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## Genius, Men, and Manners: Burns and Eighteenth-Century Scottish Criticism<sup>1</sup>

There is a temptation to view the initial reviews of Burns following the publication of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* as a damaging blend of myth-building and moralising, or the application of inappropriate aesthetic principles by an aloof and Anglocentric literati who were simply out of tune with Burns and his work. Nowhere perhaps is the critics' failure to respond adequately to Burns more evident than in the near universal proclamation of his 'genius' following the publication of the Kilmarnock poems in 1786. For rather than being the figure of the untaught rustic bard promoted by the majority of reviewers of *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* and encapsulated in Henry Mackenzie's famous phrase 'Heaven-taught ploughman', Burns was a tenant farmer who had already revealed himself to be considerably well read, showing, for example, an acquaintance with writers as diverse as John Locke, Joseph Addison, Robert Boyle, James Thomson, Laurence Sterne, William Shenstone, Ossian and the author of *The Man of Feeling* himself, to name but a few.<sup>2</sup> Yet, while such details may indicate the inadequacies of the formulation of genius employed by Mackenzie and cohorts, to hastily dismiss this formulation as critical quackery is to do something of a disservice to the Scottish critical tradition in the late eighteenth century. It is not simply the case that any attempt to separate Burns the man from Burns the myth will necessarily encounter a poet who proves himself to be as much a protean master of persona in his private life as in his poems; it is also the case that the genius myth itself can help us understand something of Scottish criticism in the late eighteenth century and the crucial role this tradition played in facilitating Burns's rise to fame. In this essay, I wish to briefly

explore the analysis of genius in late eighteenth-century Scotland and the broader project of studying human nature to which this effort belongs, and how this work filters into the initial reception of Burns, helping to shape both the poet's public image and even his own self-image.

## I

That Burns's initial rise to fame was in many ways indebted to the concept of genius is shown by the fact that the majority of reviewers following the publication of the Kilmarnock poems turned to genius as a means of explaining Burns's obvious talent in spite of his perceived station in life. The unsigned notice in the *Edinburgh Magazine* of October 1786 called his poems 'a striking example of native genius', while the letter signed 'Allan Ramsay' in the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* of November the same year was already noting the extent to which Burns's 'genius is applauded'.<sup>3</sup> Henry Mackenzie's influential review in the *Lounger* in December, of course, sealed the genius myth by famously describing Burns as a 'Heaven-taught ploughman'. These early responses were followed in 1787 by notices in the *Critical Review*, the *New Town and Country Magazine*, the *General Magazine and Impartial Review*, and the *Monthly Review*, which variously presented Burns as a 'signal instance of true and uncultivated genius', 'blessed by nature with a powerful genius', 'the genuine poet of nature' and 'Bard of Nature'.<sup>4</sup>

While it would in many respects be correct to view such pronouncements as the critically shortsighted effusions of a moderate literati who were generally prone to exhibiting what Gerard Carruthers has termed 'mainstream cultural ignorance' when

dealing with the vernacular revival,<sup>5</sup> the concept of genius would have seemed highly appropriate to those who initially reviewed the Kilmarnock poems. By 1786, ‘genius’ had become an important explanatory concept in dealing with poetic production, becoming a term applied to characterize certain gifted authors as much as a concept used to delineate the ‘spirit’ of whole groups of people from nations through to the female sex (an alternate use of the term still in widespread use in the late eighteenth century). ‘Genius’ was also a ready-made means of explaining innate skill or, what amounts to much the same thing, prodigious talent in the absence of formal education. A traditional eighteenth-century formulation of genius viewed it as a natural ability that does not require tuition, as in Joseph Addison’s influential description of ‘great geniuses’ as ‘prodigies of mankind, who, by the mere strength of natural parts, and without any assistance of art or learning’ have produced timeless works.<sup>6</sup> Education, although it can assist poets of the second rank, cannot supply powers that are wanting at birth. As the poet Edward Young opined in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* of 1759, learning is only ‘most wanted...where there is least Genius’.<sup>7</sup>

Applied to Burns, these notions about genius would have acted as a means of explaining his talent in spite of his supposed lack of a formal education. Indeed, many of Burns’s initial reviewers focused upon his position in life, something which, in their view, could not have afforded the possibility of a polite education. To the ‘Allan Ramsay’ of the *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, Burns naturally appeared a ‘self-taught poet’, while the reviewer in the *Edinburgh Magazine* attempted to second guess wider critical response by asking the question he thinks may be on the lips of other ‘surly’ critics: ‘Who are you, Mr. Burns?...At what university have you been educated?’ – to

which he responded not with like churlishness but rather with admiration for the ‘exertions of untutored fancy’.<sup>8</sup> Mackenzie at least declined to rest Burns’s pretensions to the title of genius on the ‘lowness of his birth’ and ‘the little opportunity of improvement, which his education could afford’ stating that, although these circumstances may provoke ‘wonder at his productions’, Burns’s poetry would still merit approbation when ‘considered abstractedly, and without the apologies arising from his situation’.<sup>9</sup> There were also those who questioned the genius myth on the very grounds that Burns’s work showed distinct signs of learning, including John Logan and the Edinburgh printer James Macaulay, who commented that Burns’s poems reveal enough ‘scraps o’ French an’ Latin’ and ‘solid lore’ to suggest an intellect steeped in ‘lear’.<sup>10</sup> Still, even if Burns’s genius could be questioned on such grounds, this did little other than to set true genius in opposition to education, in compliance with the traditional eighteenth-century view of genius as innate and unlettered. Overall, it was this latter view that came to characterise Burns.

