

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

## Robert Burns and British Poetry

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THE 'MARVELLOUS BOY' from whom the Chatterton lecture takes its name is brought before the reader by Wordsworth's introspection in 'Resolution and Independence', a poem which goes on to free its speaker of that introspection through dialogue. This lecture deals with another poet dwelt on in the early phase of that poem: Robert Burns. Its argument will be threefold. First, it will examine the critical introspection which has tended since 1945 to exclude Burns from an increasingly narrow definition of Romanticism; secondly, it will argue that Burns's concerns are in many respects not those of the 'peasant poet' or particularist Scottish writer, but in dialogue with the other major British Romantic poets; and thirdly, it will demonstrate that Burns's self-consciousness, poetic flexibility and playful use of category and genre demand a deeper understanding both of the nature of British Romanticism itself, and of the scope of Burns's achievement within it.

Increasingly, Burns's reputation has been operating within a confined realm of celebratory anaphora in Scotland and neglect abroad. The former stresses the cult of his personality in a manner which places him squarely in the Romantic category of the artist as hero, while his 'politics of vision' and prophetic role (of which more later) have been a part of Scottish culture since the Victorian period. Burns is the 'lad o'pairts'; the exceptional Everyman, advocate and exemplar of social mobility and communal egalitarianism.

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These qualities, though they incorporate the centrality of vision and personality found in standard accounts of Romanticism (e.g. the focus on images of Burns and the cult of biography surrounding the poet), express them in an inculturated form largely immune to scholarly dialogue, and mostly ignored by academic debate. Such debate has since the 1930s begun to turn aside from Burns almost altogether in its focus on an imaginative and subjective Romanticism best realised through Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Blake. The systemic presence of ‘the cult of the Romantic writer’, even in texts which return to notions of a more inclusive Romanticism, means that it can be hard to escape introspective definitions. Marilyn Butler and others have identified this problem: but it persists. The aesthetic, theoretic, subjective and individuated continue to be centripetal to the study of Romanticism: seductively, these promise a freedom from context attractive to today’s students.<sup>1</sup>

Periodicity is also a problem. Romanticism is still often seen as beginning within the parameters of the double date of 1789 and 1798. Response to the French Revolution is key for understanding Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. Why is this not the case with Burns, whose response is equally manifest? Quite simply, I suggest, because he was not alive by the latter date. To die before *Lyrical Ballads* allows Burns to be a precursor, not a participant. Wordsworth (as Kenneth Johnston and others have argued—see below) first cast him thus, and he has been at risk of it since: in studies of Romanticism, he is all too often marginal. This lecture is an exercise in uncovering Burns’s relation to the poetic concerns of his own generation through dialogue, one which I trust will serve to help free him from the introspections of class, language, periodicity, and theory which have begun to erase him from British poetry.

Robert Burns’s significance in our global culture remains out of all proportion to this erasure. He has 1,030 clubs and societies with 80,000 members in eighteen countries dedicated to him. His statues stand across at least three continents. His books have been translated 3,000 times into fifty-one languages; by 1988, 2,000 editions of his work had been published. Secondary criticism of Burns’s poetry in other languages began to appear in the 1820s, forty years before Emerson described his songs as

<sup>1</sup> For a summary of M. H. Abrams’s position on ‘politics of vision’, see Robert F. Gleckner and Gerald E. Enscoc (eds.), *Romanticism: Points of View*, 2nd edn. (Detroit, 1974 (1962)), 1–18 (12); for the issues raised by an exclusive interpretation of Romanticism, see Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 1–9. Although I. A. Richards’s *Coleridge on Imagination* was published in 1934, and F. L. Lucas’s *The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal* in 1936, it was not until after 1945 that an imaginative aesthetic Romanticism began to predominate.

‘weighty documents in the history of freedom’ to match ‘the Declaration of Independence’ and ‘the French Rights of Man’.<sup>2</sup> Burns has inspired Pushkin, Garibaldi, and Abraham Lincoln, who could ‘say nothing worthy of his . . . transcending genius’,<sup>3</sup> and has been compared to the leading writers of Japanese *haiku*, and to the national bards of Poland, Hungary, and the Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> His work has been set to music by Haydn, Mendelssohn, Shostakovich, and Benjamin Britten.<sup>5</sup>

This status does not greatly differ from that accorded Burns by Hazlitt, Tennyson, Swinburne, Auden, and many other writers;<sup>6</sup> nor is it notably out of step with Burns’s rank among critics before 1945. Arnold put him above Shelley, with Chaucer, and on occasion with Shakespeare and Aristophanes,<sup>7</sup> while Emerson stressed Burns’s ‘local language, universal audience’.<sup>8</sup> The early development of an identifiable Romantic movement within literary history saw Edward Dowden in 1897, P. Berger in 1914, Hugh Walker in 1925, Jacques Barzun in 1943, and even M. H. Abrams in 1953 all accord Burns a shaping role in Romanticism and/or

<sup>2</sup> *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 30 (1998), 324 (figures from the Bibliography of Scottish Literature in Translation (BOSLIT)) project; Alan Bold, *A Burns Companion* (New York, 1991), p. 151; James A. Mackay, *Burns* (Edinburgh, 1993 (1992)), p. 688; Mackay, *The Burns Federation 1885–1965* (Kilmarnock, 1985), 1: 29–31, 35, 149; Donald Low (ed.), *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1974), pp. 51, 440–3.

<sup>3</sup> Carol McGuirk, ‘Haunted by Authority: Nineteenth-Century American Constructions of Robert Burns and Scotland’ in Robert Crawford (ed.), *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority* (Edinburgh, 1997), pp. 136–58 (136).

<sup>4</sup> Diana van Dijk, ‘From Nancy to Selinde: On the Reception of Burns in Holland in the Nineteenth Century’, *Scottish Literary Journal*, 15: 1 (1988), 49–60 (55); Toshio Namba, ‘Robert Burns in Japan’, *Studies in Scottish Literature*, I (1963–4), 253–8; Bold, *Burns Companion*, p. 151; Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs*, 3rd edn. (Edinburgh, 1994 (1960)), p. 347; Mackay, *Burns Federation*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Lindsay, *The Burns Encyclopedia*, 2nd edn. (London, 1970 (1959)), p. 252.

<sup>6</sup> For Wordsworth’s view of Burns see for example *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years 1787–1805*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Chester L. Sharer, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1967), p. 13; *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (The Oxford Authors; Oxford, 1990 (1984)), p. 597; *The Canongate Burns*, ed. Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg (Edinburgh, 2001), p. 3; Kenneth Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth* (London and New York, 1998), p. 72; for Hazlitt see Low, *Critical Heritage*, 38; for Keats see *Letters of John Keats: A Selection*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford, 1987 (1970)), pp. 120–1, 331, 392; see also Robert Bernard Martin, *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* (London, 1980), p. 327; *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., 3 vols. (Oxford, 1982–90), 3: 140; *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols. (New Haven, 1959–62), 2: 251; *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings, 1927–1939* (London, 1977), p. 367, cited in Noble and Scott Hogg (eds.), *Canongate Burns*, p. lxxxvi.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Arnold, *English Literature and Irish Politics*, in *The Complete Prose Works* ed. R. H. Super, 10 vols. (Ann Arbor, 1962–74), 9: 185–6.

