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Rodger L. Tarr

“Close thy Byron; open thy Burns?”
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Carlyle’s Burns

“I want a hero,” so proclaimed Byron, partly in jest and partly in lament, in *Don Juan*. “I want a hero!” For Thomas Carlyle, locating heroes was never a problem; if absent, he created them; if lost, he resurrected them. One of his most enduring heroes, often lost in the Carlylean *mélange*, was Robert Burns. Why Burns was a hero to Carlyle might appear simple enough. His personal identification with many of the trials and tribulations of Burns made it so. The critical imagination takes flight when one considers that Dumfriesshire borders Ayrshire, that Ecclefechan is only a hammer’s throw from Dumfries, that Carlyle was a mere bairn of six months when Burns died in 1796, or that when Carlyle penned his famous essay on Burns for the *Edinburgh Review* in 1828, he was living on a desolate farm named Craigenputtock, which is just above Dunscore, which in turn is just above Dumfries, a farm which Carlyle in the context of his essay called the “Devil’s Den.”¹ What is more, each made the archetypal journey to Edinburgh in search of literary fortune. Indeed, in reading Carlyle’s essay on Burns, one is struck by how much of it is autobiographical. Carlyle’s Burns is, in many respects, Carlyle’s Carlyle, and this I believe is a key to understanding his reverence for Burns. Carlyle’s first interest is not in Burns the Poet, but rather in Burns the Man. In his *Reminiscences*, for example, he draws a sharp contrast between Burns and his beloved father, James, who once saw Burns outside Rob Scott’s Smithy in Ecclefechan. The two were not alike, muses Carlyle: James Carlyle was a man of “Conduct”; Robert

¹Thomas Carlyle, *Two Note Books* (New York, 1972), p. 129.

Burns a man of "Speculation."² In this telling passage Carlyle has actually drawn the difference between his father and himself: one a man of Conduct, the other a man of Speculation, a distinction that allows him and through him his hero Burns to escape the daunting strictures of Calvinism.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Carlyle concentrates his evaluation on Burns the Man, albeit the well-spring of Burns the Poet. From the outset and repeatedly throughout his essay, Carlyle reminds the reader that Burns was forever at work attempting, more often than not fruitlessly, to reduce his physical poverty, a poverty not engendered so much by Burns's own actions as by the social forces external to him. To Carlyle, Burns was scarcely a product of his own being, but instead that of the "grand maxim of supply and demand,"³ a culture in which Utilitarian margins were valued more than speculative inventions. Burns, says Carlyle, spent "his short life...in toil and penury; and he died, in the prime of his manhood, miserable and neglected," (p. 258) a stranger in a strange land. Burns, Carlyle says later, "wast[ed]" away in a "hopeless struggle with base entanglements, which coiled closer and closer around him, till only death opened him an outlet" (p. 264). To Carlyle, Burns was a victim of fickle Destiny, who with "queenlike indifference" (p. 264) gave him genius but robbed him of will. Already Carlyle has created the legend from whence heroes rise. He appeals to the reader's sympathies for the "ill-starred" (p. 264) Burns, whose spirit we are led to believe was finally and irrevocably bowed before the lions of Edinburgh and the guillotine of *laissez-faire*, in spite of and perhaps because of his speculative genius. Carlyle argues this very point in a letter to Goethe on 25 September 1828: "Perhaps you have never heard of this *Burns*: and yet he was a man of the most decisive genius; but born in the rank of a Peasant, and miserably wasted away by the complexities of his strange situation.... We English, especially we Scotch, love Burns more than any oth[er] poet we have had for centuries."⁴ Carlyle then proclaims Burns superior to Schiller. Whether this is said in earnest or to please Goethe is finally of no consequence to a hero-builder like Carlyle. Facts pale in the light of myth-making. Burns the Man was more than a Poet, he was a Man of Letters, the "most gifted British soul we had in all that century of his."⁵

²Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, ed. C. E. Norton (London, 1887), I, 14.

³Thomas Carlyle, "Burns," *Works*, ed. H. D. Traill. 30 vols. (London, 1896-1899), XXVI, 258. Further references to this essay will appear in the text.

