**Abstract**

The developments of the Romantic period set the stage for modern framings of art and the artist, establishing powerful institutionalized discourses that both created the privileged spaces in which art is presumed to operate and reified the special modes of authority that Romantic poetry and poets had claimed. However, these discourses have never been set in stone. Instead, subsequent practitioners have negotiated and renegotiated them in making their selves and works. While the rock stars of the Sixties did so principally through amplification, David Bowie established a more sceptical relationship with Romantic notions of art and artistry. His mastery of mediated interaction allowed him to throw himself with gusto at the task of expanding the field of the represented and representable, but his works also consistently articulate meaningful doubts about the possibility of transcendent communication through art. Rather than claiming to reveal truths in the manner of high Romantic conceptions, his works place the power to make meanings in the hands and minds of his audiences, employing the potency of Romantic vision while knowingly undercutting its potential for totalizing imposition.

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**“I Can’t Give Everything Away”: David Bowie and Post-Romantic Artistic Identity**

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This essay discusses how David Bowie’s self-conscious self-fashioning as an artist drew upon Romantic models created in canonical lyric poetry and through the self-presentations and receptions of Romantic poets. His practices, I will argue, improved on and critiqued these models’ representational potential and complicated their ideals of literary communication, but without surrendering their affective impact or their belief in the power and value of art. In some respects, Bowie was straightforwardly an heir to many oppositional Romantic-period writers, buying in to their collective programme of pushing back the boundaries of representation by celebrating atypical forms of experience and sociality. However, Bowie’s productions also work to subvert the Romantic paradigm that was dominant both in twentieth-century accounts of early-nineteenth-century art and within the music scene from which he emerged. Rather than straightforwardly proclaiming a triumphant subjectivity, his works challenge the veneration of stars by positing forms of artistry that privilege the swapping of masks, the fragmentation of canonical identities, and the collaborative interpretative power of audiences. In this, we might align him with the more sceptical views expressed by younger Romantic writers like Lord Byron, John Keats, and Letitia Landon, who sometimes pushed back against the conservative forms of universalizing self-aggrandizement they detected in the later work of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge by favouring more contingent and questioning modes of self-fashioning. However, with the intellectual and media resources of a further century-and-a-half behind him, Bowie was able to go much further than those writing in the 1810s, 1820s and 1830s, creating multiform fractures in his self-presentations that made his personas and works radically reinterpretable, thereby passing ownership of the powerful affects he evoked to audiences he conceived of as being active, dynamic, and involved.

In discussing Bowie alongside canonical Romantic poetry, I will draw out differences as well as considering similitudes. The twentieth-century rock song is a different beast than the nineteenth-century lyric poem, both formally and in sociocultural terms. The critical frameworks for discussing one form do not always transfer seamlessly over to the other. However, examining consonances and clashes has a great deal to offer both to Romantic Studies and to the analysis of popular culture. There has been a longstanding tentativeness in Romantic-period literary criticism about discussing Romantic legacies beyond making relatively straightforward claims regarding poetic and philosophical influences on rarefied forms of art. However, there are good reasons to make wider-ranging claims for the continuing popular currency of the modes of artistry developed in the early nineteenth century. Many scholars of the Romantic period would argue—and I would agree—that it was a time during which the roles of literature and artists were fundamentally renegotiated. As we are still living with the consequences of that renegotiation, it seems germane to be rather more explicit in our discussions of its ongoing pertinence, in order both to better understand the culture within which we live and to demonstrate the continuing liveliness of the artworks of an age characterized by conflicts between those who attempted radical expansions and powerful forces of reaction.

To set the terms for discussing Bowie’s interactions with the legacies of Romanticism, it will first be necessary to engage with the thorny issue of exactly what constitutes a Romantic artist. This is at once a relatively simple and a very complex matter. An ideal of Romantic artistry centred on the individual creative genius and ostensibly constructed around the Big Six Romantic poets (William Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Percy Shelley, and Keats) is the most recognizable and enduring cliché arising from early-nineteenth-century literature, and one that has a considerable influence on how we understand and contextualize music and musicians. Discussing rock’s discourses of authenticity, David Tetzlaff opines that “Romanticism remains the common language of middle class rebelliousness” (115). As well as marking Romanticism’s ongoing currency, Tetzlaff’s brief summation does a good job of bringing out some of the contradictions inherent in Romantic ideologies. While these can serve to constitute a shared space, that space is one implicated in privilege and one from which many of the specificities of its purported originators have been bleached away. The compound notion that positions the ideated Romantic as an individual indulging Byronic passions while producing Wordsworthian lyricism would certainly have horrified both poets. Nevertheless, this uneasy yet enticing blend of transgressive iconoclast and inspired prophet is one of the dominant cultural legacies of Romantic-period writing for society in general and for creative artists in particular—David Bowie included. When Bowie was casting around for subjects for the early songs that appeared on *David Bowie* in 1969, Romantic positions came easily to hand. The “missionary mystic of peace/love” in “Wild Eyed Boy from Freecloud,” the “Thinker” who “sits alone growing older / And so bitter” in “Cygnet Committee,” the bohemian “madness” of “An Occasional Dream,” and the “Children of the summer’s end” in “Memory of a Free Festival” all have a distinctively Romantic cast. While “Unwashed and Somewhat Slightly Dazed” seems aware of the ironies implicit in declarations like “I’m the cream / Of the great utopia dream,” placing the artist “Upon the forehead of the age to come” (Keats, “Addressed to the Same” l. 10) is a quintessentially Romantic move.

