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Recovering Burns's Lyric Legacy: Teaching Burns in American Universities

This paper has grown out of a need to explore the problems of teaching Burns in my own setting, the University of Georgia, specifically in the contexts of British literature surveys, introductory literature courses, and Romantic literature courses. It is a lonely business. Recently I surveyed the faculty of my English department, only to discover that I am one of only two to have taught Burns in the past several years. Most say that, given time constraints, the choice is between Burns and Blake—and Blake wins.

Teachers of British literature, faced with institutionally imposed course titles such as "Masterpieces of English Literature since 1700," may not recognize in university curricula what Donald Low has called "a gross imbalance in favour of the English poets."¹ English departments lacking specialization in Scottish literature (almost all of them) often ignore Scottish writers completely; and Burns exemplifies the Scottish poet whose work has rated inclusion in the anthology but seldom on the syllabus. Based on my conversations with faculty at Georgia as well as with some from other universities, the reasons for overlooking Burns may be generalized. Simply put, most teachers lack enough basic knowledge of Burns to feel comfortable teaching him with any authority. Complicating factors abound, but include the difficulties inherent in teaching a vernacular poet and a general misunderstanding of Burns's role in literary history. Resource materials and recordings lately becoming available render the former issue slightly less

¹ *Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1986), p. 131.

problematic; the latter, however, demands a rethinking of Burns's relationship to Romanticism.

The critical tradition having regarded Burns more in the light of biography than poetry, even today he is considered more rustic than poetic genius. Indeed, Low reminds us of T. S. Eliot's patronizing—and distancing—censure of Burns as the “decadent representative of a great alien tradition.”² To rescue Burns's reputation from post-Eliot dismissiveness, we must find ways of communicating to the next generation of scholars the crucial nature of Burns's contributions to lyric poetry. This paper will examine his position in the canon and suggest a few ways in which Burns, as a moving force in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature, may be integrated into the curriculum.

The problem is not that Burns is absent from the canon; having long held a place in the sacred “Hall of Literature,” he might even be described as a literary monument in what Tricia Lootens calls literary history's “architectural canon,” the “imaginary architecture of canon-as-place”:

Envisioned as a museum, church, courtroom, library, or pantheon, this canon...is a creation whose metaphoric halls are fit to house the cultural “monuments” invoked by works such as T. S. Eliot's “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”³

This canon, “[c]onceived as an enclosed physical space...is a place of containment: its contents are almost inevitably defined by exclusion and shaped through competition.” (p. 7). Such a place houses the metaphorical busts of many great writers, among them certainly a bust of Burns—in a back room perhaps, covered with dust.

The picture I have drawn is not a pretty one for lovers of Burns's poetry, but it is one that should be considered further. For professors and scholarly critical books—though they contribute to the construction of new wings of the Hall of Literature, the refurbishing of old wings, or the acquisition of new monuments—are not the ultimate arbiters of taste. Far more authority lies with teaching anthologies, especially those recommended or required for department-wide use: in selections that purportedly represent an author's “characteristic” work as well as those excluded, and in biographical headnotes that perpetuate our favorite anecdotes, many of which have attained the status of legend. Here students may find the “extra” information not covered in class, the background they believe necessary for the course. As Lootens argues in her discussion of “literary legend formation,” certain passages of criticism “have

²“Byron and Burns,” *SSL*, 27 (1992), 129; Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Cambridge, MA, 1933), p. 98.

³Lootens traces this concept of canonization throughout literary history, but focuses particularly on its nineteenth-century constructs. See *Lost Saints: Gender, Silence, and Victorian Literary Canonization* (Charlottesville, 1996), p. 6.

attained iconicity" and influence readings of an author's work: "Literally, iconized criticism often 'introduces' poets and their poetry, thus shaping critical first impressions" (p. 39). The biographical tidbits offered in anthology headnotes are convenient because they are memorable and portable, easily detached from the poetry, and reducible to a short-answer question on a mid-term exam.

