

How Scottish Weather Affected the English Literary Climate

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In Chaucer, descriptions of nature are invariably reconstructed from pre-existent literary works. In the first eleven lines of the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, for example, one detects echoes of Virgil (*Georgics* II, ll. 323 ff. “Ver adeo frondi nemorum , ver utile silvis / vere tument terrae et genitalia semina poscunt... (1)) and Guido de Colonne (*Historia Destructionis Troiae* IV, ll. 55-58: “Tempus erat quod sol maturans sub obliquo zodiaci circulo cursum suum sub signo iam intraverat arietis... tunc cum incipit tempus blandiri mortalibus in aeris serenitate intentis” (2)), not to mention Boethius, Boccaccio and Petrarch (3).

And, of course, Chaucer’s adaptations begat adaptations of Chaucer in the works of both his English and Scottish disciples. Lydgate’s somewhat clumsy attempt to extend the Prologue’s opening verse sentence by some 45 lines has already received its due amount of critical comment [see, for example, Spearing p. 75] , and we should not be surprised to find the following lines at the beginning of William Dunbar’s “The Thrissill and the Rois” (1503). Or Should we?

Quhen Merche wes with variand windis past,
And Appryll had with hir silver schouris
Tane leif at Nature with ane orient blast,
And lusty May that muddir is of flouris
Had maid the birdis to begyn thair houris,
Quhois armony to heir it was delyt

In bed at morrow, sleiping as I lay
Me thocht Aurora with hir cristall ene
In at the window lukit... (4)

All the usual Canterbury-esque opening gambits seem to be present and correct. Aureate diction makes its brief appearance, Aurora acting as Zephyrus’stand-in. March is described as windswept as opposed to merely dry, yet still heralds April, with his revitalizing powers in attendance. On the other hand one may detect signs of a squabble with Chaucer brewing up here, the point of contention being the nature of British weather conditions. April may well bring “lluvias mil”, but he still refuses to depart without one last –spitefully cold– breath of eastern wind. Unlike his southern English “master” –the literary recipient of a continental climate– Dunbar has to wait until May until he can be sure that spring has indeed sprung. Even then, he can only map out seasonal change by referring to a calendar. Sunny days when birdsong invites the faithful to prayer and the flowers bloom tend to be mere hearsay in Edinburgh,

usually until July.

Let us imagine that it is Monday morning. Nobody wants to revive the working week. Dunbar, as court poet of James IV of Scotland, knows full well that he has a tough time of it ahead of him before Friday afternoon comes round. He has three months to write an epithalamion on the wedding of his king to Margaret Tudor, daughter of Henry VII. The union is as political necessity; James has made a fool of himself by being forced out of a showdown—show of strength—between himself and the Tudors at the battle of Berwick in 1497 (5). He wishes to forge a peace via marriage, and Dunbar's poem will constitute a part of the dowry; the sooner it's written, the better. The subject is to be the renewal of spring—of Scottish / English relations—with Margaret acting as May Queen. Dunbar looks to nature for inspiration looks out of the window (after dragging himself out of bed). No source of ideas there; in the words of the prophet, it's pissing down.

He goes back to bed and throws a (metaphorical) slipper at the alarm clock that the goddess of spring represents:

“Slugird”, scho said, “awaik annone for schame,
And in my honour sum thing thow go wryt.
The lark hes done the mirry day proclame (6)

Such lines as these might well have gone down in literary history as nothing more than an example of Hibernian high jinks. After all, the idea of teasing Chaucer about the distortion of the weatherman's report did become a norm in Scottish poetry in the late fifteenth/early sixteenth centuries. At the beginning of *The Testament of Cresseid*, for example, Robert Henryson portrays himself as an old man in a wet month waiting for sun: waiting for spring, in other words, which *should* have arrived, but has not;

Ane doolie seasoun to ane carefull dyte
Suld correspond, and be equivalent.
Richt sae it wes when I began to wryte
This tragedie, the weader richt fervent
When Aries, in middis of the Lent
Shouris of hail can frae the north descend
That scantlie frae the cauld I nicht defend. (7)

