Independence for Whom? or What? Scottish Literature and the Inhuman

By Matthew Wickman

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Then again, has Alex Salmond really read Burns? The article 'Burns would be Yes' quotes Salmond claiming that the famed 'Scotch Bard' would have voted for independence. 'From tip to toe, Robert Burns was a 100 per cent Scottish patriot. No-one should ever try to pigeon-hole Burns into party politics because he was far too big for that, but it is clear from his private writings […] as well as his poetry, that he always backed the nation of Scotland'.[1] But then, as one would expect, the article cites a source with an opposing view — Labour MSP Richard Baker, a director of the 'Better Together' campaign: 'It's foolish of Alex Salmond', Baker says, 'to try to appropriate Burns for the SNP. Every Scot can find aspects of his poetry that concurs with their beliefs and much of his writing was socialist and internationalist. It's quite wrong to suggest that Burns would have voted one

particular way as Burns spoke for all Scots and all humanity'.[2] Baker's formulation is especially interesting as it implies some deep divisions and aggregates of which Burns is metonymic. On the one hand, because Burns speaks for all Scots, and because Scots are divided on the issue of independence, Burns would not vote yes. On the other hand, because Burns speaks for 'all humanity', and because humanity is a larger category than Scotland (and one over which Scotland has no jurisdiction), Burns would not vote yes. In the first instance, Scots — and Burns with them — are deeply divided; and in the second instance, Scots, and Burns, are aggregates of vaster networks — societies, nations, and reticula of capital and information. Each precludes a vote for or even a proper concept of independence. For independence implies a coherent human subject and we Scots, whoever 'we' are, are not ourselves.

Forget for a moment Burns's imaginary proclivities about the outcome of the vote. Perhaps without intending to, Baker conjures a more fitting place for the humanities in the public sphere than the ventriloquizing ascription of voting preferences, and that concerns the status of the human. And with one breath Baker has made Burns a precursor to concepts of the human subject as both fatally riven and as multiplied indefinitely beyond itself — as the ancestor, that is, to Freud and Heidegger on one side, with their views of a humanity sundered from its own desires or from a proper understanding of its own being, and also as the ancestor to Deleuze and Guattari, with their notion of a 'schizophrenic' dispersion of subjects into complex networks of affect.

Consider the example of one of Burns's best-known poems, 'To a Mouse'. You recall the situation of this dramatic poem: Burns's plowman-poet inadvertently destroys the home of a mouse during a month, November, when the displaced rodent will likely die from exposure. As he watches the creature scurry, he reflects on traits the two of them share. Each 'schemes' for a better life and suffers disappointment at the hands of fate, perhaps by the plundering of those who claim the land by force or by legal ownership. Burns's poet thus finds himself in the role of both landowner and mouse, with the power to evict but not to prevent a similar fate from happening to himself. The poem thus multiplies the poet's identities — even as, at a different level, it divides them into fractions of themselves. Indeed, the poet reflects, he and the mouse do not share similar states of being:

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The poem concludes by drawing these essential contrasts: the mouse dwells in the present whereas human existence suspends itself between past and future; the mouse inhabits a world of objects — straw, soil, barley — while humans occupy a realm of haunting absences and pseudo-presences; the mouse's existence is tangible, the poet's atmospheric; the mouse is an organism of earth, as is the plowman, although he is also a creature of heaven or, more properly, of the 'environment' as what literally environs or surrounds him, spiriting him away from what is materially at hand.[4] This existential condition ruins the plowman's integrity of self, converting his existence into a fraction, into something less than anything whole. He belongs neither to nature nor to civilization, nor to past, present, or future. Spatially and temporally, biologically and psychologically, he is a divided creature.[5]

At this level, at least, Baker is right: Burns's plowman is both too split and too multiple for anything as ostensibly unified as independence. And yet, to complicate matters, we should recall that Burns's poem initiates a tacit dialogue with Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* regarding the concept of sympathy, the great Scottish Enlightenment idea concerning individual and group psychology that purports to explain how societies of all sizes, including national communities, develop. Burns's poem is about the human predilection toward sympathy, both with other humans and also with nature. Ultimately, however, it asserts the failure of sympathy: the plowman cannot fully connect with his riven self, let alone with other creatures. And because of this he is incapable of fostering a true community. 'I'm truly sorry Man's dominion / Has broken Nature's social union' (ll. 7-8) he tells the mouse and, in doing so, he at least partly validates Salmond's contention instead of Baker's. I say this because Burns's revision of Smith suggests the impracticability of 'Union' and thus a kind of existential independence as a human lot. 'Burns would be Yes', in other words, not necessarily because he was actively 'for Scotland' but because he may have found it impossible to be for anything else.