⁴*The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. Charles R. Sanders and K. J. Fielding (Durham, NC, 1970), IV, 407.

⁵Thomas Carlyle, *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, in *Works*, V, 190.

Where Burns is concerned, the "dearly beloved Carlyle,"⁶ as he was later characterized by the *Edinburgh Review* after his lavish toast to Burns at a dinner held for Allan Cunningham in 1831, is relentless in his condemnations and his glorifications. He finds little to credit in J. G. Lockhart's *The Life of Robert Burns*, a "trivial" book he was "to pretend reviewing" (*Collected Letters*, IV, 383). Lockhart and others of his ilk have missed the locus of Burns's life, Carlyle thought, the personal, later epic struggle to become a hero in a world hostile to heroes. Carlyle senses the paradox here. "No man...is a hero to his valet," he opines, "but the fault is at least as likely to be the valet's as the hero's" (p. 259). Continuums of Time and Space, those precious commodities assigned by Kant, are always at work, heaping paradox upon paradox. Why is it, Carlyle concludes, that personal heroes like Burns must die in order to live? Why is it that literary heroes like Burns must suffer the building of mausoleums before their fame is secure? The answer comes clear: "...to the vulgar eye few things are wonderful that are not distant" (p. 259). Irony drips across Carlyle's impressionistic page. It all seems backwards. Heroes should be of this life, not of the next. The social contract suffers when heroes must die to live. Distancing serves neither the body nor the spiritual politic.⁷ The glory of firsthand experience is lost. Worse: Posthumous anecdotal accounts, like Lockhart's, err in their "repeated attempts" and "repeated approximations" (p. 259). Essence is lost in such biographical accounts. Carlyle's frustrations with Lockhart's *Life* curiously parallel his frustrations with the creators of the New Testament, just as his frustrations with the emphasis on the historical Burns curiously parallel his frustrations with the emphasis on the historical Christ. Burns, Carlyle argues, was a man of feeling, the signet of all genuine heroes. He lived; he suffered; and he died. We want to know "why," not "how."

Heroes are real to Carlyle. Burns is real to Carlyle. Burns united the Possible with the Necessary to bring out the *Real*, wherein also lies the Ideal (*Reminiscences*, I, 13). Lockhart's failure, then, will not be Carlyle's failure. Thus, his essay becomes an exemplum on what he believes constitutes biography. He appeals for passion in the face of disinterestedness. He embraces invention. Value is preferable to Fact, Allegory to Symbol. Where Lockhart and Currie and Walker before him fail is that they re-trace rather than re-create. Their biographies are filled with stories, but devoid of parable. Biographers, argues Carlyle, should be meta-historians, not purveyors of simple creed. Carlyle is convinced that the "great end of Biography" is not found in "facts

⁶[John Wilson], "[Carlyle on Burns]," *Edinburgh Review*, 30 (1831), 484.

⁷I am indebted to Carol McGuirk who pointed out to me that Henry Mackenzie in his essay on the "Original Genius" of Burns, 9 December 1786, opens by discussing the difficulty for critics of acknowledging genius in their contemporaries. See *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Donald Low (London, 1974), p. 67. It is unlikely that Carlyle was aware of Mackenzie's essay.

and documents"; rather it is located in the "inward springs and relations" (p. 261). Readers, says Carlyle, echoing Hume, want to know "effect" (p. 261). What impact did the man Burns have upon his society, and indeed what impact did it have upon him? Lockhart fails to answer these questions; indeed, Lockhart fails to approach these questions. Carlyle's socio-moral, almost Marxian, vision of what constitutes biography is couched not so much in the remnants of the past, but rather what the cloth of the present says about the garment of the future. Biography should be inter-, not intra-. Imagination, the meta-fictional relative of invention, is always superior to fact. Carlyle is a Romantic, not a Victorian. And, in the end, Carlyle's Burns and Carlyle's Carlyle gain significantly from such eclectic vision.