The tendency among reviewers, then, was to link Burns’s genius to his learning, or supposed lack of it. This tendency, of course, exposes the critics’ ignorance of the facts about Burns’s education at the hands of tutor John Murdoch and his extensive reading, as revealed in his private correspondence (Sir Walter Scott was later to comment that, unlike Hogg, Burns ‘had an education not much worse than the sons of many gentlemen in Scotland’).<sup>11</sup> Yet we must remember that the idea of untutored genius was encouraged by Burns himself, who played an active, if inconsistent, part in directing critical response by deliberately cultivating the myth of the artless plough-hand. As Ken Simpson has suggested, Burns played a significant role in establishing the

image of the ‘untutored rustic’: despite the fact that this image is only part of an elaborate matrix of personae constructed in his writing – writing which actually reveals the considerable extent of Burns’s learning and often finds him casting himself in quite contrary roles such as the urbane ‘observer’ of men and manners à la Pope or Addison – it seems that the ‘chameleon’ Burns was happy to play the peasant genius when it suited him to do so.<sup>12</sup> The Kilmarnock poems were, after all, prefaced with the figure of ‘The Simple Bard, unbroke by rules of Art’ and Burns took care to stress that he was ‘Unacquainted with the necessary requisites for commencing Poet by rule’. Ironically, this figure of the peasant genius is not so much Rousseauvian as Addisonian, as the terms used here are a direct borrowing from the *Spectator* and Addison’s view of ‘great natural geniuses, that were never disciplined and broken by rules of art’.<sup>13</sup> Burns characteristically reveals his learning just as he is trying to play it down. Still, the preface provides a remarkable insight into Burns’s shrewd ability to manipulate audience response: on the one hand, the Bard, in a typical eighteenth-century show of authorial modesty before a discerning public, declares himself unequal ‘to the genius of a Ramsay’ or ‘the poor, unfortunate Fergusson’, yet the preface has the rhetorical effect of placing the idea of genius firmly in the reader’s mind, and Burns, the ‘Rhymer from his earliest years’, continually underlines his own credentials as a ‘natural’.<sup>14</sup> Even given Burns’s modest appreciation of his own poetic merits in relation to Ramsay and Fergusson, the figure that emerges by association is not only their logical successor but also that of the natural genius.

Burns often presented himself as the Rousseauvian child of nature in his poetry, as in the following cry from his ‘Epistle to John Lapraik’: ‘Gie me ae spark o’ nature’s

fire, / That's a' the learning I desire'.<sup>15</sup> In this poem, Burns effectively sets himself, 'a Rhymer like by chance' with 'nae pretence' to learning, in opposition to learned 'critic folk' and those college-bred fools who 'think to climb Parnassus / By dint o' Greek' (*Poems and Songs*, 67). It may seem somewhat contradictory that the same poem that can knowingly refer to 'Pope, or Steele, / Or Beattie's wark' can at the same time offer such a glib dismissal of book learning, yet Burns frequently displays a sophistication in learning at the very point where he claims to be without education.<sup>16</sup>

One can begin to see, then, that both Burns and his critics interfaced with wider critical debates about the nature of genius, particularly in reproducing an intellectual discourse that presented genius as an innate talent set in opposition to cultivation. Leading on from this, another factor that contributed to the formation of the genius myth was the problem of Burns's social status. Burns's 'humble station', as Mackenzie misrecognised it,<sup>17</sup> might have suggested to critics reasons for his supposed lack of a gentlemanly education, but they also raised practical concerns about procuring financial support. Eighteenth-century discussions of poetic merit frequently took the 'neglect of genius' as a central theme, lamenting the nation's failure to support those who showed exceptional promise. Britain could provide ready examples of neglected genius, including the unfortunate Thomas Chatterton, who died penniless and starving at the age of eighteen, and Robert Fergusson, Burns's 'elder brother in misfortune', who, as Burns himself reminded readers, had also been shamefully neglected and threatened with starvation: 'Curse on ungrateful man, that can be pleas'd, / And yet can starve the author of the pleasure'.<sup>18</sup> It was particularly fortunate for Burns, who was about to abandon poetry and seek his fortune in the West Indies, that the initial reviews of the *Kilmarnock*

poems took up the theme of neglected genius. ‘Allan Ramsay’s’ letter to the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* of November 1786 picked up on Burns’s precarious financial situation, calling for readers to ‘rescue from penury a genius which, if unprotected, will probably sink into obscurity’.<sup>19</sup> Similarly Mackenzie, who as we know was key in stopping Burns from seeking his fortune elsewhere and in a different occupation, devoted a considerable part of his review to the issue of redressing the ‘wrong which genius is exposed to suffer’. His own timely intervention in the life of Burns was phrased accordingly:

