 1–13). Naturally such an abridged and disjointed presentation of historical material cannot hope to produce a seamless and comprehensive narrative of developments through the period in question. It may be

objected that the most glaring omission here is that of Scott and his influence on the Germans; for without an acknowledgement and proper survey of the shaping of attitudes to history and modernity by his work, there is, in effect, no real survey. On the other hand, cannot such “rough cuts” as we propose here, provoke, by simple juxtaposition, new insights about the nature and scale of the epochal shift? The sheer immensity of the task for our understanding is kept palpably before us here, as by two sudden leaps we move from the early Enlightenment, with its concern with the individual subject operating within the historical residue of agrarian, feudal and humanistic layers of organisation, to writings dealing with the complex mass social structures of industrial, imperial and advanced capitalist Britain in the late nineteenth century. Carlyle is, in this sense, a midpoint between these two poles. Not only does he look to Germany as he wrestles in the dark night of his conscience to find an expression suitable – as he sees it – for the rapidly changing society of 1830s industrial revolutionary Britain, but in his obsession both with heroes and mobs, he is precariously balanced between these formal extremes of individualism and social complexity.

The title of the chapter may have aroused some curiosity. I would remind readers that these two words “slogan” and “clan” are two of the most commonly found Gaelic loan words in West European languages. They are of some pedigree: “slogan” (*sluagh ghairm* – battle cry in Gaelic) had its first recorded use in this anglicised form in Scott’s *Last Minstrel*; “clan” was first recorded in Scots/English in Douglas’s translation of the *Aeneid*, and came into German with the translation of *Humphry Clinker* in the 1770s. I would like to propose however, that “From slogan to clan”, given the full complement of meanings and connotations of those words, does encapsulate something of the changing mood from the writings of Macpherson to those of W. Robertson Smith, and the different qualities of influence they exerted.

### **Macpherson**

German literary culture was one of those most immediately and deeply influenced by the Ossian cult that followed the first publication of James Macpherson’s translations in 1760. From 1762 onwards

various translations and versions appeared in North Germany: in Bremen, Hamburg and Hanover. The first complete translation of Ossian into any language (other than English) was produced by Michael Denis, a Bavarian Jesuit, and the most famous (and arguably the most influential) partial translation is perhaps still Goethe's rendering of the "Songs of Selma" in the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774).

What were the Germans looking for, or what did they find in Ossian, that made them so enthusiastic? Tombo, in his short book on *Ossian in Germany* says "there was scarcely a writer of note who did not fall under his spell", and, more specifically, that Ossian himself was "endowed with those qualities that constitute the ideal poet of the Storm and Stress" (Tombo 1901: 67, 75).

An examination of the major translations and what they actually brought over into German might tell us what they found so captivating. The number of different forms used (there are translations completely in prose; also some in rhymed verse; in unrhymed verse; rhythmic prose laid out as verse; free rhythms mixed with odes; and, of course, Denis' translation in hexameters) suggests that the translators found nothing inherently attractive about Macpherson's spare, asyndetic and paratactic prose style. Indeed before beginning his translation from Macpherson's English into German hexameters, Denis had only read and conceived his enthusiasm for Ossian through Cesarotti's Italian translation (Cesarotti 1763) done into *sciolti* – unrhymed hendecasyllabic verse in which the "original" stylistic qualities of Macpherson are already much attenuated by addition of conjunctions and punctuation. Nonetheless some translations like those of Goethe (in *Werther*) and Petersen (Petersen 1782) do preserve some specific and important stylistic qualities from Macpherson, like the inversions (an attempt by Macpherson to give a Gaelic tone to the English) and those aforementioned asyndetic and paratactic qualities.

Yet if it was not principally Macpherson's style that the Germans found so captivating, then neither could the influence of the translations have been based on the subject matter in terms of its strictly historical or geographical content. For, as Tombo points out, some of the German poets claiming the influence of Ossian were quite confused. There was confusion about who the Celts are, or were, and what their relationship was to the Nordic peoples, the Goths and present day Germans. Gerstenberg, for example, has Fingal not only

swearing allegiance to Loda, but praying to Wodan; and in an Ossianic rewriting of the ode *Wingolf*, Klopstock has Orpheus and the Thracians as a tribe of Celts, which oddly, makes them as much German as is his Ossian.<sup>1</sup>

In fact it is precisely the simple and rarefied atmosphere of the Ossian poems in these terms – historical and geographical – which both guarantee their universality and encourage the sort of fantasies noted immediately above. As Hugh Blair wrote, it is the “great advantage of Ossian’s mythology that it is not local and temporary” (Blair 1765: 38). For what does remain in all the translations is the simple diction, the directness of the poet’s voice, the elemental (and universal) imagery – the trees, the moor, rock, moss, sea; the clouds, the rain, the snow; and the moon and sun – and the extended similes and comparisons involving these natural phenomena. This was a poetry devoid of abstract ideas, one of immediacy and emotion, a “*Poetry of the Heart*” (Blair 1765: 21) – useful as a slogan, perhaps – which thus appealed strongly, as Tombo pointed out, to the *Sturm und Drang* movement with its rebellion against the classical, the conventional, and the rational. As Howard Gaskill says:

it could respond to widely shared inferiority complexes and resentments, serving to boost the self confidence of Highlands against Lowlands, Scotland against England, the barbarous North (Germany, Scandinavia, Russia) against the classical South (France, Italy, Greece). And of course equally it could be used to support the claims of the original against the derivative, the natural against the artificial, the ancient against the modern, the vigorous against the effete, and therefore the young against the old, anarchy against order, freedom against enslavement, spontaneity against reflection, inspiration against rules, heart against head, feeling against reason; also chastity against perversion [...] the (noble) savage against the (corrupt) civilised. It could be exploited by the iconoclasts who wished to dispose of the classical canon and topple Homer off his pedestal. (Gaskill 1994: 666–67)

