Robert Burns & African American Poetry: Struggle and Song

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Poet Kevin Young is director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. This, after a distinguished period as director of The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York. He grew up in Topeka, Kansas, and I was lucky enough to be one of his teachers. In fact, he wrote his first poem in one of my summer writing workshops for gifted middle scholars, held at Washburn University. Later, when Kevin was between his freshman and sophomore years at Harvard, I hired him to help me put together the complete poems of my University of Kansas writing teacher and mentor Edgar Wolfe, who had recently died. Kevin did the lion's share of work, arranging, editing, writing an introduction, creating a chronology of Ed's life, and finally designing and seeing into print *The Almond Tree.* Wolfe, a white man from the small Kansas town of Ottawa, gained prominence in 1953 for *Widow Man,* published by Little Brown and Company, and honored as a Best Book of that year by the *New York Herald-Tribune.* The novel, about an interracial marriage in Kansas City, Kansas, chronicled the story of a widower, Tom Way, who married a black woman, and who is, upon her death, unable to make a transition into a life without black people and culture. He eventually courts and marries a black neighbor. The book, from Little, Brown and Company, was published just a year before the landmark Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision. Kevin Young attended church with the Brown family.

Over the years Kevin and I have shared family births and deaths, and poetic and family occasions in Kansas, where he has come to read from his ever-growing body of poetry and other literary work. Although Kevin Young has been kind enough to speak of our relationship as important to him, knowing him has been an enriching gift, as he continues to teach me and guide my awareness of race and black culture. I certainly welcomed his 2020 anthology *African American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle & Song* and was moved by the poets and their poetry. Just as in his own work, Young gathers together a rich mix of truth and humor, indictment and playfulness, ballad and blues, loss and love. My heart was broken, but also lifted by, such

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powerful work. And being who I am, of Scottish background, who grew up with a father who recited Robert Burns and attributed to the poet his own positions on democracy, and on social and racial justice, I wondered whether Burns was an influence on African-American poets, as he had been on my father, and on such historical luminaries as Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. My father, Lincoln, and Douglass were all touched by the qualities of Burns' life, as well. As Robert Crawford writes in the Introduction to *The Bard: Robert Burns, a Biography:*

> "Born poor, unable to vote, a villager denied much formal education in his very tone of address, his attitude to authority, his commitment to common humanity and his consummate, learned skill with the formal and informal music of words, Burns made himself a wonderful love poet and the greatest poet of democracy. More than any other poet he articulated so many of the attitudes of people who now take for granted a democratic accent of the mind."

Along with 31 others, I've memorized Burns' "Banks of Doon," with its lines: *Thou'll break my heart, thou bonie bird,/ That sings upon the bough! Thou minds me o' the happy days/ When my fause Luve was true/ Thou'll break my heart, thou bonie bird,/ That sings beside thy mate;/ For sae I sat, and sae I sang,/ And wist na o' my fate.* And: *But my false lover stole my rose,/ And left the thorn wi' me.* Those lines express how hope and desire are betrayed, how they turn to struggle and lament. America has sung its promises and broken many hearts. America has given more thorns than roses. Many of the African American poets in *Struggle & Song* give us the rose-like beauty of words, mixed with the thorny years of enduring struggle. As I read these poets, I speculated on the poetry of Robert Burns as influence.

I was trying to do what Kevin Young writes about in his introduction to Edgar Wolfe's *The Almond Tree.* Then just nineteen years old, Kevin wrote:

> I have managed to make Edgar Wolfe's acquaintance in a way few before me have, through his poetry alone. I never had the pleasure of meeting Ed. Never having been able to shake his hand, or have the chance to hear his voice aloud, I have instead learned to listen to Ed's voice through his poems. After poring over page after page of his manuscripts, notes, poems, rough drafts, dreams, journals, letters, and general everyday observations, I sometimes feel that if Ed walked into the room, I would be able to recognize him at once, if not by what he looked like, then by what he chose to say and how he chose to say it.

