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R. D. S. Jack

Which Vernacular Revival? Burns and the Makars

When I was introduced to Burns at university, he was properly described as the senior member of a poetic trinity. With Ramsay and Fergusson, we were told, he initiated something called “The Vernacular Revival.” That is, in the eighteenth century these poets revived poetic use of Scots (“THE vernacular”) after a seventeenth century of treacherous anglicization caused by James VI and the Union of the Crowns. Sadly, as over a hundred years had elapsed, this worthy rescue effort might resuscitate but could never restore the national language to the versatility in fullness of Middle Scots.

This pattern and these words—national language, treachery, etc.—still dominate Scottish literary history. They are based on modern assumptions about language use within the United Kingdom. To see Burns’s revival of the Scots vernacular in primarily political terms conveniently makes him anticipate the linguistic position of that self-confessed twentieth-century Anglophobe, C. M. Grieve. Grieve found his own Borders dialect inadequate for the expression of his profounder thoughts. To counterbalance this, he set out on an ambitious verbal quest through John Jamieson’s *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*. Moving geographically sideways and historically backwards he exited in the persona of Hugh MacDiarmid with his own unique form of “Synthetic Scots.” As Norman MacCaig once remarked to me, that quest produced a unique and artificial language, brilliantly used by its creator, but constituting a medium to which later disciples took “as naturally as ducks to glue.”

I propose to approach Burns via his predecessors rather than his heirs, testing prospectively each of the three major premises behind this retrospective

paradigm. First, did the early and later makars think of Scots as their national tongue? Two, did they think of language use confrontationally, Scots against English? Three, did the later makars treacherously sell out Middle Scots to English justifying the excision of over a hundred years of Scottish literary history from most histories and anthologies?

The answer to the “language of the nation question” is given consistently by writers from Barbour in the late fourteenth century until Drummond and Ayton in the seventeenth. All of them deny the national adjective to their poetic language. When they do name the vernacular, they call it English. Here is James IV’s “maister poete,” William Dunbar, writing when Middle Scots was at its fullest.

O reverend Chaucere, rose of rethoris all,
 As in oure tong ane flour imperiall
 That raise in Britane, evir quho redis rycht,
 Thou beris of makaris the tryumph riall;
 Thy fresch anamalit termes celicall
 This mater coud illumynit have full brycht:
 Was thou noucht of our Inglisch all the lycht,
 Surmounting eviry tong terrestriall
 Alls fer as Mayes morow dois mydnycht?¹

Even in the golden age of Scots, it is linked to Middle English dialects and its most renowned courtly practitioner is proud to follow Chaucer.

Sir David Lindsay more than sixty years later, in the mid-1550s, within that patriotic morality play, *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, still thinks of Scots as the “Inglische toung.”

Sanct Paull, that pillar of the Kirk,
 Sayis to the wretchis that will not wirk,
 And bene to vertews laith:
Qui non laborat non manducet.
 This is in Inglische toung or leit:
 Quha labouris nocht, he sall not eit.²

The Geneva Bible, here referred to, was just one of many sociolinguistic pressures which—long before the Union—was drawing later Middle Scots towards English. Printed in English but read throughout Scotland, its “treacherous” influence appears to be noticed later in Lindsay’s play, when a character cries out “In Englisch toung, and prentit in England!” (l. 1154) But

¹*The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford, 1979), p. 37.

²Sir David Lindsay, *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, ed. Roderick Lyall (Edinburgh, 1989), ll. 2602-07.

that character proves to be a Vice, Flatterie, and concerned with its content. "Herisie, herisie! Fire, fire incontinent!" (l. 1155) The figure of Divine Veritie corrects him—that is no heresy but Christ's word." (l. 1158) The problem with English is not that it is a foreign medium, but that it is too effective—transmitting the word to all levels of society.

Two views of language, one rhetorical and one historical, are held consistently by all Scots writers prior to the eighteenth century. Neither sits easily with either the first "Scots alone" nor indeed the second "Scots v. English" premise. William Alexander, Earl of Stirling, who was one of James VI's Castalian band and so writes predominantly—though not exclusively—in English, sums up the rhetorical side of the argument in his critical treatise, *Anacrisis*, published in 1634. Language, following Aristotle, is only valued as a means to an end or, in his imagery, as a "Conduit." The more subtle the tongue, the more easily it permits the "several shapes" of cognition to move for the author's mind into the understanding of his audience.³

The makars' historical view of language is even more dramatically disturbing. Being closer to the historical origins of Scots, they knew that "Scottis" was "Inglis," having originated as a form of Northumbrian. Moreover, if any political treachery was involved in national linguistics, it was the ousting of Gaelic north beyond the highland line and south into Galloway by this foreign tongue. Malcolm Canmore in the 11th and David I in the 12th centuries began that process as part of a foreign policy designed at appeasing England.⁴ By the end of the thirteenth century it had succeeded.

