"Burns, Henry MacKenzie and The Man of Feeling"

We are accustomed today to the reassessment of Burns which has established him as a well-read and poised man of the world, a new view of him which sees deeper than his self-deprecatory preface to the Kilmarnock Burns: we know that his father gave him the best education which his limited resources could afford, and we know that in certain areas, delimited both by his taste and by the availability of books, Burns was well-read to an astonishing degree. His letters prove this not only by their references to works read, but by their frequently modelling themselves self-consciously on Shenstone, on Mackenzie or on other literary models dear to Burns' heart.

One area, I would suggest, where this reassessment may not have gone far enough is in the consideration of The Cottar's Saturday Night. As James Kinsley has pointed out, a good deal of popularity has arisen from the "naturalism and the moral tone" (1) of the poem, and Burns lovers frequently attest to the poem's power, particularly to its power in depicting the life of common people, by their choice of this work for recitation in public performance.

The popularity, however, does not extend to the whole of the poem. Most lovers of Burns will apologize for stanzas 9 and 10; most students interpose severe criticisms of them in an otherwise laudatory assessment of the poem. Critics, too, point to the uneven-ness of the poem's achievement; modelled as it is on Ferguson's Farmer's Ingle, with heavy borrowing in addition from English pastoral models, it is unlikely that the poem would cohere as a single original work, but critics refer disparagingly to the "absurd artificiality" of these central stanzas 9 and 10, works both "artificial and melodramatic", where Burns is writing in "a tradition in which he is not at home" (2). Less temperate than this comment by David Daiches is one by Tom Crawford: in a book which abounds with sensitive insights into Burns' poetry, this comment seems badly out of place. Stanza 10 writes Mr. Crawford, "...is one of the most nauseating ever published by a reputable poet". (3) Certainly the stanzas do not at first cohere with the rest of the poem: are they "hysterical rhodomontade", in Mr. Crawford's words, or do they have some other feature which redeems them?

Immediately, one can point to the fact that they are in a mannered literary English, but this is not as conclusive as it might at first sight appear. The poem throughout is shot with English words and phrases, though its
narrative staple is an unmannered Scots: sometimes the words are used with curious precision, as in "Th' expectant wee-things" (4) (3.3) or "And each for other's welfare kindly spiers" (5.2): the result is an economy which arises from the particular use of a construction depending on the Anglicised Latin of "expectant", and again the construction in the fifth stanza which borrows from the terse Latin one, via English rather than Scots example. At times, the intrusive English seems much more to refer back to a literary analogue: Jenny is "in youthfu' bloom, Love sparkling in her e'e" (4.6) and the moral admonitions

"Implore His counsel and assisting might:

They never sought in vain, that sought the Lord aright" (6.8-9) are pulpit usage, in Biblical English. To dismiss stanzas 9 and 10 as intrusively English is therefore not condusive argument: intrusive they may be, but the language intrusion has already taken place in the poem, without injuring it extensively. A proper critical consideration will take account of this, then move on to a wider judgement.

At this point it might be well to quote the offending stanzas infull.

O happy love! where love like this is found!  
O heart-felt raptures! bliss beyond compare!  
I've paced much this weary, mortal round,  
And sage experience bids me this declare --  
'If Heaven a draught of heavenly pleasure spare,  
One cordial in this melancholy Vale,  
'Tis when a youthful, loving modest Pair,  
In other's Arms, breathe out the tender tale,  
Beneath the wilk-white thorn that scents the ev'ning gale.'

Is there, in human-form, that bears a heart,  
A wretch! a villain! lost to love and truth!  
That can, with studied, sly, ensnaring art,  
Betray sweet Jenny's unsuspecting youth?  
Curse on his perjur'd arts! dissembling, smothe!  
Are Honor, Virtue, Conscience, all exil'd?  
Is there no Pity, no relenting Ruth,  
Points to the Parents fondling o'er their Child?  
Then paints the ruin'd Maid, and their distraction wild!