Just as Kevin didn't know Ed Wolfe personally, the African American poets included in *Struggle & Song* did not know Robert Burns except through his poetry. And most of them would have known their Burns. A 1909 Scribner's high school textbook, *A First View of English and American Literature,* prints nine poems by Robert Burns: "The Cotter's Saturday

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Night," "The Twa Dogs," "Address to the Unco Guid," "A Red, Red Rose," "Bonnie Doon," "Of a' the Airts," "Scots Wha Hae," "To Mary in Heaven," and "To a Mouse."

The first 379 pages of *African American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle & Song* took me to 1959, the 200th anniversary year of Burns' birth. In those pages I looked for similarities in sentiment, language, and metaphor. I listened for even the slightest echoes. Or maybe something more: for pulses of Burns, for rhythms, for vocabulary, for any embodiment of the poet. How he might be recognized, as Kevin Young wrote, if he walked into a room to be somehow intuitively known. After all, poets read deeply and incorporate what they read, consciously through memorization, or unconsciously. The versatility of Burns makes his work widely accessible, and continuously popular. Certainly, he was in many a family library in the 19th through the mid-20th centuries.

As I researched and read, I found several poets who not only knew the poetry of Robert Burns but acknowledged his influence. Paul Laurence Dunbar, Sterling Brown, Jean Toomer, and Gwendolyn Brooks all read his work fully, and then care-fully.

Burns & Paul Laurence Dunbar

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), after a flattering review by William Dean Howells of his first book of poems, *Oak and Ivy* (1893), was immediately compared to Robert Burns and called "The Poet Laureate of the Negro Race," and "The Robert Burns of Negro Poetry." Even Langston Hughes later referred to him as "the black Robert Burns." Frederick Douglass called Dunbar "The most promising young colored man in America." Douglass, "delighted" by Dunbar's work, once "recited a Dunbar dialect poem 'with much spirit.'" Dunbar's tribute poem "Lincoln" (published posthumously in 1913) shows his admiration for the Emancipator: *Grave Lincoln came, strong handed, from after,/ The mighty Homer of the lyre of war.* Dunbar shared Lincoln's love of "A Man's A Man For A' That," as the Burns poem celebrates the common man, simple, honest, and grounded in the land: *A prince can mak a belted knight,/ A marquis, duke, an' a' that;/ But an honest man's abon his might,/ ... The pith o' sense, an' pride o' worth,/ Are higher rank than a' that.* And: *What though on hamely fare we dine,/ Wear hoddin grey, an' a that;/ ... The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor, Is king of' men for a' that.*

Compare those lines to these from Dunbar's "My Sort O' Man": *I don't believe in 'ristercrats;/ I like the honest tan/ That lies upon the healthful cheek/ An' speaks the honest man;/ I like to grasp the brawny hand/ That labor's lips have kissed,/* and *What though the*

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thousands sneer an' scoff,/ An' scorn yore humble birth?/ Kings are but puppets; you are king/ By right o' royal worth.

Dunbar echoes Burns' great "lost love" poem "Ae Fond Kiss," in his "Compensation," with its repetitions—*Because I had loved so deeply,/ Because I had loved so long,/ … Because I have loved so vainly/* —and its lamentation.

Most important is Dunbar's use of dialect, which, in the way of Burns, allowed him to write about common people in their own language. He attempted to find "an appropriate literary form for the representation of African American vernacular expression," according to Pauletta Washington, and while "repeated readings of John Keats, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Robert Burns saw Dunbar's poetry become more sophisticated," Dunbar "also searched for an authentic poetic diction that would incorporate the voices of his parents and the stories they told." Both Dunbar and Burns could write in standard English. Burns, however, once wrote to Scottish music collector George Thomson, "If you are for English verses, there is, on my part an end of the matter … I have not that command of the language that I have of my native tongue. In fact, I think my ideas are more barren in English than in Scottish."

