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From the early nineteenth century onwards, Robert Burns has been hailed as Scotland's national poet. The degree to which he continues to be celebrated surpasses that of other countries' national poets; not only is Burns celebrated internationally, he and his poetry have inspired regularly hosted events across the world. Burns continues to be celebrated not only in Scotland, but also in Canada, the United States, and Australia where Burns Societies and Clubs regularly host Burns Suppers and readings. "Burnsiana" has come to signify the material culture available commercially or for domestic use that celebrates, commemorates, and memorializes Burns.² This surviving evidence of Burns' legacy, the thriving Burns Societies and museums devoted to Burns memorabilia, attests to a powerful albeit commoditized and mythologized legacy. But how might the man himself relate to such a legacy? What sort of role did Burns' poetry play with regard to Scottish identity and nationalism? If monuments to Burns' memory are themselves redolent with various interpretations and perspectives on the poet and his work, what of Burns' own contribution to the memory and meaning of Scottishness itself?

¹Leith Davis. Re-presenting Scotia: Robert Burns and the Imagined Community of Scotland. in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, edited by Zack Bowen., New York:G.K. Hall & Co.. 1998. 63.

² "Commemorations of Robert Burns around the world." The Official Gateway to Scotland. 16 Jan 2005. <http://www.scotland.org/features/commemorations-of-robert-burns-around-the-world> (accessed Oct 25, 2016).

The combined paradigm of Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an "imagined community" and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's idea of the "invented traditions," with which elites construct nationalisms, offers one approach with which to better understand Burns' complex relation with Scottish nationalism. Hobsbawm and Ranger, in their study of the many old and newly invented national traditions, mention James Macpherson's *Ossian* poems as an example of a poetic "discovery" forged in the service of the historic continuity of an invented Scottish nationalism.³ Burns, born in 1759, would have lived during the immediate legacy of Macpherson's 'discovery' and 'translation' of the *Ossian* poems. In fact, in a letter to his former teacher, Burns even lists *Ossian* alongside the Bible as being among the books he cherishes most deeply.⁴ And yet, Burns' self-described admiration of *Ossian* seems to be necessarily problematized, or at least complicated, by the near-certainty of Macpherson's invention of the heritage of the poems. How does Burns fit into the complicated way in which Macpherson's printed "collection" of pieces of an oral tradition comes under attack but also establishes a template for "bardic nationalisms?"

Katie Trumpener conceptualizes this idea of "bardic nationalism," a model espoused by Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalists, who conceived of new national identities in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as Thomas Blackwell's theories of Homer, the

³ Anthony Smith. "Invention and Imagination", Ch. 6 of *Nationalism and Modernism*, Routledge, NY, 1998. 119.

⁴ Jeffrey Skoblow. Re-presenting Scotia: Robert Burns and the Imagined Community of Scotland. in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, edited by Zack Bowen., New York:G.K. Hall & Co.. 1998. 25.

classical traveling lyric, and Macpherson's "discovery" of the *Ossian* cycles set in print an ekphrastic template for what had previously existed only in oral form. Trumpener further specifies that at this moment, "the bard [is] a figure who represents the resistance of vernacular oral traditions to the historical pressures of English imperialism and whose performance brings the voices of the past into the sites of the present."⁵ Thus the itinerant poet-musician of generations of oral stories emerges in a new way, anchoring new national identities as a mythology of bard-dom is printed, and thus becomes a more permanent, textual cultural artifact during this dawn of the age of print culture.

Burns' poem "Epistle to J. Lapraik, An Old Scotch Bard," written in 1785 and published in 1786 in the Kilmarnock edition, offers a first look at Burns' contribution to the shaping of the archetypal "Scottish Bard." The poem begins with its narrator invoking a scene teeming with natural life and in which nature is intertwined with poetic influence itself

While briars an' woodbines budding green,
 An' paitricks sraichan loud at e'en,
 And morning poossie whiddan seen,
 Inspire my muse,
 This freedom, in an *unknown* frien', I
 pray excuse.⁶

⁵ Katie Trumpener. *Bardic nationalism: the romantic novel and the British Empire*. Princeton, N.J. 1997. 32.

⁶ Robert Burns. "Epistle to an Old Scotch Bard, J. Lapraik," in *The Penguin Book of Romantic Poetry*. 1-6.