There are only two instances prior to Burns where the adjective "Scottis" is coupled with the noun "language." In each case, the author claims to be, atypically, descending from poetry's distinctive disciplinary realm of imagination and potentiality to the lower ground of politician and historian. King James VI, awkwardly for those who wish him to be a villain, is the first example of this form of political correctness. Even he, however, in the *Reulis and Cautelis* of 1585 admits that Scots and English overlap, stemming as they do from the same linguistic root—"English, quhilk is lykest to our language."⁵ I have elsewhere argued the case for a decorous, mixed use of language, focus-

³William Alexander, Earl of Stirling, *Anacrisis in English Literary Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Joel Spingarn (Oxford, 1908), p. 182.

⁴See Janet M. Templeton, "Scots: An Outline History," in *Lowland Scots*, ed. A. J. Aitken (Aberdeen, 1973), pp. 4-5. Association for Scottish Literary Studies, Occasional Papers No. 2.

⁵*A Choice of Scottish Prose 1550-1700*, ed. R. D. S. Jack (London, 1971), p. 109.

ing on later Renaissance practice.⁶ I shall assume that plea to be proven and move backwards to Gavin Douglas, whose advocacy of “Scottis...braid and plane” as his “awin langage” in 1513 is more widely known.

Writtin in the langage of Scottis natioun,
 And thus I mak my protestatioun:
 Fyrst I protest, beaw schirris, be your leif,
 Beis weill avisit my wark or yhe repreif,
 Consider it warly, reid oftar than anys;
 Weill at a blenk sle poetry nocht tain is,
 And yit forsuyth I set my bissy pane
 As that I couth to mak it braid and plane
 Kepand na sudron bot our awyn langage,
 And spekis as I lernyt quhen I was page.
 Nor yit sa cleyn all sudron I refus,
 Bot sum word I pronounce as nyghtbouris doys:
 Lyke as in Latyn beyn grew termys sum
 So me behufyt quhilum or than be dum
 Sum bastard Latyn, French or Inglys oys
 Quhar scant was Scottis—I had nane other choys.
 Nocht for our tong is in the selvyn skant
 Bot for that I the fowth of langage want
 Quhar as the cullour of his properte
 To kepe the sentens tharto constrenyt me,
 Or than to mak my sayng schort, sum tyme
 Main compendys or to lykly my ryme.

(*Eneados*, I, Prologue, ll. 103-24)⁷

In his *Eneados* of 1513, Bishop Douglas—a known anglophile—does claim to compose in “the langage of Scottis natioun.” He also vilifies his English rival as translator, Caxton. Ergo, say some critics, Scots is now the national language and political linguistics rule.

What *does* Douglas say? The mode is, in this instance, crucial. The *Eneados* is a translation. As Matthiessen explains, Renaissance translations were more closely associated with national pride than any other form of writing.⁸ Just as adventurers colonized foreign countries, so the translator coined foreign words, to strengthen his land’s vernacular. Douglas, an avid reader of

⁶See “‘Castalia’s Stank’: Burns and Rhetoric,” in *Love and Liberty: Robert Burns: A Bicentenary Celebration*, ed. Kenneth Simpson (Edinburgh, 1997), pp. 111-18.

⁷*Selections from Gavin Douglas*, ed. David F. C. Coldwell (Oxford, 1964), p. 4.

⁸F. O. Matthiessen, *Translation: An Elizabethan Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1931), p. 3.

Horace, saw it as decorous to adopt a nationalist view of language for this mode alone.

