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“The savage and the tender”:
 Subtlety and Sentimentality in the Poetry of Robert Burns

Robert Burns hardly escapes sentimentality in all of his poems. His famous “The Cotter’s Saturday Night,” for example, is well known in part because it so appealed to the taste of those who romanticized the lives of the poor: the cotter and his wife live simply—she sews her own clothes, he toils at his plough before returning home to his children; they are pious, and the “artless notes” (line 109) of their hymns “tune their hearts” (line 110)—“by far the noblest aim” (line 110), Burns editorializes. Their daughter, Jenny, falls in love with a “strappan youth” (line 65), and Burns suggests that the love of this “modest pair” (line 79) is somehow more genuine than most loves: “O happy love! where love like this if found!” (line 73), he writes. The simple life of Scottish laborers, he seems to argue, is nobler than the lives of the aristocracy—a theme to which Burns returns again and again, in poems such as “A Tale of ‘Twa Dogs.” While “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” demonstrates Burns’s burgeoning criticisms of class structure, however, much of its incisiveness is lost to sentimentality which obscures an otherwise strong critique and which flattens and blurs the people of which he writes to mere caricatures. As David Daiches notes in his biography of Burns, this sort of poetry was preferred by many people of Burns’s generation, and even Burns, with his piercing satires and bawdy lyrics, seemed at times persuaded to adopt its themes: one of his most beloved books in his early years, for example, was the fiercely sentimental *The Man of*

Feeling by Henry Mackenzie, a novel which Burns called one of his two “bosom favourites” (Daiches 61).

It is interesting, then, to note where in Burns’s oeuvre he escapes this blurring sentimentality. As many scholars have noted, there are many satires in Burns’s body of work that are scarcely sentimental at all: in parodies such as “Address of Beelzebub” and “Address to the Deil,” he aptly mocks Milton’s *Paradise Lost*; in his political satires, he banishes any trace of sentimentality and substitutes for it sharp social, political, and religious critique; in poems like “Scotch Drink” and “The Fornicator,” his depiction of the Scottish poor is more humorous than romanticized. It is in his poems about the natural world, though—his “Song Composed in August” and “To a Mouse” in particular—that one can see the sentimental tendencies of this poet clashing with an utterly unromantic view of nature. In these poems, while the speaker is given to romantic language and often seems to exalt the simple life, Burns structures the poems so that they complicate such a sentimental view.

“Song Composed in August” seems, at first, to have little to prove: unlike the more ambitious “The Cotter’s Saturday Night,” which is written in the same form as Edmund Spenser’s epic tale *The Faerie Queen*, “Song” is written in simple ballad meter. In “The Cotter’s Saturday Night,” Burns’s use of complex Spenserian stanzas is a clear sign that he believed the lives of these working men and women, their mending and praying and falling in love, as worthy a tale as that of knights, ladies, and nobles. He imposes this strangely artificial form on his poem in order to make this point—and he is somewhat successful. Here, though, in “Song Composed in August,” one sees Burns try his hand at a more natural form—though, interestingly, in English scrubbed of Scottish dialect. In form and diction alone, then,

one can see the melding of genre: we have the more proper Burns, appealing to his English readers, coexisting with Burns, lover of Scottish culture and poetry.

What makes “Song Composed in August” a true melding of opposites, though, is the way in which Burns explores the natural world. Unlike “The Cotter’s Saturday Night,” in which the “natural” Scottish man is both romanticized and flattened, the natural world, here, is wonderfully full of contradiction and life. In the first two lines alone, Burns erases expectations: “Now westlin winds, and slaught’ring guns / Bring Autumn’s pleasant weather” (lines 1-2), he writes. There are many poems that Burns must have read about autumn—sonnets by Shakespeare, for example, speak to the harvest, the coming of winter, aging and inevitable death. Yet how many poets would think to begin a poem about this season of abundance and natural death with “slaught’ring guns” and “pleasant weather” set side by side? There is an odd fusing of the human and the natural here: do the guns really bring in the cool breezes and sunny skies, as Burns suggests, or, more logically, is autumn a season during which hunters bring out their guns to go after their prey? Does death bring autumn, or does the season bring death?

Just as there is ambiguity in the origin of violence and weather, so does Burns frame the natural world in ambiguous terms. It is not simply depicted as untarnished, pure—the way in which the Cotter and his family are drawn. Rather, the natural world is filled with beauty and with horror, with “the savage and the tender” (line 18). After the first lines of the first stanza, Burns reverts to a more sentimental view of nature: we see the moorcocks springing on their “whirring wings” (line 3), the heather blooming, the “waving grain” (line 5) and brightly shining moon. We see the partridge and the plover and the woodcock and the soaring hern inhabiting their favored landscapes.