If Ossian was thus in danger of being reduced to some sort of symbol, a slogan for rebellious individuals, then his influence as such would not be long lived. As W.H. Auden says of *Sturm und Drang*,

Such a movement has often arisen in history and the consequences have almost always been the same; those who embrace it produce some remarkable work at an early age but then peter out if they do not, as they often do, take to drink or shoot

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<sup>1</sup> “Sie sind auch deutschen Stamms”. *Wingolf* is a rewriting of the classical Ode “An meine Freunde” (Klopstock 1887: 5).

themselves. An art which pits Nature against Art is bound to be self-defeating. (Goethe 1970: 11–12)

Goethe did produce some remarkable work at an early age (*The Sorrows of Young Werther* among it), but he neither shot himself nor took to drink. Instead he grew to change his mind on Ossian and his presentation of the poetry in *Werther*. As a more mature writer he claimed that Werther only preferred Ossian to Homer in the second part of the novel i.e. once he had gone mad (Lampport has pointed out that Goethe's position here is textually unsustainable. Lampport 1998: 97). Goethe in his early *Sturm und Drang* years had been encouraged in his interest in Ossian by Herder, and at the same time he took an interest in the Gothic, writing an article on Gothic architecture which was published together with Herder's *Von deutscher Art und Kunst* (later called the "Sturm und Drang manifesto"). When some twelve or thirteen years later in the diary of his *Italian Journey* (an important event in Goethe's conversion to classicism) we find him saying of the Gothic "Thank God, I am done with all that junk for good and all" (Goethe 1970: 95), we must wonder if he does not dismiss Ossian and *Werther* and everything else connected with that *Sturm und Drang* period in this uncharacteristically vehement outburst.

Tombo tells us that Klopstock's interest in Ossian did not last much longer:

when his enthusiastic admiration for Ossian subsided and took on a saner aspect, when his views on the subject of the relationship of the Celts to the Older German tribes assumed a more scientific character, he could not allow Ossian to occupy the position assigned him at first. (Tombo 1901: 101)

Tombo goes on to say that Klopstock's period of "unbounded admiration" lasted no longer than a decade and that for the other "Bards", of whom Gerstenberg, Denis, and Kretschmann were the most prominent, "the thing passed into a fad through imitation" (Tombo 1901: 103).

It is interesting to note on this head that Schinkel the architect, who sketched Fingal's cave and was at the time an enthusiastic devotee of Gothic architecture, converted to classicism shortly after his trip to Scotland. He developed into Germany's most successful classical architect of the nineteenth century and is said by some to have been an influence on Glasgow's Alexander "Greek" Thomson.

In spite of these evidences of short-lived enthusiasms, the Ossian cult was long lasting in Germany, and there are certain individuals who developed deep and authentic approaches to the poetry. Howard Gaskill (1994) suggests that more work needs to be done on the influence, almost unacknowledged to date (or conveniently forgotten), on Jean Paul (Friedrich Richter), Novalis, and especially Hölderlin. The first ever translations from the so-called Gaelic originals of 1807 were done not into English but into German (in 1811) by a schoolmaster Christian Wilhelm Ahlwardt (Ahlwardt 1811), who also compiled a Gaelic Grammar in German in 1821. It was Herder however, who maintained perhaps the longest and most penetrating critical relationship with the Ossian texts. He had what seems now a most modern insight, and with the twentieth-century ring to his dictum “the thought clings to the expression”,<sup>2</sup> he could not fail to be indignant at Denis’s translations into hexameters which he reviewed in *Von deutscher Art und Kunst*. He was also able to pick out the most authentic passages of Gaelic folk poetry hidden away in Macpherson’s texts<sup>3</sup> (something which many critics contemporary and modern have been unable to do), to compile a glossary of Gaelic terms, and publish some German versions of the poetry himself.

Perhaps the overall situation of Ossian in Germany is best summed up by Gaskill:

The writers who were profoundly influenced by him matter and are still read. But one imagines that Germany would still have become – for a time – the country of poets, thinkers and indeed Celtic scholars, even if Macpherson had never lived. Nor do I think Herder’s aesthetic values are strongly dependent on his reception of Ossian. Without Macpherson he would still have been pursuing the spirit of folk poetry from Latvia to Peru. (Gaskill 1996: 271)

## Carlyle

Carlyle, born in 1795, did not learn German until he took private lessons as a twenty-five year old. By the late 1820s and through into the early 30s, however, he had already set himself the task of “germanising the public” (Norton 1888: letter of 4 June 1827 to John

<sup>2</sup> “[...] klebt der Gedanke am Ausdruck” (Herder 1877: 16–17).

<sup>3</sup> Gaskill points out that Herder picks the lamentation of the widow of Dargo – “about as genuine as anything in Macpherson’s entire Ossianic corpus” – from a Macpherson footnote to send in a sample translation to his fiancé (1996: 265).

