

1998

Moral Sentiment from Adam Smith to Robert Burns

Donald Wesling

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wesling, Donald (1998) "Moral Sentiment from Adam Smith to Robert Burns," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 30: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol30/iss1/16>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Donald Wesling

Moral Sentiment from Adam Smith to Robert Burns

Reconstructing from the 1990s, I shall attempt to think back from the 1780s to attach Robert Burns's moral premises to a line of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy. I say *attach to* and not *derive from*, because along the way I will argue that in the famous Kilmarnock volume (*Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, 1786) Burns wrenches and exceeds the Francis Hutcheson-David Hume-Adam Smith philosophy of approbation, or judgment of the propriety of passions, where the moral agent is seen by the eyes of the community. After 1789 and the events in France, Burns enters the insurrectionary politics of a new era, though more obliquely and hesitatingly than the unknown William Blake and the infamous Thomas Paine. Now, say in 1795 when Burns versifies Paine in "The rank is but the guinea's stamp, / The Man's the gowd for a' that,"¹ he is more concerned with exposing the inequities of rank in his Scottish community than with defining—also aggressively defying—a reputation as a man of correct and modest virtue. By the end of this essay I come round, if like Burns only partially, to Romanticism. Like his near-contemporary Blake, Burns in his poetry is the culmination, and surpassing, of certain eighteenth century traditions. Neo-classical satirists and Romantic singing bards: Blake and Burns are transitionally both, but also neither because their satire is no longer Augustan, and their songs are not yet individualized as lyrical ballads.

¹"For a' that and a' that" in *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), II, 762. Henceforth *Poems*.

The starting point is the double question David Craig asked in *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People, 1660-1830*:

Why was it. . . that the expression of Scottish socialness was carried on so exclusively by the vernacular writers? why did the communications represented by the national poetry stay so insulated from the more refined manners and ideas which the educated classes were learning from France and England?"²

I have no wish to challenge Craig's splendid evidences from Scots poetry, a "distinctively native mode of expression [which] held together through several generations" (p. 20) and culminated in Burns, but I would make the suggestion that Burns lived out his Scottish socialness in and through moral categories he learnt, assuredly, from Calvinist religion—but also (here is where I claim a modest originality) from Scottish philosophers. That is, Burns is the linking figure between the Scottish people and the educated classes, and he works out the linkage through his distorting reference to certain categories of the system of approbation-disapprobation, principally self-control, sympathy, generosity, and remorse. The linkage is one-way, from Burns to educated Glasgow and Edinburgh, because the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment do not mention poetry; and because the Edinburgh people who become or pose as his patrons, after his trip there in 1786, usually make a myth of what he is about.

Burns may not have read every page of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published in the year of Burns's birth, but one page obviously caught his passionate attention in 1783. We do not know why Burns identified with just this passage in Smith, but he did; it was not until later that he committed the deed that provoked condemnation by many members of his community.³ Burns entered in his commonplace book two long sentences where he said "I entirely agree with that judicious philosopher, Mr Smith," and then he wrote a short, rather horribly conventional blank verse poem about the embittering sentiment of remorse.⁴ His views, in the poem and related prose, entirely follow Smith's Section II, Chapter 2, "Of the Sense of Justice, of Remorse, and of the consciousness of Merit," on the painfulness and sense of social isolation of remorse, where our

²David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People, 1660-1830* (London, 1961), p. 20.

³On May 22, 1785, Burns's daughter Elizabeth (his "dear-bought Bess") Paton was born, but it was not until June 25, 1786, that he appeared before the Kirk Session and then made the required appearances before his congregation for the sin of fornication with Jean Armour. On Burns's behalf it should be recalled that his offer of marriage was refused by Jean's father. It was not at all uncommon among the peasantry of eighteenth-century Scotland for a couple to delay marriage until pregnancy occurred.

⁴The sentences on Smith, from the *First Commonplace Book*, are printed as a headnote to "Remorse" (*Poems*, I, 37).

guilt is deepened by the knowledge that our crime has ruined another person, and where we learn the need, in Burns's phrasing, for "a proper penitential sense of our misconduct" and "a glorious effort of Self-command" (*Poems*, I, 37). Burns appears to have been bowled over by the second-last paragraph of Smith's chapter, where Smith gives a splendid moral-psychological account of the stages of remorse in the violator, who is self-banished from society and then ricochets back from solitude into the "presence of mankind" to beg protection from the judges who have condemned him. The poem's reference to the torment of a "burning Hell" seems to be Burns's own image, but he takes directly from Smith the sense that remorse is the "most dreadful"⁵ of sentiments, that it comes from involving innocent others in folly, that the terror of punishment needs to be met by penance and firm resolve—what Burns in the last line of the poem calls "magnanimity of soul." I mention this explicit Burns-Smith connection, in a poem Burns himself did not print and whose merit is only as a symptom, because we can generate from the terms in this poem what is most important of Smith's moral system; then we can show how in the Kilmarnock volume Burns uses Smith's categories to judge himself and those who would judge him.

