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Arun, S

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Graduate School Boston University

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ARUN SOOD

Burns, Whittier, and the “Rustic Bard of New Hampshire”: Mediations in Transatlantic Reception and Influence

HEALTH to the hale auld “Rustic Bard!!”
Gin ye a poet wad regard,
Who deems it honor to be ca’d
Yere rhymin’ brither,
‘Twould gie his muse a rich reward—
He asks nae ither.

—“J. G. Whittier to the ‘Rustic Bard’”

INTRODUCTION

IN 1828, JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER SAW THE FIRST PRINTING OF ONE OF HIS compositions in book-form. Written in Scots and following the Standard Habbie stanza popularized by Robert Burns in the late eighteenth century, Whittier’s “To the ‘Rustic Bard’” reflects a versatile young poet (then twenty-one) experimenting with poetics, language, and form. Burns’s influence on Whittier has been well documented. In critical anthologies of nineteenth-century American poetry, Burns is commonly cited as being influential on Whittier’s poetic development, albeit sometimes in reductive terms where suggestions of “rustic simplicity” and “directness of expression” obscures the aesthetic fluidity and pastoral politics of both poets.¹ In Burns criticism, Donald A. Low’s seminal volume *The Critical Heritage* inaugurated the idea of Whittier as the “American Burns,”²

1. *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Eric L. Haralson (London: Routledge, 2014), s.v. “John Greenleaf Whittier.”

2. Low, ed., *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 432.

reflecting what Virginia Jackson notes as a problematic tendency of labeling popular late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American poets as “the eponymous stepchildren” of European Romantics: “the American Wordsworth (Bryant), the American Hemans (Sigourney), the American Byron (Halleck)”³ and so too, Low’s “American Burns.” This process of transatlantic pairing—whereby major European Romantics are identified with analogous American poets—may well be a product of expansive attempts to map transatlantic literary connections beyond the nation. Yet such an approach also has the paradoxical and restrictive effect of bolstering and over-simplifying national literary histories. That is, successive national literary histories are maintained through critical narratives that fail to complicate our sense of how one lionized ‘national’ or canonical author (say “Scotia’s Bard” Robert Burns) greatly influenced another (the “American Burns” John Greenleaf Whittier). While more recent Burns criticism has added further complexity to this literary relationship, the idea that Whittier was heavily influenced by Burns’s poetics (and popular ‘rustic’ persona) remains pertinent.⁴

This recurrent transatlantic pairing largely stems from the American poet’s “debt to Burns,”⁵ or rather, his 1840 composition “Burns. On receiving a Sprig of Heather in Blossom,” in which Whittier’s speaker emphatically pays tribute, in English, to “Wild heather-bells and Robert Burns! / The moorland flower and peasant!”⁶ That this poetic tribute was written a whole three decades after Whittier’s initial experimentations with Scots verse has not, however, been deemed particularly significant.⁷ Even more pertinently, the “Rustic Bard” addressed in Whittier’s much earlier (and largely neglected) poem is not actually Burns, but rather New Hampshire poet Robert Dinsmoor (1757–1836). In this essay, one of my aims is to complicate the analogy between Burns and Whittier by recovering the work of Dinsmoor and, in doing so, suggest that he functioned as a ‘poetic mediator’ between Whittier and Burns. This case study presents a challenge to prominent author-centered ideas of influence through its uncovering of how a culturally

3. Jackson, “American Romanticism, Again,” *Studies in Romanticism* 55, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 321. Interestingly, Jackson in fact cites Paul Laurence Dunbar as the “American Burns,” despite the common critical tendency to connect Burns with Whittier.

4. See Robert Crawford, “America’s Bard,” and Gerard Carruthers, “Burns’s Political Reputation in North America,” in *Robert Burns and Transatlantic Culture*, ed. Sharon Alker, Leith Davis, and Holly Faith Nelson (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).

5. Low, ed. *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*, 432.

6. Whittier, *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, ed. H. E. Scudder (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1894), 196, lines 9–10.

7. Crawford is one of few critics to have provided comment on Whittier’s early Scots poems. See Crawford, “America’s Bard,” in *Robert Burns and Transatlantic Culture*, 11.

marginal or ‘minor’⁸ literary figure (in Dinsmoor) mediated the influence of one ‘major’ or popular national poet (Burns) on another (Whittier). Though I initially engage with Whittier’s early Scots language compositions, the essay culminates with a reading of his best-known narrative poem *Snowbound: A Winter Idyl* (1860) in order to trace the evolving dynamics of influence at three different stages of his poetic career. As we shall see, Whittier’s relation to Burns was not comprised of a direct transatlantic line with only two poles, but was formed of more complex systems of exposure, exchange, and interaction.

This line of inquiry builds on the work of Meredith L. McGill and Michael C. Cohen, both of whom argue for the expansion of Atlantic literary histories to include “culturally marginal . . . poets and poetic forms.”⁹ However, diverting attention to minor poets or previously neglected literary forms is not to aimlessly exploit the exoticness attached to figures and works previously excluded from the canon. Rather, a turn to the margins can pose welcome challenges to our received and longstanding literary histories in that works and individuals long dismissed as insignificant (in this case Dinsmoor) might yet be revealed to have played an influential part in shaping the canonical formations they wound up excluded from.

What follows is a study of transatlantic poetic influence: specifically, the influence of Robert Burns on John Greenleaf Whittier, as mediated through Robert Dinsmoor. Despite my stated interest in the marginal, then, the looming presence of two literary giants (of Romantic, Scottish, American, and Transatlantic literary histories) pervades this essay, as I return, persistently, to the question of Burns’s influence on Whittier.