Carlyle). He went about this in various ways: by translating Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1824), writing a short *Life of Schiller* (1825), by writing numerous critical/biographical essays on German poets and writers for such journals as the *Edinburgh Review*, *Fraser's Magazine* and the *Foreign Review*, and by undertaking to compile a History of German Literature (with the help of Goethe). This was no easy workload, and nor did Carlyle find the path to his literary Valhalla free of grumbling editors and publishers. He had disagreements with Jeffrey at the *Edinburgh Review* about the interest value of the Germans,<sup>4</sup> and Tait abandoned the publication of the History before it was finished on the grounds that "anything German is most specially to be avoided" (Froude 1882–84: 243).

This was of course not the only, nor the greatest, problem that Carlyle faced early in his literary career. For in addition to such German criticism he was also writing essays of socio-political interest such as "Signs of the Times" and "On History", and here he expressed a fear that the world of thought was becoming increasingly polarised. By the late 20s and early 30s Scotland was already moving towards the great intellectual crisis of the 1843 Disruption. So while on one side were those parties getting involved in the schismatic debates concerning faith, religion and its relationship to the State, and who seemed to ignore the massive social upheaval caused by the rapid industrialisation of the country in the nineteenth century, on the other were the Utilitarians, following the lead of Smith, Bentham, and Mill, who advocated material progress as a cure for social ills but paid little if any attention to spiritual or religious questions. Carlyle first tackles this problem in the "Signs of the Times" in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1829, where he designates the two poles as pertaining respectively to the dynamic and mechanical nature of man. As Carlyle sees it there has been too much of a concentration on man's mechanical nature and not enough emphasis placed on the dynamic, or as we might say, spiritual nature. Each of these two poles forms, as he says, "but half a picture" (Carlyle 1839: 250), and Carlyle seems to be seeking a way

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<sup>4</sup> Bertrand Russell says of this period, "Throughout the period from Kant to Nietzsche, professional philosophers in Great Britain remained almost completely unaffected by their German contemporaries, with the sole exception of Sir William Hamilton, who had little influence. Coleridge and Carlyle, it is true, were profoundly affected by Kant, Fichte and the German Romantics, but they were not philosophers in the technical sense". (Russell 1946: 740)



in which thought and writing can deal with both the material and the spiritual at the same time.

The analysis which Carlyle gives of Mechanism and its one-sided and all-pervasive influence on the culture and society of the time is very lucid and powerful, but unfortunately when he attempts to persuade us of the need for a greater balance and emphasis on the dynamic, he is unconvincing. His method is more to tell us about rather than to show us this dynamic alternative, and it seems, at times, that he doth protest too much. Could he be said simply to fall back on a stereotypically harsh and disapproving Presbyterian heritage in the preachiness of his tone here? And if so, is that because the standard rational prose of the critic, which was rigorous enough to expose the Mechanistic problem, is, in a word, simply not a sufficiently supple and dynamic tool to work up an inspiration in us for his complementary vision? We might indeed say that in this essay we see the first ominous evidence of what A.J.P. Taylor described as Carlyle's "ideas spluttering and half-formed, ideas of revolt and rejection with nothing constructive to follow" (Taylor 1976: 59). In effect, writings as a form of slogan. At any rate, Carlyle himself seems aware of his literary shortcomings here, when at the beginning of the section dealing with the dynamic, he admits to "speak[ing] a little pedantically" (Carlyle 1839: 240).

If "Signs of the Times" was at the least a lucid posing of the problem then the first real answering to the questions it raised could be said to come with the completion of *Sartor Resartus* in 1831 (published in complete form in 1836). *Sartor Resartus* is important not only for what it says, but *how* it says it. Carlyle had by this time developed a poetic, and it must be said, dynamic style which he calls a "Babylonish Dialect". It has cosmic scope, is rhapsodic and affected, makes use of satire, invective and irony, and thus is an answer in itself to the plodding Mechanistic problem. To some extent it can be shown that he developed this style through his readings of German writers (although there are of course other very important influences, such as his strict Presbyterian background, and Biblical influences). Thus with those early essays of the late 1820s and early 30s he may be said not only to have been "germanising the public" but also germanising himself.

Carlyle's reading of German authors was very wide ranging but we may here take a brief look at some of the most important



influences, namely Goethe, Novalis, Jean Paul Friedrich Richter and Kant. Goethe was always an inspirational figure for Carlyle, and they carried out a correspondence principally between 1827–31.<sup>5</sup> The spiritual conversion which Carlyle describes as occurring in *Sartor Resartus* between the chapters “The Everlasting No” and “The Everlasting Yea” was effected in him personally by his careful reading and translation of Goethe’s Bildungsroman *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1824). Carlyle was going through a spiritual crisis, having doubts and ultimately giving up on his Presbyterian faith, and this book let him see new possibilities of self realisation through an active and socially useful life. Goethe as a pacific, all-encompassing genius who has command of all fields of knowledge and experience can be seen as an inspiration for the character of Teufelsdröckh in *Sartor Resartus*. There we have an all-knowing, all-seeing professor living in a small provincial town: is it Weimar or Weissnichtwo, Teufelsdröckh or Goethe?

