

BUT TO OUR TALE
Some thoughts on the art of story-telling of Robert Burns

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There is no doubt about the fact that Robert Burns was very well acquainted with what Norbert Voorwinden and I tried to define in our book *Oral Poetry*,¹ the telling of tales. In his early years Burns must have heard the songs his mother sang. He listened eagerly to the ghost-stories and fairy-tales that Betty Davidson, a relative of his mother who worked on the farm, told him.² Many years later he used some of the stories from his early youth for the composition of his masterpiece *Tam o' Shanter*.

In the beginning of this famous poem Burns paints us a picture of people who enjoy each others company, drinking, singing and listening to good stories:

The night draw on wi sangs and clatter;
And ay the ale was growin better:
The landlady and Tam grew gracious,
Wi secret favours, sweet and precious
The Souter tauld his queerest stories;
The landlord's laugh was ready chorus:³

Robert Burns belonged to a period in the history of European literature where poetry still was seen as *a pastime with good company*. He was of course familiar with the habit to read poems, rhymed essays, learned prose, in private. He must have done his reading for example of Alexander Pope - from his work there are almost thirty quotations to be found in Burns' poems and letters - on silent moments, probably late at night rather at the kitchen table than in a study like that of Sir Walter Scott.⁴ In his last years in Dumfries he could permit himself reading in his bed in the morning; he was quite honest about it: *up in the morning is nae for me*.

It was a gentle and friendly gesture of the Riddell family to permit him - as their neighbour from Ellisland, his last farm - to use a small romantic folly, *The Hermitage*, in their grounds at *Friars Carse* as a place

¹ *Oral Poetry, das problem der Mndlichkeit mittelalterlicher epischer Dichtung*. Ed. Norbert Voorwinden and Max de Haan. Darmstad 1974.

² James A. Mackay, *A biography of Robert Burns*. Edinburgh 1992. 31ff.

³ *The collected works of Robert Burns*. Ed. by James A. Mackay. Ayr 1986. 411; referred to as CW.

⁴ Burns would have liked very much - like all of us - Sir Walters "den" behind the diningroom of his house in Castle Street in Edinburgh. See e.g. "The Editors introduction" in the Everyman Edition of *The Heart of Midlothian* (London 1906. ii-vii).

of seclusion and quiet moments:

As life itself becomes disease
 Seek the chimney nook of ease:
 There ruminate with sober thought,
 On all thou'st seen, and heard, and wrought,⁵

Burns did a lot of reading in those years in Ellisland. Daiches points to the numerous books that Burns ordered from his bookseller Peter Hill⁶ forming a broad selection of contemporary and older English and French authors.

But many times in those years in Ellisland, six miles from Dumfries, Robert Burns would saddle his horse, Jenny Geddes, and run off to his duties as an *exciseman* or just to a visit of his favourite pub - or as he used to say *howff-*, *The Globe Inn* in Dumfries. There he would and could join in with the singing of old and new songs and probably also in the chorus of one of the bawdy songs, that he wrote so well.⁷

Anyway, there were also at The Globe Inn favours, may be secret, but certainly precious, because Robert had a passionate affair with the Landlords niece, Anna Park. *But to our tale ...*

There is another interesting example of the conviviality of poetry in the works of Robert Burns. He refers to the singing of songs and a game with rhymes his letter to a fellow scottish Bard, John Lapraik:

On Fasten-e'en we had a rockin,
 To ca'the crack and weave our stockin:
 And there was muckle fun and jokin,
 You need na doubt:
 At length we had a hearty yokin',
 At 'sang about.'⁸

Scotland had and has a long and strong tradition of singing songs and telling tales. Many, many thousands try every year at a Burns Supper - the traditional tribute to Robert Burns to commemorate his birthday, 25 January 1759 - to recite by heart *Tam o' Shanter*. The number of children, stimulated by the yearly competitions organised by The Burns Federation, that can handle this text of more than 200 lines is astonishing.

Burns was well familiar with the oral tradition. As said before, he heard the songs and stories from his earliest childhood, he was a keen observer of mankind and many anecdotes and remarkable situations

⁵ CW 325: 'Written in Friars Carse Hermitage, on Nithside'.

