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**Robert Burns and James Beattie, Minstrels “of the north countrie.”**

In 1776 and later James Beattie's *An Essay on Poetry and Music* nurtured renewed interest in the age-old controversy concerning the problematic sister arts; and, as a direct consequence, Beattie's essay exercised an important influence upon the writings and public literary career of Robert Burns (1759-1796).<sup>1</sup> At the time Beattie was celebrated not only as the best-selling author of *An Essay on Truth* (1770), which was almost universally acclaimed in the English-speaking world for its demolition of the sceptical arguments of David Hume and others and for the resulting reunion in its pages of philosophical and religious thought, but also as the brilliant new poet whose Spenserian poem, *The Minstrel; or, The Progress of Genius* (1771-1774), was already widely-read and admired.<sup>2</sup> Burns was seventeen years old in 1776 when Beattie was near the height of his fame as a writer; and for the remainder of Burns's career until his death in 1796 Beattie's achievements as a Scotsman who had won popular acclaim and critical esteem as a writer in English served as a role model for Burns's life and work.

Beattie's essay on poetry and music informed its readers of the controversial debate, throughout the eighteenth century, concerning the theory and practice of reuniting the sister arts; but, more important, it marked a significant advance on previous suggestions and claims by discerning a solution to the problem in more recent ideas and trends of thought such as the belief that music is a form of communication and the theory of the association of ideas. The starting point of Beattie's argument is his assessment of the contemptible current relationship between poetry and music:

Is not good music set to bad poetry as unexpressive, and therefore as absurd, as good poetry set to bad music, or as harmonious language

without meaning? Yet the generality of musicians appear to be indifferent in regard to this matter. If the sound of the words be good, or the meaning of particular words agreeable; if there be competency of hills and rills, doves and loves, fountains and mountains, with a tolerable collection of garlands and lambkins, nymphs and cupids, *bergères* and *tortorellas*, they are not solicitous about sense or elegance (*Poetry*, 162-3).

But the musician who believes that "Poetry is the most immediate and most accurate interpreter of music" (161) is set far apart from this "generality of musicians," for when he plays he expresses "pathos, sentiment, and melody, and in a word every gratification that the tuneful art can bestow" (166). In such a performance, music is "improved into an instrument of virtue, as well as of pleasure" (167).

Such fresh, confident statements brought joy and hope to his fellow Scots, Burns and George Thomson, who were both elated, in particular, by Beattie's comments on Scottish pastoral music. As a result, Thomson sought out Beattie's help when he began to gather materials for what eventually became his celebrated collection of Scottish airs and songs. In a letter of September 1792, he asked Beattie not only to supply "manuscript songs suitable to some of our melodies" but also to adapt his "observations on Scottish pastoral music" in his essay as an introduction to the collection.<sup>3</sup> Beattie readily endorsed the project and promised to grant his requests; as a consequence, Thomson was encouraged to continue his work as he had recently been by Burns's enthusiastic response: "I approve greatly of your plans. Dr. Beattie's Essay will of itself be a treasure. On my part I mean to draw up an appendix to the Dr's Essay containing my stock of anecdotes, etc. of our Scotch songs."<sup>4</sup> Beattie's ill-health prevented him from providing the requested introductory essay; but Thomson's *A Select Collection of Original Scotch [sic] Airs for the Voice* (1794) and subsequent editions (1803, 1831) do contain Beattie's song "Could aught of song declare my pain" to the tune of Burns's "Sweet fa's the Eve on Craighieburn." Meanwhile, Burns died without sending the promised "stock of anecdotes" to Thomson; but he did make the much more important contribution of nearly 100 songs to the collection.

