

Robert Burns and The Poetics of a Cultural Divide

Megan Messinger '08
(203) 654-6017
mm2609@barnard.edu

"The tension between one tongue and another, or between one form of a tongue and another, may itself offer possibilities for the making of a love that is unsentimentally alert to the clashes of life. Such art may well register the clash of one linguistic register against another."

- Christopher Ricks

In a February 1787 letter about Robert Burns, John Logan quipped that "no man should avow rakery who does not possess an estate of 500£ a year."¹ He had detected this rakery in Burns's "love poems, that is his bawdy songs" included in 1786's *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*.² The collection sold like mad, but during Burns's early critical reception, Logan was not alone in paying more attention to the man himself than to the specifics of his work, a response perhaps invited by Burns's unabashed earthiness and fascinating choice to write in the Scots dialect. Some of the attention was also due to timing; a kind of literary space had recently been created by the 'discovery' of the ancient Scottish poet Ossian, and by Scottish poets Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson, so will-he or nil-he, Burns became the next "rural genius."³ His family farm and attendant financial and legal difficulties had kept him from much formal schooling, and although he was taught by his father and read voraciously on his own, as well as attending the parish school, Burns was never prepared for a genteel career in law, medicine, or public service, which were the usual routes for gentleman-poets. But popular imagination was

¹ Letter to Henry Mackenzie, 28 February 1787. *Critical Heritage* 79

² Ibid.

³ Introduction, *Critical Heritage* 6.

fired on the idea of pure, untutored poetic inspiration, and although it was not until the next generation that these ideals would solidify into a movement, Burns both helped form and was subjected to the proto-Romantic obsession with the natural state of man.

As critics and other poets took more notice of this young Scotsman, the tension that would inform the rest of Burns's career began to take shape: is there any such thing as a peasant poet, or is the phrase a contradiction in terms? Can there be a poet who does not have a sense of his own context? If a ploughman reads, is his natural inspiration ruined? Was Burns such a poet in the first place? John Logan also pointed out that though people were "representing [Burns] as a poetical phenomenon that owed nothing but to Nature and his own genius...[w]hen I opened [*Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*], I found that he was as well acquainted with the English poets as I was."⁴ Burns's work is indeed a sounding chamber in which Pope, Dryden, Jonson, Shakespeare, the Bible and the classical world reverberate.⁵ In an essay on references, Christopher Ricks says that "Burns's allusions need to be read between the lines of the wrong side of the sheets,"⁶ which is to say that Burns appropriated and reworked the grand masters, entering into conversation with them instead of attempting pastiche. He had to in order to remain himself; contrary to the usual unity of the term "peasant poet," Burns was faced with the opposition between "peasant" and "poet"; the Scottish songs and folk poetry of his youth rubbed against his desire to be, not only a poet, but truly a man of letters and society.

As such, Burns took his public image seriously and worked on his correspondence with nearly as much rigor as his poetry. In the 1780s and '90s, the recipient and not the sender paid for postage, so the best letters were long and entertaining, with enclosures of poetry or even other

⁴ *Critical Heritage* 79

⁵ Ricks, Christopher. *Allusions to the Poets*, 43-82

⁶ 54

people's interesting letters – if a correspondent was known not to send good letters, the recipient might not bother to pick them up! Burns drafted, revised, copied and circulated his more formal efforts for approval; he also dashed off notes to friends, shopkeepers, and his publisher. In the collected letters of Robert Burns, as much as in the poetry, the performance of language is paramount because it is Burns's performance of the self, and he was a different self for the different people with whom he corresponded.

