

“THE MUTUAL BLISS WE PANT TO KNOW”: RADICALISM RENEWED IN JOHN THELWALL’S *THE POETICAL RECREATIONS OF THE CHAMPION* (1822)

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Abstract: After being tried and exonerated for High Treason in 1794 for acts of sedition, John Thelwall, dubbed by his detractors as “acquitted felon” (Parliamentary History 1029), nimbly negotiated creative ways of circumventing governmental measures intended to curb free speech, most notably the Pitt government’s Gagging and Seditious Meetings acts that resulted, partially, from Thelwall’s inflammatory writings and public lectures. This paper focuses on a pivotal but furtive period of what could be called Thelwall’s second act, examining his return to the journalistic medium as editor of the *Champion* newspaper between 1819 and 1821. This hodgepodge collection of political observation, societal analysis and verse exhibits distinctive and forthright dissent on issues of the day. While radical reform is blatantly evident in many of Thelwall’s front-page editorials, this paper will analyze the relevance of poetry in the *Champion*, as it covertly suggests a new programme of radical action through the use of sensual modes of expression.

Key Words: Thelwall, radicalism, *The Champion* (1819-1821), poetry, sensibility

Résumé: Après avoir été traduit en justice pour Haute Trahison en 1794 à cause d’actes séditions, puis acquitté, John Thelwall, surnommé par ses détracteurs « acquitted felon » (Parliamentary History, 1029), a habilement réussi, et ce, de façon créative, à faire échouer les mesures gouvernementales visant à mettre un frein à la liberté d’expression, notamment The Seditious Meeting Act de 1795, dont l’adoption par le gouvernement de Pitt a été – ne serait-ce que partiellement – provoquée par les écrits enflammés et les conférences publiques de Thelwall. Le présent article se concentre sur une période courte mais cruciale de ce qui pourrait être considéré comme le deuxième acte de la carrière de Thelwall. En fait, cet article se penche sur le retour de Thelwall dans le milieu du journalisme, plus précisément en tant que directeur du *Champion* entre 1819 et 1821. Ce florilège d’observations politiques, d’analyses sociétales et de poésies donne à lire diverses formes de franche contestation en lien avec les enjeux de l’époque. Bien que la revendication d’une réforme radicale soit particulièrement évidente dans plusieurs des éditoriaux de Thelwall, cet article vise plutôt à analyser l’importance de la poésie dans *The Champion*, puisque cette dernière dévoile subrepticement une nouvelle façon de concevoir l’action radicale par le recours à des modes d’expression sensuels.

Mots-clés: Thelwall, radicalisme, *The Champion* (1819-1821), poésie, sensibilité

Brimfull of bliss the goblet flow'd
'Twas lifted to the very lip;
With hope the thirsty bosom glow'd,
And the bow'd head was bent to sip;
But envious fortune snatch'd away
The mantling promise of delight:
O'er-clouded was the genial ray,
And the sweet dream was put to flight.
O Mary! is the goblet gone –
The draught forever cast away?
Or is it but a while withdrawn,
To come more sweeten'd by delay?
Yes, Mary! yes – that speaking eye
Tells me the cup again shall flow:
And the bless'd occasion shall supply
The mutual bliss we pant to know.