I have learnt from some of [Burns’s] ... countrymen, that he has been obliged to form the resolution of leaving his native land, to seek under a West Indian clime that shelter and support which Scotland has denied him. But I trust means may be found to prevent this resolution from taking place; and that I do my country no more justice, when I suppose her ready to stretch out her hand to cherish and retain this native poet, whose ‘wood-notes wild’ possess so much excellence. To repair the wrongs of suffering or neglected merit; to call forth genius from the obscurity in which it had pined indignant, and place it where it may profit or delight the world; these are the exertions which give to wealth an enviable superiority, to greatness and to patronage a laudable pride.<sup>20</sup>

Mackenzie’s discussion of genius, in other words, acted as both an acknowledgement of merit and a recognition that true merit should be supported by those with the proper means.



## II

I would therefore suggest that, to the eighteenth-century critic, the concept of genius would have appeared an adequate category for dealing with Burns and one that they would have felt immediately applicable to his situation in life. Yet, there is further context in which we can view the critics' fixation upon genius. In the decades prior to the publication of the Kilmarnock poems, Scotland's intellectuals had shown a heightened interest in the concept of genius and had produced a number of major works on the topic, including full works on the analysis of the powers of genius as well as a number of associated works of criticism and poetry that dealt with the subject. If anything, these works helped to establish the terms by which Burns was initially to be understood by reviewers, and show us that the views of Burns's critics, and even Burns himself, can be read as interventions in a Scottish tradition of discussing and analysing genius.

One key example from this tradition would be Alexander Gerard's *Essay on Genius* of 1774. Then Professor of Divinity at Aberdeen, Gerard was already the author of a prize winning *Essay on Taste*, published in 1758 after winning a medal for the best work on taste from the Edinburgh Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, and Agriculture three years earlier. According to Gerard, it was this essay, or certain issues under-explored by this work, that initially prompted him to undertake a fuller anatomy of the powers of genius, although he also viewed this anatomy as an attempt to bring the study of 'the leading faculty of the mind' under the recognition of what he calls the 'science of human nature', a project that was then reaching its zenith in late eighteenth-century Scotland. To Gerard, 'Genius is properly the faculty of

invention, by means of which a man is qualified for making new discoveries in science, or for producing original works of art'.<sup>21</sup> Like other Scottish writers on the subject, Gerard was interested in both scientific genius and poetic genius and the similarities and differences between the two. Both are powers of invention, and both are made up of a combination of the psychological powers of imagination, judgment, and taste, although these powers are asserted differently according to their diverse ends. Scientific imagination is aimed at the discovery of truth and addresses itself to the understanding whereas poetic imagination is directed towards producing beauty and adapting itself to taste.

I mention Gerard's text as it is typical of the way in which Scotland's enlightened moderates approached the subject of genius in the decades prior to the publication of the Kilmarnock poems. In defining poetic genius as the capacity for invention, Gerard stresses the centrality of imagination to poetic production and emphasises originality over what he calls 'servile imitation' – a view that was to have a considerable influence on later generations of critics, particularly during the Romantic period. In general, Gerard's *Essay on Genius* marks an important movement in eighteenth-century criticism away from delineating the psychological powers involved in the consumption of literature – taste – to the powers involved in producing literary works, thereby displaying a significant shift of critical focus towards the individual mind of the poet.

Gerard was aware of the pioneering nature of his study, noting that serious investigations of genius had been neglected by the science of human nature, and that 'In the writings of those who treat with greatest accuracy of the intellectual power, we find

only a few incidental observations concerning Genius'.<sup>22</sup> In fact, by the time it was published, Gerard's *Essay on Genius* was not the first Scottish work to offer a full investigation of the subject. An Aberdeenshire minister by the name of William Duff had already published two major works on genius, his *Essay on Original Genius* of 1767 and *Critical Observations on the Writings of the Most Celebrated Original Geniuses in Poetry* of 1770. The earlier work, the *Essay on Original Genius*, broke new ground in the analysis of genius, moving away from the eloquent yet insubstantial analogical reasoning of earlier writers like Edward Young – whose *Conjectures on Original Composition* underpins Duff's own ideas about poetic originality – towards a rigorous breakdown of the psychological 'ingredients' that make up genius, thereby taking an anatomical approach to the analysis of human nature more akin to late eighteenth-century Scots moral thought. Duff actually foreshadowed Gerard in breaking genius down into three principle psychological components, viz. the imagination, judgment, and reason, acting in concert and due proportion. Duff also stressed the centrality of imagination – and with it, originality and invention – in constituting genius, and, like Gerard's later work, gestured towards later Romantic theories of the poetic imagination even while it belonged firmly to the sentimental, psychological, and moral approach to aesthetics pioneered by Adam Smith, Alexander Gerard, and Lord Kames.<sup>23</sup>