The stanza's plosive b's and p's emphasize the striking vitality of a scene in which nature thrives in the absence of man's careful hand. The alliterative b's of the first line's "briers an' woodbines budding green" further contribute to an impression of untamed, native plants bursting with new life. The plosive p's of "*paitricks scraichan* loud" and "morning *poossie whiddan* seen" highlight the presence of wild and freely roaming animals unrestrained by man. It is in the center of this scene of thriving, fertile natural life that the narrator classically invokes his muse of poetic inspiration. The juxtaposition of this classical invocation with such wild and fecund life, and the apology, "I pray excuse," that follows, hint at a complicated argument about the real basis of true poetic inspiration.

The fertile and unrestrained character of the natural backdrop to the poem is anything but a backdrop—instead it is a first hint of Burns' argument that poetic talent and imagination find their true parentage in wild and unaffected nature. As Burns seems to argue for the importance of inspiration from nature, the form of his argument—the lines of verse themselves—functions as evidence for his implicit argument that true poetry necessarily is wild, unrestrained, and unmannered. The strongly song-like rhythm of the iambic tetrameter and dimeter generate an energy and rhythm that complement the lively scene of natural life. The natural vigor and energy of the first stanza continues into the second stanza but instead animates people instead of flora and fauna:

On Fasteneen we had a rockin,
 To ca' the crack and weave our stockin;
 And there was muckle fun and jokin,
 Ye need na doubt;
 At length we had a hearty yokin,
 At sang about.⁷

Here Burns reaffirms the idea of uncontrived inspiration by anchoring the narrator's experience of a singularly stirring song in a communal tradition of oral storytelling and song. In this stanza, the hard consonants of "*rockin*," "*stockin*," "muckle fun and *jokin*," and "*ca' the crack*" punctuate a self-referential song-like rhythm as if to echo the boisterous chatter of a social evening. This stanza seems to insist on the greater social context of the bard archetype embodied by both the narrator and the epistle's recipient, as well as Burns himself. The near rhyme of "we had a *rockin*" and "weave our *stockin*" plays with an idea of a collective, generative process in which stories and song are spun in a context of communal creation. In addition, the use of the Scots dialect words of "*rockin*" and "*yokin*" further reflects Burns' emphasis on the importance of oral tradition. Thus Burns conjures up a scene of ebullient, natural life as the origin of Scottish poetry. As the poems' narrator describes his experience of noticing how one song stands out from the rest in the third stanza, the rapid rhythm that characterized the first two stanzas slows down as it reaches the line "It *thirled* the heart-strings through the breast."

There was ae sang amang the rest,
 Aboon them a' it pleased me best,

⁷Robert Burns. "Epistle to an Old Scotch Bard, J. Lapraik," in *The Penguin Book of Romantic Poetry*. 7-12.

That some kind husband had addressed
 To some sweet wife:
 It thirled the heart-strings through the breast,
 A' to the life.

I've scarce heard aught described sae weel
 What gen'rous, manly bosoms feel;
 Thought I, 'Can this be Pope or Steele
 Or Beattie's wark?'
 They tald me 'twas an odd kind chiel
 About Muir kirk^s

This line deviates from the highly regular iambic tetrameter of the previous lines and stanzas with the spondaic rhythm of "heart-strings," which creates a lingering pause and emphasizes deeply piercing power of the poem in question. In addition, the use of "thirled," a Scots word, as the crucial verb in identifying the poem's power, suggests Burns' intention to privilege the words belonging to the community to which the poem and poet owe their existence. Pondering the song's authorship, the narrator then asks, "Can this be Pope, or Steele, or Beattie's *wark*?"⁹ Instead, the narrator learns from the crowd that the song's author is but a local "odd kind *chief*" who, by word of mouth, has amassed a certain degree of fame for his deeply moving song. This opposition between the work of English authors of the time and an uneducated local Scotsman seems to hint strongly to a nationalist intention or inspiration.

⁹Robert Burns. "Epistle to an Old Scotch Bard, J. Lapraik," in *The Penguin Book of Romantic Poetry*. 13-24.
 Jonathan Wordsworth and Jessica Wordsworth. *The Penguin book of Romantic poetry*. London. 2016. 758.