In August of 1787, Burns wrote the now-famous "Autobiographical Letter" to Edinburgh doctor and novelist John Moore. Moore had advantages that Burns never had – formal education, travel, association with nobility⁷ – and Burns admired him greatly. In the Autobiography, Burns's tone is restless and light by turns, evincing the frustration of growing up poor – the unpleasant truth of the *ploughman* half – while reaching for some peace with the pleasures his youth afforded. Burns recalls playing with the children of the local aristocracy:

It is not common at these green years that the young Noblesse and Gentry have a just sense of the immense distance between them and their ragged Playfellows. – It takes a few dashes into the world to give the young Great man that proper, decent, unnoticing disregard for the poor, insignificant, stupid devils, the mechanics and peasantry around him; who perhaps were born in the same village.⁸

The "immense distance," and the heavily ironic "just sense" thereof, presages the two lengthy lists of adjectives; this sounds like years of overheard derisive speech bubbling up, and Burns ends with the tantalizing proximity of one world to the other: the same village, by an accident of birth, provides so much to some and so little to others. Burns speaks more clearly of his feelings for plowing and thrashing when he says, "A Novel-writer might perhaps have viewed these

⁷ Lindsay, Maurice. "John Moore." *The Burns Encyclopedia*.
<<http://www.robertburns.org/encyclopedia/MooreDrJohn.647.shtml>>

⁸ *Letters*, vol. I, 136

scenes with some satisfaction, but so did not I.”⁹ Although the image is placed upon him again and again in reviews of the “ploughman poet,” Burns himself could not romanticize or tragedize the long hours of labor, and his poetic works show that he did not dwell on the hardship.

If we can say that Robert Burns had one natural idiom or another, in addition to or in conversation with the English-Scots question, he valued the expression of delight and animation over woe. What he cherished from his childhood was the vast repertoire of folk songs and faerie stories he heard from his mother’s maid that “cultivated the latent seeds of Poesy...[and] to this hour, in my nocturnal rambles, I sometimes keep a sharp look-out in suspicious places; and though nobody can be more sceptical in these matters than I, yet it often takes an effort of Philosophy to shake off these idle terrors.”¹⁰ The faeries up against rational Philosophy is the Burns dilemma writ small and clear: poetic inspiration comes from one origin, literally feminine/maternal here, and the framework to make sense of inspiration comes from another set of inheritances that are intellectual and rational. In this autobiography, Burns tries to express both sides of his creativity, but they remain at odds, Philosophy canceling out the power of faerie tales. Outside this letter to the intimidating Dr. Moore, Burns definitely maintained his love for traditional tales and music, going on to be “absolutely crazed”¹¹ about Scottish songs, writing not a few and editing two collections. Perhaps he feared Moore’s prejudices against people who believed in faerie tales and wanted to make a strong statement on the side of reason as well. Was he fighting the popular ideal of “Robert Burns as untutored rustic”? He does bring up the faeries in the first place, though, and for other delights, he turns to Scots dialect when his “scarcity of English denies me power of doing [a pretty girl] justice in that language; but you know the

⁹137

¹⁰ 135

¹¹ *Letters* 167

Scotch idiom, She was a bonie, sweet, sonsie lass.” It seems more than anything that Burns is resisting the *idea* of the rustic, the assumption of critics from Henry Mackenzie to John Keats being that Scots is bastardized English and that Burns should just translate his thoughts from one to the other to make reading easier. But Scots is *for* something; it evokes the people and places native to it. Even if this line in Scots to Moore is a conscious performance of Burns’s rural identity, he still put it there to be read, passed around, and kept on record.

One entire letter in Scots survives. It was written to a schoolmaster – not Burns’s own – called William Nicol, and it falls in¹⁰ two sections, first a description of Burns’s temperamental mare, and second a story about meeting “twa dink quines” (pretty girls), whom he so admired that “if my harigals were turn’d out, ye wad see twa nicks i’ the heart o’ me like the mark o’ a kail-whittle in a castock”¹² – which is to say, they marked his heart as deeply as a kitchen-knife does a cabbage. This is an extreme example of Scots, denser even than most of the poetry, and longer than in other letters. When writing in English to good friends like James Smith, though, Burns would often mix in a bit of Scots description – women dancing “like midges sporting in the mottie sun, or craws prognosticating a storm in a hairst day,” or a drunk man trying to ride home “when down came his horse, and threw his rider’s breechless arse in a clipt hedge.”¹³ The division of use between Scots and English is not so marked as to be one for sentiment or description and the other for thought,¹⁴ but in contrast to these easy and evocative descriptions, Burns’s most formal King’s-English communications can seem stiff and overwrought. It could not have helped that Burns wrote those letters to influential men and women whom he wanted to impress with his sophisticated side; the kinds of conversations he carried on with noble patrons

