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 26 May 2010  
 The Animal Turn  
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**Dead Pets Society:**

*Domestication and displacement in the animal memorials of Robert Burns*

In 1793, Robert Burns, Scotland's perennial poet laureate, went on a trip with his friend John Syme to Galloway. They arrived at the house of a man named Gordon of Kenmore, where they would be staying for three days. But of course, the hospitality wasn't entirely free: upon arrival, Burns was presented with the poetic equivalent of a household chore. As Syme reported in an account he gave to James Currie, one of Burns' early biographers: "Mrs. Gordon's lap-dog Echo was dead. She would have an epitaph for him. Several had been made. Burns was asked for one. This was setting Hercules to his distaff. He disliked the subject, but to please the lady, he would try" (Qtd. in *Collected Works of Robert Burns, Vol. III*, 136). Acquainted with neither the dog nor its personality, he produced the following lines:

In wood and wild, ye warbling throng,  
 Your heavy loss deplore;  
 Now, half extinct your powers of song,  
 Sweet "Echo" is no more.  
 Ye jarring, screeching things around,  
 Scream your discordant joys;  
 Now, half your din of tuneless sound  
 With "Echo" silent lies (136).

Given that a lap-dog is its subject, this epitaph is strangely distant and abstract. Echo—framed by quotation marks that suggest conceptualization more than anything else—is transformed into a pagan canine noise-god, responsible for the sounds of half the species. He is linked to what could literally be called the howling wilderness, even though he probably spent most of his time

indoors. Burns immortalizes him by following—indeed, concluding—the narrative of his name, as if barking were the fullest extent of his being and, indeed, the activity which made him both an exemplar and an individual among his species. He is not dead by the end of the poem; he is merely silent. For “Echo,” as for the sirens of the ancient Greeks, death *is* silence.

Burns “disliked the subject,” Syme reminds us, so this canine deification may very well be sarcastic. Echo is, after all, the patron saint of “jarring, screeching things,” a dubious honor if there ever was one, and the rest of the epitaph suggests mock epic in miniature. But why, then, would he engage in false exaltation? Why would he make the exaltation *seem* false? Perhaps because he was forced to valorize, to abstract, a creature that demands no such valor or abstraction. With the phrase “setting Hercules at his distaff,” Syme alludes to a line in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and also to the original story of Hercules, who was forced to take up spinning, a woman’s task, while he was enslaved to Omphale. On the surface, he suggests that Burns, coerced into writing an epitaph for a dog, is out of his masculine comfort zone. He has been forced into a feminine mode of cultural production, something manifestly sub-heroic—not only the poetic equivalent of a household chore, but the poetic equivalent of cross-dressing. On a deeper level, however, he implies that to truly eulogize a domesticated animal requires a domesticated *poet*—a poet sensitive to the fact that animals are not gods, politicians, or Herculean subjects, but meaningful in their own way.

Burns’ animal poetry is dominated by the intertwined themes of domestication and displacement. His poetry suggests a constant, willful exposure to the ways in which animal and human have come to spatially overlap—or the ways in which the home of the latter has become the home of the former. In “To a Mouse,” one of his most famous poems, he attacks humanity’s

encroachment upon nature by lamenting the destruction of the mouse's "wee-bit housie" (*Vol. I* 160). Meanwhile, one unmistakable sensation produced by Echo's epitaph is that the dog is *not at home* in the pantheon of the wilderness, not at home on the pedestal it will occupy for all eternity. Perhaps Echo led a 'full life' by barking a lot, or by being a living symbol of the urge to bark. What the jarring, deliberately "discordant" epitaph shows us is that it was entirely up to Burns to create that identity for him post-mortem—to create the essence that had, upon his death, been reduced by "half." Burns shows how the animal's 'full life'—the narrative preserved in epitaph—can only be given to it by humans, and is very likely hollow as a result. In Echo's epitaph as well as other poems, Burns wryly destabilizes the process of animal mourning, demonstrating the ways in which the preservation of animal subjectivity can be just another form of displacement and subjection. He does this, however, only because he knows they deserve better. Burns's explorations of animal elegy suggest a powerful desire to preserve the domesticated animal in the fullest dignity of its overlapping state—as an *animal given identity*. He brings us to *respect* it, driving us to the conclusion that it is not a thing, not an abstraction, not a piece of private property, but an entity with propriety, worth remembering in itself.