The notion of Romantic artistry expressed in positionings like these continues to inform representations, inspire imitations, condition receptions, and invite refutations that oppose its presumptions even as they reinscribe those same presumptions through evoking them. While many individual creative artists dispute the tenets of Romanticism, the cultural authority of the artist is still predicated in large part on their being an individual who is “endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind” (Wordsworth, “Preface” (1802) xxviiii). While eighteenth-century artists commonly purported to be social beings much like the members of their audiences, Romantic artists took pains to stress that they saw and felt differently. This special capacity for insight was a key justification when nineteenth-century institutions began to canonize a heightened notion of artistry, consequently allowing literature, in Jon Klancher’s words, to “become a specialized world in its own right” (1). While Romantic ideals of artistry were formed partly in opposition to older, pragmatic, elite paradigms, their principles of resistance were relatively easily normalized within subsequent secular pantheons and systems of cultural control. In Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre’s view, Romanticism “represents a revolt against the civilization created by capitalism” (19–20), but, as Tetzlaff suggests, evocations of this revolt have proved to be very appealing as saleable commodities.

The Romantic paradigm of artistry is, of course, deeply problematic for all sorts of reasons, particularly when considered as the defining feature of an epoch within which it was an inchoate and oppositional discourse. Jerome McGann and Clifford Siskin have shown that the development of Romantic ideals and the adoption of the term “Romanticism” were complex and belated phenomena, particularly in a British context. The valuable contributions of other scholars, including David Higgins, Julian North, and Tom Mole, have demonstrated that the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century comprised the most significant period for the propagation of the ideals of literary Romanticism. During this period, an unstable composite of received social and textual elements compiled from a diverse and fractious body of influences was brought to some degree of coherence in the popular consciousness through periodical culture, biography, memorialization, anthologization, and the rise of institutionalized forms of literature. The most familiar versions of Romanticism can be seen as even more recent innovations. Seamus Perry has shown that while a “certain archetype of the poet, living in the dreamy introverted remoteness of his own consciousness, had been current throughout the nineteenth century . . . [a] growing conception of idealism as fundamental to a definition of the Romantic” was a phenomenon of the second quarter of the twentieth century (7). While the artists of the Romantic period and their productions created the conditions for a reconsideration of what an artist was (or should be), this reconsideration took a considerable time to bed in, and remains subject to reconfigurations.

The status of Romanticism as an event that continued (and continues) to happen across different cultures and circumstances makes it difficult to delineate all its attributes with any degree of definitiveness. Nevertheless, while a critical analysis can never establish all the things that Romanticism might be in its multifarious national, formal, and temporal contexts, it remains possible to focus on aspects that sit close to the heart of its fuzzy set of potential meanings. One paradigmatic aspect worth considering would be Romanticism’s complex alignments with nature, but this does not appear to be a particularly fruitful avenue to pursue in discussing Bowie, who, while deeply concerned with human nature, makes sparse reference to the natural world in his oeuvre except as a subsidiary to anthropocentric conceptions. The “prairie” the “tactful cactus” of “Eight Line Poem” (1971) surveys is, characteristically, that of “your room,” and “the sun that pins the branches to the sky” in the same song is defined by its role as “the key to the city.” However, another key aspect of Romanticism—its concern with the articulation of selves and identities—sits right at the core of Bowie’s art, and it is in this area that we can trace some significant continuities and reactions.

For the purposes of this discussion, I propose to examine Romantic identity as operating through two contrary impulses. One of these is expansive, seeking to include in literary representations individuals and circumstances hitherto excluded. The other is a more introverted and potentially problematic impulse that seeks to establish the special qualities of a particular self, often either implicitly or explicitly that of the artist. In addressing these sequentially, I will seek to show that Bowie’s works often align with and celebrate the Romantic impulse towards acceptance and understanding, while also articulating a clear-eyed view of the social and psychological challenges of radical forms of empathy. However, Bowie’s work from the Seventies onwards consistently questions the value of a strongly articulated artistic self, at least when this self is articulated in the singular. While Bowie was able to activate a potent form of artistic heroism, it was different in its qualities and its emphases from heroic visions constructed by the canonical Romantics, although while being so it nevertheless employed a number of archetypal Romantic techniques, including the fetishization of fragmentation and the glorification of abjection.

