



Hugh Blair, Robert Burns, and the Invention of Scottish Literature

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On 4 May 1787, the day before leaving Edinburgh after his eventful first winter in the Scottish capital, Robert Burns wrote to the Reverend Hugh Blair, retired Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at Edinburgh University, thanking him for “that kindness, that patronage, that friendship” that the older man had shown him.¹ The letter is not fulsome. It is fairly short; it has none of the vivid, Shandean banter that enlivens Burns’s letters to more congenial correspondents; and it is one of a number of letters Burns sent off that Friday as he put his affairs in order. It is the perfunctory performance of a man discharging an obligation. And yet, this *was* an obligation that Burns felt keenly enough to act upon. Of all the people he encountered during his five-month stay in the capital, Blair was one of a handful whose assistance warranted formal acknowledgement.

A few weeks before departing from Edinburgh, Burns began a commonplace book, in which he determined to “sketch every character that anyway strikes me, to the best of my observation, with unshrinking justice.”² Only five characters were actually sketched, and Hugh Blair was among them. (The others were Lord Glencairn, Professor Dugald Stewart, Professor William Greenfield—Blair’s successor in the Edinburgh Rhetoric and Belles Lettres chair—and the bookseller William Creech.) Burns’s treatment of Blair in the commonplace book is marked by ambivalence,

even contradiction. Burns records his impatience at the professor's snobishness and vanity, identifying Blair as a man of unspectacular natural talents raised to his present eminence by "industry and application."

But Burns also describes Blair as a fine writer and an excellent critic. And this was no empty compliment: Burns consulted Blair on what poems to include in his 1787 Edinburgh edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, and he adopted two of Blair's recommendations, omitting the weak forty-ninth line ("And och—that's nae Regeneration") from "A Dedication to G[avin] H[amilton] Esq," and substituting "damnation" for the less forthright "salvation" in stanza twelve of "The Holy Fair."³ What emerges from Burns's own testimony and from his correspondence with Blair is the sense of a relationship marked by class tension, but also by admiration, a degree of friendship, and mutual—if qualified—respect for the other's literary abilities. It is difficult to reconcile this impression with the opinions of twentieth-century commentators, for whom Burns's encounter with Blair is emblematic of a radical and damaging fissure in eighteenth-century Scottish culture, a profound gulf between native and metropolitan trends, and between creative and critical endeavor. Burns's relationship with Blair is read as the symbol of a literary culture dichotomized between vigorous vernacular poets and effete Anglicizing critics, with little fruitful intercourse between the two. Such readings posit Blair as the representative of a Scottish critical establishment that was inherently incapable of appreciating Burns's true achievement, and that continually threatened to vitiate his work by encouraging a conformity to polite Anglocentric norms. According to J. De Lancey Ferguson, in his 1930 essay on "Burns and Hugh Blair," the "polite world of Edinburgh . . . did its best to remold the 'Ayrshire ploughman' into a 'polite' poet. Only the 'stubborn, ungainly integrity' of his genius saved Burns from emasculation at the hands of Hugh Blair and his ilk" (445–46).

In a classic study of eighteenth-century Scottish culture, David Daiches reiterates Ferguson's reading of the Blair/Burns relationship, viewing Blair as the representative member of an Anglicized Scottish critical elite that failed to recognize Burns's poetic worth, and that could only exert a pernicious influence on the poet. For Daiches, Burns "was in a very disturbing relationship with the culture represented by the Edinburgh *literati*, whose advice to him, if he had taken it, would have finished him off as an original poet once and for all." Citing Henry Mackenzie's influential *Lounger* review of the Kilmarnock volume, Daiches bemoans the "total lack of equipment

of the Edinburgh literary establishment to deal with a whole area of imaginative literature,” namely, literature written in the Scots vernacular.⁴

More recently, a new body of work has reinforced this perception of an unbridgeable chasm between the worlds of Burns and Hugh Blair, between the spheres of vernacular native poetry and enlightenment criticism. Recent work by Robert Crawford and others, exploring how the university discipline of English Studies originated in the lecture courses on rhetoric and belles lettres delivered in the eighteenth-century Scottish universities, has emphasized the Anglocentricity of these Scottish rhetoricians and their promotion of metropolitan English as the language that ambitious Scots had to acquire in order to participate in the public life of the new British Empire. That these academics largely ignored Scottish vernacular literature and insisted on Anglocentric standards of linguistic propriety leads Crawford to view their work as part of a project of “internal colonialism” or “cultural imperialism.”⁵ For Crawford, the work of these teachers—men like Hugh Blair, Robert Watson, and Adam Smith—tends towards the “suppression of native tradition” and amounts to an “official attack on the traditional, vernacular Scottish culture.”⁶

This essay seeks to revise and qualify the view of eighteenth-century Scottish culture outlined above. It aims to suggest that the eighteenth-century Scottish professors of rhetoric were less inherently hostile to native culture than contemporary nationalist commentators maintain, and that their work may indeed have helped to facilitate and direct the development of Scottish vernacular literature in the later eighteenth century, notably in the case of Robert Burns. It may be that one of the effects of the apparent “unraveling” of Britishness in the recent decades is that it alerts us to the similarly contested and problematic aspects of “British” identity in earlier ages; as Raphael Samuel has written, “The break-up of Britain in the present, and the uncertainties attaching to its future, necessarily make us more aware of its contingent character in the past.”⁷ With this in mind, I will argue that the commitment of the eighteenth-century Scottish rhetoricians to a project of Anglo-British cultural “improvement” was less complete and unambiguous than has sometimes been asserted. While alert to the advantages of integration into “Britain” on Anglocentric terms, the Scottish literati remained cognizant of, and anxious about, the moral and cultural cost of “improvement.”

