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Jeffrey Skoblow

Dr. Currie, C'est Moi

I should start by saying that I come to Burns, as I imagine most American academics do, by a route most indirect—and telling, perhaps, in its indirection. In a nutshell, Burns was not a given in my education—or if he was a given, only in the sense of a thing to which one pays no attention beyond noting that it is in fact there. Burns was not a question, certainly, not a site of inquiry; rather, as we fashionably say, an absence. I was never assigned to read a Burns poem in all the years of my schooling, high school, college, grad school. I picked up a little along the way: my brother read me "To a Louse" out of his community college textbook (although I don't know if he'd been assigned it either), a friend told me where the bit about best laid schemes of mice and men really came from, I stumbled upon "A Man's a Man for a' That" in my own high school textbook, and puzzled over it pleasurably, and a handful of other works floated into my awareness with Burns's name attached—Tam, Dr. Hornbook. And I learned somewhere that it was Burns behind "Auld Lang Syne": the song, after "Happy Birthday To You," that more Americans may have sung together more often than any other.

Burns in short appeared to me as someone not an object of the academic gaze—or if so only of the most fugitive sort, lurking on the verge of oblivion. I did not learn to assume, as I might have if I were Scottish, that Burns is a natural and significant part of an organic and ongoing tradition, or, as I might have if I were English, that Burns is a natural if pesky part of *another* organic and ongoing tradition. Although I am sure that all this is true, I also know that the Scottish and English traditions, like my own American tradition, resist Burns, and that Burns resists us all as well: resists the anthologies, resists the teach-

ers, resists the critics and scholars, that he remains to be picked up, to the extent that he is picked up at all, by revellers on New Year's Eve, by the crowds at Burns Night Dinners, by connoisseurs of bawdy, by the odd suburban youngster like myself, and at gatherings such as the conference at the University of South Carolina the Proceedings of which gave rise to this volume.

Now I don't exactly lament this situation. I don't mean to be proposing, for instance, that the MLA Convention Committee (through the Affiliated Association of some society of Burnsians) sponsor a session on Burns every year—although that might not be a bad idea. I don't mean to rectify the marginality of Burns so much as to appreciate it, to celebrate it, even—to ask what it might mean that might please me. Marginality, though, perhaps isn't even the right expression: the word suggests a border and a center to begin with, like a map—and all maps are Adamic, to name and have dominion over—whereas what I want to imagine is more a globe, or a world or a life. Whether in our map of whatever tradition we locate Burns marginally or centrally, there is something in him that challenges the very prerogatives of mapping, something extraneous, it seems, to the whole process. A matter of excess, as Georges Bataille would say, of waste: the profligate unredeemed, the vulgar vulgate rampant—something which meets the academic gaze and returns nothing: a black hole of sorts. What does one do with a black hole?

The question Burns raises, it seems to me, has less to do with what we make of him, than with what we make of ourselves when we apply the instruments of our profession to him. In fact when I applied my professional instruments—five years ago, having just completed a book on William Morris and grown interested in figures (like Burns) once highly regarded and now largely neglected, curious about such phenomena and what the process might signify—what I found was that these instruments didn't work very well. I found Burns quite unreadable, and I don't just mean that I needed a glossary. Scots is part of the story, of course—as it most pointedly was for many of Burns's earliest reviewers—but Scots is not the whole story: one reads MacDiarmid, for instance, or Sydney Goodsir Smith, or Dunbar, as one cannot read Burns. What I mean is that I found Burns not so much impenetrable as insusceptible even to questions of penetration.

Maybe penetration isn't an apt expression either, maybe this is all phallic fantasy, a tale fit for the Tarbolton Bachelors Club. At any rate, I found, as Iain Crichton Smith has observed, that "in a sense nothing much can be said of a Burns lyric except that it is there. No resources of modern scholarship can be brought to bear on it."[1] And not just the lyrics, the poems too seemed to me to present the same face. I have since of course come to read Burns more familiarly, have come to love him, and have found much of interest in the modern

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[1]"The Lyrics of Robert Burns," in *The Art of Robert Burns*, ed. R. D. S. Jack & Andrew Noble (London, 1982), p. 24.

scholarship brought to bear on him—in the work of Professors Daiches, Ferguson, Low, McGuirk and many others, work highly and rightly esteemed, and invaluable to my own understanding. But my first impression has stayed with me: there is something in Burns which doesn't love a literary critic.

