REVIEW ESSAY


Ramsay and Fergusson, at their creative best, wrote in Scots. This attractively designed, moderately priced anthology of their poems in Scots (a new edition of a work first published in 1974) makes them accessible to the general reader who may not have a specialized knowledge of Lowland Scots. The editors base their texts upon those in editions of Ramsay and Fergusson published by the Scottish Text Society but, in addition, as they remark in their Introduction, they offer “textual variants, detailed notes, and full commentaries” (p. vii). They provide a comprehensive glossary, notes to each poem, and an excellent introductory essay which establishes a broad context by means of which the reader may better understand the most significant works of either poet.

The editors look both forward and backward. They relate the texts in their anthology to the work of subsequent writers of Scots whom they influenced — to the work of Burns, Scott, Galt, Hogg, Stevenson, Lewis Grassic Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid, to name a few. Ramsay and Fergusson are also assessed by the relationship of their work to the independent Scottish medieval poetic tradition. In this respect, the editors find Ramsay’s poetry closer to that of the oral tradition than Fergusson’s whose poems, they argue, are comparable in sophistication of technique to those of the “makars”, to the Poems of Henryson and Dunbar. It is true that on the whole Fergusson’s poems are more sophisticated than Ramsay’s but the latter’s “The Monk and The Miller’s Wife” and his dream-allegory “The Vision” bring to mind the so-called Scottish Chaucerians.

While the editors make careful distinctions between the two poets’ handling of language, poetic form, and the classical tradition they rightly emphasize their common delight in a language the vigour of which derives from Scottish speech, and which forcefully, expresses a Scottish cultural identity threatened by “a foreign tradition known only by reading and report” (p. xvii).

The “foreign tradition” in question is the English cultural tradition centered upon the English language. With the decline in the seventeenth-century of Scots as a literary language and the process, in the eighteenth, of British cultural as well as political centralization, the avenues to public recognition, influence, preferment, and intellectual distinction depended upon the use of English as it was sanctioned in London. In view of this situation the Scottish writer could follow the general trend or attempt to resist it. For the sake of their intellectual influence the Scottish literati were obliged to write in English despite the fact that Scots was their daily speech. English was for them, as later for Joyce’s Stephen Daedalus, an “acquired speech”, at once “so familiar and so foreign”.

This is why men like Adam Smith and William Robertson, as Kurt Wittig has observed, wrote English “much as the learned men of the Middle Ages had written Latin”.

Writers of imaginative literature, however, found it more difficult than the literati to accept the relegation of Lowland Scots to the status of a regional dialect (or dialects). At the beginning of his literary career, for example, John Galt protested that
in polite companies a Scotsman is prohibited, by the imputation of vulgarit
ity, from using the common language of the country, in which he expresses himself with most ease and vivacity, and, clothed in which, his earliest and most distinct impressions always arise in his own mind. He uses a species of translation which checks the versatility of fancy, and restrains the genuine and spontaneous flow of his conceptions.  

In the previous century Ramsay and Fergusson had ignored “the imputation of vulgarit” and although they wrote poems in English (one of Fergusson’s is printed in the anthology) they were unwilling to employ “a species of translation”. Instead they led the way, in the years before Burns, in writing “the common language of the country” in order to set free the “versatility” of their “fancy”.

The poems contained in this anthology, written at different periods in the eighteenth-century on a variety of subjects and by two different poets of disparate background and temperament have, nonetheless, significant elements in common. These elements have not only influenced later writers but give the anthology itself a kind of unity not always to be found in such productions. The remainder of this review-essay will examine these common elements beginning with the most fundamental, the Scottish language itself.

After a century of neglect Scots had to be re-created as a medium of poetic expression. In his first “Epistle” to Ramsay William Hamilton amusingly describes how, with the aid of a dictionary, Ramsay deliberately set about the task of re-creation. He warns those who would joke with Ramsay to be wary “When thou consults thy dictionary/ Of ancient words/ Which come from thy poetick quarry/ As sharp as swords” (11.39–42). Ramsay wanted to re-establish connection with “the lear’d days of Gawn Dunkell” when Scotland enjoyed a literary life independent of England. At that time, he says in his “Answer” to Hamilton’s first “Epistle”,

Our country then a tale cou’d tell,  
Europe had nane mair snack and snell  
At verse or prose;  
Our kings were poets too themsell,  
Bauld and jocose. (11.56–60)

Fergusson’s “Elegy, On the Death of Scots Music”, though not primarily about poetry, recalls a time when Scots could express themselves freely in their own idiom, unlike the present time (1772) when native “hameil lays” have given way to “foreign sonnets” with their “crabbit queer variety/ Of sound” (11.49–51).

