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Steven R. McKenna

Take Your Flag and Shove It! Nationalistic Humor in Fergusson and Burns

If there is a certain sterility of style without substance, formal sentimentalism without genuine feeling in English letters of the eighteenth century, then we may be grateful that Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns felt obliged to give us a literary body politic, a reality check with which a deracinated people could gain or maintain a sense of bearing, cultural orientation, and national selfhood in the face of social and political forces that within a couple of generations wiped out the independence of a longstanding cultural history. Poets may indeed be the unacknowledged legislators of the world, and the pen may indeed be mightier than the sword. So in the absence of legal recourse and weaponry, one nation subsumed into another's empire may very well, through its literary sword bearers, fight its battles with, among other weapons, a humor that refuses to take the dominant culture seriously, for cultural hegemony and matters of conquest are very well matters of the mind as much as they are of the muck and mire of the political or artistic spheres, and Burns's favorite poetic persona, John Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*, reminds us all that "The mind is its own place" (Book I, line 254). This in itself is a revolutionary existential state, a refusal to submit intellectually no matter what the political state of affairs might happen to be. Fergusson and Burns in their merging of humor and the nationalistic impulse affirm just such an independence and integrity of spirit, a joyous and gaming Scots body politic that wants to resist loudly the enclosed and confining space of English social, political and cultural dominion.

The most obvious form this sort of nationalistic impulse takes is the use by both poets of the vernacular Scots language. Indeed, to the point of becoming

a literary-critical cliché, commentators and critics have pointed out that in Scots poetry from the late Middle Ages onward vernacular Scots has always existed parallel to and contending with standard English. Further, the result of this situation, as has been widely observed, is a degree of realism since the Scots literary language (as opposed to that of English) tends to be closer to the people and the lived life of ordinary folk.¹ When looked at specifically within the context of the late eighteenth century, we can readily see that both Fergusson and Burns achieve a heightened sense of realism by playing off against one another the topical matter of their poetry, the vernacular language with which they express it, and the accepted literary conventions (largely defined by English literary tastes) of the day. Both writers struggle with the language issue in particular. The education system, especially on the higher level as experienced by Fergusson at St Andrews, stressed a rhetoric that devalued the Scots language. The official literary culture, situated mainly in Edinburgh, was caught between the pull of native traditions and the use of English for truly genteel literature.²

For Fergusson and Burns, English neoclassical language and its artificiality prove to be quite limited vehicles for expressions of true, realistic feeling. The turn to vernacular Scots, furthermore, results, in many cases, in an honest sense of humor, and here I would like to make a distinction between humor and wit. The latter can be seen as an intellectual exercise in the play of language and subject, but need not be seen as much else than verbal cleverness. Humor, on the other hand, especially as we will see in the works of these two poets, involves the interconnection of language and a realistic sense of the body—the body as flesh and blood, but also a living body politic in a very much alive nation that in these poets' visions would not succumb to being intellectualized, conceptualized or rationalized into oblivion. Humor in this case becomes a vehicle for these poets for engaging the dominant English culture in a dialogue—a dialogue of nations, people, and of literatures themselves.³ The

¹On this general point of the relationship between Scots and English as literary languages in the poetry of the two countries, see Kenneth Simpson, "Poetic Genre and National Identity: Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns," *SSL*, 30 (1998), 33 and passim.

²Regarding Fergusson's having to contend with this language dilemma, see Allan H. MacLaine, *Robert Fergusson* (New York, 1965), pp. 15-21 (henceforth MacLaine), and Robert Crawford, "Robert Fergusson's Robert Burns," in *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, ed. Robert Crawford (Iowa City, 1997), p. 2. For a general discussion of Fergusson's employment of neoclassical diction, see Jerry O'Brien, "The Sonsie Muse: The Satiric Use of Neoclassical Diction in the Poems of Robert Fergusson," *SSL*, 19 (1984), 165-76.

