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Lice, Mice, Bumclocks, Grubs: The Challenge of Regional Language and the Legacy of Robert Burns

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Burns's preface to the Kilmarnock edition emphasised that his *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* had been composed 'amid the toils and fatigues of a laborious life' and begged readers, accordingly, to 'make every allowance' for his humble 'Education and Circumstances of Life'.[1] It is not surprising, then, that the early responses to Burns's work were conditioned by thoughts of agricultural labour and cultural limitation.

The brief notice in the *New Annual Register* struck the keynote when it observed that Burns's *Poems* were 'the productions of a man in a low station of life', for the *Monthly Review* ran a piece that dwelt on Burns's situation, 'born in a low station, and following laborious employment', while the *Critical Review* began with general recollections of 'poetical productions written by persons in the lower ranks of life'.[2] As Donald Low, whose own name may have sensitised him to this recurrent feature of the early critical reception, observed, 'the subject most often under discussion was not a body of poetry but a socio-literary phenomenon'.[3] Once Henry Mackenzie had published his famous review in *The Lounger*, 'Burns' became virtually synonymous with 'ploughman', while his literary brilliance was attributed, ironically enough, not to his own careful labour but to Heaven.

The powerful image of the ploughman poet, prompted by the full titles of poems such as 'To a Mouse, on turning her up in her Nest with the Plough, November 1785' or 'To a Mountain-Daisy, on turning one down, with the Plough, in April 1786' did much to determine attitudes to Burns's language. To many, the use of Scots seemed both a natural aspect of his low birth and an obstacle to those unfamiliar with rural Scotland. James Anderson, for example, regretted that the poems had been composed in what would be, for many readers, 'an unknown tongue', and thought that their constant reference to the 'life, opinions, and ideas of the people in a remote corner of the country' rendered them obscure to those from anywhere else.[4] Even William Cowper, one of the first English readers to recognise Burns's innate genius, was still troubled by

the use of Scots, observing that in order to achieve even greater success, Burns needed to 'divest himself of barbarism and content himself with writing pure English'.[5] Cowper's logic is clear – Burns's origins 'in the lower rank of life' were irrelevant, since his genius needed no special pleading. Why, then, did he persist in using the language of the farmyard? 'Barbarism' was only one stage above 'savagery', according to eighteenth-century assumptions about the advance of civilisation[6], so Burns, whose refined sensibility was abundantly apparent in his work, should surely be striving for correct English compositions?

Behind most of the early reviews lay an assumed equation between low social rank and an inability to compose in pure English. That a poet of Burns's ability might actually *choose* to write in Scots for particular literary purposes seems to have occurred to no one. Nor is this surprising, given that, in 1786, the drive to standardise language, adopt correct grammar and purge Scottish publications of 'Scotticisms' had been underway for thirty years.[7] Although the 1780s saw a growing interest in colloquial or 'vulgar' language, the antiquarian impetus behind such collections only reinforced the assumption that no contemporary writer would employ traditional, provincial language for serious modern poetry.[8] Poems such as 'Halloween' played directly into the increasingly widespread association between rural life, outmoded beliefs and dialect, so even though Burns's poem also had a freshness and immediacy quite unlike a museum piece, its pseudo-antiquarian notes and introductory emphasis on the 'remains' of an ancient culture worked against any idea of literary experimentation (K, 73, I, 152). If Scots was coming to be seen as the language of a vanishing way of life, or even as a connection to 'Human-nature in its rude state', Burns's exciting new voice was in danger of seeming doomed to the half-life of costume drama. Paradoxically, Burns's admirers often regarded his poetry as triumphant *in spite of* its language.

Burns was well aware of the contemporary prejudices concerning language, education and literature that would inform the early responses to his work. The 'Epistle to J. L*****k', for example, is especially robust in its attitude to the 'Critic-folk', who might cock their nose at a simple bard, and proclaims the superiority of 'nature's fire' over the laborious attainment of Latin or Greek (K, 57, I, 87). The use of Scots is essential to the verse epistle's disdain for the emasculated university students who '*gang in* Stirks, and *come out* Asses', in their misguided attempts to climb Parnassus. Despite the declared preference for 'ae spark o' Nature's fire', however, Burns still acknowledged the prevailing admiration for pure English by emphasising the inevitable obscurity of the rural bard. The conscious projection of the poet in his russet coat, content to rove among the busy ploughs rather than hope for 'Laurel-boughs', which can be found in poems such as 'To J. S****' (K, 70, I, 180), emphasises the difficulty of finding approval for poetry in Scots among the critical circles of Edinburgh. In his very assertion of obscurity, however, Burns was declaring his independence from contemporary critical convention. If a poet

were not aiming for public accolades, then failure to find favour could have little effect. Burns made plain in 'The Vision' that the wreaths that mattered most were those bestowed by his local Muse, which rendered the opinions of self-appointed judges in Edinburgh or London largely irrelevant. Though somewhat disingenuous, perhaps, it was a startling stance for an avowedly low-born poet to assume in his first publication and one that posed a powerful challenge to the received wisdom about correct English and literary decorum. Burns's radicalism was not merely a reflection of contemporary politics, but rather a literary impulse to overturn the conventional hierarchies and establish a new republic of letters where voices of every social sector would be free to speak out.