Remorse is not simple regret, but more like shame and guilt in its acceptance of responsibility for injuries to others. Remorse is directed inward, because one holds oneself to blame; it would seem, though neither Smith nor Burns says this, a self-indulgent sentiment, wherein the human agent is more concerned with its esteem in its own eyes than with the victims of its folly. Remorse wards off censure from others by first inflicting it upon oneself; such dramas of self-interest are typical of Burns, as we shall see.

In the paragraph just following where Adam Smith offers his disturbing description of remorse, the philosopher examines how the "opposite behavior"—that is, generosity—"naturally inspires the opposite sentiment" (Smith, p. 85). Performing a generous action, giving to another rather than taking, is worthy of the approbation of an impartial judge, and the generous person is "secure that he has rendered himself worthy of [the] most favorable regards" of all mankind (Smith, p. 85). Generosity is not antagonistic to self-love, if we wish to inspire in others, about ourselves, the sentiments of approbation or gratitude, or if we wish to avoid blame, censure, or punishment. Of all human virtues, generosity is most useful to other persons. The tenderness of humanity is the virtue of a woman, Smith unkindly says (Smith, pp. 190-91), while generosity is the virtue of a man who has greater self-denial, self-command, and a fuller sense of propriety. Generosity, magnanimity, and justice command a high degree of admiration (Smith, p. 167). In allowing magnanimity to decline into a general sense of benevolence, we have perhaps lost the full urgent Enlightenment concern for the dignity of one who can learn from the community's disapprobation, and wisely judge how and

⁵Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford, 1976), p. 85. Henceforth Smith.

when to despise an advantage. Justice is the most useful to society of all these virtues. Smith says, "though it may be awkward and pedantic to affect too strict an adherence to the common rules of prudence or generosity, there is no pedantry in sticking fast to the rules of justice" (Smith, p. 175); this because justice maintains the integrity of the social rules themselves in their general applicability to all persons.

Those are some leading value-terms of Smith's system, categories he shares with his Scottish predecessors in the philosophy of approbation, Hutcheson and Hume. Earlier than Smith, Hume in his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), had held that "virtue is whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation"—and vice the contrary;⁶ both Hume and Smith determine moral approbation by qualities as they are agreeable to others, and both make fellow-feeling, or sentiment or sympathy, a main constituent of their moral philosophy. Smith's originality involves developing the system of regard, amplifying the relationships of the sentiments, emphasizing the mediating role of sympathy for others as we calculate our position in relation to them, and notably theorizing the role of a real or imaginary impartial spectator—whose opinion we might take as standing for the community's. Believing that self-control is the capability around which all the other passions gravitate, Hume and Smith are moral conservatives who applaud cool behavior, even as they elaborate a theory of the passions; for them humans can be purposive and rational in their emotional lives.

Why bother to outline this classification of the passions? It is always of value to inquire how subjectivity is fitted into discourse, and Hume and Smith are distinguished contributors to a European problematic that is part of the fate of feeling in the West. In the 1980s, Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1981, 1984) rejected the Enlightenment project of Hume and Smith because of the disappearance, there, "of any connection between the precepts of morality and the facts of human nature," and the inadequacy of their notion of sympathy as a philosophical fiction to bridge the logical gap.⁷ In Winter 1996, *New Literary History* built a whole issue around a programmatic essay by Tzvetan Todorov, who takes Smith with Rousseau and Hegel as the great Western philosophers of the social dimension of our experience.⁸ Todorov defends moral recognition, in the eyes of the community, against what he calls the "self-mutilating" (p. 14) monotony of current scholarship's obsession with a conflict over power. So Smith has not been forgotten in serious recent work. Still, the mapping of the

⁶David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), ed. J. B. Schneewind (Indianapolis, 1983), p. 85.

⁷Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, 1984), p. 56 (quotation), p. 49 (on inadequacy of sympathy).

⁸Tzvetan Todorov, "Living Alone Together," *New Literary History*, 27 (Winter 1996), 1-14.

relationships of the passions is a frankly archaic side of Smith's book, and my purpose in returning to it is not to denounce or promote Smith but to show a pattern of behavior in Burns's *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*.