⁶ David Daiches, *Robert Burns, the poet*. Edinburg 1994. 249.

⁷ Robert Burns, *The merry Muses of Caledonia*. Ed. J. Barke and S. Goodsir Smith. Edinburgh 1982.

⁸ CW 370-72: 'Epistle to J. Lapraik'.

stuck to his mind. He devoted himself more and more to the songs of his country in the last ten years of his short life. He collected texts and melodies, from fragments of stanza's he tried to reconstruct the whole of a song or tried to rewrite it. In this way he gave the world the song now familiar to many millions in the world, the song of saying good-bye, the song of New Years Eve: *Auld lang syne*.

But once again: to our tale. The life of Robert Burns came in 1788 to a somewhat quieter stage. At last he married Jean Armour and took the lease of a new farm, *Ellisland*. After the second edition of his work in Edinburgh he was a famous person, befriended with important people. His neighbours in *Friars Carse*, the Riddells, had a keen interest in music and poetry. Burns visited them often and met at their house an interesting man, the antiquary Captain Francis Grose (1731-1791). This former army officer of Swiss origin published books with descriptions and illustrations of important historical views of England and Scotland.

Grose looked for suitable subjects for his engravings and for texts that could go with the illustrations. He was a small and heavy fat man; Burns liked him obviously very much. He pulled gently and friendly Grose's leg in several witty poems.⁹

Burns suggested to include Alloways old and roofless church as one of the sights to be displayed in Grose's *The Antiquities of Scotland*. From the three still existing letters from Burns to Grose two are devoted to the famous tale in verse that Robert wrote on request of Captain Grose, *Tam o' Shanter*. In the first letter probably of June 1790,¹⁰ Burns summarizes three stories related to Kirk Alloway, as the old church is named in the Ayrshire dialect. It must have been stories from his youth. Burns lived and worked in this period of his life in *Ellisland*, close to Dumfries, and at least fifty miles away from the old haunted church, that stood as a ruin at walking distance from the house where he was born.

The first story tells the tale of a drunken farmhand who discovers a light in the old church returning at night from the smithy. He saw a kettle over the fire 'simmering the heads of unchristened children, limbs of executed malefactors'. The farmhand took the kettle from the fire poured out the terrible ingredients, inverted it on his head, took it home and there it remained in the family 'a living evidence of the truth of the story'.

The second story is about a man returning from a market day who saw a dance of witches in the old church. And as Burns says: 'the ladies were all in their smocks; and one of them happening unluckily to have a smock which was considerably too short to answer all the

⁹ CW 373 and 415.

¹⁰ *The collected Letters of Robert Burns*. Ed. James A. Mackay. Ayr 1987. 557-58. Referred to as CL.

purpose of that piece of dress, our farmer was so tickled that he involuntary burst out, with a loud laugh, 'Well luppen Maggy wi' the short sark!' and recollecting himself, instantly spurred his horse to the top of his speed.' By passing the bridge over the river Doon, half a mile or so from the church, he escaped the hellish legion of witches that chased him, because witches cannot cross a running stream. But Maggy, the witch with the *cutty sark*, robbed his horse of its tail.

The third story deals with a shepherd boy that flew by witchcraft from Alloway's church with witches to a wine cellar in Bordeaux and got so drunk that he could not take the flight home with the witches. The next day he was found in the wine cellar by a person that understood 'Scotch'. Some way or another he came back home again, where he often told this wondrous tale.

The third remaining letter in connection with stories about Kirk Alloway dates from 1 December of 1790 and came to Captain Grose with the manuscript of *Tam o' Shanter*:¹¹ 'Inclosed is one of the Alloway-kirk Stories, done in Scots verse - Should you think it worthy a place in your Scots Antiquities, it will lengthen not little the altitude of my Muse's pride [...].'

Burns' thoughts must have gone back to many memories from his youth. He tells us that during his stay in Kirkoswald (1775) he sheltered himself for a storm in a farm near the coast, where he heard the wife complain that her drinking husband one day on his return from the marketday would fall into the river Doon. The good man, Douglas Graham (1738-1831), and his wife lived on the farm of Shanter. The name of his boat was: *Tam o' Shanter*. Burns met also Douglas's best friend John Davidson (1732-1806), a shoemaker: *Souter Johnny!* He must have kept the idea for his tale for some time in his pocket till Captain Grose gave him the right opportunity to pick up the bits and pieces from his youth in Alloway and Kirkoswald.

