Robert Burns Through Russian Eyes

Robert Vlach

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Robert Burns Through Russian Eyes

Few serious books about Robert Burns have attracted as little notice as A. Elistratova's *Robert Burns* which was published in Moscow in 1957. The book was not listed in the *PMLA Annual Bibliography*, nor was it reviewed in the *Burns Chronicle*.

To review a book to which few scholars have access, and which is written in a language which (unfortunately) few of them read serves little purpose. The Editor therefore decided to publish a synopsis of the book rather than to have it reviewed. Professor Robert Vlach of the University of Oklahoma, Editor of *Books Abroad*, graciously agreed to write the synopsis.

158 pages. 3r.40k.

INTRODUCTION

The author visits places reminiscent of Burns and witnesses to his living popularity: Ayr, Kilmarnock, Dumfries, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Carcadale, where the writer Naomi Mitchison is her hostess. The verse and songs by Burns live in the hearts of the Scottish people. They represent, since long ago, nor a literature in books, but something as usual and necessary as bread and air. Already Goethe had understood the national character of Burns's poetry — he spoke about it to Eckermann. Burns felt the same already when writing the preface to the first edition of his poems. Byron, too, saw in his national character the basis of his greatness. Burns's love for folklore was creative. With zeal he collected and learned old songs, ballads, traditions, melodies of popular dances, and ancient battle-marches, but in his works he was able to breathe a new life into them, renewing traditional texts, blending old with new; and, though deeply national both in spirit and form, his work is, at the same time, independent, marked by his individuality. This progressive man of his time had a great understanding of new, contemporary literary and social-political development: isn't his "Scots, Wha Hae" called the "Scottish Marseillaise"? Burns's inspiration is equally national, social, and political because he was able to grasp the
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economic motives behind the English oppression of Scotland. The theme of individual human dignity, too, permeates his entire work from "The Jolly Beggars" to "Is There for Honest Poverty." Here he went much further than most writers of the Enlightenment: their ideal stood on abstractions, while Burns derived his inspiration from poor and exploited toilers. He expressed (with a few exceptions, like "The Cotter's Saturday Night") the opposition between happiness in poverty and unjust riches, in an aggressive fighting spirit.

Burns's lyric is, from the beginning, inseparable from Burns as a satirical poet. He had learned much from the progressive literature of the eighteenth century, with its democratic pathos and the deep insight that the Enlightenment showed in the laws of human nature and reason. Yet, Burns's work differs greatly from the English and Scottish poetry of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries. Young, Thomson, Gray, Goldsmith, Cowper, MacKenzie, etc., were descending to the village theme, as Burns ironically remarked in the preface to his first edition. The suffering of the people inspired the sentimentalists to reflections about celestial justice — a tendency which was deplored already by Belinski in his criticism of Goldsmith. Burns, who early became acquainted with their works, never let himself be limited by their narrowness. He liked, for instance, Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" because of the compassion shown by the author to simple people; however, he could not accept his humility and resignation. Not even the one-sided and incomplete heroes of the realists of the period (like Fielding and Smollett) can stand up to those of Burns, who was the only writer who knew them as real people — not only as objects of purely poetic sympathies. This is why he so surpassed the models of his youth.

Some utopian traits can be found in Burns's social-political views. Paine's "political summer," expected after the French Revolution, did not come, but time confirmed Burns's revolutionary enthusiasm because it was in agreement with the progressive direction of society. The poet's faith in the transforming role of the people in the social-historical development adds a particular depth to his realistic poetry.