And yet here, too, there is the specter of violence. “The partridge loves the fruitful fells” (line 9), writes Burns. Of course, he speaks of fields; but in the Scottish language, “fell” can also mean “biting” and may also refer to the flesh just under the skin. Perhaps, then, there is also a slightly sharper meaning, here, an acute pain hidden just beneath the lush and lilting verse, beneath the fruitful plains. Likewise, in the second half of this stanza, Burns writes:

Thro’ lofty groves, the cushat roves,
 The path of man to shun it;
 The hazel bush o’erhangs the thrush,
 The spreading thorn the linnet. (lines 13-16)

Like Tennyson’s nature, “red in tooth and claw,” Burns’s earlier depiction of the natural world is hardly romanticized. In these lines, there is, yet again, ambiguity in syntax: does the linnet o’erhang the spreading thorn, or the thorn the linnet? If the former, then we see something delicate hanging over something pointed and harmful; if the latter, then perhaps the thorns become a protective shelter for the bird. In either case, there is clearly a melding of the delicate and beautiful with the painful, of a sentimental view of nature with a more realistic one. Moreover, in the third stanza, the more violent side of the natural world seems to emerge with greater force: he speaks of “the murd’ring cry” (line 23) of sportsmen as they hunt, of “the flutt’ring, gory pinion” (line 24) of a bird shot, of “the savage and the tender” (line 18).

It is in the final two stanzas, however, that Burns’s brilliance shines. Here, the poet withdraws from what approaches a social critique and rushes into the seemingly sentimental: he speaks to his beloved—to his “charmer” (line 8) that he mentions back in the first stanza—of the charms of the natural world, wholly ignoring the dangers and violence we have seen, the slaughtering guns and spreading thorns and murdering cries. He writes:

But Peggy dear, the ev’ning’s clear,

Thick flies the skimming swallow;
 The sky is blue, the fields in view,
 All fading-green and yellow:
 Come let us stray our gladsome way,
 And view the charms of nature;
 The rustling corn, the fruited thorn,
 And ev'ry happy creature. (line^s 25-32)

As Burns spreads a gloss over the lives of the poor in “The Cotter’s Saturday Night,” so too does the speaker of this song try to hide the horrors of which he has just spoken: he metaphorically flies above the thorny earth, like the swallow skimming over that which he would prefer not to discuss; he looks to the clear blue sky, speaks of the fields becoming more homogenous in color, fading-green turning to yellow—becoming less vibrant, less multi-faceted. Yet, as he paints this serenely beautiful picture over reality, there are sounds that escape his gloss and remind us of the previous stanzas. In the fifth line, here, for example—“Come let us stray our gladsome way”—the internal rhyme recalls the frantic fifth line of the previous stanza: “Avaunt, away! The cruel sway / Tyrannic man’s dominion” (lines 21-22).

Even as the speaker (and, probably, his “lovely charmer” [line 40]) is carried away by the sentimental, then, Burns the poet is not. Instead, this poem seems to be crafted so as to expose the easy way in which the violent and frightening and grotesque may be covered up by a romantic sensibility—by a brief mention of blue skies and the supposed “charms of nature.” Thus, Burns—unwittingly or not—demonstrates to us not only the ambiguities of the natural world, but also the ways in which he, or any other poet or lover, may skim over imperfections.

“To a Mouse,” of course, is the better known of these two poems, and superficially it seems quite different: it is written in Scottish dialect, not in English. Nevertheless, the method by which Burns contradicts the reader’s expectations—a simplistic view of the natural world—is actually astonishingly similar. At the beginning of the poem, Burns employs the

trope of humans breaking the unity natural world: "I'm truly sorry Man's dominion / Has broken Nature's social union" (lines 6-7), he says to the timorous beastie. As the poem unravels, though, it becomes not a diatribe against humankind, but a sympathetic portrayal of the lives of the poor and homeless. This mouse is not like the Cotter, warm by the fire as he plays with his children and reads the Bible aloud: it is a pitiful creature without shelter, without food. Throughout the poem, Burns details the swelling hardships that the mouse faces daily: the lack of food (most humans will not give it even an ear of corn on which to nibble); the bleak December winds; "Winter's sleety dribble, / An' *cranreuch* cauld" (lines 35-36). Each time the poor beastie thinks he has reached shelter, his home is torn apart:

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' wast,
 An' weary Winter comin fast,
 An' cozie here, beneath the blast,
 Though thought to dwell,
 Till crash! the cruel *coulter* past
 Out thro' thy cell. (lines 25-30)

Even the most pitiful of shelters, brittle and cell-like, are taken from him.

The final two stanzas of "To a Mouse" at first seem a valid comfort: at least, the speaker says to the mouse, "The *present* only toucheth thee" (line 44). Whether knowingly or not,¹ Burns echoes the stoic philosophy of Seneca in the final stanza in his attempt to assuage the griefs of the mouse.² He writes:

Still, though are blest, compar'd wi' me!
 The *present* only toucheth thee:

¹ Burns claimed to know little Latin or Greek.

² In Letter 5, Seneca writes: "Ferae pericula quae vident fugiunt; cum effugere, securae sunt; nos et venturo torquemur et praeterito. Multa bona nostra nobis nocent; timoris enim tormentum memoria rducit, providentia anticipat. Nemo tantum praesentibus miser est." This translates roughly to the following: *Beasts avoid dangers that they see; when they have fled, they are free from care; we are tortured both with that which is to come and with that which has gone by. Our many blessings harm us, for the memory brings back the torment of fear, foresight anticipates it. No one is miserable because of merely present things.*

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