There were centrifugal, and not just centripetal forces at work in eighteenth-century British society, which impinged on the intellectuals of the

Scottish Enlightenment. If the late eighteenth century was a period of literary centralization, it was also, as Katie Trumpener reminds us, a period of “literary devolution.” In the Celtic peripheries of Britain, antiquarians and poets were recovering and renewing native oral traditions, notably in popular song collections such as David Herd’s *Ancient and Modern Scots Songs* (1769) and Burns and Johnson’s *Scots Musical Museum* (1787–1803), and were producing vernacular poetry, while both Edinburgh and Dublin had become, by 1800, “lively centres for novelistic publication.”⁸ The ascendancy of Anglocentric British cultural norms in late-eighteenth-century Scotland was by no means uncontested by Scotland’s literati; there were “devolutionary” pressures operating on Scottish writers and intellectuals, whose influence can be detected in even the most zealously “improving” texts of the age.

There is little warrant for viewing eighteenth-century Scottish culture as bifurcated between two monolithic and antagonistic movements, the Scottish Enlightenment and the Vernacular Revival: the one, a cosmopolitan movement, concerned to explore a universal “science of man” through the medium of metropolitan English; the other, a movement to preserve and valorize native language and traditions, maintaining cultural difference and distinct national manners. These movements, these cultural forces, interacted with one another and intersected in the lives of individual Scots. Robert Burns is a case in point, his works and his cultural activities tending to “express a mind in motion, giving itself over at times to *conflicting* principles and feelings.”⁹ From one perspective, Burns is the epitome of native rootedness. A provincial dialect poet; a writer of ethnographic “manners-painting” works; a collector and restorer of the national song traditions; a dabbler in antiquarianism: he is a key exemplar of “bardic nationalism,” that movement of resistance by Scottish and Irish provincials to the centralizing impetus of metropolitan English culture.

And yet the culture of enlightened Anglocentric “improvement” was part of Burns’s horizon long before he left Ayrshire, and an ethos of provincial self-improvement runs right through Burns’s life. At school he studied polite English usage in textbooks like Arthur Masson’s *A Collection of English Prose and Verse, For the Use of Schools*.¹⁰ In his youth in Ayrshire, he read *The Spectator* as a guide to metropolitan manners—“My knowledge of modern manners, and of literature and criticism, I got from the Spectator” (Burns, *Letters*, 1:138)—and played the role of impartial spectator in a

pair of commonplace books. He was an enthusiastic consumer of novels, which, as Paul Bator has shown, were read by provincials as repositories of “correct” metropolitan manners.¹¹ Indeed, around 1789–90, he planned to write a “Comparative view” of John Moore, Fielding, Richardson and Smollett, assessing their “different qualities and merits as Novel-Writers.”¹² He founded a debating club at Tarbolton, in which participants’ discussions “might not transgress the bounds of innocence and decorum,” and another one at Mauchline, whose members clubbed together to purchase the *Mirror* and the *Lounger*.¹³ When at Edinburgh, he impressed the literati with his command of metropolitan English, as Dugald Stewart attests: “He aimed at purity in his turn of expression, and avoided, more successfully than most Scotchmen, the peculiarities of Scottish phraseology” (Currie, 1:137). He established a circulating library in Dumfriesshire, placing *The Spectator*, *Mirror*, and *Lounger* as its first orders. He wrote an account of the library for that great “improving” work, Sir John Sinclair’s *Statistical Account of Scotland* (*Letters*, 2:106–08). He even cut a fleeting dash as an agricultural improver, winning a prize for his linseed growing in 1783.¹⁴ In all, he was very much part of what Ned Landsman calls the “provincial Enlightenment” and had a personal investment in the project of improvement.¹⁵

And Burns is not an isolated figure in this respect. Other poets of the time, even those who remained in comparative obscurity, show a similar involvement in enlightenment culture. James Orr was a weaver and Ulster-Scots poet, whose *Poems, on Various Subjects* was published in Belfast in 1804. Inheriting a long-standing tradition of Ulster-Scots verse (a tradition galvanized by the success of Burns), Orr composed poems in the traditional Scots stanza forms: Standard Habby, Christis Kirk, the Cherrie and the Slae.¹⁶ At the same time, however, his 1804 volume contains allusions to William Robertson’s *History of Scotland* (1759) and John Home’s *Douglas: A Tragedy* (1757), as well as an “Elegy on the Death of Hugh Blair, D. D.,” which adeptly surveys Blair’s religious and aesthetic writings. At one point in this poem, the grieving speaker is visited by the shade of Blair, who voices his hopes for his various writings, reflecting as follows on his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*:

Perhaps my lectures may some genius teach
 To judge aright of beauty and defect,
 And, steep sublimity! thy summit reach,
 Wild, as e’en OSSIAN, though as POPE correct.¹⁷

As a vernacular poet, Orr clearly does not see himself as engaged in a cultural confrontation with “the world of Hugh Blair.”

Something of that interpenetration of high and low cultures that Mikhail Bakhtin identifies in Renaissance Europe characterizes Scotland in the eighteenth century.¹⁸ However, while there is ready acceptance for the notion of Burns and other Scots poets as “tightrope walkers” on the border between folk and learned culture, there is less acknowledgement of the similarly divided allegiances of the Scottish Enlightenment intellectuals, of the extent to which their belief in “progress” is balanced by an appreciative awareness of a folk culture and idiom often seen as “primitive.”¹⁹ Even among the teachers of rhetoric and belles lettres, so committed to a process of Anglicizing “improvement,” there is often an undertow of sympathy for the vernacular. Though they did promote metropolitan English as the language of public exchange, many of their theories (especially as regards poetry and poetic language) can be read as justifying “unrefined,” nonstandard language. On the one hand they were eager to “improve” into a metropolitan linguistic idiom; on the other, they were—especially in the later part of the century—increasingly suspicious of metropolitan political corruption and disposed to praise much that was rustic, robust, and uncourtly. In approaching Scottish intellectuals of the late eighteenth century, we are dealing with “an Enlightenment culture at once actively involved in the project of modernization, visibly anxious about its consequences for traditional culture, and, thanks to the self-scrutiny of sentimentalism, intensely sensitive to its own ambivalent feelings” (Trumpener, 31). It is just this ambivalence and ambiguity that the work of Crawford has tended to obscure, and it is the key merit of Thomas Miller’s study, *The Formation of College English*, that it gives due weight to the ambivalence of the Scottish teachers of rhetoric and belles lettres, the extent to which, despite the demands of improvement, the values of supposedly more “primitive” stages of society were beginning to seem worth recuperating.²⁰

