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Hazel Hynd

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John Davidson and the Hidden Legacy of Burns

Burns is a powerful and iconic figure, synonymous with the Scottish literary tradition, while John Davidson, born sixty-one years later, has been consistently perceived as a marginalized writer, estranged from the Scottish literary scene. What significance then could Burns hold for a writer like Davidson who is considered to be the embodiment of cultural dissociation? Critics have failed to appreciate the extent to which many of Davidson's ideas have their origins in his formative experience or the enduring influence which it had upon him.¹ Analyzing the influence of Burns can act as a corrective to critical prejudice and challenge these preconceptions. By examining the influence of Burns on Davidson, it is possible to highlight neglected and misunderstood facets within his work which are indebted to the Scottish literary tradition.

The poem "Ayrshire Jock" is commonly regarded as Davidson's last word on the Burns legacy, and a scathing one at that, as it warns of a literary icon that can only inspire the poorest imitators. The title "Ayrshire Jock" and the "rough cast cottage" which the speaker vows never to look upon again suggests a problematic, much resented heritage. The speaker has become a burlesque projection of a Scottish writer, and he criticizes his countrymen who aim to make their living by becoming second-rate imitators of Burns. Perhaps even Burns himself was like Ayrshire Jock, a man projecting himself as

¹Apart from short essays by Tom Hubbard, R. M. Wenley, Andrew Turnbull and Hugh MacDiarmid, none of the major studies of Davidson (including book-length works) deal in any depth with his relationship to Scottish literature or culture.

“heaven-taught ploughman,” forever denied the ability to write with honesty and autonomy.

Yet this is not Davidson’s final word on Scottish literature and culture. He retained Scottish literary influences and used them in an experimental way. The tensions which existed for Scottish writers in the eighteenth century remained in the nineteenth century, and Davidson’s literary strategies have a marked resemblance to those of his predecessors. His experiments with idiomatic verse and dialect, and his reluctance to conform to the conventions of Standard English derive from a rich Scots tradition of vernacular poetry. His use of irony, multiple voices and divergent perspectives are linked to the eclecticism, irony, narrative flux, self-reflexivity, and multiplicity of voice that is born out of a crisis of identity found in the tension of being both Scottish and North British—a post-Union predicament experienced by Burns long before Davidson. Furthermore, his social poetry of the outcast and the underdog, his emphasis upon realism and his corresponding distaste for affectation relate to a distinctly Scottish egalitarian sensibility. The work of nineteenth-century writers extends the reactionary and restless sensibility within Scottish literature. Just as Ramsay’s “The Vision,” Fergusson’s “The Ghaists: A Kirk-yard Eclogue,” Burns’s “Tam o’ Shanter” and “Holy Willie’s Prayer” challenge social and religious orthodoxies, so too the themes and subject matter of their nineteenth-century successors are equally radical, searching and innovative. Thomas Carlyle, James Thomson, James Young Geddes and Davidson make the problems of their changing culture and society into the substance of their work.

Critics forget that Davidson did not leave Scotland until he was thirty-two years of age;² he was brought up directly under the influence of the Scottish religious and educational system. He wrote for the *Glasgow Herald* and his early works, such as the play *Bruce* (1886), and poetry such as “John Balliol,” “Thomas the Rhymer,” “The Rev. E. Kirk, B.D.,” “The Rev. Habakkuk McGruther of Cape Wrath in 1879,” and “Ayrshire Jock” strongly and explicitly engage with the events of Scottish history or features of Scottish culture. His philosophy of the hero and the great man came initially from Carlyle, not Nietzsche. Early plays were inspired by earlier Scottish writers: *An Unhistorical Pastoral* (1877) was influenced by his reading of Allan Ramsay’s *The Gentle Shepherd: A Scotch Pastoral Comedy* (1725), and *A Romantic Farce* (1878; published 1889), was influenced by James Hogg’s *Mary Montgomery*. The play *Smith: A Tragic Farce* is influenced by Alexander Smith and makes ironic use of the spasmodic writing with which Smith was, for a time, involved. The novel *Baptist Lake* (1894) is concerned with the life of expatriate

²Davidson was born in Barrhead, Renfrewshire, the son of an Evangelical Union minister. The family moved to Greenock before Davidson’s first birthday. John Sloan’s biography, *John Davidson: First of the Moderns* (Oxford, 1995), is the only biography currently available, and provides extensive background information on the writer.