Although Duff, like Gerard, was concerned with manifestations of genius in both Science and Art, his main concern was poetry, which 'affords the most extensive scope for the display of Genius truly Original'.<sup>24</sup> It is Duff's concern with this particular quality of genius, 'Original Genius', which is of particular relevance to the invention of the Burns genius myth. To Duff, this type of genius is distinguished by its 'superior

excellence' and a 'more vivid and comprehensive imagination'. Original genius, or that 'NATIVE and RADICAL power which the mind possesses of discovering something NEW and UNCOMMON in every subject on which it employs its faculties',<sup>25</sup> is, in other words, to be distinguished from the common lot of mental talents and special aptitudes by its superior imaginative powers and sheer capacity for invention. The reason this enquiry is particularly significant to the critical reception of Burns is because it is not about genius *per se* but instead focuses upon a particular type of genius that is most evident in poetry. Indeed, in focusing upon original genius, Duff was investigating exactly the same subject as that covered by Mackenzie in his *Lounger* review some twenty years later. Mackenzie's review, we may recall, specifically focused upon the 'Surprising effects of Original Genius, exemplified in the Poetical Productions of Robert Burns, an Ayrshire Ploughman'.<sup>26</sup> The review also starts with a lengthy preamble about the contemplation of genius in which that power is specifically defined as a 'supereminent reach of mind by which some men are distinguished'. In other words, Mackenzie was following Duff in focusing on a specific type of genius that was held to differ from other forms in degree if not kind. In using the term 'original genius' to describe Burns, then, Mackenzie gestured towards earlier theories about a special quality of genius, distinct from the common distribution of natural talents evident among mankind in general. Theories such as this underpin his description of Burns as not just a genius but a 'genius of no ordinary rank'.<sup>27</sup>

This was not the only theory of genius that had been circulating around Scotland in the latter half of the eighteenth century to which the *Lounger* review was indebted. Mackenzie's recycling included his famous description of Burns as the 'Heaven-taught

ploughman'. Robert Crawford, following the *OED*, has speculated that Mackenzie may have been the first person in English to use this phrase.<sup>28</sup> In fact, this succinct formulation of genius (encapsulating the familiar idea that genius is natural and does not require tuition) comes not from Mackenzie but rather from a philosophical poem written by a former student of Alexander Gerard, *The Minstrel* by James Beattie. Beattie had been a student of Gerard at Marischal College Aberdeen before gaining renown both as a poet and as a champion of 'common-sense' against Humean skepticism, and *The Minstrel* (1771–74) was the most celebrated of his literary works. The poem had an acknowledged influence on numerous poets including Cowper, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, Shelley, and Burns himself.<sup>29</sup> These poets would have recognised in the poem's protagonist, Edwin, an archetype of the natural bard. Burns, for instance, praised the figure of the 'rustic Bard' in 'The Vision', the same poem that respectfully nodded towards 'the sweet harmonious Beattie' and his 'Minstrel Lays' (*Poems and Songs*, 87), and when he recast himself as 'a Scottish Bard' in the dedication to the Edinburgh edition of *Poems*, *Chiefly*, his 'wild, artless notes' recalled the 'wild harp' and 'artless' Muse of the infant Edwin from stanza 57 of the first book of *The Minstrel*.<sup>30</sup>

Subtitled 'the Progress of Genius', *The Minstrel* deals with the development of the poetic powers of a young Scottish shepherd of low degree as he reacts to the natural environment around him. In the course of outlining the development of Edwin's imagination, Beattie uses the image of the heaven-taught poet twice, firstly in imploring genius to opt for imaginative freedom as opposed to worldly concerns:

...let thy heaven-taught soul to heaven aspire,

To fancy, freedom, harmony, resign'd;

Ambition's groveling crew for ever left behind.<sup>31</sup>

The image is later repeated in Book II of *The Minstrel* when Edwin speaks of his 'heaven-born mind'.<sup>32</sup> In all, Beattie's poem presents the enduring image of the simple rustic bard tutored by nature. One can begin to see how critics like Mackenzie might be tempted to apply this image to Burns, even if it did present an idealised vision of rural life far removed from the realities of his life in Ayrshire. In using the phrase 'Heaven-taught', then, Mackenzie invited comparison between Burns's position as a poet and the situation depicted in Beattie's poem.

Burns himself echoed the phrase in a number of poems, even when, strictly speaking, it did not apply. Jeremy Smith has discussed Burns's use of 'heaven-taught' in his *Prologue spoken by Mr Woods on his Benefit Night* as a reference to enlightened reason and a return of compliment to Mackenzie, one of the authors mentioned in the poem who presumably show how in Caledonia 'Philosophy... / Here holds her search by heaven-taught Reason's beam' (*Poems and Songs*, 265). Then there is also the 'heaven-taught song' (*Poems and Songs*, 581) for which Caledonia is said to be famed in Burns's *Ode for General Washington's Birthday*.<sup>33</sup> It seems that Burns liked to use the phrase as a synonym for 'natural', yet he also used it in direct reference to genius in his famous tribute to Robert Fergusson:

Ill-fated genius! Heaven-taught Fergusson!  
 What heart that feels and will not yield a tear,  
 To think Life's sun did set e'er well begun  
 To shed its influence on thy bright career. (*Poems and Songs*, 258)

In fact, Fergusson completed his 'heaven-taught' education at Edinburgh High School,

