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Jeff Ritchie

Robert Burns and William Wordsworth: Positioning of a Romantic Artist in the Literary Marketplace

With the publication of the Kilmarnock edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, Burns positioned himself in the literary marketplace through the creation of different literary personae. Among those Burns created in this edition the “ploughman poet” and the “Scotch Bard” are particularly important to subsequent views of Burns as one who personifies the romantic artist. Burns’s near contemporary William Wordsworth defined his conceptions of the romantic artist or poet in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*,¹ and his reactions to Burns both preceding and following the Preface demonstrate, if not a causal relationship between Burns and Wordsworth’s theories of literature, then definitely a distinct parallel. But whereas Wordsworth sees the romantic artist as subjectively independent and timeless, his conception of the romantic artist does not take into account the impact of the marketplace and society on the artist; therefore the purpose underlying the creative act is often ignored or simply viewed in terms of an individualistic assertion of the artist’s viewpoint. When viewed in terms of Raymond Williams’ definition of the romantic artist and the social forces at work on him,² Wordsworth’s idealization of Burns as a separate and distinct entity dissolves into a product of a changing society and

¹William Wordsworth, “Preface, Second Edition of the Lyrical Ballads,” *English Romantic Writers* (San Diego, 1967). Henceforth Preface.

²Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1850* (New York, 1983). Henceforth CS.

time. Burns's literary positioning and Wordsworth's interpretations of it can be seen as Burns self consciously creating and maintaining the role of the "ploughman poet" and the "Scotch Bard" as a result both of his desire to publish his poetry and his threatened national identity as a Scot in an increasingly Anglicized Great Britain.

The role of the ploughman poet in *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* is twofold. It dictates the subject matter and positions the artist. The subject matter of a ploughman poet revolves around agriculture and rural themes, and the role of the ploughman poet also positions the actual poet as one whose lack of formal education results in a poetry of natural ability. Burns's Kilmarnock edition of the *Poems*, its Preface, Burns's use of the vernacular and his subject matter all served to create this image and theme.

Within this conception of the ploughman poet can be seen a parallel to the idea of the romantic artist portrayed by Wordsworth. A poet is

a man speaking to men,. . . endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him (Preface, p. 324).

Poetry should be in the language of the common man, which is more permanent and philosophically minded than other languages. And Wordsworth defines

all good poetry [as] the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings...recollected in tranquillity...poems where any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply (Preface, p. 321).

The emphasis Wordsworth places on the uniqueness of the romantic artist should be noted, as well as the stress placed on the proper subject matter and language of poetry. Wordsworth's definitions are democratic in that they are accessible to everyone, especially the poor and uneducated.

Williams elaborates on Wordsworth and the Romantic periods' new conception of both the literary marketplace and the artist. The artist is a special kind of person who is no longer viewed as an artisan (CS, p. 36). The artist's craft is a result of genius rather than a learnable skill and is increasingly seen as both a specialized form of production and a means to truth. Furthermore, art is subjected to the demands of the market (the public) as a result of the change in the system of patronage which was occurring at this time (CS, pp. 32-3).

Viewed in light of Williams and paralleling Wordsworth, Burns self consciously created and maintained the role of the ploughman poet in the Preface to the Kilmarnock edition of *Poems*:

[Burns] sings the sentiments and manners, he felt and saw in himself and his rustic compeers around him, in his and their native language.³

Burns does not focus on the literary or social conventions of poetry which mold the poet, but rather the emotions, language and subject matter of the poet and common man. The Preface to the Kilmarnock edition exemplifies Burns's self-fashioning as a poet of sensibility, more akin to Wordsworth's definition of a romantic artist. He creates a history or picture of himself to compete and function within the literary marketplace and society; to combat the threats of criticism and industry to the artist as well as to combat the threat to the culture from which he draws his inspiration and material.

A fundamental part of this picture Burns creates is that he is a spontaneous and "heaven taught" poet, as in his poem *The Vision*.