The references to Thomson's work in Burns's letters between 1787 and 1793 show not only his great interest in collecting and preserving traditional Scottish songs but also his striking adulation for Beattie as an inspiring authority on such matters. As a consequence, it is perhaps not surprising to discover that Beattie's essay contains many ideas about the union of poetry and music that were realized in practice by Burns. There is Beattie's authoritative statement that Scottish music

arose from the native folk "who actually felt the sentiments and affections whereof it is so very expressive" (*Poetry*, 189) and that it was not an importation from the Continent as was widely believed at the time. One can imagine Burns's nationalistic pride swelling at such a declaration, as well as his enthusiasm over Beattie's insistence upon the virtue of tender feelings in song and his statements about the "wild irregularities" of ancient "fragments" of song (189). But Beattie's belief that music "never appears to the best advantage but with poetry for its interpreter" (129) must have struck Burns as the most important critical statement ever published about the two arts. In any event, the notion of the ability of poetry to interpret music became an informing principle in the composition of Burns's songs.<sup>5</sup>

Beattie's striking comments about poetry and music may be attributed to his own poetic compositions as well as to his performance as a skilled musician and accomplished singer. He often sang and played the violoncello and other stringed instruments at public concerts and family gatherings; and, in addition, he was knowledgeable in the theory and history of music. As poet, singer and musician, then, he brought to bear new ideas and a new perspective upon the problematic disunion of poetry and music; and, in the process, he provided hints of new directions in the matter. Beattie's essay, with its confident tone and assertive statements, became a challenge to Burns to engage his own knowledge and skill as poet, musician and singer in the task of solving the disunion of the two arts. As a consequence, his great triumph in his compositions was built in the image of Beattie's prophetic suggestions for reuniting poetry and music.

But it was as a practising poet that Beattie exercised his most powerful influence on Burns's writings. As the first attempt in English at sustained poetic autobiography, *The Minstrel* provided Burns with a fascinating picture of the figure of the poet in the midst of appropriate settings, characters and themes. In addition, as the record of the poet's own imaginative insights and experiences as expressed by the personality and adventures of a fictional hero, Beattie's poem became for Burns, in many of his compositions, a useful model of the poetic life. But Burns, as a Scotsman, was also well aware that the most distinctive aspects of *The Minstrel* were derived from Beattie's knowledge of the landscape, life and literature of Scotland.<sup>6</sup> It is significant, therefore, that the blending of characteristically Scottish poetic concerns into imitations of English verse, as exemplified in *The Minstrel*, is a central preoccupation of much of Burns's poetry. As a result, Burns's preeminent role as the national bard of Scotland was realized

to some extent by means of his imitation of Beattie's poem in his own poems, as well as by his emulation of some aspects of Beattie's career as a popular Scottish writer.

Beattie and his poem are mentioned several times in Burns's poems and letters; and, on one occasion, in January 1787, Burns even writes about Beattie, among others, as an inaccessible master: "... in a language where ... Thomson and Beattie have painted the landskip ... I am not vain enough to hope for distinguished Poetic fame."<sup>7</sup> Whatever his hopes for poetic fame at the time, Burns did make much use of *The Minstrel* in his compositions; as a result, echoes of the poem, as well as Beattian themes, scenes and characters, are to be found often in his poetry, as has been noted by several nineteenth and twentieth century critics of Burns. And, in her recent book, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era*, Carol McGuirk devotes two pages to her claim that *The Minstrel* "offers some fascinating parallels to Burns's career as a bard."<sup>8</sup> McGuirk's discussion of the likeness between Edwin and Burns as minstrels is at odds to a great extent with all other critics who have noted such similarities; for they have claimed or implied that Beattie had shed a pernicious influence on Burns's English verse and none at all on his Scots compositions.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to such opinions, it is clear, as I shall show, that in his poem, as in his career as a modern minstrel, Beattie provided Burns with an important model of the literary life that has never been properly investigated.<sup>10</sup>

The influence of the Beattian bard upon Burns's career is perhaps best exemplified in the poet's self-dramatizations in his verse epistles. The first *Epistle to John Lapraik, An Old Scottish Bard* (1785) is in some respects, as Thomas Crawford argues, "Burns's poetic manifesto, proclaiming the superiority of inspiration over the learned 'Jargon o' your Schools,' and the relevance (to Burns at least) of the vernacular tradition."<sup>11</sup> Burns presents himself in the poem as an apprentice-poet, like Beattie's minstrel, whose great desire is to learn from the "spark o' Nature's fire" (73);<sup>12</sup> while the high standard of the minstrel's art is set by the quality of the work of "Pope, or Steele/Or Beattie" (21-22). This Beattian propensity towards self-dramatization was so strong in Burns that it led Wordsworth to question "whether there is any individual character in all of Burns' writing except his own."<sup>13</sup> Burns's frequent recollection of images from *The Minstrel* to describe aspects of his own poetic life indicates his fascination with the Beattian life of a bard; as a result, Beattie's "malignant star" (I, i, 4), which bedevils the poetic soul, is mentioned often in Burns's early letters to signify the hardships of his own life, while Beattie's plea to