Novalis was influenced by Friedrich Schlegel who developed certain Romantic ideas and forms from a reading of the German theorist Wolff. Wolff was one of the first critics to propose that the “Iliad” was not composed by one single poet “Homer” but by many poets acting as poet-critics in a tradition and progressing the body of work through their own critical reading of it and poetic intervention in it (Martin 1994: 82). The Romantics, led by Schlegel, developed two important concepts from this critical reading.

Firstly, that of the Open Work: the literary work as progressive and dynamic, involving the critical and poetic impulses of many hands. Examples include the *Iliad* and the Bible: works that oppose the complete, finished ideal of the single-authored classical literary work. The second concept, which derives from this, is that of the fragment. If individual authority in a work is always limited then it follows that each poet’s contribution can only ever be a fragment. The fragment is thus always a key to some ineffable infinite which lies beyond the scope of literary delineation. German Romantic artists from Novalis to Goethe exploited the form of the fragment in working out the ironic stance of a self-contained autonomy as part of a greater totality – it was thus of use to Carlyle in his concern for both heroes

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<sup>5</sup> A.J.P Taylor noted of Carlyle, that “It sheds a quaint light on the two languages that Goethe, that most classical of German writers, should have inspired the most uncouth writer of English” (Taylor 1976: 59).

and mobs. These German Romantic artists used the form as an opportunity to adopt simultaneously both a subjective and an objective viewpoint. The highest development of the form is perhaps seen in Nietzsche's aphorisms.

A fairly straightforward case can be made for the influence of these ideas on the structure of *Sartor Resartus*. The book is ostensibly about Teufelsdröckh's "Philosophy of Clothes", a philosophy that would explain everything. Yet we never see the whole text, which remains in one sense at least ineffable. Instead we are treated to fragments, contributions critical and poetic, from the editor, from Teufelsdröckh himself, from Teufelsdröckh's friend, from written notes in paper bags, and so on, which all provide a key to that ineffable infinite.

To see how directly Novalis's style might have influenced Carlyle, we need only compare the following opening paragraph of *Novices at Sais* with *Sartor Resartus*, and especially Carlyle's chapter of "Symbols":

Various are the roads of man. He who follows and compares them will see strange figures emerge, figures which seem to belong to that great cipher which we discern written everywhere, in wings, eggshells, clouds and snow, in crystals and in stone-formations, on ice-covered waters, on the inside and outside of mountains, of plants, beasts and men, in the lights of heaven, on scored disks of pitch or glass, or in iron filings round a magnet, and in strange conjunctures of chance. In them we suspect a key to the magic writing, even a grammar, but our surmise takes on no definite forms and seems unwilling to become a higher key. (Novalis [1949] 2005: 3–5)

Here we have the "great cipher", somewhat like the unseen, unseeable, infinite "Philosophy of Clothes". And all these "figures" listed give a "key" to "the grammar", and remind us of Carlyle's statement that "Rightly viewed no meanest object is insignificant; all objects are windows, through which the philosophic eye looks into infinitude itself" (Carlyle 1840: 72).

Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, humorist novelist and critic, might be said to be the Laurence Sterne of German literature. Carlyle wrote two essays on Richter, one for the *Edinburgh Review* in 1827 and another for the *Foreign Review* in 1830, and it is significant that there he places greater emphasis on analysis of style, where in his essays on Goethe and Novalis, for example, he tends to look more for meaning or message. A short passage from each essay may demonstrate this:

There are few writers with whom deliberation and careful distrust of first impressions are more necessary than with Richter. He is a phenomenon from the very surface; he presents himself with a professed and determined singularity; his language itself is a stone of stumbling to the critic; to critics of the grammarian species, an unpardonable, often an insuperable rock of offence. Not that he is ignorant of grammar, or disdains the science of spelling and parsing; but he exercises both in a certain latitudinarian spirit; deals with astonishing liberality in parentheses, dashes, and subsidiary clauses; invents hundreds of new words, alters old ones, or by hyphen chains and pairs and packs them together into the most jarring combination; in short, produces sentences of the most heterogeneous, lumbering, interminable kind. Figures without limit! Indeed the whole is one tissue of metaphors, and similes, and allusions to all provinces of Earth, Sea, and Air; interlaced with epigrammatic breaks, vehement bursts, or sardonic turns, interjections, quips, puns, and even oaths! A perfect Indian jungle it seems; a boundless, unparalleled imbroglio; nothing on all sides but darkness, dissonance, confusion worse confounded! (Carlyle 1855: 10)

and,

Probably there is not in any modern language so intricate a writer; abounding, without measure, in obscure allusions, in the most twisted phraseology; perplexed into endless entanglements and dislocations, parenthesis within parenthesis; not forgetting elisions, sudden whirls, quips, conceits and all manner, yet nowise in what seem military lines, but rather in huge parti-coloured mob-masses. (Carlyle 1855: 197)

Two very important points are clear from these cited passages: Firstly, that here we have Carlyle not only providing a definition of Jean Paul's style but also attempting to create an example of that very style which he seeks to define. Are not Carlyle's own sentences here "intricate" with "the most twisted phraseology", does he not perplex the definition into "endless entanglements and dislocations"? "Figures without limit!" is surely one of these "vehement bursts" itself, and as for "obscure allusions", what about "a perfect Indian Jungle" with an Italian "unparalleled imbroglio" wrapped around it?