Scots in London and has strong echoes of Smollett's interest in examining the melting pot of metropolitan life.

It was Scott and Carlyle who fundamentally shaped his literary style. From Scott, he developed an enduring interest in the ballad form and he fashioned his philosophical ideas initially from reading Carlyle. Although he was cynical regarding the corruption of Burns into a culture of rural sentimentality and nostalgia, the artificial use of Braid Scots and the burlesque music-hall associations surrounding Scottish culture, he was not cynical about Burns himself. Davidson praised Burns openly and earnestly but only early commentators acknowledged the fact. Frank Harris, a contemporary and friend of Davidson's, made the following observation, loaded with many of the stereotypical associations which plagued Burns, Davidson and other Scottish writers:

How sincere he was and how enthusiastic when repeating the verses he loved: one could hear thrilling across the rhythm of his intimate understanding and generous admiration. It was in this spirit he quoted something of Burns, whom I had been running down just to see if his patriotism would revolt. He had not conscious local vanity, and he recognized certain of Burns's limitations, but, as a Scot, he could not help overrating him.³

Davidson identified with Burns. Historically, Scottish writers have adapted to working within a context of linguistic and stylistic diversity. The vocabulary, syntax and style of Standard English verse and the cultural associations and assumptions behind them have co-existed with surviving linguistic and technical features of native verse form and the vernacular tradition. Davidson's development of characterization and the projection of voice and persona draw upon the realism and expressive efficacy of an oral vernacular tradition. The technique has affinities with the vernacular poets of the eighteenth century. Kenneth Simpson refers to "the chameleon nature of eighteenth-century Scottish writers,"⁴ suggesting that in the period following the Union of 1707 writers experienced a crisis of national identity which resulted in the adoption of personae and the projection of multiple self-images. This chameleon nature, he suggests, offers "one of the prototypes of modern alienation" (Simpson, p. ix).

The composite literary culture in the post-Union climate of the eighteenth century meant that Burns faced the prospect of working both with an older, rural, vernacular tradition, with its sense of community and continuity, and the imported rules of form and decorum prescribed by the *literati*. He had the choice between traditional verse forms and the pressure of polite taste; between

³Frank Harris, *Contemporary Portraits* (New York, 1915), p. 131. Henceforth Harris.

⁴Kenneth Simpson, *The Protean Scot* (Aberdeen, 1988), Preface, p. ix. Henceforth Simpson.

Scots and English; and between colloquial vigor and classical formality. In Burns's time a resilient native tradition survived in tandem with imported trends but could not unify the diverse, even divisive, literary community which existed during the Scottish Enlightenment. Though Fergusson and Burns display equal proficiency with traditional Scottish verse forms (such as the Standard Habbie, the Christis Kirk or the Burns stanza) as with the pastoral eclogue or elegy and extend their own traditions considerably, there remained nonetheless, questions of cultural loyalties within every artistic decision. The writer had to negotiate his own status and function in relation to these divisions. Burns suffered from the containment of the antithetical roles of "Heaven-taught ploughman" and Enlightenment man. Such paradox created both positive and negative effects. Frequently, cultural tensions produced resourceful hybrid poetry which synthesized high culture with folk elements, and Augustan conventions with the precision, range, flexibility and wit afforded by native traditions. Such deliberate artistic free license asserted the overriding autonomy of the writer and his prerogative to engage with an eclectic, volatile kind of artistic equity.

Davidson however makes it clear in "Ayrshire Jock" that by the nineteenth century Scottish writers had inherited a problematic sense of national and literary identity—a legacy complicated by the popular mass-market appeal of Scottishness and by tensions between Scottish and British literature. Bakhtin is useful here because of his emphasis upon the social nature of literary discourse and Davidson plays out social and ideological tensions in his poetry.⁵ There is a strong element of carnivalesque multiplicity and discursiveness in the poetry of both Burns and Davidson. The latter's poetry and prose alike reveal a heteroglot, multi-voiced, multi-styled discursiveness. The dramatic monologues "In a Music-Hall" and "Thirty Bob a Week" use cockney dialect which has no relationship to the poet's authentic voice. What they do possess is an enduring sense of the subversive quality of reductive idiom; they are full of oral energy and folk irreverence in the face of Anglocentric associations. Davidson, evading the dominant, homogeneous, monocentric associations surrounding Standard English, uses an alternative dialect to create the same subversive effects which were already familiar to him through Ramsay, Fergusson, Burns and Hogg.

