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Mary Ellen Brown

“That Bards are
Second-Sighted is Nae Joke”:
The Orality of Burns’s World and Work



Robert Burns is remembered as much for his personality and character as for his poetry and songs. It is a bit ironic that as an individual his roots in a peasant class are extolled, even emphasized; however, as a creative artist his debt to written, elite precedents are principally cited. Both are probably somewhat extreme positions: as an individual Burns both represented and transcended his class and station of birth; as a poet and songwriter he followed the example of earlier writers while being influenced simultaneously by the oral literary forms which flourished in the milieu of his birth.

The stress on Burns's literary sources is a natural and explicable one: those who study Burns as literary historians and critics see him and his work through the dimension of time and often in comparison with other written work--the tangible records of the artistic endeavors of the past; and he does seem to have been the culmination of the Scottish literary tradition and to have profited greatly from exposure to English literature. Burns himself lauded various of his predecessors and tried, in so much as was possible, to read the best of past artistry and to keep abreast of current efforts. But the primary matrix in which he lived was not so totally a literate one, for much of the artistic communication he experienced with his contemporaries was oral and aural: the ballads and folk-songs he imbibed from multiple hearings¹ and the legends and

other narratives which punctuated convivial conversation, reflecting a grassroots view of the past, deep belief, or perhaps comic description, were a more pervasive and typical--if, unfortunately, ephemeral--part of the everyday world in which he lived than the poetry of Robert Fergusson or Thomas Gray. The oral artistic creations, cumulatively built and recreated, passed on from generation to generation, stable in general form but varied in individual particularization were his birth-right and a natural and universal part of the general society in which he lived--where traditional custom, belief, and practice dominated and overt creativity and innovation were not sought. This traditionally oriented way of life and the oral artistic communications it supported and sustained played a far more significant role in shaping and determining the directions of Burns's artistry than has been recognized.

It is perhaps instructive to divide Burns's work into two parts--that which came before Edinburgh and that after.² Before Edinburgh Burns was in many senses a local poet, communicating to a local audience about aspects of their shared traditional life. Thus the poetry of this period deals primarily with folk life,³ with description of the rural existence, resulting sometimes in frankly occasional pieces; and Burns makes his larger comments about life against this backdrop, which was his milieu and naturally became an important part of his creative view. The example of Robert Fergusson no doubt was influential. The publication of the Kilmarnock edition in 1786 was the culmination of this very local poetry which drew its inspiration from the region of the poet's birth. Edinburgh marked a transition to a far more aware and conscious artistry.⁴ Burns was cognizant of some of the overt reasons for his recognition in the capital city--his humble origins which, nonetheless, did not limit his literate communications but which made him stand out, even then, as a representative example of what a rural "peasant" might become. By extension, a nation of Burnses might arise and aid in Scotland's own identity crisis, acute in the 18th century, following the Union of the Crowns in 1603 and more importantly the Union of the Parliaments in 1707. And it was in Edinburgh, away from his usual environment, that Burns achieved the proper perspective to discern consciously the breadth and depth of the oral artistry of his milieu, as traditional artistry which flowed from the people and was transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth. In his own way, he saw this as an important part of Scotland's past which should be saved as one way perhaps of reaffirming Scotland. Nationalism contributed both to his fame in Edinburgh and to his own subsequent artistic and creative endeavors. In Edinburgh he was brought into contact with the force of national-

ism and through his collaboration with James Johnson in *The Scots Musical Museum* sought to make himself the anonymous bard of Scotland by celebrating the oral and traditional artistry, long passed on. He wrote the Earl of Eglinton that "there is scarcely anything to which I am so feelingly alive as the honor and welfare of old Scotia; and as a Poet I have no higher enjoyment than singing her sons & daughters."⁵ After Edinburgh the oral or verbal traditional inheritance became his primary preoccupation as he collected, edited, and imitated songs for the *Museum*, for his own manuscript collection later called the Merry Muses of Caledonia, and his work towards the end of his life for George Thomson's *Select Collection*. "Tam o' Shanter" too reflects this involvement with and interest in oral art, built as it was out of current legendary traditions and written to accompany a drawing of Alloway Kirk published by the antiquary Francis Grose in *The Antiquities of Scotland*. Burns's own deepened interest in antiquities led him to acquire familiarity with virtually all extant books of Scottish music--texts and tunes--and strengthened his communication with Robert Riddell, an amateur antiquary, and such Edinburgh enthusiasts as William Tytler of Woodhouselee and later his son Alexander Tytler.