I will put it like this: Literary Criticism is an industry of production and consumption, specializing in services pertaining to cultural representation and reproduction. (Or so it is readily construed.) Within this industry, various interests compete for attention, for sway, for market share—for power, and if the terrain competed over may seem ethereal at times, the struggle is no less real for that, the consequences no less material. The business in which we are engaged, the business of cultural representation and reproduction, is the serious business of establishing (and revising) what questions it is possible to ask. Literary Criticism is a custodian of critical consciousness as well as an instrument of social control.

But Burns comes along, himself very much concerned with questions of cultural representation and reproduction, and insists that these questions are not to be regarded in terms of production and consumption. He insists that cultural representation and reproduction occur somehow beyond the reach of social control—his vision is a utopian one, ultimately—where neither the poetic work nor the poet's life is a commodity. What is poetry when it is not a commodity? For Burns the answer is: a performance—which is a metaphor that raises a wholly different set of questions.

Unlike a commodity, a performance cannot be reproduced; although it can be recorded, this is less to reproduce than to translate it. The performance itself, for instance, always includes the audience, as well as other specific circumstances affecting the performer, and these can never be duplicated. A recording can be commodified, but not a performance—it vanishes more resolutely than pork belly futures.

Now as I write of this I'm thinking, of course, primarily of Burns's songs—his astonishing output of material for James Johnson and George Thomson, thinking too of his refusal of payment ("downright Sodomy of Soul!" he called it)[2] and his general refusal to credit his name with the work, his resistance to its commodification. In its close relation to questions of performance, the genre of song is sort of Burns's *ur*-form—it embodies his essential impulse—but I would include his poems as well within the performative model, as exempla of the noncommodified. Although he does submit both poems and songs to the market's appraising eye, what Burns provides in effect are recordings—translations from the performative to the textual—and not the thing itself, not the performance, of which, it is important to reiterate, no adequate account can be made. Burns's work exists to say: Something there is, in

[2]*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), II, 149.

the world of cultural representation and reproduction, of which your instruments can make no account.

The commodification of Burns, I mean to say, means more than the Ayrshire Tourist Board. Literary criticism is not well equipped to deal with questions of performance (as the Geographer tells the Little Prince, ephemera are of no account). We too must fawn over the commodity, we too must contest in the arena of the capitalist intellect—there's no getting around it: it has ever been thus, since Burns's time, at least, that critical moment in the expansion of public discourse, of discourse as commodity.

I think here of "The Jolly Gauger," that epitome of Commodity Man, *homo economicus* straying from the path of his official duties and attending to others, "down by yon river side,"[3] with a beggar for his queen. The man is never *not* a gauger, but his work is plainly not all in the king's service. His pursuit of production and consumption, we might say, is punctuated by performances that do not make it into the excise ledger.

The ledger in our case is Literary Criticism, and what doesn't register there is what we can't ascribe a value to: Burns in a sense represents the anxiety of the commodity, the imagination of a limit to the power of commodification. Burns marks a border, a debatable land, not so much between Scotland and England (although this makes a useful analogy or metaphor) as between a world governed by the administration of relative values and a world not so governed, a world we lack a language for—an unadministered world, as a Marxist critic like Theodor Adorno might imagine, in which market value is only an intrusion, an excrescence. And I think here of Jenny, "poor body / Comin thro' the rye... Gin a body kiss a body / Need the warld ken!" (*Poems*, II, 843-4)—where the exclamation marks that same border, between what is known, appraised, exchangeable or discardable, and what is not, what is human rather—our lives and loves: when a body meets a body. Burns's border lies between the maw of the market and the non-commodified life: he challenges the hegemony of the former by raising the standard of the latter.

The anxiety Burns provokes—the drive to commodify him and the recognition that he resists or even thwarts the effort—is clear from the start. The first review of the Kilmarnock *Poems* in the Oct. 1786 *Edinburgh Magazine*, probably by J. Sibbald, represents Burns not merely as a class interloper but as a particular conundrum for the industry of letters—an act of effrontery not only to class but to the very possibility of knowledge. In fact, with the opening sentence of this first (anonymous) review, in which our Bard appears as "a person who has come unbidden into company," Burns seems to provoke a kind of critical schizophrenia, to compel the reviewer to speak for himself in another's voice:

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[3]*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), II, 902. Henceforth *Poems*.