Both poets found language that expressed the richness of their cultures. Some samples from, "A Negro Love Song," which has the lilt, the repetition, and the arc of many of Burns' songs*: Seen my lady home las' night,/ Jump back, honey, jump back/ and Hyeahd huh sigh a little sigh,/ Seen a light gleam f'om huh eye,/ An' a smile go flittin' by—/ Jump back, honey, jump back.* In his "Little Brown Baby," Dunbar expresses the simple satisfactions of family that Burns evokes in "The Cotter's Saturday Night." From Burns: *Th' expectant wee-things, toddlin, stacher through/ To meet their dead* [dad], *wi' flichterin noise and glee./ His wee bit ingle, blinkin bonilie,/ His clean hearth-stane, his thrifty wifie's smile,/ The lisping infant, prattling on his knee/.*

And companion lines from Dunbar: *He's pappy's pa'dner an' play-mate an' joy./ Come to you' pallet now — go to yo' res';/ Wisht you could allus know ease an' cleah skies;/ Wisht you could stay jes' a chile on my breas'—/ Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes!*

Given Burns' affection for and knowledge of the folk music of Scotland, he would have applauded Dunbar's sentiments in "When Malindy Sings": *…I hyeah dat music,/ Ez hit rises up an' mounts—/ Floatin' by de hills an' valleys,/ Way above dis buryin' sod,/*

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Burns wrote *Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, as the subtitle of the Kilmarnock Edition (1786) declares. Dunbar did not. According to the introduction of *The Complete Stories of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (ed. Morgan and Jarrett), only about a third of Dunbar's first three books of poetry were verses in dialect.

From his mother, Dunbar learned African American folklore—stories and music ("the dear old ballads," Dunbar called them) and the language that comprised the dialect itself. Burns, too, was steeped in Scottish folklore from an early age. Both used these elements to create distinctive literary dialects. Dunbar scholarship mentions the influence of Burns on Dunbar in terms of dialect, sentiment, form, music, and folk culture. One scholar, Joanne M. Braxton, notes their common use of word play, quoting Dunbar's "Confirmation," and calling it a tribute to Burns, perhaps even a poem written to him:

He was a poet who wrote clever verses,
And folks said he had fine poetical taste;
But his father, a practical farmer, accused him
Of letting the strength of his arm go to waste.

He called on his sweetheart each Saturday evening,
As pretty a maiden as man ever faced,
And there he confirmed the old man's accusation
By letting the strength of his arm go to waist.

Both poets were deeply read by other writers, and each has a line perhaps best-known because of its use as a title: John Steinbeck chose *Of Mice and Men* from Burns' 1785 "To A Mouse," *The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men/ Gang aft a-gley*; and Maya Angelou chose *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* from Dunbar's 1899 "Sympathy," *I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,/ When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—/ When he beats his bars and he would be free.*

Like Burns, Dunbar died young, just 33 years old to Burns' 37. Their poetry has been paired in performances. One, in 2018 at the St. Louis Public Library, was titled "Connections: Robert Burns and Paul Laurence Dunbar – Voices of the People," with this apt description: *Robert Burns, Scottish National Poet, collected the folk poetry and music of 18th century Scotland. Paul Laurence Dunbar, African American Poet and Musician, wrote in many dialects about the music of his time, the late 19th century. Americana expert William Ray will*

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demonstrate Scottish and American folk music reflected in the poetry of Robert Burns and Paul Laurence Dunbar as Thomasina Clarke recites examples of their poetry.

Burns & Sterling Brown

Sterling Brown (1901-1989), in a 1977 interview, said, “My mother was a great reader of poetry. My mother read. I remember her sweeping the floor, standing over the broom, reciting to me Robert Burns, Paul Laurence Dunbar. You see Burns is important to me. Burns is very important, what he did with the language, how he turned away from the neo-classic high flown.” The library shelves of Brown’s mother, a graduate of Fisk University, included poetry by Robert Burns, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Paul Laurence Dunbar.

Fittingly, Brown attended Dunbar High School, in Washington D.C. (Jean Toomer is a fellow alum), where he was taught by Frederick Douglass’ grandson. He attended Williams College in Massachusetts, then Harvard University, where he received his MA in 1923. He took a series of teaching jobs in the American South that greatly influenced him and his writing. His friend Joanne Gabbin —also the author of *Sterling A. Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic* Tradition—writes that in Lynchburg, Virginia, “Brown met the people who would open up his poetic sensibility to black folk culture and unstop the wellsprings of his literary power. The people … steeped in the traditions of the spirituals, blues, aphorisms, old lies, and superstition of folk life … taught the young … professor something of folk humor, irony, fortitude, and shrewdness.”