Clearly Burns is adhering to a literary form in these lines, different from much of what we have come to recognize as typical of his work. But in looking for the literary form we do well to follow James Kinsley's comment: adverse criticism of the poem, Kinsley remarks, betrays "...lack of sympathy with Augustan ideas of poetic imitation, with eighteenth-century sentiment, and with the accepted ways of writing about rusticity and poverty which Burns
inherited.” (5) These ideas were in part inherited: comparison with Grey and Shenstone will amply confirm this. In part they were adopted and adapted, and I would argue that a much saner interpretation of these disputed stanzas can be reached by regarding them as adaptations of a mode which Burns took over from his favourite author -- Henry Mackenzie.

Burns’ real-life dealings with Henry Mackenzie the author, literary patron and sharp-witted man of business have received very ample attention, but his relationship with Henry Mackenzie the sentimental novelist has been misunderstood, even cruelly parodied. Catherine Carswell, for instance, distorts it almost beyond recognition in her description of The Man of Feeling as “one of the world’s worst novels” (6), and as “a monument to shoddy sentiment”. (7) DeLancey Ferguson, who should have known better after reading Burns’ letters so closely in the work of editing them, can write that “Nothing in his previous training had inoculated him against the virus of sentimentalility; exposed to its most extreme form, he was infected for life.” (8) The most extreme form was Henry Mackenzie’s enormously influential The Man of Feeling: what is the reality of this infection?

Burns made no secret of his devotion to his favourite novel: “...my favourite Author, the Man of Feeling”. (9) Shortly Mackenzie was to become “a warm friend” (10), “the glorious Man of Feeling” (11). “My favourite authors are of the sentim 1 kind, such as ...Man of Feeling, a book I prize next to the Bible...” (12). Another time, he admitted that in his early years “Tristram Shandy and the Man of Feeling were my bosom favorites” (13). Addison was an admired author of the time, and Burns admired him, yet in a letter of 1790 Burns wrote to his confidante Mrs. Dunlop that Mackenzie

...has been called the Addison of the Scots, and in my opinion, Addison would not be hurt at the comparison. If he has not Addison’s exquisite humour, he has certainly outdone him in the tender and pathetic His Man of Feeling (but I am not counsel learned in the laws of criticism) I estimate as the first performance of its kind I ever saw. From what book, moral or even pious, will the susceptible young mind receive impressions more congenial to humanity and kindness, generosity and benevolence - in short, more of all that ennobles the soul to herself, or endears her to others - than from the simple affecting tale of poor Harley? (14)

Poor Harley (the hero of The Man of Feeling) emerges from Burns’ description rather more flatteringingly than from Miss Carswell’s, and perhaps we should direct our attention more closely to what Burns had to say on this - for he shows himself quite in keeping with the thought of this times. Mackenzie’s novel is not mere tear-jerking, in Burns’ account, not mere sentiment, but it has a moral end. Since Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759) the Scottish critics had been fascinated by the moral possibilities in fiction and other literary forms. Many of the people Burns was to meet with in Edinburgh,
men like Hugh Blair and Henry Mackenzie in his role as critic, were outstanding practitioners of the school of criticism which to a very large extent, assessed a work of literature on its moral effect and looked to the audience's reaction (and the analysis of this) as one of the outstanding functions of a work of art. As one scholar has remarked in this context, The Man of Feeling "...moved the reader and taught him simple ethical principles, without setting up any intellectual barrier to the right kind of appreciation". (15) To move, and to improve the moral sentiments of the reader simultaneously, was the avowed intention of the sentimental novelists: The vogue passed rapidly, and today may seem ridiculous and affected, but at that time to read a sentimental novel was to participate in a seriously-intentioned self-analysis, and a well-intentioned effort as self-improvement. Thus Burns, in writing of The Man of Feeling as affecting the susceptible young mind with impressions congenial to humanity and kindness, regards the book as not only pleasurable to himself (which it was) but as a moral document in its own right. It raised the passions, in a calculated way, and for a right moral end — and Burns was aware of the potentialities of this process. His own passions, he wrote, "when once they were lighted up, raged like so many devils, till they got vent in rhyme" (16), and in this release he achieved the control of his passion in his best poetry. He saw that his passions required analysis, and could lead him to moral conclusions. In the famous and often-quoted autobiographical letter to Dr. John Moore, there is an interesting passage which bears this out.

