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"I was an atom in the world of life": James Dawson Burn's *The Autobiography of a Beggar Boy*

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Abstract:

James Dawson Burn's *The Autobiography of a Beggar Boy* (first published anonymously in 1855) relates the often-amusing life's adventures of a man coping with various forms of social marginalization, as a vagrant, an illegitimate child, and an Irish immigrant in England. A story of personal reform and social reintegration, *A Beggar Boy* seemingly relies on Victorian cultural and literary conventions and sustains the values which Burn saw as governing middle-class life. However, subtle transgressions of traditional formal and generic paradigms reveal a tension between the individual's unique perception of the self and the demands of Victorian middle-class discourse. An immediate and considerable success amongst the Victorians, today *A Beggar Boy* can help expand the parameters of discussion related to Irish autobiography and its perceived features.

Keywords: Autobiography, Irish migrants, Marginality, Vagrancy, 19th century

1. "the most pleasing part of history"

When Isaac D'Israeli published his review of the *Memoirs of Percival Stockdale* in 1809, he emphasized that he believed the English poet to be too obscure a figure to attract the readers' attention with his life story. With some concern, D'Israeli added that he expected "to see an epidemical rage for auto-biography break out, more wide in its influence and more pernicious in its tendency than the strange madness of the Abderites" (1809, 339). His fears were soon justified, as the following decades saw an unprecedented proliferation of autobiographical writing in the British Isles and other parts of Europe. It was, indeed, in the first half of the nineteenth century that autobiography gained legitimacy, established itself as a distinct genre and started claiming an aesthetic standing.

It seems a striking fact that in such an outpouring of life stories Irish experiences have often gone unnoticed, or that their specificity has scarcely been considered. Various factors could have contributed to this partial neglect. For one thing, autobiography has long been a "Cinderella genre" of Irish literature (Harte 2007, 1) which has not yet undergone the same systematic analysis as other forms of writing. Given that scholarly efforts have especially focused on contemporary authors and texts, the range of observable distinctive features of Irish autobiography is still rather limited: authors are said to privilege a tragicomic mode and show a recurring interest in exile (see Grubgeld 2004, 128, 16), they often filter their life events through the lenses of "nation and society" (Harte 2007, 3), and their accounts of childhood experience are rich in standardized elements (see Lynch 2009, 82-83) – or, to borrow Frank McCourt's words, they illustrate how "[w]orse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood" (1996, 11). These "Irish" constituents or conventions seem quite provisional in the face of the historical diversity that characterizes autobiographical writing. A "desire to relate a range of previously unspoken (or only whispered) stories from the margins" (Smyth 2001, 134) has emerged somewhat constantly throughout Irish history, finding expression in texts such as Richard Boyle's *Remembrances* (1623), Christian Davies' *Life* (1740), or Dorothea Herbert's *Retrospections* (1806, published 1929). Clearly, the specificity of Irish autobiographical writing needs further definition against the backdrop of its centuries-long tradition.

It is also true that the nineteenth century is in many ways a rather problematic period in the field of Irish literary studies. Ireland contributed to the cultural milieu of the time with many prolific writers, but most of their production sank under the weight of the triple-decker Victorian novel and their impact on the public did not equal that of Dickens, Eliot or Thackeray's works. Irish autobiography poses similar questions of 'canonicity': while this genre was becoming a widespread means of self-definition for the English middle-class, in Ireland it was chiefly appropriated by the nationalist discourse. As Sean Ryder notes, the most influential Irish autobiographies of the time were written by Theobald Wolfe Tone (1826), John Mitchel (1854), Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa (1898), as well as a number of leading figures of the Young Ireland and Fenian movements (2007, 14). The Irish nationalist heroes' inspirational life stories, as can be expected, did not excite equal sympathy in all the English-speaking world; they had little diffusion outside Irish borders and struggled to reach a wider audience even decades after their publication.

One Irish nineteenth-century life story, however, did enjoy an immediate and considerable success: James Dawson Burn's *The Autobiography of a Beggar Boy* (first published anonymously) went through five editions between 1855 and 1882, becoming one of the most viable autobiographies of the time. Written in an epistolary form addressed to Burn's eldest son Thomas, this text details the often-amusing adventures of a man who needed to cope with various forms of social marginalization, as he was a "wandering outcast" (Burn 1855, 138), an illegitimate child, and an Irish immigrant in England. Born out of wedlock in Ulster around 1800, Burn claims to have been "on tramp" (87) through Ireland, Scotland and England for most of his life. After having spent his childhood wandering and suffering at the hands of his stepfather McNamee, who was either drunk or a victim of delirium tremens, Burn found himself suddenly transferred to the care of his callous biological father, a weaver named McBurney, who was based in Killaleagh. Feeling no connection with McBurney, his family, or Ireland, Burn soon fled to England, consigning himself to years of solitary vagrancy. With hindsight, he sees this decision as "early proof of my determination of character", for "[h]ad I remained in Ireland, I think my natural energy of mind would have been crushed, and I might have remained a ragged outcast

during my life" (197-198). As an adult, he struggled to find financial stability because of failed attempts at various trades and businesses, or difficulties he encountered when his ability to work was hindered by severe illnesses, including the same typhoid fever that caused his first wife's death. Burn seems to consider also his brief involvement in trade unionism as one among the diseases that he contracted, a "madness" (137) from which he soon distanced himself.

