Thomas Moore in Bermuda: Irish and African Liberties

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Abstract: *"Thomas Moore in Bermuda: Irish and African Liberties," takes as its subject Moore's five month sojourn in Bermuda in 1803-04, where he traveled to take up an appointment as Registrar of the Court of Vice Admiralty. While employed by a colonial administration, Moore is unable to condemn the institution of slavery in Bermuda, while he is able to condemn slavery in the United States. When read in conjunction with Moore's writings from the United States, Moore's writings from Bermuda emerge as an important source for understanding his attitudes towards colonialism and slavery, as well for situating his later use of the trope of slavery in his writings on Ireland*

Most accounts which speak about Thomas Moore's time in Bermuda are concerned with the credulity of the romance he was purported to have with Nea, the subject of the love poems which he wrote in Bermuda, or the way in which his poetry and letters reflect a deeply-felt love of the Bermudan landscape. However, Thomas Moore's relationship to Bermuda promises a much broader avenue of inquiry. Most notably, Moore's relationship to empire and slavery in the Americas, made manifest in his acceptance of the Bermuda appointment, is key to observing the broad arc of Moore's political development. Furthermore, a consideration of when, and under what circumstances Moore can condemn slavery, is helpful in understanding how Moore later mobilizes slavery as a trope for characterizing the relationship between Ireland and England in the *Irish Melodies*.

When Moore was attending Trinity, he became familiar with the principles of the United Irishmen's movement, in part through his association with Robert Emmett. Moore's willingness to take a stand on behalf of the United Irishmen is evidenced, both by a poem and a letter which he wrote for *The Press*, a paper founded by Thomas Addis Emmett, Arthur O'Connor, and several other members of the United Irishmen. Moore's missive entitled a "Letter to the Students of Trinity College," and signed by "A Patriotic Freshman," ends with the the statement: "we should all have one common cause, the welfare of our country; we should all Unite, rally round her standard, and recover our Heaven-born rights, our principles from the grasp of Tyranick ministers" (Strong 51)[1].

Robert Emmett is thought to have intervened with Moore, after the publication of this letter in *The Press,* with the concern that such open discussion would do more harm than good for the cause, and potentially draw the attention of the authorities themselves.[2]

Furthermore, biographies are in consensus concerning the idea that it was not Moore's own disinterest or caution, but rather Emmett's judgment of Moore as not the sort of recruit they needed, which kept Moore away from more direct involvement with the United Irishmen's movement.

Shortly thereafter, Trinity did become a hunting-ground for informers about the United Irishmen's movement, and Lord Clare, Vice-Chancellor of Trinity interviewed students as a preemptive measure meant to "suppress sedition among the undergraduates" (Jones 36). Moore both witnessed students who gave evidence against Emmett and others and was himself called to give witness. He met this, first with a refusal to take the oath out of a fear of being made to answer questions which would incriminate others, and finally with an agreement to "take the oath, still reserving to myself the right of refusing to answer any such questions as I have described" (Strong 54). His answers were not incriminating, at least according to L.A.G. Strong, because, "thanks to Emmett, he knew nothing at all" (Strong 54). Moore was let off by the inquisitors, unlike many of the others who were expelled under suspicion of involvement with the United Irishmen, and he was able to go on to graduate from Trinity at the end of 1798.

In May of 1798, when the United Irishmen's rising began, Moore was himself removed from the action, as he was sick in bed. Howard Mumford Jones suggests that "the excitement proved too much for Tom, who fell ill, a fact which perhaps prevented him from participating in the bloody events of May" (37). Beyond the question of what cause lay behind Moore's physical distance from the rebellion, is the question of the impact of 1798 on his later political attitudes. Jones goes on to suggest that "the emotional shock of this whole experience is of first importance in understanding Moore, for it helps one to see why, after this brief dip into the dark whirlpools of rebellion, he retreated for the rest of his life into the safe Whig view which holds that progress comes, not from revolution, but from reform" (Jones 37).

Jones's explanation provides a possible framework for understanding how Moore, exposed to the organization of the United Irishmen's movement, became a spokesperson, welcome or not, for the ideals of the movement, and then, just as quickly, became a disengaged observer of the rebellion and its aftermath.