“know thine own worth, and reverence the lyre” (I, vii, 5) proved to be a prescient premonition of Burns’s career as a poet:

let thy heaven-taught<sup>14</sup> soul to heaven aspire  
To fancy, freedom, harmony resigned;  
Ambition’s grovelling crew for ever left behind (I, vii, 7-9).

In this way, Burns’s career as the “heaven-taught ploughman” followed closely the poetic life and training of Beattie’s gifted but “poor villager” (I, iv, 2); and, in addition, Burns took the idea of Coila, his muse of Scotland, from Beattie’s *To Mr. Alexander Ross*, his only poem in the Scots vernacular.<sup>15</sup>

The prominent role played by Coila in *The Vision* (1786) illustrates clearly Burns’s dependence upon Beattie for his picture of the inspired bard of nature. The first duan or section of the poem (1-132) sets the stage for Coila’s speech which constitutes the second duan (133-271); the Beattian setting of the opening duan in “many a wild romantic grove,/ Near many a hermit-fancied cove” (115-6) prepares the reader for the dignified English verse of Coila’s oration in the second duan which relies to some extent upon references to Beattie’s work to authenticate the inspirational vision of the muse:

Hence sweet harmonious Beattie sung  
His Minstrel lays,  
Or tore, with noble ardour stung,  
The sceptic’s bays (171-4).

In this way, Burns acknowledges a debt to Beattie that is greater than the mere borrowing of the designation of Coila; and, in addition, verbal echoes of *The Minstrel* underscore the implied likeness between the Beattian bard and Burns himself. When Coila says that she saw the poet “seek the sounding shore” (21), the recollection in the image of Edwin “musing onward to the sounding shore” (I, liv, 1) associates Burns with Beattie’s “lone enthusiast” in the next line; similarly, Coila speaks of Burns as a “rustic Bard” (264) and places him in the midst of Beattian landscapes and activities:

‘When ripen’d fields and azure skies  
Call’d forth the reapers’ rustling noise,  
I saw thee leave their ev’ning joys,  
And lonely stalk,  
To vent thy bosom’s swelling rise  
In pensive walk (223-8).<sup>16</sup>

Burns’s poetic concept of nature in such passages seems to be an adaptation of Beattie’s presentation of the poet’s education by nature.

as it exerts an imaginative and moral influence upon his maturing mind and poetic sensibility. The following stanzas from *To William Simpson of Ochiltree, May 1785* contain a description of a natural scene which is presented primarily for its own sake; as such it is very much like Beattie's use of poetic pictures of the real world as appropriate settings for his minstrel's pensive moods and dreamy self-indulgences:

O, sweet are Coila's haughs and' woods,  
 When lintwhites chant amang the buds,  
 And jinkin' hares, in amorous whids,  
     Their loves enjoy,  
 While thro' the braes the cushat croods  
 Wi' wailfu' cry!

Ev'n winter bleak has charms to me  
 When winds rave thro' the naked tree;  
 Or frost on hills of Ochiltree  
     Are hoary gray;  
 Or blinding drifts wild-furious flee,  
 Dark'ning the day! (66-78).

As Beattie claims in *The Minstrel*, "These charms shall work [the] poetic soul's eternal health" (I, x, 1); and Burns, even if he were remembering also Beattie's warning concerning the destructive dangers of "Imagination's lawless rage" (II, xiv,3) to a poet's mind, persists in writing self-dramatizations in his epistles which imitate the Beattian presentation of the poet's pilgrimage over landscapes that symbolize his quest as an essential feature of the poetical character. Burns knew that Beattie had taken his hints for such poetic concepts largely from the Scottish literary tradition; and he admired his skilfull blending of them into his adaptation of the Spenserian mode. By imitating such aspects of *The Minstrel*, Burns, in his turn, was helped to some extent to become a dedicated Scottish poet as he learned, in particular, to alternate between the English language and Scots in his poetry and songs.