This is, most definitely, a “chicken or egg” question. The dates of both Dunbar's and Henryson's births and deaths are uncertain (Dunbar – ? 1460 – ? 1520, Henryson – ? 1420 – ? 1490) (8). One cannot really say which of whose poems influenced which of the two writers, and where / why / how. The only certain points are: 1. —that an anti-Chaucerian reaction was very much in the (Edinburgh) air, 2.—that, amongst many other things, the Chaucerian view of nature as an enamelled portrait of the seasons as “they ought to be” was being questioned and 3.—(most importantly for our purposes) that at least one Scottish poet went far beyond the idea that the description of a landscape that did not necessarily correspond to pre-existent literary models amounted to much more than a sneer at *The General Prologue*. The poet in question was Gavin Douglas (1475 - 1522) whose influence upon English poetry in general and the Earl of Surrey's verse in particular has gone practically unacknowledged. The fact that only bits of a large body of work are currently available in anthologies (notably Bawcutt and Riddy's

Longer Scottish Poems (1987) which itself is normally to be found in “bargain bins”) is, I believe, scandalous. Here, we are dealing with a most important literary innovator.

The good Bishop of Dunkeld (in point of fact he was not a dedicated churchman and often deserted his Perthshire flock to dabble in Edinburgh politics) was at worst a competent poet, occasionally a great one. He abandoned literature after 1513, when James IV’s defeat at Flodden turned the forging of Anglo-Scottish relations into a matter of survival; he had no further time to indulge his artistic interests and dedicated the rest of his life to what really amounts to political intrigue (9). However, 1513 also saw the completion of his major work, *The Eneados*. This was the first translation into (Scottish) English verse of the whole of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (plus a thirteenth book composed upon the subject of the wedding of Aeneas and Lavinia by Maphaeus Vegius in the 1470s) It is important for two reasons.

First and foremost, Douglas was a pretty good Latinist, if not an outstanding one; close enough to average to prefer Josse Bade’s 1501 commentary on Virgil’s poems to Honratus Servius’ vastly superior work, but almost certainly better than Henry Howard, who often resorted to the makir’s version as a crib (10). Nobody had dared to conceive of the idea of rendering the whole of *The Aeneid* in “English” verse before the Scotsman took on the job. Caxton had produced a prose paraphrase in 1490, but his *Eneydos* began with the sack of Troy and worked forward: the notion of starting a narrative off “in medias res” was obviously foreign to the printer, who was –ironically enough– translating a French adaptation (the anonymous *Livres des Eneydos* 1483) anyway. Douglas sneered at both attempts (11). It was not until 1558 that anyone in England began to think of writing a verse translation of the *whole* of *The Aeneid* again; Richard Phaer followed by Thomas Twyne. Howard only managed / had time to complete books II and IV (?1539)

Nevertheless –and here we are retracing our steps back from the news (of developments in the epic field) and into the weather report again– the Earl of Surrey gleaned more from Douglas than a Latin scholar’s / poet’s tips on Virgil. As noted, only *bits* of *The Eneados* are ever reproduced in anthologies nowadays, and these extracts are very probably the ones that appealed most to the Elizabethan sonneteer. I refer to the Prologues to the thirteen books, especially those which Priscilla Bawcutt, however tentatively (see, for example, *Bawcutt* 1976 p. 186) has christened “Nature Prologues”. The introductions to Books I, VII VIII and (most importantly for our purposes) XIII contain a high percentage of descriptive writing, the subject being the Scottish landscape and its influence upon the translator’s state of mind usually before –though sometimes after– (11) his struggle with Virgil’s / Maphaeus’ texts. While Surrey was apparently oblivious to this kind of writing when rendering Aeneid II and IV in English, I believe that its influence shines through in his adaptations of Petrarch, particularly as far as “The Soote Season” (based on Petrarch *Sonnetto in Morte*, 42) is concerned.