Given this essay is rooted in questions of Romantic-era poetic influence, I will also revisit Harold Bloom’s long-contested ideas of how “one poet helps to form another.”¹⁰ Bloomian thought provided the foundations for Robert Weisbuch’s *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (1986)—a seminal work that helped usher in a new era of Anglo-American scholarship, and greatly contributed toward the establishment of the field or sub-field we now call Transatlantic Studies. For Weisbuch, American writers of the nineteenth century consistently wrote against their British predecessors in productive enmity, an argument largely based on Bloom’s idea of literary influence

8. I use the terms ‘major’ and ‘minor’ here to connote canonical and non-canonical in terms of literary histories.

9. McGill, “Introduction,” in *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange*, ed. McGill (New Brunswick; New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 4. See also Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

10. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 5.

being “burdensome, preventative, and anxiety-arousing.”¹¹ While there is no doubting the path-breaking nature of Weisbuch’s study, very few transatlantic scholars have continued to accept this model of cultural rivalry, as Amanda Claybaugh has noted.¹² However, as Marjorie Garber points out, the logic of Bloom’s very own argument presupposed and predicted this “swerve” away from his aesthetically-driven approach.¹³ If, as Bloom suggests in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), “strong” poets must perform a “revisionary swerve” or corrective “misreading”¹⁴ in order to set themselves apart from their precursors, then “strong” critics too were expected to misinterpret:

Poets’ misinterpretations of poems are more drastic than critics’ misinterpretations of criticism, but this is only a difference in degree and not at all in kind. There are no interpretations but only misinterpretations and so all criticism is prose poetry.¹⁵

Thus, the critical approaches (New Historicism, Feminist Criticism, Poststructuralism, and so on) that Bloom would later (in)famously group together as the “School of Resentment”¹⁶ were not so much “resentful,” but in fact “swerving” from his own precursing in a manner presupposed by the very ratios outlined in *Anxiety*.¹⁷ The generational aspect here bolsters Bloom’s presupposition in that the “dynamic, in fact, is Oedipal, Freudian, Bloomian, choose what nominal adjective you will.”¹⁸ In light of this schema, it is actually a good moment to reassess some of Bloom’s ideas. That is, as critics, we are arguably less preoccupied with the dutiful act of “misprision,” “misreading,” and “disciplined perverseness” than was once the case.¹⁹ As Garber suggestively concludes, “Letting go of the anxiety allows the influence to flourish—we might even say to bloom.”²⁰

11. Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), xvi.

12. Claybaugh, “New Fields, Conventional Habits, and the Legacy of “Atlantic Double-Cross,” *American Literary History* 20, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 439–48.

13. Garber, “Over the Influence,” *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 4 (Summer 2016), 731–59.

14. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 44.

15. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 94–95.

16. Bloom outlines the term in his later works *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994) and *The Anatomy of Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

17. Garber suggests that Bloom fails to acknowledge this: “Bloom, who reads everything, does not wish to read their books poetically and does not choose to credit their disciplined and disciplinary perversity as swerving” (“Over the Influence,” 736–37).

18. Garber, “Over the Influence,” 740.

19. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 95.

20. Garber, “Over the Influence,” 759.

Though the time when “influence studies” was the “topic of the moment . . . for critics on both sides of the Atlantic” is long gone,²¹ a reassessment of Bloom’s *Anxiety* from new (and indeed less anxious) vantage points can prove fruitful, particularly when discerning the interrelationships between Romantic-period texts and poets.²² In this essay, I propose that Bloomian thought can help us to understand the mediated processes of exchange between major and minor poets in the nineteenth century—an interaction Weisbuch chose to ignore in favor of his sole focus on “the traditional canon.”²³ As we shall see, Bloom’s ideas can be transposed to culturally marginal or non-canonical poets like Burns, Whittier, and Dinsmoor.²⁴ Matthew Arnold, in his late nineteenth-century critical survey “The Study of Poetry,” echoed numerous other derisions of Burns when describing him as “so widely admired” yet “poetically unsound.”²⁵ While Burns’s nineteenth-century popularity boomed on both sides of the Atlantic—by the 1860s there were 166 different editions of his works available in the US alone²⁶—it is only relatively recently that he has gained further credence with “those who set the Romantic critical agenda.”²⁷ Similarly, though Whittier was widely read in the 1840s and 1850s, it was not until the final decades of the nineteenth century that he was granted “canonical” literary status.²⁸

In the context of this paper, these critical fluctuations and processes of retroactive canon-formation are important to note for two main reasons. First, if both Burns and Whittier were considered eccentric from

21. Garber also provides an illuminating account of the twentieth century critical disparities between Bloom and Walter Jackson Bate on one hand, and the French theorists (Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault) who “largely did away with the anxious author” in favor of considering influence as a language-centered “textual system” on the other (“Over the Influence,” 734–35).

22. Bloom’s thesis was, after all, formulated around Romantic authors.

23. Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross*, xix.

24. Whether or not Bloom would support such a digression from his established “Western Canon” of major poets is another matter entirely.

25. Arnold, “Introduction,” in *The English Poets*, ed. Thomas Humphry Ward (New York and London: Macmillan and Co., 1880), i:xl–i:xli.

26. Arun Sood, *Robert Burns and the United States of America: Poetry, Print, and Memory 1786–1866* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 214.

27. Murray Pittock, “Introduction,” in *Robert Burns and Global Culture*, ed. Murray Pittock (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 13. Pittock provides a fascinating overview of Burns’s fluctuating critical status in his essay in the same edited book, “‘A Long Farewell to All My Greatness’: The History of The Reputation of Robert Burns,” 25–47.

28. Cohen correlates the “aesthetic” turn in appreciation to a change in publication format. Specifically, Whittier went from being published in “cheap and ephemeral formats” (1840–50) to “upmarket magazines and luxuriously produced books, that indexed particular modes of historical and communal identification” (1860–70). See Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems*, 175.

institutionalized literary power and canonicity, then Dinsmoor's publications and poetic persona—which made no effort to popularize him and indeed reveled in his obscurity—might be identified as truly marginal, and quite purposefully so. Second, in relation to the former point, this case study demonstrates that Bloom's theory of influence need not be bound up with rigid conceptions of canonicity.