This matches the experience of Robert Burns, whose mother, Agnes Brown, had what biographer Maurice Lindsay describes as a “… good singing voice, and a rich store of folk snatches which the children, especially Robert, would listen to eagerly. She could hardly have guessed, as she went singing about her daily duties, that one day her eldest son would lift Scots folk-song” to the higher plane of art.

This same artful use of folk culture infused the work of Sterling Brown. Gabbin writes: Brown "sought to combine the musical forms of the blues, work songs, ballads, and spirituals with poetic expression in such a way as to preserve the originality of the former and achieve the complexity of the latter." Brown himself declared "a deep concern with the development of a literature worthy of our past, and of our destiny; without which literature we can never come to much."

Out of Brown’s rural teaching experience came his first collection of poetry, *Southern Road* (1932). Poet James Weldon Johnson wrote that Brown “… "infused his poetry with

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genuine characteristic flavor by adopting as his medium … common racy, living speech." Alain Locke, an early advocate of the Harlem Renaissance, thought African American poetry should elicit "the poetic portrayal of Negro folk-life ... true in both letter and spirit to the idiom of the folk's own way of feeling and thinking," and praised *Southern Road* as groundbreaking: "… here for the first time is that much-desired and long-awaited acme attained or brought within actual reach."

Reading Burns and Brown side by side does not reveal specific influences in terms of line, meter, or form, but both excel in narrative, in dialect, and both stand for their people. "A man's a man," after all. Or as Brown writes in "Strange Legacies," *One thing you left with us, Jack Johnson./ One thing before they got you./ You used to stand there like a man/* and *John Henry, with your hammer;/ John Henry, with your steel driver's pride,/ You taught us that a man could go down like a man.* None of the "neo-Classical high flown" there, nor in Burns.

Finally, like Burns and Dunbar, Brown explored, and saved, folk culture. Unsuccessful in finding a publisher for his poetry after *Southern Road*, he turned to teaching, at Howard University, beginning in 1929 and ending in 1969. There, he wrote criticism, including his 1937 works *Negro Poetry and Drama* and *The Negro in American Fiction*, both re-released in 1969, just when the Civil Rights and Black Consciousness movements sought to recover the legacy and heritage he had dedicated his life to preserving.

Burns & Jean Toomer

Jean Toomer (1894-1967), writes Justin Mellette in his "Jean Toomer's 'Reapers' and Robert Burns," echoes Robert Burns. Like Sterling Brown in Virginia, Toomer was exposed to African American small town rural life when he moved to Georgia to teach. As Toomer wrote in a letter (to Waldo Frank, from *Letters of Jean Toomer)*, "There, for the first time I really saw the Negro, not as a pseudo-urbanized and vulgarized, a semi-Americanized product, but the Negro peasant, strong with the tang of fields and soil." Certainly Toomer's poem "Reapers," the first in his novel *Cane,* has the flavor of workers at work: the reapers *start their silent swinging, one by one./ Black horses drive a mower through the weeds. And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds./ His belly close to ground.* The field rat, like the mouse in Burns' "To A Mouse," is startled (a word common to both poems), driven from safety, exposed. Burns is sympathetic to the mouse he has turned up with the plow, and waxes philosophical about the plight of *mice and men*. Toomer is more matter of fact, his field rat a victim not just of unsettlement, but of the *silent swinging* of the scythes, the inevitable death that comes to it and

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will eventually come to the reapers themselves. In other words, a grimmer reaping in Toomer than in Burns.

In XXIV of *Essentials*, Toomer takes on the universal, as did Burns in “A Man’s A Man For A’ That.” Toomer’s assertion of being *of the human race, of no particular class, of the human class* matches Burns’ poem which speaks against class and rank and imagines a new world of equality and brotherhood *the warld o’er*.