Davidson's poems present a multiplicity of social voices ranging from the satiric portrayal of the self-seeking minister in "The Rev. E. Kirk, B.D." to the working-class voices of the London clerk in "Thirty Bob a Week" and the abused laborer's wife in "To the Street Piano." In these poems Davidson is seeking to develop a polyphonic form and a subversive relativity in the array of

⁵See M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" in his *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London, 1981), pp. 259-422.

perspectives which are dramatized. "Thirty Bob a Week" articulates not only the perspective of the underdog but does so in words, vocabulary and syntax which are opposed to authoritative Standard English using vocabulary such as "blooming," "ain't," "p'r'aps," "bally" in place of formal speech. This has its origins in the immediacy of oral dialogue, with which Davidson would be familiar from his experience of the Scottish literary tradition. Everything authoritative and rigid in terms of a linguistic and social hierarchy is undermined. The discursive structure of these poems enables the dramatic rendering of argument, doubt and contention. The multiple voices of *In a Music Hall* (1891); the fusion of private individual and burlesque character in "Ayrshire Jock"; the ironically revealing, hypocritical voice of "The Rev. E. Kirk, B.D."; the superficial persona created in "A Male Coquette"; the cockney voice of "Thirty Bob a Week"; the silent suffering of the vagrant in "A Loafer"; the discursive *Fleet Street Eclogues* (1893); the searching, painfully self-analyzing voices of the *Testaments* are all illustrative of a multitude of different identities and perspectives, similar to the multiplicity of voice which Kenneth Simpson identifies in the work of eighteenth-century writers like Smollett, Boswell and Burns.

It seems therapeutic for Davidson to engage with extremes of subjectivity within the safety of reductive humor. This dualism is apparent in earlier Scottish writers. Thomas Crawford, referring to Burns, observes:

The self-dramatisations of the epistles express a mind in motion, giving itself over at different times to conflicting principles and feelings; they mirror that mind as it grappled with a complex world. In order to body it forth, Burns had to be, in himself, and not simply in play, both Calvinist and anti-Calvinist, both fornicator and champion of chastity, both Jacobite and Jacobin, both local and national, both British and European, both anarchist and sober calculator, both philistine and anti-philistine.⁶

Certain features of Scottish poetry continued to attract Davidson such as the expressive efficacy of the dramatic monologue, which facilitated ironic self-revelation, the reductive idioms of vernacular speech, a mockery of pomposity, and a down-to-earth sensibility, particularly in his engagement with the perspective of the social underdog. Many poems use irony and humor to produce powerfully perceptive critical comment. In his Scottish poems, Davidson employs some of these stylistic features for dissociative or critical purposes. Poems such as "Ayrshire Jock" and "The Rev. Kirk, B.D." make use of ironic self-revelation and social observation in a manner akin to Burns's "Holly Willie's Prayer." "The Rev. Habakkuk McGruther of Cape Wrath" draws upon similar antecedents for its reductive satire. Davidson, like Burns, frequently exploits the dramatic monologue because of its capacity for psychological in-

⁶Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh, 1978), p. 104.

sight, expressive realism, ironic self-revelation and satiric commentary. In his discussion of "Ayrshire Jock," John Sloan observes:

The stress on the harshness of reality, the combination of high and low in the serio-comic vernacular address: these are derived from the traditions of Scottish dramatic utterance. English poetry also has its dramatic monologue but the acting-out of the feelings of others in their more spontaneous, living speech occurs more often in Scottish poetry.⁷