It is the kind of Scots which Ramsay and Fergusson developed that has influenced later writers. The language of their poems is rooted in Scottish speech, in Scottish idiom, and for all its deliberateness it is no mere “dictionary language”. Their poems express patterns of feeling and thought characteristically Scottish and yet they acknowledge the inroads upon Scots which English had made by the time each came to write, Ramsay and Fergusson manage to “scotticize” English in a variety of ways in order to make it expressive of a Scottish rather than a homegenized British culture.

One of the most obvious ways in which they do this is by writing phonetically in order to reflect Scottish pronunciation and produce a distinctively Scottish “voice”, Ramsay’s line from his poem “The Vision”, “Rude ruffians ransakk ryal bours”, (1.9)
neither looks nor sounds English yet there isn’t a single Scottish word in it. When Scottish words are used in lines or passages that contain English words the conjunction, especially in view of Scottish orthography, gives the line or passage a more Scottish than English character. Sometimes a single Scots word will suffice, as in Ramsay’s reference to “The ships lang gyzen’d at the peer” in “An Ode to Mr. Forbes” (1.5). In “Hame Cotent. A Satire”, Ferguson’s speaker, referring to poor farm labourers, advises them in an entirely English line to “thank the gods for what they’ve sent” but continues, “O’ health eneugh, and blyth content./ An pith that helps them to stravaig/ Owr ilka cleugh and ilka craig” (11.29–32), the thickening Scots characterizing the whole passage as Scots in spite of the English line.

The language of Ramsay and Ferguson’s poems more often than not is a blend of English and Scots words. English words are used as variants of Scots words and, for the sake of emphasis, Scots and English words re-inforce one another. This is the case, for instance, in the opening line of Ferguson’s flying “To The Tron-Kirk Bell” in which the bell is roughly addressed as a “Wanwordy, crazy, dinsome thing”. The Scots of Ramsay and Ferguson is an unavoidable linguistic compromise but the mixture of carefully selected Scots words and “scottiezed” English to be found in their poems constitutes an idiomatic, flexible and powerful means of expression by which subsequent writers of Scots have been influenced, directly or indirectly.

Later Scottish writers have also been influenced by the poetic world created by these two poets. It is a domestic, localized world which intentionally foregoes the epic scale (among subsequent writers Scott is not as much an exception as might be supposed in that his view of History enabled him to see the significance of the local as well as the cosmopolitan). Ramsay defines his poetic world in “Horace, Book I, Ode VI”, a poem in which, although he praises Pope as one “wha made th’inspired Greek/ In British phrase his winsome Iliad speak” (11.1–2), he also makes it clear that he will not attempt to follow Pope’s example. He declines “to sing the heroes of King Fergus’ line” (1.8). It does not seem to him to be incompatible with his freely-expressed desire for poetic fame to write:

Enough for me to draw a countrype dance,
And how blyth gossips drink the yound wife’s hans,
With ourlies clean how Tam and me fou feat
Wad rin and wrestle round the rucks wi’ Kate. (11, 21–24)

Where fame is Milton’s “spur” it is Ramsay’s companionable “jo” (“Answer II”, 1. 52). Ferguson is equally humble. When, in “The Farmer’s Ingle”, he summons his muse it is not Shakespeare’s “Muse of Fire” nor Milton’s “Heavn’ly Muse” he invokes but a less exalted source of inspiration. He writes “Begin my Muse, and chant in hamely strain” (1.9), and he identifies his poetry with those “hameil lays” the passing of which he laments in his “Elegy, On The Death of Scots Music”.

