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Dietrich Strauss

Some Reflections on Burns's Command of English

A letter to George Thomson in which Burns touched upon questions of ballad and song writing contains his famous remark on his relation to English: "I have not that command of the language that I have of my native tongue.—In fact, I think that my ideas are more barren in English than in Scotch."¹

This judgment, referred to in discussions on Burns's literary potentialities again and again, has proved very influential with regard to the evaluation of the poet's use of the English language. Another influence pertaining to the same matter originated from very early assessments by reviewers of the merits of his poetry. Indeed some of the first of his critics urged him to compose in English. Occasionally this advice, probably more or less well-meaning though condescending, was put forward indirectly, yet in absurd phrasing such as that of James Anderson who in his contribution to *The Monthly Review* in December 1786 stated, "We much regret that these poems [those of the Kilmarnock Edition] are written in some measure in an unknown tongue,"² and who, when citing parts of Burns's poems, defended "the freedom to modernise the orthography a little...to render it *less disgusting* to our Readers south of the Tweed" (Low, p. 73; italics mine).

¹*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985) II, 318. Henceforth *Letters*.

²Unsigned review by James Anderson in *The Monthly Review*, LXXV (Dec. 1786); quoted in Donald A. Low, ed., *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1974), p. 72. Henceforth *Low*.

As Burns followed this hint to write more in English but comparatively reluctantly, the conclusion, drawn by these early critics, seems to have been that it was beyond Burns's poetic gifts to express himself convincingly in English—and this opinion, at first formed subconsciously, was soon to gather momentum.

It was reinforced by judgments, arising—as far as linguo-aesthetic and poetic convictions went—from quarters apparently opposite to those pro-English, neo-classical admonitions just mentioned. Matthew Arnold powerfully set the tone for further Burns criticism: “The real Burns is of course in his Scotch poems.”³ The effect, however, of statements such as the latter was, if perhaps again partly indirectly produced, a conclusion by reversal, surprisingly similar to the earlier pronouncements of the neo-classicists: Whatever Burns expressed in English was of inferior quality.

This judgment has prevailed to the present day, producing sad consequences, among which not the least is the fact that the admirable scholarly achievements of J. De Lancey Ferguson and G. Ross Roy, editors of Burns's letters, have as yet not received the attention of literary critics which they certainly have deserved. It is my intention to inquire into the validity of this predominantly negative assessment.

First one has to recall the educational atmosphere in which the poet was brought up in his parents' home, and the ensuing linguistic implications. In the second surviving letter to his cousin in Montrose and in his autobiographical letter to Dr. Moore he has, of his father, drawn the picture of a very conscientious educator, in his own words of “the ablest of instructors” (*Letters*, I, 21). From the only surviving letter which he, not yet twenty-three years old, directed to his father (Dec. 27, 1781; *Letters*, I, 6-7), we must conclude that the recipient was a man who undoubtedly appreciated that kind of English which was then elevated epistolary style. That his father had a surprising ability to express himself in an English that was at the same time clearly phrased and remarkably devoid of Scotticisms can be demonstrated by several documents. For instance *A Manual of Religious Belief, Composed by William Burnes...for the Instruction of His Children*⁴ has come down to us, a little catechism composed in the spirit of Arminianism, a Christian creed that defied some of the strict dogmata of Calvinism. This manual is preserved in the hand of John Murdoch, sometime teacher of young Robert; therefore the assumption that Murdoch may at least have been partly responsible for its more or less correct orthography and may also have influenced its phrasing here and there, is not

³*The English Poets, Selections with...A General Introduction by Matthew Arnold*, ed. Thomas Humphry Ward (London, 1880), p. xli.