This essay explores Burns's deft treatment of the late-eighteenth century tendency to associate non-standard English with the lower stations of life, his fascination with images of lowness, and his development of literary strategies that enabled an elevation of the low – or deflation of the high. Such strategies had strong appeal for later poets whose familiar modes of speech remained outside the linguistic domain of Standard English and so Burns's legacy can be seen throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in poems that chose to incorporate 'non-standard' language. Burns, as a self-styled 'dialect' poet and only too aware of others' perceptions of his humble position, demonstrated the huge literary advantages of remaining close to the ground by revealing the unexpected power of 'low' language and by finding significance in the small and conventionally unlovely. As he played with scale and presented the world from a deliberately unelevated angle, Burns showed how poets might use non-standard language to reveal new dimensions in the familiar world. His use of dialect was anything but an exercise in nostalgia.

Lice, mice, bumclocks, grubs

Burns, whose example inspired countless later writers to believe in their own value irrespective of social position, was persistently drawn to the apparently unremarkable. In poems that insistently recalled the spoken word, addressed to mice, daisies or dead sheep, he focussed on everyday objects in order to overturn entrenched opinions and force his readers to reassess their assumptions about the world. The best example of this strategy is 'To a Louse, On Seeing One on a Lady's Bonnet in Church', because it is difficult to think of a less obvious subject for a poem, especially in a period when the rural muse still generally seemed to inspire thoughts of nymphs and swains with unlikely neoclassical names. Burns's awareness of contemporary tastes is abundantly evident from the opening stanzas, which play on the horror provoked in sensitive bosoms by the thought of a louse:

> Ye ugly, creepan, blastet wonner,
> Detested, shunn'd, by saunt an' sinner
> (K, 83, I, 193)

Squeamishness about parasites is by no means a bi-product of the modern obsession with hygiene, judging from the tone adopted in standard Natural Histories of the eighteenth century. Goldsmith, for example, in *Animated Nature*, began his chapter on the louse with a survey of human phobias, which built up to an apparently universal revulsion for the humble louse:

> The antipathies of man are various; some considering the toad, some the serpent, some the spider, and some the beetle, with a strong degree of detestation; but while all wonder at the strangeness of each other's aversions, they all seem to unite in their dislike to the louse, and regard it as their natural and most nauseous enemy.[9]

If anything, insects were viewed with even more distaste in the eighteenth century than today, as Keith Thomas found when researching his history of human attitudes to the natural world: 'reptiles, insects and amphibians were especially detested, though the reasons for this loathing were seldom clearly articulated'.[10] According to anthropologists, deep suspicion was provoked by the anomalous state of certain creatures, which moved 'ambiguously' between earth, water and air, laying eggs and possessing too many or too few legs.[11] Insects were at once unlovely and uncontainable. The old Chain of Being, which ordered creatures from highest kinds to lowest had largely relegated the most unappealing insects to the bottom rungs of existence and while Linnean classifications contributed to the general shift in man's assumed dominion of the earth during the eighteenth century, the dislike of insects and especially the louse seemed entrenched. Even Buffon, generally distinguished by his seriousness and objectivity, quickly betrayed the influence of more popular prejudices when it came to describing the louse: 'in examining the human louse with a microscope, its external deformity first strikes us with disgust'.[12] What emerges from the Natural Histories is an underlying fear of infestation. As Buffon dwelled on the louse, he commented, 'there is scarcely any animal that multiplies so fast as this unwelcome intruder… a louse becomes a grandfather in the space of twenty-four hours'.[13] He even recalled that Linneaus had introduced a louse into his garden in order to observe its behaviour only to discover that, within a few weeks, every garden in the city had been overrun with lice. Natural histories were offering a kind of micro-sublime, staggering their readers with visions of modern man being overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of tiny, sucking insects.

For Goldsmith, the louse represented the most odious enemy of man, because it preyed on those already suffering: 'wherever wretchedness, disease, or hunger seize upon him, the louse seldom fails to add itself to the tribe, and to increase in proportion to the number of his calamities'.[14]

Goldsmith presented the lice almost in terms of a Biblical scourge, erupting out of nowhere to afflict helpless humanity. His well-meant horror nevertheless reveals a further widespread association – for the louse was not only deemed disgusting, but also most virulent among the poor. By 1785, when Burns composed 'To a Louse', his subject had become almost symbolic of wealthy aversion to the poor after the well-publicised explosion of George III, on finding a louse on his plate. The king's anger led first to an order that all his servants should have their heads shaved and subsequently to a host of satirical responses, most notably by John Wolcot, whose mock-heroic *The Lousiad* appeared in 1785 and was a runaway success.[15] Deep-rooted human anxieties and contemporary class prejudices combined to provide a powerful context for Burns's poem: evidently, his choice of topic was every bit as audacious as the little insect in his poem.