First, though: representation. The centrality of Romantic assumptions to modern accounts of artistic value can sometimes make it tricky to recover a sense of their genuine radicalism at the time of their initial emergence. However, something of the shock of the new can still be discerned through examining the scathing critiques authored by advocates of the older systems Romantic thinking challenged. A good example is Francis Jeffrey’s review of Robert Southey’s *Thalaba the Destroyer* in the first number of the *Edinburgh Review*, in which he wrote that the new sect of poets he was assessing “seem[ed] to value themselves very highly, for having broken loose from the bondage of ancient authority, and re-asserted the independence of genius” (63–64). However, for Jeffrey, the Lakers’ supposed declaration of independence from a socialized tradition was an embarrassing imposture resulting from a fundamental misconception about what poetry was supposed to represent:

The love, or grief, or indignation of an enlightened and refined character is not only expressed in a different language but is in itself a different emotion from the love, or grief, or anger of a clown, a tradesman or a market-wench. The things themselves are radically and obviously distinct; and the representation of them is calculated to convey a very different train of sympathies and sensations to the mind. The question, therefore, comes simply to be—which of them is the most proper object for poetical imitation? (66)

For Jeffrey, needless to say, the rural, dejected, exotic, and psychological objects selected by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey were decidedly improper. In the world that the *Edinburgh* sought to legitimate and defend, poetry was principally a refined form of communication within a dominant class. In that role, it served as both an embodiment of that class’s values and a validator of its right to rule. The notion of poetry that Jeffrey sought to reinforce was essentially imitative, rather than creative in an expansive or imaginative sense. Consequently, Jeffrey saw Wordsworth’s “perverted taste for simplicity” (68) as a monstrous imposition on polite readers that broke down necessary boundaries between classes and nonsensically evoked the priorities of people from whom poets differed in fundamental and irreconcilable manners.

In making these assertions, Jeffrey was echoing a common position, and one on which Whiggish and more conservative commentators anxiously agreed. Introducing the fourth and final dialogue of his satire *The Pursuits of Literature* (published in parts between 1794 and 1797 and first published in full in 1798), Thomas James Mathias mixed an ambivalent recognition of progress with contempt and concern, opining that

We no longer look exclusively for learned authors in the usual place, in the retreats of academic erudition, and in the seats of religion. Our peasantry now read the *Rights of Man* on mountains, and moors, and by the way side; and shepherds make the analogy between their occupation and that of their governors. (238)

While the full emergence of a genuinely expansive reading public is better dated to the 1820s than the 1790s, Mathias’s account makes it clear that the fear of new readers and writers was becoming a potent force. Those who strutted on the stage of culture were intensely aware of the growing ranks of other actors and of increasingly copious, inscrutable, and potentially demanding audiences. Commentators like Mathias figured this plenitude as fundamentally destructive: “The objects of publick regret and offence are *now* so numerous and so complicated, that all the milder offices of the Muse have lost their influence and attraction” (250).

Mathias’s pronouncements are strikingly similar in tone to Wordsworth’s contention in the 1800 “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* that “The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespear and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” (xix). Such similitudes demonstrate that Wordsworth was in certain ways quite a conventional and conservative thinker when it came to addressing cultural change, pressured by what Lucy Newlyn has accurately characterized as an intense anxiety of reception. However, his impulse in the face of a perceived expansion of the literary franchise was not to retrench established privilege, like Jeffrey and Mathias, but rather to experiment with new positionings. This was by no means a wholehearted embrace of new media forms and audiences—it was in many respects a form of resistance—but it was a response that was fundamentally creative. While his essentialist evocation of “great and permanent objects” (xix) ostensibly models a return to fundamental values, Wordsworth’s rhetorically locating these fundamental values in “common life” (x) enacted a paradigm shift in terms of what art could take as its subjects. In the eyes of more traditional commentators, Wordsworth’s solution to cultural desensitization was worse than the problem. However, for the acolytes and popularizers who spread his reputation through the same burgeoning print culture that he feared, Wordsworth succeeded in reflecting subjectivities not hitherto made available in art. In seeing this as a triumph, his advocates began the process of rewriting the rules by which artistry was henceforward to be judged.

Discussing Jeffrey’s *Thalaba* review, Robert Miles contends that Jeffrey suspiciously detected “a striving towards the representation of the full otherness of others, which naturally begged the question of the social and political entitlements of others” (82). It seems safe to say that while Jeffery’s Whigs and the conservative establishment disapproved of such strivings, a radical expansion of the boundaries of representation in literature is one of the unambiguously great achievements catalysed by Romantic-period practices. Romantic and post-Romantic art has trumpeted the artist’s ability imaginatively to sympathize and encompass, changing formerly improper objects into recognized subjects. We might choose centrally canonical cases to exemplify this, such as Wordsworth’s connection with the spirit of nature at Tintern Abbey, or Blake’s evocations of London’s poor, or Byron’s glamorization of literal and emotional outlaws. However, such expansions are far from being solely the province of the Big Six. We might as easily consider sympathetic subjectivities in instances such as Charlotte Smith’s taking creative possession of Petrarch and Werther in her *Elegiac Sonnets*; or the bird and animal consciousnesses that John Clare creates; or Ann Radcliffe’s explorations of how it feels to fear or control; or Jane Austen’s subtle craft of human gradation. By being perceived as expanding the range of representable subjectivities, these writers’ works—regardless of their authors’ political stances—played important roles in emancipating artistic practice from implicitly endorsing prevailing systems of social superiority. Post-Romantic art claims both the world and the mind as its purview, justifying itself through asserting its ability to see differently and draw new connections. While in practice art can never wholly escape social and cultural conventions, the developments of the Romantic period saw it repositioned as a critical and experimental process whose practitioners were granted licence to push back the boundaries of expression and empathy. The artist was no longer a custodian of established forms, but rather a forger of new modes for appreciating things formerly neglected, misunderstood, or despised.