⁴*A Manual of Religious Belief, Composed by William Burnes...for the Instruction of His Children*, ed. with biographical Preface by James Gibson (Kilmarnock, 1875). Henceforth *Manual*.

altogether unlikely. The concept of composing such a text betrays a spirit that strives to come to grips intellectually with its beliefs, and to do so in as intelligible and satisfying a form as could be achieved.⁵ We also know of two letters written by William Burnes, both well composed in the standard English of his time. One is to his relative James Burness of Montrose, containing family news and expressions of cordial affection. The other is a short note to someone who was to help with the harvest. What deserves to be recorded is that a poor Scottish farmer was capable of such written performances. Indubitably he profited from the fact that Scottish peasants were better educated than the English, due to a more intense acquaintance with the English Bible. The lack of Scotticisms in William's writing is an indication of the quality of the linguistic culture in the family in which the poet grew up, a culture which accepted *English* as the dominant medium of serious communication.⁶ John Murdoch put it thus:

[William Burnes] spoke the English language with more propriety (both with respect to diction and pronunciation) than any man I ever knew, with no greater advantages; this had a very good effect on the boys, who began to talk and reason like men, much sooner than their neighbours (*Manual*, p. xvii).

Next, the effects of the schooling Burns received have to be considered. In terms of length of time it was certainly only a tiny fraction of what pupils of the higher classes then obtained. However, it apparently concentrated to a large extent on the subject of English. Burns himself, when remembering his school days, noted, "I made an excellent English scholar; and against the years of ten or eleven, I was absolutely a Critic in substantives, verbs and particles (*Letters*, I, 135). And his brother Gilbert later told Mrs. Dunlop:

[Robert] soon became remarkable for the fluency and correctness of his expression, and read the few books that came in his way with much pleasure and improvement; for even then he was a reader when he could get a book.⁷

So quite evidently, apart from his schooling, autodidactic efforts soon added to the results of the teaching he was given, and before long independent reading

⁵See James Muir, "William Burnes's, 'Manual of Religious Belief,'" *Burns Chronicle*, 2nd Series, 8 (1933), 79.

⁶Avoidance of Scotticisms among the literati was of long standing—it will be recalled that the author of *The Minstrel*, James Beattie, had published in 1779 and reissued in 1787 *Scotticisms, Arranged in Alphabetical Order, Designed to Correct Improprieties of Speech and Writing*, leaving little doubt about where he stood on the subject.

⁷*The Works of Robert Burns: with an Account of his Life, and a Criticism on his Writings*, ed. James Currie. 4 vols. (Liverpool, 1800), I, 60-61. Henceforth Currie.

completely outdid in quantity and quality what he had become acquainted with at school. What finally became the astonishing circumference of his mental library of English authors cannot be even outlined here. It must suffice here to refer the reader to earlier editors and biographers and to sum up what they all testify: the poet's astounding wealth of knowledge in the realm of English literature. A man, whom we could—in twentieth-century language—call a professional, James Gray, Latin master in Dumfries and teacher of Burns's children, later headmaster, deacon and scholar, who occupied himself with, among other subjects, Indian languages, put it as follows:

to the very end of his life, reading was his favourite amusement. I have never known any man so intimately acquainted with the elegant English authors. He seemed to have the poets by heart. The prose authors he could quote either in their own words, or clothe their ideas in language more beautiful than their own.⁸

In this context it is interesting also to register what Gray had to say about the poet's educational activities:

I have frequently found him explaining to this youth [his eldest son Robert], then not more than nine years of age, the English poets, from Shakespeare to Gray, or storing his mind with examples of heroic virtue, as they live in the pages of our most celebrated English historians (Peterkin, I, lxxxv).