³For an extended discussion of Burns's dialogic relationship with English culture, see Thomas R. Preston, "Conrary Scriptings: Implied National Narratives in Burns and Smollett,"

combination of English literary culture and tastes in the late eighteenth century undoubtedly struck many if not most literary people as the standard against which all was to be measured, and both Fergusson and Burns certainly at periods in their careers employed standard English, sentiment, neoclassical diction and all else popular at the time. In short, this is what we call fashion—with all the leveling of styles and homogenization of taste that the notion implies. But as we can see such an authoritarian prescription for taste, though an attempt to thwart or devalue other styles or modes of expression, cannot silence the use of the vernacular. Indeed, Fergusson's and Burns's nationalism generally, and their comic nationalistic discourse in particular, function as a reaction against the self-righteousness of English neoclassicism.

I should note here that the employment of humor for broadly nationalistic themes and subjects in no way denies the seriousness of the issue for these Scots poets. Rather, the humor accentuates and transcends the cultural dominance in all its forms that England inflicted upon Scotland. In other words, humor calls into question the cultural orthodoxy that the political relationship between the countries fostered. In this sense, there is a forward-looking optimism in both poets, a refusal to write Scotland off totally as a nation. To base nationalism (or patriotism for that matter) on nostalgia is an attempt to erect a castle on a foundation of quicksand. Christopher Whatley has examined Burns's nationalism and feelings about the Union of 1707, concluding that Burns himself was uncertain about his position.⁴ Paul Scott, on the other hand, downplays the nostalgic character of Burns's patriotism and sees instead in the poet a political realist whose Jacobitism "was an expression of his detestation of the Union and of the arrogance and corruption of wealth."⁵ Burns, the democrat, as Fergusson before him, felt a great and perhaps impotent rage at the very undemocratic Union of 1707, which he, some generations after the fact, could do nothing to reverse. Ambivalent feelings of Scots nationalism and simultaneously British patriotism might very well be expected of any human being caught in such a cultural and political context. We must also remember that both these poets were intelligent men, connoisseurs of subtlety and nuance and ambiguity, who also died quite young. It is perhaps too much

in Kenneth Simpson, ed., *Love and Liberty: Robert Burns A Bicentenary Celebration* (East Linton, 1997), pp. 198-216. Henceforth *Celebration*.

⁴Christopher A. Whatley, "Burns and the Union of 1707," see *Celebration*, pp. 191-93. A. M. Kinghorn has voiced similar skepticism regarding Burns-the-man's nationalist feelings as being the same as Burns-the-poet's in "Scots Wha Hae and a' That," *SSL*, 30 (1998), 187-96; Richard Finlay in "The Burns Cult and Scottish Identity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Celebration*, pp. 69-78 and Andrew Noble in "Burns and Scottish Nationalism," Kenneth Simpson, ed., *Burns Now* (Edinburgh, 1994), pp. 167-92 have explored how in the nineteenth century Burns cultists saw him as a British patriot and a British writer.

⁵Paul H. Scott, "Robert Burns, Patriot," *Celebration*, p. 269.

to expect of them that they would have formed and rigidly adhered to a monolithic socio-cultural-political system of beliefs.

What Thomas Crawford has said of Burns along these lines bears repeating here:

The central core of all his thought was his exploration of the Scottish predicament, he belonged to a nation which had lost its independence but was at the same time part of a larger state in whose success he could rejoice and in whose better government he was interested, so that his patriotism was always of a double sort.⁶

In the humorous response to Scotland's predicament, we do not have a call to revolution; there exists a realism that provides a sense not of the once and future Scotland, ruled by the Bruces and Wallaces, but rather a sense of ongoing dialogue between two cultural entities and their respective signifiers. In any power relationship, the dominant entity generally takes itself seriously, and in order to maintain dominance must continue to take itself seriously. The humorous nationalistic expressions by Fergusson and Burns therefore serve as subversive voices because in these expressions we see that the poets do not and will not take the status quo power relationships entirely seriously, hence the relationships are not acknowledged to be absolutely hierarchical. Scots food is as good as English or Continental, the Scots muse is as good as the Greco-Roman-neoclassical-English, Scots literature is as good as English, and Scotland is itself of no less importance than the self-important England.