And so, while the Salmond and Baker quotes in *The Scotsman* article are in some ways mere acts of projection, Burns's iconic poem does speak to the referendum in ways that have nothing to do with voter preference, instead casting independence as both impossible and inevitable, a classic double bind. 'How should Scots vote?' is not the question foregrounded in perhaps the most famous poem by the writer both sides have enlisted for the cause. Instead, the presents the subject of independence and/or union as subordinate to, and practically a logical predicate of, the question of what it means to be human and of what the relationship between Scottishness and humanity may be in a poem imagined as an oracle of each.

To answer the riddle posed by the poem let's follow its rationale and chain of associations just a little further. Burns's plowman-poet, we have seen, professes an inability to transcend the self and or even the capacity to organize a unified self that one could attempt to transcend. And to that extent, his meditation on sympathy resembles David Hume's more than Adam Smith's. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume invokes the concept of sympathy as one in which an observer attributes an outward circumstance she perceives in another person to some apparent cause of that circumstance. The sight of a person weeping, for example, suggests misfortune. Sympathy thus forges two links — an effect to a cause (weeping to misfortune) and one person to another. But there is still a third link that sympathy forges, and that is to society as a whole. Justice, national allegiance, modesty, and good manners, Hume says, are all 'mere human contrivances for the interest of society'. And because society attaches moral virtue to these traits, and because we behold the public esteem these virtues inspire, 'It follows', Hume says, 'that sympathy is the source of the esteem, which we pay to all the artificial virtues'.[6]

So, in addition to the bonds of cause and effect and person to person, sympathy links human nature to social convention. Indeed, for Hume, such conventionality follows from the complexities — the divisions and multiplicities — of human nature. Those familiar with Hume's *Treatise* will recall his logic: we esteem moral virtues from a principle of self-preservation — to embody such virtues is to gain the approbation of others — and this predisposition, in turn, reveals us to be creatures motivated by feeling rather than reason. It is feeling, especially the passion for self-preservation, that moves us, and that causes us to form societies; and it is sympathy that connects us to one another and thus ensures the stability

of society and, by extension, ourselves. Burns's plowman, recall, sympathizes above all with this self-preserving instinct in the rodent whose dwelling he has crushed; but his sympathy is imperfect on that very basis because his sense of the precariousness of his own existence — of the past that fills him with regret and the future at which he can only 'guess an' fear' &mmdash; diverts his attention back to himself. At its best, then, sympathy helps us craft illusions concerning the nature of our connection to others and of our permanence amid the greater instability of existence. And this instability reflects, for Hume, the contingency of the world — its merely accidental character and our accidental place in it.

This tension between contingency and permanence — or between accident and some apparent guarantee of its durability — is what the philosopher Quentin Meillassoux calls 'Hume's problem'. Meillassoux is best known as the founder of speculative realism, and as a foundation of his 2006 book *After Finitude* he invokes the principle that Hume's subversion of cause and effect teaches us, namely that 'the same cause may actually bring about [an infinite] number of events', indeed that 'any cause may actually produce any effect'.[7] In the terms we have been discussing, any convention may attach itself to any virtue, and any virtue to any real or imagined source of self-preservation. And why is this principle so important to Meillassoux? Because it allows him to formulate the possibility of situations or worlds of which we have no experience and barely any conception. He lists these facts of modern science:

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'How', Meillassoux asks, 'are we to grasp the *meaning* of scientific statements bearing explicitly upon a manifestation of the world that is posited as anterior to the emergence of thought and even of life — *posited, that is, as anterior to every form of human relation to the world*', and in which human existence itself 'is just one event among others?'[8] The reason why these questions are so vexing is that the Kantian tradition we have inherited bequeaths a mediation so thoroughgoing that it admits of no concepts — concerning nature, truth, or other ways of life, noumenal entities all — that have not been filtered by our consciousness, language, and categories of understanding; and these filters, cultural critics

