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Gerard Lee McKeever
University of Glasgow

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“TAM O’ SHANTER” AND AESTHETIC CULTURAL NATIONALISM

Gerard Lee McKeever

In a letter to Francis Grose of 1790, Burns sends three supernatural tales “relating to Alloway Kirk.” The central tale finds a farmer returning home from the market day in Ayr at “the wizard hour,” only to see “a blaze streaming from the kirk”:

When he had reached the gate of the kirk-yard, he was surprised and entertained, through the ribs and arches of an old gothic window which still faces the highway, to see a dance of witches merrily footing it round their old sooty blackguard master.

“Surprised and entertained,” the farmer’s excitement boils over when he perceives the deficient length of one of the ladies’ dresses, prompting the outburst, “Weel luppen Maggy wi’ the short sark!”¹ It is a manifestation of spectacle that is of course familiar from the verse companion to the tales, “Tam o’ Shanter,” a work which, perhaps more than any other, continues to cement Burns’s place in Scottish and global culture.² Built around the voyeuristic encounter that this prose variation riffs upon, “Tam” directs a fruitful meditation on Ayrshire and Scotland towards this revelatory moment. Its importance to the poet’s own iconic status is a routine point, yet the poem has more to say on the development of cultural nationalism in Scotland. Focussing on the central kirk episode, this article reads “Tam o’ Shanter” as heralding an aesthetic model of

¹ G. Ross Roy, ed., *Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd ed., 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), II: 29-31; hereafter cited as Roy.

² See James Kinsley, ed., *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), II: 557-564 [K 321], hereafter cited by line number in the text. In 2012, *YouGov* reported that “Tam” was “Scotland’s favourite [Burns] poem”: see <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2012/01/Burns23012012> [accessed 7th January 2016]. Burns described it to Mrs Dunlop as “my standard performance in the Poetical line” (April 11 1792, in Roy II: 83).

cultural nationalism that would grow to prominence in the early part of the nineteenth century.

It seems odd to speak of a writer with the popular profile of Burns as experiencing a revival, yet the Oxford edition currently being produced at the University of Glasgow reflects a strengthened critical awareness. Liam McIlvanney and Nigel Leask have explored Burns's cultural politics and his nuanced triangulation of the cultural field.³ However, as Murray Pittock and others argue, his achievement also needs to be viewed within the larger context of Scottish Romanticism.⁴ With that goal in view, this article considers the place of "Tam o' Shanter," and Burns's oeuvre more broadly, in what I term (following Ian Duncan) "aesthetic cultural nationalism." Burns's widespread popularity since 1786 is part of the picture. Becoming a ubiquitous totem of Scottishness has involved him in a problematic brand of national self-reflection, hollowed out into an easy idiom capable of accompanying the excesses of shortbread-tin nationalism.⁵ Burns and Burnsiana habitually function as part of the compliant, axiomatic colour of nationhood, occupying a shallow aesthetic paradigm that flattens meaning. Yet Burns himself played a more active role in the development of aesthetic discourses of nationhood than is often allowed. His works construct a network of associations between the poet, his nation and ideas of the rustic that shapes a ready aesthetics of Scottishness. The central episode of "Tam o' Shanter" explores this role, dramatizing the realization of an aesthetic model of nationhood as a moment of national self-revelation. Previous criticism has done much to reveal the complexity of meaning in the poem, shrouded in opaque irony, yet this reading makes new sense of its pivotal set piece as the apex of Burns's performance. As Tam peers through the window of Kirk-

³ See Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2002); and Nigel Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴ For recent reassessments of Scottish Romanticism, see, e.g., Leith Davis, Ian Duncan, and Janet Sorensen, eds., *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004); Murray Pittock, *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008); Pittock, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2011).

⁵ On Burns's importance within Scottish culture, its roots, and the means of its endurance, see Corey E. Andrews, *The Genius of Scotland: The Cultural Production of Robert Burns, 1785-1834* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015).

Alloway, he is witnessing on our behalf a crucial moment in the development of cultural nationalism in Scotland.

If Scott’s *Waverley Novels* attempted to rewrite a notion of Scottishness within the conceptual space of art, decades earlier Burns was exploring the emblematic qualities of cultural productions and of the aesthetic itself. His poetics mobilizes a discourse of nationhood that we more readily associate with the early nineteenth century, anticipating strategies that Ian Duncan has located in Scott and the *Blackwood’s* milieu. Working in the decades following the death of Burns, these authors developed what Duncan calls “an aesthetically based cultural nationalism.”⁶ This emphasized a (more or less consciously ironic) sympathetic investment in Scottish nationhood understood as an aesthetic concern, mediated through the work (production, possession and appreciation) of canonical literature. Duncan takes the King’s Jaunt of 1822 as a key moment, with George IV visiting Scotland to engage in a contrived pageant of Highlandism and Jacobitism orchestrated by the author-hero Scott. The Jaunt performs a reconstitution of nationhood that Duncan reads as centred upon the city of Edinburgh, which becomes “a new kind of national capital—one constituted not upon politics or finance but upon cultural production and aesthetic forms.”⁷ The process is nicely symbolized in Scott’s *Guy Mannering*, in which Harry Bertram’s recollection of a ballad is the signifier of his Scottish heritage and the clue to his symbolic restoration; “I have forgot it all now—but I remember the tune well,” says Harry, establishing the pure aesthetic medium of melody as the substance of nationhood.⁸