The element of Moore's biography which encapsulates this divergence most succinctly is the close proximity between Robert Emmett's execution and Moore's voyage for the promise of fortune across the Atlantic. After having gone to London in 1799, Moore decided to leave London for transatlantic fortunes. His ship for the United States sailed from Spithead on September 25th, 1803, five days after the execution of Robert Emmett in Dublin. Emmett led the last rising of the United Irishmen's movement, and was executed for his efforts, while Moore became a beneficiary of the British Empire abroad. As Strong notes, Moore makes no mention of Emmett's execution in his letters (55). This would be the first of a series of silences present in the writings surrounding

Moore's movement to Bermuda which has significance in understanding the later development of Moore's political sensibilities.

Involvement in the British colonial administration came to Moore in the form of a post as Registrar of the Court of Vice-Admiralty in (a Naval Prize Court) in Bermuda. This position was given to him because of the influence of the Earl of Moira, a friend and useful connection which he had made while in England. Lord Moira had, earlier in the same year, also been responsible for creating a post for Moore, in collaboration with the Chief Secretary for Ireland, in the form of an Irish Laureateship. By some accounts, Moore declined to accept the post after his family objected to it on patriotic grounds.[3] However, Moore also notes that such an acceptance would not be congruent with his hopes for promotion through the government:

> Feeble as my hopes are of advancement under government, I should be silly to resign them, without absolute necessity, for a gift which would authorize them to consider me provided for, and leave me without a chance of any other and further advantage. (Strong 88)

Moore's acceptance of the Bermuda post is the result of financial concerns: "it promised me a permanent subsistence and the means of providing for those I love." (White 37) The patriotic grounds that may have prevented him from accepting the laureateship were not of issue in the question of accepting an appointment abroad in the British Empire abroad.

When slavery is understood as part of the economy in which Moore's appointment involves him, his proximity to the origins of the United Irishmen's movement in Dublin become more important in situating changes in his political sensibilities. Kevin Whelan draws attention to the link which the United Irishmen made between the Republican struggle in Ireland and opposition to the transatlantic slave trade, evidenced through an excerpt of a letter written by Thomas Russell in 1796:

> Are the Irish nation aware that this contest involves the question of the slave trade, the one now of the greatest consequence on the face of the earth? Are they willing to employ their treasure and their blood in support of that system, because England has 70 or 70 millions engaged in it, the only argument that can be adduced in its favour, *monstrous* as it may appear? (Whelan 233)

An opposition to slavery in the Americas was key to the United Irishmen's understanding of anti-imperialist struggle in Ireland. The verse tradition of the United Irishmen, found in *Paddy's Resource* and other volumes, bore witness to this transatlantic frame of reference, through the utilization of slavery as a trope for oppression, whether slavery in the Americas, or the bondage of British imperialism in Ireland. Moore's proximity to the development of the United Irishmen at Trinity put him in close contact, not only with key leaders of the movement, but also with its tenets, tropes and rhetoric.

Despite this, Moore remained silent about the institution of slavery in the writings that emerge from the first leg of his trip to Bermuda. Moore landed originally in Virginia, where he spent time in Norfolk, in the residence of the British Consul, Colonel Hamilton. One of the poems which he writes in Norfolk, "Miss Moore," contains an abstract recognition of disappointment about the society which he encounters there:

> Blame not the temple's meanest part
> Till thou hast trac'd the fabric o'er: –
> As yet, we have beheld no more
> Than just the porch to Freedom's fane;
> And, though a sable spot may stain
> The vestibule, 'tis wrong, 'tis sin
> To doubt the godhead reigns within! (Moore 1895, 128)

Although tantalizing in its recognition of a "sable spot [that] may stain the vestibule" of "Freedom's fane," Moore is ultimately unspecific about what aspect(s) of American society disappoint his expectations. However, his letters do contain more specific commentary. An excerpt from a letter written back to his family during this initial stay in Virginia, while not recognizing slavery's existence in the United States, or, indeed, any inequity in the society based on skin-color, does demonstrate the operation of a racialized aesthetics:

> This Norfolk is a most strange place; nothing to be seen in the streets but dogs and negroes and the few ladies that *pass for white* are to be sure the most unlovely pieces of crockery I ever set my eyes upon. (Moore 1964, 50)

Seemingly, Moore is able to acknowledge race as a topic in his personal writings, but not in his poetry. In neither case, however, do we find an overt condemnation of the institution of slavery itself.