Specifically, I will draw on Bloom's distinction between "strong poets" and "weaker talents" to suggest that Dinsmoor's compositions might be considered the work of a "strong poet" (in spite of his marginal status) owing to an "imaginative capability" to wrestle with a "strong precursor" in Burns.²⁹ Moreover, Dinsmoor's "imaginative capability" was to have some—dare I say it—"influence" on Whittier's reading of Burns. Here, the intended effect is to further destabilize notions of linear influence, canonical superiority, and prominent-author processes of exchange and influence.

Robert Dinsmoor: The "Rustic Bard" of New Hampshire

Very little had been written on the life and work of Robert Dinsmoor until recently, when a scholarly revival in Ulster Scots language and literature took a transatlantic turn to consider American writers of Ulster Scots heritage.³⁰ In 2012, the Ulster Historical Foundation published *Robert Dinsmoor's Scotch-Irish Poems*, edited by Frank Ferguson and Alister McReynolds. The recovery of Dinsmoor's work is, as Ferguson and McReynolds point out, important for the development of Ulster-Scots scholarship in that it ties together the language, culture, and experiences of the torrent of Ulster-Scots who emigrated to America almost a century after leaving the Lowlands of Scotland.³¹ Dinsmoor's great-grandfather had originally moved from the Tweed area of Scotland to the plantations of Ulster in the early eighteenth century, and a few decades later his own grandfather crossed the Atlantic, building a house in Fort George, Brunswick, between 1718 and 1720. It is widely known that a large portion of Ulster-Scots emigrants "appeared in the forefront of the American revolution,"³² and Robert Dinsmoor was no exception, having fought against

29. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 5.

30. The formation of the Ulster-Scots Language Society has been credited as a principal agent in sparking the revival. See for example Frank Ferguson, ed., *Ulster-Scots Writing: An Anthology* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008); and Michael Montgomery, "The Rediscovery of The Ulster Scots Language," in *Englishes Around the World: General Studies, British Isles, North America*, ed. Edgar Werner Schneider (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Press, 1997), 215.

31. Dinsmoor, *Robert Dinsmoor's Scotch-Irish Poems*, ed. Frank Ferguson and Alister McReynolds (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2012).

32. T. W. Moody, "The Ulster Scots in Colonial and Revolutionary America: Part II," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 34, no. 134 (1945): 211.

the British during the Revolutionary War and notably being present during the surrender of Sir John Burgoyne at Saratoga: an episode that Burns himself would later write about in his “When Guilford Good” or “Ballad on the American War.”³³

In 1828 Massachusetts publisher A. W. Thayer published a collection by Dinsmoor titled *Incidental Poems*. The title page attributes the work to “Robert Dinsmoor, ‘The ‘Rustic Bard’”; a term derived from Burns’s self-presentation as “a Bard of rustic song” in “A Bard’s Epitaph.”³⁴ The preface to *Incidental Poems* also draws heavily on Burns’s construction of himself (in *Poems*) as a “Simple Bard, unbroke by rules of Art.”³⁵ Burns’s purposeful and indeed *artful* prefatory framing, written in the third person, contributed toward the persistent myth of the “Heaven-taught Ploughman” which had gained considerable traction in America by 1828, and Dinsmoor plays on, adapts, and appropriates the persona to his own localized end. Dinsmoor’s poems, we are told, were composed “from the untutored impulses of his own mind” and “his right to poetry was derived from the God that made him.”³⁶ Yet where Burns’s preface (to *Poems*) disclaimed any literary influences other than Ramsay and Fergusson, Dinsmoor’s “untutored impulses” are explained by “New England customs”:

Every one acquainted with New England customs, knows, that in a farmer’s house, you commonly see, a Bible and Watt’s Psalm-Book, his Lyric Poems, Pope’s Essay on Man, Pilgrim’s Progress, and an Almanac. This constitutes their library; and from sources like these, our author probably derived all his juvenile literature.³⁷

After discussing the merits of Shakespeare’s and Addison’s treatment of nature, the preface, presumably written by Dinsmoor himself, extols the virtues of the “‘Rustic Bard’ of New Hampshire.”³⁸ While “there is no art, no refinement, no sublimity” in his lines, there is a “fresh importation of images from the living world”; his “homely and rustic air” is described as “profoundly original.”³⁹

33. See *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 1:49.

34. This appears as the final poem in the first 1786 “Kilmarnock Edition” of Burns’s *Poems, Chiefly in The Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock: John Wilson, 1786), hereafter referred to as *Poems*.

35. *Poems*, title page.

36. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems: accompanied with letters . . . Together with a preface, and sketch of the author’s life (written by himself)* (Haverhill: A. W. Thayer, 1828), preface, v.

37. Dinsmoor, preface, viii.

38. An introductory note to the volume reveals that Silas Beton compiled much of the materials for publication, which Dinsmoor subsequently edited along with the preface.

