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Living Beings and Mental Entities in the Poetry of Robert Burns

In Robert Burns' poems, the issue of death reveals an ever-present divide between the physical and mental worlds, that of external existence and existence in memory. People are embodied being but there is also much that is conceptual about being and identity. When one knows another person, that mental understanding is the construction of sensory data combined with that conceptual frame. Burns ends "I Love My Jean" with a comment that "There's not a bonnie bird that sings, / But minds me o' my Jean." The connection between the world of the mind and reminiscence in saying "minds" here reflects this system of understanding. It is clear across much of Burns' writing how after death the person in the physical world is gone, while the person in the mental world lives on. Pain ensues not only from the loss of the person in the physical world, but from the irreconcilability of the lasting mental being and the death of their physical counterpart.

The tension between physical and mental appears in "Auld Lang Syne," as Burns chooses to refer to the mind in discussing memory. The poem begins, "Should auld acquaintances be forgot, / And never brought to mind?" The equivalent of the "forgot" at the end of the first line, being a past participle, would be another past participle, "remembered;" however, Burns instead writes "brought to mind." This marks the distinction that memory is not simply a process of loss and retrieval, but of engaging with a complex mental world where things have distinct mental being. That being was first brought to the mind by the initial encounter of the person. Before that moment, the speaker would have no conception of such a person. An initial encounter can take the form of a reference to a person, where from limited information the mind will construct a whole person. Upon directly interacting with the person, perhaps in a letter, the mental existence

of the third-party is reformed to fit the now more expansive data, and should the two parties meet in person, the sensory data from that encounter would form the mental entity further still. In future times, a variety of external and internal stimuli, such as a reference with connections to a specific person, will bring that person to mind again in the sense that the mental entity correlating to them is brought to the fore of the subject's mental world. The distinction between simple remembrance and this in Burns' diction marks recognition of the mind as a separate place significant to the functioning of memory and how we know others.

The disparity between the physical and mental being of another person is, in a more common way than the metaphysical distinction, a matter of time and familiarity. If one sees a person frequently, their connected mental being will have a constant and recent stream of data from which to form. Conversely, if one doesn't see a person for a long time, the data relating to them will be outdated and often partly forgotten. Burns refers to this disparity later in the poem, writing, "But we've wandered mony a weary foot, / Sin' auld lang syne" (11-2). These lines measure the span of time since the speaker and his acquaintances have seen each other in terms of physical activity, rather than a mental conception of time like years. This further highlights the interplay between physical and mental. Time doesn't simply pass. Over time, our daily activities act upon our bodies and influence our minds. The word "weary" makes it clear that the wandering has made a noticeable effect on each person, and so they've felt these actions as they occur over time and drag on to the point of weariness. This makes the wandering fit as a unit of measurement. The specifics of "wandered" also aids in this, for many other types of motion imply much more directionality, whereas "wandered" implies aimlessness and no necessity that one ends up in a different place or far off from where he began. It is then wholly an image of measuring time by the physical activity of the body over time, with no accomplishments or

anything to complicate the measurement. As living beings we are embodied beings, and so the speaker understands both himself and his acquaintances by the ongoing performance of their bodies.

There are points where the body ceases, though, and handling one's relation to another who is now dead becomes much more complicated. In another poem whose title aptly captures the anguish of the divide it examines, "Though Cruel Fate," Burns writes, "Though cruel fate should bid us part, / Far as the pole and line; / Her dear idea round my heart / Should tenderly entwine" (1-4). The poem recognizes that in one dying and the other living, the two become as far apart as possible. Jean, as a physical being, is gone. What the speaker has left is "Her idea." The speaker is forced to face the fact that Jean and the idea of Jean, the mental entity he has of her, are two different things. All he has left is the latter, which will likely never have any more experiences to shape it. It is left then doomed to a static state, in a way dead itself, but not fully. Jean can still live on to the speaker through his idea of her, such as in memories wherein previous experiences can reoccur to his mind. The idea of her, part dead and part alive, mirrors in small scale then the troublesome divide between living beings and their related mental entities.