As we shall see, Hugh Blair best exemplifies this ambivalence, but at a certain level it is perceptible in even the most determinedly Anglocentric Scottish rhetoricians, men like James Beattie and Adam Smith. Beattie, who from 1760 lectured on rhetoric as part of his moral philosophy course at the University of Aberdeen, spoke of wishing to “see the English spirit and English manners prevail over the whole island” (Miller, 170). He compiled a dictionary of Scotticisms, as an aid to writers wishing to avoid them, and criticized the “broad Scotch dialect” of writers such as Allan

Ramsay. And yet Beattie also wrote a spirited Scots vernacular epistle, “To Mr Alexander Ross at Lochlee” (1768), and cooperated with Burns on his Scottish song collecting for the *Scots Musical Museum* (*Letters*, 1:163, 1:168). Adam Smith, who lectured on rhetoric and belles lettres at the University of Glasgow from 1751, identifies the language of the court as the standard to which all Britons must conform, welcomes the demise of “harsh and uncouth gutturals” (his own pronunciation had been softened by six years at Oxford), and, in Lecture 23 of his rhetoric and belles lettres course, deplores the “vulgarity” of Scots popular literature. He chastises Allan Ramsay for not writing like a gentleman, and is reported to have declared: “I dislike that homely stile which some think fit to call the language of nature and simplicity, and so forth.”²¹ And yet Smith subscribed for four copies of the Edinburgh edition of Burns’s *Poems*, *Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, and attempted to assist Burns in securing a civil service post.

However, it is in the work of Hugh Blair—by far the most influential of the Scottish professors of rhetoric and belles lettres, his *Lectures* becoming “a staple of instruction for half the English-speaking world”—that we can most clearly perceive the literati’s simultaneous espousal of “propriety” and “primitivism.”²² The incongruous yoking of “wildness” and “correctness” apparent in Orr’s elegy on Blair reveals a deep ambivalence that runs throughout the *Lectures*, an ambivalence that makes Blair’s championing of Burns less surprising than it might otherwise seem. It is to this ambivalence that I now wish to turn.

At the outset of the *Lectures*, Blair undertakes to justify the study of rhetoric and to commend it to his audience. As we might have expected, given his clerical background, Blair’s first argument is a religious one. He regards speech as a unique gift of Providence, “the great instrument by which man becomes beneficial to man,” and he argues that the cultivation of this gift is laudable in itself.²³ But he also makes the practical purpose of his lecture course quite clear. His course will benefit those who “may have the view of being employed in composition or in public speaking” as well as those who wish “only to improve their taste with respect to writing and discourse” (1:5). This emphasis on practical improvement, and on providing guidance to those who wish to make public interventions, aligns Blair with other Scottish teachers of belles lettres. Like them, Blair is engaged in training ambitious Scots in polite metropolitan English in order that they may play a full part in the British Empire. In his opening lecture he associates the contemporary vogue for the refinement of lan-

guage with progress in other spheres. The present, writes Blair, “is an age wherein improvements, in every part of science, have been prosecuted with ardour. . . . The public ear is become refined. It will not easily bear what is slovenly and incorrect” (1:7). Having analyzed “correct” style under such rubrics as “beauty” and “sublimity,” Blair goes on to discuss appropriate stylistic models—notably Addison and Swift—for his audience to copy, and stresses that there is nothing to prevent dedicated provincials from acquiring a delicate taste and a correct style. Taste, which Blair defines as the “power of receiving pleasure from the beauties of nature and of art” (1:16), is a faculty of sense “common in some degree to all men” (1:17), and one that is “remarkably susceptible of cultivation and progress” (1:19).

Yet even in this opening lecture, Blair betrays a deep ambivalence concerning the project of improvement. Having aligned his lectures with the new demand for linguistic propriety, with a “public ear” that “will not easily bear” slovenly and incorrect language, he then qualifies his enthusiasm for excessive linguistic refinement:

I will not deny that the love of minute elegance, and attention to inferior ornaments of composition, may at present have engrossed too great a degree of the public regard. It is indeed my opinion, that we lean to this extreme; often more careful of polishing style, than of storing it with thought. Yet hence arises a new reason for the study of just and proper composition. If it be requisite not to be deficient in elegance or ornament in times when they are in such high estimation, it is still more requisite to attain the power of distinguishing false ornament from true, in order to prevent our being carried away by that torrent of false and frivolous taste, which never fails, when it is prevalent, to sweep along with it the raw and the ignorant. They who have never studied eloquence in its principles, nor have been trained to attend to the genuine and manly beauties of good writing, are always ready to be caught by the mere glare of language; and when they come to speak in public, or to compose, have no other standard on which to form themselves, except what chances to be fashionable and popular, however corrupted, or erroneous, that may be. (1:7–8)

Blair’s commitment to polite, metropolitan, “fashionable” English is pragmatic—he wants Scots to get on, to play their part in the new Britain. The acquisition of standard English will facilitate this, and it will also enable Scottish writers to communicate their ideas to a wide international audience. Yet Blair is not without misgivings about the transition to a more punctilious and “elegant” language, and, particularly as concerns poetry,

his remarks often betray a desire for an earthier, more vehement style, a “longing for the creative genius of unrefined language” (Miller, 233).