In 'To a Louse', the speaker's indignant rebuke clearly reflects contemporary assumptions about the natural habitats of lice:

> How daur ye set your fit upon her,
> Sae fine a *Lady*!
> Gae somewhere else and seek your dinner
> On some poor body. (7-12)

What can this louse be doing, daring to approach a fine lady, when he should be confined to the bodies of the poor and unwashed? Here are all the contemporary fears of infestation, predation, disorderliness, ugliness, poverty and indifference to rank, condensed into a matter of lines. The little louse is breaking proper bounds, usurping an environment that properly belongs to another species, refusing, in fact, to take any notice of the social norms of his day. The poem's comedy relies on the widespread revulsion towards lice, but almost at once, the use of the direct address prompts an unexpected strain of admiration for the insect. As the poem unfolds, the speaker's obvious relish in the louse's progress through the elaborate bonnet, with its lace and ribbons, reveals the compelling appeal of a creature so untroubled by human constructions of rank. It may be ugly and appalling, but it is also wonderful.

From the very first stanza, the alternative perspective encouraged by the behaviour of the louse is apparent, as the speaker, observing the way it struts rarely 'Owre gauze and lace', comments, 'faith, I fear ye dine but sparely, / On sic a place'. This is the same voice that could express such ready sympathy for the plight of birds in winter ('A' day they fare but sparely' (K 200, I, 389) and which startles the reader into sharing the louse's perspective on the situation. For a hungry blood-sucking insect, fine trimmings cannot offer much satisfaction. While the idea of the louse working its way to a more satisfying dinner underneath the bonnet is decidedly unappealing, by the end of

the poem the self-deluding vanity of wealth and beauty seems rather less attractive than the little insect which merely follows its natural instincts.

Despite this striking inversion of conventional attitudes, the poem still manages to avoid either the puritanical condemnation of human vanity or the heavy satire on luxury, which were both prevalent in eighteenth-century culture and so often masks for misogyny. Burns's poem is much lighter in touch than many contemporary conduct manuals, sermons or indeed, satires, which routinely castigated young women for their love of frills and finery.[16] Though somewhat Swiftian in its fascination with ideas of high and low, tiny and outsized, the humour in 'To a Louse' is marked by its inclusiveness, especially in the stanza where the moral is made obvious:

> O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
> *To see oursels as others see us!*
> It wad frae monie a blunder free us
> An' foolish notion:
> What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us
> And ev'n Devotion! (43-8)

If readers were expecting an accusatory finger to be pointed at the kind of young ladies who are more interested in their appearance than their souls, what they found instead was a wry comment on human behaviour, which included the reader and the speaker as well as the Lady in the poem. 'To a Louse' had, after all, been gently mocking the speaker throughout, by revealing that his attention was not on the sermon but rather on the pretty young woman in front of him – and hence, perhaps, its appeal to female readers from the earliest days. Dorothy Wordsworth, for example, who read the Kilmarnock edition soon after its publication, singled out 'To a Louse' for special commendation, when enthusing over the volume to her friend, Jane Pollard.[17] The poem may begin with an act of observation, but the speaker also has an internal spectator, of whom Adam Smith would approve, and thus recognises his own shortcomings rather than condemning those of others.[18] Seeing ourselves as others see us is also a means of removing motes from our own eyes, and therefore not such an inappropriate prayer to offer during a church service, whether or not it was prompted by the text for the day.

In 'To a Louse', Burns's admiration for the louse's ability to get beneath the coverings of the rich and expose essential truths about humanity finds perfect expression in his energetic deployment of Scots. Colloquial language, in his skilled hands, was a means to cut through the blinds of social convention and reveal the world as it really was, rather than as it sometimes pretended to be. Just as the louse homed in on what really mattered, irrespective of layers of finery, so the self-styled 'dialect' poet was able to transform abstract ideas into living human situations. His

allusion to Adam Smith is a translation of moral philosophy into the everyday world, in terms that not only made Smith's ideas accessible to everyone – but also far more memorable. Burns's poem seems free to draw on modern philosophy, Christian doctrine and wry first-hand observation of life, but the different elements fuse successfully because it also recreates the tone, rhythm and language of everyday speech.

Burns's levelling humour in 'To a Louse', as in his volume as a whole, works to bring everyone together. Though often directed satirically at those who assume superiority over their fellow men, its sole purpose is not to debunk the rich, as is clear in the poem that preceded 'To a Louse' in the Kilmarnock edition, 'A Dedication to G**** H******** Esq'. In this poem, the wealthy Hamilton is projected imaginatively into the grip of 'That iron-hearted Carl, *Want*', but only as a condition for the poet to pledge his lasting devotion, irrespective of personal advantage:

> If friendless, low, we meet together,
> Then, Sir, your hand – my FRIEND and BROTHER.
> (K 103, I, 246)

Burns was pointing out that if Hamilton's good fortune should ever fail, the unhappy turn of events would actually enable him to see those around him more clearly – in other words, that the low perspective is the truer, more reliable one. Burns was expressing his affection for Hamilton as a friend rather than a patron, but as he did so, he emphasised the ultimate superiority of an unelevated situation. At the same time, his self-deprecating humour which presents Hamilton being made 'as poor a dog as I am' (124), precluded any hint of pious poverty or satisfied envy in the prospect of the rich man's descent.