Abounding witness of his intimate and active relationship with the English language is, of course, to be found in his letters. More than 700 are known and it is perhaps no bad guess that their total number originally amounted to well over a thousand. What is more, however, he was proud of his "epistolary performances" as he wrote to Henrietta Don in March 1787 (*Letters*, I, 103), and later in the same year he confessed to Dr. Moore "I kept copies of any of my letters that pleased me" (*Letters*, I, 141). This did not prevent him from occasionally viewing some of these "epistolary performances" in a rather critical light. So, again in 1787, he finished a letter to Robert Muir:

If I could think on any thing sprightly, I should let you hear every other post; but a dull, matter-of-fact business like this scrawl, the less & seldomer one writes, the better.—

Among other matters-of-fact I shall add this, that I am and ever shall be,
My dear Sir, your obliged

Rob' Burns (*Letters*, I, 151)

Coming back to Burns's statement to Thomson that he had no great command of English, this was not the only one he made on the topic. In the auto-

⁸*The Life and Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Alexander Peterkin. 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1815), I, lxxxvi. Henceforth Peterkin.

biographical letter to Dr. Moore in which he had proudly declared, as noted above, that he had "made an excellent English scholar" (*Letters*, I, 135), he also, rather surprisingly, noted with reference to a young girl that he had once fallen in love with: "My scarcity of English denies me the power of doing her justice in that language; but you know the Scotch idiom, She was a bonie, sweet, sonsie lass" (*Letters*, I, 137). How are these divergences to be explained? As to the latter of the two utterances just cited, it contains in itself a satisfying answer. Everyone will admit that descriptions which are emotionally highly charged may often be more convincing when expressed in a dialect rather than in a standard language.

But there is more to it. There can have been few contemporary authors more honest than Burns, and he was too alert not to realize that the concept of the "Heaven-taught ploughman," to use Henry Mackenzie's phrase,⁹ fitted rather well into an aspect of the spirit of the age, that of Rousseau's noble savage, and that this concept strikingly resembled the "current Anglo-Scottish primitivist theory" (Low, p. 6), developed under the influence of Macpherson's *Ossian*. His intelligence was too highly developed not to realize the advantages connected for him with this circumstance: the advantages of figuring as "an obscure, nameless Bard," who was "Unacquainted with the necessary requisites for commencing Poet by rule."¹⁰ This concept of his poetic rôle, unrealistic though it was—probably just because of that fact—obviously needed the assumption that in his rustic dialect he was much more at home than in the standard idiom English. And apparently this assumption had now and again need of repeated pronouncement.

Moreover some linguistic considerations are necessary here, the relevance of which was perhaps instinctively seen by educated Scots of the eighteenth century, but never precisely uttered, though it has to be admitted that Burns, in the passage cited, speaks of English as "the *language*" and of Scots only as "my native *tongue*."¹¹ From the point of view of linguistics, of course, Scots had well before Burns's time lost the status of a fully developed language. Ample proof of that assertion is the fact that the poet, who was so fond of his native idiom, used it extremely rarely as linguistic medium in the more than

⁹In his review of Burns's Kilmarnock edition in *The Lounger* (Dec. 9, 1786); quoted in Low, p. 70.

¹⁰Preface to *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock, 1786), pp. iv, iii. Henceforth Kilmarnock.

¹¹One must not make too much of any distinction Burns made between the words "language" and "tongue." In the Preface to his 1786 edition, for example, he says that, "he sings the sentiments and manners, he felt and saw in himself and his rustic compeers around him, in his and their native language" (Kilmarnock, p. iii). On other occasions Burns did speak of Scots as a "language" too (e.g., *Letters*, II, 324).

700 letters that have come down to us. An exception can be seen in the lines he sent from Carlisle to William Nicol in June 1787. Can it have been that the experience of suddenly finding himself in England kindled some nostalgic feelings in him, so that he felt the need to communicate in Scots? Be that as it may, the contents of the letter, phrased in a supremely humorous way, is of no intellectual relevance whatever, it deals with the qualities and peculiarities of the poet's horse and the charms of two young women. Whenever he discussed serious matters in prose, and this he did abundantly in his letters, he literally had no choice but doing it in English—Scots having by then virtually lost the capacity of serving as linguistic medium for intellectual prose. Scots had well before the eighteenth century sunk to the socio-linguistic status which Heinz Kloss in 1952 termed "Halbsprache"¹² (semi-language), i.e. to an idiom that can only be used in some of the functional spheres in which a fully developed language would be operative. In the case of Scots that was the sphere of poetry—with limitations, typical for many "Halbsprachen," even in that field, although Scots poetry had the prestige of having produced venerable literary achievements in the past. Of the functional data concerning the consequences that followed for its prestige and status Burns was apparently fully aware, though he did not discuss the matter theoretically to any extent.

