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Kenneth Simpson

The Legacy of Flyting

She tauld thee weel thou was a skellum,
A blethering, blustering, drunken blellum

Burns's narrator in "Tam o' Shanter" reproduces the very terms of Kate's harangue to Tam. She gives him a real flyting. The flyting, following so soon upon the epigraph from Gavin Douglas's *Eneados*,¹ links Burns's poem to the native Scottish poetic tradition. With such features Burns is paying tribute, but he is also staking a claim to a place in a line of continuity; in effect, he is attempting to authenticate his poem in terms of a tradition of Scottish poetry. The affinities are striking in terms of technique: Burns inherits the expressive energy of the Makars.

The direction of expressive energy towards abuse, often by means of alliterating vernacular terms, is a feature of Scottish life and Scottish writing. Kate's tirade can be traced back to the noisy public quarrels which seem to have been a feature of Scottish street-life in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Such quarrels could get out of hand, and the frequency of reference to such in the burgh records of the time serves to support Priscilla Bawcutt's claim that "the literary flyting had a context in real life."²

¹Gavin Douglas, *Eneados*, VI, Prol. l. 18.

²Priscilla Bawcutt, "The Art of Flyting," *SLJ*, 10 (1983), 8. The most obvious descendant of the flyting as public haranguing of an individual is the West of Scotland (and

Flyting, as both social phenomenon and literary genre, is part of the Scottish tradition of reduction. In Scotland the value of expending expressive energy on reduction, insult, or humiliation has never been questioned; indeed the status of such activity has always been high. In sixteenth-century Scottish poetry Kurt Wittig found "dozens of vituperative poems . . . in which merely to let fly at someone appears to be valued for its own sake."³ Boswell records the view of John Donaldson, the painter, of the citizens of Edinburgh that there was "among the better sort a deal of ill-bred coarse raillery and freedom of abusive speech."⁴ Ironically, Boswell himself had been "much diverted with [Donaldson's] abusing Edinburgh." Meeting in London with his old friends, the Kellie family, Boswell placed his new-found identity of London sophisticate at risk by giving free rein to just such Scottish characteristics: "I let myself out in humorous rhodomontade rather too much."⁵ The presence or the influence of flyting has been identified in various post-Union Scottish authors. For T. S. Eliot, Byron's dedication of *Don Juan* to Southey "was not English satire at all; it is really a flyting and closer in feeling and intention to the satire of Dunbar."⁶ The tendency of Scott's lower-order characters to flyte one another has been widely noted. Of Carlyle's writing, Wittig commented, "the wilful comparisons in *Past and Present*, the contrasts in *Sartor Resartus*, are carried to the same grotesque extremes of logic as in the traditional flytings."⁷ In twentieth-century Scottish poetry the influence of flyting is most evident in the work of Hugh MacDiarmid. The concern of this paper is principally with the legacy of flyting as reflected in the poetry of the eighteenth-century vernacular revival.

First, the principal features of flyting have to be identified. Priscilla Bawcutt has pointed to the abundant evidence in early literature to suggest

especially Glasgow) "sherracking/shirracking." There is a notable example in *No Mean City* by Alexander McArthur and H. Kingsley Long (London, 1935), pp. 47-63; see also Edwin Morgan's poem, "King Billy."

³Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh, 1958), p. 123.

⁴*Boswell's London Journal 1762-1763*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1959), p. 211. Henceforth *London Journal*.

⁵*London Journal*, p. 68.

⁶T. S. Eliot, "Byron," in *From Anne to Victoria*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (London, 1937), p. 618.

⁷Wittig, p. 242.

that "the power to hurt was regarded as an important function of poetry."⁸ Man has long stood in awe of the power of language: language may be used to render things as they are, but, more excitingly and also more alarmingly, it may be employed to extend the frontiers of the mind, or it may be used to humiliate. These aims converge when Dunbar in "The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie" warns that he may be provoked to "rhyme and rais the feynd with flytting." There is a similar threat in the examples cited by Wittig:⁹ the rook-bard in Richard Holland's "Howlat" threatens to "rhyme" his listeners if he is not given food and drink, and in a sonnet Montgomerie encourages his audience to acquiesce in his demands by mentioning his ability to "eternize" their names. The possessor of such a power has an ambivalent status in the community: he prompts both admiration and fear. This was as true of the eighteenth century as of earlier times. David Sillar commented of Burns,