As often in the Kilmarnock volume, an apparently simple turn of phrase works to connect different poems and so the idea of being 'as poor a dog' as the poet recalls 'The Twa Dogs', with its pet's-eye view of the social divide. From the very beginning of the volume, Burns had offered a fresh perspective on life by adopting a vantage point close to the earth. Without resorting to the satiric contrivances of Voltaire or Goldsmith, who imported fictional foreigners to comment on contemporary European manners, Burns achieved a surprising defamiliarisation through the use of the local and familiar.[19] He had an immediate model in Robert Fergusson's 'Mutual Complaint of Plainstanes and Causey', but was also drawing on first-hand, habitual observation of canine behaviour to create a comically convincing presentation of the view from the ground. The dogs' surprise at human arrangements is so plausible that it encourages readers to reconsider things that might otherwise go unquestioned. The Newfoundland's comment on his master's habit of feeding his dogs better than his tenants, for example, is strikingly matter-of-fact:

Our *Whipper-in*, wee, blastiet wonner,
Poor, worthless elf, it eats a dinner,
Better than ony *Tenant-man* (K 71, I, 139)[20]

This deadpan conversation between the dogs is far more effective as social comment than a strident denunciation of social injustice, because its comedy is disarming rather than aggressive. A wealthy reader could hardly be offended by a dog's view of the world, but might well be engaged by its witty couplets.

'The Twa Dogs' stands as an appropriate introduction to *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, and finds an echo not only in the 'poor dog' of 'To Gavin Hamilton', but also in the poem that follows. The rhyme of 'wonner' and 'dinner', which appears in the first stanza of 'To a Louse', is a clear recollection of 'The Twa Dogs' and thus reinforces the reader's association between lice and poverty. Unlike some of the natural historians of his day, however, Burns considers the connection with a characteristic blend of profound sympathy and a sense of the absurd. In the Kilmarnock edition, Burns created speakers with a capacity to laugh and sympathise at the same time, a feature crucial to his treatment of the conventionally lowly. Rather than looking down on his subject matter, the inclusive tone transformed the most unlikely objects into something vital and often admirable. His use of the address – 'To a Louse', 'To a Mouse', 'Epistle to Davie, a Brother Poet', 'Guid-Mornin to your Majesty!' – suggests equality, whether the recipient is someone who might normally be deemed higher or lower. Almost everything that is addressed in the collection seems 'as poor a dog as' the poet, a refreshingly egalitarian approach that helped ensure Burns's appeal for later writers whose language might be deemed, in some quarters, incorrect.

Crucial to Burns's bringing together of high and low was his use of Scots. In 'The Twa Dogs', nonstandard language seems perfectly natural for canine conversation.

He ca's his coach; he ca's his horse;
He draws a bonie, silken purse
As lang's my *tail*. (K 71, I, 139, 55-7)

Rather than emphasising his distance from the interlocutors, however, the narrator reveals his own kinship with the dogs in vivid, onomatopaeic descriptions:

Wi' social *nose* whyles snuff'd an' snowcket;
Whyles mice and modewurks they howcket. (39-40)

Though apparently worlds apart in language and social sphere, Burns's narration anticipates Austen in its approach to free indirect style, for the speaker's voice becomes so close to that of his canine subjects as to be almost indistinguishable. Though Burns toned down some of the poem's physicality after its initial publication, changing such lines as 'Till tired at last with mony a farce / They sat them down upon their arse' to 'Untill wi' daffin weary grown, / Upon a knowe they sat them down' (43-44), the dogginess of his dogs and the narrator's canine camaraderie remained.

By the end of the poem, the poet himself is figured playfully as a droning bee, his kinship with fellow creatures underlined by the detail of the 'bumclock', a local word for a humming beetle, which helps connect the insect to the weary dogs who had been portrayed sitting down on their arses in the original version of 'The Twa Dogs'. But the dogs have now finished their conversation and it is time to start behaving like dogs again, rather than conforming to the pastoral fantasy of settling down in harmony with their surroundings:

> By this, the sun was out o' sight,
> An' darker gloamin brought the night:
> The *bum-clock* humm'd wi' lazy drone,
> The kye stood rowtan i' the loan;
> When up they gat, an' shook their lugs,
> Rejoic'd they were na *men* but *dogs*;
> An' each took off his several way,
> Resolv'd to meet some ither day. (231-8)

Burns had chosen to introduce his volume with a poem that at once recalled and resisted eighteenth-century polite traditions of rural representation. The dogs shaking their lugs is reminiscent of eighteenth-century imitations of Milton, whose uncouth swain concluded his elegy by twitching his mantle and heading for fresh woods and pastures new, but in echoing 'Lycidas', Burns was also pointing to the artificiality of much neoclassical pastoral[21]. His own collection, with its tributes to Poor Mailie, made the author's familiarity with real sheep very plain, but the challenge to contemporary notions of pastoral is obvious from the opening poem. Both Gray's 'Elegy, written in a Country Churchyard' and Collins's 'Ode to Evening' are recalled humorously in the closing lines of 'The Twa Dogs', their familiar details naturalised by the use of Scots, which re-energises the cattle from a quietly 'lowing herd' to 'rowtan' kye on their way down the 'loan' or farm track, presumably on their way to being milked. Similarly, Collins's beetle who 'winds / His small but sullen horn' in the twilight has become a humming 'bumclock', whose 'drone' has an additional meaning in Scots that continues the joke on bums and arses. Unlike Gray's meditation on the 'rude forefathers', or Collins's delicate personification of Evening, there is no sense in 'The

Twa Dogs' of lofty distance – Burns's carefully chosen words create a kinship between speaker and subjects, and in doing so, include the reader. Like the anomalous insects that troubled admirers of well-ordered hierarchies of being, Burns's language had the capacity to move between different levels of existence, often infusing the now over-used diction of polite poetry with a new energy drawn from more earthy sources.