Positioning Bowie as part of this tradition of liberation is relatively straightforward. Much of his work is heavily invested in parody, appropriation, and reinvention, but in his hands, these become means for opening up formerly closed systems and mindsets. A fairly obvious example would be “Lady Stardust” (1972):

People stared at the makeup on his face  
Laughed at his long black hair, his animal grace  
The boy in the bright blue jeans  
Jumped up on the stage  
And Lady Stardust sang his songs  
Of darkness and disgrace

The laughter in the second line of this first verse could be read as mockery, but the tone allows for delight too, and it is clear from the chorus refrain—“he was alright”—that while Lady Stardust’s performance challenges some members of its imagined audience, it nevertheless works as art, in part because it challenges. While “I smiled sadly for a love I could not obey” in the second verse looks back in a somewhat retrogressive manner to the cliché of “the love that dare not speak its name,” the reaction remains one of strong admiration, and the femme fatales and boys described in the previous lines constitute a crowd that is mixed, engaged, and itself composed of performers.

As “Lady Stardust” shows, Bowie’s art pushes the value of the idiosyncratic, the formerly excluded, and the potentially improper. Sometimes this investment manifests lyrically in surreal declarations that communicate despite themselves. While there is no pre-established poetic context for parsing what Bowie means when he declares “I’m an alligator” at the beginning of “Moonage Daydream” (1972), or to explain exactly what “squawking like a pink monkey bird” might entail, the song is a come-on made more intriguing by its fascinating crypticisms. Other Bowie lyrics explicitly defend neglected subjectivities. When in “Changes” (1971) Bowie describes “these children that you spit on / As they try to change their worlds,” the plural “worlds” is significant, acknowledging myriad valuable subjectivities, rather than Jeffrey’s singular “proper object.” The supposed children’s creative capacities serve to grant them liberty and self-awareness: “They’re immune to your consultations / They’re quite aware of what they’re going through.” Similarly, when Bowie asks who will love Aladdin Sane (1973), this is a call for a potentially impossible form of empathy, rather than a sneering objection. Like most pop music, Bowie’s oeuvre is shot through with desire, but desire in Bowie is multiple, thwarted, and shifting. His lyrics generally refuse to lay out one rule for the refined or to demarcate an in crowd without considering who this might exclude. Instead, his songs present a series of possible masks that can be worn authentically despite their capacity for being shucked off.

While Bowie might be seen as drawing on discourses rooted in Romanticism in moments such as these, his methods of communicating his artistry arguably represent a considerable improvement on those available to early-nineteenth-century poets and novelists. The mechanics of print production before the second quarter of the nineteenth century meant that even the most successful literary writers of the Romantic period addressed restricted and affluent readerships during their lifetimes, although their posthumous Victorian audiences were far more extensive. However, even the late-nineteenth-century reading audience was small by the standards of those that could be reached by singers in the mid-twentieth century. By the 1960s, the potential existed, in John Lennon’s words, for musicians to be “more popular than Jesus” (Cleave), in large part due to the range of media forms through which they could engage with their audiences. No longer were communications largely limited to written words, still visual images, and performances reliant on direct personal proximity; now, recorded and transmitted sound and vision allowed for a panoply of new forms of interaction. As a performative rock star in an age of mass media, the representational potential immediately available to Bowie was far greater than that accorded to his writerly Romantic forebears, in terms of both the forms he could employ and the audiences he could reach. He may not have had long black hair, but it was clear that he had makeup on his face when he sang “Lady Stardust” and its brethren to audiences of thousands in theatres and when he projected himself to millions through carefully designed records and TV appearances that deliberately distorted the line between stagecraft and self. By committing to visual and personal performance as well as lyric selves, Bowie was able to blur towards a key ideal of musical Romanticism: the total artwork, although, as I will go on to discuss, his manners of expression undercut the claims to universal importance that are often associated with this term.

Romantic-period authors commonly attempted to be parsimonious with their biographical significations, seeking carefully to control their images. Wordsworth in particular expressed considerable frustration when he was refashioned by essayists like William Hazlitt and Thomas De Quincey. By contrast, Bowie, with the full resources of a postmodern perspective available to him, was able to take a more magnanimous approach. Recognizing the impossibility and undesirability of policing all the ways in which he might be interpreted, he instead multiplied himself in manners that were “open to limitless interpretations of meaning” (Morley 462). This proved to be an extremely effective strategy in commercial, aesthetic, and affective terms. As Shelley wrote enviously and somewhat hyperbolically of Byron in 1822, Bowie’s multifarious representations “touched a chord to which a million hearts responded” (*Letters* II:436).

A crucial aspect of the media environment into which Bowie emerged was the space it provided for his audiences to co-author the meanings of his works in manners that were far more comprehensive than those available in the early nineteenth century. As David Baker puts it, “Bowie as rock star/artist functions in a pop/rock economy of alliance and commonality” (111). Byron and Wordsworth were certainly imitated, and Byron in particular—along with his publishers and collaborators—was a pioneer in developing what Tom Mole has characterized as a hermeneutic of intimacy. However, what Bowie could achieve was on a different scale. Rebuking a newspaper article that described Byron as having drawn “hordes of screaming young women,” Mole contends accurately that these hordes “were spliced into Byron’s story from an entirely different cultural memory. They screamed not for Byron but for the Beatles” (2007 xi). While the media environment was opening up during the 1810s and 1820s, writers in this period were by no means as readily available for appropriation as twentieth-century artists who positioned themselves knowingly within a constellation of magazines, television appearances, costume designers, other musicians, movements, newspapers, controversies, personal interactions, radio broadcasts, sleeves, vinyl, and technology.