His social disposition easily procured him acquaintance; but a certain satirical seasoning, with which he and all poetical geniuses are in some degree influenced, while it set the rustic circle in a roar, was not unaccompanied by its kindred attendant—suspicious fear.¹⁰

In various respects flyting is informed by paradox. The most obvious is the sense in which apparently spontaneous expressive energy is channelled through a form and a mode suggestive of ritual and formality. In the literary flyting the poet exploits the full resources of his technique to create an illusion of spontaneity. The contest in invective offers the perfect opportunity for a display of technical virtuosity. Each participant expects as much of his opponent, and the contest in vilification presupposes mutual respect. Respect or even friendship between the participants, as Wittig noted, "enables words to be used, and things to be said, that otherwise could not, without bloodshed."¹¹ As with all ironic techniques, the manipulation of the response of the reader/listener is of crucial importance. Part of the effect of flyting derives from the possibility that some readers/listeners will believe that the insults are meant literally. The joke is shared between poets and "sophisticated" listeners, and part of it is at the expense of the "naive" lis-

⁸Bawcutt, p. 5.

⁹Wittig, p. 123.

¹⁰Robert Burns, *Life and Works*, ed. Robert Chambers; rev. William Wallace, 4 vols. (Edinburgh and London, 1896), I, 68-9.

¹¹Wittig, p. 76.

tener: he takes everything literally, whereas the "sophisticated" listener relishes the ever-mounting hyperbole and keeps the score. Ironic stratagems are also prominent in the work of the poets of the vernacular revival, as will be seen.

Another important aspect of the flying legacy is the poet's consciousness of his role as poet. In the literary flying the poets habitually demean each other's technical prowess. Paradoxically, in this activity—as throughout—all the resources of their medium are exploited—rhythm, internal rhyme, and highly expressive sound patterns where alliteration is the essential vehicle of vituperation: "Revin, raggit ruke, and full of rebaldrie/Scarth fra scorpione, scaldit in scurrilitie."¹² The flytings are characterized by the poets' skilful control of the language level, a particularly effective technique being the reductive juxtaposing of formal and vernacular diction, as here, for example: "Criant *caritas* at duris *amore Dei*/Barefut, brekeles, and all in duddies up-dost" ("Kennedy to Dunbar," ll. 383-4).

In the flytings, energy and momentum find expression through pattern. There is, for instance, the patterned or formulaic use of such features as berating one's opponent in respect of his appearance, qualities, behavior, ancestry, place of origin, and poetic ability, and a prime vehicle of invective is the insulting application of animal epithets. But the very momentum of the language itself assumes a pattern. G. Gregory Smith commented that "the completed effect of the piling up of details is one of movement, suggesting the action of a concerted dance or the canter of a squadron."¹³ Extravagant details build to a climax; momentum, once established, must run its course; logic, taken to its limits, can culminate in illogicality or outright absurdity; a coarseness that might be seen as a property of realism can induce extremes of fantasy.

Allan Ramsay was certainly conversant with the flying tradition, and he included several flytings in *The Ever Green*. His own poetry reveals the extent of the legacy. In the introduction to their edition Kinghorn and Law rightly observe, "Ramsay plainly enjoys the sound of his own voice, and these poems [on Maggy Johnston, Lucky Wood, Lucky Spence, and John Cowper] seem part of an older oral tradition."¹⁴ Ramsay inherits the prac-

¹²"The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy," ll. 57-8.

¹³G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (London, 1919), p. 15.

¹⁴Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson, *Poems*, ed. Alexander M. Kinghorn and Alexander Law (Edinburgh and London, 1974), p. xiii. Further references will appear in the text.

tice of using sound as a means of allocating emphasis and modulating sense, and he is adept at juxtaposing aureate diction and vernacular terms. His second Answer to William Hamilton in "Familiar Epistles between Lieutenant William Hamilton and Allan Ramsay" includes this stanza:

Quisquis vocabit nos vain-glorious,
Shaw scanter skill, than *malos mores*,
Multi et magni men before us
 Did stamp and swagger,
Probatum est, exemplum Horace,
 Was a bauld bragger.
 (p. 28)

Then, with a subtle irony, he uses the vituperative vernacular of the flyting mode to describe the flyting of those whose very activity will shield Hamilton and himself and allow them to maintain their friendly bantering comradeship:

