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WRAITHS, RHETORIC, AND “THE SIN OF RHYME”: THE SHAPING OF THE BURNS OF THE KILMARNOCK EDITION

Kenneth Simpson

It is now generally recognized that Robert Burns was not Henry Mackenzie’s “Heaven-taught ploughman;” in fact he was widely read and expert in the use of rhetoric.¹ Less generally understood is how, even from an early stage, Burns’s writing reveals a sophisticated self-analysis, and how closely in this respect his poetry connects with larger cultural and intellectual developments in his time.² This essay explores the idea of self-representation as a formative influence on the Burns of the Kilmarnock edition (1786), both to examine how that volume’s poems reflect Burns’s mediation between wider cultural concerns and the apparently antithetical influences of his rural upbringing and experience, and to show how the volume itself acknowledges Burns’s self-identification as man and poet.

By the late eighteenth century, it was both permissible and fashionable to be fascinated by oneself; introspection was increasingly in vogue. As the Enlightenment philosophers addressed issues of identity, so

¹ Henry Mackenzie (unsigned), in *The Lounger* 97 (December 9, 1786). Cf. my “Robert Burns: ‘Heaven-taught ploughman’?,” in *Burns Now*, ed. Simpson (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994), 70-91, and “Burns and the Rhetoric of Narrative,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Burns*, ed. Gerard Carruthers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2009), 34-46.

² See, e.g., Carol McGuirok, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1985); Simpson, *The Protean Scot* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen Univ. Press, 1988), chs. 7 and 8; Ralph Richard McLean, “Robert Burns and the Enlightenment,” in *Fickle Man*, ed. Johnny Rodger & Gerard Carruthers (Dingwall: Sandstone, 2009), 104-117; Ronnie Young, “Genius, Men, and Manners,” *Scottish Studies Review*, 9:2 (2008): 129-147; Colin Kidd, “Burns and Politics,” in *Edinburgh Companion to Robert Burns*, ed. Carruthers, 61-73.

imaginative literature kept pace. Of one of Burns's favourite texts, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-66), its author, Laurence Sterne, admitted, "'Tis a picture of myself."³ Later, in the seventeen-nineties, Wordsworth would write *The Prelude: the Growth of a Poet's Mind*. Even in some of his earliest poems, Burns writes against this background of the growth of autobiographical and quasi-autobiographical writing.

Burns's acute self-awareness is evidenced both in the Kilmarnock poems and in his early letters. In the second "Epistle to Lapraik," for instance, Burns reassures the recipient and himself that, as his twenty-sixth summer approaches, he has survived gossip and sexual misadventure: "I, Rob, am here," he writes.⁴ In the early song, "Behind Yon Hills Where Lugar Flows" (dated April 1784, though not included in the Kilmarnock edition), Burns comments, "A country lad is my degree, / An' few there be that ken me, O" (Kinsley I:9, ll. 17-18). Burns prizes such elusiveness as it fosters the projection of self-images. As Carol McQuirk notes of the same song, "in stanza 5 the lyric departs from its conventional catalogue of Nanie's charms to a self-portrait of the young farmer as man of feeling."⁵

By February 1787, Burns was assuring Dr John Moore, "I have very attentively studied myself; where I stand, both as a Man and a Poet;" and he adds, "the novelty of my character, and the honest, national prejudice of Scotchmen ... have borne me to a height altogether untenable to my abilities."⁶ He had used the phrase "the novelty of my character" the previous month in his first letter to Moore (Roy I:88). Burns is not just alluding to his celebrity in Edinburgh society, as, in Mackenzie's characterization, "humble and unlettered," but "heaven-taught" and "a genius of no ordinary rank," he is also following the contemporary trend towards self-examination.⁷

³ *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Lewis P. Curtis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), xxiii.

⁴ James Kinsley, ed., *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), I:91 (line 60); hereafter cited in the text as "Kinsley."

⁵ Carol McQuirk, ed., *Selected Poem of Robert Burns* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 192.

⁶ G. Ross Roy, ed., *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edition, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), I:9; hereafter cited in the text as "Roy."