39. Dinsmoor, preface, vi.

And it is here, in Dinsmoor's claim of "original[ity]," that we might begin to identify the Bloomian "mechanisms of defense"⁴⁰ that pervade Dinsmoor's work and his relationship to Burns. Like Burns, Dinsmoor asserts his unique sensibility and capacity for genius through a paradoxical emphasis on "rustic" authenticity rather than literacy. Yet Dinsmoor performs a "revisionary swerve"⁴¹ away from his predecessor in Burns by claiming his place as the first "poet of domestic life as it is exhibited in New England."⁴² Grappling with his anxiety of influence—"a disease of self-consciousness"⁴³—Dinsmoor deviates from Burns by emphasizing his unique geo-cultural singularity. This is further demonstrated when Dinsmoor's muse is described:

She is a nymph, dressed not in the classic wreaths of Greece and Rome; nor does she wear the roses and lilies of Italy or England. Her garland is white-weed, a less fanciful plant, but the production of our own soil. We hear, not the nightingales of a foreign grove, but the Bob'o'lincoms of our own.⁴⁴

Dinsmoor rejects "Nightingales," used as a motif by Roman, Greek, and English poets ranging from Sappho to Keats, in favor of "Bob' o' lincoms"; a loaded reference to both a species of bird unique to North America ("the bobolink") and also William Cullen Bryant's corresponding poem "Robert of Lincoln."⁴⁵ Dinsmoor's muse is depicted as entirely "the production of our own soil," demonstrating a sense of "imaginative identity" which, according to Bloom, is present in all "strong poets":

a poet's stance, his Word, his imaginative identity, his whole being, *must* be unique to him, and remain unique, or he will perish, as a poet, if ever even he has managed his re-birth into poetic incarnation.⁴⁶

However, Dinsmoor's "poetic incarnation" as the "'Rustic Bard' of New Hampshire" is also inhibited, to follow Bloomian thought, by "an obsessive reasoning and comparing, presumably of one's own work to the precursor's."⁴⁷ This is most explicit in the conciliatory and defensive turn

40. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 11.

41. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 44.

42. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems*, preface, vii.

43. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 29.

44. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems*, preface, vii–viii.

45. Another poem titled "The Bobolink" by Thomas Hill appeared in a bird-themed American poetry collection, *Among the Birds: Selections from the Standard Poets*, ed. Dana Estes (Boston: Dana Estes, 2009), 33. Bryant's "Robert of Lincoln" appears on 40.

46. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 67.

47. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 29.

Dinsmoor takes when addressing Burns directly: "It may be said that he writes in the Scotch dialect, and with manifest reference to Burns."⁴⁸ A subsequent defense of Dinsmoor is put forward; firstly on the basis of his emigrant heritage: "respecting his using the Scotch dialect, we would remark, that he is really of Scotch descent, though of American birth."⁴⁹ It is notable that Dinsmoor's use of Scots is, rather facetiously, attributed to his "Scotch-descent" rather than it being recognized as a purposeful literary device. The assertion, similar to Burns's imaginative construction of himself as a "Simple Bard," simultaneously denies Dinsmoor his linguistic versatility whilst emphasizing his "Rustic" sense of American *and* Scottish/Ulster-Scots authenticity. However, it is Dinsmoor's geo-cultural singularity that forms the backbone of his "imaginative identity":

If he resembles Burns, it is with all the diversity of the two countries in which each were born. Burns is the bonny Doon flowing through the banks and braes of Scotland; and Dinsmoor, is the Merrimack, passing through our western soil and reflecting from its crystal bed the western scenery through which it passes . . . whatever similitude there may be between them, he shews [sic] peculiar judgment in not transfusing, a single sample of foreign scenery into his native land."⁵⁰

In a more disputable statement, the preface goes on to state that Dinsmoor "began to write poetry probably before he knew that Burns existed" and it was not until a friend gave him a copy of Burns's poetry that he realized that they "were congenial spirits."⁵¹ The paternal denial and assertion of "coincidental" congeniality here verges on the Oedipal. There might well be some truth in Dinsmoor having experimented with Scots at an early age, yet it is hard to imagine the effusions in *Incidental Poems* being written before the New England poet had read Burns. That is not to say that Dinsmoor's claims of "original[ity]" were wholly untrue.

In addition to depicting "western scenery" such as the Merrimack River (which rises at the confluence of the Pemigewasset and Winnepesaukee rivers in New Hampshire), many of Dinsmoor's poems deal with regionally-specific socio-political issues. In "Thanksgiving Day,"⁵² for example, the speaker delights at a family celebration beside a "rousing fire" with "wholesome fare," before turning to the contentious rise of American Unitarianism:⁵³

48. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems*, preface, vii.

49. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems*, preface, vii.

50. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems*, preface, viii–ix.

51. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems*, preface, viii.

52. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems*, 102.

53. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems*, 101, lines 9, 4.

Lowell and Channing may debate,
 As politicians, wise and great,
 Predict their country's future fate,
 By reasoning clear;
 And shew blind rulers of the State,
 What courses to steer;⁵⁴

The references to William Ellery Channing (1780–1842) and Reverend Charles Russell Lowell Sr. (1782–1861) not only alert us to Dinsmoor's acute attention to theological issues of local and national interest, but are also interesting for their connections to "major figures" of American literary history. Channing was a leading proponent of Unitarianism, whose essays *The System of Exclusion and Denunciation in Religion* (1815) and *Objections to Unitarian Christianity Considered* (1819) came to be hugely influential on Emerson's transcendentalist thought; while Reverend Charles Russell Lowell, also a prominent Unitarian pastor at the West Congregational church in Boston, was the father of poet James Russell Lowell. However, Burnsian dramatic effect echoes throughout Dinsmoor's treatment of American theology. In denouncing Lowell, Channing, and Unitarianism, for example, Dinsmoor's speaker reverts to a familiar and scathing Calvinistic rhetoric. It is an insult that "The mighty God, who all things made" could ever be considered as being present "In human nature";⁵⁵ the language here echoing Burns's (more satirical) Calvinist meditation "To Ruin" in which the "Inexorable Lord!" has power over the "mightiest Empires."⁵⁶ Thematic and linguistic debts to Burns can also be found in Dinsmoor's comic and egalitarian works. In "Spring's Lamentation and Confession,"⁵⁷ Dinsmoor begins his verses about a dog by directly drawing on the comic anthropomorphism of Burns's "The Twa Dogs":

Long hae I liv'd wi' kind Miss Bessy,
 Wha kept me cozie, warm an' fleshy;
 In lanely hours she would caress me,
 An' mak' me fain,
 Baith e'en an' morn I gat a messy,
 As though her wean.⁵⁸

54. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems*, 102, lines 25–30.

55. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems*, 102, lines 33 and 36.

56. Burns, *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 1:19, lines 1 and 3. As Susan Manning notes, Burns's views on religion are notoriously hard to pin down. See Susan Manning, "Burns and God," in *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, ed. Robert Crawford (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 129.

57. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems*, 49.

58. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems*, 49, lines 7–12.

In addition to this comic use of Scots, Dinsmoor also borrows from Burns's strategic use of language to channel egalitarian sympathy through a class-infused, vernacular energy. In a poetic response to one Silas Beton, who had written to Dinsmoor in reference to poverty and a lack of corn, Dinsmoor responds:

I aye was free wi' a' my might,
To help the poor dependant wight,
Nor wad I drive him out at night,
Amang the snaw;
To warm his bluid, I took delight
An' fill his maw.⁵⁹

The language here takes on added resonance and associational power given Burns's poetic reverence for those "constantly on poorith's brink."⁶⁰

Thus, while claims of "original[ity]" might well be based on Dinsmoor's geo-cultural "revisionary swerve" and attention to local landscape, theology, and socio-political issues, the shadow of his predecessor looms large throughout. Having outlined Dinsmoor's own claims of "original[ity]" and relationship to Burns, I shall now turn to Whittier in the hope of adding nuance to a frequently over-simplified literary relationship.

John Greenleaf Whittier and "The 'Rustic Bard'"

Appearing in the final few pages of Dinsmoor's *Incidental Poems*, "J. G. Whittier To The 'Rustic Bard'" was deemed fit for guest inclusion in between Dinsmoor's own verse epistles and miscellaneous fragments. Whittier critics have concurred that this was "the first printing of one of Whittier's poems in book form,"⁶¹ though it has been continually overlooked in analyses of his relationship to Scots-language poetry and Burns. This is perhaps owing to its omission from nineteenth-century collected editions that claimed to represent, in Whittier's own words, "a complete collection of my poetical writings."⁶² The poem also does not appear in the second edition of Dinsmoor's *Incidental Poems*, which was compiled and edited by Leonard Allison Morrison in 1898. In Morrison's introduction to that edition, however, he makes reference to Whittier through an apologetic plea to readers to forgive Dinsmoor's lack of literary refinement:

59. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems*, 123, lines 13–18.

60. Burns, *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 1:141, line 104.

61. Whittier, *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier: 1828–1845*, ed. John B. Pickard (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975), 1:8.

62. Whittier, *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier* (Boston: J. R. Osgood and Co., 1873), 3, note by the author.

But in these pages they need not look for the refinement, polish, culture, and intellectual force of Tennyson or Wordsworth, Bryant or Longfellow . . . Nor need they expect the tender sweetness of our own loved songster of the verdure-clothed valleys, the rolling waters, and the wooded hills of New England; he whom the people loved, to whom God gave a beautiful soul, the saintly Whittier, for the writings of such as these they will not see.⁶³

Morrison goes on to state that he [Dinsmoor] “and John G. Whittier were personal friends, and the latter in his prose works, pays a ‘tribute of love’ to the name of the Windham poet.”⁶⁴ The “tribute of love” Morrison refers to is Whittier’s (also largely neglected) essay on Dinsmoor in his 1850 prose collection *Old portraits and modern sketches* (discussed further below). Despite editing the second edition of *Incidental Poems* and lavishing praise on the “saintly” Whittier, Morrison appears to have consciously omitted the former’s contribution. It is plausible that this stemmed from an editorial hesitance to include a work by Whittier in a more formative phase—when he was, in Bloom’s terms, but a “young citizen of poetry, or ephebe” who idolized rather than wrestled his precursors.⁶⁵ Any suggestion of Whittier idolizing Dinsmoor—that minor and unrefined poet—may well have jarred against the canonical sanctification that had formed by the turn of the twentieth century. It seems it was more fitting for Morrison to acknowledge Whittier’s later essay which, as we shall see, underlines Dinsmoor’s poetic inferiority to a much greater extent.

“J. G. Whittier To the ‘Rustic Bard’” is comprised of eleven Standard Habbie stanzas in which Whittier’s humble and inferior speaker lavishes praise on Dinsmoor. The speaker deems it an “honor to be ca’d/ Yere rhymin’ brither”⁶⁶ while acknowledging that his young muse “Is na possessor” of skill compared with Dinsmoor’s (“But yours has been a lang time busy—/ An auld transgressor”) (10–12). Having emphasized the “skill” of Dinsmoor, the speaker turns to dismiss the “heartless sneer” of critics who “urge their wordy weir” (19–20), suggesting that Dinsmoor’s self-fashioning as a “rustic” writing in Scots had been subject to much “taunt an’ jeer” (21). Yet for Whittier’s speaker, critical jibes “canna mak’ the muse less dear” (23), and poets must ignore “What fools may chance to say” in the knowledge that “wise men roose us” (35–39). The former sentiment is notable for its acknowledgment of linguistic fluidity and purposeful aesthetic self-fashioning. Whittier’s speaker further implies that to “wear the garb”

63. Morrison, introduction to Dinsmoor, *Poems of Robert Dinsmoor, “the Rustic Bard”*, ed. Leonard Allison Morrison (Boston: Damrell & Upham, 1898), 14.

64. Morrison, introduction to *Poems of Robert Dinsmoor*, 15.

65. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 5.

66. Dinsmoor, *Incidental Poems*, 243, lines 4–5. Hereafter, the poem is referred to by line number in-text parenthetically.