Fans responded to this cornucopia of stimuli both through forming shared interpretive communities and through valuing particular irreducible specificities. Bowie’s productions proved to possess an enormous capacity for conjuring feelings of affinity. In Nick Stevenson’s words, fans reacted to Bowie and his works by employing them for “the creation of meaning through diverse patterns of identification” (149). Creative audiences were able to use Bowie’s multivalent capacities to transcend dominant media narratives. Patrick Glen, examining Bowie’s outing himself as bisexual in the *Melody Maker* in 1972, argues that while reportage often attempted to position the singer and his characters within constrained traditions of queer expression, Bowie’s use of “references drawn from complex scenes that could accommodate a number of narratives, symbols, individual and sexual identities” meant that “[t]hose who had not encountered these scenes . . . could appropriate elements of Bowie’s identity and references for themselves” (423). John Gill writes similarly that Bowie provided a powerful and outrageous, if not unproblematic, model for gay identity “at a time when queer appearances in the media tended to be in the form of arrests and police statistics” (110). Bowie was by no means always an ideal role model; as Will Brooker has pointed out, certain performances, such as “China Girl” (1983, although written earlier for Iggy Pop), can rightfully be challenged for their uncomfortable cultural appropriations (98–100). Nevertheless, the kinds of fan responses recorded by Stevenson, Glen, Gill, and thousands upon thousands of articles, conversations, comments, forum posts, Tumblr memes, and blogs make it clear that Bowie’s modes of expression have often been received as being enormously liberating. While Bowie was not wholly responsible for the emancipatory potential of his self-presentations, he was nevertheless a master manipulator of the forms available to him, creating spaces for alternative subjectivities. These subjectivities were modelled at least in part on Romantic exemplars (in a few cases explicitly, as with Screaming Lord Byron, as Emily Bernhard Jackson has discussed (2018)). However, these were often cleverly subverted by new contrasts and contexts. The affordances of modern media forms enabled Bowie to expand considerably on the Romantics’ accomplishments in terms of visibility, ease of transmission, and potential for immediate remediation.

Bowie’s approaches to core Romantic concerns might be also be seen as improvements in other respects. While we would now reject the exclusionary conservatism in Jeffrey’s *Thalaba* review, we might nevertheless recognize his accuracy in contending that the discourses of Romanticism are often intrinsically egocentric. There is a crucial contradiction at the heart of Romantic artistry between expanding the range of possible representations and focusing in on the special minds that performatively accomplish these expansions. This contradiction is implicit in Keats’s ideal of “*Negative Capability*, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (*Letters* I:193). While the notion of negative capability is ostensibly focused on avoiding certain kinds of overdetermination, the evocation of uncertainties in Romantic poetry nearly always connotes a viewing consciousness, privileging the discriminating powers of the artist. This privileging of the artistic consciousness is a quintessentially Romantic phenomenon. In no previous era would it have been tenable to write an epic poem whose central subject was the “growth of a poet’s mind” (Wordsworth, *Prelude*) or to claim in all seriousness that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World” (Shelley, “Defence” 535). Shelley and Wordsworth may have differed on a great number of issues, but they were united in ferociously exalting the power of the poetic self. In his sonnet “To Wordsworth” (1816), Shelley valorizes a “Poet of Nature” (l. 1) who has the sublime ability to rise above “the blind and battling multitude” (l. 10) through weaving “Songs consecrate to truth and liberty” (l. 12). Of course, Shelley goes on to add, “Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve, / Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be” (ll. 13–14). Perhaps these final lines might helpfully be read an early-nineteenth-century equivalent of the betrayed Bob Dylan fan’s “Judas!” heckle at the Manchester Free Trade Hall, an attack that criticises a perceived swerve from genuine art into falsity. However, while Shelley and Wordsworth differed regarding the appropriate politics *for* art, they essentially concurred regarding the politics *of* art. Romantic artists might express doubts about their sociocultural effectiveness, but in both Shelley and Wordsworth’s visions and versions, they possess the ability and the responsibility to “see into the life of things” (“Tintern Abbey” l. 50) and be seen as reporting back authentically and comprehensively.

Crucially for the purposes of this essay, this is an ideal of artistry that Bowie’s work at once partly endorses and utterly undercuts, showing it to be simultaneously absolutely ersatz and absolutely true. For Bowie, as he worked through a series of characters and selves compromised by recognizably Romantic maladies, such as self-love, madness, and addiction, the artist was simultaneously a visionary and a fraud. A paradigm of authentic inauthenticity lies at the heart of his artistic practice, which rebukes key aspects of the Romantic paradigm while preserving its affective charge.

