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A. M. Kinghorn

Old Bones Disinterred Once Again: Ramsay's Pastoral and its Legacy for the Literati

Over half a century after it was first published Hugh Blair accorded Allan Ramsay's *Gentle Shepherd* ex cathedra attention in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783) by praising its variety in natural description and character and drawing attention to its superiority over English examples of the pastoral. Pope and Prior he dismissed as unoriginal imitators of Vergil, town-dwellers whose notions of the country had little to do with the truth of nature. Ramsay on the other hand offered a landscape painter's realistic reconstruction of rural trials and tribulations perceived against a domestic background and peopled it with kenspeckle personalities recalling to life genuine Lowland shepherds and rustics of yesteryear.

In the 1724 Preface to *The Ever Green* Ramsay spoke nostalgically of the "good old Bards" whose "Images are native, and their Landskips domestick; copied from those Fields and Meadows we every Day behold."¹ Proud to tread in the track of the makars, Ramsay, who had adopted the pseudonym Gavin Douglas in the days of the Easy Club, wrote his pastoral comedy in a composite neo-Scots dialect further enlarged to form a basis for the definitive literary Scots of Burns's Edinburgh edition. According to Lord Woodhouselee (Alexander Fraser Tytler), writing before 1800, it was widely read throughout the century by folk who learned to recite whole passages by heart. This must have

¹Allan Ramsay, *The Ever Green, Being a Collection of Scots Poems, Wrote by the Ingenious before 1600*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1724), I, vii, viii. Most of the Preface is set in italics. Henceforth *Ever Green*.

helped to preserve many words and expressions current in the late seventeen hundreds that might otherwise have fallen out of use.

Ramsay was a man with a mission, fired by his own patriotic desire to rescue the language, once a rival to Chaucer's, from its debasement in the face of anglicization and encouraged by the example of James Watson's *Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems* (3 parts, 1706-11). Literary Scots had to weather many critical storms during the century and the Edinburgh literati, of whom Hugh Blair was a leading light, did not support even a limited use of this newly-refangled native idiom in serious poetry. Blair therefore has to be given credit for identifying *The Gentle Shepherd* as a work worthy to be given space among his "Belles Lettres."

In Lecture XLVI Blair declared that "In every rank of life the relations of Father, Husband, Son, Brother, Lover, or Friend lay the foundation of those affecting situations which make Man's heart feel for Man," a sentence which encapsulated the emotional yardstick against which he and his "free reasoning" contemporaries believed poetry should be judged. Their conviction that the true call of the poet was not to the intellect but to the passions defied the school of Pope and underlay the judgments of the *literati*. Ramsay's dramatic pastoral appeared to Blair to conform to this heart-touching standard and he calls it "this beautiful poem" but with disadvantages to the reader, chiefly "that it is written in the old rustic dialect of Scotland which in a short time will probably be entirely obsolete and unintelligible since only natives could understand or relish it." Unlike the majority of his fellow-critics, Blair was reluctant to reject Ramsay's idiom entirely and took refuge in a muddled explanation, confusing gloomy prognostications that it might not survive the rising tide of social change with doubts of the capacity of non-Scots to grasp its sense. Those who praised the play's literary qualities but saw the author's Scots as a blemish lacked the critical assurance shown later by Woodhouselee, who, while admitting that common Scots was "gradually refining and coming nearer to the English standard," noted that the one distinctive feature of Ramsay's style lay in his transference of the oral tradition to his writings. As a good minor swimmer in the neo-classical mainstream Ramsay knew what he was doing but Blair failed to understand the poet's statement in the Preface to his 1721 *Poems*: "Good Poetry can be in any Language" (p. vi). Instead, Blair concentrated on the theoretical disadvantages of composing the shepherds' dialogue in a blend of English and Scots, an essential component in the dramatic recreation of Ramsay's peasant community. He also underestimated the sagacity of Ramsay's audiences and, perhaps, of his own. *The Gentle Shepherd* was acclaimed far and wide from the time of its first publication, but sixty years later Blair, while admitting the comedy to be a considerable achievement, could still regard the Scots idiom not as a source of strength but almost

as an impediment.² His attitude to the play was always ambivalent and Blair was even ready to laud it to the skies without reference to its language. After Burns's death he sent a letter to the poet's friend John Syme, expressing unqualified enthusiasm for Ramsay's play and calling it "the greatest masterpiece of Drammatick Pastoral that has ever appeared in any language." Blair had tried to get Burns to write one like it. On the vexed topic of Scots, influential members of the literati were inevitably less circumspect in private communications than in their published utterances.