(34) of a rustic (an image that further evokes an aesthetic “dressing up”) is not a regressive tendency but rather a shrewd device that only “wise men” could understand.⁶⁷ The verses that follow channel the vernacular energy of Scots to protest against the “rank” and “station” of critics who choose to criticize Dinmoor’s poetics, thus revealing their “bloated ignorance”:

But whyles they need a castigation,
 Shall either name, or rank, or station,
 Protect them frae the flagellation,
 Sae muckle needed?
 Shall vice an’ crimes that “taint the nation”
 Pass on unheeded?

No! let the muse her trumpet take,
 ‘Till auld offenders learn to shake,
 An’ tremble when they hear her wake
 Her tones o’ thunder;
 ‘Till pride, an’ bloated ignorance quake,
 An’ gawkies wonder.

(36–47)

On the whole, Whittier’s early poem reads as an ardent defense of Dinsmoor’s use of Scots and concern with locality. It is Dinsmoor, not Burns, who appears to catalyze Whittier’s formative interest in the New Hampshire pastoral; but, in a triangulated process of exchange, this influence derives from Dinsmoor’s own heavy reliance on Burnsian poetics. As demonstrated by the concluding verse of “To The ‘Rustic Bard,’” it is the empowerment of a New Hampshire muse that most concerns Whittier’s speaker:

Farewell! The poet’s hopes an’ fears
 May vanish frae this vale o’ tears;
 An’ curtain’d wi forgotten years,
 His muse may lie;
 But virtue’s form, unscaith’d appears –
 It canna die!

(54–59)

With specific regards to language, there is further evidence to suggest that it may have been Dinsmoor, rather than Burns directly, who inspired

67. As I go on to conclude, a similar aesthetic play on rusticity informed Whittier’s own poetic persona and prominent works, most notably in his popular pastoral epic “Snowbound.”

Whittier's early turn to Scots.⁶⁸ As Robert Crawford notes, "part of Whittier's poetic apprenticeship involved trying on Standard Habbie for size, not just the stanza form but also the Scots dialect so associated with it."⁶⁹ This is demonstrated by Whittier's other (and also under-acknowledged) Scots-language poems "Donald" and "The Drunkard to his Bottle"—both of which were written in close proximity to "The 'Rustic Bard.'"⁷⁰ The same year that Whittier wrote "To The 'Rustic Bard,'" "Donald" was published in a local Haverhill paper run by A. W. Thayer, who had printed the first edition of Dinsmoor's *Incidental Poems*. The appearance of the (anonymously published) poem caused Dinsmoor to write to Thayer and inquire about the "allusions to the Rustic Bard's volume now in the press."⁷¹ Whittier later purchased this letter at an auction as a keepsake, an act that further testifies his fondness for the "'Rustic Bard,'" especially seeing as the letter also contained an unpublished poetic fragment.⁷²

Of course, it remains difficult to ascertain the extent to which Whittier's engagement with Dinsmoor altered his relationship with Burns, or vice versa for that matter. What we can deduce, however, is that the young Whittier was reading the work of both poets around the same time. An early catalogue of Whittier's personal library reveals that Whittier owned Dinsmoor's volume and also the 1828 Philadelphia edition of *The Works of Robert Burns* (printed by J. Crissy and J. Grigg). According to the catalogue notes, Burns's *Works* contained numerous "pencil markings by him" and it was the "first copy of Burns's poems ever owned by Mr Whittier."⁷³ Whittier's copy of *Incidental Poems* from the same year had a "couple of leaves of the [Scots] Glossary missing," and the poet had rather curiously "written the name of his sister, Mary W. Caldwell, a number of times" on its title page.⁷⁴ The note further states that "one stanza on p.37 bears corrections and interlineations in Mr. Whittier's handwriting."⁷⁵ Pertinently, the page referred to features three stanzas from a verse epistle in which Dinsmoor thanks a friend for presenting him with a copy of R. H. Cromeck's *Reliques of Robert Burns*.⁷⁶

Clearly, Whittier was reading the work of both poets at this formative stage. As biographers have pointed out, Whittier's childhood teacher Joshua

68. See Whittier, *Catalogue of manuscripts, books and autographs from the library of the late John Greenleaf Whittier* [. . .], (New York: Taylor, 1903), 8.

69. Crawford, "America's Bard," 111.

70. Whittier, *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier* (1873), 490.

71. Whittier, *Catalogue of manuscripts*, 9.

72. Whittier, *Catalogue of manuscripts*, 9.

73. Whittier, *Catalogue of manuscripts*, 4.

74. Whittier, *Catalogue of manuscripts*, 8.

75. Whittier, *Catalogue of manuscripts*, 8.

76. I have not been able to track down this edition.

Coffin “introduced him to a knowledge of Burns,” whose poems “he read aloud” as “the family sat by the fireside in the evening.”⁷⁷ Moreover, Michael C. Cohen has recently underlined the significance of “Yankee Gypsies”—in the form of peddlers, vagrants, wanderers, and musicians—having visited Whittier’s rural family homestead. As Cohen notes, quoting from Whittier’s later recollections:

One of these gypsies, “a ‘pawky auld carle’ of a wandering Scotchman,” introduced Whittier to the songs of Burns, which would become his most important literary model: “after eating his bread and cheese and drinking his mug of cider he gave us Bonny Doon, Highland Mary, and Auld Lang Syne. He had a rich, full voice, and entered heartily into the spirit of his lyrics.”⁷⁸

While this further suggests that Whittier was familiar with Burns long before the 1828 printing of *Incidental Poems*, the above recollection also shores up a key point of this essay. That is, acknowledging and recovering hybrid processes of poetic exchange is a fruitful endeavor, and one that helps to challenge more rigid definitions of authorial influence in transatlantic contexts. Rather than a linear sense of influence between Burns and Whittier, then, it is surely worth noting the marginal figure of Dinsmoor, and perhaps even the “pawky auld carle of a wandering Scotchman” who so enchanted Whittier as a young boy.