remind us, are woven of our biases — pertaining to race, class, gender, ethnicity, anthropocentrism, logocentrism, and so on. Kant installed this system of mediations as a kind of counterpoint to Hume's philosophy. Unlike Hume, who ultimately attached thought to the vicissitudes of experience — to accidents of circumstance that provide us with the raw materials of cognition, and that continually modify our sense of the world and of ourselves — Kant sought to circumvent such contingency by asserting a stable subject capable of registering, reflecting on, and representing these modifications. In effect, representation — mediation — ensures stability by enabling us to make sense of, and thus capture, even those things that elude our understanding. Hence, while in one sense Kant effectuated a 'Copernican shift' by diverting philosophical attention from 'things-in-themselves' to the analysis of 'things-as-they-appear-to-us' and 'things-as-we-represent-them-to-ourselves', in another sense Kant placed the human subject squarely at the center of the knowable universe, with the diversity of phenomena swirling around it as the basis of their very existence.

However, and quoting here from an important 1885 essay by the Scottish philosopher James Hutchison Stirling (and alluding to the extended discussion of this essay by Cairns Craig), what if Kant has not answered Hume?[9] What if Humean contingency undercuts the Kantian master subject, or at least opens the possibility for situations for which Kant's philosophical program cannot account? Because this would be the consequence, Hutchison Stirling and Meillassoux assert, if one could show, as Hume effectively does, that it is not logically contradictory that things might exist of which we have no conception, that there are things that exist which we cannot represent. What if, therefore, we are not — indeed, what if humans are not — the measure of all things? This is Meillassoux's wager, the wager of speculative realism — speculative because we can only venture the existence of things and worlds outside ourselves; in effect, such speculations are self-conscious fictions even when they take the form of such empirically verifiable facts as the ones Meillassoux cites concerning the age of the universe, and of the planet, and of life on earth. In this respect, Meillassoux's position not only evokes Hume's but also Burns's plowman-poet in 'To a Mouse'. For the failure of sympathy severs the connections we forge between persons and worlds, eroding causal relationships and revealing a series of underlying contingencies. When plowmen can no longer sympathize with mice or even with themselves (their own pasts and futures), then whatever they take themselves and their worlds to be is revealed to be accidental, the products of history rather than

necessity. They are, but they might be otherwise.

Perhaps on this basis we can venture, less perhaps with Salmond than with Meillassoux, that Burns, or at least his plowman-poet, would be 'yes', but on speculative rather than traditionally nationalistic grounds. For independence at least tenders the possibility of something modern Scotland has never been, although it's difficult to say here exactly what 'Scotland' would mean.[10] As the naysayers remind us, such a Scotland is a radical unknown — undefined and almost otherworldly. Burns in some ways is the laureate of this Scotland, which is to say that he is the bard of a nation that does not exist, not yet. With an eye to Baker, we might also label Burns the poet of all inhumanity, the poet of creatures we might otherwise be.[11] And so, too capacious for Scotland, too taxing for humanity; the program of a heretofore unimagined, inhuman, non-nation: this is what the independence referendum might mean if Scotland's leaders were speculative realists, or if they simply took Scottish literature and thought seriously instead of enlisting figures like Burns as sympathizers for political measures presented as the logical effects of predetermined causes.

References & Further Information

[1] Andrew Whitaker, 'Scottish Independence: Burns would be Yes — Salmond', in *The Scotsman* 23 June 2013, http://www.scotsman.com/news/scottish-independence-burns-would-be-yes-salmond-1-2973883. Accessed 21 November 2013.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Robert Burns, 'To a Mouse, On turning her up in her Nest, with the Plough, November, 1785', in *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968). 1:128. ll.43-48.

[4] On the ideological difference between 'environment' and 'ecology', see Lawrence Buell (2005: 140-41).

[5] For a larger analysis of this poem, see my essay 'Robert Burns and Big Data, or, Pests of Quantity and Visualization', in *Modern Language Quarterly* (MLQ) 75:1 (2014) pp.1-28.

[6] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (London: Penguin, 1968), p.628 (see pp.625-42).

[7] Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008) p.90.

[8] Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, pp.9-10, Meillassoux's emphases.

[9] For an extended discussion of this essay and its place in Scottish (and a wider Western) intellectual history, see Cairns Craig, *Association and the Literary Imagination: From the Phantasmal Chaos* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp.41-83.

[10] See my article 'Scotland — The Event; or, Theory after Muir', in *The International Journal of Scottish Literature* 3 (2007). http://www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk/issue3/wickman.htm. Accessed December 10, 2013.

[11] I echo here the title of Emmanuel Levinas's influential 1974 book *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*.

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(c) The Bottle Imp