Then let the doofarts fash'd wi' spleen,
Cast up the wrang side of their een,
Pegh, fry and girn wi' spite and teen,
 And fa a flyting,
Laugh, for the lively lads will screen
 Us frae back-biting.
 (p. 28)

In Ramsay, too, one finds the poet's awareness of himself as poet. Thomas Crawford has noted Ramsay's "essentially dramatic attitude to his material."¹⁵ That material includes his own status and function as poet. His self-portrait in "An Epistle to Mr. James Arbuckle" follows the formula of the flyting (physical description, "fabric of my mind," his opinions, etc.). In a poem characterized by a sense of both irony and self-irony Ramsay succeeds in presenting a personal poetic manifesto. As he defines his religious views negatively by means of ever more comically particularized extremes, so he also rejects rhetorical and poetic formulae by feigned adherence to them. Similarly, "An Elegy on Patie Birnie" begins with a joke at the expense of the form itself—"In sonnet slee the man I sing"—and it is truly both "sly" and "skilful". The subject-matter incorporates an attack on the Italian *castrati* tenors and a concomitant vaunting of both the manliness and the musical prowess of the Scots. Here the expressive invective of the flytings is plainly influential. Foremost among Edinburgh street-musicians, Patie Birnie

¹⁵Thomas Crawford, *Society and the Lyric* (Edinburgh, 1979), p. 172.

takes precedence over Apollo in an account which shows that Ramsay has inherited from the Makars both the fondness for the absurd and the skill in the reductive juxtaposition of terms. The poem ends with the speaker proclaiming that "a' Britain" should know that Patie is not dead. This is one of several of Ramsay's poems in which there are suggestions that he is deliberately employing the resources of the native tradition to assert the distinct identity of Scotland within the Union.

The poetry of Robert Fergusson reveals an even more sophisticated and innovative use of traditional techniques. Fergusson is particularly successful in establishing and maintaining relationships—often to ironic effect—between modes and forms and their subject-matter. In "To the Tron-Kirk Bell" the speaker immediately embarks on flyting the bell. Allegedly deafened by it, he uses the flyting's resources of sound to create a rival cacophony:

Wanwordy, crazy, dinsome thing,
 As e'er was fram'd to jow or ring,
 What gar'd them sic in steeple hing
 They ken themsel',
 But weel wat I they coudna bring
 War sounds frae hell.

What de'il are ye? that I shud ban,
 Your neither kin to pat nor pan;
 Not uly pig, nor master-cann,
 But weel may gie
 Mair pleasure to the ear o' man
 Than stroak o' thee.
 (p. 365)

It is a fine irony: just as the flyting poets vie with one another, countering extreme with even greater extreme, so Fergusson's persona would outdo the bell in its own terms.

In "The Daft Days," his first experiment in the use of Scots, Fergusson affects to employ the stock pastoral mode only to show its inadequacy as a vehicle for rendering the distinctive life of Edinburgh. By the energetic use of that most Scottish of stanza forms, the Standard Habbie, Fergusson reinforces his plea for Scottish culture (and here again there is a rejection of Italian music). In the penultimate stanza Fergusson lures the reader into thinking he has lapsed into formal poetic diction. This is introduced, however, only to be undermined by the conclusion in the highly expressive vernacular which both represents and is the true reality of city life:

Let mirth abound; let social cheer
 Invest the dawnin' o' the year;

Let blithesome Innocence appear,
 To crown our joy;
Nor Envy, wi' sarcastic sneer,
 Our bliss destroy.

And thou, great god of *Aqua-vitae*!
Wha sways the empire o' this city,
Whan fou, we're sometimes capernoity,
 Be thou prepared
To hedge us frae that black banditti,
 The City Guard.
(pp. 122-3)

In Fergusson is the culmination of the attempt, initiated by Ramsay, to employ Scottish forms, techniques, and diction (often in juxtaposition with English or classical) as part of a cultural manifesto. The flyting mode is used in "To the Principal and Professors of the University of St. Andrews, on their superb treat to Dr. Samuel Johnson" precisely because it is alien to Johnson. The fierce attack on Johnson and those who would pander to such foreign tastes combines with the lively endorsement of Scottish fare to form a strong proclamation of Scottish values, literary as well as culinary. Once again, the chosen means reinforces the point. The sustained expressive energy, and especially the hyperbole which is both extravagant and brilliantly controlled—these are the direct descendants of the flyting mode. Fergusson here both asserts and exemplifies the distinct nature of the Scottish poetic tradition.