Evolving States of Influence

Poetic Influence is the passing of Individuals through States. . . . but the passing is done ill when it is not a swerving.⁷⁹

It is clear from the above analysis that the mediating presence of Dinsmoor complicates any idea of a direct transatlantic line of influence or “mirror” between Burns and Whittier. This has been established through the recovery of Dinsmoor’s work and, correspondingly, Whittier’s engagement with it as a young poet. In the concluding part of this essay, I will turn to three later points in Whittier’s career in order to trace the evolving dynamics of this triangulated relationship. First, I will revisit the poem that has most linked Burns and Whittier, “Burns. On receiving a Sprig of Heather in Blossom” (1840), before offering analysis of Whittier’s prose essay on Dinsmoor, written a decade later in 1850. Finally, I will touch on Whittier’s best-known

77. Whittier, *The Complete Poetical Works of Whittier* (1873), 11–12.

78. Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems*, 17. Cited from *The Works of John Greenleaf Whittier* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1889), 5:334–35.

79. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 44.

narrative poem, the New England pastoral epic, *Snowbound: A Winter Idyl*. As Bloom notes, “poetic influence is the passing of individuals through states,” and it is hoped the juxtaposition of these works not only provides insights into Whittier’s development (or “passing through states”) as a poet, but also reveals the broader complexities of hybrid patterns of poetic influence and exchange.

Unsurprisingly, the one poem critics have commonly referenced when suggesting Burns’s influence on Whittier is “Burns. On a receiving a sprig of heather in blossom,” written almost three decades after Whittier’s earlier Scots-language poems. Burns critics have predominantly cited the version of the poem found in Donald Low’s *The Critical Heritage*, which omits several stanzas. The first few stanzas of the full-length version are, however, particularly insightful when considering the mediated influence of Burns via the “Rustic Bard of New Hampshire.” For example, the importance of a localized “soil of song” quite distinct from Burns’s Scotland is evoked in the opening lines:

No more these simple flowers belong
To Scottish maid and lover:
Sown in the common soil of song,
They bloom the wide world over.⁸⁰

Later on, the speaker once again reminds us that nature’s muse is uniquely local. While the speaker’s “heart” might resonate with the “old tunes” of Burns, it is their relationship to New England’s ecology (“I hear . . . blackbird,” “corn,” “locust,” “hayng”) that forms the basis of the verse:

I hear the blackbird in the corn,
The locust in the hayng;
And like the fabled hunter’s horn,
Old tunes my heart is playing.
(23–26)

More emphatically, Whittier’s speaker declares that “Scotland’s heathery hills” have been matched by his own “native rills” that echo “wood hymns chanting over” (44–47).

Following Dinsmoor’s dictum of rejecting “nightingales of a foreign grove” in favour of “Bob’o’lincoms of our own,” assertions of “native” inspiration resonate throughout. Moreover, where the young Whittier

80. Whittier, “Burns. On a receiving a sprig of heather in blossom,” *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier* (1873), 186, lines 1–4. Hereafter, all references to this poem are to this edition and are cited in-text parenthetically by line number.

was quick to lavish unbounded praise on Dinsmoor, the “tribute” to Burns quickly turns to denigration of his bacchanalian tendencies:

Lament who will the ribald line
 Which tells his lapse from duty,
 How kissed the maddening lips of wine
 Or wanton ones of beauty;
(95–98)

Here, Burns’s supposed tendencies towards “the ribald line,” inebriation and fondness for “wanton” women is considered a “lapse of duty.” Claiming the higher moral ground, Whittier’s speaker suggests that Burns should, “like Magdalen,” be “forgiven” (95–102).⁸¹ It is almost certain that James Currie’s moralizing and highly ideological biographical account of Burns (in his *Works of Robert Burns*) would have been familiar to Whittier, and thus impacted this depiction of a flawed, debauched, or “lapsed” poet.⁸²

Yet the denigration of Burns’s poetic (“lapse from duty”) and personal (“kissed the maddening lips of wine”) character also has deeper resonances. To follow Bloomian thought, Whittier’s praise may have been (consciously or unconsciously) restrained in order to “clear imaginative space”⁸³ for himself and assert his sense of difference, and indeed superiority. Gerard Carruthers goes further to suggest that Burns is “de-canonized”⁸⁴ by Whittier’s speaker toward the end of the poem, when juxtaposed with the superior Dante—“The mournful Tuscan’s Haunted R’hyme” (105)—and “Milton’s starry splendour” (106). Reducing Burns’s literary amplitude by way of comparison, the speaker declares (of Burns): “Not his the song whose thunderous chime / Eternal echoes render” (103). Whittier’s poem, though shrouded in praise, effectively serves as a reduction and slaying of his predecessor in Burns, similar to Dinsmoor’s own “revisionary swerve” in the preface to *Incidental Poems*.

Crucial to note, however, is that this act of ancestral reduction was not present in Whittier’s earlier poetic tribute to Dinsmoor. This raises important questions about poetic influence and, in the case of this triangulated relationship, the dynamics between culturally marginal and major poets. There is the obvious possibility that Whittier had to place and reduce Burns due to the former’s widespread fame and overbearing shadow. This act of reduction was not necessary for the culturally marginal and unknown Dinsmoor. In

81. This stanza has been largely neglected by critics—likely owing to both its omission from *The Critical Heritage* and less favorable depiction of Burns.

82. For an informed discussion of James Currie’s edition see Leith Davis, “Negotiating Cultural Memory: James Currie’s Works of Robert Burns,” *International Journal of Scottish Literature* 6 (Spring/Summer 2010), <http://www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk/issue6/davis.htm>.

83. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 5.