This can be read as a definition not only of Jean Paul's style, but also of Carlyle's mature style as it is found in *Sartor Resartus* and the *French Revolution*. For here, in a confusing but planned poetic jumble, "a stone of stumbling to the critic", the author himself, his personal dynamism, is ever-present and linked through figures of "metaphors and similes and allusions" to a cosmic scope of "Earth, Sea and Air". During the year (1830) of the writing of *Sartor Resartus* we see him thus practising again a style which he had first attempted in 1827 and which allows him to charm the Mechanistic Universe,

given that “Not our Logical, Mensurative faculty, but our Imaginative one is King over us” (Carlyle 1840: 225).

Carlyle was an enthusiastic expounder of German Idealism, especially in his immature and early mature writings. We find him setting out his versions of that philosophy in the early critical essays, the philosophico-fictional *Sartor Resartus*, and the *Histories*. Indeed, we only get as far as page six of the three-volume *French Revolution* before he audaciously implies that the whole Gallic affair was underpinned by German philosophy. Carlyle’s version of German Idealism consisted more or less of ideas from Kant, conflated with those of Fichte and Schelling, and blended with his own idiosyncratic brand of spiritualism. Indeed while Rene Wellek (1931) admits that Carlyle probably did more than anyone else to make England “receptible” for German idealism, he suggests that what Carlyle expounded as such was more Carlyle than Kant. Wellek implies that Carlyle had never in fact properly read Kant, saying that Carlyle relied “mostly” on “second hand reports” (Wellek 1931: 200). Both Wellek and Froude claim that, in fact, Carlyle never got beyond page 150 of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: starting it in order to “allay his fears” about his impending wedding to Jane Welsh but then abandoning it when it became “too abstruse” for him (Froude 1882–84: 375).

But whatever Carlyle’s sources: Kant’s writings, other writers’ expositions of Kant and German Idealism (notably Novalis), or his own brand of spirituality; and whatever the truth, misrepresentation, and intellectual soundness of Carlyle’s “Kantianism”, the fact is that he did not hesitate to exploit his own version of these ideas in all forms of his writings. To take an example first from his early critical essays, that on Novalis in the *Foreign Review* in 1829:

The Idealist, again, boasts that his Philosophy is Transcendental, that is, “ascending beyond the senses”; which, he asserts, all Philosophy, properly so called, by its nature is and must be: and in this way he is led to various unexpected conclusions. To a Transcendentalist, Matter has an existence, but only as a Phenomenon: were we not there, neither would it be there; it is a mere Relation, or rather the result of a Relation between our living Souls and the First Cause; and depends for its apparent qualities on our bodily and mental organs; having itself no intrinsic qualities; being, in the common sense of that word, Nothing. The tree is green and hard, not of its own natural virtue, but simply because my eye and hand are fashioned so as to discern such and such appearances under such and such conditions. (Carlyle 1839: 203)

This essay was written in the same year as “Signs of the Times” in which we see a similar lucid and rational prose style. If we turn now to a couple of excerpts from *Sartor Resartus* completed in 1831, and therefore after the final 1830 essay on Jean Paul’s style, we see again an expounding of Carlyle’s Kantean ideas, but in a completely different style from their presentation in the 1829 Novalis essay.

But deepest of all illusory Appearances, for hiding Wonder, as for many other ends, are your two grand fundamental world-enveloping Appearances, SPACE and TIME. These, as spun and woven for us from before Birth itself, to clothe our celestial ME for dwelling here, and yet, to blind it – lie all embracing, as the universal canvas, or warp and woof, whereby all minor Illusions, in this Phantasm Existence, weave and paint themselves. In vain, while here on Earth, shall you endeavour to strip them off; you can, at best, but rend them asunder for moments, and look through. [...] Believe what thou findest written in the Sanctuaries of Man’s Soul, even as all Thinkers, in all ages, have devoutly read it there: that TIME, and SPACE are not God, but creations of God; that with God as it is a universal HERE, so it is an everlasting NOW. (Carlyle 1840: 265–66)

Here we have a presentation of Carlyle’s own (spiritualised) version of German Idealism, meshed with “astonishing liberality” in that dynamic style, the “Babylonish Dialect”, of which he’d learned so much from Jean Paul. Turning now to the *French Revolution* (1837) we can see how he develops this happy marriage of Kant and Jean Paul to its most mature expression:

For ours is a most fictile world; and man is the most fingent plastic of creatures. A world not fixable: not fathomable! An unfathomable Somewhat, which is Not we; which we can work with, and live amidst, – and model, miraculously in our miraculous Being, and name World. – But if the very Rocks and Rivers (as Metaphysics teaches) are, in strict language, made by those outward Senses of ours, how much more, by the Inward Sense, are all Phenomena of the spiritual kind: Dignities, Authorities, Holies, Unholies! Which inward Sense, moreover, is not permanent like the outward ones, but forever growing and changing. Does not the Black African take of Sticks and Old Clothes (say exported Monmouth Street cast-clothes) what will suffice, and of those, cunningly combining them, fabricate for himself an Eidolon (Idol or Thing Seen), and name it Mumbo-Jumbo; which he can thenceforth pray to, with upturned awestruck eye, not without hope? The white European mocks; but ought rather to consider; and see whether he, at home, could not do the like a little more wisely. (Carlyle 1837: 6)

Here the style has with its “certain latitudinarian spirit” completely stifled any clear expression of content. The “German Idealism” is a substructure clothed in the prose such that it is only exposed in a par-

enthetical reminder that “Metaphysics” are under all this somewhere. What Carlyle has managed to do is to sublimate completely his own Presbyterian urge to preach, and in effect he has created a dynamic and organic unity of content and style. To attempt a Carlylean-style metaphor: might it not be said that on a certain stylistic level what we have in the *French Revolution* is a warp of Richterian prose woven through the woof of a homespun Kantianism?