Like all writers or creative artists, Burns was not an isolate, nor can he be realistically divorced from the milieu in which he lived. He was a product of what had gone before and what was and his artistry often lay in uniquely blending, juxtaposing, or representing this. He was a part of a long tradition.⁶ When T. S. Eliot reminds us in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that all artists are a part of a tradition and are representatives of it, he is referring essentially to literary and elite aesthetic traditions.⁷ I must also add--any artist is, as well, a product of a cultural tradition. And it is Burns's cultural tradition which has been slighted and frequently overlooked in most serious studies of him and his work.

The rural Ayrshire into which Burns was born might be described as a modified peasant society: it was rurally based and dominated by near subsistence level agriculture; its people were essentially homogeneous and thus shared a body of knowledge, mostly oral. In other words, it was a society in most aspects characterized by a preference for the old ways, for what had always been, the "tried and true." This society often provided the background and informing principle for Burns's writing; and the oral artistry found in such a society shaped both the form, content, style, and process of much of his work. These traditional manifestations of culture--folkways or folk life and oral literature--might be broadly called *folklore*.

In a multiplicity of ways, Burns's art was affected by folklore: the traditional life and art available to him. The content of his poems and songs overtly drew upon the repeated themes, made reference to known locale as well as to facets of the shared oral art; utilized phrases, lines, and stanzas extant in the tradition; described custom, practice, belief, and milieu; and repeatedly used the structures and forms of the traditional oral artistry circulating in his milieu. Not only was the content and often the structure of his work drawn from the folkloric milieu, but his very medium of communicating--the Scots vernacular--and stylistic devices such as repetition and frequent use of refrain assert his cultural heritage. And in several works he replicates the traditional matrix for artistic communication. Scottish traditional life and especially its oral and artistic forms dominated Burns's own aesthetic perspective and formed, frequently, the very basis for his creativity.⁸

Burns was not the only local person writing poetry and songs; in fact he is undoubtedly related to a local poet tradition which sprang up in the eighteenth century. A more literate tradition, based in large measure initially on the once oral poetic and song tradition justly celebrated in the works of such persons as David Herd, Walter Scott, William Motherwell and later in the nineteenth century Francis James Child, the local poet tradition grew organically from the earlier oral form of artistry which produced such tauted anthology pieces as "Sir Patrick Spens" and "Lord Randal, My Son." As literate art replaced aspects of the oral and pride in authorship replaced anonymity, the printed word gained prestige as media of communication over the ephemeral, though exceedingly artistic, oral performance. The local poet replaced the oral bard, assuming his subjects, his forms and structures, his metrical patterns and rhyme schemes. But his literacy enabled him to draw as well from earlier and contemporary written art, and thus the local poet tradition may well provide the important bridge between the great Scottish oral artistry and the literate vernacular tradition with roots going back to Makars. In its developing stages, the local poet tradition, which persists today, shows clearly its affinity with the earlier oral art and its artistic milieu.

Burns then was not an oddity in writing poems and songs. He knew others who shared his predilection for rhyme and exchanged verse epistles with several--notably John Lapraik. And his audience was conceived of originally as a local one, interested both in a confined geographical area and in current events and issues--thus most of his early poetry. Additionally, his audience was known to him; it included his friends and his neighbors; and as often as not he read or recited his pro-

ductions aloud to them or circulated them in handwritten manuscript. The audience he addressed--their politics, ethos--no doubt affected what lines he added or cut, aptly illustrated in his lengthy correspondence with Mrs. Dunlop and the manuscript versions he frequently sent her. This reflects an attitude more akin to oral communication than to the impersonality of the written literary world where the reading public is only generally known and where literary text is fixed and unchanging. Burns's audience always retained a specific quality for him, even when he was no longer a local, but more nearly a national, poet. The principal edition of his work, the 1786 Kilmarnock edition, was essentially aimed at a relatively local audience, though his Preface looked beyond it. This concern with the conception of audience is characteristic of oral communication; it reflects a need for immediate response, for give and take. Like the folksongs and narratives which were passed on in small, local, mostly homogeneous groups, Burns's poetry and songs sought that same milieu either with a more contemporary subject or in his songs an analogous--sometimes similar--subject, tune, or form.