That the idea of her goes "round" the speaker's heart is in part necessity, conforming to the physical shape of the mentioned organ, but conceptually that he suggests the idea of her should become round includes in it the idea of coming back upon itself and becoming now a completed object rather than an ongoing line. The idea is complete in that there will be no more experiences forming it, which has an unexpected positive aesthetic result. The act of coming back upon itself is even more conceptually fruitful. The idea of a person existing in the world becomes the person, thus closing the feedback cycle in which it had been previously operating.

The idea of Jean tenderly entwining itself around the speaker's heart is not only a desire, but the idea's inevitable conceptual conclusion.

The poem further develops the distinction between the living being and the mental entity in its closing two lines, "Yet dearer still than my deathless soul, / I still would love my Jean" (7-8). The introduction of the idea of a "deathless soul" being present in the living speaker troubles the relation between the two people. If he has an immortal soul, the woman should as well, and there would theoretically be a point of contact both immediately in the recognition of them both having immortal souls and anticipated for when he dies and they both live on as their souls. The poem marks them as being impossibly far away, however, and so the poem expresses the idea that in life he has his physical body, and Jean no longer being alive has left her physical body, and there can be no access from his physical being to her non-physical being. They are wholly disconnected, yet to the speaker there is still a Jean. It is important to note he refers to her as "my Jean." This same construction is repeated later in the previously mentioned poem, "I Love My Jean." This is distinguished from the actual Jean, who is gone. The speaker's Jean is the mental entity, which lives on, but even when the physical being that was Jean was alive, the speaker's Jean was the mental entity. Having to grapple with her death reveals this to be the case. It is only when the idea of Jean is all he has left that he so closely, directly contemplates the notion of an "idea" of Jean which exists inside his mind, and has always existed as long as he's known her.

Another incident of death is addressed in the poem "Highland Mary," which even more directly handles the idea of an internal representation of a person living on. The poem begins with the speaker addressing a spot of nature, as it is of significance to him as the last place he saw Highland Mary before her death. The poem sets up at the start this interplay between an external living world and internal memory. There is physicality even to the speaker's memory of

Mary when she was alive. Burns writes, "I clasp'd her to my bosom!" (12). This is a physical performance which will then parallel the internal notion in the closing lines that "still within my bosom's core / Shall live my Highland Mary," but the parallel only heightens the difference. The physical action is a play at closeness, but is not itself the feeling of closeness. Additionally, the action is momentary, whereas the internal closeness of Mary to the speaker's bosom is an ongoing state. Mary's physical heart is elsewhere. In the previous lines, Burns writes, "And mould'ring now in silent dust, / That heart that lo'ed me dearly!" (29-30). Her heart is not just elsewhere, but disintegrating. Noting how the heart loved him dearly in this context adds another level to the relation between physical and mental, as the mental processes rely on the ongoing functioning of the heart and continuation of life. While the speaker was once a mental entity in the mind of Mary, in her death, that ceases as well. All that is left is the speaker and his mental construction of Mary, which he notes at the end shall live on. The internal representation of a person is set up in the poem to be a lasting, self-sustaining entity.

The ongoing internal existence of lost loved ones is set up in the poetry of Robert Burns not just as a point of comfort, but as a troubled experience. A person is gone, either temporarily or forever, but you have memories of them, and thus a copy of them, in your mind. This allows you to assuage longing, but for Robert Burns also brings a deeper recognition. The existence of that internal being is not a response to a person's death, but is simply brought into prominence by their death. He is left to face with the recognition he was, in a sense, always interacting with a mental entity, that what he is encountering now is the same entity that had been there. That internal representation then that was supposed to be a point of comfort is exposed to be distinct from the living person that was lost. This would be a point of great tragedy, yet Robert Burns' poems have a positive tone in declaring this internal representation will ultimately live on. As

“Though Cruel Fate” shows, in this harsh realization comes the successful conclusion to an idea, coming then back onto itself and forming a lasting, self-sustaining understanding.

Works Cited

Burns, Robert. *Poetical Works and Letters*. London: Gall & Inglis, 1860. Print.