At the heart of “Tam o’ Shanter” lies a foreshadowing of this Blackwoodian model of nationhood. There is a quasi-religious aspect to the idea of Scottishness as aesthetic essence, versatile yet perennial, a matter more of sympathy (perhaps even “faith”) than rational discourse.

⁶ Ian Duncan, *Scott’s Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 14.

⁷ Ian Duncan, “Urban Space and Enlightened Romanticism,” in Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion*, as in n. 4 above, 72–83, (p. 73); cf. also John Prebble, *The King’s Jaunt: George IV in Scotland, 1822: “one and twenty daft days”* (London: Collins, 1988; Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2000); Murray G. H. Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland: The Stuart myth and the Scottish identity, 1638 to the present* (London: Routledge, 1991), 88–90.

⁸ Walter Scott, *Guy Mannering*, ed. P. D. Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1999), 248.

Burns's poem chimes with this in the setting of its central episode at Kirk-Alloway, the narrator drawing particular attention to objects such as the upright coffins and redundant "haly table" (125, 130), now serving other functions in the satanic ceilidh, just as the religious space of the kirk is repurposed for the production of a new language of national identity. Tam's intoxicated gaze into the ruins, through the aperture of a window that acts like a picture frame, opens onto a concerted, iconic image of Scottishness. Burns draws on an ideological edifice that by 1790 was well established in his work, the kirk scene exploring the familiar superimposition of his rustic aesthetic and his projection of nationhood. It provides the centrepiece to a poem in which the act of looking is paramount. The shifting and unpredictable vantage of the narrator establishes this early on, veering from the sight of Tam's wife, "Gathering her brows like gathering storm," (11) to spy on the farmer himself, flirting and exchanging "favours" with the landlady (47-48). With thrilling command of its energy throughout, the piece dips in and out of the visual action of Tam's drama, including via a complex switching of registers. However, again the agency of the crucial kirk scene is an outcome of a larger deployment of the aesthetic in Burns's poetics. Before we can properly understand the intervention of "Tam," we must first address the aesthetic paradigm upon which Burns's whole career was based.

1. Foundations: bard, nation and improvement

By the time Burns was writing to George Thomson in the summer of 1793, the use of knowing irony that had always accompanied his public persona was grown familiar and self-referential. "Being a Bard of Nature, I have some pretensions to Second Sight," he rehearses, touching of course that central topos upon which he had launched his cornerstone Kilmarnock and Edinburgh publications: unlettered and unlikely genius (Roy II: 222). If Mackenzie's ideal of the "Heaven-taught ploughman" was in equal measure naïve and theatrical, it reflected nevertheless the most pungent layer in the controlled mystique of this "nameless Bard."⁹ While such rhetoric secured for Burns a lasting claim on a privileged discursive position, similarly as effective was the parallel gesture by

⁹ See Henry Mackenzie, in *The Lounger*, December 9, 1786, repr. in Donald A. Low, ed., *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 67-71, (p. 70); and Robert Burns, preface to *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock: Wilson, 1786), pp. iii-vi (p. iv).

which he indelibly associated his rustic aesthetic with the nested identity formations of Ayrshire and Scotland. Indeed, an embodiment of national virtues had always been implicit in his projection of natural virtuosity, a schema brought to its logical conclusion in a work like “The Author’s Earnest Cry and Prayer,” where the “simple Bardie” is spokesman for his embattled nation; the masculine, Lowland counterpart to, and intermediary for, “auld Scotland” as robust Highland virago (Kinsley I: 185-191, ll. 5, 86).

This process needs to be contextualized within the culture of improvement in eighteenth-century Scotland. Successful discussions of improvement by critics including Raymond Williams and Peter Womack have argued that, despite the widespread application of the term, it retains a significantly economic meaning, offering a lightning rod for the encroaching overlap of the ideas of progress and profit in the evolution of capitalism.¹⁰ It is no surprise, then, that during the period of frequently remarkable economic growth in Scotland from around 1760, the *zeitgeist* of improvement should become so unmistakable. This obsession with the diverse issues and possible pitfalls of “progress” is embodied in works from the *Statistical Account* to Burns’s Kilmarnock Volume.¹¹ Indeed, while the dialectical functioning of improvement provides us with a key to understanding the cultural life of Scotland over this period, Scottish Romanticism more specifically can be understood as a modal series of works coordinated around this central concept.¹² Rooting our focus in the complex narratives of improvement that permeate this writing offers critics of Romanticism an interpretive method that is inclusive, incisive, and, while of more general application, particularly well suited to the Scottish context.