One of the most gratifying expressions of these sentiments which I have outlined is Robert Fergusson's howler on "The King's Birth-Day in Edinburgh." The title immediately introduces to this poem the dualist play that Fergusson so keenly exploits for his comic effect. On the one hand, the title suggests a typical occasional panegyric about a traditional British holiday and the monarch reigning at the time. Such at least would seem to be the case. But consider that the title itself makes no promise of extolling the virtues, if we may call them that, of George III. Rather, Fergusson presents us, subtly perhaps, with a promise of a poem about a particular place on a particular day. Indeed, the poem is in fact a mock epic about the festive goings-on in Edinburgh complete with a tribute to the cannon Mons Meg in the castle. The King does not exist in this poem except by allusion to "the day sae aften sung...the fourth of June."⁷ All hint of seriousness vanishes by the time Fergusson finishes the first stanza. The imitation of the seriousness with which classical epics (and their eighteenth-century counterparts) open, with an obligatory in-

⁶Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Stanford, 1960), p. 238. Henceforth Crawford.

⁷*The Poems of Robert Fergusson*, ed. Matthew P. McDiarmid, STS, 3rd Series, 21, 24 (1954-56), II, 52, 53, II, I, 25. Further references will be given in the text.

Inspire me, till I lisp an' wink,
To sing thy name!⁸

Whether as whisky or ale, John Barleycorn, not French brandy nor Russian vodka nor Kentucky bourbon nor especially English gin, is the key to poetic inspiration for both Scots poets.

"Scotch Drink" may indeed be, as Thomas Crawford has claimed, Burns's parody of his own nationalism (p. 149). Indeed, Burns's insistence on the joyous necessity of his having to drink his fill in order to produce a "rowth o' rhyme" (l. 123) and how "When wanting thee [whisky], what tuneless cranks / Are my poor Verses! (ll. 105-6) does tend to reinforce a sense of self-mockery here. Burns shows that as a Scotsman he is capable of seeing humor in his situation. Yet beneath this there is an underlying core of seriousness, for if drunkenness is the key to poetic inspiration, then logically any form of alcohol will suffice to get the job done. Why wouldn't a poor poet then extol the virtues of "Cheap Drink"? I suspect the answer to this is that the high spirited (pun intended) and self-mocking tone of "Scotch Drink" represents the humorous counterpart to the much more serious issue (from a drinker's or a distiller's point of view) of Scotch Whisky as a subject of economic policy as directed by Members of Parliament. In particular, Burns, in "The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer, to the Right Honorable and Honorable, the Scotch Representatives in the House of Commons," to give the poem its full title,⁹ employing yet again his humble poet persona with a lighthearted diction, urges the Scots MPs to repeal the excise duties placed on what is in fact "Scotch Drink"—whisky. Since this poem addresses itself squarely to the parliamentary representatives of Scotland about onerous, and quite probably punitive, taxation on a product of Scotland, we can readily see that Burns requests these men to act in their nation's best interest when it comes to the drink of choice. Further, the poem dwells at length on matters Scots, concluding with a rousing observation that "FREEDOM and WHISKY gang thegither" (l. 185). Burns carefully avoids specifying what sort of freedom he has in mind here, and as Crawford has observed, "the ambivalence of the ending is an intentional part of the poem's comic effect" (p. 154). This is the freedom of the barroom in the vein of "Love and Liberty." But more seriously, Burns sees in whisky a battleground for political, economic and cultural forces.

Turning here to Burns's satirical treatment of King George, we can examine his own mock Ode, "A Dream," which shares many affinities with Fer-

⁸*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 173, ll. 7-12. Further references will be given in the text. Henceforth *Poems*.