Thou canst not learn, nor I can show,
To paint with *Thomson's* landscape-glow;
Or wake the bosom-melting throe,
 With *Shenstone's* art;
Or pour, with *Gray*, the moving flow,
 Warm on the heart ⁴

The eighteenth century emphasis on the artist's forms and conventions, which can be taught, is replaced by romantic sensibility, which cannot be taught and is akin to the idea of genius. Burns writes in the Kilmarnock Preface,

The following trifles are not the production of the Poet, who, with all the advantages of learned art, and perhaps amid the elegancies and idlenesses of upper life, looks down for a rural theme, with an eye to Theocrites or Virgil. To the Author of this, these and other celebrated names their countrymen are, in their original languages, 'A fountain shut up, and a book sealed.'⁵

I find these lines both telling and ironic. The confession of an inability to read classical languages both betrays the lack of a classical education (which would be expected for a ploughman poet) as well as rhetorically distances Burns from possible failings of his poetry in regards to poetic convention. If his poetry fails, it is because he didn't know any better. However, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* would be found by those unable to understand Scots as "a fountain shut up, and a book sealed." In an ironic turn, through the use of

³Robert Burns, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock, 1786), p. iii.

⁴*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 112. Henceforth *Poems*.

⁵*Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock, 1786), p. iii.

Scots the exclusive world of the educated is partially excluded from the ploughman poet's world. However, this partial exclusion decries the decline of the ploughman poet's culture and language in his attempts to resurrect or recreate it.

Burns's lack of formal education and his subsequent posing as the "ploughman poet," aside from playing what is now considered the romantic theme of artistic genius versus classically trained imitator, also plays along the theme of native art forms. If the poet had only the models of Scottish folk songs and other common art to imitate or influence him, then this artist's art would be considered more uniquely Scottish than an artist who was able to read and be influenced by foreign or non-Scottish art forms, including English, continental and classical texts. The threats of the market place and industry to the artist are then mirrored in the threat of English and foreign culture to Scottish culture, in that all threaten to silence the ploughman poet. Taken in this light, he becomes the Scotch bard, the unique spokesperson of Caledonia.

In an interesting twist, Wordsworth, whose familiarity with the Cumberland border counties' dialects allowed him "not only to understand but to feel" Burns's poems, introduces in the same note an element which Burns poetry was to focus upon. Wordsworth writes:

May these few words serve as a warning to youthful Poets who are in danger of being carried away by the inundation of foreign literature from which our own is at present suffering so much, both in style and points of far greater concern.⁶

These lines echo what was inherent in Burns's poems, the encroaching English culture was eroding the Scottish language, customs, dress and culture, just as Wordsworth saw non-English literature encroaching upon English culture. Burns similarly exhorts and admonishes his Scottish audiences in "The Cotter's Saturday Night,"

O SCOTIA! my dear, my native soil!
 For whom my warmest wish to Heaven is sent!
 Long may thy hardy sons of rustic toil
 Be blest with health and peace and sweet content!
 And O may Heaven their simple lives prevent
 From *Luxury's* contagion, weak and vile!
 Then howe'er *crowns* and *coronets* be rent,
 A *virtuous Populace* may rise the while,
 And stand a wall of fire, around their much-lov'd ISLE.
(*Poems*, I, 151)

⁶William Wordsworth, note written in 1842; rptd. in *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Donald A. Low (London and Boston, 1974), p. 63. Henceforth Low.

The "crowns and coronets . . . rent," perhaps referring to the events of 1745-46, resulted in the defeat of the Scots. With this in mind, the "virtuous populace," referring to the "hardy sons" of Scotland, are called upon to "stand a wall of fire around their much-lov'd isle." The connotations of this exhortation suggest far more than merely protection of Scotland from foreign enemies. It suggests an idealization of culture as a pure, static and monolithic entity which is not open to change or interaction with other cultures.