<sup>8</sup> Carol McGuirk (ed.), *Critical Essays on Robert Burns* (New York, 1998), pp. 2–7.

set him alongside one or other of the six major English Romantic poets. When he was seen as a Romantic precursor, as by George Saintsbury and Emile Legouis, it was in company with Blake.<sup>9</sup> Yet while Blake was adopted from pre-Romanticism firmly into Romanticism, a long and catastrophic decline set in for the fortunes of Burns as a studied text under either heading, though his trajectory as a read and translated poet continued strongly. In the late 1930s, more articles were published on Burns (57) than on Coleridge or Blake, and he was on a par with Byron; by the 1960s, he had sunk to a quarter of Coleridge's total and half Blake's, lying altogether well adrift of the canon he had helped to define.<sup>10</sup> This process did not go entirely unnoticed. Raymond Bentman, in his article 'Robert Burns's Declining Fame', published in *Studies in Romanticism* in 1972, describes Burns as 'ignored in current scholarship . . . critics and scholars have often acted as if his poetry did not exist'.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the decline continued unabated: by the end of the twentieth century, despite the boost of a recent bicentenary, articles on Burns had sunk to one-sixth of those devoted to Shelley, the least popular of the six central English Romantic poets. Despite the massive growth of the academy, the number of articles published on Burns has fallen 70 per cent in absolute terms in sixty years.

One peculiarity which Bentman did not identify in his 1972 article was the manner in which this decline occurred at different speeds in different kinds of publication. Burns's central role in educated literary allusion, evidenced in his forty-one citations in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (ahead of Blake, Shelley, and Coleridge) is arguably reflected in his survival in anthologies, which must balance their novelties with emplaced established expectation. In this context, both Christopher Ricks's *Oxford Book of English Verse* (1999) and Paul Keegan's *New Penguin Book* (2000) include as much of Burns as of the other main Romantics. On the other hand, while Burns's decline in refereed articles is steep, it is as nothing to his near-exclusion from textbooks and works

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Noble, 'Burns, Blake and Romantic Revolt', in R. D. S. Jack and Andrew Noble (eds.), *The Art of Robert Burns* (Totowa, New Jersey, 1982), pp. 191–214 (209); Aidan Day, *Romanticism* (London, 1996), p. 88. For Burns and Blake as pre-Romantics, see George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody*, 3 vols. (London, 1910) and Emile Legouis (possibly the inventor of the term 'Pre-Romanticism'), *A History of English Literature*, trans. Helen Douglas Irvine, 2 vols. (London, 1948 (1926)).

<sup>10</sup> These figures are taken from the *Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature*: though thus not exhaustive, they are representative of the central concerns of criticism at particular periods.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Bentman, 'Robert Burns's Declining Fame', *Studies in Romanticism*, 11 (1972), 206–24 (207).

of reference. The 1993 *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* cites him three times, compared to twenty for Southey and seventy for Blake. The 1998 Clarendon Press *Literature of the Romantic Period: A Bibliographical Guide*, allocates between eighteen and twenty-eight pages for the main six Romantics, fourteen to Clare and two to Burns (incidentally omitting a large amount of recent Burns criticism), while the recent Blackwell *Companion to Literature from Milton to Blake* (2000) which after all, does not have to deal with the established major Romantics, has fifty-five essays including pieces on Mark Akenside and Stephen Duck, but no essay on Burns, although he manages eight appearances in the index, on a par with Henry Brooke and Thomas D'Urfey, just behind Nahum Tate and Sir William Davenant, and trailing in the wake of Eliza Heywood, Thomas Shadwell, and Joseph Warton. As a demonstrably worldwide writer, Burns has become British literature's invisible man.

There has been little or no challenge to the dimensions of this reputation. It has simply, as Bentman observes, ceased to be. Why is this? Reasons have from time to time been offered, though usually by those defending Burns: the case for the prosecution is almost never made save by silence. For some the issue is Burns's language, the use of unfamiliar words: this is addressed in Nicholas Roe's 1996 *Essays in Criticism* article, 'Authenticating Robert Burns'.<sup>12</sup> Burns's use of unfamiliar language is the most popular explanation for his declining fame where one is offered; yet for all that it seems a *post hoc* argument given the familiarity of Burns in general British and American culture before 1960, and the powerful survival of his poetry in Anglo-American literary allusion. In 1957, Hardin Craig identified America's national affinity with Shakespeare and Burns, 'by virtue of our language and our cultural inheritance': terms seen as unitary.<sup>13</sup> It is unclear why Burns's Scots should have been less accessible to a 1930s audience in the heyday of Empire and Received Pronunciation than it is now; the critical popularity of Clare, who requires significant glossing of Northamptonshire dialect even in Carcanet paperback, is difficult to explain in these terms. Moreover, as Thomas Crawford showed as long ago as 1960, Burns's language is highly varied, moving through at least four registers for thematic purposes. The very flexibility of Burns's register, though, appears to distance him from the hieratic high cultural activities of the poet as theoretician of art, imagination, and language, those features which Marilyn Butler identifies as the twentieth century's

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Roe, 'Authenticating Robert Burns', *Essays in Criticism*, 46: 3 (1996), 195–218 (201 ff).

<sup>13</sup> Low, *Critical Heritage*, p. 45.

contribution to a more abstract and stereotypically inward 'Romanticism'. Burns's language may thus contribute to his neglect; but perhaps this is due as much to the force of an aesthetic/theoretic Romantic paradigm as to anything else. Scott's narrative poetry, though a less glaring case, has suffered the same fate for all its standard English.<sup>14</sup>

Scottish culture's sometimes repetitive and critically undemanding celebration of its 'national' poet is no doubt another cause for neglect in a critical world increasingly in love with novelty.<sup>15</sup> Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg trace a long attempt to separate Burns from his natural relationship to the English Romantics, initiated in Scotland by Francis Jeffrey and perpetuated there, whereby Burns was divorced from the toxin of Romantic radicalism and emphasized as 'naturally loyal' to the Crown, as was Scotland herself: this is the ancestor of the Burns Supper Burns.<sup>16</sup> Sharp as this point is, it may overstate the case, although there is certainly something being obscured as much as revived in the presentation of Burns as representative celebrity, the aboriginal drunk man looking at the thistle, as if the poet were one of his own characters rather than their creator.

The overlooked Britishness of Romanticism, central in the period and still a matter of record, lies at the root of both the introspective neglect and introspective celebration of Burns. 'Four nations' literary study is less well-developed than 'four nations' history, a term deriving originally from a book published by Hugh Kearney in the 1980s, and since then in increasingly predominant use.<sup>17</sup> Yet Burns among others benefits greatly from this approach. Through the poems which follow, Burns's role in British poetry will be established by examining the nature, sophistication, and dimensions of his poetic voice: in particular, his strategic adoption of the role of bard. The popularity of the image of the bard in the representations of Gray, Ossian, and Primitivism in general had already seen the term begun to be applied to Shakespeare in England, as Robert Crawford points out;<sup>18</sup> there was early recognition of Burns as some kind of a Scottish equivalent. This is clear in Henry Mackenzie's infamous

<sup>14</sup> John Clare, *The Midsummer Cushion*, ed. Kelsey Thornton and Anne Tibble (Manchester, 1990 (1979)), pp. 493 ff; Crawford, *Burns*, pp. xi–xii; Butler, *Romantics*, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Benjamin Fisher, 'The Eighteen Nineties', *Victorian Poetry* (Spring 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Noble and Scott Hogg (eds.), *The Canongate Burns*, p. lxxii.

