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Robert Burns as Dramatic Poet

R. D. S. Jack

One of the most enjoyable features of Ross Roy's Burns conferences at the University of South Carolina is the time allowed for performance. That opportunity accords with the aural tradition in which Burns worked. I am personally sympathetic to this because of my schooling. Born near Burns' birthplace, and educated at Ayr Academy, I was not introduced to Ayrshire's bard as part of the academic curriculum. That was confined to English authors. Instead we all had to recite or sing his verses. Thus we all became masters in memorizing. Having heard 'Ca' the yowes' sung thirty times, you never forget the words! This training also mirrored the rhetorical methods which Burns followed. I too was taught grammar, rhetoric and dialectic first and so could match his claim to be at an early age "a Critic in substantives, verbs and particles" (Roy I:135). It is this, literally 'trivial' voice which I shall employ in assessing the dramatic Burns.

When I later chose to specialise in early literature, I remained involved in a culture which, at both popular and courtly levels, relied heavily on aural means of transmission. In that context, I became aware that the discrete classical division of written literature into genres had a looser aural, indeed 'vocal' equivalent. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, lyrical, dramatic and narrative voices were often subsumed within the idea of 'Poesie' as the imaginative branch of oratory.¹ Burns himself knew the advantage of

¹ See P. B. Salmon, "The 'Three Voices' of Poetry in Medieval Literary Theory," *Medium Ævum*, 30 (1961): 1-18.

switching from a generic to a vocal perspective. When claiming that he is now a Poet with capital P it is the latter categorisation he employs and within it his dramatic voice is subsumed—"I muse & rhyme, morning, noon & night; & have a hundred different Poetic plans, pastoral, georgic, dramatic, &c. floating in the regions of fancy, somewhere between Purpose and resolve" (Roy I:357).

With a performer's eye and in the same pragmatic spirit I have chosen to prove the existence of a dramatic voice in the most unpromising areas of Burns's art—his romantic and patriotic lyrics and major supernatural narrative, "Tam o' Shanter." In so doing, I am indirectly claiming that his own voice is always elusive. The generic vision conceals this by limiting his strictly theatrical verses to five theatrical prologues. But Watson's *Choice Collection* had introduced him to a wide variety of alternative dramatic forms—debate, cantata, masque, and flyting—which flourished during the Scottish renaissance and reformation. From this base, his more overtly dramatic work emerged, his epistles in verse and prose, his dialogues, his cantata, *The Jolly Beggars* and many of his satires.

"O, my Luve's like a red, red Rose" is a suitable starting point for analysis as it seems to be the epitome of his simple, "heaven-taught" muse. The voice, like that of its author, is that of a youthful, amorous male. The only issue seems to be how he has transformed a series of hyper-conventional images of love into so moving a poem. Look closer, however and one sees that each stanza depends on the rhetorical device of anaphora. "O my Luve's like", "I will love thee still", "Till a' the seas", "And fare thee weel" are all repeated initially. The poem therefore mixes Romantic directness with Neoclassical mannerism. And that is not all. On Burns's own evidence he published the poem in his capacity as folk-song collector. As it was just "a simple old Scots song which [he] had pickt up in this country," the authentic authorial voice retreats even further from view (Roy II:258).

The romantic lyrics also prove that he can assume voices which are not even remotely his own. In "John Anderson, My Jo," the persona is that of an aged faithful married woman who sings proudly of her equally ancient and faithful partner. None of the states imagined here were, or could be,

Burns's but once more the vision is convincingly presented. If the two songs contrast in this way, they share the anaphoric presentation of the romantic voice and its submergence within the folk tradition. Burns may encourage his own bawdy image to the Crochallan Fencibles but here he purifies an earthier folk original. In it John's wife views his aging process in selfish and sexual terms. Simple antithetical images contrast past potency with present impotence. His penis, once a powerful "chanter pipe" now plays no tunes; once powerful it is "now waxen wan."² Burns's text for Johnson's *Musical Museum* maintains the same rhetorical pattern. The wife contrasts her husband's hair, once black as the raven's, with its present snowy whiteness; his youthful, unwrinkled forehead with present baldness. The divergent endings illustrate how completely bawdiness has been converted into sentimentality. While Burns's female persona wishes a platonic blessing on her husband's "frosty pow," her original model threatened him with "the cuckold's mallison" if he failed, again, to satisfy her sexually. But if a complete character change has been invented, it emerges from close mirroring of the folk song's stylistic, rhetorical and dialectical structuring.