As he invited his readers to view the world from unfamiliar perspectives, Burns often achieved the most startling effects through his careful choice of vocabulary. His ability to combine dialect words with Scots, English and Latinate language gave his poetry a flexibility and range that facilitated unexpected juxtapositions, elevations and deflations. 'To a Louse' was the twenty-sixth poem in the Kilmarnock edition, so by the time the reader encountered it, Scots was already firmly established as the natural voice of a poet who had been carefully constructed through the preceding sequence. In 'To a Louse', it is therefore the most obviously *unScottish* words that stand out as somehow odd and out of place. The crucial stanza is the sixth, where the louse is once again called on to explain its choice of food:

> But Miss's fine *Lunardi*, fye!
> How daur ye do't? (35-6)

Lunardi is the only word in the poem, other than the Scots vocabulary, for which English readers require a gloss – and it leaps from the page.

The Lunardi, as most modern editors note, was a kind of bonnet named after the Italian diplomat and pioneering balloonist, Vincenzo Lunardi, who had made a number of flights in Scotland in 1785. Burns could hardly have chosen a better detail for his social comedy, in which those who consider themselves somewhat loftier than others are brought firmly back down to earth. Not only was the Lunardi the height of fashion in 1785 when the poem was composed (and therefore calculated to surprise any readers who might consider rural Ayrshire rather remote from *le beau monde*), but it also combined two of the major preoccupations of the day – balloons and extravagant headgear. Both of these fashionable creations had become common images in the satirical discourse of the 1780s, inspiring numerous prints featuring grotesquely exaggerated hats and hairstyles, and startling ascents from the ground. By the 1790s, women's hats returned to more modest proportions, because the huge aristocratic bonnets of the 80s seemed less attractive in the revolutionary decade that followed – so Burns was ahead of his time, in his deflation of the fashionable Lunardi. Instead of using the extravagant foreign accessory as a way to attack its young owner, however, Burns refers to the Lunardi in the same matter-of-fact tone that Caesar uses to describe his master's lifestyle choices, and so the surprise belongs to the reader, not the poem's speaker. As soon as the Italian import appears in the poem, however, the

distance between the speaker and the Lady is bridged, for she ceases to be remote – 'Sae fine a Lady' – and instead is addressed directly and affectionately – 'O *Jenny*, dinna toss your head, / An set your beauties a' abread!' (37-8). As the poem reaches its conclusion, any distinctions in rank have dissolved and the Lady's pretensions have been punctured. But in the process, Jenny, no longer an object, has become a woman with a name and personality, while the poem shares its joke on human absurdity with everyone.

'To a Louse' demonstrates the victory of the low and unassuming, but in keeping with its levelling purpose, it avoids unnecessary triumphalism and ends by transforming a potential target into a friend. Burns may have drawn on the satirical traditions of the eighteenth century, but his humour was generally more forgiving, since he constantly drew attention to his own shortcomings. At the same time, the jokes against himself have none of the self-loathing sometimes apparent in Swift's harsh concluding satires on the satirist. Indeed, his frequent reminders of the frailties common to mankind, most obvious in 'A Bard's Epitaph', with its grave and grubs, make the poet persona too sympathetic a voice to resist. The colloquial language, mixing with the more polite register, enhances the reader's sense of intimacy with the poet, who has been 'laid low': in sharing his familiar phrases, we enter his being, flawed and mortal as our own. Burns's poetry is all-embracing but where 'To a Louse' emphasised the universal comedy of the human condition, 'A Bard's Epitaph' confronts a more melancholy truth.

Burns's legacy

Efforts to trace Burns's legacy in the nineteenth century often focus more on the 'Scottish' element of his collection than on the notion of 'Dialect', but Burns's clever inversions of low and high, which were at once linguistic, formal and dramatic, offered vital inspiration to numerous aspiring writers, conscious of their own situations in a 'low station of life', on both sides of the Scottish Border.[22] Far from seeming a medium exclusive to readers in rural Scotland, Burns's choice of language provided a sense of possibility to anyone who felt more at home among the non-standard and regional. One of the many poets to draw strength from Burns, for example, was Samuel Laycock, who worked in the heavily industrialised Lancashire mill-towns and began to publish poems during the Cotton Famine of the 1860s. Despite the dire economic distress of his community, his poems sold in thousands, obviously fulfilling a profound social need. Many of Laycock's poems follow patterns established in the Kilmarnock edition, addressing other local bards, such as Edwin Waugh or Samuel Bamford in an attempt to construct a band of rhyming brothers to match those of the master. Laycock followed Burns in expressing his preference for a local audience, which he emphasised directly in poems such as 'The Cricket' and indirectly in all his publications, through his use of Lancashire dialect.[23] Although Lancashire offered a less extensive vocabulary than Scots, the insistent representation of local pronunciation through the

spelling of his published poems instantly mark Laycock's poems out from Standard English poetry of the period and underline his northern attachments. Like Burns, if rather less skilfully, Laycock expressed the same deep sympathy with the poor and the hungry, using his language to assert his own authority. In poem after poem, Laycock's simple sentiments and carefully chosen Lancashire phrases demonstrate his first-hand knowledge of the people he described and addressed. If some poetry readers of the 1860s considered mill-workers beneath their notice, Laycock's poetry made plain that it was those outside industrial Oldham and Manchester who seemed unimportant to him.