Of necessity, ascertaining Blair’s attitude towards Scots vernacular language and literature is largely a matter of inference. Like most of the Scottish literati, he avoids direct discussion of Scotland and of Scottish literature, the sole exception being his brief treatment of Ramsay’s *Gentle Shepherd* (1725). Blair’s opinion of Ramsay’s play is high indeed: he calls it a “Pastoral Drama, which will bear being brought into comparison with any Composition of this kind, in any Language” (*Lectures*, 2:351–52). And though he expresses regret at Ramsay’s Scots idiom, he does so on specific grounds: where Adam Smith castigates Ramsay for not writing “like a gentleman,” Blair’s only objection to “the old rustic dialect of Scotland” is that it may soon be obsolete (2:352).

As Carey McIntosh shows, questions of “correctness” and “politeness” are central to Blair’s *Lectures*.²⁴ Importantly, however, despite his appeal to “correct” taste, Blair does not attempt to articulate a single, universally applicable standard. He acknowledges the relativity of taste, its diversity not just in individuals but between nations: “The Tastes of men may differ very considerably as to their object, and yet none of them be wrong. . . . Some nations delight in bold pictures of manners, and strong representations of passion. Others incline to more correct and regular elegance both in description and sentiment.”²⁵ On the evidence of the *Lectures*, Blair himself is among those for whom “boldness” and “strength” are more appealing than “correct and regular elegance.” He prefers “sublime” vehemence and power to the “beautiful” (1:91). Surprisingly, given his fastidious, prudish image among modern commentators, Blair argues that expressive force and “vehemence” ought always to outweigh considerations of delicacy and refinement. Throughout the *Lectures*, he praises the rough, enthusiastic vigor of “primitive” poetry over the insipid correctness of modern verse, and insists that a work of art may contain impure language, grammatical errors and indelicacies, and nevertheless be “admirable” (1:43).

What Blair is reaching towards here is the proposition that genius is superior to taste: “Genius . . . in a Poet or Orator, may sometimes exist in a higher degree than Taste; that is, Genius may be bold and strong, when Taste is neither very delicate, nor very correct” (1:42). Blair goes further, and asserts that genius and taste are frequently incompatible: the fiery, vigorous writer does not have time to attend to “all the lesser and more refined

graces” of composition, while a detailed attention to these graces is usually “accompanied with a diminution of sublimity and force” (1:43).

Although their expressed aim is to promote linguistic delicacy and refinement, Blair’s *Lectures* are marked by a distaste for excessive ornamentation in language and by an advocacy of a direct, spoken style, a puritan enthusiasm for “great plainness of speech.” Conscious of rhetoric’s reputation as an “ostentatious and deceitful” art, Blair emphasizes the power and importance of “simplicity” in oral and written discourse (1:3). He recommends that writing strive for the sincerity and immediacy of the extempore spoken word: “The voice of the living Speaker, makes an impression on the mind, much stronger than can be made by the perusal of any Writing” (1:136). Discussing Shakespeare’s characters, Blair praises their earthy, vigorous speech: they may be “vulgar,” but they “speak with human voices,” and it is for this reason that Shakespeare’s plays interest us to a greater degree than the “more polished and regular, but more cold and artificial performances of other Poets” (2:524).

This endorsement of the unimproved speaking voice informs Blair’s lecture on “Pronunciation, or Delivery,” which emphasizes the importance of maintaining a delivery that is natural to the speaker: “Nothing can be more absurd than to imagine, that as soon as one mounts a Pulpit, or rises in a Public Assembly, he is instantly to lay aside the voice with which he expresses himself in private; to assume a new, studied tone, and a cadence altogether foreign to his natural manner” (2:218). Even when one’s “natural” manner lacks fashionable “correctness,” its authenticity creates an impression of sincerity and conviction, and is therefore likely to win over one’s listeners:

Let your manner, whatever it is, be your own; neither imitated from another, nor assumed upon some imaginary model, which is unnatural to you. Whatever is native, even though accompanied with several defects, yet is likely to please; because it shows us a man; because it has the appearance of coming from the heart. Whereas a delivery, attended with several acquired graces and beauties, if it be not easy and free, if it betray the marks of art and affectation, never fails to disgust. (2:224)

Challenging the view of Blair as an “internal colonialist,” Fiona Stafford argues that we need to distinguish between the printed text of the *Lectures* and Blair’s oral delivery of them over a period of twenty-odd years. When accompanied by his own “distinctively Scottish intonation,” Blair’s

“repeated preference for the spoken and the natural” would hardly have lent itself to “internal colonialism.”²⁶ It was, argues Stafford, “the movement from orality to print that turned Blair’s *Lectures* into the Anglicizing, institutionalizing project for which he has been criticized in the twentieth century” (80–81).

If Stafford rather underestimates the Anglicizing import of Blair’s *Lectures*—there is, after all, much in their *content*, and not merely their form, that could be considered Anglocentric—she usefully reminds us that a commitment to “correct” English in their expository prose did not always extend to their conversation. Both Hume and William Robertson, according to James Currie, spoke a broader Scots than Burns (Currie, 1:26). Stafford is also right to draw attention to the neglected demotic sympathies at work in Blair’s text, his “repeated preference for the spoken and natural,” evident in his aesthetic judgments throughout the *Lectures*. Blair criticizes the Earl of Shaftesbury because his florid style, with its “pomp and parade,” departs so materially from common usage and “simplicity” (*Lectures*, 1:192). He accepts that satires and epistles (Burns’s favorite genres) ought to eschew elevated language and cultivate “the ease and freedom of conversation” (2:366). He presents the Grecian style of oratory—forceful, familiar, even licentious—as a legitimate alternative to the more elegant Roman mode (2:24–25). He deplores the excessive linguistic refinement of his own age, its “love of minute elegance” (1:7), arguing that language “is become, in modern times, more correct, indeed, and accurate; but, however, less striking and animated: In its antient state, more favourable to poetry and oratory; in its present, to reason and philosophy” (1:124–25).