Just how precisely Carlyle's essay on Burns contributed to the developing veneration of the poet is, of course, difficult to establish. By 1828, Burns was already legend, made more so by poets and poetasters who penned their experiences in tears before his grave. Yet one could argue that Carlyle's review of Lockhart's *Life* altered the pitch of Burns's reputation, or at the very least it did nothing to damage Burns's increasing popularity among the intellectuals. To put it in another context, Carlyle did not end the reputation of Burns as he did, unwittingly, ten years later when he dismissed and thus sullied the novelist Walter Scott before the same biographical eyes of J. G. Lockhart, whom Carlyle chastises once again for bringing out a "well-done compilation" instead of a "well-done composition."⁸ Scottophiles have never forgiven Carlyle for the damage he inflicted upon Scott, nor perhaps should they. But in the same vein, Burns devotees, I submit, have never given Carlyle proper credit for providing a new vision upon which Burns's reputation might be enhanced, a vision that provided a context for Burns's myriad accomplishments. Consider for a moment some of the language Carlyle develops to embrace his hero Burns.

We are assured that Burns was born in the "most disadvantageous" of times, when the "mind, if it accomplished aught, must accomplish it under the pressure of continual bodily toil...." Yet, Carlyle continues, "through the fogs and darkness of that obscure region, [Burns's] lynx eye discerns the true relations of the world of human life; he grows into intellectual strength, and trains himself into intellectual expertness..." (p. 263). Such protean conclusions, told in the face of Burns's "darksome drudging childhood," could not be more idealistic (Carlyle was reading and translating Saint-Simon at the time), or more inventive (Carlyle was beginning his "Essay on Metaphors," later retitled *Sartor Resartus*, at the same time as well). In his essay on Burns, closely edited by Francis Jeffrey, Carlyle takes Burns by his mortal pre-Romantic bootstraps and catapults him into the ether of Victorian eternity. Carlyle's Burns, re-formed upon the language of the apocalypse, rises from the material dead and ascends into cosmos of the heroic. Even Carlyle is taken aback by his own

⁸"Sir Walter Scott," *Works*, XXIX, 28.

inventive genius, and at one point pauses in mid-thought to say to the reader: "We are anxious not to exaggerate" (p. 263).

Never mind. Carlyle continues to corral the already tethered reader by asserting globally that "We love Burns, and we pity him; and love and pity are prone to magnify" (p. 263). The reader now is a direct participant in the creation of this "New Mythos," this new Burns. We have been fully assimilated. Aesthetic distance, if it ever existed, is gone; no objective correlative is to be found here. Art is life. Carlyle defines Burns by urging the reader past dreary factual discourse. To paraphrase Lavater, Burns in Carlyle's hands is at once nothing and at once all. Carlyle's *Iliad* delivers Burns from the corporeal indignities that plagued him. He reminds us that once the "good...avoid[ed]" Burns (*Reminiscences*, I, 13), largely because of unwarranted, often malicious anecdote. Carlyle seems determined to change the course of Burns criticism. In the face of substance, we are asked to concentrate on essence. And, with a masterful grapeshot of litotes he dismisses proto-Arnoldians everywhere: "Criticism, it is sometimes thought, should be a cold business; we are not sure of this; but, at all events, our concern with Burns is not exclusively that of critics" (pp. 263-4). It is at this point in the essay that Carlyle mounts his most passionate defense of his "Peasant Poet" Robert Burns.