The preceding poem by John Thelwall, published under the title “Hope Deferred” in *The Poetical Recreations of the Champion* (1822), seems tame and tempered in regards to this conference’s twin themes of “Radical Action, Radical Subject.” There appears to be no animated claims for overthrowing tyranny and oppression; no passionate call to arms. Indeed, any intended political insinuations found in the lines of this piece are perhaps hidden in the residual golden droplets of the toasting goblet used on this occasion. I would like to posit that in this particular poem, the author is, in fact, using subversive techniques to promote an agenda of the body as imminent instrument of liberty. In order to accomplish this, Thelwall had to successfully operate on the fringes of polite society while articulating an aesthetic that covertly, rather than expressly, challenged the status quo. Over his lengthy, wide-ranging public career as political activist, orator, poet, playwright and elocution professor, Thelwall encountered sustained suspicion and resistance from an institutionalized hegemony that watched carefully over his every move. After being tried and exonerated for High Treason in 1794 for acts of sedition, this important cultural figure, dubbed by his detractors as “acquitted felon” (Cobbett, Hansard & Wright, 1818: 1029), nimbly negotiated creative ways of circumventing governmental measures intended to curb free speech, most notably the Pitt government’s Gagging and Seditious Meetings acts that resulted, partially, from Thelwall’s inflammatory writings and public lectures. This paper will focus on a pivotal but furtive period of what could be called Thelwall’s second act, examining his return to the journalistic medium as editor of the *Champion* newspaper between 1819 and 1821. This hodgepodge collection of political observation, societal analysis and verse exhibits distinctive and forthright dissent on issues of the day. While radical reform is blatantly evident in many of Thelwall’s front-page editorials, I would like to analyze the relevance of poetry in the *Champion*, and posit that a piece like “Hope Deferred” may covertly suggest a new programme of radical action through the use of sensual modes of expression.

Recent criticism on Thelwall has attempted to reassess his impact beyond his radical Jacobin activities of the 1790s, where he staunchly questioned government encroachment on individual liberty. There has been a movement to situate him within the political and social atmosphere of the nineteenth century by re-examining his *entire* public career. Following his self-fashioned retirement and resolution to devote his efforts to promote elocution as a primary means of self-expression, certain critics, most famously E.P. Thompson, have suggested that “nothing survived of the Patriot except his fading notoriety” (Thompson, 1994: 95). However, Thelwall’s stunning return to affairs of the state by assuming editorial control of the *Champion* newspaper in 1819 signalled a clear “effort to re-enter political life despite twenty-one years’ absence from the public arena” (Claeys, 1995: xxxv). Since there is much contradictory speculation by Thelwallian scholars as to his political convictions at this time, we should, at this juncture, examine the author’s own insights about his return to public life, best expressed in the unpublished, tongue-in-cheek doggerel entitled “Auto-Biography” (1822), composed shortly after he was forcibly relieved of his editorial duties.

Thelwall admits that he arose, after his long government imposed exile, from his “cot” in 1819 where he had retreated to “live snugly” and escape the “strife/That has sometimes look’d threat’ning & ugly” (Derby, MS 3: 900). He then cleverly muses, in the third person, of a retired radical whose return is predicated on the fact that:

*...maggots of state
 Had got in his pate,
 In spite of his former hard lesson;
 And to Champion the press
 And Corruption redress
 Became his Quixotic profession (Derby, MS 3: 900)*

This appears to prove the adage that you can take the rebel out of the rabble, but never the rabble out of the rebel. In subsequent stanzas, Thelwall expands upon the *modus operandi* of his largely reformist and libertarian endeavor to rectify corruption in all forms. He declares that he was “too stubborn to bend/To party’s end” in addition to being “[t]oo proud for patron courting” and would not succumb to forced insularity (Derby, MS 3: 901). The context of Thelwall’s return to the political soapbox is certainly significant. Following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, England was in a state of economic depression that was compounded by the passing of restrictive laws, which led to inflation, famine and rampant unemployment (Wu, 1998: 930). Mass mobilizations and relatively peaceful demonstrations by the working class in rural and provincial parts of the country culminated in the infamous Peterloo Massacre of 1819, where “a political meeting of 60,000 working men and women was dispersed by mounted dragoons, with a brutality that left eleven people dead and 421 cases of serious injury” (Wu, 1998: 930). Motivated by outrage at the government’s malfeasance act, the Cato Street Conspiracy was a failed 1820 coup designed to eliminate all British cabinet ministers and the Prime Minister. This led to repressive and restrictive government measures that equalled those faced by Thelwall in the mid 1790s. Upon re-entry to a cultural landscape marred by divisive politics, Thelwall slyly defended the victims of Peterloo while advancing the idea that the Cato Street Conspiracy was an attempt to discredit organized opposition. These staunch

stances eventually led to another seditious libel indictment and the threat of lengthy incarceration that obliged him to abandon the *Champion*.