Among the many aspects of Scottish life that became bound up in the dialectics of improvement during the long eighteenth century, the negotiation of the nation’s alternative identity formations within this

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, rev. ed. (London: Flamingo, 1983), 160-61; Peter Womack, *Improvement and Romance: Constructing the Myth of the Highlands* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 3.

¹¹ *The Statistical Account of Scotland: Drawn Up from the Communication of the Ministers of the Different Parishes*, ed. Sir John Sinclair, 21 vols. (Edinburgh: Creech, 1791-1799).

¹² See also Gerard Lee McKeever, “‘With wealth come wants’: Scottish Romanticism as improvement in the fiction of John Galt,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 55. 1 (Spring, 2016, *forthcoming*).

framework is a recurring pattern. While the dominant British culture was able to exert a significant monopoly over discourses of improvement—a neat example being the issue of linguistic “Scotticisms,” which tied socioeconomic progress to Anglo-British cultural orthodoxy—, key formations of Scottishness took up alternative and oppositional positions.¹³ Central to this configuration was the work of Scottish Enlightenment historiography, which Colin Kidd’s research has revealed as ensuring a profound inflection of the priorities of improvement towards the formations of Britishness.¹⁴ Applying the teleological rationale of stadialism to Scottish history, William Robertson, for example, achieved a vivid rendering of Britain as progress, Scotland as backwardness, narrating a journey from a dark and violent past to the neoclassical, imperial confidence of eighteenth-century Britain.¹⁵ In part this reflects a consistently uneasy relationship in improving discourse between the mechanisms of progress and localised expressions of cultural particularism, as formations of Scottishness interact with a globalizing empire.

Burns provides an intervention in this same narrative, a long ideological process through which elements of Britishness and Scottishness grew to be understood via the relationship of improvement and its alternatives. By way of the associative web touched on above (rustic-bard-nation), Burns ends up yoking his projection of the rustic (or a state of “unimprovement”) onto the idea of Scotland. He secures for Scottishness a robust aesthetic politics of the unimproved—“warm-reekin, rich!”—contrasted against a polite culture that is by turns metropolitan, cosmopolitan and continental (“To a Haggis”: Kinsley I:311, l. 18). The term “Namby Pamby” that crops up in Burns’s correspondence is illuminating in this context, the effeminate, Anglophone inverse of a rustic aesthetic potency in which “words come skelpan.”¹⁶ In the context of “Tam o’ Shanter,” while the kirk scene

¹³ For a discussion of Scotticisms, see Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 16-44.

¹⁴ See Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland’s Past: Scottish whig historians and the creation of an Anglo-British identity, 1689-c. 1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993).

¹⁵ See William Robertson, *The History of Scotland During the Reigns of Queen Mary and of King James VI*, 2 vols (London: Millar, 1759).

¹⁶ “Epistle to David, a Brother Poet”: Kinsley I: 69, l. 142. See, e.g., Burns to George Thomson, August 13 1793, Roy, II: 227-229, (p. 228). Burns’s pastoral

provides a climactic saturation of the theme of rustic Scottishness, Burns’s language makes something of a related gesture. Key to his control of pacing in the poem is his modulation of the vernacular density of a Scots that is often considered by critics to be closest to the active core of the *völkisch* tale. The effect is rendered most clearly when this register is juxtaposed against English lines that provide notes of abstracted moral anxiety, as in the central passage, “But pleasures are like poppies spread” (ll. 59-66), which functions as a contemplative lull before the storm. The first line of the tale proper, following the introductory preamble, neatly captures the effect: “But to our tale: Ae market-night,” Burns using the Scots term “Ae” to signal a switch in mood from the analytic first clause into the world of late-night rural merriment. That said, the pattern is circumscribed and we need to be careful to avoid over-privileging the role of Scots in this dextrously bilingual work, with the range of registers interweaving along the fluctuating perspective of the tale. Indeed, in his recent monograph on the poet, Alex Broadhead takes this argument to task, countering the arguments of David Daiches, Carol McGuirk and others to suggest that the “poppies” sequence “subtly problematizes” the division they perceive between Scots (experiential immediacy) and English (cool reflection), with the English lines actually “hyperbolic and effusive” and the final moral – “Nae man can tether time or time” (67) – opened in Scots. By insisting on the active role of the reader in producing such effects, Broadhead offers a useful corrective that aptly demonstrates the fluidity of signification in Burns’s language, though in “Tam o’ Shanter,” the above pattern represents one tangible element of a more complex picture.¹⁷

Burns’s rustic-bard-nation compound tends to produce that understanding of the Scottish subjectivity discussed above as associated with Scott: Scottishness as an explicitly aesthetic construct. Though with deep internal tensions and a limited application through Scott’s oeuvre, it

inversions are of course in line with the Fergusonian vein in the Enlightenment tradition by favouring, in moral and aesthetic terms, the unimproved; though both men look more to civic humanism and an ideal of humble, engaged citizenship, than they do to noble savagery. See Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995); and McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical*, 22-37.