In almost causal brilliance Carlyle walks the reader through "To a Louse," "To a Mouse," and "To a Mountain Daisy," poems "so full of inborn riches, of love to all living and lifeless things! How his heart flows out in sympathy over universal Nature" (p. 265). Working himself into a crescendo of torrid passion, Carlyle observes that Burns "dwells with a sad and oft-returning fondness in these scenes of solemn desolation...." His poetry is not, however, an "Arcadian illusion." The "rough scenes," formed "in the smoke and soil of a too harsh reality, are still lovely to him," and it is over these "the lowest provinces of man's existence he pours the glory of his own soul" (p. 265). Carlyle compares his Peasant Poet to the Classical Æolus who harnessed the "vulgar wind" and changed it into "'articulate melody'" (p. 166). Burns's poems, says Carlyle, are "mere occasional effusions; poured forth with little premeditation..." (p. 266). Here, through allusion to Coleridge and Shelley, Carlyle conflates Classical metaphor and Romantic discourse and thereby assures the already breathless reader that Burns's poems (and songs) were not written for the "literary virtuosos: but instead for the 'unlettered and truly natural' classes 'who read poetry for pleasure.'" Burns's virtue is "his *Sincerity*, his indisputable air of Truth.... He does not write from hearsay, but from sight and experience;...and he speaks forth what is in him" (p. 267). Carlyle's distinctly Wordsworthian views end with predictable passion: "This [writing what one feels] is the grand secret for finding readers and retaining them: let him who would move and convince others, be first moved and convinced himself" (p. 268).

Interestingly, it is at this point in his essay that Carlyle offers a digression on Byron to provide counter-example. Byron's failure, we are assured, is that

he leads readers to "dislike, or even nausea" (p. 269). Unlike Burns, Byron does not create "real men; we mean, poetically consistent and conceivable men" (p. 269). Byron's theatrics, exclaims Carlyle, are akin to the "bawling of a player in some paltry tragedy" (p. 269). Byron's "stormful agonies," "teeth-gnashing," and "sulphurous humour" are marks of insincerity (p. 269). Satan is "Byron's grand exemplar, the hero of his poetry, and the model apparently of his conduct" (p. 315). Burns, on the other hand, is "an honest man, and an honest writer," who is "ever clear, simple, true, and glitters with no lustre but his own" (p. 269), though he too learned too late that "vulgar Ambition will not live kindly with poetic Adoration" (p. 316). Yet, in spite of his capitulation to Mammonism, Burns in Carlyle's next breath is favorably compared to Shakespeare and then to Homer. It could not be otherwise. Even the *Edinburgh Review*, always under the stern editorial eye of the patrician Jeffrey, was unable to check entirely Carlyle's elaborate conceits.⁹ Poets, after all, are prophets of the human condition; their "Ideal world is not remote from the Actual, but under it and within it..." (p. 272). Myth, to Carlyle, is Reality.

Taking into account, then, Carlyle's declared disgust for Byron and his unbridled passion for Burns, I find it curious that his famous injunction in *Sartor Resartus*, "Close thy Byron; open thy Goethe,"¹⁰ does not read "Close thy Byron; open thy Burns," loosely translated "Close thy Cant; open thy Sincerity." My emended declaration would certainly make Carlyle's contextual point more dramatically, and at the very least would have earned him the enduring affection of Burnsians everywhere. Of course, one could make the argument that *Sartor Resartus* is German-like; hence Goethe is more appropriate. Yet such conclusions are faulty. Carlyle's understanding of German idealistic/transcendental philosophy was imperfect at best, and at the writing of *Sartor* there is evidence that he was already moving away from the teachings of Goethe, understood or not. Further, and perhaps more to the point, why is it that Carlyle does not mention Burns by name in *Sartor Resartus*, his most philosophic and allusive work? John Sterling, for one, notes the absence of Carlyle's "favourite Burns" in his famous letter of 29 May 1835 in which he criticizes the excesses of Carlyle's "Rhapsodico-Reflective" style.¹¹

Carlyle's neglect of Burns in *Sartor Resartus*, his most profound, enduring, and influential work, is indeed striking. Perhaps this neglect lies deep in