Burns saw problems attending the funeral of the animal that are best illustrated, perhaps, in the figure of Pharaoh's cat. Pharaoh can choose the relics and symbols that adorn his mummified corpse for eternity, projecting the narrative of his existence. Were we to approach these items and decipher their meaning, we could say, as it is said at many funeral proceedings, "this is what he would have wanted." Pharaoh's cat, buried with him, buried *on his terms*, lacks that luxury. It might appear to be an eternally cherished equal, attended by its favorite ancient squeaky toy or contorted in a meaningful position, facing Pharaoh. It could not have asked for such affectations.

The glorified objecthood of a favorite pet is the key issue in “My Hoggie,” one of the folk songs Burns collected in his travels and expanded upon, which begins with the following lament:

What will I do gin my Hoggie die?  
 My joy, my pride, my Hoggie!  
 My only beast, I had nae mae,  
 And vow but I was vogie! (*Vol. II*, 134).

Hoggie is undoubtedly the singer’s very favorite animal. But how so? As in the epitaph for poor “Echo,” the issue of nomenclature rears its ugly head. “Hoggie” is and is not a proper name. It refers to the singer’s “only beast,” we learn, but the word itself is a common term for a sheep (not a pig, surprisingly) that hasn’t yet been sheared. Even in the name, therefore, there is an ambiguity between animal as companion and animal as commodity, either of which could be the object of his lament. The song establishes two ways in which an animal can be rendered singular in the imagination, two ways in which a lamb can become “my Hoggie”: through character or scarcity. One route—the line “My joy, my pride, my Hoggie!”—is marked by a clustering of associative nouns; Burns attaches positive qualities to Hoggie as if they were augmentative Lego bricks, ultimately forming a better whole. But the other route, equally present in the song, involves reduction and plurality. Hoggie becomes a “beast” among others, important only *with respect to* others.

Imbuing the animal with ‘favoriteness’ is one way to imbue it with ‘fullness,’ but Burns is aware of the problems with this approach. Preference implies comparison; comparison implies transaction, economics, objecthood. You wouldn’t see “favorite grandson” written on a human tombstone. Hoggie’s problem is the very opposite of Echo’s: whereas Echo is elevated to the level of an abstraction, detached from everyday existence, creating noise on a spiritual plane,

Hoggie is reduced to the level of a possession. As the song goes on, the animal is shown to be literally alienated from its peers, who threaten its existence every time they make noise:

The tod reply'd upon the hill,  
I trembled for my Hoggie.  
When day did daw, and cocks did crow,  
The morning it was foggie (135).

Evidently their jealousy is palpable enough to drench the atmosphere of the farm in ill omens. (Indeed, Hoggie is murdered by a dog shortly thereafter.) But why are they jealous? Or, to revise the question: why does Hoggie's owner seem so paranoid? I would suggest that Nature is conspiring against Hoggie—and the singer—precisely because the animal's inflated status has not been properly earned. Its 'fullness' derives from arbitrary favoritism—favoritism based on economic necessity. The other animals do not accept such an artificial, man-made distinction; they speak out, one might say, against it. They band together in a "warbling throng" not unlike the one that made Echo seem so intensely out-of-place.

A deliberate slippage between animal identity and objecthood is even more apparent in "Elegy on Willie Nicol's Mare," a poem Burns wrote to commemorate the sudden death of a horse he had bought for fifty-five shillings from his friend Willie Nicol. Throughout the poem, Burns alternates between celebrating the horse as an entity *in itself* and lamenting it as the abused slave of its master. "Peg Nicholson was a good bay mare," he asserts in the first line, but then he qualifies: "As ever trod on iron" (*Vol. II* 291). Indeed, although the poem keeps up the illusion that it is venerating the animal in and of herself by repeating that first line, the last stanza is transparently about her master:

Peg Nicholson was a good bay mare,  
An' the priest he rode her sair;

And much oppress'd, and bruis'd she was,  
As priest-rid cattle are (291).

By the end of the poem, the adjectives Burns uses to describe the mare are uniformly negative and passive: “oppress’d,” “bruis’d,” “priest-rid.” She is transmogrified into “cattle,” a lower species celebrated for plurality rather than singularity. Significantly, Burns gives her a name that cheekily recalls Margaret Nicholson, the insane woman who attempted to stab George III. At the very least, she lives on with some dignity as a symbol of oppression. Even so, however, her existence is only meaningful insofar as it says something about her master as a buying, riding, abusing, *using* man. She, like Hoggie, is inextricably tied to the person who has given her meaning, preserved not in ontological fullness but in perennial *reference* to a more fully defined human subject. She is exactly like Pharaoh’s cat.