¹⁷ Alex Broadhead, *The Language of Robert Burns: Style, Ideology, and Identity* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 2014), 143-48

is a dynamic that has been identified by generations of critics, reaching back notably to the work of Daiches. This argument has been made most effectively about Scott's *Waverley*. Murray Pittock suggests that in *Waverley*, "old Scottish patriotism" is rendered "a childhood story" that must give way to Britishness, which is "a matter of adult responsibility."¹⁸ Drawing from and contributing to the persistent implication of Britishness and Scottishness in the relationship of improvement and its alternatives, *Waverley*'s answer to (in Daiches's well-worn phrase) "the inevitability of a drab but necessary progress" is to reimagine a form of Scottishness in a liminal space beyond what Edward Waverley himself intuits as the "real history" of British concerns.¹⁹ In Cairns Craig's influential analysis, the portrait of Waverley and Fergus Mac-Ivor constitutes the crucial device. As Craig writes, Waverley's "life in history has been turned into art; it has been 'framed' and removed from the flow of events, its static form matching the lack of causal connection between that primitive world and his modern condition."²⁰ Of course, even if we accept that *Waverley* does indeed act to transpose a version of Scottishness into the aesthetic realm, questions remain over the ideological charge of the procedure (what, after all, is the political agency of art?), and in drawing a parallel between Burns and Scott it need hardly be said that quite distinct politics are at work. Yet the division between Tory, aristocratic Scott and Whig, "middling sort" Burns, should not blind us to analogues between them. One of "Tam o' Shanter"'s central achievements is its innovative heralding of these nineteenth-century aesthetic approaches to nationhood.

2. Kirk-Alloway and aesthetic Scotland

The poem as "national tale" is by now well-travelled critical ground, yet it will help us get to the heart of what is interesting here. Douglas Gifford describes "Tam" as "on the surface a traditional folk tale about human

¹⁸ See Murray Pittock, *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 187.

¹⁹ David Daiches, "Scott's Achievement as a Novelist," in *Walter Scott: Modern Judgements*, ed. D. D. Devlin (London: Macmillan, 1968), 33-62, (p. 36).

²⁰ Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), 39; and Walter Scott, *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since*, ed. Claire Lamont (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 283 and 338.

exuberance embedded in the hearts of all Scots.”²¹ His stress on national character is productive, reminding us that although “Tam” was commissioned by the Englishman Grose, it addresses itself in significant part to a familiar “imagined community”—the repeated “we” of the work.²² This community reveals itself as a Scots-cultural base conceived as masculine, members of the select society to which the poem gives voice. Tam, the eponymous hero, becomes the avatar for this particular “we.” It is “we” who “sit bousing at the nappy,” putting off the return to Kate, “our sulky sullen dame,” Burns ventriloquizing a communal imagining of the folk tradition (5, 10). This narrative register is a modulation on his typical use of the rustic-bard-nation compound via a direct address, although the parochial figure of Tam retains some of this associative potential as part of Burns’s oeuvre, and the hints of autobiography surrounding the protagonist cannot be ignored. Yet following an expansion of frames between rural Ayrshire and Scotland that is characteristic of the poet, Tam serves an archetypal function.²³ He is to explore the darker domains of the folk tradition on behalf of Burns’s “we,” venturing out into the “lang Scots miles” in a journey of national-cultural exploration (7). The poem sustains multiple implicit readerships throughout, as captured in the expansive address to “wha this tale o’ truth shall read” (219). Yet within this the act of reading Scots contributes to the figuring of a national public which becomes a significant object and subject of the text. Tam, himself a Scots reader—who we see “crooning o’er some auld Scots sonnet”—centres the action in a poem very much about Alloway first, and Scotland second (84).

Of course, the ostensible function of the work was to articulate the

²¹ Douglas Gifford, “Sham Bards of a Sham Nation? Edwin Muir and the Failures of Scottish Literature,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 35:1 (2007): 339-61 (p. 355): <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol35/iss1/26/>. On a linked note, Thomas Crawford describes “Tam” as “the most genuinely *national* of all [Burns’s] poems;” Crawford, *Burns: a study of the poems and songs*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1965), 222.