The banks of the River Nith are a landscape of pure and rare beauty. Ellisland, Burns' last farm is quietly stretching its acres alongside the murmuring stream. Tradition tells us that Burns, during his work at the banks of this lovely river, loudly talking to himself, created in one morning his unsurpassed tale *Tam o' Shanter*, based mainly on the second story from his letter of June 1790. Between the summer and December of 1790 Burns must have devoted considerably more time than one morning to the composition of this masterwork.

At the end of the poem Burns states:

Now, wha this tale o'truth shall read,

This line shows that Burns was well aware of the fact that he wrote his tale for readers. Although *Tam o' Shanter* is a written epic poem, it reflects undoubtedly in many ways the oral tradition of Burns' own time

¹¹ CL 559-60.

and of earlier days.

First of all it is important to observe that there are many instances in the text, where the narrator addresses an audience, rather than a reading individual. Of course that is part of the game. Burns as a writer, a poet, an author, describes for us the way such a story could have been told by someone. It is all part of the game called literature. On the other hand such a 'make believe' can only be achieved by imitating carefully the way stories once were or still are told. That is exactly what Burns does.

And so for the last time: *to our tale*.

A	Vss. 1-12	Description of the end of the marketday, the long road home, the wrath of the waiting wife.
B	Vss. 13-16	Remark of the narrator: this are just the things that happened to Tam o' Shanter.
C	Vss. 17-32	The long advices of Kate, the <i>haunted church</i> is mentioned for the first time(see I, L, O)
D	Vss. 33-36	<i>A captatio benevolentiae</i> , but the narrator directs his words to the obviously not present ladies.
E	Vss. 37-52	<i>But to our tale</i> the night in the pub: drinking, good company, 'precious' favours (from the landlady, see O, not from Cutty Sark).
F	Vss. 53-68	An allegorical figure, <i>Care</i> , is astonished about the happy bliss of Tam o' Shanter. The moments are like happy humming bees (but see P).
G1	Vss. 61-72	Until vs. 67 the famous description of the fragile nature of human happiness. The proverb-like <i>Nae man can tether time nor tide</i> suggests the looking for the approval of an audience.
G2		First mention of the dreadful night outside.
H	Vss. 73-78	After the first mention of the horrifying night, the narrator gives now more details.
I	Vss. 79-88	We see before us Tam riding out. Witches are mentioned.
J1	Vss. 89-104	A first scene full of frightening stories.
J2		Again further information about the night, storm and rain and lightning and we learn

- what the devil had at his hands (vss. 73-78).
- K1 Vss.104-142 The longest part of the poem, some manuscripts and Grose's edition make a division at vs. 115.
- K2 The narrator postpones the sensational information about what Tam sees by a digression about whisky and beer. Meggie is sober but then: witches and warlocks are seen.
- K3 Description of the horrors in the church (a parallel to vss. 89-96).
- L Vss. 143-150 More details on the 'dance of witches'.
- M Vss. 151-158 The narrator directs himself to Tam.
- N Vss. 159-162 But the witches are ugly old wives.
- O Vss. 163-178 Tam knows better. There is one beautiful young witch, (he likes *precious favours* ..., cf. E).
- P Vss. 179-192 The narrator tells us that he is not capable to describe what happens (see vs. 142), but Tam, *a blethering, blustering drunken blellum* (vs. 20) opens his mouth and cries out *Weel done Cutty Sark ...* and the hellish legion flies out ('Bees').
- Q Vss. 193-200 The witches attack Tam.
- R Vss. 201-218 One of the manuscripts has a blank line at vs. 205, but the story becomes fast and sensational. Kate shall never more have to wait for her husband (vs. 11-12).
- S Vss. 219-224 A wise lesson, mirroring Kate's *sage advices* from vss. 17-32.