Viewed realistically these contrasts and variations seem puzzling. Related to the most basic tests of ancient oratory these concerns disappear. Already "John Anderson, My Jo" illustrates the guidance given for classical invention—*varius sis sed tamen idem*—while the test of arguing on both sides of the question, designed to prove the range of one's persuasive virtuosity, is obviously well adapted to a personality like Burns's which "contains multitudes."

"John Anderson my Jo" also introduces the vexed question of sentimentality. Modern sensibility finds excessive emotionality, especially in the positive Utopic range of reference, distasteful. But Burns, that icon of down-to-earth Scottishness, regularly praises sentimental writers and creates sentimental types. His conversion of Mrs Anderson into one half of a Darby and Joan relationship demonstrates this. His use of the same purifying, idealising

² *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, 1799, with intro. by G. Ross Roy (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 53-55.

techniques in his overtly patriotic and political lyrics will provide further examples of these 'tender skills.'

My first example, "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn," takes me back to my early Burns competition days. At the age of twelve, I recited that poem for the great Russian translator, Samuel Marshak. At the end, he congratulated me on being "A fine little soldier." Saving his memory, this was inaccurate; I would have made a truly reluctant soldier. What I could do was inhabit vicariously another non-proven soldier's vision of Bruce's heroism.

My experience in performing confirms not only the range of Burns's histrionic imagination but also the clear 'stage-directions' he gives. The first of these is usually structural. Of the six stanzas on Bannockburn, two deal with past, present and future respectively. Bruce rouses memories of the past with a series of commands and exclamations. When he comes to the present, he changes to rhetorical questioning in order to prevent the less valorous from defecting. Only a really brazen quisling could publicly exit as proof that coward, slave-like traitors do exist!

Bruce addresses the future by recalling the commands and exclamations which opened the poem. But within this artificial stylistic circle one difference emerges. The anaphoric exclamations of stanza five recall the style of stanza one. But they are democratic appeals, not feudal directives. The call "Follow me" is justified in terms of "your sons" the blood of "our veins". Neither the poem nor the argument can end there because this is a hierarchical age, where leaders lead and followers follow. So Bruce returns to his oratorical rostrum having, like Mark Anthony, effectively descended.

Burns offers as wide a range of patriotic personae as he does romantically. "The Lament of Mary Queen of Scots" shows him transferring his eulogistic skills from martial praise of a victorious king in the fourteenth century to romantic and spiritual praise of a tragic queen in the sixteenth. For her, as for Bruce, an especially dramatic moment is chosen. The poetic spotlight illuminates Bruce before his greatest victory; Mary is caught in its beam as she faces execution.

Once more a clear structure aids the interpreter. Mary's victory is mirrored in the seasonal cycle. Spring dominates, being the setting for six out of the poem's seven stanzas. What does change is Mary's relationship to it. Initially self-absorbed, the clear "azure skies" only highlight the contrasted darkness for one who "fast in durance lies." Thoughts of her rank and the honour she knew in France only intensify her misery as she sees even servants enjoying Spring. The transition from inward-looking defeatism to altruism and heavenly victory appropriately begins in the central stanza. From self-analysis, Mary turns outwards to Scotland "and mony a traitor there." Re-gaining her sense of superiority from this she next contemplates her arch-enemy Elizabeth. Both as woman and as head of the Stewart line, she conquers her as well. Beth Tudor may win the short-term temporal victory but she is a "false woman" in more senses than one and therefore has no successor. Through "My son! my son!" she will gain the political triumph. Stewarts not Tudors will rule Britain.

Spiritual victory and the remaining three seasons are reserved for the final stanza. As sign that Mary now reads God's resurrective purpose correctly she does not see the cycle ending with winter and "the narrow house o' death." God signs his resurrective purpose in the joys of the next spring. Then Mary will share the eternal spring reserved for the faithful:

Let winter round me rave;
And the next flowers that deck the spring,
Bloom on my peaceful grave.