Although Laycock's editor, George Milner, believed that Burns's influence was 'general rather than specific', some of the poems demonstrate a similar use of dialect as a means to challenge class divisions.[24] 'Thee and Me', for example, owes much to Burns's dialogues and epistles in its use of an obviously regionally-accented speaker exposing the shortcomings of the rich. It also continues the levelling strategies of both 'To a Louse' and 'A Bard's Epitaph' in its emphasis on the physical facts of human existence. Like the final poem in Burns's collection, 'Thee and Me' recognised that not only the poor speaker and the landowner, but also the poet and the reader would eventually be laid equally low; the tone of Laycock's poem, however, owes more to 'To a Louse'. For if Burns's louse could find nothing of value in the lacy Lunardi bonnet, so the worms in Laycock's poem are used to expose the ultimate emptiness of material possessions, on the death of the rich man:

> But deawn i'th'grave, what spoils o th' sport,
> No ray o' leet con shoine;
> An' th' worms'll have hard wark to sort
> Thy pampered clay fro' mine.[25]

Laycock's worms are no more respectful of social distinction than Burns's louse and, in its black humour, the poem posed a challenge to conventional notions of rank and power by exposing the superficiality of worldly possessions. 'Thee and Me', inspired by Burns's example, used its Lancashire accents to examine the difference between rich and poor, advising Mr Jones to 'Pack up thi albert, hoop, an' pin, / An' opera-glass an' o' before his burial, so that there would be more chance of the worms recognising his superiority. Empowered by his reading of Burns, Laycock employed dialect unapologetically to drive home its point, though as so often in *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, the final note is forgiving and conciliatory rather than contemptuous. In 'Thee and me', dialect not only levels human difference, but as in 'To a Louse', eventually directs attention on high, where 'up above, ther's One 'at sees / Thro' th' heart o' every mon', for the poem ends not with an image of both rich and poor laid low, but of ultimate friendship, 'Bi shakin' honds I' heaven!'

Dialect was crucial to Laycock's emphasis on the ultimate equality of all human clay, even as his poem acknowledged that the barrier between the two nations of rich and poor were often signalled by their distinct accents. In his insistent use of local language, Laycock refused the kind of social aspiration so often promoted by his contemporaries, celebrating rather than denigrating the world into which he had been born. In his use of dialect, he set his face against the poetic norms of his day, preferring to find favour among the ordinary northern people than in the columns of critical journals. His massive contemporary popularity still poses a challenge to academic notions about what constitutes a good poem, for he evidently delighted those living and working in industrial Lancashire, even though his work has failed to find a place in modern anthologies of Victorian poetry. The gulf between the dialect poet and the 'Critick folk' which Burns had admitted in his 'Epistle to Lapraik' was nowhere more apparent than in the case of his Lancashire follower, Samuel Laycock, and the difficulty of approaching these poems *as poems* rather than as evidence of a 'socio-literary phenomenon' is salutary. Not only does it raise questions about aesthetic and formal judgments, but it also turns us back to Burns and the desire among his modern admirers to praise his poems for their ability to transcend their original audience and location.

Laycock's ability to unsettle modern readers is abundantly evident in the work of Simon Armitage, who grew up in Marsden, the Pennine village in which Laycock was born. Armitage has written a poetic response to Laycock, but in his own version of 'Thee and Me', with its additional pairing of the two poets as well as the rich and poor men of the original – 'The Two of Us (*after Laycock*)' – he avoids Laycock's distinctive contractions and dialect spellings, relying instead on colloquial phrasing: 'You sat sitting in your country seat', 'Me stewing turnips, beet, one spud'. In the last stanza, however, where he revisits Laycock's list of the wealthy possessions with a bravura catalogue of modern consumer items ('Opera glasses, fob-watch, fountain-pen, a case of fishing flies, / a silver name-tag necklace full-stopped with a precious stone / a pair of one pound coins to plug the eyes…'), Armitage still employs Yorkshire dialect with great economy – and power. For after advising the rich man to make sure that he is buried with an appropriate selection of worldly goods (in contrast to the poet, who will be laid out in whatever he happens to be wearing), he observes:

> That way, on the day they dig us out
> They'll know that you were something really fucking fine
> and I was nowt.
> Keep that in mind,
>
> because the worm won't know your make of bone from mine.[26]

The word 'nowt' demolishes the great pile of status symbols with simple force. It is a very knowing use of dialect, in a poem that reflects on the differences and continuities between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as on rank and language, and recognises the undiminished power of the non-standard to surprise and discomfort. ‘Nowt’ is the linguistic equivalent of the worm, which Armitage inherits from Laycock, and ultimately from Burns, – the tiny, but at the same time, great leveller, capable of bringing down an enormous pile of empty extravagance.