This last quotation points to a crucial concern of Blair’s: the history of language. The attempt to trace the progress of language from its remote origins to its present condition was undertaken by several of the Scottish literati, and Blair’s Lecture VII, on the “Rise and Progress of Language,” shares many features with other Enlightenment works such as Monboddo’s multivolume *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* (1773–92) and James Dunbar’s essay “On Language, as an universal Accomplishment” (1780). Like Dunbar, Blair traces the origins of language to the spontaneous cries and exclamations common to all human beings. There are certain sounds that, for all human beings, denote certain specific emotions. These tones, says James Dunbar, “independently of art, by an inexplicable mechanism of nature, declare the purposes of man to man.”²⁷ The words of early languages would have been formed from these primitive sounds, and also

from onomatopoeia, so that in the earliest stages of language there would have obtained a genuine correspondence between sound and sense, word and object. Even when language developed and became more complex and abstract, interjections conveying indignation, surprise, fear, and so forth persisted as relics of this “primeval” language. According to Blair:

If we should suppose a period before any words were invented or known, it is clear, that men could have no other method of communicating to others what they felt, than by the cries of passion, accompanied with such motions and gestures as were farther expressive of passion. . . . Those exclamations, therefore, which by Grammarians are called Interjections, uttered in a strong and passionate manner, were, beyond doubt, the first elements or beginnings of Speech. (*Lectures*, 1:101–02)

As vocabulary increases over time, language assumes greater abstraction, and moves away from primitive universality (1:115). What Blair calls “the natural relation between words and objects” (1:105) gives way to an arbitrary one as language becomes a system of arbitrary signs. And yet the power of modern language is greatly enhanced by the orator who can skillfully reintroduce the primitive sounds, who can recall what Dunbar calls the “accents of nature” and the “rude accents of mankind” (Dunbar, 69, 70).

The implication of several Scottish Enlightenment treatises on language is that vernacular Scots is one of these primitive, poetic languages—vehement, rumbustious, forceful, vividly concrete, and sensual. It is perhaps to this notion that Burns gestures in his “Epistle to W. S[impson], Ochiltree,” when he describes lowland Scots as a no-nonsense, plainspoken idiom, belonging to the childhood of the human race:

In days when mankind were but callans,
At *Grammar, Logic*, an’ sic talents,
They took nae pains their speech to balance,
Or rules to gie,
But spak their thoughts in plain, braid lallans,
Like you or me.²⁸

We are led, then, to an intriguing paradox: vernacular Scots can, in the context of Scottish Enlightenment thought, be seen to approach more closely than English to the universal language discussed by Dunbar and Blair, having retained to a greater degree those passionate and onomatopoeic elements from which all languages originate. Like Gaelic, identi-

fied by Blair as the originary language of the British Isles, Scots is close to being, in that Blairite-Burnsian phrase, the “language of the heart.”²⁹

The primitivism that animates Blair’s *Lectures* is evident a fortiori in his *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763). Making use of the Scottish Enlightenment’s stadial view of human development, Blair assigns the poems of Ossian to the first of the “four stages” of society, the age of hunters.³⁰ While this stage of human social development may not produce improvements in many arts, it *is* conducive to the production of poetry: “Many circumstances of those times which we call barbarous, are favourable to the poetical spirit.” In “rude” or uncultivated ages, men’s passions and imaginations are comparatively unrestrained by reason; so, while their artistic productions may lack regularity and order, they possess “that enthusiasm, that vehemence and fire, which are the soul of poetry.” Highly colored, impassioned, full of that vivid figurative language that the paucity of abstract terms forces on a primitive people, the discourse of “barbarous” ages is naturally poetic.³¹ James Dunbar agrees, arguing that, while linguistic refinement may bring advantages in “perspicuity,” what is lost is the “superior vivacity, which accompanies a rude tongue” (Dunbar, 123). In the case of Ossian’s poetry, however, Blair finds that this primitive vehemence and passion are accompanied by “an amazing degree of regularity and art. We find tenderness, and even delicacy of sentiment, greatly predominant over fierceness and barbarity” (Blair, *Critical Dissertation*, 349). The presence of these apparently civilized elements (regularity, tenderness) Blair attributes to Ossian’s involvement with the learned order of the Druids, but Blair is keen to stress in any case that “Barbarity” is a relative concept, and is “not inconsistent with generous sentiments and tender affections” (350–51).

Clearly, there is a heavy irony in Blair celebrating the Gaelic vehemence and vigor of a body of verse he had encountered only James Macpherson’s English prose versions. However, it is worth pointing out at this stage that Blair’s advocacy of a manly, forceful, “natural” style ought not to be read as an endorsement merely of Gaelic or Scots “primitivism.” There is no reason why such a style could not include English, and it is with the promotion of a sinewy, vigorous English style that Blair is most concerned in his *Lectures*. The same holds true for other Scottish rhetoricians. When Adam Smith praises the superior “strength” of native words and abhors the fashion for importing Latinate “Foreigners,” he is of course advocating the use of homegrown *English*—“good old English”—not Scots (*Lectures*, 3). My

point is merely that the terms in which such an advocacy is made—the praise of orality, the celebration of forceful “native” words, the distrust of excessive refinement and ornamentation—tend to license and legitimate the use of Gaelic and Scots as much as a certain style of English.

In both the *Lectures* and the *Critical Dissertation* Blair celebrates the force and vigor of unrefined language. His reasons for doing so are aesthetic, certainly, but they are also, to some extent, political. Several commentators have noted that, as rhetoric developed in eighteenth-century Europe, it became depoliticized. The move to belletristic criticism meant that rhetoric’s traditional concern with civic, public issues was diminished (Miller, 147). As taught by Blair and the other Scottish academics, rhetoric was less about training an elite group in principles of political debate than about educating the middle classes into the reception of polite literature and the practice of linguistic propriety. And yet the “art of speaking well,” to quote Neil Rhodes, “dwindled to the art of being well spoken,” which Hugh Blair regretted even as he promoted it.³² In his discussion of “modern eloquence,” Blair laments that there are no modern parliamentary orators who come near to the ancients, and he ascribes the ineffectiveness of contemporary orators to the constraints imposed by the vogue for linguistic refinement: “Our Public Speakers are obliged to be more reserved than the antients . . . and, by the influence of prevailing taste, their own genius is sobered and chastened, perhaps, in too great a degree” (*Lectures*, 2:42). So much have modern orators been “chastened,” that their eloquence “has been often found too feeble to counterbalance” what Blair refers to as “ministerial influence” (2:43). Despite his own position as a broker and beneficiary of “ministerial influence,” Blair regrets the absence of a forthright, vigorous political oratory.³³ The accents of civic humanism are unmistakably present in his warning that “language has been carried so far, as to be made an instrument of the most refined luxury” (1:99).