⁷ Mackenzie, as in n. 1 above.

So, in his long autobiographical letter to Moore, he writes, "I have taken a whim to give you a history of MYSELF," "to divert my spirits a little in this miserable fog of Ennui" caused by "some lingering complaints originating in the stomach" (Roy I:133). Later in the letter, he discusses self-scrutiny further:

To know myself had been all along my constant study.—I weighed myself alone; I balanced myself with others; I watched every means of information how much ground I occupied both as a Man and as a Poet (Roy I:144).

Compare Rousseau in his *Confessions*: "Myself alone! I know the feelings of my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those I have seen; I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different."⁸ It seems likely that Gavin Hamilton, Robert Aiken, or John Murdoch familiarised Burns with Rousseau's *Confessions*, written much earlier but not published till 1782. Originally intended as the last poem in the Kilmarnock edition but replaced by the more restrained "A Bard's Epitaph" (Kinsley I:247), Burns's "Elegy on the Death of Robert Ruisseau" offers his design for life:

Tho' he was bred to kintra wark,
And counted was baith wight and stark,
Yet that was never Robin's mark
To mak a man;
But tell him, he was learn'd and clark,
Ye roos'd him then! (Kinsley I:322: ll.13-28).

The farm boy would be a poet; and, with his distinctive plaid and, according to David Sillar, the only tied hair in the parish, he stresses his individuality.⁹

Burns is acutely conscious of his role and status as poet: for instance "On a Scotch Bard Gone to the West Indies" includes the lines, "Auld, cantie KYLE may weepers wear...He was her *Laureat* monie a year" (Kinsley I:238; ll. 25-29). The poems abound in references to his craft. Following the example of Robert Fergusson in "The King's Birthday in Edinburgh," Burns dismisses his Muse in the second "Epistle to Lapraik," only to engage in mock demeaning of his own achievement:

⁸ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions ... now for the first time translated into English without expurgation*, 2 vols. ([London]: privately printed, 1896), I:1.

⁹ For Sillar's description, see *The Life and Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Robert Chambers, revd. William Wallace, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1896), I:68-9.

Sae I've begun to scrawl, but whether
 In rhyme, or prose, or baith thegither,
 Or some hotch-potch that's rightly neither,
 Let time mak proof;
 But I shall scribble down some blether
 Just clean aff-loof (Kinsley I:91: ll. 37-42).

It is no coincidence that the Kilmarnock edition includes seven epistles.¹⁰ The epistle fosters writing to the moment, which resonates with Burns's desire to present himself as a “Bard of Nature's making” (Roy I:68), anticipating the “Heaven-taught ploughman” designation. In the first “Epistle to Lapraik” he claims

Amaist as soon as I could spell
 I to the *crambo-jingle* fell (Kinsley I: 86-87; ll. 44-45).

and he continues

I am nae *Poet*, in a sense,
 But just a *Rhymer* like by chance,
 And hae to Learning nae pretence,
 Yet, what the matter? (ll. 49-52).

There follows one of his several attacks on formal learning and the wish,

Gie me ae spark o' Nature's fire,
 That's a' the learning I desire (ll. 73-74).

The evidence of his avid pursuit of knowledge would suggest otherwise, but Burns knows the role he wishes to play.

So who and what influenced Burns? Plainly his father, William Burnes. Burns notes, “I have met with few who understood ‘Men, their manners and their ways’ equal to him” (Roy I:134). Revealingly, he had used this line from Alexander Pope's poem “January and May” in a letter of January 15, 1783, to John Murdoch: “the joy of my heart is to ‘Study men, their manners, and their ways’” (Roy I:17). Burns's father was actively involved in the rearing of his children, writing the *Manual of Religious Belief* as a dialogue between father and son, and, as Burns recorded, “keep[ing] his children under his own eye till they could discern between good and evil” (Roy I:135). After the father's death, Burns assumed the role of moral guardian, especially to his young brother, William. Apprenticed to a saddler in Newcastle, prior to moving to London, William received a cautionary letter from Robert warning against “that universal vice, Bad Women” (Roy II: 14), and Burns