We lived very poorly; I was a dextrous Ploughman for my years; and the next eldest to me was a brother, who could drive the plough very well and help me to thrash. — A Novel-Writer might perhaps have viewed these scenes with some satisfaction, but so did not I: my indignation yet boils at the recollection of the scoundrel tyrant’s insolent, threatening epistles, which used to set us all in tears...(17)

The scoundrel tyrant was the landlord, whose exactions ensured that the Burns' family were not to find farming a profitable business. The indignation was real, and the artificiality of the literary English in which it is phrased does not disguise the real emotion behind this memory.

Burns was living then, as it were, in the heart of a "sentimental novel position": the suffering he knew then would have made a reader's blood boil with anger, or move a softer heart to pity, but to the person in the novel there was nothing to be satisfied about with the position at the time. Yet there were two levels, the real-life level which was anything but picturesque, and the picturesque second-hand vicarious thrill of sympathy which, Burns realized, could easily come to someone reading in a novel about his family's position. The situation is real enough to Burns in this case. If he is to transmit the strength of his passion to the reader in a similar situation, where the reader is merely imagining a situation which he or she will never know, then Burns has somehow to elevate his reader's emotions to the pitch of his own, by literary and stylistic means. This may be easy, it may not. In a letter to his cousin Elizabeth Rose of Kilarvock, Henry Mackenzie in 1776 was to observe that "One great excellence of (ancient compositions) is a certain manly unaffected simplicity which we do
not always find in our best modern performances. We are often obligated to resort to Expression for that energy which they found in Idea.” (18) This is a just criticism, which rebounds on his own practice, as Burns must have known it in The Man of Feeling. One example must suffice to illustrate the literary mode Burns knew and loved in that novel.

Harley, the hero, wanders to London, and there encounters variety of situations calculated to raise his own tender passions (Harley weeps easily, and often): one of these is when a “ruined maid” tempts him into a room, and attempts to seduce him for her advantage. Her heart is not in it. She breaks down easily under Harley’s gentlemanly questioning and obligingly tells him her life-story. At the crucial point, when she has described how she broke her father’s heart by running away from home with a blackguard, and how her ruin followed from this, she stops — “She listened for a moment, then starting up, exclaimed, “Merciful God! my father’s voice!”

She had scarce uttered the word, when the door burst open, and a man entered in the garb of an officer. When he discovered his daughter and Harley, he started back a few paces; his look assumed a furious wildness! he laid his hand on his sword. The two objects of his wrath did not utter a syllable.

“Villain,” he cried, “thou seest a father who had once a daughter’s honour to preserve; blasted as it now is, behold him ready to avenge its loss!”

Harley had by this time some power of utterance. “Sir,” he said, “if you will be a moment calm—”

“Infamous coward!” interrupted the other, “doest thou preach calmness to wrongs like mine,”

He drew his sword.

“Sir,” said Harley, “let me tell you” — the blood ran quicker to his cheek, his pulse beat one, no more, and regained the temper of humanity — “you are deceived, sir,” said he, “you are much deceived; but I forgive suspicions which your misfortunes have justified: I would not wrong you, upon my soul I would not, for the dearest gratification of a thousand worlds; my heart bleeds for you!”

His daughter was now prostrate at his feet. “Strike”, said he, “strike here a wretch, whose misery cannot end but with that death she deserves.”