Only the most superficial reading allows one to derive from the above the triple claim that Scots is his national tongue so he will use it—"braid and plane" (l. 110)—throughout, defying all "sudron" forms (l. 113). As sociolinguistic pressures were moving Scots closer to English even in his day, what he offers, anticipating Wordsworth in the Lyrical ballads, is an artificial imitation of plain Scots. It will be based on the language of his pageboy youth (l. 114). That is—the days of full Middle Scots, of Dunbar and Henryson. Moreover, as Vergil writes more skillfully than he does in a subtler tongue on topics high and low (ll. 121-4) that artificial form of Scots can only be his normal or middle style. In using coinages from Latin, English or French (l. 117) he will patriotically boost Scots. That is why the language of his *Eneados*, far from being uniformly plain, abounds in complex diction and rhetorical tropes.⁹

What he is claiming, with the same especial emphasis on the high style, is to imitate the Chaucer praised by Dunbar, in "The Goldyn Targe." That is, decorously to expand the home vernacular via foreign graftings throughout the full range of stylistic registers. It is this rhetorical view of language which permits Douglas to claim a patriotic purpose yet obey the classical-medieval tenets of decorum. The complex high style, drawing its coinages mainly from Latin and French, is used for the topics you hold to be the most serious and noble; the middle constitutes the normal style and draws mainly from Scots and Inglis, while the staccato, low style, supplemented mainly by Scandinavian and Germanic loanwords, is used for low subjects, vituperation and farce.

Scottish poets in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries inherited these historical and rhetorical views of language plus intensified sociolinguistic pressures towards anglicization. To superimpose nationalist images of linguistic confrontation on an age whose own literary critics do not accept the nationalist premise, preferring to assess on comprehensive rhetorical criteria and explain a mutually supportive inter-relationship between dialects using organic images—the tree and its branches for example—is anachronistic. James's *Reulis* is a rhetorical treatise with long sections on decorum; Ben Jonson in his conversations with William Drummond finds the Scot too heavily influenced by this type of thinking in his *Conversations* with Ben Jonson. Alexander's *Anacrisis* invites us to consider poetry organically as a garden "the diversity of whose flowers" is "kept" under the control of decorum.

This is why, as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁰ at the highest decorous level of all, in the *Delitiae Poetarum Scotorum*, Renaissance Scotland is not at all de-

⁹See Bruce Dearing, "Gavin Douglas' *Eneados*, a Re-interpretation," *PMLA*, 67 (1951), 845; Priscilla Bawcutt, *Gavin Douglas: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh, 1976), pp. 45-9.

¹⁰"Of Lion and of Unicorn: Literary Traditions at War," in *Of Lion and of Unicorn*, ed. R. D. S. Jack and Kevin McGinley (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 93-4.

fensive about accommodating its wealth of linguistic traditions—English, Scots and Latin—a little, through partial anglicization, to benefit its southern neighbors. The brightness of King James Apollo will lighten their darkness. After all, as Alexander puts it in *Anacrisis*, “Language is but the apparel of Poesy”¹¹—its strength lies in the message and in moving your defined audience as effectively as possible. Thinking in these strategic and oratorical terms of the *causa finalis*, having no firmly established national tongue to betray, believing they possessed deeper truths and a wider linguistic range, James and his disciples did not see a movement towards English which retained crucial Scottish words as any threat.

Indeed, it was not paranoia but overconfidence that betrayed them. James’s optimism was partly misplaced; partly overtaken by events. As the printing presses made silent reading more common and as the Scots writers lived from day to day in the larger London court at the time of Shakespeare and Jonson, their confidence and the *Scots register* began to dwindle away. By the end of the seventeenth century, the wider range of stylistic levels which had, hitherto, been the Scottish poet’s birthright was really threatened.

To replace the discontinuous history which seeks to construct a huge bridge from Dunbar to Burns with rhetorical continuity is my aim in now turning to Burns and the so-called “Vernacular Revival.” Comparative criticism has to pay attention to differences as well as similarities. The major difference between the “revivers” and the later makars is focused on the first of the issues I defined. For obvious historical reasons, writers after the Union of the Parliaments do think of Scots diction as a sign of patriotic intent. The Burns who boasted that Blind Hary’s *Wallace* “poured a tide of Scottish prejudice in my veins”¹² is simply enacting Barbour’s belief in Book 1 of *The Bruce* that only those who lose national liberty truly value it.