Blair's opposition to the reinstatement of literary Scots as an alternative standard was mild in comparison with the rigid views of the diehards, of whom one of the most outspoken was John Pinkerton, ultra-conservative editor of *Ancient Scottish Poems never before in Print, but now Published from the MS Collections of Sir R. Maitland: Comprising Pieces Written from about 1420 till 1586* (1786). Pinkerton's main target was not the popular *Gentle Shepherd* but Ramsay's *Ever Green* edition of the Bannatyne MS which Lord Hailes (David Dalrymple) had thoroughly trounced in the Preface to his *Ancient Scottish Poems from the Bannatyne Manuscript* of 1770, brought out chiefly as a protest against the inaccuracies of *The Ever Green*. In terms less polite Pinkerton, violently ignoring the *de mortuis* maxim, alleged that Ramsay was "entirely ignorant of the Scottish tongue, save that spoken by the mob around him." Pinkerton, a minor rhymester but no literary critic, admired the makars, especially Dunbar, and agreed that medieval Scots should be preserved, but only as a museum-piece, with its cruder elements excised. Less fastidious collectors, like David Herd and Pinkerton's determined adversary Joseph Ritson, had studied the old Scots ballads and found that these anonymous verses in short stanzas possessed a rare emotional force which pulled at the heartstrings but they showed no developed sense of literary judgment and their assessments of the makars were eccentric. These men of taste dispersed into factions of hard and soft (or softer) liners with the small group of antiquarians following their own track and the various learned societies neglecting early Scots literature, preferring to follow Blair's lead and extol the genius of Osian.

It is important to note that Ramsay himself never tried to set old and new in opposition. The best-known Scottish poet before Burns, he was the only one with a following south of the border but suffering during and after his lifetime from the disadvantages befalling a prophet in his own country. His patriotic work as editor in *The Ever Green* might have made a case for co-existence in spite of Pinkerton's denunciations had not influences from the south proved

²It will be recalled that Blair was not alone in decrying the use of Scotisms. James Beattie, author of *The Minstrel*, a work written in Augustan English, also published *Scoticisms, Arranged in Alphabetical Order, Designed to Correct Improprieties of Speech and Writing* (1779).

overpowering. When Ramsay died in 1758 the literary standing of the language was too far reduced in metropolitan Edinburgh for any poems in a near-current Scots to attract non-partisan criticism from the literati, who with few exceptions regarded the slightest dependence on Scotisms as a departure from good taste, and in their eyes good taste was paramount.

Though scores of poets happily disregarding if not oblivious of the censorious policies of the Edinburgh *bon ton* were busy in Lowland Scotland during the second half of the eighteenth century, the only other substantial work in the pastoral tradition was composed by a schoolmaster in the parish of Lochlee, in the north-west of Angus. Alexander Ross's *Helenore or The Fortunate Shepherdess* appeared in 1768 and went through several editions. Ross acknowledged his indebtedness to Ramsay in the opening section but little serious critical notice was taken of the poem until 1887, when William Walker described the pastoral as "a piece of incongruity—a strange mixture of delicacy and coarseness, of beauty and deformity" in which "lies the charm of the poem," language recalling Blair's double-edge praise of *The Gentle Shepherd*. Soon after its publication Ross's friend James Beattie, for once holding back his prejudice against contemporary poetry in the Doric, printed a selection. Under the pseudonym Oliver Oldstile an enthusiastic letter in praise of the poem appeared in *The Aberdeen Journal*, together with a verse epistle to the author in Scots, the latter signed by Beattie. His surprising incursion into the vernacular honors the old makars and includes Ramsay in their ranks, and by implication Ross, who composed *Helenore* in a form of his (and Beattie's) native Aberdeenshire dialect, which Edinburgh bookbuyers must have found hard to comprehend. In a letter to his long-time friend Sylvester Douglas (Lord Glenberrie) Beattie observed that "the common people of Aberdeen speak a language that would scarce be understood in Fife and how much the Buchan dialect differs from that of Lothian may be seen by comparing Ramsay's *Gentle Shepherd* with Ajax's speech to the Grecian Knabbs"—in other words, two mutually incomprehensible tongues. Ross composed *Helenore* for a limited audience in his home parish without making compromises in order to gain a reputation further afield. Another friend of Beattie's, Dr. Thomas Blacklock, considered it the equal of *The Gentle Shepherd* but beyond the boundaries of Aberdeenshire, Angus, and the Mearns its dialect ensured that *Helenore* remained, as Burns said of his own knowledge of Greek and Latin authors, "A fountain shut up, and a book sealed."³