First we may consider the ways in which Introduction to Literature anthologies used as Freshman English readers present the legendary, monumental Burns. These texts generally include one or two poems by Burns, almost exclusively one of the short lyrics. Most often, editors pull "A red red Rose" into service to exemplify figurative language (especially simile, metaphor, and hyperbole) or the love lyric, though little if any mention is made of Burns's lyrics as songs. Among the anthologies I have examined, other choices that appear occasionally include "John Anderson my Jo," "Mary Morison," and "Auld lang syne" (the latter used as an example of dialect).⁴

And how does Burns figure in that monumental tome the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, so frequently used in British literature survey courses? In the first three editions (1962, 1968, 1974), Burns appears as the first author of the Romantic Period and is represented by thirteen poems: "Song" (It was upon a Lammas night; this work is also variously known by its air *Corn Rigs are bonie* or the first line of the chorus: "Corn rigs, an' barley rigs"), "To a Mouse," "Green grow the Rashes," "Holy Willie's Prayer," "Willie brew'd a peck o' maut," "Tam o' Shanter," "Afton Water," "Song" (Ae fond kiss), "The Banks o' Doon" ("A" version, Ye flowery banks o' bonnie Doon), "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn" (Scots, wha hae), "Song—For a' that and a' that," "A red red Rose" and "Auld lang syne." With the fourth, fifth, and sixth editions (1979, 1986, 1993), Burns shifts to second place after William Blake, and "To a Louse" replaces "Corn rigs an' barley rigs" and "Willie brew'd a peck o' maut" for a total of twelve poems. This is not a bad selection for an anthology of its kind. The range of Burns's skill in lyric poetry, mock heroic, and song is shown; and anyone teaching a survey of British literature can find material here that will engage students. Considering Burns-as-monument, however, with the exception of a few words the sympathetic biographical headnote by David Daiches has remained unchanged—and perhaps undusted—over the course of thirty-four years. Burns makes no appearance in the *Norton Anthology of Major Authors*, in which Blake is generously represented.

⁴ Interestingly, Michael Meyer, editor of *The Bedford Introduction to Literature: Reading, Thinking, and Writing*, 4th ed. (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996), ignores Burns's use of a persona in "John Anderson my Jo," calling the song "a sincere lyric with little distance between the speaker and Burns himself....It expresses the importance to him of companionship and looks back on a friendship that has lasted into old age" (p. 274).

Burns actually fares better in the Norton than in two new anthologies of Romanticism, a wing of the Hall of Literature where, given the direction of recent Burns scholarship, we might expect to find more selections from which to choose.⁵ In Duncan Wu's influential *Romanticism: An Anthology*, the choices ostensibly "indicate [Burns's] range and influence."⁶ In the brief headnote, Wu rightly emphasizes Burns's popularity among the Romantics; however, Burns is represented by only five poems: the first "Epistle to J[ohn] Lapraik, An Old Scotch Bard" (dated Apr. 1, 1785), "To a Mouse," "Man was Made to Mourn, a Dirge," "Tam o' Shanter," and "A red red Rose" (edited from manuscript). Another anthology, *British Literature: 1780-1830* edited by Anne K. Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, has been long-awaited because of its promise to include noncanonical writers.⁷ In a selection decidedly different from that offered by the Norton, this anthology contains eleven Burns poems: "John Barleycorn," "To a Mouse," "Address to the Unco Guid, or the Rigidly Righteous," "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn," "Song—For a' that and a' that," "Auld lang syne," "Such a parcel of rogues in a nation," "A red red Rose," "The Fornicator," "Green grow the Rashes," and "Why should na poor folk mowe."

⁵ Disturbingly, the recently published anthologies considered in this essay contain one-sixth to one-third the number of Burns's poems as Russell Noyes' 1956 anthology *Romantic Poetry and Prose* (Oxford University Press), which includes thirty poems. (In a five-and-a-half-page headnote, Noyes also challenges common Burns myths and discusses in detail the poet's place in late eighteenth-century Romanticism.) If further analysis of anthologies confirms the trend suggested here, a decline in the representation of Burns, perhaps scholars should be concerned that Burns may soon be "decanonized" through neglect, even as many noncanonical writers are being introduced or reintroduced into the canon through the efforts of energetic proponents.