> Who are you, Mr. Burns? will some surly critic say. At what university have you been educated? what languages do you understand? what authors have you particularly studied? whether has Aristotle or Horace directed your taste? who has praised your poems, and under whose patronage are they published? In short, what qualifications entitle you to instruct or entertain us?[4]

Note that the question is not what languages do you *speak*: our Bard is of note here not for what powers he has, but for what powers he recognizes. This list of questions is admirable for the precision with which it delineates the terms of a contract, which Burns, having put his poems into general circulation, might be presumed to have signed. Institutional affiliation, linguistic command, curricular history, classical allegiance, current sponsor: these are the sites of validation and judgment—all matters of identifying documents, entitlements—beyond which "Mr. Burns" might be said to be of no account whatsoever. This surly critic, at least, hardly looks up from his desk.

At the same time, the naked insistence on these documents and entitlements—a kind of half-joke that reveals more weight than it pretends—carries the shadow of its own uncertainty. Mr. Burns *is* a commodity, he *will* be accounted for, but at least he will remind us that accounting is what we are doing—as opposed to engaging in some other relation, for instance loving him—a possibility beyond the pale.

Henry Mackenzie's instantly famous review appears two months later in *The Lounger* to smooth these ruffled feathers, to assure us that nothing lies beyond the pale—there is no pale, only taste and sensibility—that knowledge and its institutions are in fine shape, thank you very much, never been better. He begins:

> To the feeling and the susceptible there is something wonderfully pleasing in the contemplation of genius, of that supereminent reach of mind by which some men are distinguished. In the view of highly superior talents, as in that of great and stupendous natural objects, there is a sublimity which fills the soul with wonder and delight, which expands it, as it were, beyond its usual bounds, and which, investing our nature with extraordinary powers, and extraordinary honours, interests our curiosity, and flatters our pride (Low, p. 67).

Mackenzie's rhetoric is that of a select club in which nature is invested, curiosity interested, and pride flattered, a connoisseurship of the most exalted discrimination which takes in everything and turns it to account—an account, ultimately, of the club itself, of course, the whole world (beyond even the soul's usual bounds) reduced to a tickling of refined taste. This club may not

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[4]Donald A. Low, ed., *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1974), p. 63. Henceforth Low.

be ours, exactly—the characteristic tone of our own contemporary, institutionally academic critical discourse doesn't tend to the smug nobility of "something wonderfully pleasing in the contemplation of genius"—our lingo tends more to the dispassionate, the New Critical. But in speaking to the club of Edinburgh literati in 1786, Mackenzie speaks to us as well; the approval of the professional class is the prize and the main point of interest—as when Mackenzie speaks of Burns's work and "that superior place, which the enthusiasm of its patrons would have assigned it" (Low, p. 68). It is a self-reflexive business: poetical productions are commodities by means of which our taste and our power can appreciate itself, thereby appreciating in power—a profitable business.

Dr. Currie, of course, speaks to us as well—speaks for us, even. Currie dots the i's and crosses the t's in the commodification of Burns, Work and Life; ever after the equation is set—although the relative values may change. Burns is an entity, a phenomenon, a prodigy, not to be accounted for by the usual means, but in the end—a little bowdlerized, perhaps, or otherwise spun—nevertheless made out to speak a language we know the value of. In Currie's case this language is essentially anthropological—an affair of distance, and of distance scientifically overcome. His extensive "Prefatory Remarks, on the Character and Condition of the Scottish Peasantry"[5] frame the project, at once recognizing and negating the alien nature of the material Burns's corpus represents. Burns again is Other, but this Otherness, which might otherwise threaten, is nevertheless explicable.

Currie divides the subject of the Scots into five: "church establishment," "absence of poor laws," "music and national songs," "laws respecting marriage and incontinence," and "domestic and national attachments"—in each case an inquiry into organs of regulation. Burns, and with him all of Scotland, appears as if an object of the doctor's autopsy: the "separate and independent" (Currie, I, 2) body of Scotland, or of Burns, is no more—Burns's poetry "displays, and as it were embalms, the peculiar manners of his country," Currie notes (I, 31). Embalms and as it were reproduces for consumption. The separate and independent becomes the unseparated, dependent—Burns's fate a consummation of the Union of Parliaments and of Crowns.