This, for me, is one of the most touching stanzas Burns ever wrote. Cathartically, it brings Mary out of worldly tragedy into the twin joys of the divine succession (James) and eternal life (herself).

It is, of course, undeniably sentimental and even intelligent critics use that fact to dismiss it with faint praise. I have no quarrel with the diagnosis; descriptively Burns does excise all Mary's weaknesses, dwelling on her courage, nobility, sexuality and faithfulness alone. Dramatically, she is then faced by her anti-type in evil, the soulless "Bess Tudor" of his letters, that "perfidious Succubus" whose guilt exceeded Judas Iscariot's (Roy, II: 73).

The same methods can be traced, less stridently, in 'Bruce's March to Bannockburn.' By omitting troublesome facts such as Bruce fighting for the English against Wallace and so replacing the "truth of chronicles" with an idealized hero figure, he makes it easier to sympathize with the cause of freedom he represents. This is in accord with the early moralised view of history which saw facts as the rough ground out of which ethical patterns could be traced and transmitted as guidelines for future action. Burns knew the method early on. Blind Hary's *Wallace* as represented in Hamilton of Gilbertfield's significantly 'protestantized' eighteenth-century text, he records, filled him with "a Scottish [sic] prejudice" (Roy, I: 136).³

Sentimental persuasion was, however, also appropriate to and encouraged within the 'trivium.' These are three of the Seven Liberal Arts and an artist aims not at realism but at mannerism. The poet especially is not concerned with mirroring actual behaviour but with imaginatively presenting Ideas of behaviour and exploring the limits of possible action. Not only Bruce and Mary but the idealised peasants in "The Cotter's Saturday Night" are, therefore, presented as the most virtuous possible representatives of their kind and set against villains of equally deep-dyed villainy. Cathartically, the orator-poet arouses pity or joy via exaggerated oppositions between good and evil. He is not failing to affect the real world—he hopes to influence practical moral action—but he does so at one remove through idealistically constructed oppositions between good and evil. Burns in this way anticipates the methods of Dickens. The cotter's family like *Oliver Twist* may seem unrealistic but both are perfect emotive vehicles for arousing sympathy.

The danger of applying solely realistic criteria to Burns is only one part of the problem. Seeking to reduce to one consistent authorial personality the man whom Byron famously defined in terms of antitheses and self-contradictions is another critical danger.⁴ While this psychological bias has been implicit in the earlier analyses of

³ Cf. Burns's phrase "*genuine* Caledonian Prejudice" (Roy, II: 73).

⁴ Leslie A. Marchand, ed., *Byron's Letters and Journals*, 12 vols. (London: John Murray, 1973), III: 239.

Burns's romantic and patriotic lyrics, it is especially evident in his supernatural poems.

"The Address to the Deil" offers a microcosmic introduction to these contradictory attitudes. Observe how many devils appear in it and the different sides of Burns they reflect. The learned and literate Burns opens the poem epigrammatically with the apocryphal Miltonic devil "That led th'embattl'd Seraphim to war." To that apocryphal vision he returns in Stanza 19, this time recounting Lucifer's defeat by Michael in *Paradise Lost*, Book VI. Within this referential circle, the superstitious side evokes both the folk devil (appeased in colloquial language as "Nick or Clootie") and those elemental sprites associated with him in the pagan world. The faithful Burns is also reflected. The Biblical devil of Old Testament and Eden is introduced, then distinguished from his merciful New Testament equivalent. Psychological and Masonic perspectives only reinforce the confusion. Within the human soul and the mysteries of the cult, Satan remains a shadowy, concealed entity observed by a shifting authorial persona, at once above religious fundamentalism and superstition yet a victim of both.

The changeability of attitude and perspective evident in the "Address" stems from Burns's own admission that, in this area, he is divided by disbelieving head and accepting heart. It also provides a helpful introduction to Burns's longest lyrical poem, "Tam o' Shanter." Here, lyrical and dramatic voices combine within a narrative poem. That voice seldom dominates in Burns. Tam's story was, as he confesses to Alexander Tytler, "an essay in a walk of the muses entirely new to [me]" (Roy, II: 85).