This great book opens with an abject Preface, and ends with the imagined epitaph of a poet, entirely Adam-Smithian in its invocation of fellow-feeling, denunciation of unchastity, and last-stanza hope for the italics-emphasized quality of "*self-controul*" (*Poems*, I, 247). The contents of this book, between these wobbling-tone brackets, often lead us to think that Burns is a combustible person who would say anything. There is the element of danger and instability. From Smith, Burns apparently drew reinforcement for his impulses to self-command, and permission for his impulses to sympathy. His book contains many magnificent peaks of sentiment, profound and quotable, such as lines that are straight out of Smith though strikingly transformed by context:

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!
("To a Louse"; *Poems*, I, 194. Italics are Burns's)

Who else but Burns would have seen that, and who else could have used it for a distinctively Scottish socialness?

The person who lacks it most, most eagerly supplicates self-control. Burns in his 1783 poem "Remorse," worried about his reputation, has already the developed anxiety that will persist to his dying words—on how his character will be attacked as soon as he dies. It is this anxiety of being in the eyes of the community that predisposes Burns to the moral philosophy of Smith, where he sees his weakness chastised and also his possible redemption through self-command. His weakness, he well knows, is for the most part a specifically sexual emotional volatility, what he calls the "*softer flame*" in the last-page "Bard's Epitaph" of the Kilmarnock volume (*Poems*, I, 247). Like David Hume, who in one of his essays declared that the "affection of gallantry is natural in the highest degree....as generous as it is natural,"⁹ Burns was more apt than Smith was, or than we are, to forgive and wish forgiven sexual follies and crimes.

Carol McGuirk puts the general point well when she affirms that "to be candid, even feckless, in one's emotional responses was central to Burns's idea of being heroically human."¹⁰ She thinks Burns, in his inability to pin down a stable identity, is like James Boswell, that wavering Scot who needing something obdurate cultivated in Samuel Johnson a model and interlocutor of supreme definiteness—except that Burns had no Johnson. Burns, says McGuirk, exposes his "vast social unease" (see pp. 86-8) in his letters, not in his poems, which after

⁹David Hume, "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," in *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 132-3.

¹⁰Carol McGuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens, GA, 1985), p. 129.

all are very secure and subtle in their presentation of character-types and in their firm familiar sense of who may be the addressee of the utterance. I would extend the "vast social unease" to the poems, and will argue that Burns's *Lowland*, laborer-farmer experiences of class and gender, mediated through moral categories he partly learned from Smith, permeate the *Kilmarnock* volume as well. The unease is no place more evident than in the structure of experience I have already called "warding-off." In "Remorse," Burns inflicted punishment on himself in order to duck the disapprobation of his community; in the satirical and familiar-epistle poems of the later 1780s, where misanthropy is the polar opposite of sympathy, he excoriates others, including others not known to him personally, like King George III. The person who craves self-control most eagerly identifies the want or excess of self-control in others; those vulnerable to censure, censure first. In many of the poems of the 1780s, within and without the 1786 volume, Burns is the virtuoso of the preemptive insult.

Burns had twenty years as a writer. He began writing songs at 16 under the combined incentive, he said, of love for a girl and competition with the poem-writing son of a laird. He worked largely as a satirist and familiar-epistle poet to the age of twenty-seven, when his breakthrough to publishing and to Edinburgh high society, in 1786, put him in touch with the wider intellectual community in Scotland. Then he spent the decade to his death working largely as a writer and re-writer of Scottish songs. The songs Burns arrives at, or ends with, effortlessly find a language anterior to anxiety of class and masculine desire, and previous to propriety, esteem, and the regard of community. Those like David Craig and Angus Calder, who would connect Burns to the Scottish folk tradition through the songs, are perhaps the critics least likely to see Burns's linkage with the other, educated tradition through the language of approbation in satires and epistles.¹¹ To study the language of approbation, we must focus on the work other than songs. We should remember that contest with the laird's son, whose deep meaning I interpret as inaugurating the intention of literature, which hoists Burns from his social and moral milieu, puts him into articulate conflict with the monologic Calvinists of Ayr and Irvine, obliges him to read Adam Smith and identify himself in a paragraph on remorse, obliges him to read Milton and identify with Satan's magnanimity, and puts him into a passive-aggressive struggle with the dying institution of patronage.

There are four places to look for the structure of moral sentiment in Burns.