In seeking to become a rock star, Bowie was working in a tradition that often drew uncritically on the legacies of Romantic artistic exceptionalism. We might think here of Mick Jagger quoting *Adonaïs* at the Brian Jones memorial concert in 1969. By intoning some of Shelley’s least ambivalent stanzas, Jagger claimed Jones as an exemplary paragon for a vast corporeal and media audience. Bowie was a keen if slightly alienated observer of such spectacles. Unlike some Sixties stars, whose careers blazed to life with astonishing quickness—but like many of the poets of the Romantic period who later became established as canonical—Bowie had to struggle to refine his own radical artistry into forms that would communicate, a process that entailed the development of an intense kind of self-reflexivity that we might liken to negative capability. However, in Bowie’s case, assertions about insights and performed processes of doubt are commonly alloyed with a reflexive irony. As Shelton Waldrep put it when discussing the aesthetics of self-invention, “Bowie’s famed artificiality sprang from a desire to reject the immediate history of rock music” (*Aesthetics* 106). We might extend this insight to other forms of discourse that insist on the authority of authenticity. Bowie was very uncomfortable with the idea of legislating the world, and through staging his discomfort in a plethora of different manners, he encouraged his audience to think about the limits of his powers of communication and the possibility that the performances he put on might as easily mislead as lead.

A good early example of Bowie’s suspicious staging of his artistic self can be found in a key lyric from “Changes”:

So I turned myself to face me  
But I’ve never caught a glimpse  
Of how the others must see the faker  
I’m much too fast to take that test

“Changes” presents a vision of identity both more fluid and more playful than that found in stereotypical Romantic discourse. Rather than being the subject of infinite contemplations, the self slips easily out of view, proving impossible to pin down. The song recognizes that the identity others see must always be falsified to a certain extent, and must always remain in some respects ineffable to its possessor. In this paradigm, the outpourings of self that Romantic poems imagine are not valuable because they genuinely communicate lucid truths; rather, their value lies in their evoking the possibility of such powerfully affective communications. For Bowie, the vision of transcendent, authentic correspondence that Romantic art holds out should not be accepted as a totalizing paradigm, and neither should it inevitably be seen as admirable. In his work, space is created for the audience and the artist to appropriate, misunderstand, and move onward. An unintended or misconceived meaning need not be any less powerful than an intended one, and painstakingly seeking to draw distinctions is a slow game to play when you can just communicate again with a different mask. When Bowie tells his audience in “D.J.” (1979) “I am what I play,” he evokes the ease with which art can efface identity, but also its capacity for being duplicated, reconfigured, and shared—for meaning different things to different people at different times and in different places. While the Romantic artist is capable of being in uncertainties, Bowie is prepared to replace the self who performs the balancing of these uncertainties with a kaleidoscope of different possibilities, without any irritable reaching after definitiveness. Through doing so, he captures a vast range of contingent forms of originality that model character as being lambent and mutable, rather than centred and cerebral.

The extent to which Bowie’s self-presentations differ from strong Romantic evocations of the self might be demonstrated by contrasting a poem like Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” (written in 1819) with a lyric like Bowie’s “Quicksand” (1971). Both these works deal with an element of nature often depicted as being difficult to grasp, but they approach these elements in ideologically disparate manners. Shelley’s “Ode” is a powerful act of shamanism with a singular focus. The first three stanza pile up calls and invocations, a constant stream of addresses that conjure the wind in its various aspects and locales before seeking tightly to align it with the poet’s own identity. Shelley ostensibly recognizes his separation from the wind in his showy falling away onto the “thorns of life” (l. 54), but the echoes of Christlike suffering point towards a rise and a resurrection for one self-confessedly “tameless, and swift, and proud” (l. 56). In the final stanza, Shelley completes a comprehensive process of identification and alignment, first imagining the wind sounding through him, harrowing him into a pure voice, and then imploring it to become the best part of his self-as-poet:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:

What if my leaves are falling like its own!

The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,

Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,

My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe

Like wither’d leaves to quicken a new birth!

And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish’d hearth

Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!

Be through my lips to unawaken’d earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,

If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind? (ll. 57–70)

Shelley’s megalomaniacal focus reaches its apotheosis in this moment, where the poet and the poem become one, encoding in being so the seeds of a revolution modelled as being necessarily eventually successful.

This visionary mode, despite its potency and attractiveness, is one regarding which Bowie’s works display considerable suspicion. While he sometimes employs the abject manner that Shelley assays in the penultimate stanza of the “Ode,” he is not generally willing to crash through to the kinds of transcendence modelled in the final stanza, at least not without encoding a substantial degree of ambivalence. The subjects Bowie addresses commonly prove to be unresponsive or treacherous. When he breathes words into the void on a key track from *Station to Station* (1976)—“Lord, I kneel and offer you / My word on a wing / And I’m trying hard to fit among / Your scheme of things”—the song ends with doubts as to whether the singer’s struggles can ever be successfully reconciled with eternal verities: “Does my prayer fit in with your scheme of things?” Time in “Time” (1973) is a toxic and unreliable muse, who “speaks of senseless things,” demands the lives of friends and attenuates the bonds of relationships. In the song bearing his name (1971), Andy Warhol is just as capable of doing “jolly boring” things as he is of looking a scream, and ultimately he cannot be differentiated from a “Silver Screen”: he represents a mode of artistic reflection, but not of a kind that provides definitive answers.