Burns & &Gwendolyn Brooks

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000), in her “A Song in the Front Yard,” understands the temptation of the forbidden, the desire for independence. The girl has *stayed in the front yard* all her life and wants *a peek at the back/ Where it’s rough and untended and hungry weed grows./ A girl gets sick of a rose.* She is warned by her mother to stay in the front, that her friend Johnnie Mae *Will grow up to be a bad woman./ That George’ll be taken to Jail soon or late.* The rough, the untended, the opposite of the rose also lurks in “Tam O’ Shanter,” by Robert Burns, as Tam ignores the warnings of his wife Kate, who *prophesied, that late or soon,/ Thou would be found deep drown’d in Doon.* We don’t know whether the front yard girl trespasses, but we know Tam does, and we know the tongue-in-cheek moral that might be shared by the girl’s sneering mother: *Think, ye may buy the joys o’er dear.* In a 1977 interview, Brooks spoke about her desire to write a poetry that anyone could enjoy, and yet still rise to the highest “art” of poetry: “I have mentioned Robert Burns who seems to me to write poetry that is quickly accessible and still manages to have it called literature by people who feel that they know what literature is.”

As he did for Dunbar and Brown, then, Burns perhaps helped Gwendolyn Brooks find a literary aesthetic.

Burns & Influences: Some Speculations

All the poets and poems Kevin Young selects for *Struggle & Song* have the clarity and readability Gwendolyn Brooks spoke to. In looking for influences, I was particularly attracted to poems of similar themes and language as in the poetry of Robert Burns. There are calls to freedom, calls for justice, equality, honesty, and integrity. There are questioners: of society and of God. And there are stunning poems of love and loss. The necessity and freedom to use dialect informs the work of Dunbar and Brown, but also Claude McKay and many others. Chronologically, here are those poets I’d speculate as influenced by Robert Burns.

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George Moses Horton (c. 1798-c. 1883) was born a slave, only two years after the death of Robert Burns. Like Burns, he composed poetry in his head. His "To Eliza" has strong similarities to "Ae Fond Kiss," and "The Banks O' Doon," and is about saying goodbye. The lines *Fare thee well—away I fly—/ I shun the lass who thus will grieve me/* and *Fare thee well! Although I smile,/ I grieve to give thee up forever/* and *"Fair thee well!—and if forever,/ Still forever fare thee well!"* echo the "Ae Fond Kiss" lines: *Ae fareweel, and then forever/* and *Who shall say that fortune grieves him,/ Ae farweel, alas, forever* and *Fare thee weel, thou first and fairest.* Both poems wish the beloved well, both emphasize the severance and the remembrance of the love, both repeat the word *forever*. From "Banks O' Doon" the line *Aft hae I rov'd by bonie Doon,/ To see the woodbine twine/* is echoed by Horton's *Eliza, I shall think of thee—/ My heart shall ever twine about thee.* "The Banks O' Doon" is more a poem of lament, pairing well with the sentiments of "To Eliza." (*African American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle & Song [S & S]*, p. 17)

Sarah Louisa Forten (1812-1884), in "The Grave of a Slave," echoes some Burns vocabulary when she writes in the second line, *His woes and his sorrows, his pains are all o'er,/* In his "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn," Burns starts his fifth stanza with: *By oppression's woes and pains!/* The poems are both calls to freedom—Forten's in the freedom that comes for the slave only in death. But Burns' call includes this idea as well: *By your sons in servile chains!/ We will drain our dearest veins,/ But they shall be free!* Both assert that if the price of freedom is death, freedom is the correct choice. As Forten writes, *No master can raise him, with voice of command,/ He knows not, he hears not, his cruel demand./* and she ends with: *The grave to the weary is welcomed and blest; And death, to the captive, is freedom and rest.* (*S & S*, p. 24)

In "America," James Monroe Whitfield (1822-1871) asks *Was it for this, they shed their blood,/ On hill and plain, on field and flood?* He is asking why America, given the potential for liberty from tyrants, would then be so tyrannical, so enslaving? In his "Address to a Haggis," Robert Burns paints a portrait of the rugged Scot ready for battle, *Thro' blody flood or field to dash/.* Whitfield is calling for a time when *In freedom's cause their voices raise,/ And burst the bonds of every slave;/* His language echoes Burns in "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn," or "Scots Wha Hae," in which Burns imagines Bruce rallying his troops in the cause of liberty and freedom. Some lines: *Wha sae base as be a Slave?* and *Free-man stand or Free-man fa'/* and *Tyrants fall in every foe!/ Liberty's in every blow!* Both poets are concerned with courage, rights, fighting slavery and the cowardice of tyranny. (*S & S*, p. 36)