Let us start off with an analysis of the Italian original, go on to note how Henry Howard transformed it and conclude by attempting to show how Douglas’ Prologues influenced the Englishman’s approach. In Petrarch, Spring has come, heralded by larksong and swallows’ chirruping. The English reader will see, immediately, how Chaucer’s *General Prologue* picks up echoes of “Zefiro torna” (... “Whan Zephirus eke with his sweete breath... and “smalen fowles “which “maken melodye”) as an anticipation of the tunes which lovers compose for their ladies (*Robinson*, 1976, p. 17, ll. 2-9):

Zefiro torna, e’l bel tempo rimena,
e i fiori e l’erbe, sua dolce famiglia,
e garrir Progne, a pianger Filomena

e primavera candida e vermiglia (13)

Yet, as early as this first quatrain, signs of unease are in evidence. Philomel and Procne are as much women transformed into birds (after Tereus' rape and mutilation of the former and the sisters' revenge upon his son) as feathered friends. Death—a "jug-jugging" to dirty ears—is ominously present in the warm spring air; memories of Laura's death, in fact:

...Ma per me, Lasso!, tornano i piú gravi
sospiri...(14)

Nature has renewed itself, the warm weather returned; Proserpina has come back from the underworld. His loved one, however, has gone to heaven and shut the pearly gates behind her. (16)

I do not believe that Surrey's adaptation of this amounts to a particularly good poem, although his contemporaries would probably have disagreed with such a judgement. To the modern reader it seems too self-consciously clever by half. It is now summer, "for every spray now springs" and yet the poet's sorrow has not ended; it too "springs", as in tears to the eye (and, of course, as if the "season of grief" had outlasted Petrarch's, emotional "one-upmanship" as literary conceit). This, then, is an example of poetical virtuosity for little more than its own sake. The use of only two rhymes throughout only serves to drive home the image of the poet as-trick-cyclist shouting "look! No hands!"

The piece *does* have its saving graces, however, although these, too, may have been conceived of as nothing more than a subtly anti-Petrarchan twist. Mythological undertones are deliberately removed from the poem. This is particularly obvious when we look at those lines which describe the Philomel figure (here a nightingale shedding her feathers, nothing more sinister than that) and a Procne "swallowing" flies:

The nightingale, with feathers new, she sings...
The swift swallow pursueth the flies small... (16)

Perhaps, however, these lines—and those that surround them—represent a genuine desire to create a landscape of flower and fauna that is authentically British (as opposed to Mediterranean). If this was indeed the case, then my argument is that Douglas was Surrey's major influence: for once, a direct literary debt (that of Howard's *Aeneid* II / IV to the *Eneados*) is traceable. If Surrey had read the translation of Virgil's *Libri*, he had obviously perused the Prologues too. Don't just take my word for it. Look at the examples which, as stated, are to be found in the Prologue to *Eneados* XIII.

An overdose of technical virtuosity and self-conscious intertextual dabbling aside, what really tones down "The Soote Season's" emotional impact is the very element that distinguishes it from other sonnets: the descriptions of nature themselves. There are simply too many of them, stuffing three quatrains full of turtle doves cooing, deer shedding winter coats and antlers, river-fish and vipers stripping off in the heat, bees buzzing. By the time Howard does get round to describing his own state of mind in the final couplet, we, the readers, have been so overfed by these images that we don't care overmuch for his supposed emotional traumas; the summer heat has lulled us into such a pleasant doze that we are unwilling to wake up. While making perfect sense as a piece of "literary arithmetic", then, the calculations *vis à vis* audience response seem to have gone badly askew. The "ambience" is too lazy and "summery" to ever

hint at Petrarch's "spring of discontent". Surrey has misjudged the tone of the piece rather badly and has done so, I believe, because he chose the wrong bit of Douglas to blend into Petrarch.