Lyrics that maintain a single subject of address in the manner of Shelley’s most famous lyrics, or Keats’s odes, or (perhaps more in theory than in practice) Coleridge’s conversation poems are relatively uncommon among Bowie’s oeuvre. Instead, he often flickers from image to image even in brief songs, creating effects through collage or accumulation rather than the careful delineation of a central presence. In “Quicksand,” he begins by evoking hermetic modes of order—“I’m closer to the Golden Dawn / Immersed in Crowley’s uniform / Of imagery”—but these opening lines already contain crucial degrees of deflection and alienation very different from Romantic reachings-out. Closer is not the same as part of, a uniform is not its wearer, and imagery is not that which is represented. Where Shelley longs for purity, truth, and authenticity (even while partly recognizing the desperation of such an ideal), Bowie suspends himself in a network of suggestions and possibilities that rely on allusions to others’ arts and artifices. While Shelley begs the wind to be his avatar, Bowie asserts himself as an aspect of wider cultures, a being unable to cohere into a position of singular subjectivity or devotion:

I’m the twisted name on Garbo’s eyes  
Living proof of Churchill’s lies, I’m destiny  
I’m torn between the light and dark  
Where others see their targets, divine symmetry

Nor does the song present this lack of definitive positioning as a bad thing. There are moments of paranoia and melodrama in the lyrics of “Quicksand,” but these are underpinned by the beauty of the elegant string parts, which evoke a kind of harmony that grounds the words’ reflections. Shelley’s verse is desperate to validate its writer’s self, to make his utterances truths, to spread what he asserts he knows to be right across the globe. By contrast, Bowie’s song cautions against certainties. Its reference to the “next bardo” evokes Buddhist notions of multiple lives comprising cyclical orders, rather than lines directed forwards. The words of the chorus—“Don’t believe in yourself, don’t deceive with belief / Knowledge comes with death’s release”—rebuke the kinds of confidence that would seek to trumpet forth prophecy. While Shelley’s “Ode” concludes with a question that begs a particular answer, the sung part of Bowie’s song ends with voices producing pure, open-throated sounds rather than words, fading into pure musicality.

Through this comparison, I am not seeking to assert that either “Quicksand” or “Ode to the West Wind” is a better artwork than the other. Rather, I wish to draw out and characterize a difference in their ideological approaches that reflects what Bowie rejects and reconfigures from the Romantic project. Romantic poems depict their poets as concerned with and capable of locating meaningful things. Sometimes these can be captured in aphorisms like “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” or “The Child is Father of the Man,” sometimes their assertions are more diffuse or allusive, but in either case, the Romantic poems that have been particularly valued often frame themselves as their poet’s responses to significant questions about existence. Biographical circumstances meant that Shelley’s Rousseau was never able to tell the narrator of “The Triumph of Life” what life is, but the framing of the question nevertheless implies that this is something that poetry might potentially establish. Bowie’s work challenges such attempts at definitive meaning-making, in part due to his greater awareness of the importance of his audiences. According to *Hunky Dory*’s producer, Ken Scott, Bowie intended “The Bewlay Brothers” (1971) to be “specifically for the American market . . . the lyrics makes absolutely no sense, but the Americans always like to read into things, so let them read into it what they will” (Buckley 97). To the more Romantically inclined, this might sound like a terrible abdication of artistic responsibility, but it reflects Bowie’s sense that meaning can never be created solely by the artist (particularly an artist who works in concert with skilled musicians, technicians, and designers). Rather, significance is the product of complex processes of collaboration. In his practices, Bowie actively sought out spaces for the co-creation of meaning through the use of cut-ups in the late Sixties and early Seventies and Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt’s Oblique Strategies for elements of the Berlin Trilogy (*Low* (1977), *“Heroes”* (1977), and *Lodger* (1979)). This preoccupation with the interpretations of others also manifests in his lyrics. The subjects of his songs often shift in manners that model crossings-over of responsibility and identity. After the bridge in “Young Americans” (1975), the song’s subject moves from being a series of pitied characters (he or she “wants the young American”) to the audience (“You want the young American”) and finally the singer (“I want the young American”). The narrator of “Panic in Detroit” (1973) is a fan and an imitator of revolutionaries, rather than a revolutionary himself in any uncomplicated sense. The film-devouring potential ravers in “Drive-In Saturday” (1973) require a crash course in a practice in which they feel irredeemably secondary. On *Diamond Dogs*’s “Sweet Thing” (1974), the singer depicts himself as “a portrait in flesh,” but also wonders desperately whether his auditor will “see that I’m scared and I’m lonely.” Such framings demand that their audiences recognize that identities must necessarily be staged and seen. As Waldrep puts it, “Bowie gives us a way to understand the vicissitudes of performance, aestheticizing the link between rock music and everyday life by calling attention to the artificiality of both” (*Future Nostalgia* 3).