Dundee Grammar School, and St Andrews University, but, these irksome biographical details notwithstanding, one can see that the poem is drawing on the same associations between poetic genius and nature as had already appeared in Beattie's *Minstrel* and which were in popular circulation at the time. By labeling his elder brother in the Muse 'heaven-taught', Burns was simply employing an image of genius which had already appeared in his own description of himself as a 'Simple Bard, unbroke by rules of Art'.<sup>34</sup>

Burns and his reviewers were happy to draw on the mythology of the primitive Bard to fashion a public image. James Anderson labeled Burns the 'Bard of Nature', a title that not only echoed Burns's attempts at self-fashioning in the Kilmarnock preface but also drew upon a popular primitivist conception of genius based on the idea that a distinct lack of cultivation is conducive to genius. Associations between the primitive and true poetic genius permeated Scottish criticism in the decades prior to the publication of the Kilmarnock poems and in the wake of Rousseau's influential writings on natural education and the progress of civilisation. Such theories promoted the view that primitive life might actually favour the appearance of genius as it places the developing poet in close contact with nature, away from the distortive influences and false refinements of civilisation, and in a position that actively encourages originality and freedom of expression over slavish adherence to established critical canons (the 'rules of Art' that the 'Simple Bard' of Burns's preface evidently remains ignorant of). William Duff, for example, attempted to show that 'early and uncultivated periods are peculiarly favourable to the display of original poetic genius, and that this quality will seldom appear in a very high degree in cultivated life'.<sup>35</sup> To Duff, access to manners that remain natural and uncomplicated by progress, 'exemption from the rules of criticism',

and an almost total ‘want of that knowledge which is acquired from books’ explains why ‘original Poetic Genius appears in its utmost perfection in the uncultivated ages of society’.<sup>36</sup>

The main Scottish writer to promote the primitivist thesis of genius was an individual who, of course, played a crucial role in the development of Burns’s career: Hugh Blair, Minister of the High Church in Edinburgh, Professor of Rhetoric and Belle Lettres at Edinburgh University, and, alongside Mackenzie, one of the leading literati when Burns arrived in Edinburgh. Blair set out his primitivist thesis in his *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* of 1763, an acclaimed yet, given its attention to James Macpherson’s infamous ‘translation’, controversial critical evaluation of the merits of Ossian in comparison to that exemplar of primitive genius, Homer. There, Blair first promoted the idea (his later *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres*, published 1783, were to adopt much the same position) that primitive societies are more favourable to the appearance of poetic genius than modern society. Whereas in modern society, human nature is ‘pruned’ or subject to forms of cultivation which subdue the passions and superimpose upon human nature an array of artificial manners and refinements, primitive states favour the poetical spirit, for, in such a state, ‘human nature shoots wild and free’ and the ‘high exertions of fancy and passion’ intrinsic to poetical genius are encouraged.<sup>37</sup>

While historicising genius, critics like Blair set it in opposition to cultivation in a manner that helped lay the foundations for the portrait of Burns as the uncultivated, uneducated bard of nature. Such ideas echo throughout Burns’s early writing, from the preface to the Kilmarnock edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* through to



the Edinburgh edition. In the latter, the figure of the bard features in the dedication to the Noblemen and Gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt<sup>38</sup> and reappears in *The Brigs of Ayr* as ‘The simple Bard, rough at the rustic plough, / Learning his tuneful trade from ev’ry bough’ (*Poems and Songs*, 226). Jeremy Smith describes the fashioning of this figure as a ‘new Scots-speaking rival’ to Ossian who was of course much admired by the literati,<sup>39</sup> and indeed it does appear that the literati were happy to build upon the Ossianic dimensions of Burns’s public profile. The figure of the unrefined bard who learns his craft directly from nature appeared in such reviews as *The Edinburgh Magazine*, which echoed Blair’s primitivist model of genius when placing the following words in Burns’s mouth:

I have not looked on mankind *through the spectacle of books*. An ounce of mother wit, you know, is worth a pound of clergy; and Homer and Ossian, for any thing that I have heard, could neither write nor read.<sup>40</sup>

It is particularly telling here that the reviewer has Burns, a contemporary poet, compare himself to the two exemplars of primitive genius from Blair’s *Critical Dissertation*, Homer and Ossian. Had the reviewer been aware of Burns’s knowledge of and admiration for Ossian, he may not have been so quick to foreground the poet’s artlessness.<sup>41</sup>

Interestingly, the review implies that Burns’s talent should be specifically tied in with the observation of man in a pure form, undiluted by book learning: Burns, like Homer and Ossian, has looked on mankind through nature rather than books. This is all the more significant when we consider that writers like Blair linked genius with the

capacity for observing man. Along with the pressing questions of antiquity and authenticity, Blair's *Critical Dissertation* attempted to establish the excellence of Ossian in comparison with Homer, and in doing so judged the worth of Ossian's poetry in terms of its adequacy in presenting human nature. Homer, Blair discovered, displays a 'deeper knowledge of human nature' than Ossian but only because his 'field of observation was much larger'.<sup>42</sup> Though inferior to Homer in certain respects, Ossian has managed to achieve what Blair finds essential to epic poetry, the 'natural representation of human characters', and 'has indeed given all the display of human nature which the simple occurrences of his times could be expected to furnish'. Ossian's characterisation also has merit because it manages the difficult task of being 'distinct and affecting to the mind' by including some 'strokes of human imperfection', thereby recalling 'known features of human nature'.<sup>43</sup> The genius of Ossian, therefore, is measured by his skill in sketching universal features of human nature. Critics were to measure Burns's genius in much the same way.