<sup>17</sup> Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations* (Cambridge, 1989). J. G. A. Pocock's 'British History: A Plea for a New Subject', *Journal of Modern History*, 47:4 (1975), 601–21 was an avatar of this approach.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Crawford, review of the *Canongate Burns*, *London Review of Books*, 25 July 2002, 16–18 (16).

review of the Kilmarnock volume of poems in *The Lounger* for December 1786, where Burns is called a 'Heaven-taught ploughman'. It is this proletarian and socially confined Burns who appears in 'Resolution and Independence' as 'Him who walked in glory and in joy/Behind his plough, upon the mountain-side', and who survives today in the category of 'peasant poet'. But Mackenzie also refers to Burns's 'wood-notes wild', a quotation from Milton's *L'Allegro* characterising the native naturalness of Shakespeare, and invites an explicit comparison between Burns and Shakespeare, which he cleverly mentions then shies away from.<sup>19</sup> As A. D. Harvey has pointed out, imitations of *L'Allegro* and other early Milton became very fashionable in the second half of the eighteenth century; while Arthur Lovejoy alluded to the importance of the natural/bardic Shakespeare to Romanticism in the 1920s. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Burns's critical stock stood higher in such a context. A whole redefinition of poetic roles lurks behind Mackenzie's review of a book in which Burns presents himself in his preface as a natural poet, 'Nature's Bard'.<sup>20</sup>

Burns's debts to a broad British literary tradition have long been recognised. As early as 1782, he was quoting in his correspondence from Pope's *Satires*, and in January 1783 he told the London schoolmaster John Murdoch that Shenstone, Thomson, and Sterne were all among 'the glorious models after which I endeavour to form my conduct'.<sup>21</sup> Ken Simpson has noted the 'sustained echoes of Sterne' in Burns's own prose.<sup>22</sup> Burns read and quoted from Dryden, Milton, Otway, Fielding, Johnson, Akenside, Churchill, and Goldsmith among others, a range of reading under way by his earliest adulthood: Burns read Shenstone as early as 1775.<sup>23</sup> These writers are frequently deployed in his poetry: 'To a Mouse' for example (Kinsley 69) bears on it the imprint of *Rasselas*, Pope, Thomson's *Winter*, and Robert Blair's *The Grave*, from which Burns adapted 'The best-concerted schemes men lay for fame/Die fast

<sup>19</sup> Henry Mackenzie's review of the Kilmarnock edition in *The Lounger*, 97 (9 Dec. 1786) (Edinburgh, 1785-6); Low (ed.), *Critical Heritage*, pp. 68-71; Raymond Bentman, *Robert Burns*, Twayne Authors, (Boston, 1987), p. 70; Mackay, *Burns*, p. 256.

<sup>20</sup> A. D. Harvey, *English Poetry in a Changing Society 1780-1825* (London, 1980), pp. 57, 121, 130; A. O. Lovejoy, 'On the Discrimination of Romanticisms' in Gleckner and Enscoe (eds.), *Romanticism*, pp. 66-81 (70-1); *Canongate Burns*, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. DeLancey Ferguson; 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), Letters 11, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Simpson, 'The Impulse of Wit: Sterne and Burns's Letters', in Jack and Noble (eds.), *The Art of Robert Burns*, pp. 151-90.

<sup>23</sup> *Burns: Poetry and Prose*, ed. R. Dewar (Oxford, 1929), x; Letters 11, 13, 40, 43, 79, 223, 228, 238, 247, 294.

away'. Burns knew the work of Locke, Smith, and Francis Hutcheson, and addressed the Common Sense philosophy most associated with the name of Thomas Reid in 'The Holy Fair' (Kinsley 70), 'The Ordination' (Kinsley 85) and 'Letter to James Tennant, Glenconner' (Kinsley 90).<sup>24</sup>

Burns's intellectual roots in the age of sensibility have long been noted by thoughtful critics. Burns entered the Sentimental era not only through the work of Henry Mackenzie and Laurence Sterne, but also by virtue of his close interest in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and the association of sentimentality with 'political liberalism and religious tolerance'.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Smith, who disliked the first manifestations of the French Revolution, Burns showed an avid interest in it to the point of personal risk, while also being ready to place it in a native, even patriotic context. For Burns, who subscribed to a new edition of Blind Hary's *Wallace* in 1790,<sup>26</sup> William Wallace was a figure of libertarian resistance to absolutist tyranny, a foe to the Norman Yoke who foreshadowed the radical struggle of the ordinary folk against Bourbon and Hanoverian. Scotland-centred Burns criticism can tend to see this as evidence of uncomplicated patriotism in the period; but Wallace was a common feature of British radicalism, and both Wordsworth and Southey went on to espouse him in this light, without forgetting his 'patriot' dimension in *The Prelude* and 'The Death of Wallace'.<sup>27</sup> To Burns, Wallace is quite capable of being an avatar of the American as well as Scottish or British patriot, as in his 'Ode [For General Washington's Birthday]' (Kinsley 451).

The complexity of Burns's radical energy in this context can be seen in his 1787 letter comparing the Jacobites to Milton's devils, 'after their unhappy Culloden in Heaven . . . "prone-weltering on the fiery Surge"'.<sup>28</sup> At this time, Burns was still involved with Edinburgh's remaining Jacobite club, at which he addressed 'A Birthday Ode' to Charles Edward on 31 December 1787:<sup>29</sup> hence, earlier than Blake, the condemned and confined

<sup>24</sup> References to Kinsley are to the standard *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968) and subsequently (1969) published as a one-volume Oxford Paperback, since frequently reprinted; Bold, *A Burns Companion*, pp. 109, 112–13, 224–6.

<sup>25</sup> *Robert Burns' Common Place Book*, ed. Raymond Lamont Brown (Edinburgh, 1969 (1872)), p. 7; Carol McGuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens, 1985), p. 53; Donald Wesling, 'Moral sentiment from Adam Smith to Robert Burns', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 30 (1998), 147–55.

<sup>26</sup> Letter 584.

<sup>27</sup> *The Letters of Charles Lamb*, pp. 112–13; *The Poetical Works of Robert Southey* (London, 1845), p. 128.

<sup>28</sup> Letter 84.