Like Echo, Hoggie and Peg Nicholson are the subjects of anti-elegies. Burns never criticizes the animals in their own right, but involves them in systems of mourning—structures of expressing specialness, favoriteness, fullness of being—that lack their presence. We get no sense of Hoggie’s identity other than that it is (economically) important to its owner and alienated from the rest of the animal kingdom. We get glimpses of Peg Nicholson’s identity (the vague, repeated assertion that she was “a good bay mare”), but the poem focuses on the fact that she was “priest-rid”—and the priest was not very kind. Just as the mouse in “To a Mouse” is displaced from its home by human contact, these animals are displaced from *themselves*.

Burns wants to keep the animal itself in memory, not just a shadow puppet created by human fingers. He wants it to be present in the amber, and even somehow *alive*. “The Wounded Hare” is a poem about a dying animal rather than a dead one, a wild animal rather than a

domesticated one. In its last lines, we can begin to detect some of the crucial ingredients to Burns' preferred flavor of literary formaldehyde:

Oft as by winding Nith I, musing, wait  
 The sober eve, or hail the cheerful dawn,  
 I'll miss thee sporting o'er the dewy lawn,  
 And curse the ruffian's arm, and mourn thy hapless fate (*Vol. II* 214).

Burns uses the same rhyme scheme Tennyson will use to lend "In Memoriam" a sensation of stasis and eternal recurrence: "eve" will cycle into "dawn," but the hare's image will linger. In a way, it is literary taxidermy: an attempt to freeze the hare in an active, gerundial state, "sporting o'er the dewy lawn" for all eternity. More than that, however, it is the preservation of an *encounter*, an encounter that preserves the rabbit without taking from it. The poet is by the river; the rabbit is on the lawn. They meet, in a way, but do not move each other. Even in a poem about the rabbit's death, the poet does not displace it from its "sporting," on the lawn or in the middle of the stanza—it will be missed from afar, just as it was once appreciated. Nor does he revoke its subjectivity, its "thee"-ness; instead, he revokes the subjectivity of the "ruffian," who is reduced to an intrusive arm.

In effect, Burns implies that the best way to keep the animal whole, the best way to memorialize it without shortchanging its living essence, is to refrain from trying to grab it. And there is perhaps no better testament to this ideology than the memorial he penned for his dog Luath, a border collie who stands with him in statue form, for all eternity, in Boston's Financial District. A letter by Burns' brother Gilbert describes how important it was for Burns to memorialize his dog in a special way:

Robert had a dog which he called 'Luath' that was a great favourite. The dog had been killed by the wanton cruelty of some person the night before my father's death. Robert said to me

that he should like to confer such immortality as he could bestow upon his old friend Luath, and that he had a great mind to introduce something into the book under the title of ‘Stanzas to the memory of a quadruped friend;’ but this plan was given up for the tale as it now stands (Qtd. in *Vol I*, 216).

“The tale as it now stands” is “The Twa Dogs,” one of Burns’ most famous poems. In it, the poet is certainly trying to steer clear of both eternal objectification (Hoggie, Peg Nicholson) and distant abstraction (Echo), two owner-centric approaches that would be inappropriate for his “old friend.” What he comes up with is a strange kind of strategic anthropomorphism designed to lend subjectivity to the dog, but never at the expense of doghood.

The most immediately jarring fact about “The Twa Dogs” is right in the title: this memorial to a beloved individual animal actually stars two dogs, only one of which is Luath. “The first I’ll name, they ca’d him ‘Caesar,’” the poet states, but it is he who is inventing Caesar by naming him. Indeed, “Caesar” is not merely an identity invented *for* a preexisting animal like “Echo,” “Hoggie,” or “Peg Nicholson”: he is a completely fictitious animal, created to engage in a political dialogue with Luath (*Vol. I*, 208). Caesar is a “gentleman an’ scholar,” we learn; a pampered aristocrat whose “hair, his size, his mouth, his lugs, / Shew’d he was nane o’ Scotland’s dogs” (209). He is not inordinately proud, but he’s certainly different from Luath, a working-class creature whom the poet characterizes as “a ploughman’s collie— / A rhyming, ranting, raving billie” (209). The dogs are friends; they hunt the same mice and mingle in ways that their class-conscious companions would not. Indeed, the poem is meant to be a social critique, using the conversation between these two amicable animal observers—who are free from prejudice and ideology—to challenge the presumed superiority of the rich. “But will ye tell me, master Caesar, / Sure great folk’s life’s a life o’ pleasure?” Luath asks (214). Caesar responds by saying that “There’s sic parade, sic pomp an’ art, / The joy can scarcely reach the



heart” (215). The lives of the rich are too constructed, too overwrought, too manipulated, to be honest in their essence.