Given that “so many of the ideas that characterize [Blair’s] work were part of the general intellectual climate” (Stafford, 84), it is difficult to be certain about his influence on particular writers. Clearly, however, his emphasis on the spoken voice, on poetry as impassioned utterance, on the persuasive force of unrefined language, and on the figure of the bard, find powerful echoes in the work of Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, all of whom were familiar with Blair’s *Lectures*. The preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, with its discussion of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and its call for a poetry written in “language really used by men” is

a highly Blairite text. However, while critics have readily acknowledged Blair's influence on the English Romantic poets, any possible influence on Robert Burns has been occluded by narrow perceptions of Blair as the champion of Anglocentric propriety.

From the outline of Blair's literary theory given above, his interest in Burns is readily understandable. Blair views Burns as he had viewed Homer and Shakespeare in the *Lectures*, that is, as a writer of forceful genius, who yet lacks delicacy and refinement, one "in whose admirable writings are found instances of rudeness and indelicacy" (*Lectures*, 1:43). And while Burns's poetry—witty, social, intimate—is not "sublime" in its subject matter (it does not describe grand, imposing spectacles, such as battles or turbulent natural forces), it does have the vehemence and the muscular linguistic energy, the "mighty force or power" (1:56), that Blair praises in sublime poetry. When Burns consulted Blair over what to include in the 1787 Edinburgh edition, Blair advised some alterations, on grounds not of linguistic but of *moral* decency (he was, after all, a Church of Scotland minister). Unlike Dr. John Moore, Blair did not advise Burns to turn away from dialect, and he actually singled out for praise two densely vernacular works, "Death and Dr Hornbook. A True Story" and "John Barleycorn." That Blair apparently had no objection to Burns's Scots dialect is not in fact surprising. Throughout the *Lectures*, Blair recommends what is "natural" in speech, even "when accompanied by several defects." His position is probably that of a later Scottish teacher of English Literature, the Glasgow professor John Nicol (who acknowledged a professional and intellectual debt to Blair), who wrote in 1879 that "the natural language of a writer is always the best—*e.g.*, the Scotch dialect of Burns. But the forced assumption of a dialect is an affectation to be carefully avoided."³⁴

While there is no direct evidence that Burns read Blair's *Lectures*, he had, by January 1783, encountered Blair's *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian*, which Stafford describes as a "condensed version of much of the material being delivered in [Blair's] Edinburgh lecture room" (77). One could, moreover, make a case for regarding Burns's considered assessment of Blair's critical abilities in his Edinburgh commonplace book as evidence that Burns had indeed read the *Lectures*. The same conclusion would seem to be warranted by the fact that Burns's epigraph to the Kilmarnock volume, which speaks of the "simple Bard" who "pours the wild effusions of the heart," echoes Blair's remarks on the "early bard" in the *Lectures*: "He sung indeed in wild and disorderly strains; but they were the native effu-

sions of his heart” (2:322–23). In any case, the influence of Blairite ideas is everywhere apparent in Burns’s *Kilmarnock* volume.

For one thing, Burns habitually casts himself as a bard, whether as the “simple Bardie” of “A Dream,” the “*Patriot-bard*” of “The Cotter’s Saturday Night,” or the “Bard of rustic song” in “A Bard’s Epitaph.”³⁵ He presents his poems as spontaneous passionate effusions (“Just now I’ve taen the fit o’ rhyme”), and aims to reproduce what Blair calls the “voice of the living Speaker.”³⁶ He also demonstrates a Blairite concern at the “chastened” condition of modern political eloquence. In “The Author’s Earnest Cry and Prayer, to the Right Honorable and Honorable, the Scotch Representatives in the House of Commons” (*Poems*, 1:187), Burns associates the servility and ineffectiveness of Scotland’s political representatives with their excessively refined and polite language:

Some o’ you nicely ken the laws,
To round the period an’ pause,
An’ with rhetoric clause on clause
 To mak harangues;
Then echo thro’ Saint Stephen’s wa’s
 Auld Scotland’s wrangs. (ll. 67–72)

Feeble and fastidious of speech, the Scottish MPs are failing to fight in Scotland’s corner in the British Parliament. Burns exhorts them to throw aside this insipid style and speak out boldly for Scotland: “Speak out an’ never fash you thumb!” (l. 26); “But raise your arm, an’ tell you crack / Before them a’” (ll. 35–36). Only then will the forty-five Scottish MPs be able to counteract what Hugh Blair calls “ministerial influence”:

And now, ye chosen FIVE AND FORTY,
May still your Mither’s heart support ye;
Then tho’ a Minister grow dorty,
 An’ kick your place,
Ye’ll snap your fingers, poor an’ hearty,
 Before his face. (ll. 133–38)

Burns’s own political integrity is demonstrated throughout the *Kilmarnock* poems by his use of a vehement, plainspoken style—“plain, braid lallans,” the “raucle tongue” of the Scots.³⁷

If Blairite political oratory informs the *Kilmarnock* volume, Burns seems also to have absorbed Blair’s teachings on religious eloquence. In his

lecture on “Eloquence of the Pulpit,” Blair advocates a passionate, engaged style of preaching. Since persuasion is the preacher’s aim, his eloquence “must be Popular Eloquence.” To connect forcibly with the audience matters more than observing linguistic proprieties: “Correct language, and elegant description, are but the secondary instruments of preaching in an interesting manner. The great secret lies, in bringing home all that is spoken to the hearts of the Hearers, so as to make every man think that the Preacher is addressing him in particular” (*Lectures*, 2:112). The preacher’s discourse should be vehement, plain, concrete, and “carried on in the strain of direct address to the Audience” (2:112). Above all, preaching requires a unity of “Gravity and Warmth,” mixing French enthusiasm with English accuracy (2:107, 2:119). There is no merit in the measured, philosophical vein of preaching: “A dry sermon can never be a good one” (2:112).