While ‘The Two of Us’ acknowledges the power of dialect words, it also works to bring Laycock within the pale of acceptable, standard English – a deadly deracination for the dialect poet, which suggests that Armitage's homage to Laycock is somewhat double-edged. As Armitage admitted in a drily self-mocking account in *All Points North*, local pride in Laycock, which is symbolised by a statue in the centre of Marsden, has always been a cause of considerable irritation, not least because his own reception, though critically favourable, has never given rise to the phenomenal sales figures achieved by the nineteenth-century dialect poet. Laycock may seem an unlikely candidate as a strong poetic predecessor, but his popularity has led to a localised anxiety of influence, prompting Armitage to observe that: 'There's only room for one poet in a village the size of Marsden, which makes Laycock someone to move past or knock over'.[27] Effective demolition involves taking Laycock's poems and translating them 'from whatever version of English he wrote in to whatever version of English you practice yourself', which renders 'The Two of Us' less like a tribute and more like an expulsion, because it removes Laycock's essential ties to Marsden. Ironically, the dialect that Laycock, following Burns, had used to level the rich masters in the Victorian mills, became a means to his own elevation – and hence to subsequent demolition by his poetic heir.

Although Armitage’s response to Laycock is clearly tongue-in-cheek, his rewriting of ‘Thee and Me’ does reflect a modern poet's awareness of the difficulties of presenting regional pronunciation on the page. In the case of Laycock, the problem is partly owing to the somewhat clumsy orthography, which impedes reading by demanding a kind of mental ventriloquism. Armitage’s own economical use of northern speech-forms, however, indicates his own awareness that the choice of non-standard English by a well-read writer can attract charges of sentimentality or truculence. Modern uses of dialect can only too easily appear calculated or nostalgic, and if regarded as an affectation, non-standard language loses its power to cut through social pretension and reveal essential truths. Seamus Heaney shows an acute modern consciousness of this dilemma in a sonnet recalling his mother's fear of the 'affectation' she associated with 'Pronouncing words "beyond her"'.[28] Her refusal to acknowledge her own intelligence is matched by her son’s conspiratorial denial of his own educated tongue, which he governs accordingly:

I'd *naw* and *aye*
And decently relapse into the wrong
Grammar which kept us allied and at bay.

The poet, here, is caught between opposing affectations – the assumption of received pronunciation and the pretence of reverting to childhood language. His rather heavy repetition in the sonnet's first line, 'Fear of affectation made her affect / Inadequacy', emphasises that beneath the wordplay lies a deeply-felt, or affecting, dillemma.

The self-consciousness about dialect that afflicted eighteenth-century writers took on a new complexion in the twentieth century, when non-standard speech was sometimes seen not as a sign of ignorance but of sentimentality or posturing. In the eyes of Philip Larkin, for example, William Barnes's use of the Dorset dialect was a major obstacle to potential readers, not merely because of the off-putting orthography ('Lwonesome woodlands! Zunny woodlands!'), but also because perpetuating an insistently local, rural medium seemed futile and artificial.[29] Since Barnes was an educated man, his choice of dialect struck Larkin as sentimental and perverse. Unlike Burns's early critics who saw his language as the unfortunate corollary of his low station in life, Larkin responded to Barnes with suspicion, viewing his linguistic games either as a calculated strategy or as a refusal to face up to historical change. It was perhaps the widespread tendency to regard dialect as a hallmark of authenticity that provoked such a response, since accomplished poets are rarely given to condemning fellow writers for careful rhetorical strategies. The notion of dialect being assumed seems even more troubling to some readers than the notion of donning Standard English in the pursuit of linguistic correctness.

In the last decades of the century, however, as Scottish devolution began to dominate the cultural agenda, the use of Scots ceased to smack of the kail-yard and to assume an aura of political urgency. Many highly educated Scottish poets have welcomed both devolution and the opportunity to compose serious poetry in Scots, a development which has, in turn, renewed a sense of national indebtedness to Burns. Robert Crawford's homage to Burns for the 250th anniversary of his birth is an obvious case in point, for in addition to a new biography, boldly entitled *The Bard*, Crawford also compiled an anthology of contemporary poetry, *New Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*. In Crawford's preface, there are no claims about the poems being the work of ploughmen, though the endnotes reveal that most modern Scottish poets have other jobs by which to live. If any allowance is to be asked from the reader for the modern poet's 'Education and Circumstances of Life', then it is more likely to relate to their sense of distance from the land than to their low stations. Crawford's own meditation, 'Waas', presents an image of the poet cut off by walls, whose building went on undetected, which leads to the melancholy conclusion that 'Certie, bit by bit, they've snibbed me aff'.[30] For such a poet, composing in Scots

is obviously a literary decision and the language is used to express aspects of modernity: the skill may be Burnsian, but the subject is not.