### III

The readiness with which critics linked exceptional poetic ability with a heightened ability to observe and depict human nature was another key aspect of eighteenth-century thought on genius. A profound insight into the passions, great ability in sketching character or in 'delineating' human nature: all were taken as marks of original genius. For Blair, Homer and Ossian possessed such ability; to others, like Mackenzie, so too did that other exemplar of genius, Shakespeare. When analyzing the power of genius in *The Lounger* review, Mackenzie remarked that

The power of genius is not less admirable in tracing the manners, than in painting the passions, or in drawing the scenery of Nature. That intuitive glance with which a writer like Shakespeare discerns the characters of men, with which he catches the many changing hues of life, forms a sort of problem in the science of mind, of which it is easier to see the truth than to assign a cause.<sup>44</sup>

In fact, the propensity to view Shakespeare's insight into human nature as a key mark of his genius was itself a critical platitude by the time of Mackenzie's review: for example, in the *Elements of Criticism* of 1762 – perhaps the definite attempt to marry Scottish aesthetics to the 'science of mind' – Lord Kames had already noted that Shakespeare 'excels all the ancients and moderns, in knowledge of human nature, and in unfolding even the most obscure and refined emotions'.<sup>45</sup> Mackenzie, then, was not entirely original in suggesting that the power of genius lies in, as he says, 'tracing the manners' or 'painting the passions', but his views nevertheless show the influence of established critical discourse in defining the specific nature of Burns's genius. Although Mackenzie avowedly stopped short of comparing 'our rustic bard to Shakespeare', he nevertheless demonstrated that a major feature of Burns's genius consisted of his knowledge of the characters and minds of men, or 'the uncommon penetration and sagacity' with which 'this Heaven-taught ploughman, from his humble and unlettered station, has looked upon men and manners'.<sup>46</sup> Other reviewers followed suit. The *Edinburgh Magazine* noted that Burns's 'observations on human characters are acute and sagacious' and even the churlish John Logan reluctantly admitted that Burns possesses 'the genuine characteristics of a poet', part of which consists of a 'surprising knowledge of human

nature'.<sup>47</sup>

Such associations between genius and the observation of human nature were soon to seep into Romantic critical theory, as in Wordsworth's view that the true poet has a 'greater knowledge of human nature...than are supposed to be common among mankind'.<sup>48</sup> Yet ideas about the literary observation of human nature had a particular resonance in late eighteenth-century Scotland, where, since the 1750s, the paraphernalia of criticism, from published works on taste through to the courses on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres taught at the universities, had been busy aligning itself to the project of studying human nature under the far-reaching auspices of a general science of man. Criticism, rhetoric, and literature itself, all had their role to play in 'illustrating' or 'delineating' the various powers of the human mind. In this climate, literary authors were actively encouraged to become observers of human nature, and were able to participate in the study of man by investigating human passions, sympathetic reactions, and 'character'. As a prime example of the vogue for the literary analysis of sympathy and sentiment during the period, Mackenzie's debut novel of 1771, *The Man of Feeling*, was deliberately contrived to place a 'man of sensibility into different scenes where his feelings might be seen in their effects'.<sup>49</sup> Burns, who of course greatly admired Mackenzie's novel ('a book I prize next to the Bible'),<sup>50</sup> likewise presented himself as an adept observer of human nature. One of Burns's stated aims in the Kilmarnock edition was, after all, 'to transcribe the various feelings, the loves, the griefs, the hopes, the fears, in his own breast'.<sup>51</sup>

In fact, Burns frequently couched his critical reflections, including reflections on his own work, in the kind of terms being promoted by the science of man. While such

reflections on his own position as observer of human nature might seem to tie in with the view promoted by Scotland's critics that a 'pure' and anti-scholastic, primitive yet precocious, understanding of human nature is an index of genius, they also begin to reveal the contradictory and self-undermining dimensions of Burnsian self-fashioning, which oscillates between a notion to play the peasant and a contrary impulse towards gaining recognition as something of an equal among the learned and enlightened. As David Daiches has suggested, the young Burns revealed himself to be considerably acquainted with the main concerns of Scotland's leading 'scientists of man' and the work of figures like Adam Smith, even going so far as to present himself in his *Commonplace book* as 'a rustic character' to be studied by observers of human nature:

It may be some entertainment to a curious observer of human nature to see how a plough-man thinks, and feels, under the pressure of Love, Ambition, Anxiety, Grief with the like cares and passions, which, however diversified by the Modes, and Manners of life, operate pretty much alike I believe, in all the Species.<sup>52</sup>

In putting his passions on display, Burns tapped directly into new currents in Scottish thought, exhibiting what were then commonplace beliefs about a basically uniform human nature. But the rustic character wishing to be observed was also a self-styled observer of rustic character. In his letters, Burns went to some effort to present the persona of a keen observer of human nature. Writing to Thomas Orr in 1782, Burns described himself as an individual occupied in 'studying men, their manners, & their ways, as well as I can' – 'the only study in this world', he added, that 'will yield solid satisfaction' (*Letters*, I, 14).