Still smarting from his summary dismissal, Thelwall collected and published the poetical pieces from his time as editor of the *Champion* as a stand-alone work in 1822. However, he arguably approached the publication with trepidation, realizing the scrutiny and suspicion these works were sure to generate, and endeavoured to ensure that they could not be pigeonholed as political. For example, the advertisement to *The Poetical Recreations* concludes with the following avowal: "this volume [is] not intended to address itself to *political* feelings, or to serve any *political* purpose... [and] from those very omissions, [is] so much the more remote from assuming a *political* character" (Thelwall, 1822: vi. Italics mine). This rhetorical strategy of denial is a common trope in Thelwall's publications following his acquittal of high treason in 1794. Thelwall's use of emphatic repetition simultaneously serves two purposes: he deftly makes his point about becoming a so-called apolitical figure in the present while also piquing the reader's attention about his decidedly radical treatises of the past. Thelwall knew that suggesting the collection was devoid of political poetry was an erroneous assertion since the volume included the reprinting of the highly charged political verse from his earlier *Poems Written in Close Confinement in the Tower* (1795), poems written while he was first imprisoned and awaiting trial. Although Thelwall emphasizes the original publication dates of these poems within the *Champion*, their inclusion suggests he viewed them as relevant commentary on the increase in repressive measures enacted by the Whig government. They are a not so subtle acknowledgement that, with the jailing of speakers and attendees of the Peterloo protest and the hangings of the failed Cato Street Conspiracy perpetrators, perhaps history was repeating. Nonetheless, the volume as a whole, with its seemingly slight verses addressed to women, wine and indulgence, like "Hope Deferred," appears to partially justify Thelwall's claim of political disinterest. One of the few contemporary reviews of the collection, from *The Monthly Magazine*, points out how reader expectations, vis-à-vis political discourse, might be thwarted upon first perusing the poems. The anonymous reviewer contends that, in these selections, Thelwall seems "better fitted to chant the amorous lay of the troubadour, than the spirit-stirring strain of the warrior" (Thelwall, 2013 : 133). While praising "the strains of sweetness and tenderness" within the volume and including the poem read at the outset of this presentation as an illustration, the reviewer highlights the lack of effective political effusions within the collection (Thelwall, 2013: 133-34). Interestingly, the two examples he does cite as political, "Ode to the Maratists (1793)" and "Sonnet II. To Tyranny (14th July, 1794)," pre-date the *Champion*. They are works from a period from which Thelwall ostensibly desires to distance himself. The juxtaposition between poetry of soft sighs and throbbing and those pieces of political lobbying implicitly poses important, as yet unexamined, queries: were the poems published in the *Champion* simply recreational, light leisurely effusions, or do these pieces imply metamorphic re-creations, whereby Thelwall produces political affect and effect using covert methodologies?

In answering these reflections, one must examine what exactly Thelwall was up to during his twenty-one year exodus away from the public arena. Critics and historians largely ignored his work as a professor of elocution, which originated in various provincial towns in England and was eventually institutionalized in London for two hundred years. Recent scholarship has revived interest in Thelwall's public speaking agenda and asserts that his valuable "speech theory emerges as part

of a total system to reform the body politic" ("Re-sounding Romanticism" 24). By contextualizing Thelwall's elocutionary work, which occurred during his tireless lecture touring and work at his institution, where he taught, but also attempted to remedy speech deficiencies, it becomes obvious that *The Poetical Recreations of the Champion* should not be read as mere poetic trifles. Rather, they represent Thelwall's bold attempt to give voice and free the tongues of those bastilled by physical, moral, social and, by proxy, political impediments. Seemingly innocuous pieces like "Hope Deferred" then take on a deeper level of political profundity if they are considered within the context of Thelwall's larger project of radical reform through experimentation with different modes of poetic expression, including versified toasts and communal anacreontics, which shifted throughout his career to contend with hampering and hindering acts of oppressive governmental actions.