One might wonder, then, about Caesar and Luath. Are they not also constructed characters, ceremonial rhetoricians? Not quite. As Currie notes, “The dogs of Burns, excepting in their talent for moralizing, are downright dogs, and not, like the horses of Swift, and ‘Hind and Panther’ of Dryden, men in the shape of brutes” (qtd. in *Vol. I*, 216). This is one of the poem’s deliberate effects: to cultivate a sensation of doghood even when it seems completely anthropomorphic. It achieves this effect most explicitly in a couplet near the end: “When up they gat, an’ shook their lugs, / Rejoic’d they were na *men*, but *dogs*;” (216). When they “shake their lugs,” they transform, before our very eyes, back into the creatures they ought to be. Their conversation is framed by explicit references to physiology—furry hindquarters lying on the floor. They are *left* as dogs, just as the wounded hare is left to be a hare. They are comfortable in their own skin.

And yet, while Luath may indeed be a “downright dog,” he is much more than beast. Burns performs a subtle yet enormously meaningful service for his dear “old friend”: he makes the dog a *companion*. Luath is physically animalistic and detached from human affairs, but he is nonetheless capable of engaging in dialogue, communicating on the same wavelength as a creature said to be of a higher order. The poem’s explicit project is to collapse the essential differences between human classes; its implicit project is to collapse the differences between dog and man. Consider the following lament by Caesar:

But then to see how ye’re neglectet,  
How huff’d, an’ cuff’d, an’ disrespecket!  
L—d man, our gentry care as little

For delvers, ditchers an' sic cattle (211).

Once again, the word “cattle” and a series of violent, passive adjectives are used to designate animal inferiority. But Caesar is telling this to Luath. Caesar is demonstrating the “respect”—a dialogic phenomenon—that dogs are singularly capable of giving and receiving. He consciously refrains from underrating his friend, for his friend is not to be underrated. Burns’ ultimate accomplishment in “The Twa Dogs” is to carve out an ontological space for Luath to occupy ad eternum; a status—in this poem about status—that avoids being overly indebted to any owner. Luath is a conversant entity, a political entity: a creature of wisdom, curiosity and independence who is, nonetheless, non-human. Unlike Hoggie or the mare, who both persist in memoriam *with respect to* a human subject, Luath has been made respectable. Insofar as he is actually alone in the poem, he even shows self-respect.

For Burns, respect is the key to approaching the animal in a way that does not appropriate it. Respect is the key to *being with it*, rather than *being over it*. If the poet’s animal elegies suggest one thing—if there is a single ideology behind the wry displacement of Echo, Hoggie and the mare on the one hand, and the comfortable situatedness of Luath on the other—it is that crucial distinction. When Burns went to visit the house of a nobleman, he found a worm-eaten volume of Shakespeare and decided to mark it with the following lines:

Through and through th’ inspir’d leaves,  
Ye maggots, make your windings;  
But O respect his lordship’s taste,  
And spare the golden bindings (*Vol. II*, 66).

Naturally, the worms are trespassers, refugees, unstable tenants at best. Their stay in the house of “his lordship” is predicated on subjection. But they are also welcome. Burns applauds the worms’ persistence for eking out an existence in a new context; he gives *them* respect for

devouring the Shakespeare when the actual owner of the book, their roommate, will not. As long as they remain in that space of fulfillment, the space untouched by human hand (another form of the “ruffian’s arm”), they can flourish. They can have what Virginia Woolf would call “a room of one’s own”: a space within the domestic realm that is still somehow set apart. And that space, moreover, is literally defined by “respect.”

Anthropology tells us that ritualistic burial of the dead is one of the cornerstones of civilization. To preserve an animal in elegy, eulogy or any type of written mourning, then, is to civilize it—to domesticate it in a profound way, lending it not only a place within the home, but also status. Burns was aware of the ways in which this could backfire, preserving subjection in the guise of subjectivity. He saw how the animal’s sarcophagus, no matter how elaborately adorned, could be filled with the whims, the desires, the projections—the personality, in effect—of its owner. He saw the displacement—the absence—in that tableau. Yet he also saw an opportunity to *fill* that absence through the very process of mourning that could be so problematic. Syme, his friend, believed that memorializing the animal was “setting Hercules at his distaff”: an unnatural process that would domesticate the poet, contorting his gaze toward the realm of the home. But the domestication of animals—our invasion of their homes, and their involvement in ours—was precisely what drove Burns to a kind of bardic heroism. He knew that they were *gone* in one form, *with us* in another, and he strove to preserve them in a way that could account for that strange overlap. The preservative he chose was respect.

#### Works Cited

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