¹⁰ Cf. also Steven R. McKenna, “Spontaneity and the Strategy of Transcendence in Burns's Kilmarnock Verse-Epistles,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 22:1 (1987): 78-90: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol22/iss1/8>

regularly cited his favourite lines, from Young's *Night Thoughts*: "On Reason build Resolve, / That column of true majesty in man."¹¹ One suspects that Robert, as much as his sibling, is being counselled. In a comparable self-memorandum, at the end of "A Bard's Epitaph," the reader is advised "Know, prudent, cautious, self-controul / Is Wisdom's root" (Kinsley I: 247; ll. 29-30).

If morally strict, William Burnes senior was also enlightened. The hiring of Murdoch as tutor contributed to Burns's sporadic formal education. Robert was, by his own testimony, "an excellent English scholar ... noted for a retentive memory" (Roy I:135). Murdoch's main text-book was Arthur Masson's *Collection of Prose and Verse, from the Best English Authors*, second edition (1767). The early emphasis was on reading, writing, memorising poems and hymns, and elements of rhetoric. Burns wrote, "My knowledge of modern manners, and of literature and criticism, I got from the Spectator" (Roy I:138); and he added that he was also familiar with "a collection of letters by the Wits of Queen Ann's reign" (Roy I:141). If Robert Crawford is correct in identifying this as John Newbery's frequently-reprinted *Letters on the Most Common, as well as Important, Occasions in Life*, then Burns had access here to a wider range of writers than he acknowledged – from Cicero and Pliny to Addison, Steele, Pope, and Swift.¹²

The example of Burns highlights the nonsensical dichotomy of knowledge and skills in recent educational debate: in his quest for knowledge he was all the time acquiring skills. From all of these sources he was absorbing rhetoric, the writer's means of convincing the reader, the artifice that conceals artificiality, the subtly disguised means of shaping the reader's response. Burns was also recognising the importance of rhetoric to writer and speaker. In "The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer" he comments,

Some o' you nicely ken the laws,
To round the period an' pause,
An' with rhetoric clause on clause

To mak harangues (Kinsley I:187; ll. 67-70).

So while the substance of the sermons of the likes of Black Russell in "The Holy Fair" may be anathema to him, Burns acknowledges the power

¹¹ Edward Young, *Night Thoughts*, I:30-31.

¹² *Letters on the Most Common, as Well as Important Occasions in Life* (London: J. Newbery, 1756 etc.), discussed by Robert Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns, A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009), 66-67.

of the oratory. In a recent essay, "Burns in the Counsellor's Chair," the psychotherapist Colin Kirkwood argues that Burns even had a certain affinity with Holy Willie. Kirkwood writes, "If I were ever writing a play about Burns, I would have him address Holy Willie in the following terms: *hypocrite fornicateur, mon semblable, mon frère*," a neat adaption of Baudelaire's advice "To the Reader," in *Les Fleurs du Mal*.¹³

Burns's retentive memory was retaining not just favourite words and phrases but also techniques. And all the time he was perfecting his mastery of English, so that he was effectively bilingual. In the first "Epistle to Lapraik," he writes "There's ae wee faut they whiles lay to me;/I like the lasses – Gude forgie me" (Kinsley I:88; ll. 97-98). He makes the same point, but more formally, to Moore: "My heart was compleatly tinder, and was eternally lighted up by some Goddess or other" (Roy I:139). The Kilmarnock edition includes poems in standard English such as "The Lament," "Despondency: An Ode," and "Man Was Made to Mourn." But "Auld Scotland has a raucle tongue," he writes in "The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer" (Kinsley I:187; line 127). This is used to good effect in poems where the legacy of the flyting tradition is evident.¹⁴ In the opening line of "To a Louse," "Ha! where ye gaun, ye crowlan ferlie!" (Kinsley I: 193), the rhythms, tones, and cadences of the spoken vernacular are clearly audible. Poems such as "Halloween" and "The Auld Farmer's New-Year Morning Salutation to His Auld Mare, Maggie" reproduce the terms of the farming community.