Although our own categories may differ entirely from Currie's, I would argue that in our institutional claim to the power of explication we share his point of view. We too must see to it that Burns is knowable, that his resources are well managed (Currie worked on behalf of the widow and orphans; we work for posterity as well), that his texts are cleaned and spruced up to enable deepest appreciation, that the Bard sings in a register we can recognize. We must see to it that the power of explication, even when challenged, is un-

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[5]James Currie, ed., *The Work of Robert Burns*. 4 vols. (Liverpool, 1800), I, 1-31. Henceforth Currie.

daunted. Currie is our model, his work the seminal document of Burns's after-life; and to us as to him, the ghost of Burns says "No. Say what you like about me, it will be beside the point, can take nothing of my measure."

He says this again and again, in his songs, in his poems, in his prose; the songs in particular and the poems as well say as much again in themselves, in their forms, in their insistence on being performed. They say, "Play me or say me, but don't speak for me."

"What's *done* we partly may compute, / But know not what's *resisted*"—that's how Burns closes his "Address to the Unco Guid, or the Rigidly Righteous" (*Poems*, I, 54). My point here is that however casually unrighteous we may be, Burns addresses us here too, that his work as a whole embodies an impulse of resistance to computation—Mackenzie's, Currie's, our own—that life, and the life of poetry, lies elsewhere, and that this radical unknowability (unaccountability) of poetry is a kind of triumph over the institutions of social control, an escape from its prescriptions, a demonstration that the administration of meaning does not extend everywhere.

It's an old trope, of course, that I'm offering—Burns the embodiment of Freedom. I only wish to add that this freedom constitutes a particular critique of the industrial production and consumption of meaning, as practiced by modern institutions of intellectual enterprise. Freedom and intimacy, ultimately, are what Burns demands—what can be neither produced nor consumed—a language our discipline of literary criticism can hardly speak. He aims, if we will, to save us from ourselves.

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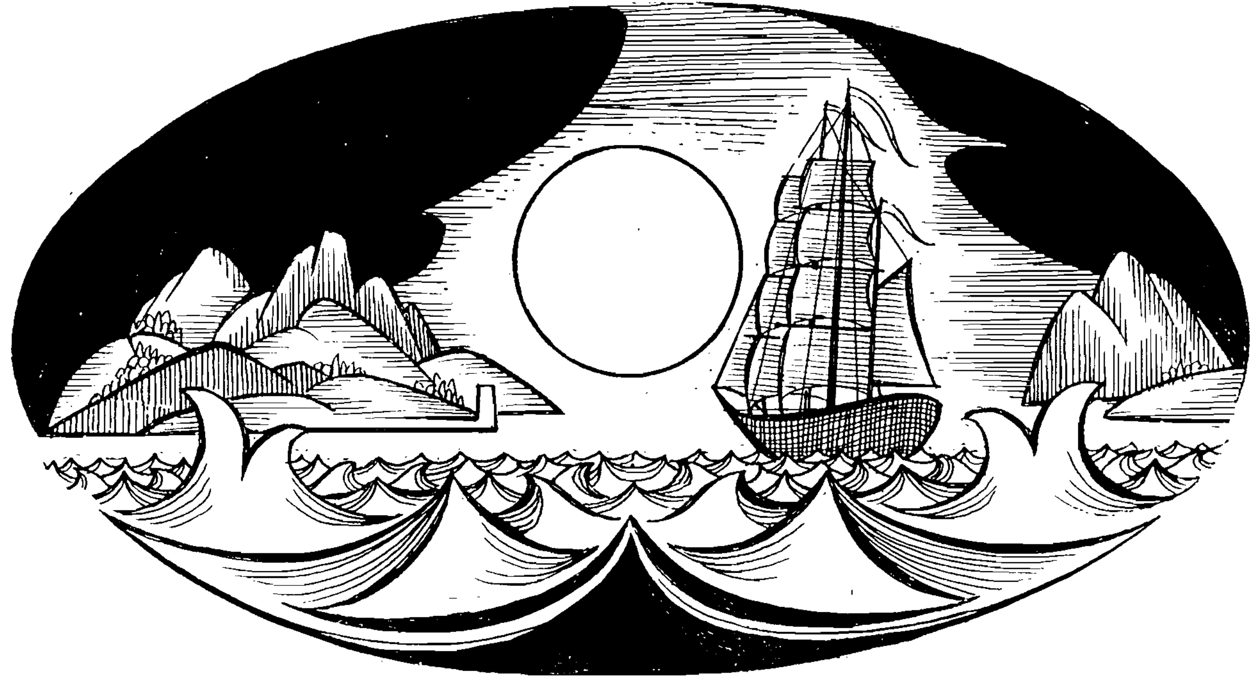

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