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In "Christmas in de Air," Claude McKay (1889-1948) contrasts what should be a holiday of giving with the misery wrought by the miserly, whether plantation or government. As in Burns, the poem's profundity lurks in the seeming simplicity and rustic sound of dialect. The last stanza demonstrates this best: *O sweet life so sad, so gay,/ Oh why did you come my way,/ All your gaiety to vaunt/ An' yet torture me wid want?/ I'm a-dyin o' despair/ While dere's Christmas in de air.*

The repetition of lines and images is not unique to any poet, but McKay lifts "Harlem Shadows" into song reminiscent of Robert Burns in "Banks O' Doon." Such power in these, words, for example: *I hear the halting footsteps* and *I see the shapes of girls*, when combined with all the images of feet, *slippered feet, little gray feet, tired feet, timid little feet of clay, the weary, weary feet/ In Harlem wandering from street to street.* Heartbreak and understanding moves the poet to write *Ah, heart of me.*

McKay's "If We Must Die" is a battle cry that has a predecessor in Burns' "Scots Wha Hae." Read side by side, these poems cry out against cowardice and oppression and for nobility and honor. "Scots Wha Hae" is a rallying of troops before battle. McKay's poem, similarly, is a rallying against *the mockers, the monsters, the common foe, the murderous, cowardly pack*, to quote his characterization of the enemy. (*S & S*, p. 226; p. 228-229)

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) writes poignantly about an exploited, then shamed woman in "A Double Standard": *Do you blame me that I loved him,/ That my heart beat glad and free,/ When he told me in the sweetest tones/ He loved but only me?* Watkins gives voice to a woman *coldly spurned*, who wears *the brand of shame,* while her tempter *Still bears an honored name.* The poem is an excellent double to Burns' "Banks O' Doon," another piece about betrayal, written to give voice to the plight of Margaret Kennedy, seduced by Andrew McDouall of Logan, who kept his honorable name while refusing to acknowledge his child by her. Some of the same sentiment, of the heart beating glad and free, are in the Burns lines: *Thou'll break my heart, thou bonie bird,/ That sings upon the bough!/ Thou minds me o' the happy days/ When my fause Luve was true/* and *Wi' lightsome heart I pu'd a rose,/ Frae aff its thorny tree;/ But my fause Luver staw my rose,/ And left the thorn wi' me.* (*S & S*, p. 62)

Carrie Williams Clifford (1862-1934) begins and ends her "Character or Color—Which?" with nearly identical stanzas: *What is blood, or what is birth?/ What is black or white?/ Or small or great, or rich or poor?/ Just so the man's all right?* The poem celebrates integrity, modesty, and honest achievement. The sentiments and the language are reminiscent of "A Man's A Man For A' That," one of the most influential in the Burns cannon. His praise

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of *honest Poverty, hamely fare, independent mind, The pith o' sense an' pride o' worth,* and his call for brotherhood in the final lines—*That man to Man, the world o'er,/ Shall brothers be for a' that*—all reinforce Clifford's expression of the importance, first, of character. And *Just so the man's all right*, as repeated, makes use of the same "chorus" effect of the Burns lines that insist on the same thing: *The Man's the gowd* [gold] *for a' that.* (*S & S*, pp. 73-74)

Eva Jessye (1895-1992) writes in "The Singer" of a man of blunt speech, *of ebon skin and humble pride,* a man of plain manner, enslaved and beaten down with hatred, yet maintaining the *light of faith*. The second verse begins *But fragrance wafts from every trodden flower,/ And through our grief we rise to nobler things,/ Within the heart in sorrow's darkest hour,/ A well of sweetness there unbidden springs.* The man was born with the priceless gift of song, *And nations marveled at the minstrel lad,/ Who swayed emotions as his fancy led;/ With him they wept, were melancholy, sad.* The man sings from *the essence of his heart*, Jessye concludes. The power of art as it transcends class, rank, wealth and status, brings to mind what so many people saw in Robert Burns, the "heaven taught ploughman," when he burst as his own kind of marvel in Edinburgh. Jessye, famed choir director who traveled the world, was once told by Booker T. Washington not to forget the spirituals, not to forget where she came from, not to forget her people. Robert T. Kerlin makes a similar statement in his *Negro Poets and Their Poems* (1923): ". . . the folk rhymes and songs, both the Spirituals and the Seculars, of the Negro. Their art potentialities are immense. Well may the aspirant to fame in poetry put these songs in his memory and peruse them as Burns did the old popular songs of Scotland, to make them yield suggestions of songs at the highest reach of art." (*S & S*, p. 217)