<sup>29</sup> F. Peter Lole, *A Digest of the Jacobite Clubs*, Paper LV (London, 1999), p. 66.



demons of *Paradise Lost* symbolise the fetters of repression put on the disruptive energies of resistance. Here, as in 'Tam o' Shanter' and 'Address to the Deil', what Andrew Noble has called the 'insurrectionary energy' of Burns's devil challenges the Urizen of Enlightenment definition in ways directly comparable to Blake's.<sup>30</sup> 'Tam o' Shanter' I will come to later; but in 'The Address' (Kinsley 76), written in 1784–5, Burns, as Fiona Stafford observes, chooses an epigraph from Milton ('O Prince, O chief of many throned pow'rs, / That led the embattl'd Seraphim to war—') as a ploy from classical rhetoric 'to win the audience away from the opponent who is being quoted'; as Stafford argues in a related case, there is a different but equally interesting opposition of register between the 'pride, sexual secrets, and splenetic dispositions', of Belinda and Willie Fisher in the epigraph from *Rape of the Lock* which sets off 'Holy Willie's Prayer' (Kinsley 53).<sup>31</sup>

In the 'Address to the Deil', Burns's Devil offers an ideological contrast as well as a sociolinguistic one, being a figure of folk familiarity described by 'my rev'rend *Graunie*' (l. 25), who is a local bandit rather than a fallen prince: both reference and register endorse this position, and Burns only rises to higher style in describing Eden's 'raptur'd hour' and 'shady bower'. Paradise, is, of course, out of reach to all mortal life, and the register emphasises its distance from the poor country folk in whose language the poem purports to be written, who, familiar as they are with the Devil, hope that he will have bigger fish to fry: 'I'm sure sma' pleasure it can gie, / Ev'n to a *deil*, / To skelp an' scaud poor dogs like me, / An' hear us squeel!' Suitably, the devil in Burns's work seems to take the hint, for in 'The Address of Beelzebub' (Kinsley 108) he speaks in his own person to tempt the rich to oppress the poor, promising them the reward of hell, while in 'Bonnie laddie, Highland laddie' (Kinsley 353) the devil is fully occupied in roasting the Duke of Cumberland. High style and manners may speak of Paradise, but may not reach it.

Burns's use of epigraphs is implicit as well as explicit. The 'Address to the Deil' may be headed by an epigraph from Milton, but its first lines contain another submerged epigraph; 'O Thou, whatever title suit thee! / Auld Hornie, Satan, Nick, or Clootie', taken of course from the address to Swift, 'O Thou! whatever title please thine ear, / Dean, Drapier, Bickerstaff, or Gulliver!' from Book I of *The Dunciad*. The speaker's

<sup>30</sup> Noble and Scott Hogg (eds.), *Canongate Burns*, p. 680 n.; Noble in Jack and Noble (eds.), *The Art of Robert Burns*, pp. 208, 211.

<sup>31</sup> Fiona Stafford, *Starting Lines in Scottish, Irish and English Poetry: From Burns to Heaney* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 56–8.

intimacy with the devil is thus that of a fellow-satirist of human pride, folly, and the pursuit of power: hence if “‘a certain Bardie” can be saved, then there must be hope for a mere devil’ as Carol McQuirk points out:<sup>32</sup> Burns also has the temerity to suggest in the last stanza that the Devil should ‘tak a thought an’ men’, that is repent. In doing this Burns invokes the heresy of Universalism, deeply antipathetic to established Presbyterianism, and teetering on the verge of Deism. Eighteenth-century Universalists ‘denied the Fall’ (hence rendering the Miltonic Devil illusory), while Paineite Deism stressed human rights within Creation not human sinfulness. Allusion to these sophisticated if heretical positions (not altogether unknown to Dryden, Sterne or Anne Brontë)<sup>33</sup> undercuts the wisdom of the speaker’s ‘*Graunie*’ and opens up a world of freethinking without miracles, where superstition is an instrument of political oppression as much as folk celebration.

Burns’s address poems promote a range of speakers who both frame and intervene in their narratives, from the devil himself to the sly bard posing in folk naiveté. Where Wordsworth describes his solitaires or reveals them through dialogue with an interrogator, Burns’s poetic voice conflates with its subject: the commentator as participant, the agent as spectator. Both the sympathy of the benevolent spectator and the objective correlative of the imagined sensuality of nature are present in an alliance of Sentimental object and Romantic subject, the metonymy of environment into experience. This inward outwardness is perhaps one reason for the flexibility of Burns’s register: ‘the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation’ represented within the shifting sociolects of the language and metrics themselves, and the relationship between the tale and its teller to which they bear witness.

In poems of apparent folk naiveté such as ‘To a Louse’ (Kinsley 83), Burns shows a truly Swiftian consciousness of hygiene combined with the radical energy of the louse, whom the speaker repeatedly appears to blame for its impertinence in infesting a member of the upper middle class while being in reality a voyeur of its classless explorations through all the artifices of clothing, whether fine or greasy, cheap or dear. Burns’s apparently simple language has often concealed the density of his allusion and conceit: the ‘*Lunardi*’ bonnet (l. 35) was modelled on Lunardi’s

<sup>32</sup> Stafford, *Starting Lines*, p. 57; McQuirk, *Sentimental Era*, pp. 233–4; Noble and Scott Hogg (eds.), *Canongate Burns*, p. 43.

<sup>33</sup> David Christie-Murray, *A History of Heresy* (Oxford, 1991 (1976)), p. 185; Kinsley, 3: 1132–3.

balloons, one of which flew 'over Edinburgh . . . in 1784'.<sup>34</sup> In the poem, 'The vera tapmost, towrin height / O' *Miss's bonnet*' is therefore one which reaches for the skies to the extent of taking off, so full it is of hot air—that is, pride and conceit. The last stanza's famous lines 'O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us / *To see oursels as others see us!*', as Alexander Broadie has pointed out, sum up in two lines the need for our consciousness of the external spectator, advanced by Adam Smith in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Indeed, they are a paraphrase of Smith's view that 'If we saw ourselves in the light in which others see us . . . a reformation would be unavoidable. We could not otherwise endure the sight.'<sup>35</sup>

In 'To a Mouse' (Kinsley 69), Burns combines local event and the larger politics of the Sentimental era with a universal stance suited to his emerging prophetic status as a 'bard', a term which Burns constructs cunningly to his own advantage, as I shall argue below. The animal is many different things: a Sentimental object like Smart's cat, the inheritor of a tradition of political fable reaching back to Robert Henryson and beyond, an avatar of the misery of the poet and, on some level, an anticipation of the Wordsworthian solitary, the victim of a changing countryside. The local event is a moment in the speaker's life as a tenant farmer, which is poor as that of the mouse he encounters in part because Scottish leases, as Burns argued to the writer (solicitor) James Burness, 'make no allowance for the . . . quality of the land' compared with the British norm, and thus 'stretch us much beyond what . . . we will be found able to pay'.<sup>36</sup> It was this situation which helped to bring Burns to the brink of emigration, all too alike the unhoused mouse of the poem. Indeed, Burns wrote in 1788 to Mrs Dunlop that his conditions of living were such that he 'could almost exchange lives at any time' with farmyard animals.<sup>37</sup> The initial language of 'To a Mouse' is unhoused, the register of the rural poor. Burns's voice here is that of the ploughman, the tenant farmer with no wider horizons: and yet that language deceives us. From the intimate monologue of the first stanza, where ploughman meets mouse, a different voice supervenes, that of the benevolent bystander of Enlightenment theory. Instead of the agent who speaks to the mouse in his own local speech (for no Ayrshire mouse could be supposed to attempt standard English) a voice speaks who, in words close to Adam Smith's (and Pope's,

<sup>34</sup> Noble and Scott Hogg (eds.), *Canongate Burns*, p. 132 n.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Broadie (ed.), *The Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1997), p. 285.