Notably, *A Beggar Boy* contains most of the elements that are now considered typical of Irish autobiography. Burn dwells upon his miserable childhood, emphasizing how he "was born in poverty, nursed in sorrow, and reared in difficulties, hardships, and privations" (2), he discusses social questions regarding the condition of lower classes in the British Isles, and he often identifies with an exile, in that he "wandered forth into the wide world a fugitive from kindred and from home" (47). In addition, Burn adopts a tragicomic view of life, which finds expression in a mixture of modes and frequent wordplay. For instance, here is the account of the first time he tried alcohol:

> After walking about 100 yards after my last draw, I fell down on the road as if I had been shot, and I knew no more about the history of the world for forty-eight hours, and all the parties interested but myself, imagined that my rum-drinking was over. However, the doctor being anxious to prevent a coroner's inquest, pulled me back from the world of spirits. (58)

A Beggar Boy owes much to the English picaresque tradition, being constructed as a sequence of episodes from Burn's life, who constantly remembers "little" or "very good" anecdotes of people and places involved in his wanderings (e.g. 75, 89, 114, 159, 167). Although these incidents might be expected to play a role in the unfolding of the autobiographical memoir and in the development of the self, their actual import consists in constructing a general discourse about mid-century moral values and choices. There is little doubt that Burn is making a claim for respectability by relating his experience according to upper-class models; by the time he wrote his autobiography, his days as a "beggar boy" were behind him, he had raised his social status and was striving for further achievements. In fact, especially in the last letter, Burn seems to foresee further opportunities for his future and, almost in an Ulyssean-like fashion, hints at his need to pursue new adventures that would bring to completion the "unfinished processes through which I have passed" (193). It is not surprising that, after the success of *A Beggar Boy,* Burn wrote other books, engaged in a series of new occupations and even resumed his political interests[1]. He had clearly intended to further elevate his social and financial position, and a first step in that direction was his autobiography, where he attuned his discourse to popular literature and met middle-class expectations.

In particular, Burn addresses the wide readership of Dickens' novels, a writer he admired so enthusiastically that he dedicated the first edition of *A Beggar Boy* to him. What Burn attempted to learn from Dickens was especially the ability to "delight and instruct" (iii), a point that is repeatedly emphasized in the initial tribute. Even when he introduces the most troubled aspects of his experience and discusses the most alien contexts he visited, Burn carefully manages for them to be appealing to a middle-class audience. This was probably one of the reasons for the success of *A Beggar Boy* in the nineteenth century: it excited curiosity for an unknown and mysterious underworld that was never too frightening or too shocking for the reader. The underworld in question, of course, is that of beggars and vagrants, who were regarded by Victorian society with preoccupation, if not outright alarm. According to Charles Edward Lester's estimates, in the year

[1] For instance, see Burn 1858 and 1865.

1848 alone the city of London relieved vagrants in 41,743 occasions and, in the same year, twelve English parishes offered help to "poor wretches" 130,523 times (1866, 24). The numbers of the wandering poor had so increased by mid-century that even Dickens, often a champion of the destitute, lamented their presence on the streets and warned his readers of their many deceits in "Tramps", first published in *All the Year Round* in 1860. Yet, when Burns talks about his fellow "wandering vagabonds" (1855, 7), they become "*artistes*" invested with "genteel mysteries" (9, 16) or mere buffoons, the protagonists of amusing episodes such as that of the lady who "was short of the sense of hearing" but, as occasion required, saw her capacity miraculously restored (7-8). The anti-society is also normalized and rendered more familiar, as even among vagrants "there is an aristocracy as exclusive as any that prevails among the higher orders of society" (8).

As the illegitimate child of itinerant beggars, Burn carefully mediates his own otherness to the readers. The fact that he is also an Irish migrant, for instance, needs to be almost searched for in the text – Burn's first statement about his origins is, "[w]here or how I came into the world I have no very definite idea" (3). Then, he talks about his Irish parents and step-father, proudly comments on his change of surname from McBurney to Burn to "sever the only remaining link that bound me to my family" (47), but he almost inadvertently drops the information that his nickname used to be "Mack" at least until 1848 (139), suggesting that he "tore two syllables" (47) from his name not long before writing his autobiography. Uprooted from his motherland and his family, Burn lacks "a stable sense of who he is and where he belongs" (Harte 2009, 24). Indeed, *A Beggar Boy* betrays an anxious desire of belonging and normalization; Burn's efforts are clearly directed towards creating an autobiography that responds to literary tradition, relies on contemporary stereotypes, and draws upon common cultural knowledge. The most original aspects of Burn's work emerge, however, because of this seemingly broad acceptance of contemporary standards and cultural codes: conventions are rarely fully embraced, and the elements of variations allow insight into tensions between the individual's unique perception of the self and the demands of Victorian middle-class discourses.

2. "mere worldly education"

A Beggar Boy opens with a short essay on autobiography, clearly an attempt to find a suitable justification to publish the life story of a lesser-known figure. However, by the 1850s, the idea that autobiography need not be the special province of the great was already commonly accepted. Some twenty years after *A Beggar Boy* was published, *The Blackwood Magazine* even suggested that, because of their "instructive and entertaining" function, "the best of our autobiographies are those that have chiefly a domestic or personal interest" (Anon. 1879, 488). The fact that autobiographical writings could contain edifying or instructive elements was indeed one of the reasons why the initial wariness towards this genre had been overcome. Burn capitalizes on this mainstream cultural discourse and validates his work in the light of its didactic purpose, for, he says, his life "may be of service" to both his son and other youngsters, to guide them "in the path of duty", because "in some cases, my conduct may be found not unworthy of imitation" (1855, 1, 2). What at first glance seems to be a fairly conventional opening apology takes on added significance and finds unexpected development in the text, where Burn proceeds to elaborate a sort of philosophy of childhood and education.

A Beggar Boy illustrates a path of self-formation that is deeply rooted in childhood. Burn details his progressive acquisition of skills and abilities by reconstructing the evolution of his understanding in an almost Wordsworthian manner: "My capacity for thinking was at this time beginning to expand, and my mind began to chronicle passing events" (6). In addition, he feels

that, when very young, "I was a thing without a mind, and might be said to have neither body nor soul of my own – that plastic part of my nature, which was to become my only patrimony, was being moulded under the most degrading influences and corrupt examples" (19).