⁹"This was wrote before the Act anent the Scotch Distilleries, of session 1786; for which Scotland and the Author return their most grateful thanks"—Burns's footnote.

gusson's treatment of the same subject. To begin with, Burns in the poem's epigraph offers an apology of sorts, though the irony of it soon becomes apparent when the poet's real agenda of admonishing the monarch comes to the forefront in the poem. The couplet with which Burns heads his poem reads:

*Thoughts, words and deeds, the Statute blames with reason;
But surely Dreams were ne'er indicated Treason.*

In the paragraph that follows these lines, Burns sets forth the circumstances of the poem's composition. He read "the Laureate's Ode" for "June 4th, 1786," the traditional date of the King's birthday, "and, in his dreaming fancy, made the following Address" (*Poems*, I, 265). The clever cover for potentially treasonous sentiment is the age-old device of disclaimer, the dream. How could a poor, "humble Poet" (l. 4) be guilty of treason when he just fell asleep and dreamed a poem in his down-home native Scots tongue rebuking the King and his administration? Why, such an irreverent thought would never cross his mind.

The intent, of course, is quite similar to Fergusson's in his poem: mockery. Though Burns concerns himself to a far greater degree than does Fergusson with taking his jabs directly, if sometimes with tremendous subtlety and irony, at the King, both poems nevertheless concern themselves largely with poking fun at, indeed mocking, the traditional Birthday Odes of the time. Burns, in the same vein as Fergusson, immediately undercuts the high rhetorical seriousness of such occasional poems by employing Scots vernacular rather than Standard English. The simplicity of Burns's opening greeting to the monarch—"GUID-MORNIN to your MAJESTY!" (l. 1)—presents us, and ostensibly the King as well, with a decidedly non-epic and rather chatty tone. This quite blatantly deflates the pomposity and consequent high artificiality of traditional Birthday Odes. To further this undercutting of the genre, Burns takes direct aim at the convention itself, just as Fergusson did in the opening stanza of his Birthday Ode. Burns writes,

The *Poets* too, a venal gang,
Wi' rhymes weel-turn'd an' ready,
Wad gar you trow ye ne'er do wrang,
But ay unerring steady,
On sic a day (ll. 14-18).

This overt critique of the tradition functions also as a backhanded slap at the poetic subject matter, and thus to the flesh and blood subject of these types of poems. Burns also, in speaking of the "rhymes weel-turn'd," and ironically doing so in vernacular "rhymes weel-turn'd," implies a dismissal of the inflated and grandiose diction of neoclassical English poems of the Birthday Ode convention. Fergusson achieves a similar effect through the use of an ironic and satirical use of just such conventions in his Birthday Ode.

Burns then runs through a litany of complaints ranging from the inability of King George to rule wisely, taxes, debt, regal extravagance, and social ills generally—all in a voice of the “humble Poet” but which exudes sarcasm and mockery. Such criticism of King George in and of itself does not make of Burns a rabid Scots nationalist, though his passing reference to Prince Charlie does cast the poem as a political condemnation from the stance of the Scots cause. In stanza ten Burns writes,

But some day ye may gnaw your nails,
An' curse your folly sairly,
That e'er ye brake *Diana's pales*,
Or rattl'd dice wi' *Charlie*
By night or day (*ll.* 86-90).

As an expression of nationalism, this would appear to be rather low-key. Crawford is no doubt correct in seeing the poem as a whole and its mood as “a romantic Jacobite nationalism in the process of turning into something politically radical and uncompromising” (p. 159).¹⁰ The degree of nationalistic intensity in the poet and his poem could be debated forever to no satisfactory conclusion. However, there appears to be no doubt that the poem and the man creating it express a nationalist sentiment. I would suggest that this criticism of the King and his administration from the stance of a Scots poet writing in Scots and violating the conventions of the Birthday Ode genre as he does would at least strike a Scots reader as an expression of a nationalistic distaste for being governed by an English King and an English Parliament. The irony, the satire, the outright mockery of subject and convention serve to underscore Burns’s refusal to accept the artistic and political status quo.