When one asks what Burns was capable of, when communicating in the sphere of English, one obviously has to take into consideration not only written but also oral performances. Though the latter are, with personages of the past, often not traceable at all, with Burns circumstances are, fortunately, quite different; we have many witnesses of them. The general tendency of what they testify to is the same, though they differ in a few particulars.

First perhaps as to the range of subjects on which he touched in conversations. It is in this respect that one important witness differs from the others, if only to a certain extent. Robert Anderson, though on the whole eulogizing with regard to Burns's oral capacities, was, as far as this aspect goes, at least partly critical:

Though his knowledge in many instances was superficial, yet he conversed on every subject in a manner that evinced the strongest marks of genius, sagacity, and acuteness, combined with the most powerful sallies of wit, sarcasm, and satire. With acuteness of intellect, which might sometimes be termed shrewdness, he possessed a still more useful talent, Good Sense, which enabled him instantly to discern what was right or wrong in literature, morality, and the general affairs of the world.

* * *

Jealous of the independence of his mind, which was a prominent feature in his character, he spoke in a peremptory and decisive tone upon almost every subject of dis-

¹²Heinz Kloss, *Die Entwicklung neuer germanischer Kultursprachen von 1800 bis 1950* (München, 1952), p. 118. In later publications Kloss replaced "Halbsprache" by several more differentiating terms.

cussion. The pride of genius or the affection of singularity often led him wantonly to oppose received opinions, and pertinaciously to maintain the most unreasonable positions.¹³

Josiah Walker saw the same trait of conversational demeanor in quite a different light:

His conceptions and expression...on all subjects were as remote as possible from common places. Though somewhat authoritative, it was in a way that give little offence.¹⁴

while Walter Scott and Dugald Stewart flatly denied that the poet maintained any magisterial attitude. Scott declared that Burns "expressed himself with perfect firmness, but without the least intrusive forwardness; and when he differed in opinion, he did not hesitate to express it firmly, yet at the same time with modesty."¹⁵ Stewart stated: "He took his share in conversation, but not more than belonged to him; and listened with apparent attention and deference, on subjects where his want of education deprived him of the means of information" (Currie, I, 136-7).

It goes without saying that as with all others, so also with Burns different social and convivial situations and constellations occasioned different behavior, but the three positive opinions of Scott, Stewart and Walker apparently count more than the one of Anderson, which in itself is only partly pejorative. Scott and Stewart do in fact maintain that for Burns conversation meant genuine communication—not, however, display of self-importance.

Secondly as to the phonetic and, in a somewhat wider sense, oratorical character of the presentation of what he had to say or quote in conversations, Josiah Walker commented on Burns's way of recitations, which, he noted, as "plain, slow, articulate, and forcible" (Renwick, p. 20). For the taste of the second half of our century these four adjectives comprise, with reference to someone's oral capacities, a high degree of praise; for Walker, however, the praise was only qualified, as he went on "but without eloquence or art" (Renwick, p. 20).

It may be surmised that by "eloquence" and "art" a sort of conversational or oratorical demeanor was meant by Walker which in that genteel age was

¹³"Letters from Dr Robert Anderson to Dr James Currie, 1799-1801," in *Burns Chronicle*, 34 (1925), 14-15. Henceforth Anderson.

¹⁴William L. Renwick, ed. *Burns as Others saw Him* (Edinburgh, 1959), pp. 19-20. Henceforth Renwick.

¹⁵Quoted in *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), III, 1541-42. Henceforth *Poems*.

appreciated in the socially dominant classes as something very appealing, yet which for our taste would pertain to somewhat irritating elements such as rather noticeable degrees of artificiality and exaggeration. Be that as it may, Walker's reminiscence quite apparently referred to certain particular situations.

