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Goodbye, Yellow Brick Road: How Fathers and Farmers Inform Burns's Poetry and Personal
Philosophy

In "My Father was a Farmer", Burns extends the spirit of agricultural romanticism to the labors of the poet, disregarding typical metrics of success and encouraging instead a culture of creative intensity and rigorous idealism that inspires social thought at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Burns offers the title of the poem as an explanation for his own character and belief system, and the seemingly mundane phrase contains implications partial to a late-eighteenth century conception of agricultural romanticism. Farmers, while burdened by backbreaking manual labor, enjoyed a noble reputation in Burns's time. One facet of this glorification was the image of supreme masculinity, and Burns paraphrases his father's advice in lines three and four to "act a manly part, though I had ne'er a farthing, O/ for without an honest manly heart, no man was worth regarding." While poverty acted as an emasculating force, the meager income of a farmer did not discredit him from a claim on the "manly"-ness and dignity that society ascribed to those whose work entailed exertion of power over the land. Farmers in addition cultivated foodstuffs for the masses and fueled the urban growth accompanying the Industrial Revolution in the United Kingdom Burns would have known. This important role, recognized by capitalists and local artisans as even life-sustaining, enforced the idea that farmers held a special and blessed status. Personifying this perceived felicity, Burns again reminisces on his father's belief that

“one...to labour bred, was a match for Fortune fairly” in line twenty. Political thought echoed such sentiments of agrarian virtue, famously in the case of Thomas Jefferson’s liberal defense of the small yeoman farm economy. In the opposite direction, Burns appears to capture the Revolutionary zeitgeist in his speaker’s own personal conviction when he writes in lines fifteen and sixteen that “the past was bad, and the future hid, its good or ill untried.../but the present hour was in my pow’r, and so I would enjoy it”. Romantic writers speculate on the “hid” future and dream of its “untried” good, while their contemporaries wax politically about seizing the “present hour in (their) pow’r” to set into motion those hopeful changes. The idealized farmer’s humble dignity and unshakable integrity occupy a revered space in the collective consciousness of Burns’s milieu, which he would invoke and then expand upon throughout the course of “My Father was a Farmer”.

To Burns, the agriculturist represents not the target occupation for contentment but rather a lifestyle with the potential to inspire creative types to a higher plane of existence, a conviction that he essentially formed through his personal experience. Historically by and large, farmers inherit that profession from their parents and grandparents before them. Agriculture tends towards this sort of heritage work at Burns’ time and at our own because of the relationship between people and land. In both of these eras, arable land is expensive and the equipment necessary to harvest it even more so, and those who are willed these resources can more easily and successfully enter the field. The skills and instincts necessary to possess in relation to the land are equally difficult to come by and those who have grown up with the schedule and duty of farm life as a child are more naturally inclined both to experience contentment with the work as an adult and to achieve mastery of those skills. Burns addresses the generational pull of agricultural work in lines eighteen and nineteen where he assesses “So I must toil, and sweat, and

moil, and labour to sustain me, O;/To plough and sow, to reap and mow, my father bred me early.” Here Burns cites his predisposition to hard physical labour but extends those actions into a metaphor for the mental rigor necessary to make good poetry. In his mind, Burns breaks the cycle of the family values in no way except form. The tension between father and son is evident in this line as Burns appears to blame his father for his sometimes cursed work ethic and feels his lineage dooms him to giving Herculean effort for survival. His upbringing, too, he mentions in ambiguous terms, writing of his father in line two that “carefully he bred me in decency and order,” a phrasing that evokes images of livestock confined and herded, “bred” and kept in “order”. While Burns’s father’s expectations of hard work and discipline may have caused sufficient friction to send his son packing and seeking to eke out a living in an unfamiliar terrain and manner, it’s clear that the younger Burns has come around again to the value of his father’s teachings and has gained an appreciation for the ethos of agrarian life. Though Burns in this poem charts his departure from a farming lifestyle, he makes clear that he is a farmer’s poet and holds the attitudes and values of that trade in high esteem, even regarding them as his guiding principles.