¹² *Letters*, vol. I, 120

¹³ *Letters*, vol I, 125

¹⁴ Edwin Muir, qtd in *The Burns Companion* 79.

or the wealthy and attractive Agnes M'Lehose required a heavy dose of social graces – figures of speech which, to Burns, were native to the English vocabulary. Burns's letters prove that he was deeply conscious of the social divide between Scots and English and skilled in forming a 'natural' mode based on the expectations of his correspondent.

Of course, many people also expected Burns to give up this Scots nonsense and write in English. Again and again, Burns invited the same left-handed compliment. English poet William Cowper demonstrated both the casual slap and the height of praise when he wrote,

It would be a pity if he should not hereafter divest himself of barbarism, and content himself with writing pure English, in which he appears perfectly qualified to excel. He who can command admiration, dishonours himself if he aims no higher than to raise a laugh.¹⁵

Cowper was the kind of man with whom Burns would have loved to correspond – another poet, learned, respected – and this was the comment of every critic who was not wrapped up in the romance of the ploughman poet. **Burns was constantly presented with two gross**

no bold **misconceptions: one, that he wrote in Scots because it was his natural language, how**
sublimely quaint, and two, that he wrote in Scots because he was not a serious poet looking
for a broad audience. In fact, the stakes were much higher. His linguistic search for identity, and his explorations of language as self, encompassed the question of national identity. Burns's entrapment between Scots and English, between peasant and poet, was the dilemma of Scotland itself. Burns would have known what Alan Bold lays out in *A Burns Companion*, that Scots and English share a common Anglo-Saxon source rather than Scots being degraded English. When the English Bible was adopted in the mid-sixteenth century, English suddenly became the language of authority, and when English monarchs began holding the Scottish crown as well,

¹⁵ William Cowper to Samuel Rose, 24th July 1787, *Critical Heritage* 91

Scots was further reduced to provincial status.¹⁶ Burns wrote the scathing “Parcel of Rogues” about the Scottish commissioners who had negotiated terms of union only eighty years before, in 1707, terms that included the adoption of English as Scotland’s official language.¹⁷ Across the globe and throughout history, expansionist powers have fought to control indigenous languages, and Burns fought back.

The central problem, and the reason why critics and readers were sometimes confused or dissatisfied with Burns, is that Burns was struggling with a bilingual, bicultural¹⁸ heritage which he did not have the cultural or artistic space to realize fully. There is no choosing one or the other; Burns could not have abandoned everything he had read and only write from bucolic inspirations, or write nothing and just farm, once he had done it, but neither could he leave behind the first sources of his aesthetic pleasures and become what the Anglicized reading public would have been more comfortable with. A generation after Burns, John Clare’s similar struggle to reconcile his personal and literary lives would ruin him and contribute to his psychosis; there is nothing to do with a dual heritage but what Burns *did*, which was to actively perform both identities. Write the Scots songs to a mouse and the flowery English poems to the spirit of Edinburgh, and then take those traditions and re-imagine them. Dress them as each other, write out Bible verses in Scots to begin “Address to the Unco Guid.” Burns’s persistent ability to absorb and transform what he was exposed to, and still maintain his artistic integrity in the face of pressure, is the reason we still read him today. Christopher Ricks go so far as to say that “Burns is stagnant when there is no crepitating discrepancy between what he takes and what he

¹⁶ Bold 83

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ This term was coined to describe an educational philosophy for young Deaf children, whose native culture is even more mismissed than Burns's was.