Burns's poetry is full of movement; in the best works, its interior drama dominates the description. Scenes of drama — or comedy — are contained in poems like "The Jolly Beggars," "Tam O' Shanter," or "The Holy Fair." Allegorical but humorous and full-of-life poems like "Twa Dogs" or "The Brigs of Ayr" take the form of a dispute in
dialogue. The living intonations of the popular language may be found in "Findley," [sic]¹ "My Collier Laddie," etc. In a century of rhetorical amplifications and paraphrases, Burns brought to a peak the mastery of laconism in poetry. The fundamental idea in his work is the dignity of simple people and their right to happiness. He did not share with the sentimentalists their distrust of reason and their cult of irrational feeling. In him, feeling and reason are wonderfully balanced. His acceptance of the world is elemental and materialistic. He is the first who, in the English poetry of the eighteenth century, bridged over the conflict of "soul" and "flesh," and the entire world cherishes his work as a hymn of glory to the great possibilities of work, struggle, and pleasures of life which are contained in man.

CHAPTER I

1

The "honest poverty" of a poor peasant family representative of the Scottish people of the eighteenth century — that of Burns’s parents — is still attested by the house built in Alloway near Ayr by the poet’s father in 1757. The taxes on windows forced the poor to economize even on sunshine, and were responsible for there being only one window in the room where Robert was born January 25, 1759. A double oppression marked his youth: national, as a consequence of the uprising of 1745-1746; and economic, because at that time the rich landowner still was the central figure in the Scottish village and opposed even attempts to emigrate to Canada on the part of his dependents. New forms of bourgeois exploitation appear with the beginning of industrialization.

For a long time the Burns family had not possessed the land they cultivated. When Robert was born, his father had a job as gardener for a landowner from whom he rented a strip of land on which he built a house. When Robert was six years old, his father rented a farm in Mt. Oliphant; in 1777, another one in Lochlea. Yet only debts and a long lawsuit were the result of his striving, and these hastened the old man’s death. The children proclaimed themselves his creditors in order to save some money, claiming their salary as stable-boys and servants.

Robert, the eldest of seven boys and girls, had to manage the greatest part of the work. At thirteen or fourteen, he was an experienced ploughman. Yet he found time to learn to read and write not only

¹ Fintry (?) i.e. "Election Ballad at the Close of the Contest for Representing the Dumfries Burghs, 1790." — Editor.
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English, but also French. Folklore was another school for him: both his mother and an old servant saw seeds of poetry in him. With his teacher he read Shakespeare and Addison, but the first books he read by himself were the biographies of Hannibal and of Sir William Wallace, a hero of wars for Scottish independence in the thirteenth century. In November of 1780, he founded, in Tarbolton, the Bachelors' Club, where young farmers and artisans discussed such matters as marriage to a rich or to a poor but loving woman, or whether a savage or a peasant is happier in a civilized country — a little naïve but progressive thought for the late eighteenth century.

In 1781 Burns became a member of the Masonic Lodge in Tarbolton, but the religious, mystic motives of the Masons left no traces in his work — probably they remained foreign to him. However, they inspired him by their social-utopian tendencies ("Farewell to the Brethren of St. James's Lodge, Tarbolton").

The reading list of young Burns was not long but diverse. It was composed not only of Pope, Richardson, Smollett, the sentimentalists, and his Scottish contemporaries Ramsay and Ferguson, but also of theological works, Biblical history, physics, Locke, etc. His aesthetics were formed by reflections over a songbook (of 1746) in which he tried to distinguish the true poetry from affectation.

He wrote his first verse in the fields during the harvest ("Handsome Nell") on the melody of a reel when he was fifteen years old. In the beginning, he wrote not for print but for circulation among friends. Long before the idea of a publication came to his readers, Burns became progressively aware of his talent. His First Commonplace Book, started in 1783, begins with a kind of social and literary program. The embryo-motives of his poetry are the consciousness of his own dignity as poet of the working people, contempt for egoistic success in life, and desire truly to express the feelings and passions of simple working men. Their life, not the Enlightenment ideas about "human nature," becomes for him the measure of humanity. His prose notes reveal his great interest in the Scottish literary traditions and poetic forms; the nature and history of Scotland make a unity; the rhythm and metrics of national songs show national character. Social motives like those in "Man Was Born to Mourn," "My Father Was a Farmer," "John Barleycorn," etc., point to what was exciting the young poet.