This community and its traditions represent another major influence. From his mother and her cousin, Betty Davidson, Burns had access from infancy to the rural folk-tradition in which superstition loomed large. Of Betty, he wrote,

I owed much to an old Maid of my Mother's, remarkable for her ignorance, credulity, and superstition. – She had, I suppose, the largest collection in the county of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantraipts, giants, enchanted towers, dragons and other trumpery (Roy I:135)

¹³ Colin Kirkwood, *The Persons in Relation Perspective, In Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Community Adult Learning* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012), 127.

¹⁴ Cf. Kenneth Simpson, "The Legacy of Flyting in Later Scottish Literature," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 26 (1991): 502-514, esp. pp. 509-512: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol26/iss1/43/>

After so clearly identifying the influence of the folk tradition, Burns then writes very formally of its effect: "This cultivated the latent seeds of Poesy." What follows highlights a central ambivalence in Burns, reflective of the dual influence of mother and father, native folk and formal English traditions:

...[the tales of the supernatural] had so strong an effect on my imagination, that to this hour, in my nocturnal rambles, I sometimes keep a sharp look-out in suspicious places; and though nobody can be more sceptical in these matters than I, yet it often takes an effort of Philosophy to shake off these idle terrors.

Is it really the case that childhood tales of ghosts have such an effect on rantin' rovin' Rob Mossgiel, or is he, for the benefit of Dr Moore in London, authenticating his status as rural bard? That is, he has to prove that the "Heaven-taught ploughman" is steeped in the traditions of a community where George Sinclair's *Satan's Invisible World Discovered* (1685) is a key text. Superstition remained rife. Though the last execution of a witch in Scotland had occurred in 1722, in Galloway a century later suspected women were still being branded. "I rhyme for *fun*," writes Burns in the epistle "To James Smith" (Kinsley I: 179; line 30). But in "The Holy Fair," it is significant that Fun recruits Superstition and Hypocrisy (Kinsley I: 130; ll. 37-40). These are the poet's real targets.

If Burns is both product of a folk-culture and sophisticated literary artist, it is hardly surprising that an ambivalent attitude should manifest itself in his poems; or that those poems can be read on various levels. In the preface to the first *Commonplace Book*, he acknowledged "I was placed by Fortune among a class of men to whom my ideas would have been nonsense" (Roy II:126). Yet in his first letter to Moore, he announced

my first ambition was, and still my strongest wish is, to please my Compeers, the rustic Inmates of the Hamlet, while ever-changing language and manners will allow me to be relished and understood (Roy I:88).

With a style and register to suit every context and every recipient, Burns demonstrates mastery of "ever-changing language and manners." Compare the comment to Moore with the lines in *The Vision* where he claims to have done nothing "But stringing blethers up in rhyme / For fools to sing" (Kinsley I: 103; ll. 23-24).

In "Halloween" Burns records in vibrant vernacular Scots some of the associated superstitions. He prefaces the poem with a headnote justifying the addition of notes:

To give some account of the principal charms and spells of that night, so big with prophecy to the peasantry of the west of Scotland. The passion of prying into futurity makes a striking part of the history of human nature in its rude state, in all ages and nations; and it may be some entertainment to a philosophic mind ... to see the remains of it, among the more unenlightened in our own (Kinsley I:152).

This is remarkable: an authentic representation of a whole range of customs and superstitions, but at the same time, as Corey Andrews has recently argued in a major reevaluation of this previously neglected poem, Burns is also the detached anthropologist.¹⁵