Anderson remembered a livelier kind of Burns's oral representations:

He recited his own beautiful Songs very readily, and with peculiar animation and feeling, though he affected to be ignorant of the principles of music (Anderson, p. 15).

This impression is admittedly only of relative value for the question that interests here, as, first, most of his songs are either Scots or at least tinged with some amount of Scots, and, secondly, this recitation may have been one that was sung. Anderson's recollection had, however, to be mentioned, as it refers to the subject under discussion: recitation.

Another witness of his ability to recite and phrase independently was John Gray in a statement already reprinted above at greater length:

The prose authors he could quote either in their own words, or clothe their ideas in language more beautiful than their own (Peterkin, I, lxxxvi).

Most telling is what Maria Riddell had to say about the sound of his spoken word:

His voice alone could improve upon the magic of his eye; sonorous, replete with the finest modulations, it alternatively captivated the ear with the melody of poetic numbers, the perspicuity of nervous reasoning, or the ardent sallies of enthusiastic patriotism (*Poems*, III, 1545).

From these remarks having focused more on phonetic qualities that were characteristic of Burns, to a third aspect of the field of his conversational style. Dugald Stewart wrote to James Currie:

Nothing, perhaps, was more remarkable among his various attainments, than the fluency, and precision, and originality of his language, when he spoke in company; more particularly as he aimed at purity in his turn of expression, and avoided more successfully than most Scotchmen, the peculiarities of Scottish phraseology (Currie, I, 137).

It should be remembered in passing that Dugald Stewart was Professor of Moral Philosophy in Edinburgh and as such of course entitled to judgments of a certain relevance on the quality of someone else's English. This statement of his, in itself of weight, gains in momentum, if one recalls the fact that not even the slightest evidence exists that would proclaim Burns guilty of insecurity or even clumsiness when conversing in English.

It is worth imagining that David Hume, so anxious to avoid Scotticisms, might have been proud if a colleague of his had maintained anything like the judgment just cited about the quality of Burns's conversational English.¹⁶ And it is certainly worth considering by conversion that those who later gave accounts of Burns's personality, being either socially or educationally his superiors, or having some individual reason to talk negatively of him, would indubitably have referred to defects of his command of English, if there had been any!

It remains, fourthly, to outline what the overall opinions on his conversational abilities were. Burns scholarship has been aware of the poet's faculties to utter his emotions, thoughts, convictions, and ideas orally in an impressive way. Donald Low summed it up very aptly: "Contemporaries credited Burns with brilliance in conversation," (Low, p. 7), but up to the present the momentum of that fact has, on the whole, been rather neglected by a wider literary public.

Indeed an astounding sequence of relevant judgments could be cited. James Currie reported:

The late Dr Robertson, Dr Blair, Dr Gregory, Mr Stewart, Mr Mackenzie, and Mr Fraser Tytler may be mentioned in the list of those who perceived his uncommon talents, who acknowledged more especially his powers in conversation (Currie, I, 153).

John Gray confirmed the "fascinating powers of his conversation" (Peterkin, I, lxxxv), and Josiah Walker recollected: "In conversation he was powerful. His conceptions and expression were of corresponding vigour" (*Poems*, III, 1540). Walter Scott remembered: "His conversation expressed perfect self-confidence, without the slightest presumption" (*Poems*, III, 1541). The otherwise critical Robert Anderson felt obliged to confess:

No words can do justice to the captivating charms of his conversation. It was even more fascinating than his poetry. He was truly a great orator (Anderson, p. 14).

Maria Riddell's famous judgment declared:

none certainly ever outshone Burns in the charms—the sorcery I would almost call it—of fascinating conversation; the spontaneous eloquence of social argument, or the unstudied poignancy of brilliant repartee (*Poems*, III, 1545).