2 "O, once I lov'd a Bonie Lass."

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Burns's popularity as a poet, though in his immediate surroundings only, is connected with his first satirical poems on church and religious themes. Scotland at that time was Calvinist and the clergy powerful. The Bible was most often the only book that ever came into the hands of people, and they became accustomed to thinking in its language. Questions of religious orthodoxy continued to inflame the thoughts of all, including Burns. This "heretical" spirit is reflected in two poems that were among the first of his works to achieve wide popularity: "The Twain Herds" and "Holy Willie's Prayer." Though directed against real "pillars" of the Church, they are, at the same time, remarkable for their satirical generalization. They constitute the beginning of the poet's ant clerical creation, which progresses with "The Holy Fair," "Address to the Deil," "Epistle to Davie, a Brother Poet," "Scotch Drink," "Epistle to The Rev. John M'Math." "The Holy Fair," incidentally, is one of the first social-realistic works of the poet; Burns appears here as a national poet, proving with all the riches of popular wisdom and humor the incompatibility of the Presbyterian orthodoxy with popular common-sense. In "Epistle to The Rev. John M'Math," however, he reveals his religious feelings, as he does in "A Prayer in the Prospect of Death," where God in the deistic way is called "unknown, Almighty Cause" of human hope and fear. His God is a sort of pseudonym for "Nature" as the Enlightenment understood this word.

His ethical views in this first period are best developed in "Address to the Unco Guid" (1786). Satire on the clergy is here connected with a deeply human attitude: one can judge one's neighbor only when one understands what causes his faults. Social-political inspiration fills the "Address of Beezlebub," who embodies the dark and cruel forces opposed to working people.

The poem crowning this period of Burns's creation is "The Jolly Beggars." In "Beezlebub," the heroes had maintained their connection with earth; here, they have nothing more to lose — they have reached the Gorkyan "bottom." (Some heroes of Walter Scott descend as low, too.) Burns's originality resides in his realistic approach to his protagonists, which is without the slightest embellishment or sentimentality. Gay in The Beggar's Opera, Fielding in The Covent Garden Tragedy, and Defoe in Moll Flanders, Colonel Jack, and Roxana had introduced "low heroes," but, with Burns, they become poetically attractive beings for the first time. Poosie-Nansie's and its visitors are depicted as they were in reality, with their offended, humiliated, but living humanity.
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Burn's poetry here is full of humor, but also of anger; yet he is not a singer of anarchy, as has been said by some critics: he only lets, quite righteously, the victims of society be its judges. He is a revolutionary.

Society did not pardon him for that. He had a bitter time when his natural daughter was born, when his marriage to Jean Armour could not take place. His intention to emigrate to Jamaica, however, was abandoned because of the unprecedented success of his first book.

It would have been too dangerous to include all poems Burns had written in the Kilmarnock edition. Still, those thirty-five pieces that constitute the volume are enough to make clear Burns's original tendencies. He dared to put in both "The Holy Fair" and "Address to the Deil." A magnificent realistic satire, "The Twu Dogs," opens the collection. An important place is given to epistles which by free composition and language, as well as unconstrained tone, greatly differ from the rhetorical and pedantic epistles by the classicists modeled on Horace. "A Dream" is a kind of literary manifesto, with its expression of the independent, popular, and national character and tendency of his creation. The same idea, without allegory this time, is contained in the "Epistle to Davie, a Brother Poet," the "Epistle to William Simson" (in particular), and in the epistles to J. Lapraik. Aesthetic problems are already social problems for the young Burns: his identification of true poetry with laborious poverty is more than an autobiographical motif; it is clear to him that art can exist only where there is no exploitation of man by man.