A more ostensibly strident and radical poem along these political lines is Burns’s “Ode [For General Washington’s Birthday].” Significantly, this poem is written in Standard English and is a Birthday Ode for a national leader, complete with all the rousing political themes of freedom and democracy and glorious national pride. It’s surely no accident that this Birthday Ode follows the formula and language that one might well expect of an Ode written in honor of King George, yet this poem is directed to an enemy of English colonialism and an enemy of King George III. Further, Burns’s “Ode to General Washington” was written in 1794 at a time when Washington himself was President of the United States. Beyond the high rhetorical and political seriousness of the poem, a potentially comic edge, and a sharp edge at that, is the deliberate jab Burns takes at Odes for King George and other British mon-

¹⁰On the anti-Hanoverian sentiment in “A Dream” and its relation to Presbyterianism, see Liam McIlvanney’s “‘Sacred Freedom’: Presbyterian Radicalism and the Politics of Robert Burns,” *Celebration*, pp. 168-82. McIlvanney’s essay as a whole explores the relationship between Presbyterianism and Burns’s politics.

archs. This Birthday Ode, being more or less generically orthodox in form, in fact praises a successful rebel-as-national-leader, one who just happens also to be named George.¹¹

The nationalistic dimension of Burns's Ode to Washington becomes quite blatant at the end, for fully the last third of the poem concerns "Caledonia" and the comparison of Scotland's present condition with that of the newly formed and newly independent America. Burns's direct reference to the long-dead William Wallace becomes a lament for what Burns sees as the long-dead freedom of Scotland itself—a freedom and independence that America at that point had recently won under the William Wallace of the New World, George Washington. Though not a comic send-up like "A Dream" or Fergusson's "King's Birth-Day in Edinburgh," Burns's "Ode for General Washington" does play with the expectations of the genre and underscores the humor of the piece by making a conventional poem about an enemy of the Crown.

I would like to turn back to Robert Fergusson at this point and the question of the relationships among a sense of national pride, language and humor, specifically in regard to one of Fergusson's most brilliant satires, "To the Principal and Professors of the University of St Andrews, on their Superb Treat to Dr Samuel Johnson." From Scotch whisky we turn to Scottish food.

When Johnson visited the University of St Andrews on 19th August 1773 as part of his tour of Scotland with James Boswell, eight members of the University faculty treated their guest as visiting academic royalty.¹² In both Boswell's and Johnson's account of the visit, we can see that the University Professors were obviously honored to receive the foremost man of English letters. Johnson, in a polite sort of way, wrote of St Andrews that it "seems to be a place eminently adapted to study and education."¹³ Reported conversation was duly intellectual, and the food impressed Boswell at least as being "very good" (Wendt, p. 157). Johnson, according to Boswell, responded to the offer of dinner by saying, "Ay, ay; amidst all these sorrowful scenes, I have no objection to dinner" (Wendt, p. 157). In his own account of St Andrews, Dr. Johnson elaborates on the rundown state of the University at the time. He writes,

The kindness of the professors did not contribute to abate the uneasy remembrance of an university declining, a college alienated, and a church profaned and hastening

¹¹For an extended discussion of Burns's attitudes toward America, see Roger Fechner's "Burns and American Liberty," *Celebration*, pp. 274-88.

¹²As reported by Boswell in his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, the hosts were Professors Murison, Shaw, Cooke, Hill, Haddo, Watson, Flint, and Brown.

¹³*Samuel Johnson: A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland and James Boswell: Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL. D.*, ed. Allan Wendt (Boston, 1965), p. 6. Henceforth Wendt.

to the ground.... Had the university been destroyed two centuries ago, we should not have regretted it; but to see it pining in decay and struggling for life, fills the mind with mournful images and ineffectual wishes (Wendt, p. 7).