The child starts his process of growth and formation from an initial state of 'emptiness' or absence – almost a state of non-existence, in which he is not even considered to be a human being ("a thing"); then, the shape he assumes depends upon external influences. Burn seems to have in mind John Locke's Enlightenment child of reason, and the blank slate, or the so-called *tabula rasa* which the philosopher believed to characterize the young mind (1824 [1689], 77)[2]. To Locke, each pupil is like "white Paper, or Wax, to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases" in the hands of his guardians and tutors (1712 [1693], 322). In the same vein, Burn ascribes the problems he encountered later in life with those responsible for his early formation, especially his parents and their dereliction of duty: "Having received a considerable part of my education in such a romantic school, it would be strange indeed if I could have escaped without being subject to the impressions consequent upon such a course of training" (1855, 34). The mind, Locke says, is guided into a certain way of thinking from childhood, when individuals are "most susceptible of lasting impressions", and neglect or wrong influences can be detrimental to the appropriate development of the understanding (1824, 422). Indeed, Locke believes that when ideas are joined in the mind by habituation from childhood, "it is not in the power of reason to help us and relieve us from the effects of it" (1824, 423). Following Locke, Burn suggests that once habits or frames of mind are instilled into the child, reason is hardly capable of undermining them; his upbringing made him "a dull dog" (1855, 193), and learning from experience for him was difficult, or better, "above my capacity", for "my mind […] only received such impressions as it was most susceptible of embracing" (180).

Given his predicament as a child, Burn, like Locke, recommends that one avoid giving too much credit to opinions offered by parents and teachers[3]. *A Beggar Boy* includes a sort of categorization of sources of human knowledge where direct and autonomous experience of the world is ranked as the most important element:

> The world is a great school for human education, and the different grades of society we mingle with are our monitors. The methods of instruction may be clearly divided into three classes: the first and most impressive is that which we receive from those we associate with. Our lessons in this department are of a practical character, and embrace the every-day acts of our lives, whether they relate to business or pleasure. The second class of instruction is that which we receive from clergymen and other public instructors, and its object is to impress upon us the beauty and advantage of a correct rule of life. The last source of information is, that which is derived from books, which may be said to embrace the whole round of human knowledge. (*Ibidem*)

Burn's line of reasoning has much in common with the *Essay*: he is offering his own answer to Locke's question, "Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? […] Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge?" Whereas Locke answers in "one word", "experience" (1824, 77), Burn dwells on different options, especially on how books can help develop the individual in both a moral and an intellectual way. Near the close of *A Beggar Boy*, a short essay discusses

[2] Actually, the expression "*tabula rasa*" is never used in Locke's *Essay*, and it only appears – as "*rasa tabula*" – in "Abstract of the Essay", a manuscript first published by Peter King in 1829, then re-published with emendations in 1830. See Locke 1830, 231.

[3] See Locke 1824, 50-51.

the importance that books have in self-fashioning and offers some advice on how to use them properly to educate children. The Bible is, of course, the first book Burn recommends; after that, "Historical books may be fairly placed at the top of all other sources of human knowledge" (1855, 195). When he starts discussing fiction, his tone acquires unusual emphasis:

> There are other two classes of books which I think are perhaps more useful on their shelves than for any other purpose to which they can be turned. The first of these are the works of maudling sentimentalists; these books are full of language without meaning, and pretty flowers without fragrance! Among them are the measured effusions of men who do not possess sufficient specific gravity to keep them on the earth; their works are, therefore, too *starry* for common mortals!! The second class, comprise the works of authors who manufacture plots and incidents to suit distorted minds; the persons of their little dramas are made up of exaggerated shreds of humanity, who think and act under a lunar influence, and therefore continually outrage all our common notions of congruity!
>
> From the above observations, you must not suppose that I am opposed to all works of fiction; on the contrary, I am of the opinion that some of the best books in the English language are to be found in this class; I need only instance Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. There is a charm about these books which will always possess a fascinating influence over the minds of their readers. (196)

In pointing out the fictional works with a positive effect on the readers' minds, Burn omits to mention another "fascinating" novel that has clearly influenced him: in fact, both *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *Robinson Crusoe* are cited in *The Personal History of David Copperfield* among the books that have an impact on David's mind, determining how he perceives his life and surroundings (Dickens 1912, 58). If *The Vicar of Wakefield* represents the general cultural and social importance of family life, *Robinson Crusoe* teaches practical survival and utilitarian ethics. The latter book is a point of reference not only for Dickens and his character's development, but also for Rousseau – who, incidentally, adopts some of Locke's educational tenets – and his imaginary pupil Émile. In agreement with Rousseau's theories, Burn considers reading fictional texts as a potentially dangerous activity, which replaces direct experience of the world with something abstract and impractical; Rousseau also expresses little faith in the young readers' ability to cope with figurative language, or what Burns defines "pretty flowers without fragrance" (1855, 196). The only novel that Émile is permitted to read is *Robinson Crusoe*, a story relatively free of corrupting influences and dealing with practical skills while describing solitary life: young men are meant to be self-sufficient or even alone in life. Similarly, *A Beggar Boy* constructs the image of a solitary child who survives a hostile environment and faces life on the road without the comfort of a loving family or stable friendships, supported only by the occasional help of middle-class benefactors. Burn's self-image as a young man shows various points of contact with Crusoe, almost fulfilling Rousseau's plans for Émile:

> Je veux […] qu'il pense être Robinson lui-même; qu'il se voie habillé de peaux, portant un grand bonnet, un grand sabre, tout le grotesque équipage de la figure, au parasol près dont il n'aura pas besoin. Je veux qu'il s'inquiète des mesures à prendre, si ceci ou cela venait à lui manquer ; qu'il examine la conduite de son héros, qu'il cherche s'il n'a rien omis, s'il n'y avait rien de mieux à faire […]. (1848 [1762], 252)[4]

[4] In Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom's English translation, "I want him to think he is Robinson himself, to see himself dressed in skins, wearing a large cap, carrying a large saber and all the rest of the character's grotesque equipment, with the exception of the parasol, which he will not need. I want him to worry about the measures to take of this or that were lacking to him; to examine his hero's conduct; to investigate whether he omitted anything, whether there was nothing to do better […]" (Rousseau 2010, 115).