²² See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

²³ Discussions of Burns’s transitions between the local and national can be found in Leask, *Burns and Pastoral*, 103-8; Gerard Carruthers, introduction, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Burns*, ed. Carruthers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2009), 1-5, (pp. 3-4); and Richard Sher, *The Enlightenment and the Book: Scottish Authors and their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland and America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006), 231.

folk colour of rural Ayrshire as part of a larger illustration of the nation in Grose's *Antiquities of Scotland*, which it does in a knowing, qualified manner. The entire poem is staged as taking place beyond the sphere which it explicitly addresses, the literary and antiquarian purview of the "chapman billies," who must "leave the street" for the action to commence (1). Equally, "Tam"'s original appearance as a footnote to Grose's work contributes to this ironic play. Relegated to the role of (bloated) supplementary matter, the work's artifice is amplified, its possible claims on literary, historical or folk legitimacy dragged into view. Grose's introduction locates the poem within a "famous" history of "infernal meetings," delighting in the blurry questions of authenticity that surround folklore.²⁴ The footnote form is another layer to an insistent mediation that continues within the poem via the multiple consciousness of Burns's narration, sculpted so as to regulate our proximity to the active space of the folk tale. These strategies produce a "tension between observation and participation" analogous to that which Corey Andrews identifies in the "footnoted folklore" of Burns's "Halloween."²⁵ The moralistic authority of the narrative voice is always playful and liable to be carried away in the excitement, as in the reflective digression at the centre of the kirk scene, where, reflecting on Tam's voyeurism, the narrator is lost in his own salacious fantasy about "queans, | A' plump and strapping in their teens" (151-52). "Swinging between breathless empathy and harrumphing remonstrance," as McIlvanney puts it, this vacillation is part of a framework sustaining Burns's irony, in a folk tale that projects a variety of responses to itself, from the naïve to the sceptical.²⁶

²⁴ See Francis Grose, *The Antiquities of Scotland*, 2 vols (London: Hooper, 1789-1791), II, pp. 199-201; Leask discusses the footnote form in *Burns and Pastoral*, pp. 265-66; as does Fiona Stafford in *Local Attachments: The Province of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 217-18. Grose's *Antiquities* has recently been confirmed as the poem's true first appearance: see Bill Dawson, "The First Publication of Burns's 'Tam o' Shanter,'" *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 40:1 (2014): 105-115: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol40/iss1/11/>.

²⁵ Corey E. Andrews, "Footnoted Folklore: Robert Burns's 'Halloween,'" in *Robert Burns and Friends*, ed. Patrick Scott and Kenneth Simpson (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Libraries, 2012: also as SSL, 37), 24-37 (p. 32): <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol37/iss1/4/>.

²⁶ Liam McIlvanney, "Poems Like Hand Grenades: Baxter, Burns, and Bawdry," *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 30 (2012): 29-51, (p. 40). Carol McGuirk suggests that the poem's irony moves between "the man and the poet—between

The poem's ironic dynamic advances a possible tension between talking *to* and *about* Scotland. It is worth mentioning Pittock's discussion of the modulation between Scots and standard English, the latter of which, he suggests, helps develop a position of externalized aesthetic distance. This is tied to a use of the picturesque that amounts to what he calls "a world of genre construction, the collector's art." Crucially, this effect is collapsed by Tam's Scots outburst—"Weel done, Cutty-sark!" (189)—which for Pittock reveals the detached register as an ironic cloak behind which a truer Scottishness rests, unavailable beyond this brief eruption of "oral immediacy" (*Scottish and Irish*, pp. 158-63). In other words the picturesque rendering of Scotland is a kind of misdirection that draws a veil over the secrets of local culture, visible as such in the ideological perspective opened up by Tam's speech. There may be a danger here of unfairly fixing a limit to Burns's irony, in a poem so densely suffused with performative sophistication that the idea of locating its (even relatively) sincere level of cultural representation is perhaps moot. However, the kirk scene, far from puncturing an aestheticization of Scotland, is in fact the decisive instrument in the process. In this central episode, Tam encounters a high-concept rendering of nationhood as unimprovement, Scottishness construed as the otherworldly aesthetic excess of the polite British imagination.

In both thematic and formal terms, the poem moves inexorably towards the glowing insides of Alloway's ruined place of worship. Once there, a bagpipe-playing devil drives home Burns's essaying of Scottishness. The play on anti-Catholicism in the *mise-en-scène* of the kirk—the devil invoked as a popish antichrist, directing the ceilidh "in shape o' beast" (120)—alert us to the presence of a Celtic, Highland element, and indeed sectarian tensions are an appropriate part of what the episode achieves. Of course, as Colin Kidd has traced, the synecdochical use of the Gàidhealtachd for Scotland stretches back into the early modern period.²⁷ Yet, even beyond that dynamic, Burns draws on a variety of established icons of nationhood with a miscellaneous taste that bears affinities with what Tom Nairn describes as the distinctive

life and literature," with "an affectionate irony in presenting both" acting ultimately as a cohesive force: McGuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1985), 149-61 (p. 160).

²⁷ Colin Kidd, *British Identities Before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World 1600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 123-145.

“utilization of historical materials which generally marked the formative, ascendant phases of nationalism in Europe.”²⁸ The mining of cultural and historical materials, so important to the development of modern nationalism, is reflected here as Tam’s vision of devilish revelry becomes a panoply of Scottishness. He produces a parade of national imagery, from the bagpipes to the dances themselves – with Scottish traditional dance putting “life and mettle in their heels,” where presumably a “cotillion brent new frae *France*” would have failed (116-18). Even the focal figure, the beautiful witch Nannie, is draped in symbolism (this time literally): the “cutty sark” Tam uses to name her is made “o’ Paisley harn” (171).