For proof of Burns's familiarity with the flyting tradition one need look no further than the letter which J. De Lancey Ferguson termed "a literary exercise in the traditional Scottish form of a 'flyting.'"¹⁶ It begins,

Thou Eunuch of language—Thou Englishman who never was south the Tweed—Thou servile echo of fashionable barbarisms—Thou Quack, vending the nostrums of Empirical elocution—Thou Marriage-maker between vowels and consonants on the Gretna-green of Caprice—Thou Cobler, botching the flimsy socks of bombast Oratory—Thou Blacksmith, hammering the rivets of Absurdity—Thou Butcher, embruing thy hands in the bowels of Orthography—Thou Arch-heretic in Pronunciation . . .

This is essentially flyting as sport. One of Burns's prime motives in writing thus to William Cruikshank is the relishing of his own stylistic exuberance.

¹⁶*The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. De Lancey Ferguson; 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), II, 93. Henceforth *Letters*; references will appear in the text.

The mode is truly that of the flyting, with ever-accelerating rhythm and wild extravagance, but the language is mainly the formal English of those who are Burns's ostensible target. Here again, technique is being used to subtle ironic effect.

Of Burns's poems, it is the dramatic dialogues which bear most obvious witness to the influence of flyting. "The Brigs of Ayr" is peppered with sharp vernacular exchanges as the bridges flyte each other. In "The Two Dogs" Caesar assaults Luath with deliberately overstated harangues on the plight of the peasantry in order to try to force agreement from him, and he uses the same technique in his attack on high society and the Grand Tour. In the Addresses and the Epistles, poems notable for fluctuation in tone and range of voices, Burns proves to be skilled in the use of the flyting voice within a dramatic sequence. The attitude of Burns's persona in "To a Louse" incorporates both raillery—"Ye ugly, creepin blastet wonner/Detested, shunn'd by saunt an' sinner"—and the condescension typical of sentimental benevolism. Such is Burns's expertise in the modulation of voice that two tones, historically and artistically far distant from one another, can co-exist without incongruity.

Two types of flyting were distinguished by Priscilla Bawcutt—those with "a serious polemical purpose" and those which, though employing similar techniques and language, "are not so fired by personal rancour or fervour for a cause."¹⁷ Burns's poems and his letters reflect the legacy of each type. The former was an obvious medium for the Burns who could write of "fair, candid ridicule" (*Letters*, II, 345), and who threatened the opponents of William McGill with "the faulcons of Ridicule" and "the bloodhounds of Satire" (*Letters*, I, 175). It was Burns's responsiveness to injustice that prompted him to employ the flyting vein in his religious satires. "The Ordination" includes an ironic attack on the New Licht party. Thomas Crawford notes that "as in all his best satires, he slips into the imputed point of view of those to whom he is opposed."¹⁸ This technique reaches a peak of effectiveness in the "Address of Beelzebub" where the legacy of vernacular invective is most keenly felt. The letters, too, abound in examples of Burns's skill in vituperative attack, though there the medium is generally standard English. At times he introduces alliterating abuse and animal epithets into his letters in formal English. For instance, to Mrs. Dunlop he exclaims, "Your Criti-

¹⁷Bawcutt, p. 10.

¹⁸Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh, 1960), p. 63.

cisms, my honored Benefactress, are truly the work of a FRIEND. They are not the blasting depredations of a canker-toothed, caterpillar-Critic."¹⁹

Equally, the more playful strain was irresistible to the Burns who acknowledged, "I cannot for the soul of me resist an impulse of anything like wit" (*Letters*, I, 392). It is the momentum of that impulse which dictates the harangues of such poems as "Scotch Drink" and "To a Haggis." Such poems lend strength to Wittig's claim that Burns is closer than Fergusson to Dunbar in respect of the spirit of rollicking extravagance and lacks Fergusson's degree of rational control.²⁰ The letters, once again, offer equivalent evidence: there are several in which Burns relishes his sheer inventiveness, letting the momentum run its course before returning to practical matters. A vigorously inventive tirade to Peter Hill, for instance, ends with the acknowledgement, "Now for business" (*Letters*, II, 9).