Some of the most ironic and light passages of *A Beggar Boy* are indeed devoted to observing how young Burn deals with the "grotesque equipment" of clothes that never fit him, are too old, or too ragged, so that "no young urchin could possibly have a better suit for ventilation, and what was more, I had a numerous *live stock* on my body with the addition of the itch to keep me warm" (1855, 40). Burn's luggage is also rather eccentric: he leaves his father's house furnished with no "staff, nor scrip, nor money in my pocket", but carrying around an "old turf-bag", which is his "only patrimony" (47). Similarly to Rosseau's, Burn's child progresses in life through identification with the protagonist of one of the first great English-language novels.

Burn's adventures and switches from one job to another as an adult still remind us of Defoe's characters, but with a significant difference: the former beggar boy admits that his lack of skills has hindered his accomplishments in various occasions. When in the hat trade, he does not foresee a change in fashion, and when trying to start his own taverns, his attempts fail for what he defines, adopting again Locke's language, a "want of business habits" (130). In this sense, Regenia Gagnier observes:

> […] Burn blames himself for his failure in business. Assuming a liberal ethic of autonomy and progress, he concludes that, despite no dearth of opportunity, he was personally deficient in the struggle to maintain either self or social position, and he therefore believes himself uneducable […]. Clearly it is ideology – or hegemony in Antonio Gramsci's sense of popular consent to the political order – that distorts Burn's evaluation of his experience and induces the shame and guilt pervading the text. (1990, 108)

Because he constructs such an articulated and multifaceted discourse about education and self-growth, I do not believe that Burn blames himself for the difficulties he encountered in his business enterprise, nor that he expresses feelings of shame and guilt. On the contrary, he shows to be proud of his climb from beggar boy to respectable worker, a change he attributes to his Smilesian "character" when boasting in both his introduction and conclusion about "what energy and determination of character are able to accomplish when rightly directed" (1855, 200). Burn's discourse on failure is in part an expression of rethorical modesty and in part an assessment of the education that he received from his family, who is denounced for having sent him out into the world without the appropriate instruments to control his predicament and achieve success. For this, he especially blames his biological father: "If [my father] had sent me to school, which he could have done, and assisted me to go into the world with only an ordinary education, he would have saved me from being the foot-ball of fortune, and leading the life of a wandering vagrant for years" (44).

His mother, too, had a role in his misfortunes, as she "always stood between me and the flood which leads on to fortune" (24); after Burn discovers that he has a second step-father, he says, "I had been blessed with *three fathers* and two mothers, and I was then as comfortably situated as if I never had either one or the other, excepting that I was a living monument of the folly of both father and mother" (82). Raised by a mother that frequently misplaced her feelings by settling for untrustworthy men, a biological father uncapable of any affection, and a stepfather who was too fond of alcohol, Burn is not surprised that "instead of regulating my feelings by the rule of reason, my passions dragged me headlong through the by-ways of folly" (122). Burn suggests that it is despite a lack of useful professional and personal "habits" (understood in a Lockean sense) that he has "braved every difficulty" (198) and performed the uncommon and admirable feat of advancing his position and acquiring respectability.

As emerges from the passage quoted above, Burn believed that the disadvantaged condition suffered in his youth made him especially subject to the whims of unpredictable fortune and

unable to keep his life under control. *A Beggar Boy* is extraordinarily rich in language related to "fate", "fortune", "accidents", "trade-winds", and "storms" tossing the protagonist in various directions (e.g. 18, 39, 198, 129, 162). To some extent, Burn's proclamation that his strength of character won him success, which is very appropriate to reform narratives, is constantly undermined by references to how chance truly determines individual life. He emphasizes, for instance, that "my life was frequently on the turning point, when the merest accident would have made me a vagabond without redemption" (103). Therefore, as Burn implies, social marginality can, at fate's will, be cast on anyone: "the smallest accident in the machinery of a family dependent upon labour, is frequently sufficient to turn the current of life from one of comparative happiness to irredeemable misery" (170-171). No one is the only master of their own fortune, as chance can work counter to any determination of character or effort made by the individual. In this sense, Burn disregards the middle-class belief that the poor can solve their problems through individual hard work, or that any other member of society can maintain their position at will. Even more significantly, he specifies, "I have frequently been impelled to the performance of actions from the sheer pressure of circumstances, against which my better nature revolted, and such I believe to have been the case with many others" (182). All human beings would act similarly under the same conditions, and the morality of all members of society is equally precarious: the Victorian association between the poor and depravity makes sense only for "men in comfortable circumstances", who are scarcely familiar with "the difference between theory and practice" (121). Therefore, the actual failure portrayed in *A Beggar Boy* is that of Victorian beliefs and values, among them the ideals of industry, self-determination and character, which prove to be disconnected from a dynamic and living reality.

3. "fragments of the genus homo"

The influence of Locke's works on Burn probably extended beyond the educational tenets included in them. Between 1684 and 1691, Locke offered his friend Edward Clarke some advice on the education of his children through various letters, which were then published in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). In the opening dedication to Clarke, Locke explains the history of the *Thoughts* and emphasizes their informal character: "the Reader will easily find", he writes, "in the Familiarity and Fashion of the Style, that they were rather the private Conversation of two Friends than a Discourse designed for public view" (1712, n. p.). This "private Conversation" became a great success, as the *Thoughts* went through three editions before Locke's death and other twenty-five editions over the course of the eighteenth century. Burn may have had this exemplary precedent in mind when he conceived his epistolary autobiography in thirteen letters, a form that he later discarded in a revised edition (Burn 1882).