"To a Louse" demonstrates Burns's ability to transform a vulgar detail into a serious though humorously expressed generalization — a dissection of social pseudo-magnitude. In the same way he found pure poetry in situations unacceptable to the official school, as in "The Auld Farmer's New Year's Salutation to his Mare Maggie," "To a Mouse" (Steinbeck found a title in this poem), "The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailde," "To a Mountain Daisy." In all these poems we also have the theme of the "social Union of Nature" — in Burns's terms — so important for this as well as for the future work of the poet. He knew and loved nature as a man who toils in it, but there is also a philosophical context in his perception: wise, living, poetic understanding of the mutual bonds between all forms of the material, earthy life; Burns's man is active, thinking, and feeling his participation in the eternal material movement of nature.

Love of life is the essential poetic mood of Burns. The exceptions
in his first collection are "The Lament" and some other poems such as "Despondency," "Winter," "A Prayer under the Pressure of Violent Anguish," etc., but above all "The Cotter's Saturday Night," so dear to bourgeois critics. This static picture of the Scottish village is a utopia turned to the past, a dream of William Burnes, an idyl irrevocably by-gone in Robert's time. Even the form — Spencer's — is of the past, and Burns will nevermore use it. All this is the "meditative" poetry of the early sentimentalists.

Burns's attempts to have a second book published brought him twice to Edinburgh — two periods of extreme importance for the poet: his acquaintance with the aristocracy and intelligensia confirmed fully the ideas he had formed about the "higher" society.

CHAPTER II

1

Walter Scott, forty years later, wrote a portrait of Burns as he saw him in Edinburgh; Cromek and Lockhart give other details. Nothing, not even the advice of his friend John Ramsay, could stop Burns from making enemies. His "Lines Written by Somebody on the Window of an Inn at Stirling" confirms his satirical vein and is a precursor of Shelley's "England in 1819." Though he has some illusions about the Stuarts, he does not write elegies about the past like Walter Scott, but expresses his anger against the ruling dynasty. A plebeian in aristocratic salons, a fashion of the season, Burns felt sharply the tension of this social contradiction. Yet his two stays in Edinburgh proved helpful both to his poetry, extending its horizons, and to him, affirming the militantly democratic principles of his aesthetics. More and more Burns feels he is a poet-citizen. He demonstrates it by his initiative to honor the memory of Ferguson ("Inscription for the Headstone of Ferguson the Poet") or in his epigram addressed to Dr. Samuel Johnson. In Edinburgh, he became still more conscious of his being a national poet.

Finally he achieved his purpose, the second edition of his poems. It contains twenty-two new pieces — some rhetorical and cold like the "Address to Edinburgh" as well as versification and translation of Psalms, but also the anti-clerical "Ordination" and "The Calf," or humorous pieces like "Death and Dr. Hornbook," "Address to a Haggis," etc.

3 This poem appeared first in the Edinburgh, 1787, edition. The author doubtless referred to "A Prayer in the Prospect of Death." — Editor.
4 "Here Stewarts once in glory reign'd."
5 "No sculptur'd Marble here, nor pompous lay."
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The most important among the humorous poems is "The Brigs of Ayr," though its final part is artificial. "John Barleycorn" included here belongs among Burns's masterpieces; it is based on folkloric conceptions but is interwoven with themes of immortality of life and work and with revolutionary paths of the invincibility of the national spirit.

In Edinburgh an opportunity offered itself to Burns to turn in the direction of folklore — an event that marked his creation in a decisive way: James Johnson won him for cooperation with his own Scots Musical Museum. Burns contributed more than two hundred songs, among them some of his own, to the second and succeeding volumes, of which he was, in point of fact, both contributor and editor.

The Edinburgh sojourns also taught Burns that he had to earn his living otherwise than through writing: thus his Ellisland years began. Having brought to an end his romance with "Clarinda" and married Jean Armour, he also became an exciseman. The farm proved to be a bad business, and he finally moved to Dumfries.