A racialized aesthetics in also present in the letters that Moore writes home from Bermuda. In one of his letters, he notes that, in Bermuda:

> to my great disappointment, I find that a few miserable negroes is all "the bloomy flush of life" it has to boast of. Indeed, you must not be surprised, dear mother, if I fall in love with the first pretty face I see on my return home, for certainly the 'human face divine' has degenerated wonderfully in these countries; and if I were a painter, and wished to preserve my ideas of beauty immaculate, I would not suffer the brightest belle of Bermuda to be my house-maid." (Moore 58)

This pattern of handling issues around race, acknowledgment in personal writings and absence of acknowledgment in his poetic writings, remains constant in Moore's writings from Bermuda. The entirety of Moore's poetry credited to his Bermuda experience contains no recognition or indictment of slavery on the island.

There is a marked difference to be found in Moore's expressed attitudes towards slavery, in particular, and the shortcomings of the United States, in general, between his initial stay in the United States and his return trip. During this second visit, before he is to voyage back to England, Moore becomes openly critical of the United States.

> I have passed the Potomac, the Rappahannock, the Occoquan, the Potapsio, and many other rivers, with names as barbarous as the inhabitants: every step I take not only *reconciles*, but *endears* to me not only the excellencies but even the errors of Old England. Such a road as I have come! and in such a conveyance! The mail takes twelve passengers, which generally consist of squalling children, stinking negroes, and republicans smoking cigars! How often it has occurred to me that nothing can be more emblematic of the government of this country than its *stages,* filled with a motley mixture, "all hail fellow well met," driving through mud and filth, which *bespatters* them as they *raise* it, and risking an *upset* at every step. (Moore 1853, 161)

Moore condemns a variety of American characteristics, which he finds to stem from an American brand of "Jacobinism." In an unpublished paragraph that was to be included in *Epistles, Odes, and Other Poems*, Moore states the following:

> In the ferment which the French Revolution excited among the democrats of America and the licentious sympathy with which they shared in the wildest excessed of Jacobinism, we may find one of the sources of that vulgarity of vice, that hostility to all the graces of life, which distinguishes the present demagogues of the United States and has become too generally the characteristic of their countrymen. (Jones 79)

This contempt for the Jeffersonian democracy which he encounters in the United States is credited, in part, to the Federalist circle in which he circulated while there. These expressed attitudes highlight his movement away from his earlier Republican leanings. Moore is able to distance himself from his previous experience of the excesses of English rule in Ireland, and the excesses of English rule in Bermuda, while expressing criticism of the Republican project of the United States.

It is important to note that, when Moore leaves Bermuda, he has done so only after having appointed a deputy to fill his position, an arrangement which is expected to continue netting him a profit, especially in times of war.[4] Given this continuing financial benefit from the Bermuda appointment, it is, perhaps, not surprising that Moore can only condemn slavery in poetry which focuses on his disappointment with the new Republic of the United States. In *Poems Relating to America*, the poem entitled "The Lord Viscount Forbes," from the city of Washington, links a criticism of slavery specifically to the Republic's claims of liberty:

To think that man, thou just and gentle God!
Should stand before thee with a tyrant's rod
O'er creatures like himself, with souls from thee,
Yet dare to boast of perfect liberty! (Moore 1895, 142)

Despite having experienced direct and prolonged contact with a slavery economy which he benefitted from as a colonial administrator in Bermuda, Moore is only able to give voice to a distaste for the institution of slavery through the distance with which the United States provides him. It is the Republic's imperfections that excite Moore to the level of outright condemnation, not the colony's shortcomings, which he is apparently willing to oversee, given the absence of his discussion about slavery in Bermuda.