Usually, letters are employed to privilege a sense of authenticity and to establish the immediate response to events as a pivotal moment of signification. Since epistolary writing is traditionally connected with attributes of spontaneity and naturalness, fictional correspondence is often endowed with linguistic and stylistic choices that make the text sound 'artless'. Moreover, the epistolary form is linked to expectations of some dialogic exchange, where a voice responds at least indirectly to another and the shared world of the writer and addressee underlies such dialogue. None of these features, however, seem to concern Burn's text. The sequence of letters in *A Beggar Boy* has nothing of a 'real time' interaction: the text maintains the structure of a conventional retrospective autobiography, with a considerable gap between the events and their recording. Burn restages his life at a distance both chronologically and emotionally, adopting a 'monological' narrative and a polished and artfully crafted style, which

is devoid of any sense of spontaneity. One should not discount the manner of intimacy that letters do seem to offer, but, as I will discuss in more detail shortly, Burn writes something personal that never becomes intimate. In other words, the epistolary form scarcely affects the text except for an initial address to Thomas and a short edifying discourse at the beginning of each 'letter'. After the opening salutation, the writer seems to forget all about his addressee, as well as about the social conventions pertaining to correspondence, such as the traditional conclusion with a variation on "Yours" and a signature. Perhaps, Burn employs the epistolary form as a mere strategy to elicit among his readers an empathetic reaction based on shared experiences of parenting and educating children. Furthermore, he might want to shed light on a successful aspect of his life which is never explicitly stated or brought to the foreground in *A Beggar Boy*: the letters show that, unlike his parents, Burn established a constructive and close relationship with his children, he cares about their education and is interested in handing on his baggage of experience. By presenting himself as a judicious and affectionate father, he also adds to the aura of middle-class respectability surrounding his self-image.

Although *A Beggar Boy* does not take on the formal features of epistolary communication, the sequence of letters is an important conceptual framework for the narrative constitution of the self. Whereas more conventional forms of autobiography are expected to apply a controlling structure to the story of one's life and mould the fragments of experience into a coherent whole, a series of letters does not need to be quite so cohesive. Letters display an inherent plurality of forms; they allow the disconnected flux of experience to emerge, in that the self can assume as many different declinations as required by varying circumstances or contexts. Borrowing Lilian Hellman's words, one might say that letters are "repeated presentations of self in contradictory stories whose lack of coherence or reason parallels life's patterns" (1990, 123). By adopting an epistolary form, therefore, *A Beggar Boy* accentuates a sense of fragmentation and transformation of identity, together with a difficulty of individuation stemming from vagrancy and the lack of a 'home'. Since Burn, as we have seen, is interested in mental processes, letters may also highlight how chaotically human memory works.

Burn's style seems so far from the spontaneous immediacy of letter-writing that it has given rise to doubts concerning the authenticity of his biographical material. Julia Wardhaugh, for instance, remarks that *A Beggar Boy* was "clearly written by an educated man" (2017, 63), suggesting that the author did not actually start his life as a beggar as he claims in the book. Undeniably, the former beggar boy is well versed in letters, figurative language, and rethorical figures: the already quoted "I was born in poverty, nursed in sorrow, and reared in difficulties, hardships, and privations" (Burn 1855, 2), for example, is an instance of double tricolon. Burn favours learned turns of phrase such as "matter of palliation" (5) and adopts a flowery speech, which he sometimes overstates with ironic intent. In so doing, even the situations that would be scarcely appealing to a Victorian audience, such as his mother living with the beggar and discharged soldier McNamee, acquire a peculiar glow of respectability: "When my mother put herself under the protection of this gallant defender of his country, he was making an honourable living by appealing to the charitably disposed members of society" (*ibidem*). Burn does not avoid reproducing slang or dialect, but he generally uses it to some effect, most commonly a comedic one; he also specifies that he has never used the language of the 'lower' sections of society, as "my tongue was free from anything in the shape of provincialism" (103) and now even the "*Cockney* phraseology of my young days has lost much of its primitive simplicity" (23).

Language both reflects and contributes to the sense of fragmentation that is present on a structural level in *A Beggar Boy* through a 'Babelic' medley of tongues: the autobiography

includes vagrants' jargons, working class slang, Irish and Scottish dialects, expressions in Italian (e.g. "*con amore*"; 11), Latin (e.g. "*genus homo*"; 9, 113) and French. Burn shows his familiarity with both French and Shakespeare when describing his uniform as a member of the Northumberland militia:

> The shoes were so capacious that, with a little enlargement, and a *Siamese* union, I might have gone on a voyage of discovery in them! The chapeau, instead of being a *fit*, was an extinguisher, and when I put it on I required to bid the world good night! The longitude of the trowsers was of such a character that I could not find my bearings in them, and the coat was of such ample dimensions that if I had had a family it would have made a cover for the whole of us. I dare say you have some idea how an ordinary sized man requires to be made up for the representation of Sir John Falstaff; my case was somewhat similar. […] The coat required two or three others as companions to keep it from collapsing and burying me in its folds; and the trowsers put me in mind of two respectable towns in France, being *Too-loose* and *Too-long*! (109)

As suggested by the above quotation, Burn's display of erudition is not limited to language and its uses. *A Beggar Boy* includes references to the already mentioned Dickens, Defoe, and Shakespeare, but also to Robert Burns (a favourite), George Byron, Miguel de Cervantes, William Cowper, Oliver Goldsmith, Alexander Pope, Walter Scott, William Wordsworth, the lesser-known Irish writer Susanna Centlivre, as well as *The Arabian Nights*, the legend of *Paddy the Piper*, and many others. This dense web of intertextual relations is often used in a referential way, so that the experience of the protagonist finds an equivalent in literary and fictional worlds that are familiar to the reader; for instance, when roaming the British countryside with his stepfather McNamee, the narrator claims, "I had been the constant companion of my father, whether he was drunk or sober, like Sancho Panza, I was sure to be at this heels" (25). In other cases, Burn comments more profusely on authors and their works in short essays about the "men who erewhile scattered their beautiful flowers in the paths of humanity" (155). As is the case with letter-writing, this conspicuous use of intertextuality plays a relevant role in the process of autobiographical self-construction: quoting so many authors, Burn creates a fragmented and multidimensional narrating 'I', who appears engaged in a struggle to define a solid cultural identity.