Burns aspired to be a Scotch Bard, to be recognized as the voice of his people, so that the dissemination of Scottish culture might take place. In a letter to a friend, Burns wrote,

The appellation of, a Scotch Bard, is by far my highest pride; to continue to deserve it is my most exalted ambition. —Scottish scenes, and Scottish story are the themes I could wish to sing. —I have no greater, no dearer aim than to have it in my power, unplug'd with the routine of business, for which Heaven knows I am unfit enough, to make leisurely pilgrimages through Caledonia; to sit on the fields of her battles; to wander on the romantic banks of her rivers; and to muse by the stately tower or venerable ruins, once the honored abodes of her heroes.⁷

Yet who is this people for whom Burns is the voice? Essentially, Burns's ambition is to take part in the construction of the Scottish myth; the creation and preservation of what Peter Murphy calls a "blurry people" or "imaginary class,"⁸ which in fact echoes Wordsworth's idea of the common man. Both are the idealized stereotype of a nationalistic myth. But whereas Wordsworth generalizes his mythic people to Eurocentrically represent humanity, Burns's subject matter is essentially Scottish and patriotic. While possibly of the highest motives, Burns positioned his work in such a way that allowed him to better sell his books. He converted the celebration of native culture into an economic activity through marketing a "people" to the public.

Yet while Burns was creating this idealized or generalized Scottish people, the public, or those people to whom he had to sell his works, was in the process of change as well. The patronage system was gradually changing into a system of subscription, and, later, commercial publishing, and this change affected the manner in which artist and his audience interact (CS, pp. 32-4). The ploughman poet or romantic artist increasingly found himself catering to the needs and demands of a largely unknown public. This change in the literary marketplace roughly coincided with the change in the linguistic relationship between England and Scotland. The Act of Union, May 1, 1707, and other Scottish political setbacks, gradually came to mean that English was the official lan-

⁷*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 101.

⁸Peter Murphy, *Poetry as an Occupation and an Art in Britain, 1760-1830* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 51.

guage of Britain. That Burns did not adhere strictly to the vernacular in his poems, and that he did include a glossary in the Kilmarnock edition possibly indicate that the accessibility of Scots to a potential reader (or especially buyer) was somewhat restricted and that the market forces prevailed. However, the inclusion of a glossary in the Kilmarnock edition stressed the linguistic and cultural differences that still remained between the two cultures and served to create the image of a more coherent Scottish culture in order to oppose the English "other." Also, the glossary fulfills two different purposes. It serves to impress upon the readers the existence of a coherent Scottish culture, and it reminds these same readers of the repressed and forgotten customs and language of the Scots. The bottom line was that in order for Burns to get the book published, he had to collect subscriptions. The more people could access his poetry, the more copies could be sold.

John Anderson, a contemporary of Burns who reviewed *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, echoed this sentiment when he wrote in *The Monthly Review*, a London publication:

We much regret that these poems are written in some measure in an unknown tongue, which must deprive most of our Readers of the pleasure they would otherwise naturally create; being composed in the Scottish dialect, which contains many words that are altogether unknown to an English reader.⁹

Even though Burns included notes and a glossary, the result was still that of reading a foreign language, further reinforcing the difference between the "us" of Scottish language and culture and the "them" of the encroaching English language and culture.

Also, the creation of a cultural myth, idealized in ideas of a "people," provides a useful marketing ploy, in that foreign contaminants are xenophobically walled out, that nothing might alter or threaten the "people" created. Burns ties together economic and cultural production in an odd mixture of national pride, poetry, and Scotch in the poem "Scotch Drink," where he celebrates native economic and literary production through playfully identifying Scotch as the Muse of the Scottish Bard.

O thou, my MUSE! guid, auld SCOTCH DRINK!
Whether thro' wimplin worms thou jink,
Or, richly brown, ream owre the brink,
 In glorious faem,
Inspire me, till I *lisp* an' *wink*,
 To sing thy name! (*Poems*, I, 173)

Through relating the economic concerns of Scotland to both Scottish cultural and literary production, Burns gives an added incentive to buying his poetry.

⁹John Anderson, unsigned review; rptd. in Low, p. 72.

Wae worth that *Brandy*, burnan trash!
 Fell source o' monie a pain an' brash!
 Twins mony a poor, doylt, druken hash,
 O' half his days;
 An' sends, beside, auld *Scotland's* cash
 To her warst faes. (*Poems*, I, 175)

Burns's admonition to his readers to reject foreign goods is similar to that of Wordsworth's warning to "youthful Poets who are in danger of being carried away by the inundation of foreign literature."¹⁰ Not only are those people who buy foreign wines, or foreign products from countries such as France or England, sending the money of Scotland to their foes, but by inference supporting the Bard by buying his poetry becomes a patriotic act.