First, a conspectus of many of the issues concerning Burns in the eye of the community comes from "The Brigs of Ayr" (1786), where the poem as a whole sets the bridges arguing in their own voices, the new against the old, a forensic debate of eras that is possible to orchestrate because it is in the first instance raging in Burns's own mind. Part of the author's self-assignment here is to work

¹¹For David Craig, see Note 2; for Angus Calder, see his "Descriptive Model of Scottish Culture," 2, 1 (1995), 1-14, esp. p. 10.

through the problem of gaining a patron, here John Ballantine to whom the poem is dedicated, without becoming a sycophant. The poem opens with self-naming as a "simple Bard," a frequent awkward propitiatory rhetoric in Burns, with possibilities for taunting, as to say, I'm "rough at the rustic plough" (*Poems*, I, 280), but see what such a one can write!

Second, if a Calvinist humanism related to honest labor and individual freedom surfaces in Burns's thought after 1789, as Liam McIlvanney argued in *History Workshop Journal*,¹² a conventional Calvinism is earlier evident in his many references to the devil. Through these references, religion is both respected and taunted; religion needs to be attended to in order to be corrected. There is not only the famous "Address to the Deil" in the *Kilmarnock* volume, but also the violently sarcastic "Address of Beelzebub" where in his own voice the devil urges further excesses of Scottish aristocrats, as they ruin the lives of working people. There are many other references to the devil, mostly in passing like the "Poor devil" who is forced to eat a French ragout instead of a proper sheep's stomach in "To a Haggis." These devils are treated humorously, but Beelzebub gets some good lines, and there are enough devils in varied contexts to suggest the poet fears and admires the energy in Satan's challenge to authority. Even in rejecting the devil, Burns is talking to or as the devil, skirting the darkness. The devil may, in Burns's reading of Milton, have magnanimity and self-control, but assuredly Satan lacks sympathy, generosity, gratitude, fellow-feeling, justice and all other virtues. Speculatively and ironically, to talk to or as the devil tries out a denial of the moral sentiments of Adam Smith, the Scottish Enlightenment, and the religious leaders of the day.

Third, the meeting place of established religion, personal sexual error, and poetry is always a place of anxiety where the theory of moral sentiments is brutally tested. Here is the second stanza of "A Poet's Welcome to his love-begotten Daughter":

Tho' now they ca' me, Fornicator,
And tease my name in kintra clatter,
The mair they talk, I'm kend the better;
E'en let them clash!
An auld wife's tongue's a feckless matter
To gie ane fash (*Poems*, I, 99).

The poem is tender toward the daughter ("fatherly I kiss and daut thee") and angrily articulate against the priests who condemn the poet; Burns will turn the disapprobation into approbation by transposing it to a literary context: blame is fame. Smith, who is a stickler for chastity, would not approve, but Burns is improvising on—taunting—the notions he has inherited of the mode of regard. As

¹²Liam McIlvanney, "Robert Burns and the Calvinist Radical Tradition," *History Workshop Journal*, 40 (1995), 133-49.

a poem containing the same elements but with a radically different logic and tone, I would point to Burns's "Address to the Unco Guid, or the Rigidly Righteous" where after baiting his accusers he ends by asking that they "gently scan": ask motives, ask about remorse, wonder to what extent any of us may judge a sovereign other:

Then at the balance let's be mute,
We never can adjust it;
What's *done* we partly may compute,
But know not what's *resisted* (*Poems*, I, 54).

Besides being exact as prosody and tight as logic, this is an appeal to the moral calculus, and takes ethical questions to the edge of religious faith. "Unco Guid" begins as preemptive insult and ends, unpredictably, in an urgent morality inhabited by Søren Kierkegaard, not Adam Smith.

Finally, the generation after 1780 was the last generation of literary patronage—that scheme of rewards where social and literary approbation are knit together. The practice became unworkable when, increasingly, the booksellers' market took over. Signs of breakdown of this practice are all over Burns's work; one who believes "the Man's the gowd" cannot help mocking the part of himself that wants to be patronized, given praise, and given a job in the Excise. "A Dedication to G.H. Esq.," from the *Kilmarnock* volume, is a letter poem in couplets where Burns swears he will engage in no bowing, flattering, and begging, but by denying this he has raised the thought. Then he ends by imagining Gavin Hamilton (G.H. of the title, his rich letter-receiver) is broke, "as poor a dog as I am" (*Poems*, I, 246): the least convenient argument if he wishes to get Hamilton's financial help. The other outrageous example of a patronage poem off the rails is "A Dream," also from the 1786 volume, a birthday poem in fifteen stanzas for (and spoken to) George III. This is often dismissed by critics in a sentence or two, but it is a very impressive social poem—in fact, to my mind the greatest poem of *lèse majesté* in any language. Not only must the King of Great Britain listen to 135 lines in Scots dialect; the King must also have rehearsed for him his loss of the American colonies and his inability to control his own family. Speaker and addressee are on one level, in a calculated insulting familiarity. Perhaps here, in poems about patronage that diminish his possible patrons, Burns most exceeds the confines of Adam Smith's elaborate scheme of approbation-disapprobation.