The best result of the Ellisland period is "Tam O' Shanter," a verse tale which was, curiously, published in Grose's Antiquities of Scotland. Burns achieved in it full union between the traditions of Scottish folklore and the sceptical, ironical realism of the Enlightenment. The story is almost Voltairean. In Russian literature, the same spirit can be found in Gogol's "Propavshaja gramota" ("The Lost Letter"). Also Burns attained virtuosity of form.

In "Tam O' Shanter" satire is secondary, though attacks against clergy and lawyers continue his anti-clerical and social line. Yet his main theme at that time is the power of money, dealt with before in "Lines Written on a Bank Note" and now in the "Ode Sacred to the Memory of Mrs. Oswald." The importance Burns ascribes to his social satire is evident from his having sent it for publication, under a pseudonym, to The Morning Star in London. In a similar way he had contributed to The Edinburgh Evening Courant in 1788, showing his democratic ideas already before the bourgeois French Revolution.

The Jacobite theme, popular in the Scottish folklore of the eighteenth century, took, in the songs of Burns, not the traditional legitimist-monarchist, but a democratic turn. Burns lets simple people speak, allowing them to express even naıve hopes and illusions about the Stuarts, "really Scottish" kings ("The Highland Widow's Lament," "The White Cockade," etc.)—though it was perfectly clear to the poet that the Stuart cause was hopelessly lost; the legends and sentimental memories had for him—as later for Walter Scott—mostly historical and aesthetic interest.

In Dumfries Burns made an effort to establish a local library and
continued to work for George Thomson's *Select Scottish Airs*—a cooperative venture started in 1792 that gave us, besides many songs, a most important correspondence.

Among Burns's rich and thematically wide-ranging songs, the political ones take a particular and significant place. Also his songs of everyday life usually have a social connotation. Not an individual, egoist happiness, but a great one encompassing all, is heard in "Auld Lang Syne" and many other songs. The Scottish national character marks Burns's songs with humor, reflection, sorrow, sometimes mueinous passion. The rhythm of national melodies enabled the poet to break down the conservative rhythmics of the eighteenth century and give them, instead of an arithmetical symmetry, a great emotional expressiveness ("O, My Luve is Like a Red, Red Rose"). In lexical richness, only Shakespeare and Milton surpass Burns. His originality appears also in blending English and Scottish, as well as songs and social-political poetry.

2

Political events abroad as well as in Scotland itself had a great influence on Burns. The bourgeois French Revolution of 1789-1793 has to be named in the first place. By all his past, Burns was ready for this influence. A legend claims he bought contraband cannons at auction from a captured boat and sent them to France. This, together with his famous toasts and other circumstances, caused him troubles with the authorities and an investigation. The political activities of the Scottish democrats increased in 1792-1793, but Burns was not able to take part in them because his family depended on his Poets income. His favorite book of this time was Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*. Its influence is felt in "Is There for Honest Poverty." Burns's letter to John Francis Erskine contains an important comment on his political lyrics and his situation in the Nineties. Also his letter of January 2, 1793, to Mrs. Dunlop reveals the audacity of his thoughts. We can easily sum up his ideas: he was against war of conquest, but he accepted and justified the revolutionary struggle for liberation led by France against her enemies. His ideas on the revolutionary comradship of nations found full expression in the poem "The Tree of Liberty." The allegory was clear enough. The reaction of 1794 inspired him. "For Those Who Are Far Away," though taken from an old song to honor the Stuarts, presented a new version understood as referring to the exiles.

At that time, Burns began publishing in *The Morning Star* in

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*Here's a Health to them that's awa.*

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London. On May 8, 1794, his "Scots, Wha Hae" appeared there, which he had sent to Thomson a year before with a letter, proving its contemporary inspiration. In his conception of national history as an organic unity of past, present, and future, Burns is a precursor of the revolutionary romantics Byron and Shelley.