Such similarities indicate that Burns may have thought of himself as a kind of Beattian minstrel whose poems and songs were intended to be a light unto his countrymen; as such Burns's writings comprise an admirable completion of Beattie's presentation of the life of a bard. In addition to the many references to and echoes of *The Minstrel* in Burns's poems and letters, his enduring delight in the poem is seen, in particular, by his gift of Beattie's poems to Miss Logan on 1 January 1787 and in the inscription which he wrote inside the book: "I send you

more than India boasts, / In Edwin's simple tale."<sup>17</sup> Burns admired *The Minstrel* as an English poem; but he was also uniquely qualified by his knowledge of Scottish landscape, literature and life to recognize the disguised but distinctly Scottish elements in Beattie's poem. But *The Minstrel* contains no hint of the Scottish vernacular which Burns was to use to express the fullness of his own poetic vision. On the one occasion when Beattie tried his hand at "the broad Scots dialect" in *To Mr. Alexander Ross*, he discovered not only that it was surprisingly easy to write but also that he had "exhausted [his] whole stock of Scottish words in [its] few lines."<sup>18</sup> Beattie wrote the poem "to excite some curiosity" (*Forbes*, I, 153) about the publication of Ross's vernacular poems; and he did so in the midst of his hard labour over the *Essay on Truth*, the exacting task of preparing an elegant edition of Thomas Gray's poems to be published by the Foulis brothers of Glasgow, and the welcome respites from his philosophical studies during which he worked on Book I of *The Minstrel*. It was this life of serious writing as expressed in *The Minstrel* and *To Mr. Alexander Ross* in particular which not only provided a pattern of the poet's life for Burns to contemplate but also contained some important hints concerning the poetic use of the English and Scots languages which Burns developed in remarkable ways in his own poems and songs. In this way Burns established himself as the authentic bard "of the north country" (*The Minstrel*, I, xi, 5) by fulfilling the poetic promise that he discerned in Beattie's account of the growth of his own mind and imagination as nurtured by his knowledge of English poetry and, in particular, of his Scottish heritage.

## NOTES

1. All quotations are taken from the first edition of the essay which together with *An Essay on Laughier and Ludicrous Composition* and *Remarks on the Utility of Classical Learning* formed a companion-volume to the sixth edition of *An Essay on Truth* (William Creech and E & C Dilly; Edinburgh and London, 1776). Hereafter referred to as *Poetry*.
2. All quotations from *The Minstrel* are taken from *The Poetical Works of James Beattie* in the *Aldine Edition of the British Poets* William Pickering: London, 1831).
3. Margaret Forbes, *Beattie and His Friends* (London: Constable, 1904), 269-270.
4. *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. De Lancey Ferguson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), II, 148.
5. James Kinsely claims that Burns paid close attention to such ideas in Beattie's essay. See "The Music of the Heart" in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, ed. Donald A. Low (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 134-5.
6. See my article "Beattie's *The Minstrel* and the Scottish Connection" *The Wordsworth Circle*, Volume XIII, No. 1 (Winter, 1982), 20-26.
7. *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. De Lancey Ferguson, 2nd. ed. G. Ross Roy (Oxford:

- Clarendon Press, 1985), I, 88.
8. Carol McGuiirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 144.
  9. For a long time the critical response to Burns's own writings was fraught with similar misconceptions; of late, however, much has been done by critics of Burns to correct such widespread views. As he considers "where [in his poems and letters] Burns seems to stand in relation to what he is writing," Christopher MacLachlan stresses that such an investigation "must ... be accompanied by an awareness of Burns's complex literary-historical position, especially his combination of Scottish and English influences and trends, in short, the classic insight of twentieth-century Burns criticism, given classic statement by [David] Daiches and [Thomas] Crawford" ["Point of View in Some Poems of Burns," *Scottish Literary Journal*, Volume 13 Number 1 (May 1986), 5]. In addition, Carol McGuiirk's book is an attempt to correct "the widespread presumption that Burns was the product of a separate Scottish vernacular tradition, writing well only when writing unselfconsciously in the Scottish dialect" (xiv). Burns's imitation of *The Minstrel* is a more important aspect of his attempts to combine the Scottish and English traditions in his compositions than even McGuiirk realized.
  10. In his review of Lockhart's *Life of Sir Walter Scott* in the *British Critic* in 1838, John Keble quotes the following lines from *The Minstrel* to illustrate "[the traits] of the poetical temperament:
 