The text is very well structured. Comprehensive paragraphs of 10 to 20 verses make it easy to follow the story.¹² Not unlike the unknown author of the Medieval Dutch Life Of Christ, *Van den leven ons Heren*,¹³ Burns uses a pattern of stepping stones and repetitions gradually giving more details not overloading his public with lengthy descriptions that are difficult to absorb (D) and let us forget the mainstream of the story. We could see such elements e.g. in the description

¹² Here I can see a confirmation of some hypothetical thoughts on paragraphs in the codices of the Middle Dutch *Reynart the Fox*. May be we can assume from the many renderings of *Tame o' Shanter* I have heard in the last seven years, that for reading aloud 460 verses rather an hour than half an hour is needed, cfr. M.J.M. de Haan, 'Lombarden en paragraaftekens in de *Reynaert*', in *Studies voor Zaalberg*. Leiden 1975. 123.

¹³ *Van den Levene ons Heren*. Ed. W.H. Beuken. Zwolle 1968. Vol. II, 66-72.

of Alloway's church that comes gradually with more details to a full picture, in the same way the dreadful night and the weather is sketched in repetitions with more detail. He uses this technique very well in the famous lines:

The hour approaches Tam maun ride:
 The hour of night's black arch the key-stane,
 That dreary hour Tam mounts his beast in'
 And sic a night he takes the road in,
 As never poor sinner was abroad in.
 The wind blew as twad blawn his last;
 The rattling showers rose to the blast;
 The speady gleams the darkness swallow'd;
 Loud deep, and lang the thunder bellow'd
 That night a child could understand,
 The deil had business on his hand.

He repeats the word *hour*, carefully filling in more detail each time and steps to the word *night* to finish the vivid but gradually progressing description with a frightening climax, announcing the devils business!

In the 25 minutes that it takes to recite *Tam o' Shanter* we feel the strong drive of the story. Who reads Burns's moving poem *The Cotter's Saturday Night* feels how the poet paints a picture with a broad brush in a quiet atmosphere in a serene and realistic *clair-obscur*, using a complicated stanza-form. In *Tam o' Shanter* we see as Daiches said: 'The speed and verve of the narration, the fine flexible use of the octosyllabic couplet, the effective handling of the verse paragraph [...]'.¹⁴

Burns addresses his public, tries a *captatio benevolentiae* addressing the ladies, praising their wise lessons (D). The refined element is here that the wives belong to the *readers* of the story, but they are not present in the imaginary *audience* that is addressed in the line *But to our tale*. He knows all too well that they nevertheless will still warm their wrath: indeed what can a man better do than to say: *but to our tale*.

Burns manipulates his public very capably postponing on dramatic moments in his story the sensational events by using the *digressio*: e.g. describing the qualities of beer and whisky (K2). With a traditional *Un-sagbarkeitstopos*¹⁵ he slows down a moment where we are eager to hear more in vs. 172 (P).

With parenthetical, proverb-like, remarks he can get his public on his side e.g. with the famous - and also retarding - *For pleasures are like poppies spread* (G1, vs. 61-72). By retarding the real start of things pondering on the unique qualities of Ayr (Curtius would speak of an

¹⁴ David Daiches, *Robert Burns, the poet*. Edinburgh 1994. 251.

¹⁵ E.R. Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter*. Bern/München 1961. 3. Auflage.

*Überbietungsformel*¹⁶) he shows not only his craftsmanship as a well-read writer of literary epic verses but also as a man who knows how to tell a good story to his cronies.

Once again Burns gives us in *Tam o' Shanter* proof of his knowledge of the works of older and contemporary Scottish, French and English writers. He knew how to combine, 'mither wit and native fire' on the one hand with 'classic lore' on the other. There is hardly any doubt that Burns wrote *Tam o' Shanter* as a story to be read, as he says in the last verses of the poem. Undoubtedly he wrote it in the language, style and atmosphere of the oral tradition.

Thus his tale is also a portrait of the art of story telling in 18th Century Scotland.

And although it is long since Norbert Voorwinden worked together with me on oral poetry, a subject still dear to both of us, it is also still true what *Auld lang syne* says:

Here's a hand my trusty fier ...

¹⁶ Curtius, *Europäische Literatur...* 171.