Burns vividly recreates the lore of his childhood but, as one of the enlightened and an advocate of progress, he challenges the hold which superstition and religion exercise over the minds of the peasantry. On one level Burns is entertaining “the rustic Inmates of the Hamlet;” on another he is demystifying the supernatural. In “Address to the Deil,” Burns cites his “rev’rend Graunie” – giving her equal respect with the clergy – the source of the exploits of the Devil; and some of these mark him out as the local nuisance, so that, once again, like the minister “Daddie” Auld, the Devil is a familiar member of the community – “auld Clootie” (and later “auld Cloots”); Auld Hornie;” “auld Hangie;” “auld Nickie-ben” (Kinsley I: 168-172; lines 25, 2, 115, 7, 121). Even the Fall, the loss of Paradise, is localised and familiarised. To the Old Testament version, and that of Milton, Burns adds his own. Likewise, Burns challenges orthodox Presbyterianism with his concluding wish that the Devil might reform, since even he does not deserve eternal torment; it would be good for the Devil, and it might just help mankind! Such Arminianism scandalised the Auld Licht.¹⁶

For Burns there are two Devils, the local whom he meets and berates, and that of Milton, whose lines from Beelzebub to Lucifer he uses as epigraph to “Address to the Deil”: “O Prince, O chief of many throned pow’rs,/ That led th’embattl’d Seraphim to war” (*Paradise Lost* I:128-129; Kinsley I:168). Each is a projection of Burns himself – the local nuisance because of the satiric gift that David Sillar noted, and the towering figure who challenges orthodoxies. Burns was obsessed with

¹⁵ Corey Andrews, “Footnoted Folklore: Robert Burns’s ‘Hallowe’en’,” in *Robert Burns and Friends*, ed. Patrick Scott & Kenneth Simpson (Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Libraries, 2012), 24-37, now also available as *SSL 37*: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol37/iss1/4/>.

¹⁶ Cf. J. Walter McGinty, *Robert Burns and Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

Milton's Satan. To William Nicol he wrote, "I have bought a pocket Milton which I carry perpetually about with me, in order to study the sentiments – the dauntless magnanimity; the intrepid unyielding independence; the desperate daring, and noble defiance of hardship, in that great Personage, Satan" (Roy I:123). Later he described his life to Cunningham: "the resemblance that hits my fancy best is, that poor, blackguard Miscreant, Satan, who, as Holy Writ tells us, roams about like a roaring lion, seeking, *searching*, whom he may devour" (Roy II:44). "Intrepid, unyielding independence;" "seeking, *searching*, whom he may devour": the freedom Burns seeks leads him to identify the liberating power of the imagination with that of the arch-rebel, Satan himself.¹⁷ Revealingly, in a letter of February 1787 to James Dalrymple, Burns writes, "I suppose the devil is so elated at his success with you that he is determined by a coup de main to effect his purposes on you all at once in making you a poet" (Roy I:93). Poets are the Devil's men. This is equally true of the local Devil: in a letter to Robert Ainslie, Burns uses his grannie's "classic phrase, SPUNKIE," the will-o'-the-wisp on which he claims the Devil rides, as his "Symbol, Signature, & Tutelary Genius" (Roy II:212). And he uses the term as a synonym for whisky. "Freedom and whisky gang thegither," he writes in "The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer" (Kinsley I:91: line 185); whisky liberates the imagination, enabling it to commit "the sin of Rhyme." It is an unholy alliance that Burns exploits: whisky, the Devil, and the devilish imagination conspire to liberate the individual, as both man and poet, from societal constraints and the given self. The will o' the wisp imagination fosters the chameleon capacity in which Burns is so adept.

So to the key phrase which resonates throughout Burns's work. Burns's youthful partner at harvest, Nellie Kilpatrick, initiated him "in a certain delicious passion" (Roy I: 137), and inspired him to write "O once I loved a bonny lass," his first experience of "the sin of RHYME" (Kinsley I: 3-4; Roy I: 137). How is rhyme a sin? Revealingly here at the outset there is a correlation: "Thus with me began Love and Poesy" (Roy I: 138). Habitually in his writing he links procreation and creativity; poetic license meets sexual license. "Ram-stam boy" and "hairum-scaurum son of Imagination and Whim" are one. Sending a song, he writes "The inclosed is one which, like some other misbegotten brats, 'too tedious to mention,' claims a parental pang from my Bardship" (Roy

¹⁷ Cf. Simpson, "Legacy of Flying," as in n. 14 above, p. 512.