Tam stands peering in the gothic window of the kirk, the anarchic energy of the scene ratcheting up, increasingly “fast and furious,” the devil piping “loud and louder” (144-45). At the centre of the image Tam beholds is the “haly table,” here a sacrificial altar, decorated with items of horrific import; some of which Burns tell us “even to name wad be unlawfu” (142). Among these, the “murderer’s banes in gibbet airns” and “thief, new cutted frae a rape,” make clear the politics of this forbidden space: a dark counterpoise to the polite social world of modern Britain. The thief, petrified in the act of his “last gasp,” mutely expresses the exclusion, forever uttering his denied final sound. Nestling among the criminal outcasts, however, are “Twa span-lang, wee, unchristen’d bairns.” Given Burns’s informed perspective on religion, the tiny babies draw attention to the moral ambiguity of the quarantine, to the injustice in society’s proscriptions. From here the altar sequence expands beyond a domestic frame to include objects of imperial significance: “Five tomahawks, wi’ blude red-rusted; | Five scymitars, wi’ murder crusted;” (135-36). This broadening of the frame alludes to a global violence that the altar-display unearths. These gory, foreign weapons function as part of the nightmarish montage, with the inside of the kirk elaborating the fears of the world outside, where Tam stands. Yet equally they build on the note of moral disquiet, probing the cost of the imperial cultural hegemony, querying the ethical burden of the wealth which was so dramatically pouring into the west of Scotland in Burns’s lifetime.²⁹ Viewing the episode, Leask suggests that Burns “rejects the distancing teleology of Scottish enlightenment historiography ... insisting that these

²⁸ Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1981), 145.

²⁹ See T. M. Devine, *Scotland’s Empire 1600-1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), esp. 320-37.

relics of violence be displayed, inventorized, and acknowledged" (*Burns and Pastoral*, p. 270). The corpses standing in open coffins around the room reveal these objects by the individual candles they hold, as the dead (perhaps the wronged) accusatorily point us to this gruesome still life (125-30).

The altar sequence is also making a comment on the antiquarian process, providing what Gerard Carruthers calls a "catalogue of curiosities," or what Leask terms a selection of "antiquarian collectibles."³⁰ The grim sites of local history that Tam passes on his ride towards the kirk—including "the cairn, | Whare hunters fand the murder'd bairn" (93-94)—function somewhat in this manner, and indeed McQuirk comments that these details are "directed to Captain Grose, a collector of such stories" (p. 155). Yet in the altar sequence this element is explicitly flagged up by a significant modulation from the prose tale that opened this article. While the farmer in that account is "surprised and entertained" by the vision inside the kirk, Tam stares in "amaz'd, and curious" (143). It is a noteworthy decision by Burns, given the importance of the concept of curiosity to the antiquarian field.³¹ While Tam's "entertainment" at the prospect remains an important element, contributing to a sense that the overall image is accessed in the terms of art, this antiquarian dimension to his gaze is also significant. Given the grisly subject matter, there may well be a jocular dig at Grose here, whose interests were far from sanitized; indeed it is a joke that Burns makes elsewhere, imagining a sinister and obscure miscellany carried by Grose, in "On the Late Captain Grose's Peregrinations thro' Scotland, collecting the Antiquities of that Kingdom" (Kinsley I:495, ll. 31-42). The "curiosity" of Tam's stare is a meaningful note of reflection in a poem significantly concerned with the politics of the antiquarian process, Burns foregrounding the peculiarity of any attempt to grasp, never mind collect, the cultural life of the Scottish countryside. Both "entertained"

³⁰ See Gerard Carruthers, *Robert Burns* (Tavistock: Northcote, 2006), 92; Leask, *Burns and Pastoral*, 270.

³¹ This background to the term is nicely captured in the *OED*'s definitions of "curio" as "An object of art, piece of bric-à-brac, etc., valued as a curiosity or rarity," and "curiosity" as "Scientific or artistic interest; the quality of a curioso or virtuoso; connoisseurship." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, 20 vols (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), IV:144, and see also Nigel Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1770-1840: "From an Antique Land"* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002).

and “curious,” Tam’s gaze is a barometer for the tone of the poem, offering simultaneous notes of abandon and of critical reflection.