This rejection of formal (English) teaching for a kind of education in nature continues to permeate the poem even as it shifts to focus on the talents of its narrator. In the following stanzas of "Epistle," the poem's narrator insists that his own poetic talent is due to his lack of any formal education and consequent reliance on inspiration emanating from nature, perhaps the "briers," "woodbine," and "*paitricks*" of the poem's first line.

. . .But first an' foremost, I should tell,
 Amaist as soon as I could spell,
 I to the crambo-jingle fell,
 Though rude an' rough,
 Yet crooning to a body's sel
 Does weel eneugh.

I am nae poet, in a sense,
 But just a rhymer like by chance,
 An' hae to learning nae pretence -
 Yet what the matter?
 Whene'er my muse does on me glance,
 I jingle at her.

Your critic-folk may cock their nose
 And say, 'How can you e'er propose
 You wha ken hardly verse frae prose,
 To mak a sang?'
 But by your leaves, my learned foes,
 Ye're maybe wrang.

What's a' your jargon o' your schools,
 Your Latin names for horns an' stools?
 If honest nature made you fools,
 What sairs your Grammars?
 Ye'd better taen up spades and shoals
 Or knappin-hammers.

A set o' dull, conceited hashers
 Confuse their brains in College classes!
 They gang in stirks and come out asses,
 Plain truth to speak;
 An' syne they think to climb Parnassus
 By dint o' Greek!

Gie me ae spark o' nature's fire,
 That's a' the learning I desire;
 Then, though I drudge through dub an' mire
 At pleugh or cart,
 My muse, though hamely in attire,
 May touch the heart.¹⁰

Turning away from a focus on a communal tradition of oral storytelling, the poem's narrator, presumably a stand-in for Burns himself, asserts his own lyrical talents. But while the sharp turn in narration from the third person to the first person suggests an archetypal moment of poetic bravado—a young poet bursts out during a round *of "catches"* eager to prove himself—the legitimacy of Burns' narrator is based very specifically on the basis of his talent as natural, unschooled, and unlearned. The poem's song-like rhythm takes on a mocking, irreverent note as its brash rhymes attack the ridiculous and pretentious prose of the educated. The last stanza cited above reaffirms Burns' argument that true poetic talent, in the most classical sense, as evidenced in the allusion to "My muse," must necessarily come from nature. This idea of a true and natural poetry would later influence and inspire other poets, including Wordsworth, who liked this stanza so much that a paraphrased version appears in the preface to "The Ruined Cottage."¹¹ Thus Burns not only established a

¹⁰Robert Burns. "Epistle to an Old Scotch Bard,]. Lapraik," in *The Penguin Book of Romantic Poetry*. 43-78.

template for a true and deeply moving poetry, he himself became associated with it, as its Bard.

And yet, Burns' emphasis on a supposedly natural basis of poetic inspiration, as described throughout the poem, from its beginning to its first-person attack on "Latin names" and "Grammars," seems contradictory when one considers the extent of Burns' formal education.¹² In an analysis of "Episde," Leith Davis ponders Burns' assertion of a "Scottish literary tradition," citing Burns' borrowing of the "stanza form used by Allan Ramsay" to address another Scottish lyricist, presumably, J. Lapraik, to ultimately highlight the foundation of this tradition in a "community experience" of "oral poetry ... an oral tradition that is alien to Pope, Steele and Beattie."¹³ This opposition between Scottish barddom and English belles lettres could be interpreted as hinting to Burns' ultimately nationalist motivations, but Davis argues instead that not only was Burns aware of the project and process of inventing and imagining a Scottish national identity, he was also cognizant of the problematic nature of such a project and that his poetry traces the "indeterminacies of national identity."¹⁴ Thus this contradiction between the poem's insistence on the natural

¹¹ Jonathan Wordsworth and Jessica Wordsworth. *The Penguin book of Romantic poetry*. London. 2016. 953.

¹² Jonathan Wordsworth and Jessica Wordsworth. *The Penguin book of Romantic poetry*. London. 2016. 952.

¹³ Leith Davis. *Re-presenting Scotia: Robert Burns and the Imagined Community of Scotland*. in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, edited by Zack Bowen., New York:G.K. Hall & Co.. 1998. 65.