In "The Cotter's Saturday Night," Burns, mixing both English and Scots, ends the poem with an exhortation to the Scots and an encomium on Scotland. Speaking of Scotland, Burns writes,

O THOU! who pour'd the *patriotic tide*,
 That stream'd thro' great, unhappy WALLACE' heart;
 Who dar'd to, nobly, stem tyrannic pride,
 Or *nobly die*, the second glorious part:
 (The Patriot's GOD, peculiarly thou art,
 His *friend, inspirer, guardian and reward!*)
 O never, never SCOTIA's realm desert,
 But still the *Patriot*, and the *Patriot-bard*,
 In bright succession raise, her *Ornament and Guard!*
 (*Poems*, I, 151-2)

It is ironic that Burns should praise Scotland and exhort those for whom Scotland serves as "friend, inspirer, guardian, and reward," the "patriot" and the "patriot Bard," in English, and base his poem on English models. As Henderson notes:

This is true, but the piece as a whole is formed on English models. It is the most artificial and the most imitative of Burns's works. Not only is the influence of Gray's *Elegy* conspicuous, but also there are echoes of Pope, Thomson, Goldsmith, and even Milton; while the stanza, which was taken, not from Spenser, whom Burns had not then read, but from Beattie and Shenstone, is so purely English as to lie outside the range of Burns's experience and accomplishment.¹¹

¹⁰William Wordsworth, note written in 1842; rptd. in Low, p. 163.

¹¹*The Poetry of Robert Burns*, ed. W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson. 4 vols. (London, 1896), I, 362.

This stanza and the language it is written in, more than any other, demonstrate the tenuous position Scottish culture enjoyed in Great Britain. The “patriot Bard” or “Scotch Bard” is forced to abandon his own language, as a result of the decline in his own culture, and sing the praises of his native land in a foreign tongue. Yet, Carol McGuirk holds that Burns’s purpose in writing in dialect was,

to emphasize Scotland’s continuing cultural difference ... he chose dialect not only to assert the substantiality and validity of his Scottish world but also to disseminate it abroad: not so much to reflect Scotland as to evoke it.¹²

The fact that he emphasized his Scots vocabulary, when taken in this light, downplays cultural preservation and nationalism as primary motivations and pushes to the front his social ambitions and the motivation of publishing and sales. In order to disseminate his picture of Scotland, Burns had to sell books. In making Scotland intelligible to outsiders, through mixing Scots with English and adding a glossary and notes, Burns widened his market. The rusticity and Scottishness of his pictures would be put forward as the quaint attribute of a marketable commodity. The role of the “Scotch Bard,” related to and stemming from the “ploughman poet,” is just the position for which Burns aspired, which is basically that of a patriotic master craftsman pedaling his wares.

Romanticism in these terms can be related to cultural nationalism. The Romantic artist is attempting through the use of language, to create a “People” in Williams’s sense of the word, through the artifice of the artist’s literary creations. Wordsworth’s romantic notion of native genius, the language of the common man used to describe common scenes from everyday life, all of these, if based solely on the example of Burns, stem from an individual in a combative stance in both the marketplace and a culturally ravenous and consuming world. Wordsworth’s conceptions of the romantic artist, as applied to Burns, are erroneous, because Wordsworth failed to take into account the social factors influencing literary production. In opposition to Wordsworth’s belief in a peaceful coexistence with nature and the world (a belief he later outgrew), the idea of a romantic artist, as seen in Burns, revolves around recovering/recreating/creating a “cultural identity” of the Scottish people and competing in a literary marketplace to make this artifice known and permanent.

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¹²Carol McGuirk, “Scottish Hero, Scottish Victim: Myths of Robert Burns,” in *The History of Scottish Literature*, Vol. II, ed. Andrew Hook (Aberdeen, 1987), p. 236.