The highly educated nature of those who have chosen to write in Scots is evident not just from the biographical notes and their high profiles in Scottish universities, but also from the poems themselves, which include versions of texts by Cavafy, Hölderlin, Li Po, Desnos, and allusions to Shakespeare, Homer or MacDiarmaid. To write a new poem, chiefly in the Scottish dialect, does not entail direct imitation of Burns's familiar works, even though many of his words appear in surprising new contexts. Whether Scots can have the same power to overturn hierarchical structures and prevailing conventions as it had when Burns originally deployed it, is nevertheless open to debate. As a language for literary translation, it clearly poses a challenge to the common practice of rendering foreign literature into English and often succeeds in creating both a sense of intimacy and strangeness. Whether it provides a sense of liberation for the Scottish poet is, however, more doubtful, as Jackie Kay's witty dramatic monologue, 'Maw Broon goes for Colonic Irrigation' suggests. The speaker's feeling of relief in the aftermath of the colonic procedure, 'Aw o' a sudden yer auld body is a hale new nation', has obvious connections to the idea of a free-speaking, devolved Scotland, but it is hard not to read comic irony into a poem whose subtitle reads 'Maw Broon finds a new hobby / Say cheerio to the impacted jobby'.[31]

Elsewhere in the collection, Douglas Dunn's 'English. A Scottish Essay' examines the language question explicitly and at length, but makes plain that the English language belongs to Scottish poets just as much as to those from south of the Border. Dunn rejects the kind of cultural 'Chief Constables' who hype 'a long-deceased / National Bard as the forevermore / "Authentic" measure of the way to write' – in other words, 'the Robert Burns / Syndrome', arguing firmly that his own Muse is '*not a politician*'.[32] Later in the poem, Dunn celebrates the sounds of Scots, issuing from the lips of children growing up under a new Scottish Parliament with no sense of their natural, accented voices being somehow inferior, but his strategy is to evoke the oral language rather than to represent it on the page. Among the ironies addressed in Dunn's thoughtful verse essay is that the use of the Scottish language, which Burns had used so skilfully to challenge received ideas, is in danger of becoming a new kind of imposition, forced on modern poets by prevailing cultural politics. Burns's colloquialisms and local idiom had brought down barriers and invited connections, but in the hands of patriotic modern poets, Scots can be a means to self-definition and therefore, exclusion. While many of the poets in Crawford's anthology demonstrate the rich artistic possibilities of the Scottish language, the celebratory volume also carries its own internal warning signals and shows that the challenges posed by non-standard language, though different in kind, are just as complicated in the twenty-first century as they were in the eighteenth.

NOTES

[1] Robert Burns, Preface to *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmrnaock, 1786), reprinted in James Kinsley (ed.), *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), III, 971. All further references to Burns's work will be from the Kinsley edition, abbreviated as 'K'.

[2] Donald Low (ed.), *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 75, 72, 80.

[3] Ibid, 1.

[4] James Anderson, review in the *Monthly Review*, 85 (1786), in Low (ed.), 72.

[5] To Samuel Rose, 24 July, 1787, in Low (ed.), 91.

[6] For a useful introduction to contemporary theories of human progress, see R. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

[7] Lynda Mugglestone, *'Talking Proper': The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[8] Julie Coleman, *A History of Cant and Slang Dictionaries; Volume II: 1785-1858* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7, 14-16.

[9] Oliver Goldsmith, *A History of the Earth and Animated Nature* (1774), complete in one edition (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1845), 593.

[10] Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 57.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Natural History*, abridged edn., 2 vols (London, 1792), II, 293.

[13] Ibid, II, 294-5.

[14] Goldsmith, 593.

[15] I am indebted to Jon Mee for alerting me to the significance of Wolcot's poem.

[16] See Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 75-108.

[17] To Jane Pollard, Dec. 1787, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Volume One: The Early Years, 1787-1801*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, rev. Chester Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 13.

[18] As Robert Crawford has pointed out, the stanza recalls Adam Smith, 'If we saw ourselves in the light in which others see us, or in which they would see us if they knew all, a reformation would generally be unavoidable', *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns, A Biography* (London: Cape, 2009), 207.

[19] Cf. Voltaire, *l'Ingenue* (1767), Oliver Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World* (1762).

[20] Kinsley identifies the 'whipper-in' as Hugh Andrew, huntsman at Coylfied, Tarbolton (K, III, 107), but these lines, spoken by Caesar, seem more appropriate to the huntsman's dog.

[21] For further discussion of late-eighteenth-century pastoral, see my '"Plain Living and Ungarnish'd Stories": Wordsworth and the Survival of Pastoral', *Review of English Studies* 59.238 (2008), 118-33.

[22] For a recent account of Burns's influence on Scottish autodidacts, see Valentina Bold, *James Hogg: A Bard of Nature's Making* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

[23] Samuel Laycock, *Collected Writings*, ed. George Milner, 2nd edn. (Oldham: Clegg, 1908), xxi.

[24] Ibid, xvi.

[25] *The Collected Writings of Samuel Laycock*, ed, George Milner, 2nd edn (Oldham and London, 1908), 48-50.

[26] 'The Two of Us, (*after Laycock*)', *The Dead Sea Poems* (London, 1995), 33-4.

[27] *All Points North* (London: Viking, 1998), 4.

[28] 'Clearances, 4', *The Haw Lantern* (London, 1987), 28.

[29] 'The Poetry of William Barnes', *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber, 1983), 149-152, 149.

[30] 'Waas', Robert Crawford (ed.), *New Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Polygon: Edinburgh, 2009), 23.

[31] Ibid, 73.

[32] Ibid, 34-5.