Burn truly demonstrates that he has acquired an impressive learning, so the few imprecisions noticeable in his quotations are worthy of attention. When discussing how the principle of honesty can vary between different human beings, Burn uses the phrase "small by degrees and beautifully less" (17), which is a misquotation of Matthew Prior's *Henry and Emma* (1709), "fine by degrees and beautifully less" (line 430; 1793 [1709], 14). The same incorrect quotation must have been very frequent at Burn's time: it appears in magazines, journals and even parliamentary minutes until 1867, when Thomas Knightley published a contribution to *Notes and Queries* amending the widespread mistake and hoping that "now people will think more correctly of the poetry of Matthew Prior" (1867, 271). Burn could have simply fallen into the same error as his contemporaries, but, as suggested by the fact that he puts the phrase in inverted commas, he might also be consciously quoting *Henry and Emma* incorrectly – after all, a 'false' quotation would perfectly fit a discussion about lack of honesty. In Letter II, Burn also transforms the line "Wept o'er his wounds or tales of sorrow done" from Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (line 157; 1770, 9) into "Talked o'er his deeds of sorrow done" (1855, 32). In this case, Goldsmith's description of a suffering Irish soldier is applied to another discharged Irish soldier, Burn's step-father. Once again, the modification of *The Deserted Village* can be the result of a mistake, or perhaps it is an adaptation that better suits McNamee: it is hardly a

coincidence that the misquotation maintains only the idea of sorrows inflicted to others and eliminates any reference to the man's pain and distress. Burn's constant search of literary counterparts for people and events seems to remain frustrated and incomplete, as there can be but a partial identification between life and fiction, or between the present and the past.

A Beggar Boy is further complicated by a rich interdiscursive web of relations, for it occasionally borrows ideas and imagery from the newspapers of its time. This happens especially whenever Burn talks about Ireland, for which he expresses the same hostile feelings that he directs against his biological father. In fact, by rejecting his national identity, Burn rejects also the unloving and unavailable McBurney, for whom he reserved "the most unmitigated hatred" (37). As can then be expected, the descriptions of Ireland and the Irish are rather pitiless in the text; more surprising, instead, is the fact that Burn relies entirely on received opinions and stereotypes to build his case, without formulating any original account – in other words, for once he seems to have fallen short of his usual anecdotes. Indeed, he merely notes that in Killaleagh "I had frequent opportunities of witnessing those outbursts of feeling which arise from party spirit", but no example of such outbursts is given, and what follows is a newspaper-like generalized report of vices and follies of the "half civilized" Irish (42). Burn admits that "Ireland has suffered much from English misgovernment arising from an illiberal and short-sighted policy" (*ibidem*), a statement which echoes the willingness of mid-century press "to concede that Ireland had indeed been the victim of neglect and misgovernment on the part of past generations" (de Nie 2004, 26)[5]. He then comments about the Irish,

> Instead of extending the commerce of their country, cultivating the soil, and adding to their social comforts, their time and energies have been wasted in party feuds, and savage forays upon each other. From this state of things, the Irish character had become a problem to the rest of the civilised world, and neither statesmen nor philosophers could find a key to its solution. (1855, 42)

Even the sentence construction, with the repeated use of third-person pronouns, attempts to mark a personal sense of distance, a separateness of experience with the Irish. Here, once again, *A Beggar Boy* almost parrots contemporary press, which, de Nie notes, ascribed Ireland's backwardness to inherent defects in the people's character (2004, 11-12). The harsh word "savage" was frequently used with reference to Ireland by nineteenth-century newspapers, which in turn derived it from descriptions of Africans or Pacific Islanders (12). Burn almost adopts this adjective as a signpost of all things Irish, as he refers it also to the "native of the north of Ireland" John Rooney (1855, 43, 72) and re-employs it in later publications: "Crime against the person in America by Irishmen is marked by much the same characteristics as at home; the same notion of savage justice and false feeling of personal dignity impel them to set themselves above the law by becoming the avengers of their real or supposed wrongs" (1865, 19).

The depersonalised journalistic tone adopted to talk about Ireland sheds light on Burn's complete disconnection from his origins and his family's homeland, connoting a lack of cultural recognition, belonging and security. Burn associates himself with Ireland only in an oblique way: there is a close affinity between the imagery that he uses to talk about his course of life and Henry Mayhew's metaphorical language related to Irish migrants in *London Labour and*

[5] Michael de Nie also notes that "[i]n October 1847 the *News of the World* reproached other newspapers for parroting traditional anti-Irish stereotypes and asked them to bear in mind 'that it is English misgovernment that has made Ireland what it is – and has reduced the Irish to their present deplorable condition'" (2004, 87).

the London Poor (1851). In the public eye, the cholera epidemic of 1848-49 established a relationship between the spread of the infection, vagrants or wandering beggars and Irish migrants. Therefore, the wandering poor became a "stream of vice and disease", a "tide of iniquity and fever" that Mayhew described as "continually flowing from town to town, from one end of the land to the other" (1861 [1851], 397). Of course, the water imagery is not a coincidence: the "tide" of iniquity and fever seemed to come across the sea from Ireland. Similarly, Burn describes himself as "a feather on the stream", "a vessel at sea", the victim of a "strong tide", or "carried along by […] tidal currents" (1855, 122, 86, 199, 83), images which seem to stand for the force of fate and the flood of migration simultaneously.