Set alongside what Walker called "the 'classic' Scotch of Ramsay, Fergusson, and Burns or the broader Buchan dialect of Aberdeenshire," Ross's localized and relatively undiluted Doric, with direct links back to Northern Middle English, would have been almost a foreign tongue to the burghers of the Athens of the North. The Select Society's founding members, who in-

³Robert Burns, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock, 1786), Preface, p. iii.

cluded Ramsay's son Allan the portrait-painter, believed that a nation striving to shed her provincialism could, and should, speak to the civilized world only through books by masters of English, not in a rough colloquy distilled from a mélange of dialects bequeathed to an enlightened generation by second-rate writers of trivia. Theirs was a forward-looking quasi-political declaration, implying a rejection of insularity, although a jingoistic element inherited from the professed Jacobites of Ramsay's younger days lingered on. The Society's linguistic ideals were certainly anglicized but its real concerns lay with Scotland's future national distinction which the literati associated with creative achievement fit to be compared with the Greek and Latin classics, as well as with the works of Shakespeare. With Hume in the vanguard they were eager to lift a home-grown natural genius from obscurity to crown in poetry their country's achievements in philosophy and speculative prose. With the exception of Ossian none of those recommended (Thomas Blacklock, Michael Bruce, John Home, William Wilkie, all writing in neoclassic English), attracted more than passing attention. This ill-conceived marriage of literary appreciation and national pride was short-lived, but the quest for a Scottish (as distinct from Scots) classic continued among the literati until it lighted on Burns, initially an unpromising candidate, since although his Kilmarnock volume was titled *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* the verses which pleased his first reviewers (James Sibbald and Henry Mackenzie) were cast in English. His appeal to these gentlemen lay in his self-characterization as "a Simple Bard, unbroken by rules of art" rather than in the quality of his poems. Sibbald, editor of *The Edinburgh Magazine* and Mackenzie, author of *The Man of Feeling* and editor of *The Mirror* and *The Lounger* magazines each repeated stock observations on the vulgarity of the poet's use of idiom and praised the highly artificial elegance of his English verses. The broad Scotch which had supposedly diminished Ramsay's *Gentle Shepherd* was once again cited as a disadvantage for Burns. It is well known that Blair, with the best of intentions, clumsily tried to purge words and phrases from the manuscript of the second Edinburgh edition.

Predictably unreceptive to the use of dialect was James Beattie in his 1776 *Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition*. Following generous if conventional praise of the sentiments, the lively drawing of characters and the probability of *The Gentle Shepherd*, he lashed out: "To an Englishman, who had never conversed with the common people of Scotland, the language would appear only antiquated, obscure, or unintelligible; but to a Scotchman who thoroughly understands it, and is aware of its vulgarity, it appears *ludicrous*; from the contrast between *meanness* of phrase, and *dignity* or *seriousness* of sentiment."⁴ This, he alleged, explains why Ramsay's pastoral "with all its

⁴James Beattie, *Essays: on Poetry and Music, as they affect the Mind; on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition; on the Usefulness of Classical Learning*, 3rd edn. (London and Edinburgh, 1779), pp. 382-3.

merit and with a strong national partiality in its favour" was unsatisfactory on the stage. His initial approval of *The Gentle Shepherd's* qualities gave Beattie no legitimate ground for rejecting the play, on (or off) the stage since the brisk dialogue in familiar accents surely brought the action closer to the probability of real life but in the matter of excluding Scots even from comic scenes Beattie was unwilling to compromise his prejudices. By probability he indicated verisimilitude, a useful neoclassic term related to the essential feeling for human action and dominating passions demanded by readers.—"real matter of fact or something like it" as he remarked in his 1776 *Essay on Poetry and Music, as they Affect the Mind*.