Burns continued to cultivate this image of the eager student of human nature, going so far as to suggest, in a letter to his old tutor John Murdoch in 1783, that this is his specific calling:

I seem to be one sent into the world, to see, and observe... In short, the joy of my heart is to “Study men, their manners, and their ways:” and for this darling subject, I cheerfully sacrifice every other consideration. (*Letters*, I, 17)

Ironically, this self-portrait would seem to undermine the persona of the untutored Bard that Burns’s elsewhere tried to construct. The above letters to Orr and Murdoch allude to the same line spoken by a distinctly worldly courtier in Alexander Pope’s *January and May*,<sup>53</sup> thereby invoking a cultivated ‘Augustan’ observer of men and manners that may be quite at odds with the persona of the heaven-taught rustic. As Douglas Gifford has argued, the persona of the ‘sardonic’ observer in the above letter to Orr is just one of the many ‘poses’ emerging from Burns’s writing, distinct from, and struggling for ascendancy over, other personae, like the fashionable images of the ‘Man of Feeling’ and ‘Man of the World’ that begin to supplant the ‘heaven-taught’ image in the poet’s famous autobiographical letter to Dr. John Moore of August 1787.<sup>54</sup> In this letter to Moore, Burns did, after all, confess that he got his ‘knowledge of modern manners’ not from heaven but simply ‘from the Spectator’ (*Letters*, I, 138). However, in an earlier letter to Moore dated 15 February 1787, Burns actively ascribed his talent for observing man to his humble station in life, suggesting that his ability had actually been assisted by his social status as it allowed him a peculiar insight into men and manners:

I am very willing to admit that I have some poetical abilities; and as few, if any Writers, either moral or poetical, are intimately acquainted with the classes of Mankind among whom I have chiefly mingled, I may have seen men and manners in a different phasis, which may assist originality of thought. (*Letters*, I, 88)

Where one letter to Moore appears to be ‘worldly’ and stresses the impact of learning on Burns’s knowledge of human nature, the earlier letter would seem to be more in line with the views propounded by Mackenzie and the critics about the original genius of a poet who has ‘looked on men and manners’ from his ‘humble and unlettered station’ – and note how the January letter does echo the term ‘originality’ used in Mackenzie’s review.

At the start of this essay, I proposed that the image of Burns constructed by both his initial reviewers and by the poet himself can be read as participating in a late eighteenth-century Scottish tradition of thought regarding genius and the observation of human nature. It might appear that when it came to discussing his own ‘original’ genius, Burns was at his least original and significantly indebted to that tradition, but what his letters to Moore indicate is that this indebtedness did not result in the simple appropriation of any one of the positions offered by contemporary critical discourse. Instead it begins to show the complex role that late eighteenth-century criticism played in helping to fashion Burns’s self-image(s) and the different ways in which it enabled him to rationalise his work. This is not to suggest that Burns was disingenuous in presenting himself to his readership, whether private or public, and it is emphatically not to make any claims about a putatively ‘Caledonian’ fragmentation of the poet’s identity.

For we do not see Burns torn internally between natural poet and enlightened observer in a psychological parody of, say, the socio-economic divide between ‘vernacular’ Alloway and ‘Anglocentric’ Edinburgh or even the philosophical rift between primitive imagination and cultivated reason. Rather we see different, yet interrelated, subject positions formed by, and contained within, eighteenth-century discourse which Burns could inhabit at various points in his writing. Curiously, these subject positions included both the Ossianic and Augustan observers of human nature.

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<sup>2</sup> A complete list of Burns’s reading, which was extensive, can be found in John Robotham, ‘The Reading of Robert Burns’, in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, ed. by Carol McQuirk (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), pp.281-297. Burns mentions these specific authors in his letter of 15 January 1783 to his old tutor John Murdoch and later in his long autobiographical letter to Dr. John Moore of 2 August 1787. See *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. by J. De Lancey Ferguson and G. Ross Roy (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1985), I, 17, Letter 13 and I, 133, Letter 125. Unless otherwise stated, all further references to Burns’s letters will refer to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Donald A. Low (ed.), *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), pp.64–65.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Low, pp.70, 80, 87, 89, 90.

<sup>5</sup> Gerard Carruthers, *Robert Burns, Writers and Their Work* (Tavistock: Northcote, 2006), p.13.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Addison, *Spectator* 160 (3 September 1711), repr. in Donald F. Bond (ed.), *Critical Essays from the Spectator* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp.250–53 (p.250). See also Thomas Crawford, ‘Burns, Genius and Major Poetry’, in *Love and Liberty: Robert Burns – A Bicentenary Celebration*, ed. by Ken Simpson (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1997), pp.341–353.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition in a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison* (London: A. Millar & R. and J. Dodsley, 1759; repr. Leeds: The Scholar Press, 1966), p.29.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Low, p.65, pp.63–64.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, pp.68–69.