A personal and ideological investment in the creative potential of unstable identities lies at the heart of Bowie’s artistry. He was fully capable of “play[ing] the wild mutation as a rock & roll star” (“Star” (1972)), but in showing this to be play, albeit of a serious kind, he argued implicitly for a more fluid notion of genius that recognized the roles played by change, chance, and auditors. The characters who he both played and observed are commonly flawed, fragmented, doubting, or blinkered. Over the course of *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust*, it becomes clear that the title character is at least in part an awful person, self-absorbed and self-regarding. When asked by Alan Yentob whether “Ziggy was a monster,” Bowie replied “Oh he certainly was” (*Cracked Actor*). The nature of Ziggy’s monstrosity is often coded Romantically. “Making love with [one’s] ego,” the flaw that Jeffrey detects in the Lakers, is Ziggy’s flaw also, and “leper messiah” (“Ziggy Stardust” (1972)) sounds like a status that Shelley would have been glad to claim in his more self-abasing moments. However, for Bowie, Ziggy is far from being an all-consuming role. His rise and fall is a story told around its central character. Even the song that bears his name is narrated by his bandmates, frustrated by the alienating effects of their lead singer’s megalomania. Crucially, though, this does not mean that Ziggy’s project is necessarily a failure. What matters is not so much the artist himself, but the inspiration that other people draw from him and build upon. What’s reported of the Starman’s “hazy cosmic jive” (1972) is vague and garbled; what’s important is how his transmission makes his listeners feel, creating a community united for a moment in the ecstasy of shared excitement. The unity at the heart of the song is not so much in the lyrics, but rather in the many-voiced “na na” chant that follows the later choruses and runs into the closing fade. While *Ziggy Stardust* ironizes artistic egocentricity, it is also a record that advocates repeatedly for art’s power to create and evoke powerful connections. In both his lyrics and his practice, Bowie shows that art and its insights do not have to be perfect or essentially true to communicate powerfully. Discussing Bowie’s voice, Waldrep writes that he employs “a distinctive type of singing that almost oversignifies to remind listeners repeatedly that what they are hearing is a self-conscious performance of character and emotion (singing to make you think about singing) that yet connects to so many people because it is closer to how they experience emotion than music that attempts to be ‘naturalistic’” (*Aesthetics* 116). In Bowie’s work the medium and the message are both shown to be fallible, but their human fallibility is intrinsic to their effectiveness as meaningful and appropriable art.

An investment in exploring the interlinked power and fragility of selves and communications is remarkably consistent across Bowie’s many reinventions, from the overdetermined dead circuit in “Space Oddity” (1969) to the insistence on glorious potential existing “just for one day” in “‘Heroes’” (1977) to the final song on his final record, “I Can’t Give Everything Away” (2016):

Seeing more and feeling less  
Saying no but meaning yes  
This is all I ever meant  
That’s the message that I sent

In the stanza’s first line, there is perhaps a little echo of the epitaph of W.B. Yeats, one of the self-proclaimed “last romantics” who “chose for theme / Traditional sanctity and loveliness” (“Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931” ll. 41–42). Yeats’s self-chosen grave inscription, as laid out in “Under Ben Bulben,” runs “*Cast a cold eye* ***/*** *On life, on death / Horseman, pass by!*” (ll. 92–94). However, while Yeats’s lines are conclusive, Bowie’s second line flips to give the other side of the equation: not quite a contradiction, but a reversal of the dynamics between the internal and external worlds that the first line lays out. While seeing more and feeling less implies a desire for a kind of cold, objective voyeurism, saying no but meaning yes gestures towards a positive connection expressed through the performance of alienation. In these lines, denial and affirmation tangle together in a paradox that nevertheless communicates. You can’t give everything away—there’s never time or words enough—but the faith remains nevertheless that something, perhaps something unexpected, carries and can suffice for someone else. If Bowie’s work throws into doubt the Romantic authority of the artist as transcendent visionary, it does not do so in order to break the potency of art, but rather to think about how accepting artists’ limitations need not compromise the power of their works to work for others. Bowie’s concern with his audience and his respect for his listeners’ capacity for making meanings maintains a modified faith in the value of artistic communication, but recognizes that for art to be genuinely representative, it needs to reach out beyond the concerns of its maker by embracing the potential for radical openness in the lyric utterance.

While this embrace is sometimes oblique in Bowie’s music, at other times, it is startlingly and touchingly direct. The last song on *Ziggy Stardust*, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Suicide” (1972), makes a strange shift from much of the preceding album, moving to a second person that projects Romantic ennui onto its addressee. While the song begins by telling the listener that they’ve fallen into a state of irrevocable solipsism—“Oh, no, no, no, you’re a rock ‘n’ roll suicide”—the last words gloriously counterpoise this with a cry of connection that reasserts the brilliance not of the singer, but of the auditor who responds:

You’re not alone.

Gimme your hands ’cause you’re wonderful

This invitation to take hold of what the song provides and use it as a mooring point seems to me to typify Bowie’s works’ laudable openness to imaginative and emotional appropriation. The capital-P poet can be a powerful ideal, but it also one that risks actuating Romantic art’s unpleasant potential for insular elitism, where the insights art models are for an elect who might perhaps deign to share them as long as their genius is acknowledged. Bowie’s work flirts with this position on occasion, but he recognized its dangers. Even in troubled moments, such as when he asserted that he “always had a repulsive sort of need to be something more than human” (Crowe), his recognizing this need as repulsive registers a concern about modes that close off, rather than open up. His success at tempering the Romantic desire for transcendence created the space for him to recognize others, and to be made a part of others’ lives in ways that have allowed him to persist as an avatar of empathy, transformation, and perverse integrity. In an article marking the fifth anniversary of his death, Lynsey Hanley writes that “life, for Bowie, was a series of encounters with people and things that made change possible, not a series of transactions designed to get one over on other people.” In the same article, the singer Edwyn Collins states that “He was warm; you could walk around with him in your head all day and it comforted you.” If these feelings typify what Bowie can conjure, then it seems clear to me that his artistic self-fashioning has been profoundly, Romantically successful.

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