Ramsay and Ferguson’s focus on the keenly observed details of Scottish everyday life — on the “hamely” is democratic in nature. The emphasis of both poets is upon common humanity and common human destiny rather than upon such accidents as social rank. Ferguson wryly makes the point explicit in a witty antithesis in his poem “The Ghaists” when the speaker refers to Geordie Girdwook, grave-digger of Greyfriars Kirk,
who “many a lang-spun day/ Houkit for gentlest banes the humblest clay” (11.3–4). The world of Ramsay and Fergusson’s poems is one primarily of human comedy, the subject of celebration or of satire as the mood of the poet dictates.

Many of the poems in this collection are celebratory, expressive of the carpe diem motif to which Ramsay gives succinct Scottish utterance when, in “An Ode To Mr. Forbes”, he writes: “And since our life’s sae unko short/ Enjoy it a’, ye’ve nae mair for’t” (11.39–40). In his comic elegies Ramsay commemorates with gusto “insignificant” people who gave pleasure to others. He is thankful for Maggy Johnston, who kept a small farm near Edinburgh and brewed an ale which gratified “lairds and souters” alike (“Elegy On Maggy Johnston”, 1.9); he rejoices in Lucky Wood, the subject of another “Elegy”, who was “a donsie wife and clean” and kept a respectable ale-house (1.23) but also in Lucky Spence, “in bawdy policy well gifted”, whose establishment was anything but respectable yet equally appreciated for all that (“Lucky Spence’s Last Advice”, 1.3).

Many of Fergusson’s poems are spirited accounts of public holidays in and around Edinburgh when “gentle and semple” mingled together happily enough to drink, exchange banter, eye the girls, chase them or, as in his “Caller Oysters”, to do all of these things and in addition sample the delicious fruits of a particular season.

Complementing these poems, which commend sociability and capture the raw energy of Scottish life, are satirical poems which attack those influences which separate man from man. The worst of these is “luxury”, or that conspicuous self-indulgence by which the rich made the poor feel the burden of their poverty. Fergusson associates “luxury” with England and with Europe (France and Italy especially), all richer than Scotland with whose poverty they morally identify themselves. Fergusson’s “Hame Content. A Satire” attacks those who spend their time amassing “wardly gear” (1.16) learning, in the process, “ilka cunzied scoundrel’s trick” (1.13). In moral opposition to such people stand “herds, an’ honest cottar fock” (1.25) whose unrecorded lives spent in hard labour are admirable in their contrasting simplicity. They care for one another whereas those who live to make money “darna think to lowse the pose,/ To aid their neighbours ails and woes” (11.7–8). Fergusson presents the humble life of the Scottish peasant in “The Farmer’s Ingle” as morally ideal. “Gentler gabs” could learn from the peasant that “Wad they to labouring lend an eidant hand/ they’d rax fell strong upo’ the simplest fare” (11.27–30). Dr. Johnson is attacked for dismissing “the simplest fare” of Scotland in his supercilious definition of “oats” in the famous Dictionary. The Principal and professors of St Andrews (Fergusson’s alma mater) are mocked in a poem addressed to them for entertaining “Samy” with his “head weil pang’d wi’ lear” (1.5) at a “superb” feast in spite of his disparagement of the Scottish national staple. It is fare like this, Fergusson points out in “The Farmer’s Ingle”, which enabled the Scots to lay “Denmark’s darling sons on yird alang” and “scottish thistles bang the Roman bays” (11.43–44).

The references in the lines just quoted to the defeat of foreign invaders suggest that comedy is not the only motive force behind Fergusson’s poems. In fact both he and Ramsay harness nostalgia and indignation to express their keen sense of lost Scottish political independence and their opposition to political control from England.

Nostalgia provokes serious elegiac reminiscence of times past when Scotland still enjoyed political freedom. The elegiac mood can govern an entire poem, as with Fergusson’s
“Elegy, On The Death of Scots Music”, or it can creep into a poem not primarily elegiac. “Auld Reikie” is Fergusson’s lively poetic survey of Edinburgh life but its tone becomes elegiac for a moment when the poet’s lense is focused on Holyrood Palace. Then the speaker laments that

... the thistle springs
In domicile of ancient kings
Without a patriot to regret
Our palace, and our ancient state (11. 281–4)

He invokes the Jacobite poet Hamilton to “tent the humble strain,/ And gie’s our dignity again” (11.279–80).