On the other hand, the first 60-odd lines of Prologue XIII capture the Bishop of Dunkeld's feelings perfectly. Having just completed work on Virgil's last book, he is happy but exhausted. It is a pleasant June evening which, through a rare event in Scotland, is the best of possible seasons and hours for a well-merited snooze. After a long walk through the fields, all he wants is to do is lie down on the warm grass and "drift off". All God's creatures—save the nightingale—invite him to do exactly that:

Be the small byrdis syttand on their nestis,
 The litill mygeis, and the ursum fleys.
 Laboryous emmotis, and the bissy beys;
 Als weill the wild as the taim bestiall,
 And evry othir thingis gret and small,
 Owtak the mery nychtgaill, Philomeyn,
 That on the thorn sat sungand fra the spleyn...(17)

Now, granted, the forty winksworth of physical ease that such a setting hypnotizes Douglas into is to be rudely interrupted. While he won't wake, while his dreams will not even amount to nightmares as such, lines 75 onwards describe a visioned meeting with Maphaeus Vegius, who tells the makir that it is high time he got on with Book XIII. The translator's work is not completed. Nevertheless the "shock"—if such it can be called—of this dream visitation relies for effect upon the sense of happiness, relief, drowsiness, of what precedes it. In such a setting there is little or no room for Petrarchan grief, yet it is from here that Surrey attempted to snatch it. He did so, I think, because a reading of Douglas's work gave him a sudden, bright idea: Nature may be observed as opposed to copied.

He did not choose a particularly good example for a model. The Douglas passage quoted contains a good deal more of the semi-formulaic, a good deal less of the accurately / subjectively observed than was the Bishop of Dunkeld's wont. For a start, all nature does *not* sleep on warm Scottish evenings. If one is daft enough to lie down on the grass without a second skin of insect repellent, an uncomfortable amount of bites will be the result; siesta times of humans and midges do not coincide. One should also note that echoes of mythology haunt ornithology in the case of "the mery mychtgaill, Philomeyn's" song.

On the other hand, the "biters" in question *are* midges a somewhat civilized species of British insect that make one rather itch than go mad scratching. One should also note that, while the nightingale is half personified, it is still essentially *birdsong* that gladdens—and, in this case, eventually inspires—the poet. We are taking a leaf from the Book of Nature here—from *The Owl and the Nightingale*, for example—which, while it *is* still a book, is not quite the *Metamorphoses*. Most importantly, these lines are surrounded by descriptions of late evening and early morning which could not have been "word painted" in any other place but Scotland. In line 37, for example, one finds a wonderfully graphic depiction of the "gloaming" of twilight mist rising up off the bottom of the dampened glens:

Out our the swyre swymmys the soppis of myst...

Again, in ll. 176-177, we are made to see that flowers, like everything else, look grey (as opposed to enamelled) at first light:

The dewy greyn, puiderit with daseis gay,
Schew on the sward a cullour dapill gray...

Douglas, then, while he may be no Rabbie Burns (no minute observation of the day in the life of a harvestmouse here), while he often steps back into Virgilian pastorale and the aureate, is at least beginning to take more than a glance at such weather as affects his mood before turning back to his books. If Dunbar and Henryson used the Scottish climate as a feather with which to tickle Master Chaucer under the arm, the Good Bishop had begun to see that here existed a somewhat weightier poetical tool.

Howard, I believe, was fully aware of this, saw the potential of what Douglas was doing. Let us repeat –and slightly extend– a previous quotation, while keeping the moulting nightingale in view:

The swift swallow pursueth the flies small;
The busy bee her honey now she mings (18)

Surrey has done two things, one of them badly. First of all, using Douglas as a filter / refiner, he has attempted to “naturalize” Petrarch completely. The Scot went halfway along the road towards getting rid of Philomel. Why not go “the whole hog” and demolish Procne in the process? No sooner said than done. The makir refers to buzzless bees asleep, but has anyone ever caught one even drowsing? On the contrary, it is the humming of their busy wings that precipitate a snooze. Surrey is too miserable to doze, obviously, but it is bee sounds that tell him he ought to do so. Evening becomes noon in his poem, the time at which these insects really do have an affect upon the human consciousness.

Second, though, there existed –even in Chaucer’s time– the concept which was to become known as the pathetic fallacy: man darkens or lightens the face of Nature according to his moods and She returns the compliment. Petrarch showed this process in operation (spring is made miserable because Laura is dead) and so did the Scots Chaucerians. Dunbar struggled against a “soft day” (lá bóg) to write a sunny poem. Henryson fell victim to a miserable spring and wrote a depressing one. Douglas captured a summer evening in his writing. In this scheme of things, “The Soote Season” is neither fish nor flesh. In attempting to play off “those lazy, hazy days of summer” against the heart’s icebound season, Surrey captures the idea of the former pretty well but, in so doing, betrays his own lack of grief. There is no real sense of an emotional struggle with Nature here.