Thelwall's key concept, developed over the course of his theorizing in the early nineteenth century, was that the body was a "living instrument" whose organs, if operating properly and in unison, could allow each individual, regardless of class or social situation, to productively contribute to society (Thelwall, 1806: 13). This fosters what Andrew McCann has deduced as a fundamental tenet of Thelwall's elocutionary theory, the "self [as] a work of aesthetic synthesis" (McCann, 2001: 221). Clearly, Thelwall's conceptions of the body politic as a trope are integrated in his poetry of the period. In fact, "Hope Deferred" is comprised of depictions of emotional intensity, staged somatised spectacle and the use of a lexicon emphasizing physiological response, which Thelwall recognized as crucial to amending social inequality and corruption. Thelwall's elocutionary theory combats what Foucault later categorizes as the notion of "docile bodies," which are pruned and punished as a result of a restrictive and hegemonic superstructure (qtd in Goring, 2005: 17). If, according to Foucault, the "body [is] directly involved in a political field," Thelwall's verse should be seen as contributing to a system that emphasizes liberation, stemming ultimately from balance, equilibrium and self-sufficiency of the expressive organs that allow the individual to freely express his or her profoundest understandings, critiques and calls for reform of political organizations (qtd in Goring, 2005: 16). Therefore, Thelwall ultimately approaches the body politic through an exploration of the physiological functions of the individualized body, accentuating the corporeal through subversive and erotic embodiment.

The poems in *The Poetical Recreations of the Champion* contain a muted dimension of a hushed and subtle political consciousness; one that suggests radicalism need not always be disseminated through histrionics at a heightened and fevered pitch despite the individual's interior ardour. By building on ideas suggested in his lecture "on the exterior accomplishments of elocution," Thelwall concentrates on "the Language of the Features," emphasizing the corporeal dimension found in the "Eloquence of the Eye" (Thelwall, 1822: 103). He uses this "speaking eye" as the central image in the final stanza of "Hope Deferred." This formulation suggests that the entire body partakes in the communicative medium and that, even when voice is silenced, messages can be imparted through other non-conventional means. In this conception, the whole body can be used to articulate disdain for the status quo and to undermine dominant groups in the body politic. A striking example of this occurred recently at Barack Obama's inauguration lunch when Michelle, his wife, rolled her eyes at the Republican speaker of the House John Boehner. This simple ocular gesture generated international headlines and conveyed a highly partisan political position. In essence, Thelwall turns the silence of the interlocutor in "Hope Deferred" into something beneficial and constructive just as

Michelle Obama needed no words to make her point. This use of the eyes is in direct opposition to that of Thelwall's fair-weather friend William Wordsworth, who, in "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," famously conceived of "the inward eye/Which is the bliss of solitude" (Wordsworth, 2000: 21-2) to account for his theory of memory and the power of the imagination acting as a bulwark against ephemeral matters of history and politics. The eyes for Wordsworth, who initially sympathized with Thelwall's politics, but would later distance himself from the radical by adopting a more Tory tone, turn egotistically inward, whereas the eyes for Thelwall are tools to be used for rhetorical and political advancement.

It is important to note that Thelwall's "speaking eye" engenders and encourages emphatic poetic affirmatives in the final stanza, "Yes Mary! Yes –," a non-verbal form of reciprocation that suggests optimism and anticipation for greater political victories in the future, even if, in the present moment, these expectations are thwarted and quelled. Indeed, this concept of "Hope" is foundational to a redefined understanding of Thelwall's broad political agenda. Following the climatic questioning of the third stanza, the speaker posits the belief that a future "bless'd occasion shall supply" victory to those who continue to protest against marginalization. Thelwall recognizes that these moments might be deferred (as in *postponement*), but certainly does not suggest deference (as in *submission*). Instead, he opines that, in the present moment, open communication between like-minded individuals fighting for just causes will sustain and suffice. By tempering the *carpe diem* theme, such that the "Brimfull of bliss," when "withdrawn," may actually become "more sweeten'd by delay," Thelwall suggests that perpetual patience and fortitude, in light of hegemonic political circumstances and severe authoritarian contexts, are the best means to attain "mutual bliss" because they are predicated on informed and capable citizens who are able to openly express their ideas and values through and with their bodies as *they* see fit.

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