⁶ *Romanticism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 119. In the headnote, Wu offers a rationale for his choices:

"Epistle to J. Lapraik, an Old Scotch Bard" shows Burns's colloquial, lyric style at its most engaging; his advocacy of "nature's fire" reveals a poetic creed that would strongly influence *Lyrical Ballads*. "To a Mouse" (one of Dorothy Wordsworth's favourite poems) underlines Burns's sympathy with the natural world. "Man was Made to Mourn" is a precursor of Wordsworth's "The Last of the Flock" and "Simon Lee," the old man at its centre anticipating such characters as Wordsworth's leech-gatherer. "Tam o' Shanter" may be Burns's most important single work, remarkable for the skill of its storytelling and its energy.

⁷ *British Literature: 1780-1830* (Fort Worth: Harcourt-Brace, 1996) claims a higher proportion of women writers than any other anthology of Romanticism. This anthology seems to slight Scottish poets, however; for example, though John Clare is amply represented by ten poems (only one less than Burns), James Hogg is notably absent. Henceforth *British Literature*.

British Literature also includes excerpts from two of Burns's letters, one to Helen Craik (of 9 Aug. 1790) claiming that "Bewitching Poesy is like Bewitching Woman," the other to Robert Graham of Fintry (of 5 Jan. 1793) in response to charges that he sympathized with the French Revolution (*British Literature*, pp. 359-60). Presenting works in order of their historical production, Mellor and Matlak clearly favor the politically rebellious and bawdy Burns; they omit "Tam o' Shanter" and skim over the love lyrics, erroneously numbering the songs "200 or more" instead of the 370-plus of which we are aware (*British Literature*, p. 355). The biographical headnote perpetuates the "destructive" myths about Burns⁸ that are downplayed, relatively speaking, in the more mainstream *Norton Anthology*. The Norton cites the "Heaven-taught Ploughman" label, but at least frames it with a discussion of the "natural poet" as "a favorite myth of later 18th-century primitivists":

Burns himself sometimes fostered this belief, and rather enjoyed playing the role of the poet by instinct. But in fact he was a well-read (although largely self-educated) man, whose quick intelligence and sensibility enabled him to make the most of limited opportunities. And although he broke clear of the contemporary conventions of decayed English neoclassicism, he did so not by instinct but as a deliberate craftsman who turned to two earlier traditions for his models—the Scottish oral tradition of folklore and folk song, and the highly developed Scottish literary tradition, which goes back to the late Middle Ages.⁹

Compare this to Mellor and Matlak, where Burns is relegated once again to rustic genius, albeit legendary one:

One might apply to Robert Burns, Voltaire's comment on the divine: "if [He] did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him." Burns was an ideal discovery for a democratic, revolutionary age, because he fulfilled the expectations of cultural primitivism: that poets be natural, rather than schooled; that they be isolated from literate culture by either place or class to be free of meretricious aesthetic norms; so that their poetry and its language would flow freely from the heart and its passions, rather than be contaminated by artifice and imitation. Born in a two-room, thatched cottage, Burns did not have to pretend to be a peasant poet. Almost entirely self-educated, Burns could only modestly compete with university-trained poets, when he attempted writing in the King's English. Thus it was a great advantage to him

⁸ See Carol McGuirk, "Scottish Hero, Scottish Victim: Myths of Robert Burns" (*The History of Scottish Literature*, Vol. II, ed. Andrew Hook (Aberdeen, 1987), p. 220. Henceforth McGuirk.

⁹ M. H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 6th ed. 2 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), II, 80.

that scholars and antiquarians were prepared to receive a "natural" bard who would validate their philosophical theories of native genius (*British Literature*, p. 354).

Not only do Mellor and Matlak contradict the long-fought-for and myth-diffusing understanding of Burns as a careful and deliberate craftsman, one who borrowed and adapted the aesthetic principles of esteemed predecessors, but they also resurrect the moniker of "Heaven-taught Ploughman," and identify Mackenzie as "the celebrated author of *The Man of Feeling*" (1771); in one stroke they perpetuate the myths of Burns as primitive artist and sentimental Man of Feeling, as though approving the legendary accounts.¹⁰ Drawing attention to Burns's reputation as a womanizer, they name the historical women who were his "muses," thereby emphasizing his love affairs and illegitimate children. The introductory headnote highlights "The Fornicator," detailing Burns's affair with Elizabeth Paton and their subsequent public humiliation by the church, concluding that here and in "Why should na poor folk mowe?" Burns "makes lovemaking an act of social, political, and even existential significance" (*British Literature*, p. 355).