Henry Mackenzie, writing to his cousin Mrs. Elizabeth Rose, described *The Gentle Shepherd* as "a chef d'oeuvre in its way" with its language "to us at present one of its beauties." "In its way" and "at present" echoed Blair's expressed fear—and one commonly felt—that the language might soon become obsolete, dependent on a glossary, and a block to future understanding. Several of Mackenzie's letters to this lady betray a patriotic concern shared by many of his class that Scotland was losing her sense of nationality and this may explain why his private attitude to poetry in Scots is warmer than that shown in the *Lounger* article. It is tempting to think that Mackenzie, an arch-conservative whose published opinions on Scots were typical of his clique, may have viewed *The Gentle Shepherd* through the spectacles of an antiquary or collector as the last specimen of poetry in a dying tongue and its author as an old makar who had somehow survived complete extinction.

Time has shown that these warnings about difficulty of communication were justified. Ramsay and Burns did indeed pose immediate problems of interpretation, even for Scots. Ramsay had anticipated this obstacle and with the help of Thomas Ruddiman produced glossaries to his 1721 and 1728 *Poems* and to later editions of *The Gentle Shepherd*. Directed principally at English subscribers they could not have been entirely wasted on Ramsay's urban readers. Another glossary of 400 words appended to the 1737 *Collection of Scots Proverbs* was delicately headed "Explanation of the Words less frequent amongst our Gentry than the Commons" though Ramsay's high-flown dedication "to the Tenantry of Scotland, Farmers of the Dales, and Storemasters of the Hills" mischievously patronized his audience as "happy Herds" and apologized to "some among the Gentle Vulgar" for the "coarse Expressions" which the saying contained though Ramsay had borrowed nearly all of them unacknowledged from James Kelly's 1721 *Complete Collection of Scottish Proverbs*, itself grounded in earlier compilations.

Hugh Blair's finely-wrought *Lectures* brought rhetoric and belles lettres together with a wide variety of examples from classical and modern literature and discussed the tried and tested methods by which orator, writer and critic might succeed in touching the heart. By the 1780s the phrase had become so hackneyed as to be nearly valueless as a true token of distinction. Any writer of strong sensibility who could convey heartfelt sentiment was called a genius

and any critic capable of detecting his qualities was said to be endowed with taste. In Blair's view the two were inseparable, which may explain why his praise of Ramsay's pastoral, "this beautiful poem," did not include the magic words. Blair implied that Burns was a rising genius in a letter to the poet following *The Lounger* review (No. 97, 9 Dec. 1786), where Mackenzie had already used the words "original genius." Mackenzie's full title read "Surprising Effects of Original Genius, Exemplified in the Poetical Productions of Robert Burns, an Ayrshire Ploughman."

Taste, the power of artistic judgment, and genius, the individual inspiration, were terms much discussed by the literati. Blair described taste as a product of inborn delicacy and acquired correctness. Much of his analysis of taste originated in conversations with Lord Kames. Kames's *Elements of Criticism* (1762), Alexander Gerard's *Essay on Taste* (1759) and George Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1774) each took the argument of Hume's *Essay of the Standard of Taste* (1757) as a starting point and proposed that taste could be acquired by training in the old psychology of associated ideas or elements. The City of Aberdeen, with two separate universities, came second only to Edinburgh as a home for distinguished literati and in 1758 the Philosophical Society in Aberdeen, or Wise Club, was formed. Both Gerard and Campbell (as well as Campbell's pupil Beattie) held chairs in Aberdeen. Gerard, Professor of Theology at King's College, showed rather more independence from Hume than Campbell and stressed pity and sensibility of heart as an important factor in aesthetic (i.e. critical) appreciation. In a later essay *On Genius* (1774), he sustained the conviction, originating in Longinus' stylistic treatise "On the Sublime," that genius need follow no rules and worked without conscious effort. It should have been obvious to Hume, Blair and others who exaggerated the worth of Blacklock, Wilkie and other local English-writing poets that these industrious Scotsmen were not geniuses but patriotic enthusiasm clouded their vision. Ramsay may not have been a genius either (though Burns said he was) but after Fergusson and Burns he was Scotland's best poet and the over-eager literati might have been better advised to have raised him to their Pantheon.