<sup>36</sup> Noble and Scott Hogg (eds.), *Canongate Burns*, p. 96; Letter 14.

<sup>37</sup> Letter 290; *Canongate Burns*, p. xi.

Goldsmith's and Thomson's) is 'truly sorry Man's dominion/Has broken Nature's social union'.<sup>38</sup> The 'social union' of all creatures is disrupted explicitly by human oppression of the mouse, and implicitly by human tyranny over others, the agricultural poor, bonded once again to the mice as '*fellow-mortal*' by virtue of the suffering both experience. In a letter to the bookseller Peter Hill, Burns compares oppression of the poor to cats at 'a plundered Mouse-nest', his standard English indicative both of his sympathy and the speech of the spectator. In the poem, both agent and spectator are conflated. Wordsworth seems to have grasped this double dimension of Burns's writing when he wrote that 'on the basis of his human character, he has reared a poetic one' in his *Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns*.<sup>39</sup>

Like many suffering from enclosure and the lowland clearance spurred by rack-renting, the mouse's house is ruined. In such a case, Burns's role as prophetic bard cuts in. He asks a question critical to agricultural disruption, and one still being asked in the Kerry famine of the 1890s, when Maud Gonne and James Connolly put out a leaflet showing that St Thomas Aquinas's teaching allowed the starving to steal what they needed to eat.<sup>40</sup> The mouse's thieving is of necessity, for 'poor beastie, thou maun live!' Perhaps deliberately, Burns goes on to use the most obscure Scots of the whole poem to express the mouse's need: 'A *daimen-icker* in a *thrave*', i.e. 'one ear of corn in two stooks'. The local and agricultural Scots expresses the intensity of benevolence and sympathy, paradoxically best voiced in the tongue of the poor farmer, not the theory of Adam Smith. This sympathy is used by the bardic voice, pitched midway between the Scots English of Enlightenment reflection and the intense Scots of the farmer, to point up both the similarities and differences between mice and men, and also to allude to the mental torment of the latter, confined to '*guess an' fear*' about a future which the mouse can at least take as it comes. Burns's linguistic flexibility, is, here as elsewhere, the key to a hybridity of experience outwith and within a number of dominant cultures, not only in England but in Edinburgh, not only national but social. The sympathetic man must, in Smith's terms, 'imaginatively put himself in "the shoes of the other"', and this is what Burns does here, becoming both self and other.<sup>41</sup> 'To a Mouse' is in full measure 'the real

<sup>38</sup> *Robert Burns: Selected Poems*, ed. Carol McQuirk (London, 1993), p. 219 n.; Kinsley, 3: 1093.

<sup>39</sup> Letter, 325; Noble and Scott Hogg (eds.), *Canongate Burns*, p. xxvi; *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (The Oxford Authors; Oxford, 1990 (1984)), p. 669.

<sup>40</sup> Maud Gonne MacBride, *A Servant of the Queen* (London, 1974 (1938)), pp. 227–8.

<sup>41</sup> Broadie, *Scottish Enlightenment*, p. 155.

language of men in a state of vivid sensation' combined with 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' in pursuit of a 'revolution, not of literature alone, but likewise of society itself'.<sup>42</sup> The success of Burns's grasp of this goes far to show why Wordsworth always remained uneasy with his strong predecessor, who appears in *The Ruined Cottage*, 'The Idiot Boy' and elsewhere, as Wordsworth 'responds not only to Burns' indulgent sympathy, but to his affectionate glorification of the ordinary man'. Shelley grasped the spirit of this in 'Peter Bell the Third', when Nature tells Peter that although she yields 'love for love, frank warm and true', Peter's cold careerism has alienated her, for 'Burns . . . knew my joy/More, learned friend, than you'.<sup>43</sup> Like Yeats, Wordsworth took refuge in a myth (though not one he created) of the Tragic Generation to describe the fate of Burns, thus enhancing his own status as survivor. As Kenneth Johnston argues in *The Hidden Wordsworth*, Wordsworth's occulting of his younger self is directly comparable to his imagined viewing of 'the buried body of Robert Burns'.<sup>44</sup>

Burns's direct and indirect influences on other poets who followed were considerable. To take only one example, John Clare thought the Ayrshire writer 'inimitable and perfect' and developed Burns's nature poetry and use of the language of regional location for his own purposes.<sup>45</sup> In 'The Mouse's Nest' the action of the speaker in a very similar encounter is sustained by the dialect verb 'proged'; the mouse can only return home when the speaker leaves, thus evidencing the broken social union, although Clare only utilises the first of Burns's voices, that of the local encounter.<sup>46</sup> In 'The Yellow Wagtails Nest', Burns's 'plough', now 'broken', symbolises nature's reconquest of the territory of her 'social union', of which she is once again the 'kind protector'; and in 'The Yellowhammers Nest', the bird's eggs on the 'bleached stubbles' of 'last years harvest' suggest a renewed fertility and hope for the 'best-laid plans' of the small creature, though even 'in the sweetest places cometh ill', and the snake in the bird's Eden once again makes that Burnsian link of human and creature in their shared experience of life brimmed with the

<sup>42</sup> Gill (ed.), *Wordsworth*, pp. 595 ff.

<sup>43</sup> Mary Jacobus *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads 1798* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 90–1, 254–5; *Shelley: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson and corr. G. M. Matthews (Oxford, 1988 (1905)), pp. 346–63 (354).

<sup>44</sup> Noble and Scott Hogg (eds.), *Canongate Burns*, p. xlvii; Johnston, *Hidden Wordsworth*, p. 835.

<sup>45</sup> *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey, (Oxford, 1985), p. 437; Mark Storey, *The Poetry of John Clare* (London and Basingstoke, 1974), pp. 96, 210.

<sup>46</sup> *John Clare*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell, (The Oxford Authors; Oxford, 1984), p. 263; Timothy Brownlow, *John Clare and Picturesque Landscape* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 55–6, 118.

risks of suffering. Likewise, Clare's 'Moorhens Nest' brings to mind 'broken hopes & troubles never past', while the poet hates 'the plough that comes to dissaray' the bird's life as surely as it once did that of Burns's mouse.<sup>47</sup>

Burns's cultural hybridity was critical in denominating the scope of a British Romanticism which drew so much of its strength from the imagined recreation of the familiar yet alien particular: leech-gatherer, mariner, Grecian urn, the 'chartered streets' of 'London'. In this, Burns's idea of the Bard was important, because for him the familiar and alien were comprised in himself as subject, not located in the objects of his gaze. Burns adopted the persona of the Bard not as a ventriloquist, like Gray in 'The Bard' (1757), a poem Burns knew, but as a means of hybridising his own cultural origins with the literary expectations of a wider audience. Burns's bard was only at the margins the fatalistic, doomed figure of Gray, Macpherson or Charles Maturin's *Milesian Chief* (1812): he is more centrally part of the living community. Yet much as he might claim to own 'the appellation of a Scotch Bard' who sought only 'to please the rustic', Burns always aimed to be more than this.<sup>48</sup> In mediating the bardic ability to speak both the language of locality and that expected of the more universal figure of the Noble Savage, Burns adopted a variety of linguistic registers, much more sophisticated tools than the predictable tone and oblique narration of Macpherson's Ossian poetry, which in its own way also sought to give the intensely localized bard a universal appeal.