Moore's other notable silence about the Caribbean concerns the slave rebellion which triumphed in Haiti in November 1803, and the Haitian Republic which was declared independent on 1st January 1804. Moore landed in Bermuda in January, and news of a new Black Republic in the Caribbean must certainly have reached Bermuda. Yet, the topic of slavery in the colonies, or its overthrow through rebellion, is absent from Moore's writings during this time.

Moore's ability to condemn slavery in the United States, while not in Bermuda, is of import, not only in locating Moore's politics in the Americas, but also in understanding the position which he takes towards questions surrounding the relationship of Ireland and England in later work. Moore's *Irish Melodies* derive their expressive strength from, among other things, his utilization of tropes of slavery and bondage, in representing the position of Ireland under British rule. While unable to condemn slavery in the empire abroad, Moore is able to use the idea of slavery as a means of embodying Irish oppression.

The *Irish Melodies*, which start appearing in volume form in 1807, incorporate tropes of slavery/liberty in verses which comment both on Ireland's history of resistance to invasion in general, and the more specific colonial history between Ireland and England. In the second piece in *Irish Melodies*, "Remember the Glories lf Brien the Brave," Moore characterizes the Irish struggle against Danish/Viking invaders during the eleventh century as a fight against enslavement:

Monomia! when Nature embellish'd the tint
Of thy fields, and they mountains so fair,
Did she ever intend that a tyrant should print
The footstep of slavery there? (Moore 1895, 170)

In "Erin, Oh Erin," Moore moves to a contemporary moment is characterizing Ireland's present state as one in which slavery is suffered by its inhabitants:

The nations have fallen, and thou still art young,
Thy sun is but rising, when others are set;

And tho/ slavery's cloud o'er thy morning hath hung
The full noon of freedom shall beam round thee yet (Moore 1895, 178)

These two examples underscore how the idea of slavery functions for Moore as a way of contextualizing Ireland's experience of colonization in the *Irish Melodies*. Moore's rhetorical use of slavery can be argued to evidence his changed relationship to the topic of Ireland's plight, something which he had turned his sympathies away from when swayed by American federalism. Or, it can be argued that Moore utilized slavery opportunistically to communicate what was, by now, a broadly recognized means of signaling Ireland's colonization, an exercise that he could safely engage in while still being invited into the drawing rooms of the English aristocracy.

Whichever conclusion one might draw about Moore's use of slavery as a trope in the *Irish Melodies*, it is important to note his unwillingness to condemn the slavery which the Bermudan economy depended upon, even as he continued to benefit from it. Moore's contradictions speak to the complexity of his personal involvement in the economy of slavery, and the manner in which that complicity influenced his responses to Bermuda, Ireland and the United States.

Notes

1 Howard Mumford Jones identifies the letter as having been printed in the twenty-ninth number of *The Press*, on December 2nd, 1797, whereas Strong states that it was printed in the sixtieth number of *The Press*.

2 "The limits to the association were set by Emmett himself. He knew Tom's mother, and he knew Tom. Only once in Tom's hearing did he allude to the United Irishmen, and he never proposed that Tom should be enrolled. Tom attributes this to Emmett's realization of the watchful anxiety with which he was regarded at home, and to his reluctance to increase it. Anastasia had no wish that her boy should be caught u pin a revolutionary society, which might endanger his prospects, if not his life. She worried continually lest his impulsive nature, or his sense of loyalty to his comrades, should lead his astray. Emmett must have known all this, for Anastasia was never one to keep her anxieties to herself, and his "forbearance" was without doubt partly due to it: but he saw from the first that Tom, burning with romantic enthusiasm, was not of the stuff of which rebels are made. It was both kinder and wiser, on all accounts to leave him out. So Tom remained, throughout, ignorant or more than the vaguest outline of what was plan." (Strong 45).

3 "Moore's patriotic family apparently objected to hymning the House of Hanover, and after the experimental "Ode for the Birthday" already cited, he resigned the "paltry and degrading stipend," or the prospects of it, explaining that he had accepted only under the "urging apprehension that my dears at home wanted it." (Jones 61).

4 This arrangement will eventually cause him great difficulty as the deputy will abscond with the money proceeding from a sale of ship and cargo. "The amount in dispute was 6,000 pounds, a sum Moore could not possibly pay." (Jones 206).

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