Semester 4: ENGH: Paper HCC-T-9: Robert Burns: Scots Wha Hae

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Background: In the later decades of the 18th century, the strict literary models of English neoclassicism waned and interest grew in non-rational modes of perception and artistic construction. This happened principally under the influence of philosophers like John Locke, Adam Smith, David Hartley and David Hume, historians like Edward Gibbon and William Robertson who published in 1759 a history of Scotland, and poets like James Thomson, William Macpherson, William Collins, William Cowper, Thomas Percy and Thomas Chatterton who, driven by their attraction for medieval and mystical modes of experience, sought to capture hitherto uncharted areas of the nation's consciousness in their lyrical verses. Their work was marked by a frank, open love for nature and the natural man, and marked a seminal move away from the formulaic, didactic poetry of the Johnsonian school. Parallel to these ran a Methodist Movement led by John Wesley within the Church of England that broke apart from its lifeless formalism. Added to these new and explorative lines of thought, there arose a political literature that contested the common view of a Scotsman as the "undesirable alien". Numerous collections of songs and ballads of Scotland, carried within an oral tradition for several centuries, were published and read and loved in a bid to build a glorious, freedom-loving and rebellious Scottish identity. Such anthologies, from Allan Ramsay to Walter Scott, became a body of literature romantically engaged with Scottish nationhood – defined by its spontaneous plunges into sensual pleasure.

The Poet: Robert Burns (1759-96) was born into a poor peasant family in Ayrshire, but received an education that led him to reading Scottish verse and, in addition, some contemporary English writers. His early youth was spent in various fruitless agricultural pursuits, drinking deep with sailors, carousing with friends in clubs and meeting poetry and music there, falling into personal trouble that made him think of emigrating to the West Indies, and finally publishing in 1786 "Poems, chiefly in the Scottish Dialect". He moved to Edinburgh in the hope of achieving poetic fame and a government job, but his hopes were dashed and he finally settled in Dumfries in 1789 with an exciseman's job. In the following years until his death in 1796, he produced his noblest work, contributing more than 300 songs, putting words to half-forgotten highland tunes, refining the rustic nature of Scottish life with his fine instinct for combining idea and feeling. Writing without any poetic association or ancestry, he nevertheless exhibits many traits of the English Romantics – mastery of the lyric form, interest in the macabre and the supernatural, use of the dialect of the rustic Scottish peasantry, a rebellious spirit. Above all, his union of song and poetry ranks him highest among the Scottish bards and places him close to the essence of all Romantic poetry: lyricism.

Scots Wha Hae: a stanza-wise prose rendering and commentary

O Scots, you who have bled with Wallace and been often led in battle by Bruce, are welcome to your choice between a bloody deathbed and victory. (The poem begins in an inspirational tone, inviting Scotsmen with a war cry to defend their motherland. They are reminded of glorious fights for freedom in Scottish history – William Wallace was a 13th century Scottish leader who led the freedom struggle of Scots against Edward I, the English king who deposed the Scottish king in 1297 and declared himself king

of Scotland; and Robert the Bruce was king of Scotland in early 14th century and leader of the First War of Scottish Independence. Burns in his early youth had come across a volume of songs celebrating the national hero William Wallace by the minstrel Blind Harry. References to these early uprisings against English domination gives authenticity to the patriotic call, and rouses Scottish manhood to an extreme choice between bloody death in battle and bloody victory.)

The day and hour of the struggle for independence has come – see before you the battlefront where the forces of 'proud Edward' approach. Defeat in their hands would mean chains (loss of freedom) and slavery to us Scots. (References to Scottish heroes like Wallace and Bruce and the English tyrant Edward establish continuity between the 13th century and the late 18th century when Burns is writing – the struggle to free Scottish identity is essentially the same after five centuries. Readers would realize that forms of subjugation are no more only military, but have ramified into political, economic and cultural colonization. The stanza wonderfully brings alive the immediacy of history, taking the reader back into the thick and thin of a medieval battle. The appeal to the visionary sense – the reader is implored to see – becomes very effective in enlivening history.)

Who can be there among Scotsmen coward enough to be a traitor? Such a man, if there is, is by his treachery/cowardice low as a slave – an object of public shame and hate. He should turn from this heroic struggle and run. The patriotic Scottish army has no place for weak hearts. (Here is a brief pause for introspection – Burns looks into the Scottish heart and scans for traces of narrow self-seeking, fear and greed, and also probably into the history of failed Scottish endeavors of independence. This public call for identifying traitors and opportunists to purge the army is also customary in every war song inspiring men to defend the land: one strong example is the Old English poem Battle of Maldon. The unthinkable evil of being a traitor to one's motherland is equated through this public defamation to not only a crime against the nation but also against a sacred ideal often linked to Christianity in the Scottish psyche. The three interrogatory lines beginning with 'who' sound like an angry Old Testament prophet searching for sinners, while the last one, "let him turn and flee",is a public proscription and condemnation to hell.)