Davidson shared Burns's scorn for hypocrisy and superstition. Religious and social hypocrisy provided an ample source of criticism for both poets and both found the dramatic monologue effective as it is more convincing to damn someone with their own words than through direct criticism. In "Holy Willie's Prayer" Burns says nothing in his own voice but allows Holy Willie to reveal himself and his limitations in a way that leaves no doubt as to the poet's view. Davidson's monologue "The Rev. E. Kirk, B.D." exploits the tensions between appearance and reality to criticize religious hypocrisy.⁸ The poem has strong affinities with Burnsian satire and the use of an ironic persona; it also shares the contempt for hypocrisy exposed in an "Address to the Unco Guid." The Calvinist dualism between self and community is exploited to the full, exposing gross self-interest and materialism. The Protestant capitalist desire to prosper on earth is evident in both poems. Self-interest breeds under the veil of Christian orthodoxy and respectability to underpin a context of a social degeneration. In "The Rev. E. Kirk, B.D.," Davidson develops a landscape in keeping with the Kailyard, picturesque vision into which, through the minister's monologue of idle complacency, he injects a pervasive air of corruption and distortion. The manse represents a prosperous sleepy idyll that is both stagnant and corrupt. Details are given of the "Rough-case manse/ With fruit on every gable" (*ll.* 3-4), of the "cosy sound" of the poultry (*l.* 7), the minister with little to do "Save sit and sip my toddy" (*l.* 18), and the material security of his "Five hundred pounds stipend" (*l.* 160). Davidson shares with Burns and Geddes a contempt for the kind of hypocrisy that masks degeneracy and which creates, in turn stasis and atrophy:

The world is here some ages late,
And stagnant as a marish:
I thank my start it is my fate
To have a country parish; (*ll.* 25-28)

⁷*Selected Poems and Prose of John Davidson*, ed. John Sloan (Oxford, 1995), Introduction, p. xii. Henceforth Davidson.

⁸John Davidson, *In a Music Hall and Other Poems* (London, 1891), p. 98.

It is an anti-Kailyard poem depicting the parochial idyll as a site of avarice and self-interest. The minister admits that he has no desire to lose these rural comforts or work too hard. "For wearing done with constant use/ For me has no inducement" (*ll.* 29-30). The Reverent Kirk prefers, instead, to pursue his salmon fishing and fraternize with the local women, "A barmaid or a ballet-pet" (*l.* 47); he plans to exploit this life-style until he should take a bride at thirty-five and settle down with a son to succeed him at fourscore. His behavior is reminiscent of Holy Willie's antics with Meg or confession that:

We' Leezie's lass, three times—I trow—
But L—d, that Friday I was fou
 When I cam near her;
Or else, thou kens, thy servant true
 Wad never steer her⁹

Davidson's poem ironically reveals a thoroughly self-seeking hypocritical materialist. The minister has little concern for the community and his duties are reduced to what constitutes a respectable minimum; "I visit sick folk if they please-/ Or anything in reason" (*ll.* 23-24). If the Reverend Kirk does spare a thought for God then it is with Holy Willie's sentiment: "But L—d, remember me and mine" (*l.* 97). Davidson displays an antipathy for the Victorian middle-class hypocrisy in a manner strongly reminiscent of Burns's criticism of an earlier age.

Davidson's social sympathies run in tandem with a Carlylean respect for the great man; he fluctuates from an elitist disdain for the mob to a genuine sympathy for individual suffering due to destitution, unemployment, social rejection and economic hardship. The hero and the underdog are equally significant in Davidson's split sensibility. "A Loafer" is a monologue expressing the silent suffering of a vagrant alone among the oblivious crowds of the city. "Thirty Bob a Week" gives both perspectives of social underdog and hero at the same time. Davidson's poem "Two Dogs" draws explicitly upon Burns's poem "The Twa Dogs. A Tale" (Burns, I, 137). In Burns, Caesar and Luath are used to articulate the view that the honest and hard-working peasants are being driven out at the whim of landlords who are ambitious parliamentarians. Caesar's speech is pitched to elicit a proud defense of the poor from Luath. The aristocracy are presented as decadent and anti-patriotic and there is a pan-European sense of crisis between the aristocracy and the people. Burn's original commentary on differences of social class, represented by the mongrel and the pedigree dog, is taken up by Davidson to illustrate his concept for the pragmatic, as opposed to the romantic, ruler. Davidson's pedigree dog is calculating. He conserves his energy and, by logical calculation, surpasses the

⁹"Holy Willie's Prayer," in *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 76. Henceforth Burns.

more overtly heroic efforts of his rival. The mongrel dashes repeatedly into the sea to pursue a stick, struggling against the waves and becoming drenched and exhausted each time. The other simply waits for the tide to bring the stick back and retrieves it with little effort.