If this provides continuity beside necessary differentiation, elsewhere similarities abound. The first group’s confident assumption that they enjoy a more varied linguistic and poetic heritage is echoed by Ramsay, when he claims two pen names to signify that he is at once an English neoclassical (Isaac Bickerstaff) and a Scots makar (Gavin Douglas). Burns, whose rhetorical and neoclassical credentials are thoroughly spelled out in his letter to Dr. John Moore and confirmed critically by Carlyle, has the same optimistic linguistic vision. To become “an excellent English scholar”¹³ in a Scottish school, for Burns in the mid-eighteenth century as for myself in the 1960s, involved founding yourself first firmly on the Trivium of grammar, rhetoric and dialectic. Nor does he eschew English literature. Indeed, it is from the English neoclassical

¹¹William Alexander, *op. cit.* p. 182.

¹²*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985) I, 136.

¹³*Ibid.*, I, 135.

poets, Pope and Shenstone, he learns his poetic craft. Put these two together and we find Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns re-translating the decorous practices of the makars to suit a new linguistic and political situation.

Dunbar, James VI and Drummond of Hawthornden, then, thought of language decorously—that is, according to the medieval system of hierarchically arranged and linguistically distinguished styles. These styles governed all levels of writing—not only aureate complexity as so many critics seem to suppose. All was artifice—even imitation of the colloquial middle style. It is this tradition, which Burns inherits, as tests of his various styles and register transitions will economically underline.

At the highest stylistic level, if a nationalist view of Scots decorously pertains, that diction should predominate when topic and mode are at their most rarefied. Yet, in his patriotic allegory “The Vision” Burns introduces the muse of Scotland as follows:

With musing-deep, astonish'd stare,
I view'd the heavenly-seeming *Fair*;
A whisp'ring *throb* did witness bear
Of kindred sweet,¹⁴

and has her talk like this:

'Mong swelling floods of reeking gore,
'They ardent, kindling spirits pour;
'Or, mid the venal Senate's roar,
'They, sightless, stand,
'To mend the honest *Patriot-lore*,
'And grace the hand (*Poems*, I, 110).

Here, in full cry, is the English of the high style with its self-consciously poetic diction, its archaisms and compound words. It is given to the bard decorously, as a sign of her high standing.

Of course, Burns does not follow these rules rigorously. But a simple nationalist view of language cannot adequately define a writer who, so regularly, equates English with the higher rhetorical levels of style and so can, with no sense of incongruity, make his patriot bard talk like Milton's Satan on a heavy day.

On the low side of the decorous coin—if Scots is per se “good” and English per se “bad,” why does Willie Wastle not describe his wife as follows:

My cat sits at the fair fireside
With her paw, her face a-washing

¹⁴“The Vision,” Duan Second. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 109. Henceforth *Poems*.

But William's wife is not so nice
 She cleanses her countenance with a stocking

preferring:

Auld baudrans by the ingle sits,
 An wi' her loof her face a washin;
 But Willie's wife is nae sae trig,
 She dights her grunzie wi' a hushian:¹⁵

It is not that Burns is any the less a patriot because he regularly uses aureate English for his highest topics and thick Scots for his lowest—he thinks decorously and profits from Ramsay's confident re-introduction of that dialect into poetic play after the unique period of linguistic attrition endured in the later seventeenth century.

Finally, let us look briefly at two examples of rhetorical transition. I have not chosen extreme ones. I do not need to, for there can be little doubt that alterations from a Scots-dominated level of diction to an English dominated one, are a major strength of Burns's work as of Dunbar's, Lindsay's, Drummond's, Ramsay's and Fergusson's.

Ye high, exalted, virtuous Dames,
 Ty'd up in godly laces,
 Before ye gie poor *Frailty* names,
 Suppose a change o' cases;
 A dear-lov'd lad, convenience snug,
 A treacherous inclination—
 But, let me whisper i' your lug,
 Ye're aiblins nae temptation.

* * *

Who made the heart, 'tis *He* alone
 Decidedly can try us,
 He knows each chord its various tone,
 Each spring its various bias:
 Then at the balance let's be mute,
 We never can adjust it;
 What's *done* we partly may compute,
 But know not what's *resisted*.¹⁶

In this example, the narrator may plead the case of the “no sae guid at all” in

¹⁵“Song—Sic a wife as Willie's wife,” *Poems*, II, 641.

¹⁶“Address to the Unco Guid, or the Rigidly Righteous,” *Poems*, I, 53, 54.

the middle style of Anglo-Scots, but he moves very close to “Inglis alane” for his divinely ethical conclusion.