"Is There for Honest Poverty" can be considered his last word to posterity. It represents a kind of summing up of his ideas and poetical motifs of many years. It may be seen as a democratic manifesto of progressive social thinking in Scotland at that time.

Deceived by the turn the French Revolution took, he wrote a song for the Dumfries Volunteers, of which he became a member. He had to ask Thomson and his cousin James for money in order to pay for his uniform when he was in danger of going to prison because of that debt.

His last song is "Fairest Maid on Devon Banks." He died July 21, 1796. The day of his funeral his wife gave birth to their fifth son. Many months of the family's life could have been made less unhappy if they had had only a part of the costs of the military burial.

EPILOGUE

Already in the beginning of the nineteenth century, Burns was translated into many languages. In the Museum in Alloway, there is now also a book of Samuel Marshak's translations; and the USSR participated in the Burns Festival in 1955.

The national individuality of Burns's work was not an obstacle to his international fame; on the contrary, Lafargue witnesses that he was among the favorite poets of Marx.

Burns's influence on English Romanticism is enormous. Modern British authors, too, liked him (for instance, Shaw)—and even found inspiration in him (like Sean O'Casey). The reactionary critics try in vain to mask the progressive spirit of his work. James Barke is right in saying that only people with clean hands should dare to approach the poet's memory.

One of the first evaluations of Burns in Russian is by Professor I. Sreznenvskii in Sobranie obrazovoiikh russkikh sochinenii... [Collection of Model Russian Works...] published in 1821. In 1800, the journal Ippokrema carried a prose translation of the "Address to the Shade of Thomson." Among the first Russian translators of Burns is I. T. Kozlov who, in 1829, published Selskij subbotnij vecher v Shotlandii [Peasant Saturday Evening in Scotland] which he called "free imitation of Burns." He finished with an enthusiastic address to "Holy
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Russia" wishing her prosperity and peace. In 1835, he translated "To a Mountain Daisy." A discussion in the press developed around these works which is dealt with by the Soviet literary historian S. A. Orlow in his essay "Borns v russikh perevodakh" ["Burns in Russian Translations"].

In 1837, the journal Biblioteka dlya chteniya published an article, "Robert Burns" whose author was probably O. I. Senkovski. It was accompanied by a translation of "John Barleycorn" in the style of a Russian bylina.

In 1832, Lermontov—eighteen years old—translated the four lines of Burns's "farewell" that Byron used as motto to his Bride of Abydos.

Belinskij names Burns with Shakespeare and the English Romantics among the poets whose works constitute the treasury of lyric poetry.

Taras Shevchenko, in the manuscript preface to his Kobsar confiscated upon his arrest by the gendarmes in March 1847, evokes Burns in justification of his own work. Also Ogarev points to him as an example of a truly national poet, in the preface to an anthology, Russkaja potomstva literatura [Russian Secret Literature], published in London in 1861.

Nekrasov and Turgenev had different plans concerning Burns, as we learn from their exchange of letters; however, nothing came from them. Nekrasov's journal Sovremennik carried translations from Burns by Kurochkin, Mikhailov, and others.

The one-hundredth anniversary of Burns's death was remembered by P. I. Veinberg, who wrote an essay on him, and his translations appeared in book form in Moscow in 1897.

In 1904, a collection, Robert Burns i ego proizvedeniya v perevodakh russikh pisatelej [Robert Burns and his Works in Translations of Russian Writers], appearing in the Deshevoj Biblioteka [Cheap Library] for twenty kopecks, was readily accessible. It was a very representative selection.

After the Revolution, Samuel Marshak devoted half of his life to his beloved poet. His first translation was published in 1924. He never stopped translating Burns. As the poet A. Tvardovskij put it, Marshak "made Burns Russian, although letting him be a Scot." Marshak's translation exceeded 600,000 copies. Other poets, like T. L. Shchepkina-Kupernik and E. Bagritskij, have translated Burns also.

7 "Ae fond Kiss."

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