84. Carruthers, “Burns’s Political Reputation in North America,” 93.

this way, we might even consider Whittier's early homage to the "Rustic Bard of New Hampshire" as a cathartic, unconscious acknowledgment of Burnsian influence; but one that was free from the "anxiety" of compromising one's own "imaginative space" and identity. However, Whittier's later prose essay on Dinsmoor complicates the issue.

Published in *Old Portraits and Modern Sketches* (1850), Whittier's essay, titled "Robert Disnmore [sic]" spans a remarkable twenty pages and begins with a lengthy lamentation on the absence of New England pastoral poetry:

We have no Yankee pastorals. Our rivers and streams turn mills and float rafts, and are otherwise as commendably useful as those of Scotland . . . Is there nothing available in our peculiarities of climate, scenery, customs, and political institutions? Who shall say that we have not all the essentials of the poetry of human life and simple nature, of the hearth and the farmfield? Here, then, is a mine unworked, a harvest ungathered. Who shall sink the shaft and thrust in the sickle?⁸⁵

What follows is Whittier's recollection of an "old friend of our boyhood" (Dinsmoor) who had "the good sense to discover that the poetic element existed" in New England. However, in contrast to the idolizing praise in "J. G. Whittier To the Rustic Bard," Whittier goes some way to establish that Dinsmoor was "unable to give a very creditable expression of it."⁸⁶ Whittier proclaims: "He [Dinsmoor] had the 'vision' indeed, but the 'faculty divine' was wanting . . . it would not out, but lay coldly in him like fire in the flint."⁸⁷ In boldly underscoring Dinsmoor's inability to give a "credible expression" of New England, Whittier carves out his own "imaginative space." It is the better-equipped *Whittier*, not Dinsmoor or Burns, who will gather the harvest and "sink the shaft and thrust in the sickle." The older Whittier, in his later, swerving, poetic "state," acknowledges the "old tunes" of Burns, pays tribute to the "vision" of Dinsmoor, but crucially "rescues"⁸⁸ their muse and asserts his own uniqueness. An important point here is that Dinsmoor is treated in a similar manner to Burns. That is, irrespective of culturally marginal or canonical status, Whittier reveals the interrelated influence of both poetic ancestors through the very reduction of them.

85. Whittier, *Old Portraits and Modern Sketches* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1850), 284–88.

86. Whittier, *Old Portraits and Modern Sketches*, 289.

87. Whittier, *Old Portraits and Modern Sketches*, 289.

88. Here, another Bloomian ratio of "influence" becomes apparent in the form of the *tessera*—when a poet "rescues" the "beloved Muse from his precursors . . . for how else can he be assured that *he* is unique and irreplaceable?" (Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 62).

I will conclude this essay by briefly touching on Whittier's best-known work, *Snowbound: A Winter Idyl*, with an eye toward re-iterating the mediated or triangulated influence of Burns via Dinsmoor. Where "To The 'Rustic Bard'" reveals an idolizing young poet, and *Old Portraits and Sketches* asserts a "strong" poetic self, *Snowbound*, written in 1866, offers another glimpse into the evolution of Whittier's "states" of influence. Set in a rural Haverhill Homestead over three days, as a snowstorm rages outside, the chronicling of sublime domesticity in *Snowbound* is unequivocally resonant of Burns's "The Cottar's Saturday Night." The dreary opening scenes of the poems are strikingly similar, with Burns's speaker depicting how "November chill blows loud wi' angry sigh;/ The short'ning winter-day is near a close" (10–11);⁸⁹ and Whittier's narrator describing how "The sun that brief December day/ Rose cheerless over hills of gray" (1–2).⁹⁰ Similarly, both poets' adaption of the pastoral mode to comment on socio-political issues is deceptively complex. Where Burns "breathes radical energy into the quiescent genre of cottage pastoral"⁹¹ through his attack on luxury and aristocratic privilege ("The Cottage leaves the Palace far behind:/What is a lordling's pomp? a cumbrous load"),⁹² Whittier's rhetoric of reconciliation speaks to post-Civil War divisions and anticipated reconciliation:

It is not ours to separate
The tangled skein of will and fate,
To show what metes and bounds should
Stand
Upon the soul'd debatable land⁹³

Whittier's fusion of cottage domesticity with the political sublime is, then, unashamedly derivative of Burns's poem. However, the geo-cultural transference of Burnsian poetics to this localized context also reveals the pervading influence of Dinsmoor. Thus, we might identify a process of mediated influence not only on Whittier as an impressionable young poet; but even in this "final phase" of his as a "strong poet," which Bloom terms *Apophrades*:

89. Burns, "The Cottar's Saturday Night," *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 1:72, lines 10–11.

90. Whittier, *Snowbound: A Winter Idyl*, in *The Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier* (London: Macmillan and co., 1874), 351.

91. Nigel Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 231.

92. Burns, "The Cottar's Saturday Night," 1:72, lines 168–69.

93. Whittier, *Snowbound*, in *The Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier* (London: Macmillan and co., 1874), 351, lines 579–82.

The later poet . . . holds his own poem so open again to the precursor's work that at first we might believe the wheel has come full circle . . . and the uncanny effect is that the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself has written the precursor's characteristic work.⁹⁴

Indeed, the uncanny effect in *Snowbound* is one which serves to nullify and mute the influence of *both* precursors. Whittier, by the end of his career, is at ease with his Dinsmoor-inspired approach to Burnsian poetics, as demonstrated in his epic, New England-based cottage pastoral which derives from, but eclipses, both poets.

What all this reiterates, at the very least, is that the mediating presence of Dinsmoor, clearly evident at different stages or "states" in Whittier's career, complicates our idea of how one popular national (and subsequently canonical) author influenced another. When it comes to the question of intra-poetic relations in transatlantic contexts, then, a Bloomian turn to the margins can indeed make for fruitful analysis of our long-established literary histories—as demonstrated by the case of "The Rustic Bard of New Hampshire" himself.

University of Plymouth

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94. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 16

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