It might be argued that Burns’s style throughout the Kilmarnock poems—vehement rather than “correct,” and often “carried on in the strain of direct address”—represents the kind of “Popular Eloquence” commended by Blair. More specifically, however, when Burns comes to depict a group of Presbyterian preachers in “The Holy Fair” (*Poems*, 1:187), his critique of their preaching styles reflects rather closely the sentiments of Blair. In the following passage, Burns is describing two ministers at an Ayrshire “Holy Fair” or sacramental celebration. First on the rostrum is the tempestuous “Old Light” Calvinist, the Reverend Alexander Moodie; he is followed by the Reverend George Smith, a moderate “New Light,” whose style is somewhat dryer:

Now a’ the congregation o’er,
 Is silent expectation;
 For [Moodie] speels the holy door,
 Wi’ tidings o’ d-mn-t—n:
 Should *Hornie*, as in ancient days,
 ‘Mang sons o’ G—present him,
 The vera sight o’ [Moodie]’s face,
 To’s ain *het hame* had sent him
 Wi’ fright that day.

Hear how he clears the points o’ Faith
 Wi’ rattlin an’ thumpin!
 Now meekly calm, now wild in wrath,
 He’s stampan an’ he’s jumpan!
 His lengthen’d chin, his turn’d up snout,

His eldritch squeel an' gestures,
 O how they fire the heart devout,
 Like cantharidian plaisters
 On sic a day!

But hark! the *tent* has chang'd it's voice;
 There's peace an' rest nae langer;
 For a' the *real judges* rise,
 They canna sit for anger.
 [Smith] opens out his cauld harangues,
 On *practice* and on *morals*;
 An' aff the godly pour in throngs,
 To gie the jars an' barrels
 A lift that day.

What signifies his barren shine,
 Or *moral pow'rs* an' *reason*;
 His English style, an' gesture fine,
 Are a' clean out o' season.
 Like SOCRATES or ANTONINE,
 Or some auld pagan heathen,
 The *moral man* he does define,
 But ne'er a word o' *faith* in
 That's right that day. (ll. 100–135)

While it is clear that Burns's genial satire encompasses both of these preachers, it is hard not to feel that Moodie comes off rather better than Smith. Moodie's warm, passionate style means that he succeeds in "bringing home all that is spoken to the hearts of the Hearers," as Blair puts it, while Smith, on the other hand, is so preoccupied with elegance and propriety ("His English style, an' gesture fine") that he alienates his audience. The reference to Smith's "cauld harangues" is particularly telling, since this calls to mind not just the feeble "harangues" of the MPs in "The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer," but also Blair's warning in the *Lectures* against those preachers who engage in "frivolous and ostentatious harangues, which have no other aim than merely to make a parade of Speech" (2:107).

Throughout the Kilmarnock volume, Burns draws on ideas propounded by Blair and others in order to present Scots dialect as the language of primitive simplicity, masculine vigor, and political integrity. However, the centrality of Blairite aesthetic ideas to Burns's Kilmarnock volume has yet to be acknowledged by scholars inclined to view the bardic persona as something that a misguided critical establishment foisted on Burns. The

fallacy at the heart of much contemporary Burns criticism is the notion that Burns wrote his Kilmarnock poems *and then* adopted the persona of the untaught bard in order to sell them to the literati. In fact, the bardic persona and the accompanying rhetoric of spontaneity are integral to the poems themselves, not least to the verse epistles, perhaps the best poems Burns wrote. Nor did the bardic, primitivist discourses popularized by academics tie Burns into a humiliating, subaltern role; on the contrary, these theories proved enabling for Burns (as they did for such subsequent writers as Wordsworth and Whitman in verse, and Sydney Owenson in prose), by providing a vantage point from which the project of “improvement” could be criticized and challenged.

While contemporary commentators have been ready to acknowledge the dualism of a Ramsay or Burns, negotiating native and metropolitan cultures, they have been reluctant to acknowledge the same tensions in the work of Blair and the Scottish rhetoricians, preferring to see them as monologic agents of English cultural imperialism.³⁸ Recognizing the complexity of Hugh Blair and the Scottish teachers of rhetoric and belles lettres is crucial to a nuanced understanding of eighteenth-century Scotland, allowing us to perceive connections between the apparently separate worlds of vernacular and enlightened Scotland. While the recent discussions of eighteenth-century Scottish rhetoricians as “internal colonialists” remain valid up to a point, more attention needs to be given to the ambivalence and ambiguity at work in the “Scottish invention of English Literature.” At the same time as they promoted a project of Anglocentric linguistic improvement, the Scottish teachers of rhetoric and belles lettres popularized aesthetic ideas that undermined that project and that provided inspiration for nonstandard poetic voices such as that of Robert Burns. To say, with Crawford, that Blair “simply banned Scoticism” (“Scottish Literature,” 231) may be to simplify the import of Blair’s teachings, and to reproduce the exaggerated notion of an “enormous gulf which separated the kind of critical theory expounded by Kames, Blair and Mackenzie from the poetry written by Burns in fulfilment of the Scots literary tradition.”³⁹ Indeed, as Crawford elsewhere argues, and I hope to have demonstrated in this essay, Burns “also made use of that culture to which Hugh Blair and his fellows belonged” (*Devolving*, 94). The ideas that Blair and other Scottish rhetoricians popularized—primitivism; the emphasis on stylistic “simplicity”; the promotion of orality, or the “voice of the living Speaker”—facilitated the emergence and the positive reception of writers like Robert

Burns. Blairite primitivism and bardic orality freed Burns from the constraints of Blairite linguistic “correctness.” It would be unfortunate if a one-sided perception of Blair as simply an Anglicizing “improver” were to obscure the profound, if sometimes paradoxical, affinity between his aesthetic theory and the poetic practice of Robert Burns.