The breathless, shivering mongrel, rushing out
 Into the heavy surf, there to be tossed
 And tumbled like a floating bunch of kelp,
 While gingerly the terrier picked his steps
 Strategic in the rear, and snapped the prize
 Oftener than his more adventurous, more
 Romantic, ore devoted rival did. (*ll.* 85-91)

The terrier is irritated because the mongrel remains more popular:

'I'm despised, it seems!'
 The terrier thought. 'My cleverness (my feet
 Are barely wet!') beside the mongrel's zeal
 Appears timidity (*ll.* 67-70)

The mongrel is more engaging; but it is the cold logic of the terrier which succeeds. The poem concludes with the meditations of the terrier on the contradictions of human nature: "Let men and mongrels wet their coats! / I use my brains and choose the better part." But Davidson notes that the mongrel seems happier and better liked and he concludes by observing a contradiction:

And yet the mongrel seems
 The happier dog. How's that? Belike, the old
 Compensatory principle again:
 I have pre-eminence and conscious worth;
 And he his power to fling himself away
 For anything or nothing. Men and dogs,
 What an unfathomable world it is! (*ll.* 108-114)

In "John Baliol at Strathcathro" Davidson equates the romantic but unsuccessful Baliol with Scotland, and the pragmatic Edward with England. Davidson appears to assume a division of the Scottish consciousness between emotion and fact, and it is interesting that he should draw on Burns as a basis for his own consideration of the romantic, and by implication Scottish, consciousness. In "John Baliol" the split within the Scottish psyche is projected onto the fabric of Scottish history, where, as with the "Two Dogs," the pragmatic, rational mind predominates, and even humiliates the more attractive but inherently weaker emotional disposition.

In his poem "The Wasp" Davidson takes and develops an attitude to his subject that is similar to that employed by Burns in "To a Mouse." In David-

son's poem the reader is encouraged to empathize with an insect which normally evokes antipathy. Davidson's speaker, the Random Itinerant, recalls a train journey in which a wasp flew into his compartment. The trapped insect, confined within the compartment, shares the predicament of the speaker. The wasp's heated reactions contrast with the impervious alien environment. The windowpane with its banal "Smoking" sign contrasts with the "wonderful / Impervious transparency" of the wasp. The insect in her "palpitating moment" is juxtaposed with the "frosted glass" which imprisons her. The shocked reactions of the wasp are akin to Burns's "cowrin, tim'rous beastie" who also displays signs of fear in its fluttering breast and is similarly used as a means of contrasting an organic, sentient creature with a hostile and unfeeling force. Davidson's speaker describes the wasp's reaction as she "flirted petulant wings, and fiercely sang" and contrasts her fragility with her resilient determination as she persists "Undismayed,/ With diligence incomparable" to seek an exit. The speaker understands the wasp's frustration and indignation. The world is "her birthright, there!/ So visible, and so beyond her reach!". Davidson, like Burns, demonstrates sensitivity towards his subject, developing an appreciation of the insect's fragility, fear and tenacity and using it as a metaphor for the predicament of the individual in an increasingly hostile, oppressive world. Davidson's trapped wasp and Burns's dispossessed mouse symbolize human displacement.

Davidson wanted his poetry to be "a statement of the world as it is."¹⁰ In the essay "November Boughs," Walt Whitman favorably assessed Burns, remarking:

He poetises work-a-day agricultural labour and life...and treats fresh, often coarse, natural occurrences, loves, persons, not like many new and some old poets in a genteel style of gilt and china, or at second or third removes, but in their own born atmosphere, laughter, sweat, unction.¹¹

This realism for which both Whitman and Davidson strove, and which is present in Burns, was not obscured by the Burns myth. It remained a source of a realist tradition in Scottish poetry.

Perhaps for an epitaph for Davidson it is best to look to a contemporary. Frank Harris wrote that "Davidson will live with Burns, it seems to me" yet he noted that Davidson was "not so great a force: he has not Burns's pathos nor his tenderness nor his humour." Yet Davidson inherited some of the themes and literary techniques of Burns, as well as his displaced status within society. Harris noted that Davidson "was as little regarded as a butler or a bootblack.

¹⁰John Davidson, *Academy*, 63 (13 September 1902), 272.

¹¹Walt Whitman, "November Boughs," in *Walt Whitman Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York, 1982), pp. 1156-7.

One of the rarest and most superb flowers of genius of our time, he was almost totally neglected: the fact does not say much for the garden or the gardener” (Harris, pp. 156-8). As critics we too must beware of being unjust to Davidson in separating him from the influences within the Scottish literary tradition which mattered to him.

University of Glasgow