### **William Robertson Smith**

By the 1890s Scotland had moved some way beyond that period of schismatic debates about faith, religion and their relationship to the State that had characterised the era of the Disruption. But it was emerging as a very different country from eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Scotland: 1872 had brought the Education Act, in 1886 the position of the Secretary of State for Scotland was established in the British Government, and the Scottish Trades Union Congress was to be formed in 1897. This was no longer a nation built around a church that governed the welfare and education of its people, but a Scotland that was more truly a constituent part of the modern British State. However, not everything of these schismatic debates which had seemed to Carlyle to ignore the great social upheavals of the time (“Hebrew Old Clothes” was his characteristic comment) was lost in self-regarding oblivion. In fact one of the great international successes of those years was the contribution of W. Robertson Smith, whose work proves that the Scottish Presbyterian tradition was still able to make a distinct, important and unique contribution to the formation of modern twentieth-century thought.

From the late 1840s onwards many Free Church theologians had started to turn towards Germany for theological guidance. By the 1860s when Robertson Smith was studying, Calvinist theology was under question and students at the New College in Edinburgh were encouraged to attend *Somerset* and to acquaint themselves with German biblical criticism. Robertson Smith went to Bonn in 1867 and studied under Adolf Kamphausen; in 1869 he was in Gottingen studying metaphysics under Hermann Lotze, theological ethics under Albrecht Ritschl, and Old Testament theology with Ernst Bertheau; and in 1872 he was again in Gottingen to study Arabic with Paul de

Lagarde. An idea of the importance which Robertson Smith himself attached to these studies can be gained from comments in his letters, where he says, "Bonn and Gottingen had quite as much to do with my theological education as the T.M. [Training for the Ministry]" (Kinnear 1995: 95), and, when with reference to the later libel case against him by the Free Church, he calls Ritschl "the *Urvater* of the Aberdeen Heresy" (Rogerson: 1995: 79). A fuller appreciation of the influence of these German thinkers and theologians and others than can be sketched out here is to be found in J.W. Rogerson's *The Bible and Criticism in Victorian Britain*, (1995) where the author establishes that one of the greatest influences on Smith was his reading of *Zur Dogmathik* by the theologian Rothe, who died in 1867.

Smith contributes to modern thought in many important ways, but we will look here in particular at his influence on Sigmund Freud, specifically through his work on the history of the Semitic peoples and religions and on his questioning of Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch. Freud cited Smith's work often and extensively, especially in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*. There are three points which may be considered of some significance in this connection.

The first is that while Hume had admitted that it was possible to establish a common sense basis for both a system of morals and of physics, he denied that it was so in the case of organised religion. Both parties at the extremes of the Disruption debates, the Evangelicals and the atheists, agreed with this point, although for different reasons. As a moderate Presbyterian Robertson Smith felt it incumbent upon himself to prove that such a common sense basis could indeed be established. One way to do this was to show the continuities between Presbyterian theology and ancient social practice, which he did by using the Presbyterian rejection of transubstantiation as the basis of his researches into the ancient Totem Meal. Comparisons between Judaism and the Old-Testament-based Scots religion are fairly commonplace (in, for example, Carlyle's comments about "Hebrew Old Clothes" and in writers such as Heine) but Smith's project for a scientific theology bears a particularly strong resemblance to the eighteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment of Moses Mendelssohn, which sets out to establish the rational basis of all Judaic precepts and laws (see Arkush 1994). One might speculate that little of this resemblance would have been lost on Freud, a secularised



Viennese Jew, in his reading of Smith. What is less speculative is the influence of Smith's work in Germany, through friendships and confederacies (notably with Julius Wellhausen), and also later in France through the readings of the sociologist Émile Durkheim. Smith was working to show that religion, and sacrifice in particular, arose not out of an attempt to appease implacable and capricious powers but out of a relationship of love with a benevolent God. The fact that someone like Sigmund Freud could use Smith's results for his own lifelong campaign against organised religion would not, however, have surprised traditionalist Presbyterians such as Dr Alexander Duff (see Walls 1995) who thought Smith's work was undermining a belief in the infallible truth of Scripture,

The second point is that Smith, as a believing critic who held that the Old Testament was a record of progressive revelation of God to the nation of Israel, considered that the study of the historical and social context of the divine action was fundamentally important to understanding the Bible. It was thus that his researches turned to the Holy Land (and the Arabian Peninsula, which he saw as the original territory of the Semitic peoples) and to the religion of the Ancient Semites. One of the results of this research was to show how the structure of relationships between ritual, belief, dogma, and myth in ancient religion differed from that of the positivist faiths.