I:163-4). Even more emphatic is this: "Making a poem is like begetting a son: you cannot know whether you have a wise man or a fool, untill you produce him to the world & try him. For that reason I send you the offspring of my brain, *abortions* & all" (Roy II:305). Rhyme is sinful, the church would tell him, because in using the imagination he not only inflames the passions, he also creates his alternative world; that is, the poet usurps the role of the great creator himself.

How Burns relished that role! While masquerading as "Heaven-taught ploughman," Burns employs the subtlest of rhetorical strategies. Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg astutely observe that "As a writer [Burns] was a smuggler not an Excise man."¹⁸ It is significant that Burns admires Robert Fergusson as "the bauld an' slee;" that he praises Lapraik, "He had ingine;" that he jests that William Simson may have "hinted / Ironic satire, sidelines sklentend, / On my poor Muse;" and that in "Epistle to a Young Friend" he advises

Conceal yoursel as weel's ye can
Frae critical dissection;
But keek thro' ev'ry other man,
Wi' sharpen'd, sly inspection (Kinsley I:249; ll. 37-40).

Burns's finest achievements are when he takes specific incidents and from them develops a universal significance. A tethered ewe has fallen on its back; the result is "The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie" in which a dying sheep exemplifies the human tendency to espouse principles in the abstract but do otherwise when personally involved. Having read Rousseau on the virtues of the natural education, Mailie advises Burns against tethering sheep in future. But her deathbed concern for her offspring leads her to be the protective mother: her son is to be warned "what I winna name, / To stay content wi' yowes at hame," while her daughter is to "ay keep mind to moop an' mell, / Wi' sheep o' credit like thyself!" (Kinsley I: 33; lines 47-48, 55-56).

The killing of his dog, Luath, on the eve of his father's death, prompts Burns to later complete "The Twa Dogs," where laird's retriever and farmer's collie share both a language and a fellowship denied their masters, whose respective lifestyles they debate. Luath, the farm-dog, skilfully controls the direction of the debate, so that it is the laird's dog, Caesar, who ends up extolling the virtues of the peasantry and denouncing the decadence of the aristocracy.

¹⁸ *The Canongate Burns*, ed. Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 2001), 133.

In "To a Mouse," composed (according to his brother, Gilbert) while the poet was holding the plough, the speaker so empathizes with the mouse as to distance himself from his fellow-mortals who have "broken Nature's social union." The breach in the natural harmony between human and natural worlds becomes a metaphor for divisions among all created life, so that the mouse's homelessness can also represent human deprivation (such as his family's threatened eviction). So the speaker endows the mouse with human faculties:

But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men,
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy! (Kinsley I:128; ll. 37-42).

Farmer Burns composes the poem with hand on plough; and farmer Burns knows of the natural hierarchy, the survival of the fittest. But poet Burns simultaneously brings his imagination to bear on the material, and farmer Burns becomes man of feeling, thereby confirming his description of Mackenzie's book (in a letter to Murdoch at the age of twenty-three) as one of "the glorious models after which I endeavour to form my conduct" (Roy I:17).

It is time to add a further R to the alliterating trio of influences of my title. Reading both stimulates and reassures Burns, enabling him to identify himself in relation to precedents and literary traditions. In "To William Simson" (Kinsley I: 94; ll. 43-48), written May 1785, he volunteers to celebrate the rivers of Ayrshire, following Ramsay's and Fergusson's memorialising of the rivers of the east of Scotland. With the publication of the Kilmarnock edition, Ayrshire's bard becomes Caledonia's; Caledonia's bard goes global when, in "Tam o' Shanter," he engages in dialogue with Homer, Virgil, and Gavin Douglas. "I, Rob, am here" assumes a new dimension. There is a very real sense in which Burns *is* his reading.

Which takes me back to the self-consciousness identified at the outset and the affinities with Rousseau, for Rousseau wrote, "I do not know how I learned to read; I only remember my earliest reading, and the effect it had upon me; from that time I date my uninterrupted self-consciousness."¹⁹ Likewise Burns, I venture to suggest.

¹⁹ Rousseau, *Confessions* (as in n. 8 above), I:4.