Those who are prepared to hold up the sword and fight in the name of the Scottish king, law and land must follow the bard. The highest honor for a Scotsman, both religiously and politically, is to be a free man, whether he stands or falls in battle. (Complementary to the disgrace to traitors in the previous stanza, this is an eulogy and impetus to the brave and the patriotic. Freedom is held up as the highest ideal - a duty for every man to protect, a state of soul and body that makes death a glorious happening, a spirit that defines the ideal states of manhood, national identity and Christian dedication. The metaphoric image 'freedom's sword' goes deep – the sword is the symbol of freedom, and the thirst for freedom is the real, spiritual sword to fight with. Behind this glorified figure of the heroic warrior stand the figure of the medieval knight who dedicates his life to the protection of his church, king and motherland, and also the more historically remote figure of the Anglo-Saxon warrior who is bound for life in a lord-liege relationship.)

Let us vow that we will drain our last drops in battle, driven by the memory of sufferings of bondage and foreign rule. The ignominy of living for generations in servile bondage is both an infernal memory and the darkest future imaginable; we will sacrifice our lives and bleed from our dearest veins to break free of

such a future. Let us fight till death so that our children may lead free lives. (The long, bitter memories of Scottish oppression in the hands of English rulers rises up here as a dark spectre, with suggestions of eternal doom in Biblical narratives. The two lines beginning with "by" have the force of solemn oaths, taken to strengthen the determination to fight, and the miseries of oppression and unbearable thought of sons in servility supply the climactic moral force expressed in the exclamation marks at the ends of the lines. The song is drawing to its end, and the whole force of a nation rising from moral and physical degradation is mustered in the stanza. The reminders of past suffering serve to heighten the earnestness of the oath. The resolve to 'drain our dearest veins' calls for all that the Scottish race has accumulated over its history as essentially its own – its language, culture, religion, land.)

(Go forward, Scottish warriors) bring down the haughty enemy, who is a usurper claiming our land unlawfully, and a tyrant we do not want. Assault them and imagine that each enemy soldier is a tyrant and usurper, and that in their defeat lies our freedom. This battle is to bring us our liberty, let us go forward and achieve it, or die in battle as men who refuse to live without it. (The condemnatory tone is continued in the last four lines with each line a complete battle call, all ending in exclamations and escalating excitement, urging Scotsmen to dive into the fiery conflict. Though the words 'usurper' and 'tyrant' properly apply to the English king Edward I, all English soldiers are called so here to produce the animism required for battle. We must remember here that Scotsmen mostly fought against a far more numerous and organized English army, and had to depend on suddenness and sharpness of their attacks for victory. The forward movement of the victorious Scottish army is echoed in the marching, military tone of the lines, and there is an implicit suggestion that each blow on the enemy is a step to a free Scotland – a heaven on earth the Scots have yearned for long. Victory thus is also redemption, and this hidden spiritual motivation is used both to preempt treachery and to add moral force to the physical.)

General Comments:

- The poem is written in six four-line stanzas, with the first three lines in each stanza in trochaic trimester with one extra accented syllable at the end, while the last (fourth) line is in trochaic dimeter in the first two stanzas, and combines one anapaestic foot with one iambic in the last four. This variation in the metrical pattern sets a rhythmic pattern to the song as well as assists the argumentative design. In each stanza, the first three lines with regular trochaic feet carry one idea or make one proposition, and then the fourth (truncated) line brings a conclusion and an imperative. The pattern of an army's marching and halting is also imitated here, and the fourth line in each stanza, spoken in the first person, expressing a command, gives the poet a leading role over his countrymen. Also, the sudden break of rhythm in the fourth line serves to shake the listener out of a jolt, waking him to the burning need of the hour. The rhyme scheme is aaab, giving the fourth, truncated line an independent sound and helping it to stand out of the regular verse in a masculine voice. Thus each stanza comes to its own conclusion, and the stanzas can be rotated like strophes while singing.
- The language Burns uses combines Scottish dialectal inflections with regular English grammar and vocabulary, so that his poetry is intelligible to all readers. The inflections happen mostly in commonly used pronouns, verbs and prepositions, and not in the more substantial parts of speech. Thus, 'who have' becomes 'wha hae', 'whom' becomes 'wham', 'who so' becomes 'wha

sae'. These deviations from Queen's English are close to the everyday speech of Scottish peasants among whom Burns lived, and give a local, rustic feel to his songs that his countrymen loved and recognized as their own. The purpose of exhortation to a patriotic 'do or die' battle is helped by the directness of speech and the imagery of war – 'gory bed', 'coward's grave', 'freedom's sword'.

- Punctuation is very notable in marking the mood of the poem – when the first two stanzas recount past struggles and rouse patriotic feeling, lines end with commas or semicolons, but when the mood rises to indignation (at treachery) or exhortation, marks of interrogation and exclamation suggest the rise. In the last two stanzas, when an immediate plunge into battle is urged, almost all the lines end in exclamation and tend to break apart from the stanzaic form into unitary slogans or war cries. Punctuation marks seem to follow the army's march, and rise to a crescendo towards the end.
- The poem bridges the medieval struggles for Scottish freedom and the more complex ideological struggles of Burns' own time. With his obvious engagement and love for his country and people, he culls from history moments of patriotism and glory, and uses them as metaphors for the battles Scotsmen are fighting on other warfronts in the 18th century. It is an opportune historical epoch for Scotland, when English-centric political, philosophic and cultural discourses are shifting and suffering rifts, and a love for the rustic and the ignored is pervading, and revolution is in the air.