<sup>10</sup> From James Macaulay’s ‘Rhyming Epistle to Mr. R– B–, Ayrshire’ published in the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* of 23 June 1787 (repr. in Low, pp.83–85). In a similar manner, John Logan questioned the idea of natural genius by claiming that Burns was obviously ‘well acquainted with the English poets’. See Jeremy J. Smith, ‘Copia Verborum: The Linguistic Choices of Robert Burns’, *Review of English Studies*, 58 (2007), 73–88.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Low, p.285. Cf. Smith, ‘Copia Verborum’, p.75.

<sup>12</sup> See Ken Simpson, ‘Robert Burns: “Heaven-taught ploughman”’, in *Burns Now*, ed. by Ken Simpson (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994), pp.70–91.

<sup>13</sup> Addison, p.250.



<sup>14</sup> *Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns*, ed. by William Scott Douglas, 2 vols. (Kilmarnock, 1891; repr. in 1 vol. Glasgow, 1938), I, xc-xci. All further references to this edition will use the abbreviation *Poetical Works*.

<sup>15</sup> From James Kinsley's one volume edition of *Poems and Songs* (London, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.67. All further references to Burns's poems will be to this edition and will appear in the body of my text.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Simpson, 'Robert Burns: "Heaven-taught ploughman"?' , p.71, which notes the irony that 'Burns's prose is often at its most formal when he is claiming in letters to his social superiors that he is an uneducated peasant.'

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Low, p.68.

<sup>18</sup> 'Lines Written Under the Portrait of Robert Fergusson, the Poet', in *Selected Poems*, p.139, ll.1-2.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Low, p.66.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, pp.70-71.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Gerard, *An Essay on Genius* (London & Edinburgh: W. Strahan, T. Cadell, and W. Creech, 1774), p.8.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p.3.

<sup>23</sup> William Duff, *An Essay on Original Genius and Its Various Modes of Exertion in Philosophy and the Fine Arts, Particularly in Poetry*, ed. by John L. Mahoney (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1768; repr. New York; Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1978), p.vi..

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, p.86.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p.86.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Low, p.67.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, pp.67-68.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Crawford, 'Robert Fergusson's Robert Burns', in *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, ed. by Robert Crawford (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp.1-22 (p.2).

<sup>29</sup> See James Beattie, *Poetical Works*, ed. by Roger G. Robinson (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996), p.xviii.

<sup>30</sup> See 'Dedication to the Noblemen and Gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt' in *Poetical Works*, I, 135.

<sup>31</sup> Beattie, p.4.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, p.50.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, 'Copia Verborum', p.74.

<sup>34</sup> *Poetical Works*, I, xc.

<sup>35</sup> Duff, pp.viii-ix.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, pp.269-273.

<sup>37</sup> Hugh Blair, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763), in James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), pp.343-408 (345-346).

<sup>38</sup> See *Poetical Works*, I, 135.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, 'Copia Verborum', p.85

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Low, p.64

<sup>41</sup> In his letter of January 15 1783, Burns informs John Murdoch that 'Mcperson's Ossian' is one of the 'glorious models after which I endeavour to form my conduct'. See *Letters*, I, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Blair, p.357.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*, pp.363-364.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Low, p.69.

<sup>45</sup> Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 3 vols (London & Edinburgh: A. Millar and others, 1762; repr. Hildesheim & New York: George Olms, 1970), II, 215f.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Low, pp.69-70.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*, p.70.

<sup>48</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*', in *Poetical Works*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson, rev. edn, rev. by Ernest De Selincourt (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.734-741 (p.737).

<sup>49</sup> Henry Mackenzie, quoted in Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.16.

<sup>50</sup> *Letters*, I, 17.

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<sup>51</sup> *Poetical Works*, I, xci.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in David Daiches, 'Robert Burns: The Tightrope Walker', in *Love and Liberty*, pp.18–31 (p.19).

<sup>53</sup> 'Sir, I have liv'd a Courtier all my Days / And Study'd Men, their Manners, and their Ways; / And have observ'd this useful Maxim still, / To let my Betters always have their Will' (ll.156–59). From *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. by John Butt (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p.80.

<sup>54</sup> Douglas Gifford et al (eds.), *Scottish Literature in English and Scots* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp.149–50.

Robert Burns â€“ Scottish Genius. January 20, 2016 By Greg Murray Leave a Comment.Â Every year, on the 25th of January, Scots the world over gather in celebration of our national poet, Robert Burns, and dinners are hosted from Moscow to Miami, Aberdeen to Auckland to honour this, our most prodigal of sons.Â Robert Burns was a genius, lets make no mistake; but he was not the first, nor will he be the last, but across the globe no-one sits down to celebrate a Mozart Dinner or a Shakespeare Evening, so it seems that Burnsâ€™ fame has a deeper reasoning.Â Over the course of the 18th century Scotland exported hundreds of thousands to America, Canada, Australia, and across the British Empire; and where these people went they took Scotland with them.