The 'fluidity' of the water metaphors and similes in *A Beggar Boy* is also meant to emphasize how unstable the situation of the working poor could be in the nineteenth century. Burn was constantly wandering from one job to another, a situation in which "the tramp, the day labourer, and the pedlar might be one and the same person at different stages in life, or even at different seasons of the year" (Samuel 1973, 152-153). In *A Beggar Boy*, transformations in state and rank can indeed be sudden; at one point, McNamee "left the begging-trade" and, seemingly without further adjustments, the family "became transformed into respectable travelling merchants, or what were then regularly termed 'pedlars'" (1855, 25). Although Burn claims that he "despised" vagrancy (82), as a young man he decided to abandon work and return on the road because his mother invited him to beg with her. A single imprudent decision dictated by affection for his own mother, and the honest worker suddenly "was again a vagrant and continued so against my will for years" (66). The boundaries established by Victorian England between labouring poor, street-folk, beggars and vagrants seem to fade in a context that is far from reassuring, because a plurality of circumstances could define or re-define the individual abruptly and unpredictably. Burn, in other words, casts himself as neither a beggar nor a working man, or perhaps as both simultaneously.

4. "in the path of working-men"

According to Thomas Carlyle, a biography cannot consist of a mere factual report of dates and events; it needs to come to terms with "a Problem of Existence" that every mortal must face, that is "the Problem of keeping soul and body together" (1864 [1832], 311). This aspect is equally, if not more important, for autobiographies[6], and it is also what nowadays is considered to be lacking in Burn's text. In this regard, David Vincent writes:

> By the third letter [Burn's] enterprise was already in deep trouble. Burn was finding it increasingly difficult to relate his inner self to the series of occupational and political reversals he was required to encompass. […] His dilemma, for which he could find no final solution, was that of how to negotiate between his private and public selves in an essentially secular universe. He wanted to give an account of his disaster-strewn life as a beggar, hatter, and commercial traveller, and as a self-improving reader, radical politician, and Oddfellow, but was deeply uncertain about the interchange between external structural processes and inner moral development. (2016, 175)

Vincent's comment evidences another way in which, unable to mediate the disjuncture between "soul" and "body", Burn represents a disintegrating identity, fragmented into as many

[6] Carlyle might be talking about autobiography, too. In the nineteenth century, the term "autobiography" was not firmly established in the language; frequently, Victorian writers would use the words "biography" and "autobiography" interchangeably.

selves as the number of different jobs (or non-jobs) that he had throughout his life. In addition, if Burn's account of his moral development is somewhat incoherent, the narration of his emotional experience is virtually absent from the text. For one thing, there is a remarkable lack of fear in *A Beggar Boy*: even when Burn describes his solitary adventures on the road as a child or a young man, he does not mention feeling alarmed or in danger, and neither he nor the reader is ever concerned for his bodily or mental safety. Tension does not build at any point of the account because the 'voices' that the narrating 'I' alternatively adopts are that of the ironic jester, the educator, the essayist, and the dry chronicler. As for the latter, Burn records the deaths of his brothers and sisters (until "out of the whole of my mother's family, I am the only one left to toil on in the journey of life"; 1855, 134) and the loss of his wife and twelve of his children with the same lack of feeling: "During my wedded life I have had sixteen births, and twelve deaths to provide for. In the course of events these were things of absorbing interest for the time being, and they have all been surrounded with many feelings of much joy and no little sorrow" (199).

Burn scarcely depicts sentiments, emotional reactions, or troubled states of mind; rather, in a Defoe-like manner, he calmly accumulates facts and circumstances. Except for a fleeting childish infatuation for the "perfect mistress of my soul" (70), he also eschews talking about romantic feelings, especially in connection with his marriages and the death of his first wife, who is remembered merely as a "quiet and gentle" woman with "a very passive character" and "a very small amount of energy" (132)[7]. After all, Burn claims, "the love of the stomach outlives all other love" (90), and romantic feelings are more suitable to poets than labourers. It is in this sense that, as I have mentioned before, Burn writes something personal, but never something intimate. His attitude can resemble that of a scientist engaging his object of study, that is, his self and his life, which sometimes require "a psychological view of the case" or insights into "technicalities" (70, 22). A scientific framework, incidentally, is adopted also in other works by Burn, who is inspired by medical models, possibly even by Lamarck or Darwin's theories of species and acquired characteristics in *Three Years Among the Working-classes in the United States During the War* (1865) and *Commercial Enterprise and Social Progress; or, Gleanings in London, Sheffield, Glasgow, and Dublin* (1858)[8]. *A Beggar Boy* seems, instead, to follow the directions that Alexander Crichton offers to any physician wishing to analyse the human mind: he should be capable "of abstracting his own mind from himself, and placing it before him, as it were, so as to examine it with the freedom, and with the impartiality of a natural historian; […] to go back to childhood, and observe how the mind is modelled by instruction" (1798, x).

Today, Burn's pseudo-scientific approach and unemotional prose are considered to be typical traits of working-class autobiography, where, Nan Hackett says, the self is minimised or even depersonalised (1989, 210). Indeed, the limited scholarly attention that *A Beggar Boy* has attracted so far is centred in the field of working-class studies, since the book conforms to a number of perceived notions and features of this kind of literature. In the same vein with most nineteenth century working-class autobiographers, for instance, Burn opens *A Beggar Boy* with an apology for his ordinariness, states a didactic purpose and uses literary contextualization

[7] Burn's first marriage sounds like a mere contract: "I went through the dutiful ordeal of obtaining the consent of all the parties who were interested in the matter, and I became the happy husband of a good and virtuous wife" (1855, 112).