Finally, Currie quotes Ochtertyre and comments:

¹⁶Cf. David Daiches, *Robert Burns* (New York, 1950), p. 32.

"I have been in the company of many men of genius...some of them poets," but never witnessed such flashes of intellectual brightness as from him, the impulse of the moment, sparks of celestial fire! (Currie, I, 190).

All these recollections are indubitable proof of the vigor and irresistible power of Burns's oral command of English. Some of the passages just quoted state this very fact not just in praising or eulogizing, but in almost hymnic terms.

All that has been presented so far is to be understood as an introduction to the question of the quality of his written English, i.e., an introduction to his written English prose in the first place—and, in the second respect, to his poetry in *pure English*. Perhaps this introduction provides a starting point from which to begin a thorough investigation into the nature of Burns's written English, which, it is to be hoped, will before long become the subject of a doctoral dissertation for some young promising scholar. The indispensable basis for such a dissertation is, of course, what Ferguson and Roy have set forth in their editions of Burns's letters.

There is no need of a reevaluation of Burns's many poetic productions that are composed in a blending of English and Scots, or in English or Scots more or less tinged by the other medium, to use Burns's own words, English affected by a "sprinkling of Scotch in it."¹⁷ Crawford and Daiches, to name but these two critics, have presented excellent linguo-aesthetic analyses of this multi-shaded section of Burns's creativity. Consequently the kind of poems and songs belonging to this category will not be discussed here.

I shall close with some observations on the poet's productions written in *pure English*, one in prose, the other in poetry. First a specimen of Burns's epistolary prose: I have, for good reasons, selected a letter which I have already discussed elsewhere, however under different aspects. It is his famous letter of 8th November 1788, sent to the Editor of the *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, and published on 22nd November. I shall quote this time a passage partly different from the one I cited in my earlier essay:

The Stuarts have been condemned and laughed at for the folly and impracticability of their attempts, in 1715 and 1745. That they failed, I bless my God most fervently; but cannot join in the ridicule against them.—Who does not know that the abilities or defects of leaders and commanders are often hidden until put to the touchstone of exigence; and that there is a caprice of fortune, an omnipotence in

¹⁷*Letters*, II, 246. This appears in a long letter to Thomson of early September, 1793, in which he discusses a list of seventy-four songs, in addition to sending him the text of "Auld Lang Syne." "A small sprinkling of Scotisms, is no objection to an English reader," he says of another song (*Letters*, II, 240), and of "Saw ye my father?" ("one of my greatest favorites," he comments) Thomson is told, "I have sprinkled it with the Scotch dialect, but it may easily be turned into correct English" (*Letters*, II, 245).

particular accidents, and conjunctures of circumstances, which exalt us as heroes, or brand us as madmen, just as they are for or against us?

Man, Mr. Printer, is a strange, weak, inconsistent being—Who would believe, Sir, that in this our Augustan age of liberality and refinement, while we seem so justly sensible and jealous of our rights and liberties, and animated with such indignation against the very memory of those who would have subverted them, who would suppose that a certain people, under our national protection, should complain, not against a Monarch and a few favourite advisers, but against our whole legislative body, of the very same imposition and oppression, the Romish religion not excepted, and almost in the very same terms as our forefathers did against the family of Stuart! I will not, I cannot, enter into the merits of the cause; but I dare say, the American Congress, in 1776, will be allowed to have been as able and as enlightened, and, a whole empire will say, as honest, as the English Convention in 1688; and that the fourth of July will be as sacred to their posterity as the fifth of November is to us.

To conclude, Sir, let every man, who has a tear for the many miseries incident to humanity, feel for a family, illustrious as any in Europe, and unfortunate beyond historic precedent; and let every Briton, and particularly every Scotsman, who ever looked with reverential pity on the dotage of a parent, cast a veil over the fatal mistakes of the Kings of his forefathers.