Thus concludes his description of his visit to St Andrews.

In his poem to mark the occasion, Fergusson begins where Johnson left off, with the ruin and desolation of the place. In rather broad strokes, Fergusson paints a picture of a place in decay:

St Andrews town may look right gawsy,
Nae Grass will grow upon her cawsey,
Nor wa'-flow'rs of a yellow dye,
Glour dowy o'er her RUINS high,
Sin SAMY'S head weel pang'd wi' lear
Has seen the ALMA MATER there (*ll.* 1-6).

In the opening line, Fergusson unleashes the biting irony that is a hallmark of the whole poem. The town looks "gawsy," that is fine, showy, as a ruin! And this state of affairs he sees as part of a cause-effect relationship, the cause being none other than the learned "Samy" himself and the visit to the Alma Mater. It's perhaps unrealistic to think that one English man of letters could single-handedly nearly wreck the oldest university in Scotland by a mere visit, but the irony in Fergusson's opening lines does indeed reverberate with highly nationalistic overtones. St Andrews was not only Fergusson's own Alma Mater, but in a very real sense the Alma Mater of all of Scotland's higher education. So the link between the University's state of disrepair and the presence of Dr. Johnson would suggest that St Andrews' "ruins" as Fergusson calls them can be viewed in and as a wider cultural and national context and are a result not of Johnson himself, but rather what Johnson represents culturally and nationally. To put it another way, St Andrews is Scotland (broadly figured), Dr. Johnson is England (again, broadly figured), and the University has declined "Sin SAMY'S head.../Has seen the ALMA MATER there" (*ll.* 5-6). The University, like the nation, has been wrecked by outside influences.

Fergusson then proceeds to the matter of the feast and the effort lavished upon Johnson and Fergusson's own recipe for how the visiting academic dignity should have been fed. The poet prefaces his bill of fare with a blatant statement of his disgust with Johnson, and by implication a criticism of the professors' fawning over their guest. He snarls with lack of respect for his addressees and their guest:

But hear me lads! Gin I'd been there,
How I wad trimm'd the bill o' fare!
For ne'er sic surly wight as he [Johnson]
Had met wi' sic respect frae me (*ll.* 23-26).

Thus far, the sense of easy familiarity Fergusson displays toward “Samy” Johnson¹⁴ functions as a humorous and deflating response to the ludicrous and dismissive contempt Samy in his *Dictionary* showed toward Scotland and her inhabitants. The nationalistic theme comes to the forefront in the next six lines, where Fergusson translates Johnson’s famous definition of “oats” into Scots:

Mind ye what SAM, the lying loun!
Has in his Dictionar laid down?
That AITS in England are a feast
To cow an’ horse, an’ sican beast,
While in Scots ground this growth was common
To gust the gab o’ MAN an’ WOMAN (*ll.* 27-32).

He then goes on to offer up the menu Johnson would have received if he, Fergusson, had been the caterer, and the first item on the table would have been that quintessential Scots dish, the haggis. It’s important to note here that the disrespect Fergusson would direct at Johnson comes in the form of food, but food charged with national significance for the Scotsman.

On the level of language itself, we again have in this poem the employment of the vernacular, this time in service of deflating the icons of the English language—Dr. Johnson as well as his *Dictionary*. As Robert Crawford astutely remarked, “By first of all translating Johnson’s words [that is, the definition of “oats”] into Scots, Fergusson robs the great *Dictionary* of all its supposed cultural authority as arbiter of the English language.... Fergusson upends Johnson’s Anglocentrism...by contesting authority through the politics of oatmeal” (pp. 6-7).¹⁵ I might add to this that Fergusson’s sly effect here makes of Johnson’s *Dictionary* of the English language a Dictionary of the Scottish language as well, and he gives new meaning to the old saw about making someone eat his own words.¹⁶ Indeed, as a bill of fare, this whole list of haggis and sheep’s head and black trotters and bloody puddings and all the rest might induce a profound case of disgust for the uninitiated palate. Perhaps such was Fergusson’s hope should Johnson actually dine on these regional and national

¹⁴MacLaine (p. 117) has a discussion of Fergusson’s familiar tone regarding Johnson.