"Responsive to the tuneful pipe, when all  
   In sprightly dance the village youth was join'd,  
   Edwin, of melody aye held in thrall,  
   From the rude gambol far remote reclin'd,  
   Sooth'd with the soft notes warbling down the wind":—

 Keble next prints the following remarks by Burns to elaborate upon his point "that love of natural objects, and ... scenery, especially of the wilder kind, is an acknowledged element in the poetical character":
 

There is scarcely any earthly object gives me more—I do not know if I should call it *pleasure*—but something which exalts me, something which enraptures me than to walk in the sheltered side of the wood, or high plantation, in a cloudy winter-day, and hear the stormy wind howling among the trees, and raving over the plain. It is my best season for devotion [John Keble, *Occasional Papers and Reviews* (Oxford: James Parker, 1877), 19-20].

 By placing Beattie's description of Edwin and Burns's statement about himself side by side, Keble indicates clearly not only his own belief that Beattie's minstrel and Burns the bard were remarkably similar but also that such important affinities between the Beattian poet and the lives and work of actual poets were widely acknowledged among critics and readers of poetry well into the nineteenth century.
  11. Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1965), 89.
  12. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968). All quotations are taken from this edition.
  13. Letter of 26 February 1799 to S.T. Coleridge, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. De Selincourt, 2nd ed. I *The Early Years 1787-1805*, rev. C.L. Shaver (1967), 256.
  14. The well-known designation of Burns as the "heaven-taught ploughman" was adapted from Beattie's phrase by Henry MacKenzie.
  15. Letter of 7 March 1788 to Mrs. Dunlop: "I am highly flattered by the news you tell me of Coila. I may say to the fair painter who does me so much honour, as Dr. Beattie says to Ross the poet, of his muse Scots, from which, by the by, I took the idea of Coila: ('Tis a poem of Beattie's in the Scottish dialect, which perhaps you have never seen).
 

"Ye shak your head, but o' my fegs,  
   Ye've set auld Scotsa on her legs:  
   Lang had she lied wi' buffs [*for beffs*] and flegs,  
   Bombaz'd and dizzie,  
   Her fiddle wanted strings and pegs,  
   Waes me, poor hizzie!" [Letters, I, 256].
  16. Burns borrows also from Beattie's *Verses occasioned by the Death of ... Charles Churchill* (1765) when he presents Coila's judgment that the poet can not hope to write in the English language as well as Thomson, Shenstone, or Gray:



'Thou canst not learn, nor can I show,  
 To paint with Thomson's landscape-glow;  
 Or wake the bosom-melting throe  
     With Shenstone's art;  
 Or pour with Gray the moving flow  
     Warm on the heart (247-253).

Much of this stanza seems to be drawn from the following lines in Beattie's poem:

Is this the land where Gray's unlabour'd art  
 Soothes, melts, alarms, and ravishes the heart;  
 While the lone wanderer's sweet complainings flow  
 In simple majesty of manly woe;  
 Or while, sublime, on eagle-pinion driven,  
 He soars Pindaric heights, and sails the waste of heaven?  
 Is this the land, o'er Shenstone's recent urn  
 Where all the Loves and gentler Graces mourn? (29-36).

17. A.M. Oliver, "The Scottish Augustans" in *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London, 1955), 146.
18. Sir William Forbes, *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie* (Constable: Edinburgh, 1807), I, 153. To this day, *To Mr. Alexander Ross* is reprinted in anthologies of Scottish poetry; and almost always the editors of these collections name it Beattie's best poem and mention *The Minstrel* as a overrated English poem which is much inferior to it.