Standing aloof from Ramsay and the Scots poetic tradition was George Campbell, Principal of Marischal College, Aberdeen, one of the most dedicated of those eighteenth-century writers to assume that the art of poetry was an intellectual process and lay within the province of rhetoric. Compared with Blair, Kames or even Gerard, he is not a joy to read. He did not show the same happy tendency to digress and confined himself to expounding the rhetorical traditions of Cicero, Quintilian and Horace, reminding the literate world that fine style could be achieved by following prescribed methods. These included the imitation of established authors and reliance on the associative power of the imagination, controlled by the familiar elements of rhetoric or criticism, also known as eloquence, the Roman orator's ideal.

Campbell, interpreting Hume, defined eloquence as "that art or talent by which the discourse is adapted to its end" and set out the skills which the art of the orator and the critic must study in order to attain Hume's "true standard of taste and beauty," stressing the importance of establishing the precise meanings of individual words and making them fit the things they signified. Thanks to the philosophers, questions of definition were in the air. Dr. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, completed in 1755, had a similar object. Campbell attempted to translate theory into practice by first defining his own terms and then applying this vocabulary, a spiritless and overworked jargon, to works by seventeenth and eighteenth-century English poets. The result is deadening. More convincingly, Kames addressed Shakespeare and the French dramatists, quoting not only from the Graeco-Roman rhetorical school and modern, mainly French, neoclassical writings, but also from Macpherson's *Ossian*, dubiously respectable in the shadow of Blair, for whom it passed muster according to the rules of Aristotle. Kames's illustrations underlined an essential neoclassic rule, namely that literature must reflect human nature and human sentiments. Dryden, Pope and Johnson had spoken in similar terms.

Like Kames and Blair, Campbell directed much of his attention to style. In his "Nine Canons of Verbal Criticism," he presented a guide to usage elaborating on his predecessor's attempt to clear up difficulties in terminology and under the heading of "The Discriminating Properties of Elocution" followed the purist trend in listing words and expressions which he believed ought to be expurgated from living speech, not by the rigid authority of grammatical rules but by persuasion and argument. This is the most readable part of his treatise even if it does demonstrate the limited perspective of apostles of correctness who used classical authorities to control a writer's vocabulary. Campbell supplied numerous examples of "barbarism," a category of obsolete words, clumsy transplants from a foreign language, particularly French, domestication of foreign names, abbreviations, solecisms, "bad" grammar and "improper" usage. He is convinced that the purity of English can be protected by excluding what he calls "nonsense," a reference to Campbell's *bêtes noires*, including objectionable intrusions, usage devoid of precise meaning, exuberance of metaphor and loose abstractions. Like other idealistic grammarians, Campbell sought a universal standard of elegant English prose suitable for his sermons and the discussions in which the Wise Club delighted. Neither he nor Gerard touched on the vernacular, though their speculations on rhetoric and the original imitation of nature might well have been cited in support of *The Gentle Shepherd* or any poetry in Scots which reflected living speech and real places. Time has shown that their denial of the potential of Scots led to the failure of the mandarins of taste as practical critics, a gradual downfall first assured by the test-case of Burns, whom Henry Mackenzie welcomed as a "Heav'n-taught ploughman" limiting his comments to praise of the sentimental English verses in the Kilmarnock volume and like Blair urging him to drop writing in a language which no one could understand and which would soon die out.

But if their practice fell short, the mainstay of their theory did not. Blair declared the rules of criticism to be ultimately founded upon feeling and defined poetry as the language of passion, or of enlivened imagination. Coleridge and the Romantics distinguished Imagination from mere Fancy by the former's power to perceive the world in terms of human feelings and sympathies. To paint to the heart as well as to the fancy had also been the cardinal message of the Scots critics. In his *Essay on Poetry* Beattie insisted that all true poetry was addressed to the heart and intended to give pleasure by raising or soothing the passions, a clear statement of what romantic poetry was to be like and anticipating Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* by more than twenty years. Wordsworth's intention, to describe incidents in common life in "the real language of men," had also been Ramsay's when he composed *The Gentle Shepherd* in a heightened form of the vernacular accepted as the idiom of Lowland peasants. Ramsay was praised for his pastoral and at the same time blamed for breathing new life into the moribund remains of Scots. After the success of Robert Burns, Ramsay's place as a pioneer became more secure and an uneasy compromise was reached. Scots emerged from limbo, licensed by later generations of literati for use on rustic subjects only, identified with unsophisticated interludes of comic vulgarity until it was rescued by R. L. Stevenson, Lewis Spence and Hugh MacDiarmid, but that's another story.

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