Her hair had fallen on her shoulders! her look had the horrid calmness of out-breathed despair! her father would have spoken; his lip quivered, his cheek grew pale, his eyes lost the lightning of their fury! there was a reproach in them, but with a mingling of pity. He turned them up to heaven, then on his daughter. He laid his left hand on his heart, the sword dropped from his right, he burst into tears. (19)
Not perhaps a deathless moment in fiction, but the effect is clearly illustrated. A fictional moment of crisis is depicted, without real regard for credibility of probability. Regardless of the likelihood of the million-to-one chance of her father discovering her in Harley’s arms in the heart of London, there is very little chance that in real life she would have found so sympathetic a client, and one so interested in her life rather than her more immediate attractions, as Harley. Credibility is not the point, nor in this limited context the “goodness” or “badness” of style. What counts is the audience’s self-identification, and involvement: sympathy, in the truly enlightened sense (to feel with the person described), is the effect sought after, with the intention of improving the audience through the achievement of sympathy, and the exercising of the individual’s powers in that field. Burns’ description of The Man of Feeling to Mrs. Dunlop fully bears out his understanding of this point, and his manifest love for the book suggests very strongly that he was in accord with its intentions.

From this discussion I return to Burns’ poem, and to the two stanzas which lie under criticism at this time. I have suggested that they are not to be easily dismissed as English interpolations in an otherwise Scottish poem, for the rest of the poem contains perfectly acceptable interpolations at intervals. The criticism has rather been of their poor quality as verse, and now the reader is better qualified accurately to judge these verses. Qualitatively, they are not great poetry. Their verse moves haltingly, their cumulative technique is probably overdone, for in the space of a few lines the reader is asked to make a very abrupt transition from the warmth of the family hearth, where all is security and good principle, to the ruined maid and her wild distraction.

Yet quality, if we accept that Henry Mackenzie might be an influence on this part of the poem, is not necessarily the only criterion, as we have seen in a brief analysis of part of The Man of Feeling. These two stanzas, I would argue, bear a carefully-calculated relation to the rest of the poem, in much the same way as these interpolated passages of high feeling play a carefully-calculated part in Henry Mackenzie’s narrative. In the latter, they are high points which stimulate the mind to an upwelling of sympathy, interspersed with deliberately low-key narrative. The reader’s response is a succession of climaxes of grief.

The Cotter’s Saturday Night is, in some senses, a low-key poem. It invites self-identification on the part of the reader, in a social scene of deliberate lack of artifice, the homely fireside where Jenny’s boyfriend can feel at home without awkwardness. The joy the family feel at meeting each other is “unfeigned”, the supper “cheerful”. One of the virtues which has most recommended this poem to its admirers is Burns’ ability to describe the homely and domestic working-class scene without embarrassment. The narrative staple is low-key (though in no sense dull), the occasional flash of emotion, inviting sympathetic involvement, in deliberate contrast. The contrast is partly in the use of language (alternating Scots and English, as Burns subtly does, particularly to divide the narrative sections of Tom o’ Shanter), partly in the sudden access of high emotion after the domesticity of the previous scenes. Burns tries the effect twice, for after the low-key stanzas 11-19, depicting family
life and family worship, there is an attempt to raise the tone to high pitch again in the patriotic stanzas 20 and 21 — but these stanzas involve pre-digested and ready-made ideas of patriotism which make them less applicable to our present argument than the disputed stanzas 9 and 10.

My argument, as it is emerging from the analysis, is that far from losing control, and writing two stanzas of semi-doggerel in the heart of an otherwise distinguished Scottish domestic poem, Burns is contriving an episode in the poem, and an alteration of the quality of response in the readers. The poem has followed a low-key pattern, I have argued, but it is one which was contrived in a rhetorically satisfactory way. The invitation to participate in family life and worship is prefaced by a dedication to a personal friend, so that the poet is not intruding in an alien scene, but inviting a friend to share with him, as it were, the hospitality of a home he knows well. His emotion is "honest pride": the native feelings are "strong", the Ways "guileless" in a way which does not apologise for them, so much as prevent the possibility of criticism of the subsequent poem as too "low". (stanza 1)

The contrast between the first and second stanza, passing from friendly conversation (in English) to realistic description (in Scots) is not severe, in the sense that the transition from the mock heroic to realistic barroom conviviality at the beginning of Tam o Shanter. The fortitude and hard work of "Aiken in a cottage" of the first stanzas, amply prepares the reader for the November winds of the second. Everything is seen, though low-key, to be hard-edged and realistic. The involvement of the reader is invited in the same way as in the "Winter" episodes of Thomson's Seasons: although the reader may not himself be familiar with the harder realities of working-class life, he is made aware of the circumstances, unpleasant as well as pleasant, in an unsensational way so as to allow him imaginatively to participate in the scene which follows. Thus the scene in the Cotter's Saturday Night is matter-of-fact working-class life at more than subsistence level. There is room for hospitality, there is enough money to store food against the unexpected guest, and extend a welcome to anyone who joins the family circle.