Notes

1. *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. De Lancey Ferguson, 2nd edn., rev. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 1:110–11.
2. *The Life and Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Robert Chambers, rev. William Wallace, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1896), 2:84.
3. For the complete text of Blair’s “Observations on Mr Burn’s [*sic*] Poems,” taken from the Esty Collection of Burns MSS, see J. De Lancey Ferguson, “Burns and Hugh Blair,” *Modern Language Notes* 45 (1930): 440–46; the text is on 441–42.
4. David Daiches, *The Paradox of Scottish Culture: The Eighteenth-Century Experience* (London: Oxford Univ., 1964), 75–79.
5. See particularly the following works by Robert Crawford: *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 16–44; “Introduction” and “Scottish Literature and English Studies,” in *The Scottish Invention of English Literature*, ed. Crawford (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1998), 1–21, 225–46; and “Introduction” and “Internationalizing English Studies,” in *Launch-Site for English Studies: Three Centuries of Literary Studies at the University of St Andrews*, ed. Crawford (St Andrews: Verse, 1997), 1–22, 55–77.
6. Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, 22, 37. For Crawford’s references to “internal colonialism” and “cultural imperialism,” see *Scottish Invention*, 7–8.
7. Raphael Samuel, “Four Nations History,” in *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (London: Verso, 1998), 21–40, especially 22.
8. Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 1997), 16.
9. Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (1960; rep. Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994), 104.
10. On Burns’s schooling, see William Will, *John Murdoch: Tutor of Robert Burns* (Glasgow, 1929), reprinted from *Burns Chronicle* 4 (1929): 60–89.
11. Paul G. Bator, “The Entrance of the Novel into the Scottish Universities,” from *Scottish Invention*, 90.
12. *Letters*, 2:37. See also Burns’s letter of 6 September 1789 to Mrs. Dunlop, in which he refers to his reading of Dr. Moore’s *Zeluco* and writes: “I have been revolving in my mind some kind of criticisms on novel-writing, but it is a depth beyond my research” (*Letters*, 1:440).
13. James Currie, “History of the Rise, Proceedings, and Regulations of the Bachelor’s Club,” reproduced in *The Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Currie, 4th edn., 4 vols. (London, 1803), 1:106, 1:108.

14. James Mackay, *Burns: A Biography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1992), 93.
15. See the following works by Ned Landsman: "Witherspoon and the Problem of Provincial Identity in Scottish Evangelical Culture," in *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment*, ed. Richard B. Sher and Jeffrey R. Smitten (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ., 1990), 29–45; "Presbyterians and Provincial Society: The Evangelical Enlightenment in the West of Scotland, 1740–1775," in *Sociability and Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland*, ed. John Dwyer and Richard B. Sher (Edinburgh: Mercat, 1993), 194–209; and "The Provinces and the Empire: Scotland, the American Colonies and the Development of British Provincial Identity," in *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689 to 1815*, ed. Lawrence Stone (London: Routledge, 1994), 258–87.
16. For a discussion of the popular verse tradition in Ulster, which was "firmly Scottish in tone" from the beginning of the eighteenth century, see J. R. R. Adams, *The Printed Word and the Common Man: Popular Culture in Ulster, 1700–1900* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1987).
17. James Orr, *Poems, on Various Subjects* (Belfast, 1804), 94.
18. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana Univ., 1984).
19. David Daiches, "Robert Burns: The Tightrope Walker," in *Love and Liberty: Robert Burns: A Bicentenary Celebration*, ed. Kenneth Simpson (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1997), 18–31.
20. Thomas P. Miller, *The Formation of College English: Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in the British Cultural Provinces* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh, 1997).
21. Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J. G. Bryce (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 1983), 15, 135–41, 230.
22. The first quotation is from Robert Morrell Schmitz's *Hugh Blair* (New York: King's Crown, 1948), 3; the second from Miller, *Formation of College English*, 139.
23. Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 2 vols. (London, 1783), 1:1.
24. Carey McIntosh, *The Evolution of English Prose, 1700–1800: Style, Politeness, and Print Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1998), 166–67.
25. Blair, *Lectures*, 1:27–28. Adam Smith, in *Lectures on Rhetoric*, makes a similar point in his comparative discussion of Demosthenes and Cicero, when he argues that Demosthenes' "downright plainness" was adapted to the "familiarity and equality of his countrymen" (160–61).
26. Fiona Stafford, "Hugh Blair's Ossian, Romanticism and the Teaching of Literature," in *Scottish Invention*, 80–81.
27. James Dunbar, *Essays on the History of Mankind in Rude and Cultivated Ages* (London, 1780), 68.
28. From *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 1:93–98 (ll. 115–20).
29. Janet Sorenson, *The Grammar of Empire in Eighteenth-Century British Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 2000), 164.
30. On stadial history, see Christopher J. Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ., 1997), 93–106.

31. Hugh Blair, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* [1765], in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ., 1996), 345–99. The quoted material is from 345.
32. Neil Rhodes, “From Rhetoric to Criticism,” *Scottish Invention*, 32.
33. For ministerial influence, see Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ., 1985).
34. John Nichol, *English Composition* (London: Macmillan, 1879), 33–35, quoted by Robert Crawford, in *Scottish Invention*, 230.
35. Burns, *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 1:152, 1:247, 1:268. For a discussion of Burns’s use of bardic personae, see Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, 92–95.
36. The Burns quotation is from “To J. S****,” in *Poems*, 1:179 (ll. 67–72).
37. For an extended discussion of Burns’s presentation of Scots dialect as a language of political integrity, see my *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002).
38. As does Daiches, in *Paradox of Scottish Culture*, 28.
39. Alexander Manson Kinghorn, “A Study of Literary Criticism in Scotland during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century” (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Aberdeen, 1953), 188.