Much of this is undeniable, and all of it is fascinating, but how does the information contribute to our understanding of Burns's poetry? Unfortunately, what survives in academic memory is mostly anecdotal praise of the variety that Burns critics have fought to overcome. As Carol McGuirk observes, "Burns the person has been 'immobilized' by Burns the myth, metamorphosed into a 'motionless prototype'...who lives on in place of the complex and notably elusive man behind the assumed mask" (McGuirk, p. 219). That myth determines the shape of the Burns monument in the architectural canon, the sacred Hall of Literature.

Relative to the other new anthologies of Romanticism considered here, Jerome J. McGann's *New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse* covers a wider range of Burns's influential works.¹¹ From *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786), he includes "Address to the Deil," "Halloween," "The Cotter's Saturday Night," "To a Louse," and "It was upon a Lammas night." From *Scots Musical Museum* (1790, 1792, 1796) come "John Anderson my Jo," "Song" (Ae Fond Kiss), and "A red red Rose." This anthology also includes works published individually, including *Tam o' Shanter*, *Love and Liberty. A Cantata*, and "Holy Willie's Prayer." McGann's presentation of all material in order of publication, without isolating any author's works, may cast

¹⁰ See Donald Low, ed., *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London & Boston, 1974), pp. 16-17, for a discussion of Mackenzie's mixed response to *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* and the damaging effects of his review.

¹¹ Oxford University Press, 1994.

Burns's influence on the Romantics in its most advantageous light.¹² McGann avoids creating icons. Omitting headnotes, he comments on the works only in the context of concise endnotes; for *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, acknowledged as one of the most important works published in 1786, he defers to Burns's own prefatory note, then provides an extensive gloss and informative annotations.

To navigate the maze of anthologies and to counter the negative effects of iconized criticism, we must insist on recognizing Burns's place in literary history, his profound effect on the development of lyric poetry. The Romantic poets celebrated Burns in reviews, letters, imitation, and poetic tribute.¹³ That they admired him is certain; that they learned from him is more significant. Far more than hero worship, the poets' recognition of Burns's qualities bespeaks their admiration of his poetic skill. Poets as diverse as Wordsworth, Keats, Scott, Byron, Hogg, Joanna Baillie, and Carolina Oliphant (Lady Nairne) gleaned inspiration from Burns that they could not find elsewhere. By shifting emphasis from biography to poetry, with students we may discover—and recover—Burns's innovations. His advocacy of natural language predates Wordsworth's manifesto in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. His musical use of vernacular Scots opened doors for Scottish writers who otherwise never would have picked up the pen. In other experimentation, he adopted and imaginatively transformed poetic conventions, as in his ingenious applications of Standard Habbie. (Why, indeed, should Burns's stanzaic choices not be as familiar as Keats's Spenserian stanza in "The Eve of St. Agnes" or Byron's *ottava rima* in *Don Juan*?) Perhaps most important is his use of the folksong and ballad traditions, for he carried the example of Allan Ramsay, Thomas Percy and David Herd a step beyond antiquarian imitation, into the arena of sophisticated lyric poetry and song. As what McGuirk terms "a self-consciously idealizing reviser" rather than "a neutral transmitter of collective folk tradition,"¹⁴ Burns provided a model for using oral tradition for literary purposes. The poets following him eagerly explored this role for themselves.

In teaching Burns, I continue to experiment with methodology. I have found that students benefit from playing out loud with the Scots language, practicing old-fashioned recitation to experience the musicality of Burns's

¹² Given the tendency among authors of the period to circulate manuscripts among their friends, McGann's emphasis on the historical production of texts (i.e., chronological publication) presents problems of its own. An attempt to place Burns's poetry in its Romantic context, however, benefits from this kind of organization; generally, those who credit his influence the most encountered him first through his published work.

¹³ See Low, *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*.

¹⁴ "Burns, Bakhtin, and the Opposition of Poetic and Novelistic Discourse: A Response to David Morris," *The Eighteenth Century*, 32 (1991), 63.

supplemented, and the prejudices of iconized criticism must be mitigated. I do not suggest that Burns's colorful biography be ignored but that privileging his poetry (as informed by his life) will clarify his place in the development of lyric. Making a monument of Burns does him disservice. A monument is stationary, acted upon rather than acting, whereas Burns's poetry, above all else, celebrates active living.

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