The reader's sympathy is not exercised for poverty, not for the sort of hard work which we know angered Burns, and made rustic life for him a misery of long hours and prematurely hard work. The reader is drawn in in stanzas 2-8, involved in the family life, as it were luxuriating in the relaxation of a hard, though bearable, working life. The compensations are in the moments of relaxation, the "social hours, swing-wing'd" (5.3) which bring the family without sense of strain home to the family fireside, and which for the father makes him quite forget his labor and his toil" (3.9). The sympathy is exercised in the imaginative re-creation of a scene (alien to most) of simple contentment of the spirit, associated with temporary physical ease in relaxation of tired muscles. It is essentially a physically static, socially excited moment.

In this context the interpolated stanzas 9 and 10 may seem exceedingly out of place. It is not their Englishness which makes them so (for the parents, in
stanza 6, and delivering moral admonition in Biblical English) but their failure to match the mood of the stanzas before and after. They certainly are not relaxed stanzas, but self-consciously straining to match an emotion which is alien to the scene, and assumed for the moment. They are not expressions of moments of social happiness in intervals of demanding physical work – they are entirely suppositional and intellectualised, and divorced from real experience or likely future development.

This does not necessarily make them incongruous to the progress of the poem. Physical fatigue and social relaxation frequently lead to this very mood: the mood which calls for recitation, song, public performance, and which led to a whole tradition of oral literature in Scotland with which no man was more familiar than Burns, who did a lot to transliterate much of this tradition and save it from extinction at the close of the eighteenth century. Such public performances as the tragic and historical ballads belong essentially to just the sort of atmosphere and occasion as Burns is depicting in The Cotter’s Saturday Night. His own family will almost certainly have entertained themselves in this way, and in this way, too, infected Robert with his taste for oral literature and public performance which allowed him in mature years to be at the heart of all social gatherings, the moving spirit in public debate and performance.

The reader and the assumed character participating in Burns’ world in this poem, is in the mood for entertainment – or for some mental stimulus to accompany physical relaxation. It is completely in keeping that Burns should provide this with some interlude in keeping with the literary tastes of his time. He could have presented a border ballad real or re-created, to fulfil the same function of entertainment as the “old Scots sonnet” which Tam o’ Shanter crooned to keep himself company on the dark ride home from Ayr. Alternatively, he could write a Mackenzie-esque episode of sentimental feeling, an interlude for both the characters in the poem (who could exercise their wakeful sympathies in the imagination of what would happen if the touching love of Jenny and her beau were to go wrong) and the readers of it, who would certainly be alert to the possibilities of this scene in exercising their sympathetic imaginations. From both points of view, these interpolated stanzas seem to me eminently in keeping with the real-life conditions of a cotter’s Saturday Night and the social milieu obtaining there, as also with a literary stance which Burns might quite reasonably be expected to take, both as a man of his times and as devotee of Henry Mackenzie.

The entertainment over, the supper is served (stanza 11) and the poem proceeds in its familiar way. There is no doubt that these stanzas of homely description are triumphant, yet what I have argued for here is a re-assessment of the preceding stanzas which seem much more than hysterical rhodomantade, but a part of their times and of Burns’ intentions. To criticise them for their success in this, is surely to misinterpret them in the worst way.

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FOOTNOTES


4. Quotations are from Kinsley's edition thus: (3.3) after the passages quoted refers to stanza 3 at line 3.

5 Kinsley, The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns, III, 1112.


11. RB-Mrs Dunlop, 26 March 1788, Letters, I, 213.