If his audience was local and shared his world, that matrix of necessity found its way into his creative work as an essential ingredient in facilitating communication. He began with the shared world, the familiar which he knew and to which he--as are all outstanding writers--was extraordinarily sensitive. This in no way should imply that he was but a describer, an ethnographer, for he selected and focused on aspects of the shared world as a base from which to draw broader conclusions and generalizations about the human condition. And in transferring reality to creative work, whether destined for oral or written transmission, his own unique personality and background--albeit shaped by the common tradition--contributed to an equally individual perception of the world. Nonetheless his depiction of the world held in common with his audience lay within the recognizable parameters of general experience and formed the essential understood grounding which often effectively drew the readers or hearers of his work into the poem or song and provided them with a basis for the response all artistic endeavors strive for if they are indeed media of communication. Burns wrote about what he knew using familiar forms and familiar language as well as familiar content. From a specific account of aspects of religious controversy rampant in Burns's day in "The Ordination"⁹ and in "The Kirk of Scotland's Garland--a new Song" (#264) to a depiction of a gathering of three friends, including himself, in "Willie brew'd a pack o' maut" (#268), Burns drew on his own environment for surface content. The obvious and identifiable are especially blatant in his frankly occasional and extemporary poems and

songs, which, like "At Roslin Inn" (#158), remark on the obvious and record an impression; they remain not as a great testimony to his poetic power, but as testimony to his spur-of-the-moment poetic ability.

The celebration of the immediate, often a shared experience, links Burns with both the earlier ballad and song and the later poet-laureate traditions. Many of his occasional poems are said to have been off-the-cuff extemporaneous productions. Some were composed in writing and remain today incised in windows of various inns he frequented. Other works he created mentally, in memory, and later, after a long journey on horseback perhaps, put in writing.¹⁰ The oral sound rather than the written text may well have controlled his composition.¹¹ His use of proverbs and sayings from oral tradition,¹² phrases from traditional songs,¹³ not to mention the whole stanzas and refrains which provided the basic creating materials for many of his songs indicates a form of composition at least akin to oral formulaic composition.¹⁴ Multiple versions of some of his works may also reflect a concept of artistic product which does not insist on fixity of text; such disregard for a definitive text is another element linking Burns to the world of traditional oral composition. But it would be inaccurate to deny him the literacy that was his and the reflection that must have been a part of his creative production. For Burns, in many ways, is a kind of transition figure--an individual who straddled both the literate and the non-literate worlds and his own method of composition reflected compositional approaches from both worlds--the oral and the written.

He composed and wrote, of course, as all artists do--at least in part--in order to communicate, perhaps to influence. But he created as well to provide solace for himself:

However as I hope my poor, country Muse, who, all rustic, akward, and unpolished as she is, has more charms for me than any other of the pleasures of life beside--as I hope she will not then desert me, I may, even then, learn to be, if not happy, at least easy, and south a sang to sooth my misery.---¹⁵

And he created to relieve tension--as entertainment--as part of life. Creating, composing was for Burns as for oral poets past and present organically a part of life he led:

Leeze me on rhyme! it's ay a treasure,
My chief, amaist my only pleasure,
At hame, a-fiel, at wark or leisure,
The Muses, poor hizzie!

Tho' rough an' raploch be her measure,
 She's seldom lazy.