Sketched out in detail by the poet, gazed upon, the prospect within the kirk behaves then like an exhibition of the national subjectivity. Tam stumbles upon a scene that is at once pseudo-comical burlesque and serious political tableau. Yet, this tonal variety is ultimately less important than the simple, massed presence of Scottishness here, the ceilidh a visual embodiment of an iconic understanding of nationhood, with the kirk window framing a national microcosm. Key to its particular effect is the supernatural mode, centred upon an aggressively Scottish articulation of hellish machinery. As Tam approaches and observes the satanic ceilidh in Kirk-Alloway, Burns gives us a fine example of how what Penny Fielding has called a “post-enlightenment” conceptual territory can function in the figuration of Scottish culture, though in this case “pre-enlightenment” might be more fitting.³² Communing in the revelry with his spoken outburst, Tam signals his invasion, on behalf of the reader, into a realm of nationhood that Burns stages as literally the stuff of another world, of fantasy and even drunken reverie. As the reader-voyeur watches the ceilidh unfold, complete with doses of piping, traditional dance and *völkisch* thrills, we are viewing a powerful literary representation of Scottishness as the Other of improved British modernity (114). Hidden in a deserted and ancient kirk, the icons of nationhood are found occupying an uncertain ideological domain, beyond the boundaries of the modern world and of political hegemony; one that is, above all, an aesthetic space. The view is described in the poem as “an unco sight,” potent and strange, with the terrain of the uncanny helping to provide the necessary objective distance for the image of unimproved Scottishness to be recalibrated as art by Tam. The farmer is appropriately “curious” as well as “amaz’d;” in other words, he derives intellectual pleasure (the “entertainment” of the prose version) from the image, in tandem with, or rather due to, his thrilling fear of the unknown.³³ Objectified by Tam’s

³² Penny Fielding, *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography: North Britain, 1760-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 184-88.

³³ In a distinctive reading, Ian Duncan argues that the structuring principle of the poem is “enjoyment,” involving an interaction between pleasure and the forbidden that governs our collective life. Originally given as a plenary address in 2009 at the conference “Robert Burns in European Culture” in Prague, Duncan’s argument is available online as “‘An Unco’ Sight’: Burns and Enjoyment,”

lusty gaze (with its sectarian tensions intact), these emblems are framed in a snapshot of nationhood, the poem catapulting from its powerful sense of location in Alloway into this national terrain.³⁴ Saturated by Burns with national colour, the aesthetic assemblage of the witches’ dance is a rendering of folk tradition that is here synonymous with Scotland itself. Operating in a transcendent, supernatural area outside the political, social and cultural norms of British culture, this realm of Scottishness is figured as a function of the imagination, as conceived through the sonnet-crooning Tam and the text’s implied readerships.

Within the image, the presence of the “curios” of imperial violence pulls in two directions: on one hand, aligning unimproved Scottishness with the “primitive” societies encountered by the imperial project worldwide; on the other, implicating it in Empire’s crimes, perhaps even pointing up the dark potential of jingoistic simplifications. It does seem fitting that, at the heart of this image of Scotland, we should find a littering of the contradictions and global casualties of improvement. Just as the poem essays the proximate darkness in Alloway, justifying Fiona Stafford’s note that “local attachments were not without their darker sides,” this complexity of vision continues through the expansive national and international themes.³⁵ If Burns is sometimes guilty of a selective imagining of Scottishness as a righteous antidote to the strictures of polite culture, this image seals his sense of the ironies and complexities in the relationship, the way in which Scottish identity in the period straddles a boundary between improvement and its alternatives, becoming a *locus classicus* for the pressures of modernization. The whole picture is disrupted by a sharp modulation between horror and humour, historical sincerity interchanging with an ironic self-consciousness that refuses a static message, insisting instead on a dynamic web of meaning. Yet it is clear that our access to the image is contingent on the disruptive agency

Robert Burns Lives!, ed. Frank R. Shaw, no. 146 (July 31, 2012): http://www.electricscotland.com/familytree/frank/burns_lives146.htm [accessed January 7, 2016].

³⁴ The poem’s complex gender dynamic is beyond the scope of this article, yet the significant rendering of the prospect as female, via Nannie and her companions, certainly contributes to the othering and objectifying effect; on gender in the poem, see Sarah M. Dunnigan and Gerard Carruthers, “Two tales of ‘Tam o’ Shanter,’” *Southfields*, 6:2 (2000): 36-43; also available as *Robert Burns Lives!*, no. 79: http://www.electricscotland.com/familytree/frank/burns_lives179.htm.

³⁵ Stafford, as in n. 24 above, 218.

of the supernatural, nationhood located in the shadowy confines of a haunted ruin—the perfectly rustic locus, of course, for this unruly and conflicted emanation of Scottishness as unimprovement.³⁶ Revealed as a figment of the imagination, literally a fiction, Scotland steps into a new aesthetic order here. A moment of national self-revelation becomes one of transformation.