¹⁴ Leith Davis. *Re-presenting Scotia: Robert Burns and the Imagined Community of Scotland*. in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, edited by Zack Bowen., New York:G.K. Hall & Co.. 1998. 72.

inspiration rather than formal education and Burns' own schooling reflects a more complicated individual behind Burns' symbolic role as the archetypal Scottish Bard.

The poem's seemingly forceful rejection of learnedness also contrasts mightily with Burns' preface to the 1786 Kilmarnock edition itself and this contrast reveals insight into the way in which the disconnect between the Bard of "Epistle" and Burns himself is a function of his own complicated self-representation and belies any simple understanding of him as merely a nationalist poet.

Jeffrey Skoblow offers one approach that lends itself well to further problematization of understanding Burns and his legacy as "The National Poet of Scotland." Skoblow asks the reader of Burns, "How can we represent Burns when our own interests and language derive from a world ... that all of Burns' work endeavored variously to denounce, renounce, master, subvert, escape, mock, and negate?"¹⁵ In other words, how does today's reader of Burns, having been introduced to the poet as the great national poet of Scotland, read the preface to the Kilmarnock edition, with its insistence that "none of the following works were ever composed with a view of the press," or that "now that he [Burns] appears in the public character of an Author, he does it with fear and trembling," and reconcile it with a poem such as "Epistle" with its associated comments on oral tradition, denunciation of English belles lettres, and forceful assertion of a democratic Scottish oral poetry?

¹⁵ Jeffrey Skoblow. Re-presenting Scotia: Robert Burns and the Imagined Community of Scotland. in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, edited by Zack Bowen., New York: G.K. Hall & Co .. 1998. 19.

The answer lies perhaps in the idea that Burns himself plays with as well as resists the kind of symbolic role of nationalizing poet, that he rejects alongside "all powers of Calculation, of equivalence and inequality, of identification, appropriation, commodification, of absorption, comprehension: he mocks the very limits of knowledge, yea, of knowledge as power, the presumptions of knowledge."¹⁶ Returning to the preface to the Kilmarnock edition, the way in which Burns negotiates this paradoxical role of mythologizer and debunker, of the Scottish "Heaven-taught plowman" and the forcefully subversive Fornicator, of the self-promoting, fluent-English-writing Author and "nameless Bard," Burns offers perhaps a final answer: to consider him a celebrated Poet, let alone the national poet of Scotland, is, in Skoblow's words, to read the

"textual Burns [which] is designed to resist its condition, [for] [our] engines and instruments, and refinements of critical discrimination, our institutional powers and serious intentions are all quite decidedly, for Burns, beside the point. Reading our Bard, we are to sing or be damned-to find the whole constructed world of the literati, all the social political economic cultural arrangements of which that world is composed, a thing of dubious account. Burns unread (Burns unreadable) is Burns unsold."¹⁷

Understanding Burns' poetry as textual artifact and realizing Burns' understanding of the meaning of writing and publishing both collected and invented poems, the inheritance of an oral heritage, offers a final insight into how Trumpener's conceit of "bardic

¹⁶Jeffrey Skoblow. Re-presenting Scotia: Robert Burns and the Imagined Community of Scotland. in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, edited by Zack Bowen., New York:G.K. Hall & Co.. 1998. 21.

¹⁷Jeffrey Skoblow. Re-presenting Scotia: Robert Burns and the Imagined Community of Scotland. in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, edited by Zack Bowen., New York:G.K. Hall & Co.. 1998. 30-31.

nationalisms" revises Anderson's "imagined communities" through a dialectical notion of both "triggered" and invented cultural memory as "new forms of economic oppression are being joined to old forms of political oppression."¹⁸ Burns' highly complex negotiation of linguistic and cultural boundaries, of Scots dialect and English, of oral and print cultures, reflect his own dialectical relationship with nationalism. He was conscious of his act of participating in a process of invention, but the way in which his poetry presents challenges to its reader resists any easy interpretation of being merely the nationalist poetry of Scotland's Bard. In the end, Burns' lasting legacy as Scotia's bard might have more to do with the poet's keen ability to negotiate the linguistic and cultural boundaries between Scotland and the English speaking world and his adeptness in concealing his own subversiveness within a highly successful constructed identity of "Bard."

¹⁸ Katie Trumpener. *Bardic nationalism: the romantic novel and the British Empire*. Princeton, **N.J.** 1997. 23.

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