Haud tae the Muse, my dainty Davie:
 The warl' may play you [monie] a shavie;
 But for the Muse, she'll never leave ye,
 Tho' e'er sae puir,
 Na, even tho' limpan wi' the spavie
 Frae door tae door. (LL. 37-48, #101)

And poetic and song form, set off as distinct from daily discourse, allowed Burns to use the form and its rules to write of love for women whom he could not ordinarily address in that manner and to write of subjects, especially bawdry, he might not so widely discuss in polite conversation. The functions of his art were many.

Burns's focus in his early work on local topics, his frequent use of traditional material, his acceptance of the fluidity of texts, his stress on audience and the oral socialization of his own works, and his articulated views on the function of composition--all suggest Burns's strong ties to the traditional and largely oral matrix of late eighteenth-century Ayrshire. This is not meant to diminish his relationship with the literary world with which his contact was not primarily through social interaction but rather through print. He read; he felt a debt to Allan Ramsay, to Robert Fergusson and others--both Scottish and English. And it was through the creative medium--writing and related print--he shared with them that his work lives today. But the literary and literate world was superimposed on the traditional and oral world which formed the very basis of his being. It provided him with forms and structures, the content and contexts on which to build. Scottish tradition and Scottish oral artistry were his birthright.

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NOTES

¹ August Angellier in *Robert Burns, La Vie, Les Oeuvres* (Paris, 1893, 2 vols.) pointed to this when he said, "But underneath this scholarly poetry there existed a popular poetry which was very abundant, very vigorous, very racy and very original," (Jane Burgoyne's selected translation in *Burns Chronicle and Club Directory*, 3rd Series, Vol. 18 [1969]).

² Angellier earlier suggested this division and I agree with him that Burns's work prior to Edinburgh was dominated by depiction of the world around him. After Edinburgh, Angellier indicates that Burns relied less on the specific incidents and more on general sentiments. I concur again but the significance of this move to generality is in Burns's nationalism.

³ Hans Hecht in *Robert Burns: The Man and His Work* translated by Jane Lyburn (London, 1936), p. 86 discusses Burns as a *Heimatkunst*.

⁴ The subscription list for the Edinburgh edition, including as it did the members of the aristocratic Caledonian Hunt, illustrates his radically altered audience.

⁵ J. DeLancey Ferguson, ed., *The Letters of Robert Burns* (Oxford, 1931, 2 vols.) I, 64, #74.

⁶ Most critics and students of Burns take some stance towards his relationship with previous work. Hecht (p. 29) suggests that Burns was the culmination of a tradition, but he speaks of a literary rather than cultural inheritance.

⁷ See T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London, 1950), pp. 47-59.

⁸ These three levels of folkloric utilization in literature, I have called product, medium, and situation; see "The Study of Folklore in Literature: an Expanded View," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 40 (1976), 343-51. In actuality, the three are parts of a whole: a situation exists in which people communicate through a medium--such as language and style--producing a product; in other words, the interaction of individuals results in a product, often a text. Students of folklore in literature have placed considerable stress on parallels or corroborative materials as proof that the material identified is folklore.

⁹ All references to Burns's work are to James Kinsley, *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* (Oxford, 1968). Item numbers will be given hereafter in the text. "The Ordination" is #85.

¹⁰ See for example "The Banks of Nith" (#229) and his comment in Ferguson, Letter #265, that it was composed as he jogged along the bank.

¹¹ James Cameron Ewing and Davidson Cook, eds., *Robert Burns's Commonplace Book 1783-1785* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1965), p. 39.

In describing the inspiration for his fragment "Altho' my bed were in yon muir" (#22) said to be an imitation of "a noble old Scottish Piece called McMillan's Peggy," Burns comments, "I have even tryed to imitate, in this extempore thing, that irregularity in the rhyme which, even judiciously done, has such a fine effect on the ear.--"

¹² "Worth gaun a mile to see" is from "The Humble Petition of Bruar Water to the Noble Duke of Athole" #172.

¹³ See "For lake o'" from "[Lines written on a Banknote]" (#106).

¹⁴ See the general work on this subject by Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (New York, 1971) and a book which presents specific application of this theory to the Scottish scene, David Buchan's *The Ballad and the Folk* (London, 1972).

¹⁵ Ewing and Cook, p. 42.