Following this argument, the window-frame through which Tam peeps can be read as a significant precursor to *Waverley*'s painting, which in Craig's argument plays such a major role in the aestheticization of Scottishness, delivering nationhood as an artefact, an aesthetic object. If the painting of Waverley and Fergus Mac-Ivor acts to pull the events of the Jacobite Rising into an artistic space, entailing a transposition of Scottishness, then this effect is suggestively paralleled by the prospect accessed by Tam.³⁷ The squared-off view inside the kirk consummates the poem's toying with ideas of emblematic Scottishness. The agency of the supernatural partly substitutes here for the explicit rendering of Scottishness as art in *Waverley*, providing the transition into a realm of the imagination. The reader is asked to gaze in and find nationhood construed as a notional aesthetic prospect, occupying a liminal space both literally and metaphorically. Indeed, by way of this reading, Tam's enraptured praise of Nannie's dancing comes into its own as an apposite statement of aesthetic judgement.³⁸ Standing on tiptoes to peer through the rustic opening in the kirk at a knowing image of Scottishness as unimprovement, Tam glimpses into the future, Burns brilliantly heralding subsequent developments. In this sense, the irony surrounding Burns's refiguring of Scottishness, rather than undercutting the move as a statement of serious ideological intent, confirms it as a forerunner of later cultural practice, producing an understanding of identity as ironic self-awareness that would be taken up by Scott and the Blackwoodians.

It is not a little ironic that "Tam o' Shanter" has become so central to the Scottish literary canon. While Burns's later work with national song

³⁶ Additionally, McIlvanney notes the appropriate status of graveyards as "sites of folk festivity and carnivalesque resistance to the powers-that-be" ("Poems Like Hand Grenades," p. 40).

³⁷ Craig, *Out of History*, as in n. 20 above, 39.

³⁸ McGuirk provides a complementary point here, in noting that the interposition by the narrative voice at lines 151-62 represents an "aesthetic objection" to Tam's visual delectation of the witches. She suggests that "Tam's taste is vindicated" by Nannie's youthful beauty (McGuirk, *Sentimental Era*, 156).

is one of the most important acts of cultural collection in Scottish history, “Tam” finds him reflecting upon such processes, deconstructing the category of the folk artefact. Though the narrative pun leaves a frustrated Nannie in possession of an inert “tail”—a displaced revenge for Tam’s improper appreciation of her own exposed rear—the “tale” itself demands instability (216-19). Stuck at the heart of Scottish literature, “Tam” asks us to reconsider quite what we mean when we suggest that an artefact is representative. As part of this meditation, the poem’s central device builds on the national aesthetic framework in Burns’s poetics to perform an act of aesthetic cultural nationalism, “Tam o’ Shanter”’s internal logic thus presaging its own emblematic status. Tam, himself an icon of nationhood, gazes in at a careful tableau of Scottishness understood as unimprovement. It is a moment of charged national self-consciousness with which Burns anticipates strategies that would be developed by Scott and others in the early nineteenth century. In drawing on an extant understanding of nationhood in his poetics, this central performance bears out Stafford’s argument that Burns is “reconsidering his earlier aims and influences” (p. 217). While the poet, never without a dash of irony, had oriented himself as a local and national bard, his image and words the embodiment of Scotland, “Tam o’ Shanter” adapts and reflects upon this aim, depicting a relationship to nationhood based in his aesthetic vocabulary of Scottishness. Stafford’s further observation that, “The old question ... of whether even the most vivid supernatural experience was really a projection of the human mind was being posed again,” is also equally apt (p. 222). Tam’s vision symbolizes, at least in part, the creative energy of imagination, engaged here in reproducing the communal fiction of national identity in aesthetic terms.

The treatment of Scottishness in “Tam o’ Shanter” might appear to render it an impotent dream, subordinate to what Edward Waverley would term the “real history” of the improving cultural hegemony. Indeed perhaps an aesthetic rendering of nationhood could defuse the problematic of its recurrent opposition to improvement, making it available as passive romantic detail. Alternatively, and in line with revisionist readings of the Waverley Novels as generative and polyphonic in their approach to Scotland, might not an aesthetic nation provide a space for debate, with credible forms of power, taking on the unstable politics of art itself?³⁹ In “Tam,” though the witch Nannie cannot cross

³⁹ See in particular Caroline McCracken-Flesher, *Possible Scotlands: Walter Scott and the Story of Tomorrow* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005).

the River Doon, the latent vigour of an aesthetic existence is still hinted at, as the “hellish legion” escapes its frame to launch out into the night (ll. 192-208). Burns’s kirk sequence is far from depoliticized, finding room to query the norms of a culture in which war, social injustice and criminality occupy a darkened frame, ousted to occupy the same hidden space. Memorably banishing Scottishness itself to the space of nightmares, the poem probes at what is ostracized by the culture of improvement. By recalibrating nationhood in the conceptual space of an artwork, it also invites a formal debate on how identity structures are mediated. For one thing, if Scottishness can be sustained in emblematic, aesthetic terms, then the relationship of this to an essentialized national identity certainly becomes a pressing question. An aesthetic paradigm perhaps lends itself to narrow tropes of nationhood, yet its inherent formal instability may counteract this. Such questions evince the discursive richness of “Tam o’ Shanter”’s pivotal aestheticizing moment, “an unco sight!,” the recognition of which strengthens our sense of Burns’s influence on the evolution of Scottish Romanticism.

University of Glasgow