Pastoral poetry is as much the product of nostalgia as elegiac poetry and there is a marked tendency to pastoral in both Ramsay and Fergusson’s poems as there is in Scottish Literature in general. Where satire attacks things as they are pastoral suggests how they might be Ramsay’s pastoral poetic drama The Gentle Shepherd (printed in full) is unlike classical pastoral in that it is historically specific. It argues contemporary social, moral and political issues and is set in 1660 when a Stuart king had just been restored to the British throne. His loyal follower, Sir William Worthy, returns to his estate, like Scott’s Baron Blandardine, from the European exile his loyalty has entailed. He is welcomed with joy by his tenants who rejoice that “things have taken sic a turn,/ Will gar our vile oppressors stend like flaes,/ And skulk in hidlings on the hether braes” (II, i, 11.16–18). The “vile oppressors” are the English soldiers of Cromwell and their Scottish allies. When this play was published in 1725 the situation in Scotland was the reverse of that in the play. The Stuarts had once again been driven into exile, the “vile oppressors” were in control, the first Jacobite uprising had been put down and the Act of Union remained in force. By thus depicting a situation in his play which, from Ramsay’s Jacobite viewpoint, was the ideal opposite of that which actually existed, he engages in oblique political protest.

Where Scott and his generation accepted the Act of Union it was the object of Ramsay and Fergusson’s detestation. In “The Vision” Ramsay again uses historical distancing and in this case, the form of the dream-allegory to make his protest against it. The speaker in the poem falls asleep thinking of Scotland’s woes, especially of the theft by the English of the Stone of Scone, symbol of independent Scottish power. In his dream the speaker encounters Scotland’s Guardian Spirit who tells him that his country has been betrayed by “our trechour peirs” the worst of whom is Bailiol who “Scottish richts did sell,/ With small howp of reliefe” (11.107–8). It takes little effort of the imagination to see in Ramsay’s Bailiol the type of Scottish politician who willingly took English bribes to accede to the Act of Union and thus give up that last symbol of Scotland’s independence, its parliament. In “The Ghaists: A Kirk-Yard Eclogue” Fergusson is more direct. He raises the ghosts of George Heriot and George Watson, notable philanthropists in a less dependent Scotland, to attack the Mortmain Bill of 1773. The Bill stipulated that funds set aside by Scots in Scotland for philanthropical purposes were to be managed in England. The Bill was thus a humiliating reminder of Scottish dependence which George Heriot has no difficulty in relating to the Act of Union. With reference to the Mortmain Bill he exclaims: “Black be the day that e’er to England’s ground/ Scotland was
eikit by the Union's bond" (11.57-58). Watson and Heriot are as appalled at the betrayal of Scotland by its venal leaders as Ramsay's Guardian Spirit had been. From beyond the grave both ghosts see "... a set o' men,/ Wha, if they get their private pouches lin'd,/ Gie na a winnelstrae for a' mankind" (11.105-7), and these are the men who, in England, frame "ruthless, ravenous, and harpy laws" for the subjection of Scotland (1.94).

The manner in which one responds to the poems printed in this anthology will to some degree, as with any literary work, depend upon one's taste and pre-conceptions. If, for instance, Ramsay and Fergusson's deliberate rejection of the epic scale strikes the reader as an act of artistic cowardice or as a consequence of limited talent then such a reader will probably think their poems light-weight stuff, easily dismissed. If, however, the reader shares with these poets as well as with the Romantic poets (who in some respects they anticipate) a sense of the importance of the local, the provincial, the "hamely" - words which, in effect, characterize the world in which we all live from day to day - such a reader will not readily discount their work. It is, I think, those who appreciate the significance of the apparently unimportant and who relish the craft of these two eager wordsmiths who will get the most out of this admirably presented anthology of their best work.

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NOTES

1 A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (Harmondsworth, 1976), 189.
3 Scotch[sic] Descriptive Poems (Edinburgh, 1803). The book was printed by John Leyden but Galt wrote this passage in a biographical sketch which he contributed to it of his old schoolmaster, John Wilson, a minor poet. The passage appears at p. 14 and follows closely the account of the Scotsman's linguistic dilemma given by Smollett's Lismahago in Humphry Clinker.