In the case of Burns there is one further important dimension to the legacy of flying. I refer to the way in which the spirit of flying is set to serve the expression of the psychological needs of the writer. There are poems which exemplify, and letters which recognize, the therapeutic function of self-expression. Burns wrote to Moore, "My Passions when once they were lighted up, raged like so many devils, till they got vent in rhyme; and then conning over my verses, like a spell, soothed all into quiet" (*Letters*, I, 141). Raillery is functioning as a means of catharsis. The strident anti-intellectualism which surfaces in the first "Epistle to J. Lapraik," "Epistle to Dr. John Mackenzie," "On Willie Chalmers," and "Letter to James Tennant, Glenconner," comes strangely from the pen of one who, by his own admission, devoured books and whose letters testify to his depth of knowledge across a range of subjects. Is this note the manifestation of the poet's awareness, or perhaps even resentment, of his increasing distancing from his rural origins?²¹ Does Burns sense, and indeed feel keenly, the fact that by being poet he is not just admired and feared but also alienated? It says much that after leaving Edinburgh in the early summer of 1787 Burns wrote a letter to William Nicol entirely in the vernacular (*Letters*, I, 120). For all the letter's rich comic vein, it also fulfilled a deeper therapeutic function, I suspect.

¹⁹*Letters*, I, 323. Cf. Smollett in similar vein, both in his own letters and in the fulminations of Matt Bramble in *Humphry Clinker*.

²⁰Wittig, p. 210.

²¹Cf. "I was placed by Fortune among a class of men to whom my ideas would have been nonsense," in Prefatory Note to the Abridgement of the First Common-place Book, *Letters*, II, 126.

Flyting is "an act of revolt." In the form of ritualized street-quarrel it could become so intense as to constitute an offence. In its poetic form it became a public or court performance in sixteenth-century Scotland. Each of these versions suggests that flyting functions as a temporarily liberating device for both performers and observers. In the constraining atmosphere of post-Union Scotland, however, raillery, often culminating in fantasy, takes written form and offers a private, sometimes deeply personal, release. In the case of Burns the whole process has become internalized, and a mode which originated as sport or polemic has assumed a crucial role in the drama of the self.

There are examples of flyting in various literatures, but it seems to have particularly thrived in Scotland. It may well be, as Wittig suggests, that it is not surprising that a people "passionately addicted to argument . . . should have evolved this highly dramatic way of expressing themselves."²⁵ The enduring attraction of flyting, like the propensity of Scottish writers to role-playing and the adoption of personae, may be explained at least in part in terms of compensatory means of dramatic expression in post-Reformation Scotland where dramatic performance was discouraged by the Church. In seeking other factors to help explain the Scottish addiction to argument, raillery, and the strenuous advocacy of views which one does not actually hold, I choose to avoid the minefield of racial characteristics and opt instead for equally hazardous speculation. It is generally agreed that one of the beneficial effects of the Reformation in Scotland was the establishment of parish schools whereby a relatively high standard of education became publicly available. Yet until well through the eighteenth century Scotland comprised a large number of small and fairly isolated communities. If the questing mind is thwarted by physical constraints then one outlet for intelligence is in playing devil's advocate. Boswell was to capitalize upon this talent to great literary effect in the management of his subjects. In his *London Journal* he wrote, "I must remark that I have a most particular art of nettling people" (p. 182). The record of the outcome is some of the finest English prose of the eighteenth century. For that most chameleon of Scots the experience was psychologically rewarding; equally, another Scottish writer had found an outlet for dramatic impulse:

Goldsmith said I had a method of making people speak. "Sir", said I, "that is next best to speaking myself". "Nay", said he, "but you do both" (*London Journal*, p. 288).

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 76.

The dialogue that was the late-medieval contest in invective is the ancestor of Boswell's subtly managed dialogue in which he plays one part and shapes the other.

On the debit side of the legacy of flyting is the undeniable fact that Scots' facility in raillery means that the reductive note is struck rather too readily. But perhaps the explanation lies in Scottish history. In the movement that was to culminate in Romantic idealism various elements interact, principally empiricism, libertarianism, sensibility, and nationalism. The wholeness of identity and the forward-looking spirit—essentially the optimism—of Romantic idealism were by then outwith the experience of Scots. Nationalism could find only vicarious or sentimentalized expression: Scots might, like Boswell and Byron, identify with freedom movements elsewhere. Scottish life, and its reflection in Scottish literature, tended (indeed tends still) to be characterized by fluctuation, sometimes startlingly sudden or erratic, between harsh realism and fantasy, between sentimentality and the put-down. Denied an ideal or goal, Scottish writing tends to relish the expression of extremes for their own sake.

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