Countee Cullen (1903-1946), in his "Yet Do I Marvel," both praises and questions God, calling Him *good, well-meaning, kind,* but also *inscrutable, and immune to catechism,* with an *awful brain* [that] *compels His awful hand.* Like Robert Burns, in his "Prayer Under The Pressure Of Violent Anguish," which begins with *O Thou Great Being! what Thou art,/ Surpasses me to know,* and ends with *But, if I must afflicted be,/ To suit some wise design,/ Then man my soul with firm resolves,/ To bear and not repine!*, Cullen accepts his lot: *Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:/ To make a poet black, and bid him sing!* Countee Cullen's poetry, like Burns', is sometimes playful, as in the epitaph "For a Lady I Know": *She even thinks that up in heaven/ Her class lies late and snores,/ While poor black cherubs rise at seven/ To do celestial chores.* But Cullen is also declarative, and justice-seeking, as in the first line of "From the Dark Tower": *We shall not always plant while others reap.* Both poets speak from the personal, but to the widest of audiences. In his "Tableau" Cullen describes a white boy and a black boy *locked*

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arm in arm as they cross the street, shocking those behind *lowered blinds.* He ends the poem: *They pass and see no wonder/ That lightning brilliant as a sword/ Should blaze the path of thunder.* Burns ends his “A Man’s A Man For A’ That” with *It’s coming yet for a’ that.* Both are bid to sing the inevitability of brotherhood and justice. (*S & S*, pp. 160-168)

In the second stanza of her “Rosabel,” Angelina Weld Grimke (1880-1958) makes that oft-used comparison of a love to a rose. She does it through metaphor, *Rose whose heart unfolds red petaled/ Quick her slow heart’s stir;/ Tell her white, gold, red my love is;/ And for her, a—for her.* Robert Burns’ “A Red, Red Rose” is simile: *O my luve’s like a red, red rose.* Though the Burns poem is his most anthologized of all his work, the quieter “Rosabel” is, to me, more subtle, tender, tentative and winning. (*S & S*, p. 98)

Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880-1967), who studied music at Oberlin Conservatory of Music, wrote songs, as well as stories and plays. The musicality is strong enough to hear in her “I Want to Die While You Love Me,” with its tight rhyming and the chorus-like repeated title as the first line of each stanza. Robert Burns wrote most of his later poems as songs, collected music in his travels through Scotland. In “I Want to Die While You Love Me,” *while* is repeated twice in the first stanza: *While yet you hold me fair,/ While laughter lies upon my lips.* And Johnson’s *Oh,* and *‘Til* make the poem feel akin to “A Red, Red Rose,” with its *O my luve*, and its *While the sands o’ life shall run*, and its *Till a’ the seas gang dry*. Though I can’t make a solid case for influence, placed side by side I find a kinship between the two poems. (*S & S*, p. 221)

Just as I find kinship between so many poets, African American and others, with Robert Burns. The first poet of international reputation, Robert Crawford writes of him:

> “… the modernity of his democratic radicalism did not compromise his artistic gift; today it presses the case that contemporary egalitarian societies around the world should regard him as both ancestral and familiar … Burns’s poetry’s democratic tone … attracted the great poets of democratic America from Whitman, Poe, Dickinson and Longfellow to Whittier and Robert Frost. There are more statues of Burns in the United States than there are of any American poet, and his present-day US admirers range from Maya Angelou to several ex-presidents. Growing up mute, poor and black in the American South, Angelou developed a lifelong and deep conviction that ‘Robert Burns belonged to me.”

Robert Burns belongs to all of us, of course, but uniquely and importantly to the traditions of African American poetry.

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