More subtly, the voice of Holy Willie changes from the self-deluding Scots of confession—“Surely, God you cannot blame me for lechery when I was drunk?”—

Besides, I farther maun avow,
Wi' Leezie's lass, three times—I trow—
But L--d, that friday I was fou
 When I cam near her;
Or else, thou kens, thy servant true
 Wad never steer her.—

to the equally self-deluding English voice of petition—“Beatitude for me, please; hellfire for almost everyone else!”—

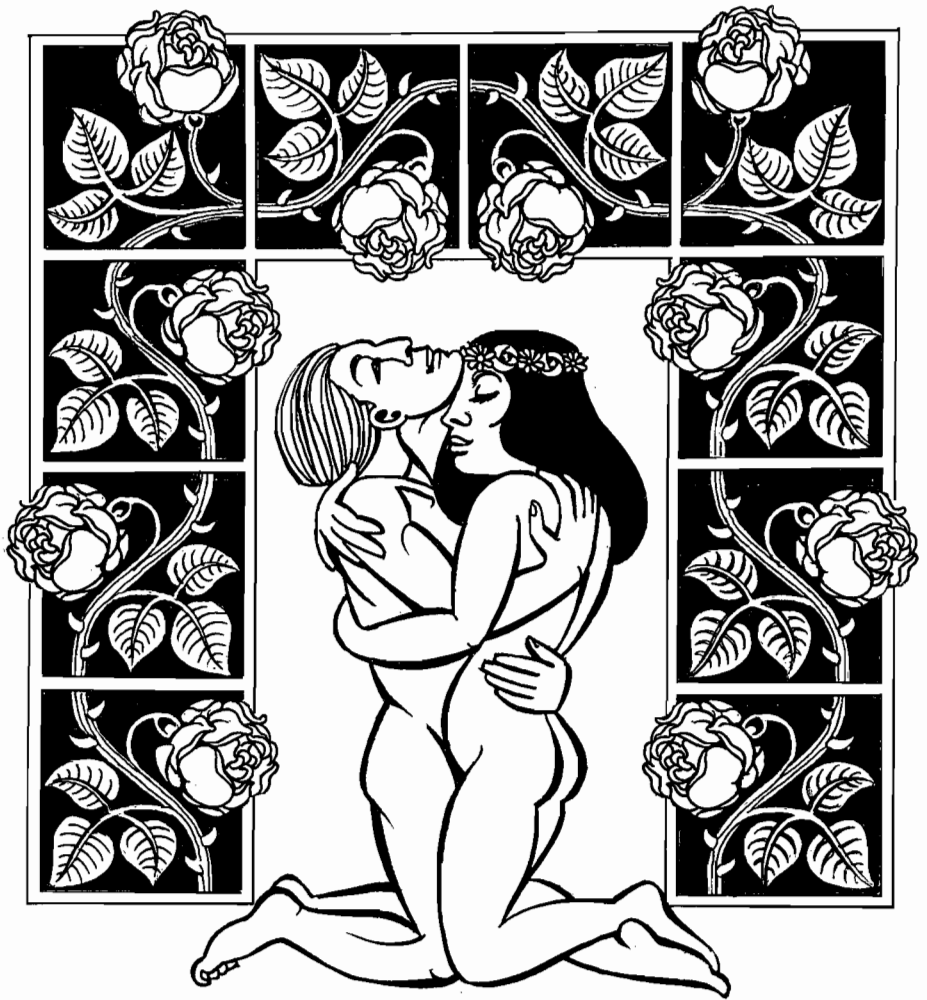
L--d, bless thy Chosen in this place,
For here thou has a chosen race:
But G-d, confound their stubborn face,
 And blast their name,
Wha bring thy rulers to disgrace
 And open shame.¹⁷

Burns and his predecessors did revive something but it was not THE vernacular. English is a vernacular as well as Scots. Nor was literary Scots revived at the expense of English, in a defensive spirit of linguistic nationalism. The eighteenth century poets accepted the makars' view that the two dialects had always been intertwined. What they did revive, *on rhetorical criteria*, was the full and varied range of styles by returning Scots diction to interlace as complement and supplement to English within all registers. Like William Alexander they wished to broaden “Language as a conduit,” the more efficiently to “deliver... the several Shapes [of] adorned Truth.”¹⁸

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¹⁷“Holy Willie's Prayer,” *Poems*, I, 76, 77.

¹⁸*Anacrisis*, *op. cit.* p. 182.



My love is like a red red rose —
A Gray 1996