Burns's Kilmarnock edition of 1786 begins to emplace this notion of the Bard, presented to the world as 'obscure' and 'nameless', yet making his probable first (anonymous) appearance in the unattributed lines on the title page. Here the bard (officially anonymous, but probably Burns) is described as 'The Simple Bard, unbroke by rules of Art', and yet the couplets, the iambic pentameter of the first three lines and the use of internal paradox all bespeak an accomplished composition in the eighteenth century's dominant form. Violating the expectations of form was one of the things Burns could do best, and for which he is least recognised. Even the literate, conventional preface to the Kilmarnock edition which likewise stresses its own artlessness, teases in its reference to the Bard's 'heart-throbbing gratitude' to the 'Benevolence' of the subscribers:

<sup>47</sup> Clare, *Midsummer Cushion*, pp. 208, 212–13, 239.

<sup>48</sup> Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism* (Princeton, 1997), pp. 6, 8; Letters 90, 462; *Burns: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Dewar (1929), p. 127; McGuirk, *Sentimental Era*, pp. 106, 109, 160; Clare, *Midsummer Cushion*, p. x.

the unlettered bard lets his 'Learned and . . . Polite' betters know that they are both on a sentimental journey, that he, like them, is a man of feeling: in other words, that they are both human, perhaps even equal. Burns describes his poetry as 'some kind of counterpoise to the struggles of a world': an oppositional force. In this neglected phrase, Burns anticipates the argument of Seamus Heaney's *The Redress of Poetry*: that poetry is an oppositional force seeking redress or justice, Burns's 'counterpoise to the struggles of a world'. The Bard's voice sets out from the beginning of Burns's career to defeat our expectations of its simplicity, much as Blake violates the form of the eighteenth-century hymn to create his own bardic 'counterpoise'. Despite the wonderful knowingness with which the Bard is laid to rest in 'The Bard's Epitaph' (Kinsley 104), which closes the Kilmarnock edition by advising its readers to practise 'prudent, cautious, *self-controul*', the 'wild' and 'artless notes' of the 'Scottish Bard' are again invoked in the Preface to the 1787 Edinburgh edition.<sup>49</sup> One of the most remarkable things about Burns criticism is how often his playful characterisations of the bard and bardic roles have been taken as authentic, even autobiographical. Truly, like the much lesser poets of the 1890s, Burns's reputation is polluted by biography. More wisely, Kenneth Johnston noted in 1998 that 'the lead sentence of Burns's preface' to the Kilmarnock edition 'helped prepare the way for Wordsworth's great preface of 1800'.<sup>50</sup>

Burns's opening sentences in the Kilmarnock Preface speak of the 'rural theme' of the collection as one addressed by a bard who is 'unacquainted with the necessary requisites for commencing Poet by Rule'. As Burns put it in the Edinburgh Preface the following year, this bard 'sings the sentiments and manners' of rustic life: 'the loves, the joys, the rural scenes and rural pleasures of my native soil, in my native tongue'. In 1798, Wordsworth was to defend low style as 'a natural delineation of human passions, human characters and human incidents', and by 1800 spoke of 'Low and rustic life' as being 'that condition' in which 'the essential passions of the heart . . . speak a plainer and more emphatic language'. For Wordsworth, 'feeling . . . developed gives importance to the action and situation'; for Burns, 'the various feelings . . . in his own breast

<sup>49</sup> Robert Burns, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, (Kilmarnock: John Wilson, 1786), 1: iii–vi, 235; Burns, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1787), p. vi (this latter has a Romantic image by Alexander Nasmyth as the frontispiece); Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London and Boston, 1995), p. 4; Noble and Scott Hogg (eds.), *Canongate Burns*, pp. 4–5, 169–70.

<sup>50</sup> Johnston, *Hidden Wordsworth*, pp. 86–7.

... find some kind of counterpoise to the struggles of a world' through poetry. Burns's defence of his 'native tongue' in both Prefaces, delivered as it is in Standard English, is a defence of 'the very language of men', which at the same time is conscious of the hybridity possessed by Burns but not by Wordsworth, in its acknowledgement that Shenstone too writes in 'our language' for 'our nation', on this occasion not Scotland but Britain. The key follows in what Burns says next: 'our species'. The 'language really used by men' is native, national and universal: hence Burns's 'Bard's Epitaph' (Kinsley 104) which concludes the Kilmarnock edition, not only foreshadows Wordsworth's 'Poet's Epitaph' but also looks back to Theocritus, invoked in the Kilmarnock Preface's artful journey across the different kinds of language used by 'a man speaking to men'.<sup>51</sup>

Even in Burns's songs the singer's voice can invoke the knowingly bardic 'counterpoise' of the Kilmarnock Preface to qualify the emotion or situation being described. As long ago as 1841, it was pointed out that 'For a' that and a' that' ('Is there for honest poverty' Kinsley 482) might be indebted for its imagery to Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* (1676): it also contains suspected borrowings from Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* and Paine's *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man*.<sup>52</sup> Its main debt, however, is to the Jacobite song tradition, particularly the song from which it takes its air and refrain, 'Tho Georthie Reign in Jamie's Stead'. The potency of the possible combination of the concept of honesty and the 'honest man' from Wycherley and the Jacobite traditions is linked to the words of *Common Sense*: 'of more worth is one honest man . . . than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived' in a relationship which can be held to evince the complexity of Burns's own concept of honesty, at once neither prudish nor servile:<sup>53</sup> 'The honest man, though e'er sae poor / Is king o' men for a' that', where Jacobite loyalty is transferred to Jacobin radicalism, for every man is now his own king to be loyal to. Burns's 'honesty' is arguably close to the emphasis on private judgement found in Godwin and Priestley, while it has also been argued that the 'honest man' is not only a compound of the politicised senses of the word, but also another version of Smith's impartial spectator.<sup>54</sup>

I will conclude my argument by an examination of Burns's bardic voice in 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' (Kinsley 72) and 'Tam o' Shanter'

<sup>51</sup> Gill (ed.), *Wordsworth*, pp. 591, 595–603; Noble and Scott Hogg (eds.), *Canongate Burns*, pp. 3, 169.

<sup>52</sup> Kinsley, 3: 1467–8: Burns had ordered Wycherley's plays in 1790.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 81.

<sup>54</sup> Broadie, *Scottish Enlightenment*, p. 285; Butler, *Romantics*, p. 44.