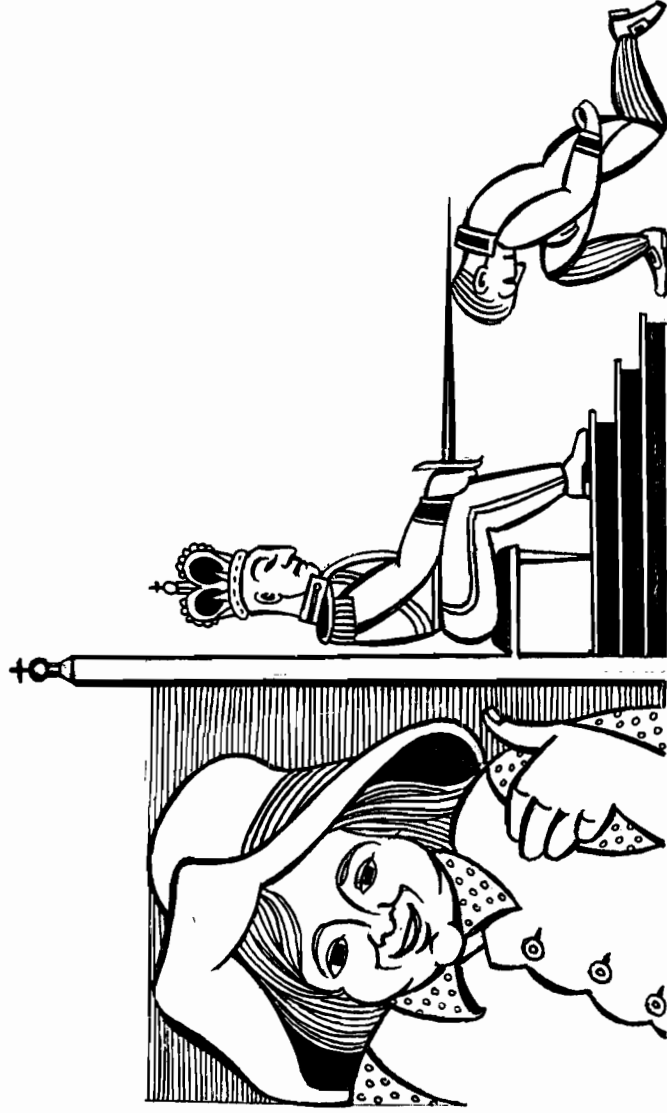
Smith followed *Moral Sentiments* with his far more influential master-work *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776; here, leaving moral sentiments behind to study capitalist markets, he inquired into the economic motives for human actions. Later in 1790, the year of his death, he published a revision of *Sentiments* with additional materials in Part VI, section ii (2.12-18), where he registered his shock at civil faction in the French Revolution—the overthrow of a whole social order

based on what were for Smith merely abstract ideas.¹³ This thoroughly Edmund-Burkean position in 1790 casts a light back on a limitation that was always there in the *Sentiments*, namely a tendency for the economically secure person to assume that the manners and institutions of society are appropriate to the deepest needs of all persons. Smith, with his settled belief in rank, overlooks the questions of inequality that torment Burns, and in this respect, however haltingly, Burns makes the turn to Romanticism and modern society while Smith does not.

Approbation is in the eye of the community, but who is the community? Burns forces the question; Smith need not. The community of Scottish socialness is not the implicit order of Smith. Rank is not of the essence but ornamental: "The rank is but the guinea's stamp" ("Song—For a' that and a' that," *Poems*, II, 762). Burns, it seems, found a slippage at the center of Smith's philosophy, but he did not point it out or make the issues explicit. In the 1780s he worked it out in satires and epistles, anxiously exceeding Smith's sympathy with his misanthropy. In the 1790s he worked it out in a few lyrics about brotherhood, like "For a' that and a' that," exceeding Smith's sympathy with his radical idea of equality. Earlier I touched on Alasdair MacIntyre's complaint that no one at the time understood the failure of Enlightenment moral philosophy, its separation of conduct from religion. But if my argument is correct, at least one Scots contemporary of Smith in part understood this failure: Robert Burns.

University of California, San Diego

¹³Raphael and Macfie discuss Smith's late revisions in response to the events in France in their Introduction, pp. 18-19.



A King can make a belted knight, a marquis, duke
An honest man's above his might — and a' that ;
----- The man o' independent mind, he looks & laughs at the
A Gray 1996