[8] In *Three Years Among the Working-classes*, Burn comments on the "physique" of American people, their "physiological features", questions of race and adaptability (e.g. 1865, xii-xiv, 3-9, 72); in *Commercial Enterprise and Social Progress*, he recognizes a "peculiar adaptability in the Irish females for fine sewing" and illustrates other ethnic and/or national features for different groups (e.g. 1858, 135).

to demonstrate his education and self-improvement[9]. He can also be easily seen as avoiding introspection in order to "maintain a 'mask', which […] is that of a successful, moral member of society" (Hackett 1985, 3), as is the case with many other authors who told their stories of social 'redemption'. *A Beggar Boy*, however, shows some crucial departures from working-class memoirs, in which

> […] the desire to inform an outside group about an unfamiliar segment of society first justifies and then frequently subsumes the story of the individual. He or she no longer tells his or her own private story, but is rather relating the story of a group of people, so that his or her autobiography becomes a representative or collective narrative. […T]hese works become cultural narratives rather than individual stories […]. (2)

It is true that *A Beggar Boy* articulates a constant tension between a public and a personal sphere, but the representation of individuality is never surpassed in favour of class identity or collective discourses. This is especially evident when Burn discusses his previous political activity, which he abandoned with the threat of the first general strike in 1839, when he turned against the Chartists and started considering his previous involvement "political folly", "monomania", and "insanity" (1855, 145). Burn's position is rather atypical for a working-class autobiographer as he not only disagrees with Chartist methods and approaches, but he also completely disowns the ideological apparatus connected with the movement, which is accused of having caused the tragic demise of many of its members. In fact, statements such as "it is very questionable, whether a more equal distribution of property would be beneficial to the community" (184) are rather rich coming from a former beggar and political activist. He also dismisses the Trades' Committee as merely "an excellent school for young beginners in the science of oratory and public debating" (124), whose meetings were chiefly "dangerous" pretexts for "everlasting adjournments to the taverns after business hours" (125). In most cases, Burn's accounts of gatherings and other political activities become occasions to praise the benefits of abstinence, industry and interclass sympathy, thus implicitly combating pejorative associations of the immigrant Irish with moral degradation and ineptitude. Burn's main concern, even when discussing political matters, is his self-image as a prospective member of the English middle-class.

A Beggar Boy also shows an urge to consider and value the individual outside his social context and beyond any label assigned through cultural norm: in a sense, this could amount as a 'subjectivist turn' of working-class autobiography. This tendency becomes manifest once we compare Burn's text with other memoirs where, instead, the self identifies with class and labour. For instance, William E. Adams was a Chartist, like Burn, who became a newspaper editor and an important member of the English republican movement. His autobiography, first published in 1901 in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, insists on the ideas of repetitiveness and dullness of work and opens with these self-effacing words: "I call myself a social atom – a small speck on the surface of society. The term indicates my insignificance. […] I am just an ordinary person" (Adams 1903, xiii)[10]. For Adams, lack of differentiation is primarily an ideological tenet, according to which individual action must be minimized in the promotion of class effort. Interestingly, his memoir might have been influenced by *A Beggar Boy*, where similar imagery and wording are used though with very different implications:

[9] See Gagnier 1987, 338; Hackett 1989; 2010, 211.
[10] On the topic see Gagnier 1987, 338.

> Although I was an atom in the world of life, I was never without an individuality; in all my miserable littleness, I possessed a mind far above my position; and though I often wandered in the gloomy valley, bordering on despair, the lamp of hope never ceased to burn and light me on my way. (1855, 98)

Burn employs the past tense, suggesting that he has now abandoned a marginal position in society which he had never accepted. In addition, while Adams' atom is a "social" one, a part of a cohesive and organised group, Burn's seems lost in a chaotic and bustling "world of life", where he always stood out from the mass, as if under a spotlight. Incidentally, in this sense *A Beggar Boy* calls to mind Tobias Smollett's *Adventures of an Atom* and its talking particles of matter, which "are singly endued with such efficacy of reason, as cannot be expected in an aggregate body" (1806 [1769], 404). The fact that the atom-imagery for Burn is connected with resistance to engulfment is further reinforced by another occurrence of the term when he describes his arrival in London:

> [In London] I was fairly lost in a wilderness of human beings; I was a mere atom in a huge mountain of humanity! and as it were an unclaimed particle of animation – a thing that belonged to nobody. In fact, I looked upon myself as one of the outside links in the chain of civilized society. If I could have become a part of the monument somebody would have looked at me, and have set their wits to work to find out my use. (1855, 95-96)

London is not a suitable context to Burn, who, overwhelmed, decides to leave within three days. Significantly, although he writes a story of reform and inclusion, Burn seems to reject any assimilation of the self with "humanity". In the big city, he especially feels that he does not belong to society, that he is "outside" civilization, perhaps as both a vagrant and a 'savage' Irishman. His desire to be "part of the monument", to participate in something important and lasting, responds again to an individualist drive; it can be read as a metatextual remark, since, as James Olney says, autobiography is a "monument of the self as it is becoming" (1972, 35). Eventually, Burn builds his own monument in *A Beggar Boy*, where he lines up his achievements as if piling one stone upon another, demonstrating he is well familiar with the conventions and structure of Victorian society, its codes of culture, existing models of self-narration and literary practices.

On a superficial level, in fact, Burn's autobiography is a conventional mould deeply embedded in the cultural, literary and political discourse of the Victorian middle-class; yet, this mould is fraught with tensions and deviations from established paradigms, so that *A Beggar Boy* seems to resist most of the same values that it embraces. Burn is, then, a liminal figure at the centre of a liminal text: he is a working beggar, a settling vagrant, an 'apolitical' activist, who tells a story of self-realization while suggesting that life is dominated by chance and his true fulfilment is yet to come. He adopts an epistolary form without writing letters and he relates a "true history" (1855, 163) so loaded with literary references that it almost demands to be read as fiction. Working within traditional or extant templates, Burn establishes a dynamic intersection and contradiction of discourses, creating a dual dimension that pervades all levels of the text. Although he eschewed being associated with Ireland, his autobiography definitively adds new facets to the definition of a specifically Irish autobiographical mode. *A Beggar Boy* creates a multi-perspective narrative by responding to mainstream discourses while simultaneously subverting them; it also invites the reader to think about identity in nuanced terms by configuring the various components of the self as plural, partial and fragmentary. The fact that these same characteristics can be traced in the works of at least three among the most analysed Irish autobiographers, George Moore, W.B. Yeats, and Sean O'Casey, points to a cultural continuity that awaits further investigation.

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