(Kinsley 321), chosen in order to discern the unfamiliar in the familiar works of Burns. Wordsworth, perhaps in passing, saw the complexity of Burns's narrative voice in remarking that in 'Tam o' Shanter' 'conjugal fidelity archly bends to the service of general benevolence', with the intervention of the Enlightenment voice in the world of the festive peasantry. In the apparently less complex 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', Burns makes an appeal for a declining class, that of the small tenant farmers, decaying into labourers on both sides of the Border, whose status as 'honest men' ('An honest man's the noble work of GOD' (l. 166)), was, given the context alluded to above, perhaps a warning of the radical energy which might be released by their dispossession. 'The Cotter's' particular 'honest man' is of course a quotation from Pope's congenial reflection on the emptiness of rank and fame in *Essay on Man*, IV. Burns's poem owes much to 'Pope, Thomson, Goldsmith, and even Milton', and is headed by an epigraph from Gray. It offers a British poetic gloss (using language closer to standard English than Burns's usual bardic voice) on the life of the tenant farmer, and draws on a number of more or less politicised eighteenth-century rural poets who wrote about the land and bad landlordism to do so: the poem is 'in a recognizable tradition', and this is a most intertextual bard.<sup>55</sup> Yet Burns defeats expectation, for the 'simple Scottish lays' promised by the 'honest' bard in stanza 1 are those of the Spenserian stanza, and the Scots, when it occurs, does so in the context of the language and perception of the Cotter himself and his family alone. The bard eschews the domestic voice in this window on Thrums: he stands outside the kailyard, with the only other bard mentioned, the '*royal Bard*' of l. 121, King David. The status of the '*lyre*' in the hands of David and other '*Holy Seers*' is dwelt on by the bardic voice, which thus aligns itself in text as well as form and language with an international community of prophetic commentators. Even the prayers of the Cotter's family are represented by a quotation from *Windsor Forest*, in a manner which no true Presbyterian peasant would appreciate, even if they were ignorant of its implicit politics. The '*Patriot-bard*' (l. 188) who praises Scotland uses a quotation from Pope and a paraphrase of Thomson to do so (ll. 163, 166; Kinsley, 3: 1117), and does so in three stanzas of entirely standard English, moreover describing Scotland as a 'much-lov'd ISLE' thus conflating it (as in Burns's praise of Shenstone in the Kilmarnock preface) with the wider

<sup>55</sup> Jeff Ritchie, 'Robert Burns and William Wordsworth: Positioning of a Romantic Artist in the Literary Marketplace', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 30, 129–36 (135); Stafford, *Starting Lines*, p. 57.

British experience alluded to throughout. This bard evades the role he adopts even in the act of complimenting it.

In 'Tam o' Shanter', the bard creates his own intertexts. The Britishness of this poem lies at one remove from its local subject, for Captain Grose, for whom it was written 'had already published the *Antiquities of England and Wales* (1773–87), and was now at work collecting material for his *Antiquities of Scotland* before going on to begin an Irish volume'.<sup>56</sup> Burns's bardic voice was thus, within the context of the poem itself as well as within the purview of his wider creative aims, presenting a locality to a general audience. But Burns eschews the Ossianic fate implied by the deceptive cultural compliment of the term *Antiquities*, the romantic temptation of Flora MacIvor's Gaelic battle song in ch. 22 of *Waverley*, itself existing in a tellingly intertextual relationship with the song of the Albanian 'Highlanders' in the second canto of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*,<sup>57</sup> in another forgotten byway of a British Romanticism which fails to read across four nations. Rather Burns makes his 'tale' a 'tail' with an 'I': a bawdy story which is also a warning coda to the depoliticisation and bowdlerisation of the Romantic collector.<sup>58</sup>

Tam's story begins, fittingly enough, with the departure of the 'chapman billies', those purveyors of printed ballads, already being collected by the antiquaries to whose representative the poem is dedicated. In their absence, the narrator makes room for himself in a tone of easy oral intimacy, a member of the community retailing a tale in the pub: 'While we sit bousing . . . And getting fou and unco happy.' Even in the first verse paragraph, the language shifts from the medium Scots of the opening to standard English ('Gathering her brows like gathering storm/Nursing her wrath to keep it warm'). This shift is a sign of things to come, as the narrator by turns conspires with his subject as an equal, and satirises him as a fool, turning from the laughter of belonging to being 'above the object of his mockery' in Bakhtinian terms; although the narrator can, as in lines 151–2 ('Now, *Tam*, O *Tam*! had thae been queans, / A' plump and strapping in their teens'), always lapse back into the interiority of a shared festivity.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Crawford, *Devolving*, p. 108.

<sup>57</sup> Lord Byron, *Selected Poems*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Peter J. Manning, (London, 1996), pp. 118–19, 131.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Robert Crawford, 'Robert Fergusson's Robert Burns', in *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, pp. 1–22 (16).

<sup>59</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, tr. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984 (1965)), p. 12. David Morris (*Eighteenth Century*, 28 (1988)) and others have argued that the nature of Burns's register makes the application of Bakhtinian theory a suitable one. Cf. J. C. Bittenbender,

The setting of the poem almost fulfils Bakhtin's category of the ritual spectacle. The market day is a time of carnival and riot ('That frae November till October, / Ae market-day thou was nae sober') which is based on drink ('They had been fou for weeksthegither'), oral tales and laughter ('The night drave on wi' sangs and clatter . . . The Souter tauld his queerest stories; / The landlord's laugh was ready chorus'). Here the narrator speaks in Burns's hybrid style of light Scots: he is at home with this market-night, but his tale (also told in a pub) is for more public consumption than the precious and secret interiority of Tam's enjoyment, which paradoxically the narrator is broadcasting to the world under the guise of oral anecdote. Tam's folly is kingly, for 'the fool or clown is king of the upside-down world', and likewise for Burns, 'Kings may be blest, but *Tam* was glorious, / O'er all the ills o' life victorious!' (ll. 57–8).<sup>60</sup>

Then Tam 'maun ride' and leave the scene of his bacchic triumph to return home. As the narrator describes this departure, he resorts to the highest style of English in the whole poem, the 'pleasures are like poppies spread' passage, to emphasise his authority and to pass 'judgement on Tam's drunken abandon', evicting his subject from the secret world of oral and introspective pleasure to the governing realm of normality and rule, farms and marriages.<sup>61</sup> But his Romantic hero never reaches this Neoclassical goal within the confines of the poem's couplets. Instead, the commentator's sociolinguistic divorce from the scene of Tam's pleasures betrays us into the fantastic world of the second part of the poem, where folk carnival is no longer the hybrid scene of local Ayrshire pleasures reported on for a wider public, but instead the threateningly anti-hierarchical and overtly orgiastic cavortings of the witches, the dark underside of peasant celebration, one tinged with the hidden world of a local culture disclosed for a British readership, where the witches dance 'hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys, and reels' (l. 116), the native dances of Scotland. The devil's 'charge' is 'To gie them music' (l. 122), and he plays the pipes, aboriginal instrument of 'old Scotland'. Like the Bard (compare 'Address to the Deil' (Kinsley 76), which also likens bard and devil) 'auld Nick' (l. 119) gives voice to a native tradition: unlike the Bard, his chthonic folk voice offers no hybrid music, only that of the native soil's now hidden culture of riot, exposed in alliance by Tam and the narrator,

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'Bakhtinian Carnival in the Poetry of Robert Burns', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 21: 2 (1994), 23–38 and Liam McIlvanney, "'Why Shouldna Poor Folk Mowe": Bakhtinian Folk Humour in Burns' Bawdry', in *Scottish Literary Journal*, 23: 2 (1996), 43–53.