This can be seen in his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* in which Smith contends that "the antique religions had for the most part no creed; they consisted entirely of institutions and practices," and that as a consequence, their rituals were "connected not with a dogma but a myth" (Smith 1889: 16–17). "It must however be remembered", Smith insists, "that in ancient religion there was no authoritative interpretation of ritual. It was imperative that certain things should be done, but every man was free to put his own meaning on whatever was done" (Smith 1889: 399):

Ancient religion was so entirely ruled by precedent that men did not deem it necessary to have an adequate moral explanation of even the most exorbitant demands of traditional ritual; they were content to explain them by some legend that told how the ritual first came to be set up. (Smith 1889: 409)

It is quite a simple step from these findings, which establish rite as more fundamental and chronologically prior to myth, to set up a rough analogy between Smith's analysis of the structure of Ancient Religion

and Freud's psychoanalytic theory. In this reading ritual is seen as a sort of collective compulsive neurotic act and myth (like the work of analysis) a retroactive explanation emerging from the collective unconscious. Indeed on the first page of *Totem and Taboo* Freud makes it clear that he is aware of these similarities:

a comparison between the psychology of primitive peoples, as it is taught by social anthropology, and the psychology of neurotics, as it has been revealed by psychoanalysis, will be bound to show numerous points of agreement and will throw new light upon familiar facts in both these sciences. (Freud 1985: 53)

Freud makes extensive use of W. Robertson Smith's research material, and even makes a six-page resume of his findings in the "Return to Totemism" chapter of *Totem and Taboo*. But where Smith organises his work into what might be crudely described as a dialectic of historico-critical character, mapping out man's gradual coming to dominion over the natural world, Freud absorbs the material into his own idiosyncratic mytho-psychoanalytical canon. Robertson Smith follows Julius Wellhausen in seeing the ancient religion, even with its sacrificial feasts, as a joyous thing (see Wellhausen [1885] 1957) in which there is little of guilt or atonement (this comes later with the development of private property, individuality, and in the Hebrew case, with various political disasters). Freud however, asserts both in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism* that the slaughter of the totem animal and the totem meal are a commemoration in communal guilt of the original slaughter of the tribal father.<sup>6</sup> Freud argues in *Totem and Taboo*, that "Psychoanalysis has revealed that the totem animal is in reality a substitute for the father" (Freud 1985: 202), and in *Moses and Monotheism* that,

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<sup>6</sup> Durkheim argued in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915), that although some writers (e.g. Tyler in *Primitive Culture* and Wilken in *Het Animisme bij den Volken van den Indischen Archipel*) saw totemism not as the most elementary religion but as a special form of the cult of ancestors, this is only because they take their evidence from societies which have passed the stage of pure totemism to a decadent form. Freud also seems to believe here that totemism is not an elementary form of religion, but one derived from the cult of ancestors. Durkheim points out for example, that the purest form of totemism is found in Australian societies among whom metempsychosis is unknown. He also points out that in totemism it is not the actual animal or plant that is worshipped, but the emblem or image of the totem, "Now between this religion of the emblem and the ancestor-cult, there is no connection whatsoever" (Durkheim [1915] 2001: 128).

The first decisive step towards a change in this sort of “social” organisation seems to have been that the expelled brothers, living in a community, united to overpower their father and, as was the custom in these days, devoured him raw (Freud 1985: 325)

These assertions fly in the face of Robertson Smith’s conclusion from the same material. Namely, that within one totemic clan the same sort of being, or spirit, was seen as belonging equally to the non-anthropomorphic deity, the totem animal, and the worshippers, but that when this Totem system fell into abeyance and was gradually replaced with the institution of property, then the worshippers performing the same prescribed rites could no longer understand the familial or shared blood references to the sacrificial animal. According to Smith:

I apprehend, therefore, that human sacrifice is not more ancient than the sacrifice of ancient animals, and that the prevalent belief of ancient heathenism, that animal victims are an imperfect substitute for a human life, arose from a false inference from traditional forms of ritual that ceased to be understood [...] when the full kinship of animals with men (The Totem System) was no longer recognised in ordinary life, all this became unintelligible, and was explained by the doctrine that at the altar the victim took the place of a man. (Smith 1889: 365)

While Robertson Smith can in many ways be seen as the founder of the modern sociology of religion, his almost exclusive advocacy of the totemic system and the joyous sacrifice that goes with it was largely rejected as a model by later scholars. This is the view of T.O. Beidelman:

Undisputably, Smith was a major figure in creating a popular interest in totemism. Freud and Durkheim accepted Smith’s data uncritically, even though Smith’s scholarly evidence for early mother-right and totemism is very questionable and discredited today. His was a kind of reconstruction based on the worst forms of conjectural history founded on the doctrine of survivals. Certainly his insistence that early man was totemic in religion and never polytheistic, much less monotheistic is now generally rejected. Smith presents his own theory of sacrifice as essentially related to totemism and he relates what he considers the primordial form of sacrifice to communal and commensal rites deriving from a sacrificial devouring of a totem by those who venerate it. (Beidelman 1974: 37–38)

Beidelman then goes on to deal with the question of the “joyous” sacrifice, quoting from Thompson’s 1963 study,

In his useful survey Thompson notes: “Most of the scholars reviewed have conceded that expiation had a larger place in early Israelite sacrifice than the Wellhausen school allowed, but none of them have (sic) devoted to it, a systematic and methodological investigation.” Indeed he provides an extensive list of recent biblical researchers who have found the joyous sacrifice theory untenable and the theme of solemnity and expiation the dominant one in Old Testament sacrifice. (Beidelman 1974: 55)

In fact in *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud declares that for his earlier *Totem and Taboo* he made use of theoretical ideas put forward by “Darwin, Atkinson, and particularly by Robertson Smith” but specifies that the killing and eating of the patriarch by the sons was an idea he took from J.J. Atkinson (Freud 1985: 379). At any rate Freud here is evidently more closely aligned with the ultimate orthodoxy than with Smith. Durkheim, for example, (whose *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* was published in its original French version in 1912, a year before *Totem and Taboo*) found that oblation and expiation were as important to sacrifice as communion, and explicitly criticised Smith and his rejection of the theory of animal substitution for original human sacrifice as “false inference”. According to Durkheim, “it is inadmissible that beliefs and practices as universal as these, which we find at the basis of the expiatory sacrifice, should be the product of a simple error of interpretation” (Durkheim [1915] 2001: 307).