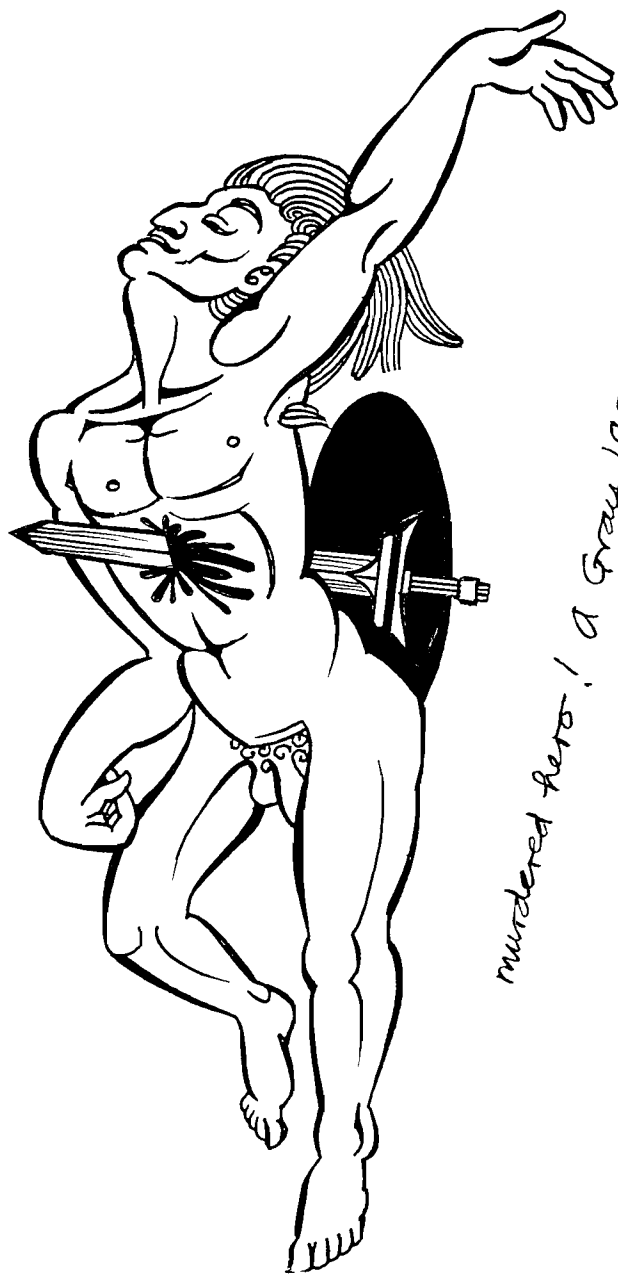
⁹After reviewing the essay in manuscript, Jeffrey urged Carlyle to give up his mystical language and "write to your countrymen & for them." Carlyle rejected Jeffrey's pleadings, which in turn led Jeffrey to editorial excision. See Maxwell H. Goldberg, "Jeffrey: Mutilator of Carlyle's 'Burns'?" *PMLA*, 56 (1941), 466-71, and P. Morgan, "Carlyle, Jeffrey, and the *Edinburgh Review*," *Neophilologus*, 54 (1970), 297-310.

¹⁰*Sartor Resartus*, in *Works*, I, 153.

¹¹Thomas Carlyle, *The Life of John Sterling*, in *Works*, XI, 109.

Carlyle's Scots-born psyche, somewhere in that "Devil's Den" Craigenputtock just above Dunscore. Perhaps, just perhaps, Carlyle did not mean the accolades advanced in his essay on Burns. Fortunately, we are rescued from such fantasies by Carlyle himself. A decade later as he closes his lecture, "The Hero as Man of Letters," in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, Carlyle adopts once again his messianic cloak, declaring Burns a "giant Original Man" who took his "rank with the Heroic men." To which Carlyle adds, with an air of excitement born from incredulity: "...and he was born in a poor Ayrshire hut" (V, 188). Unable to contain his exaggerations, Carlyle through evocative language and descriptive metaphor paints the image of Christ into the character of Burns: "The largest soul of all the British lands," he concludes, "came among us in the shape of a hard-handed Scottish Peasant," only to fall victim to the Edinburgh "Lion-hunters" who were his "ruin and death" (pp. 188, 194). A number of years later Yeats paused over similar sentiments, an echo of The Book of Revelation, in "The Second Coming." Perhaps we should pause as well. Veneration after all is the stuff that dreams (and heroes) are made of. The bicentenary celebration of Burns is confirmation of such dreams and such hero-worship.

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murdered Aero! a Gray 1996