<sup>60</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, pp. 5, 8, 426.

<sup>61</sup> Bittenbender, 'Bakhtinian Carnival', 33.

whose language lapses into its subject's diction: when these two come to act in combination, discretion, a function of the distancing effects of register, disappears. In the first part of the poem, Tam's 'secret favours' from the landlord's wife are those of folk bawdy, but they are kept private, even in the narrator's report. In the latter part of the poem, Tam publicly bawls out 'Weel done, Cutty-sark!' (l. 189), thus spreading throughout the world of the narrative the power of the sexualised witch carnival, which excites both Satan (l. 185) and the narrator himself (ll. 157–8), perhaps as Bard and devil are kin. Just as the unfettered imagination of Blake's Milton and Shelley's poetic conception are more powerful than what appears in print, so the residue of writing's record of orality is inflamed, if only for a moment, by the intervention of Tam's delighted and abandoned words in the immediacy of their contact with the peasantry's hidden culture. At the same time, even in the orgiastic moment of Tam's sole piece of direct speech, the folk voice's breach in the bardic narrative (complicitly revealed by the narrator), the scene is still constrained within the familiar lineaments of the Picturesque. On Tam's journey to Alloway Kirk, the darkness, gloom, and ruinousness of the scene develop to the point where the knowing reader becomes aware that he or she is in a familiar world of genre construction, the narrator's art and not the peasant's: 'That night, a child might understand, / The Deil had business on his hand' (ll. 77–8). Indeed, the Picturesque's role as 'a frame of mind, an aesthetic attitude involving man in a direct and active relationship with the natural scenery through which he travels', enables the reader to take a parallel journey to Tam's, one rationally conducted and yet spiced with that *frisson* of controlled fear which characterises the transitions from light to dark in the Picturesque landscape, when 'The speedy gleams the darkness swallow'd' (l. 75).<sup>62</sup>

In 'Tam o' Shanter', then, a poem which begins as a written report of an oral tale told about another oral tale, develops into a satire of the genesis of the oral tale as a fanciful product of alcohol and lechery, which at the same time conspires to celebrate the liberating quality of the secret life of the locality, represented by the witches' freedom from control. The satirist's conclusion is itself, in all the restored orderliness of its closure, an apparently unconscious testament to the victory of orality over its satirist, for the moral is itself a world turned upside down, where Tam has not suffered from buying 'joys o'er dear' and the suffering of his mare has

<sup>62</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, (London and New York, 1999 (1982)), p. 11; Carl Paul Barbier, *William Gilpin*, (Oxford, 1963), p. 99 for the Picturesque.

got nothing to do with transgression. The satirist's moral is misplaced: the folk world is free of his control. But despite the shifting voice of the narrator throughout, the poem ends with an assertion of that control because that is what poems do: they close out the stories which run on in and through one another, and draw a line under and put a period to what they relate. 'Remember' is the instruction of the poem's last line: a memorialisation which emphasises closure, just as Burns, like other collectors, created single canonical versions of altering and varied songs for Johnson's *Musical Museum*. But although 'Nae man can tether time or tide' (l. 67), Tam's ride is from one riot to another, one zone of 'unpublicized speech, nonexistent from the point of view of literary written language' to another. The printed page presents what Bakhtin calls 'only a small and polished portion of these unpublicized spheres of speech'.<sup>63</sup>

It is this question of Burns's polish on which this essay ends. British Romanticism makes room for radicals, bards, dreamers, prophets, and visionaries bent on a direct or indirect sensory encounter with the world, whether in the guise of the metaphorical dawn of 1789 or the concrete sublime of Snowdon. If this spectrum of definition appears to be a broad one, it can be narrowed both by a preference for aesthetic self-consciousness and by an implicit periodicity wherein *Lyrical Ballads* both buries Burns and eulogises him. The critical world of the post-war era has drifted from a proper consciousness of the 'four nations' element in Romanticism. Hazlitt's cry that 'what that is Scotch is not approved?' is incomprehensible to the reader of many modern accounts of Hazlitt's age; likewise, the 'Great Shadow' of Burns of which Keats wrote and which he, Byron, Coleridge, and Wordsworth were all in dialogue with, has become invisible in the introspective solitary walk towards the idealisms and theories of the Romantic imagination which underpins the dismissal of a poetry written from and across a society in dialogue with itself and the world.<sup>64</sup>

Burns died in 1796, and no-one can change that; but in understanding that what the century in which he lived would have called 'polish' was present in the self-consciousness of the nature of his bardic and imaginative vision we can begin to give him his due, and to deliver him from being that humorous, parochial and ultimately naïve figure, the Ploughboy of the Western World.

<sup>63</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 421.

<sup>64</sup> *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover, with an introduction by W. E. Henley, 12 vols. (London, 1904), 12: 230; John Keats, *The Poems*, ed. David Bromwich and Nicholas Roe, (London, 1999 (1906)), p. 296.

British Broadcasting Corporation Home. Accessibility links. Skip to content. Works with a theme of poetry (44). List all themes. A Ballad [While prose work and rhymes]. "While prose-work and rhymes ..." A song performed by Alex Norton. A Bard's Epitaph. "Is there a whim-inspired fool ..." A poem written in 1786 and performed by John Gordon Sinclair. A sonnet upon sonnets. "Fourteen, a sonneteer thy praises sings" Epistle to Robert Graham Esq: of Fintry on the Election of the Dumfries string of Boroughs, Anno 1790. "Fintry, my stay in worldly strife ..." An epistle written in 1790 and performed by Simon Tait. Epitaph. Here lies Robert Fergusson, Poet. "No sculptur'd marble here, nor pompous lay, ..." An epitaph written in 1787 and performed by Barbara Rafferty. Robert Burns (25 January 1759 " 21 July 1796), also known familiarly as Rabbie Burns, the National Bard, Bard of Ayrshire and the Ploughman Poet and various other names and epithets, was a Scottish poet and lyricist. He is widely regarded as the national poet of Scotland and is celebrated worldwide. He is the best known of the poets who have written in the Scots language, although much of his writing is in English and a light Scots dialect, accessible to an audience beyond Scotland. He also wrote in... Robert Burns's status as a poet sufficiently close to rural poverty to be able to represent himself as its product, and sufficiently distant from it to be able to manipulate that product, is increasingly being realized. In this essay, Burns's use of the country lore associated with the birch and hawthorn trees in Scotland and indeed in Europe more generally, is analyzed in terms of its deceptively simple representation of emotion, and the manner in which it acts as a point of access for Burns's view of the tragic status of being human, caught between the cyclical.