The final point concerns W. Robertson Smith’s use of the word “clan”: this aspect of Smith’s work remains important, as, in Beidelman’s words, “group-held, communal values epitomised primitive life and thought” (Beidelman 1974: 39). Clearly, as an Aberdeenshire Scot, Smith had easy access to this word “clan” and was familiar with the concept behind its native use. It appears however that it was the Americans who were first to employ this word in the anthropological context through Albert Gallatin’s studies of North American Indigenous peoples (Gallatin 1836: 109).<sup>7</sup> J.F. McLennan, Robertson Smith’s friend and colleague, and a fellow Scotsman, notes Gallatin’s use of the term in his seminal article on Totemism in *The Fortnightly Review* (McLennan 1869: 70). In this context it is adapted as a specifically scientific term, and in a way which may be said to prefigure much of the language and thought of

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<sup>7</sup> Swiss-born Gallatin was Thomas Jefferson’s Secretary of the Treasury, managing the Louisiana Purchase for Jefferson and serving also under Madison. He was also the founder of the American Ethnological Society.

late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century modernism.<sup>8</sup> With Smith for example, “clan” denotes a specific level of social organisation, namely one that might be said to be supra-family but sub-tribal:

the notion that the clan is only a larger household is not consistent with the results of modern research. Kinship is an older thing than family life, and in the most primitive societies known to us the family or household group was not a subdivision of the clan, but contained members of more than one kindred. (Smith 1889: 277)

The word “clan” here signifies that these ancient peoples had complex social structures, integral in this case to the Totem system. Totemism as a concept has however been largely discredited by more recent anthropologists, who regard their predecessors’ attempts at defining and delineating the “primitive” as “abnormal” and separate from “civilised” man as products of an outdated politics. As such it is surely no accident that this word “clan” was adapted (or adaptable) for anthropological use from the language of a marginalised European people, who for centuries were themselves treated by their nearest mainstream European neighbours as evolutionary throw-backs. And given the history of oppression and denial which that people faced, it is perhaps less than surprising that this lexical borrowing has rarely, if ever, been explicitly acknowledged in the literature.<sup>9</sup>

If in his writings Smith confirms the anthropological orthodoxy of the word “clan” then he uses this word and views the concept in a very different sense from the eighteenth- (and early nineteenth-) century Enlightenment or Romantic sense. In the eighteenth century’s gradual working out of bourgeois subjectivity it was the individual rather than the social structure that generally presented more interest. Indeed, as John Dwyer has pointed out, there were no “clans” at all in Macpherson’s ideal world of the Gaelic past. Macpherson’s attempt to establish that a society of magnanimous, sympathetic, “feeling” indi-

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<sup>8</sup>Although McLennan does at this stage only quote Gallatin using the word “clan”, and himself employs various terms, including *families*, *gentes*, *stock*, *stock-tribes*, *persons of one stock*, *stock-names*, *bands*, and confusingly, *tribes*, to refer to this social structure.

<sup>9</sup>It is notable, even shameful, in this respect that although many if not most of the writers, (including both Durkheim and Freud) give definitions, etymologies and commentaries on the use of the loan word “totem” (ododem), similar discussion on the origins of the word “clan” (except sometimes to say that it is an “English” word) are extremely rare (this writer has never found an adequate one).

viduals like Ossian could exist in a “barbaric” or pre-Enlightenment era meant of course that he had to show that lineage and other formal or legalistic relations “counted for very little and love a lot” (Dwyer 1991: 170). Moderate clergymen like Hugh Blair may have been pleased to see in the image of the Ossianic Bard a role for themselves as one who would temper the ratio-scientific character of the Scottish Enlightenment by discovering “the emotional springs of action” and manipulating “the passions in the interest of a more general benevolence and humanity” (Dwyer 1991: 175).

William Robertson Smith himself may be seen as a later representative of this same moderate tradition, but nonetheless, with the scientific adaptation of the word “clan”, his common sense approach takes on a more formalistic, proto-modern aspect. Indeed it is this idea of “clan” as a determinist model in social anthropology, as a complex pre-existing structure which is “always already” there and only within which the discernible primitive “individual” as such can be encountered, that prefigures so much of modernist thought in the early twentieth century. One need only think here of Saussure and the “sign” in structural linguistics; Marxism and “class” in historical materialism; of the “world” and its implemental determinism in Heidegger’s existentialism; and of course, Freud and the “unconscious” in psychoanalysis. When Freud himself follows W. Robertson Smith in the use of the word and concept “clan” it is definitely not to be used as a mere slogan but as a significantly more subtle political tool.

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