¹⁵A. Gibson and T. C. Smout trace the increasing dominance of oatmeal during the period 1500-1800. Their evidence argues that the decrease in a meat-based diet means a decrease in the standard of living. Dr. Johnson’s jab at oats and thereby Scots themselves therefore becomes simultaneously national, cultural and also economic. See “Scottish Food and Scottish History, 1500-1800” in *Scottish Society, 1500-1800*, ed. R. A. Houston and I. D. Whyte (Cambridge, 1989), p. 60 and passim.

¹⁶I have to thank Robert Crawford for the wordplay.

delicacies, since Johnson's life, his attitudes, language, and habitation all served to keep him at a distance from the food, culture and life of the Scots for whom such a menu would not seem indelicate.¹⁷

Importantly, Fergusson concludes his alternative feast with a call to culinary nationalism, much in the same vein as the alcoholic nationalism of whisky as voiced by both himself and Burns. Fergusson writes,

Ah! willawins, for Scotland now,
Whan she maun stap ilk birky's mow
Wi' eistacks, grown as 'tware in pet
In foreign land, or green-house het,
When cog o' brose an' cutty spoon
Is a' our cottar childer's boon,
Wha thro' the week, till Sunday's speal,
Toil for pease-cods an' gude lang kail (*ll.* 71-78).

In sum, then, this poem, as the others I've discussed here, functions as yet another call for Scots to turn away from the siren song of that which is foreign and alien and to turn inward in order to valorize their native culture and its traditions. For Fergusson, there appears to be something inherently degrading and destructive in the spectacle of Scots intellectuals at St Andrews sucking up to the pompous guest from England, and doing so in a way that ultimately weakens and undermines the integrity of Scotland's own culture. As such, we can see that for Fergusson, and for Burns also, humor is a vehicle, one weapon in an arsenal, for challenging the cultural and national status quo as they perceived it. The poems in question here attempt to upend the hierarchies of literature, style, cuisine, booze, and nations themselves. These poems and the poets' comic visions, are expressions of a broad-based nationalistic impulse and become all the more important as expressions given the apparent impotence and ineffectualness of the political sphere in undoing the perceived damage of the Union of 1707.

By the way, Boswell read Fergusson's poem to Dr. Johnson on 29th September 1773. "Samy's" response? "He laughed, but said nothing."¹⁸

This laugh displays the assumed cultural superiority that Fergusson and Burns, with their own nationalistic humor, sought to upend. This is not to diminish the seriousness of the Scottish cultural and political situation vis-à-vis England in the late eighteenth century. Rather, the humor that the Scots poets

¹⁷For an amplification of ideas along these lines, see Alan McKenzie, "'Two Heads Weel Pang'd Wi' Lear': Robert Fergusson, Samuel Johnson and St Andrews," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 11 (1984), 25-35.

¹⁸Reported by Boswell in his manuscript (*Boswell's Journal*, ed. Pottle and Bennett, 233) but omitted from the published edition.

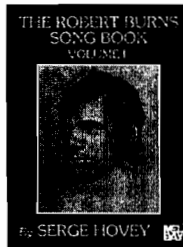
employ in the nationalistic vein refuses to accord England and the English (and indeed any and all things non-Scots) the deference to which they think they are entitled. The air of cultural superiority epitomized in and by Dr. Johnson meets its counterpart in the comic visions of Fergusson and Burns who with surgical precision dissect the imperiousness and pretentiousness of any and all who for a moment think they are better than Scotland and her people.

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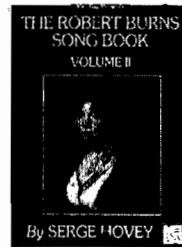
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