A BRITON
(*Letters*, I, 334-5)

The whole letter has about two and a half times the length of the passage just quoted. Apparently Burns drafted and structured the letter very carefully both with regard to language and content. The sequence of thoughts in it is convincing, the language clear, lucid, and perfectly well adapted to the intended effect. He may have been induced to speak of the "tear" by Hume who had been bold enough "to shed a generous tear for the fate of Charles I"¹⁸ in his autobiography. Certainly this letter of Burns's expressing historical truths that were then by no means generally accepted but rather suspected by many of bordering on treason, enters the sphere of philosophy of history. As far as texts written in the English language are concerned this letter of the poet constitutes one of the epistolary masterpieces in historiography. And yet, such is the power of prejudice, I have not found it in any anthology of English letters! In fact it is difficult to find any Burns text in any collection of English prose!

Finally as to a poetic example: Gilbert Burns told Currie that his brother had more than once remarked to him "that he could not well conceive a more mortifying picture of human life, than a man seeking work. In casting about in his mind how this sentiment might be brought forward, the elegy *Man was made to mourn*, was composed" (Currie, III, Appendix p. 8). It may, therefore, quite reasonably be suggested that Burns started the poem from stanzas VII-IX. Of these three I should like to quote the two latter. They contain sixteen lines;

¹⁸David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (Oxford, 1963), p. 611.

four of them owe their origin to Dryden, on whose work Burns, however, strikingly improved:

See, yonder poor, o'erlabour'd wight,
 So abject, mean and vile,
 Who begs a brother of the earth
 To give him leave to toil;
 And see his lordly *fellow-worm*,
 The poor petition spurn,
 Unmindful, tho' a weeping wife,
 And helpless offspring mourn.

If I'm design'd yon lordling's slave,
 By Nature's law design'd,
 Why was an independent wish
 E'er planted in my mind?
 If not, why am I subject to
 His cruelty, or scorn?
 Or why has Man the will and pow'r
 To make his fellow mourn? (*Poems*, I, 118)

It was rightly stated by Crawford that these lines are possibly the earliest example in British literature of expressing the "working-class predicament"¹⁹ in poetic form, and one has, I think, to approve of his judgment that the whole poem is "one of his best pieces" (Crawford, p. 23). It is, therefore, irritating, to say the very least, when being reminded of Hugh MacDiarmid's casual and lofty remark that most of Burns's work "is full of eighteenth-century conventionalism."²⁰

What is to be criticized about that poem is its thematic structure, because after these self-asserting stanzas two more follow which, unexpectedly, betray a totally different mood, being almost Henrysonian in sentiment, reminding one of that poet's "The Praise of Age."

What, however, is to be admired is the frank, challenging phrasing of Burns's critical assessment of the drear conditions human beings of the lowest social strata live in. The persuasive power of these lines rests on the outspoken directness and clarity of the wording, in which conventional elements, if present, are not conceived as decorative at all. The result is convincing poetic power of expression. There can be no doubt whatever that Burns's command of *pure English* was indeed masterly.

¹⁹Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh, 1960), p. 21. Henceforth Crawford.

²⁰Hugh MacDiarmid, *Burns Today and Tomorrow* (Edinburgh, 1959), pp. 24-5.

The wholly mistaken idea of Burns being only good when expressing himself in Scots may of course also have arisen due to subconscious Scottish national feelings, following the formula: Burns was Scotland's national bard only insofar as having created poetry in Scots. It must of course not be denied that the notion of language had a historio-political aspect in the eighteenth century. Burns was certainly aware of that. But as he clearly perceived, English was even then one of Scotland's languages, so he could use it without questioning his loyalty to his home country. Yet he was also, considered all in all, a law-abiding citizen of Britain; moreover he intensely felt that he belonged to the realm of political ideals which had originated in, and encompassed the whole of the English-speaking world. These different loyalties, perhaps not always easily reconciled to one another, made him express himself in two idioms. Thus he became an example for cultural federalism in the best sense of that expression.

*Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz
Germersheim*



Rantin roarin Willie
A Gray 1996