The evidence Burns provides for this agricultural-poetic synergy comes from his own life. He draws parallels between how hard farmers and poets work and for how little money they do so, an assessment that stands up pretty well today. With few resources or faculties, nonetheless a young Burns reports that “resolv’d was I at least to try to mend my situation” in line eight of the poem. Such a belief in the sheer force of independent will and actions can be classified as a mark of the bootstraps ideology. The “mend(ing)” Burns seeks for his “situation” he makes careful to show does not entail wealth or a comfortable income of any sort. The poet distinguishes between the ideas of “rich(ness)” and “great(ness)” and pursues with integrity the

latter, establishing as early as line six that “to be rich was not my wish, yet to be great was charming.” Here Burns expands his father’s definition of great, that of great character, to include great accomplishments and nurtured talent, achievements that in no way guarantee generous monetary compensation. He furthers the idea by claiming that “but cheerful still, I am as well as a monarch in his palace” in line 25, elevating mere “cheerful(ness)” to the equivalent satisfactory status as wealth. The compensation of joy, Burns argues, is as rich as any that money can buy, and the farmer knows this as does the poet. He expresses his worldview as such in line 23: “No view nor care, but shun whate’er might breed me pain or sorrow.” In “My Father was a Farmer”, Burns establishes credibility as he tracks his course to adopting these ideas. His strong message of righted priorities gets distilled with time and imitation, though, and soon enough the righteous figure of the farmer morphs into a stereotype of dopey naivete and cluelessness. The theatre in particular reinforces this trope, which separates the calm appeasement of the farmer from their complex understanding of the available “isms” of the time and their respectable choice to refuse the heartless chase for an excess of capital. Influential early American shows like *The Downfall of Justice* and *The Drunkard* present the farmer in a negative light, either as corrupt and uncultured or as mere comic relief, rather than a noble hero. Romantic poetry of Burns’s variety, too, has a reputation for flowery idealism which inspired later poets to pointedly break away from the style. In this way, too, are poets and farmers connected—popular media forms tend to overlook the substance behind their mild and contented perspective.

What Burns determines that poets do not share in common with farmers is a connection to the muse. The success of a crop or the strength of a livestock animal depends in no small way on something other than the farmer’s own hard work—there is a bit of inevitable luck involved. Call it what one wishes, but Burns refers to this mystic force as “Fortune” and recalls how “in

many a way, and vain essay, I courted Fortune's favour" in line nine. Read one way, Burns appears to stab arbitrarily at recognition to no avail. In another context, though, Burns seeks the blessing of a favorable higher power to deliver him in the way his father found deliverance, and the "vain essay" is not merely filler but a message on how the "crop" of a writer cannot impress Fortune enough to influence the poet's universe. Burns further develops this contentious relationship with the muse when in line 26 he writes "tho Fortune's frown still hunts me down, with all her wonted malice" and the reader may wonder why Fortune so actively intends to harm and neglect Burns. His occupation and his deviation in it from his father's approved course may answer this question of victimization. In brave opposition, Burns then responds to his spiritual mistreatment claiming "But as daily bread is all I need, I do not much regard her" in line 28. After begging for "Fortune's favor" with his dedicated work in letters, Burns realizes the futility of his efforts and ceases to appeal to her. At this moment in the poem, Burns has forsaken the muse and the dominant currency of his age. He dreams of the world where hard work will provide security for those outside the perfect example of his father's ideal and stoic agriculturalism. The poet's currency of work ethic and good nature borrowed from the farmer, he argues, far outperforms the material currency of the wealthy, saying to them in line 34 that "the more in this (money) you look for bliss, you leave your view the farther." Burns seeks to apply the spirit of those who work within the sphere of the land to those who occupy the plane of air—poets and other idealists. He sees real possibility for people to thrive by refusing to ascribe to societal norms that glamourize and excuse the pursuit of material wealth. The uplifting ending to this poem on poverty has an idealistic cheeriness that would be reproduced in the published ideas of many other thinkers and writers of Burns's time—a time of revolution.

In its stirring defiance and persistent uplifting of hard work and good spirit, Burns's "My Father was a Farmer" borrows the ideas of his father and transplants them to the lifestyle of the poet in an effective personal anecdote attesting to the merits of those ideals. While modern farmer-poet relations and ideologies are less clearly connected, it's important to remember this moment of early Romantic fusion of the two's goals and ideas, the result of which would influence a wide sphere of revolutionary thought and action in the years to come.