And yet his sonnet does represent a brisk and healthy step forward for English poetics –a foot lifted out of the Chaucerian mire of the natural world as idealized picture and forward onto the firmer ground of actual experience of it. This leads to the metaphysicals’ tendency to view, say, insect life closely before using it as stuff for metaphors and similes (Donne “The Flea”, Lovelace “The Grassehopper”) and, eventually, to the Romantics, (Burns especially). I believe that the Scots Chaucerians placed a vital steppingstone along this particular poetic pathway.

NOTES

¹ Myers, R.A.B. ed.1969: *P. Vergili Maronis Opera*. London. O.U.P.:165

- ² Griffin, Nathaniel E. ed.1970: *Guido de Columnis, Historia Destructionis Troiae* . Cambridge, Mass: The Medieval Academy of America: 34-35.
- ³ (a) Robinson, F.E.ed.1976: *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* London. O.U.P.: 326 - 332.
 (b) Pentimalli, Atilio. ed.1981: *Petrarch: I Sonetti del Canzoniere /Los sonetos del Cancionero*. Barcelona, Bosch: 602.
- ⁴ Kinsley,James ed, 1958: *William Dunbar - Poems*. London, O.U.P. 10 ll 1-10.
- ⁵ See Nicholson, Ronald. 1974: *Scotland, The Later Middle Ages* Edinburgh; Oliver & Boyd; 1974: 552.
 ... possession of Berwick was to be settled either by a general engagement by the two armies or a hand-to-hand combat between the two commanders. When Surrey (Henry Howard's father, Thomas) announced that he was not authorized to hazard the town on such terms, James 'fled shamefully and sodeynly with all his company".
- ⁶ Kinsley, James , 1958: II ll. 22 - 24.
- ⁷ Harvey Wood, H. ed 1990: *Poems and Fables by Robert Henry son*. Edinburgh, The Mercat Press: 105 ll. 1 - 7.
- ⁸ These approximations of birth and death dates are "roughed out" from the following sources:
 (i) Bawcutt, Priscilla / Riddy, Felicity eds. 1987: *Longer Scottish Poems* Vol.I 1375 - 1650. Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press: 134, 195.
 (ii) Lindsay, Maurice. 1992: *History of Scottish Literature*. London, Robert Hale: 27, 37.
 (iii) Scott, Tom ed. 1970: *The Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* London; Penguin: 128, 83
- ⁹ See Bawcutt, Priscilla, 1976: *Gavin Douglas, a Critical Study* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 11 - 22
- ¹⁰ Bawcutt, 1976: 119 - 121
- ¹¹ See Small, John.ed. 1974: *The Poetical Works of Gavin Douglas, Bishop of Dunkeld*. Edinburgh; William Paterson Vol. i ll. 80 - 96.
- ¹² Bawcutt, P. / Riddy, F. eds, 1987: 236 -241. The prologue to book VII actually functions as an epilogue to book VI, the description of the descent into Hades.
- ¹³ Pentimalli, A. ed.1981: *Francesco Petrarca: Sonetti del Canzoniere* (Barcelona; Bosch: 602. ll. 1 - 4)
- ¹⁴ Pentimalli, A. ed. 1981: 602, ll. 9 - 10.
- ¹⁵ Pentimalli, A. ed. 1981: 602, ll. 10 - 11.
 ... che del cor profondo trague
 quella na ch'al cial se ne partò le chiavi.
- ¹⁶ Brooks-Davis, Douglas.ed. 1992: *Silver Poets of the Sixteenth Century* London; J.M. Dent & Sons : 87 ll. 3 & 10.
- ¹⁷ Bawcutt, P., Riddy, F. eds. 1987: 243 ll. 56 - 62.
- ¹⁸ Brooks. Davis, D. ed. 1992: 87 ll. 10 - 11.

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