In arguing that all three voices conjoin in this poem I shall begin with narrative. That it is a narrative poem and part of performance tradition is revealed by its sources. Its origins lie in folk narrative but also involve the antiquarian, Captain Grose. He was a visual artist and when Burns asked him for a drawing of Alloway Kirk he requested a poem about the same building and drawing on the pre-existent folk tales connected with it. These stories are echoed in the poem and so the poet-narrator's voice is again submerged.

That Tam's journey is an essentially *dramatic* narrative poem is implied by its aural origins but re-confirmed by its

form. If Burns relinquishes some of his authorial responsibility to the storytellers of the past, he also relinquishes responsibility to a narrator who becomes one of the most powerful characters in the story. He it is who guides the reader's reaction to events. An attempt to read the poem in consistent biographical terms is, therefore, a truly hopeless activity. It is after all the representation of a *drunken* man's vision of supernatural events as first related in folk tales, then re-transmitted by a self-evidently bemused narrator on behalf of an author who "contains multitudes" and is especially undecided when it comes to witches!

Burns's reliance on the quidditative strengths of drama-- the spoken word and the visual immediacy of the form-- also reinforces the poem's 'theatrical' appeal. One has to hear Kate's Ayrshire accent to appreciate the power of her prophecy. The assonance of "th[oo] wood be f[oo]n'd deep dr[oo]n'd in Doon" is lost in the Anglicisation of "thou would be found deep drowned in Doon." But if we hear her, Burns' power to create pen portraits of individual characters lets us see her as well. Sitting there, "gathering her brows like gathering storm, nursing her wrath to keep it warm," specifically poetic skills also enter the narrative.

Having briefly suggested a synthesis of all three voices in Tam's 'Poesie,' I shall end as I began, recounting the clear signs Burns provides for performers at the same time as he artfully conceals himself from view. Formally, the poem naturally divides into five acts: Introduction (1-58), Tam's Journey (59-104), the Devil's Dance (105-92), the Infernal Chase (193-219) and Dénouement (220-4). In theatrical terms, the first section offers an overview of Ayr on a busy market night, aurally strengthened by the onomatopoeic echoing of horses' hooves on the cobbles. Visually, a panning-in technique spotlights Tam as final focus after his chosen hostelry and select companions have drawn us in to see him.

Clear contrasts mark off the second movement. From lethargy, warmth and conviviality Tam is hurtled into frenzied action and bitter weather accompanied by his horse alone. Spatially, he enters a broader landscape but loses his mental freedom as fears crowd in upon him. Further contrasts mark off the third section. Tam's frenzied journey

is literally stopped in its track as Maggie freezes in fear. Visually, a stark lighting change turns the wood's darkness into ghostly brightness while Tam quits centre stage for the wings, allowing the Devil to replace him at centre stage.

An aural cue and another lighting change herald the final chase scene. Tam's cry of "Weel done Cutty Sark" "in an instant" turns the whole stage dark. When light returns, both focus and action have dramatically changed. As Tam's carousing led to his first journey, so the devil's carousing into the frenzied chase, led by Maggie with the witches in pursuit. The conclusion to this farcical scene is appropriately light. The action we have seen wittily fails to support the overt 'moral' against excessive drinking. For Tam, you will notice, is not "drown'd in Doon" as Kate benevolently prophesied. Indeed only Meg suffers and she appears entirely guiltless of that vice!

Burns attracts biographers because his life was, in itself, dramatic. Yet, as Sir Alexander Gray noted, he was, in specifically literary terms, "Of all the great poets ... the least original; one might say, the most anxious not to be original."⁵ The different ways in which Burns dramatically subsumes, and even conceals, his already variable voice as well as broadening its range beyond his own immediate experience has been the topic of this article. That breadth of reference, while aiding the universality of his general appeal, poses a major problem for those who wish to interpret his verse on its own histrionic terms.

⁵ Alexander Gray, *A Timorous Civility* (Glasgow: Collins, 1966), p.142.