

WARTON LECTURE

BURNS AND THE PEASANTRY, 1785¹

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IN August 1787 Burns wrote a long letter to Dr. John Moore, giving him 'a history of myself . . . an honest narrative', down to that marital crisis of 1786 which precipitated the publication of the *Kilmarnock Poems*. This letter is invaluable for (with much else) the picture it gives of Burns's early education: English grammar, 'a little French', tales and songs from his mother's old servant 'concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies . . . and other trumpery', miscellaneous reading in theology and 'ancient story', Shakespeare, Locke, Boyle, Pope, Thomson, and the English novelists. Burns is not parading his scholarship but (as Robert Dewar said) 'half-apologising for it'; his main theme is 'what it had meant for [him]—man and poet—to be born a very poor man's son and destined to . . . "the cheerless gloom of a hermit with the unceasing moil of a galley-slave"'. Yet he packed into his short, harsh life a prodigious amount of reading in English, Scotch (and some French) poetry and drama, translations of the classics, history, philosophy. Scholars have made much of this record, fragmentary as it is; and my own annotation has illustrated both the range and the depth of Burns's familiarity with the English Augustan tradition. He took much—indeed, too much—from that tradition in diction, imagery, and poetic form; and seldom happily. His English elegies and pastorals are rarely more than competently conventional. His English Pindarics, like many southerly experiments in his century, are deplorable. He knew that he could not rival the greater English poets in their own styles. His most sustained experiment in a foreign mode of allegory, *The Vision*, owes heavy debts to Cowley, Dryden, and Pope; but this is also the poem

¹ Quotations are from my edition of Burns's *Poems and Songs* (Oxford, 1968) and J. De L. Ferguson's edition of the *Letters* (Oxford, 1931). In this review of Burns's manners-poetry I have drawn freely—but I hope constructively—on my own Commentary.

in which, through the words of Coila his muse, Burns accepts his limits:

Thou canst not learn, nor I can show,
 To paint with *Thomson's* landscape-glow;
 Or wake the bosom-melting throe,
 With *Shenstone's* art;
 Or pour, with *Gray*, the moving flow,
 Warm on the heart.
 Yet all beneath th' unrivall'd Rose,
 The lowly Daisy sweetly blows;
 Tho' large the forest's Monarch throws
 His army shade,
 Yet green the juicy Hawthorn grows,
 Adown the glade.
 Then never murmur nor repine;
 Strive in thy *humble sphere* to shine;
 And trust me, not *Potosi's mine*,
 Nor *King's regard*,
 Can give a bliss o'ermatching thine,
 A *rustic Bard*.

Burns had, in his way, poetic resources as rich as Thomson's or Gray's; and he absurdly overrated Shenstone. But it was to be in a language very different from theirs that he realized his potential. For the intellectual reference expected of any serious poet in his time, he went at will to Pope, Thomson, and the philosophers; but he lacked the ability and temperament to interpret a moral or a metaphysical system in poetic terms. ('Burns the poet', says Ramsay of Ochertyre, 'told me here in the year 1787 that the Ayrshire clergy were in general as rank Socinians as himself. That poor man's principles were abundantly motley—he being a Jacobite, an Arminian, and a Socinian.')

The literary world that mattered to Burns—the poetic world that truly made him, and was to be transformed by him—was the native Scotch tradition of balladry, love-lyric, and manners-poetry. The human world that mattered to him was the rural society in which that tradition flourished. To the lettered public of Edinburgh, he was a poetical Noble Savage. 'I know very well', he told Dr. Moore, 'the novelty of my character has by far the greatest share in the learned and polite notice I have lately got'; 'for my part, my first ambition was, and still my strongest wish is, to please my Compeers, the rustic Inmates of the Hamlet, while everchanging language and manners will

The self-portrait Burns goes on to present to Lapraik is not in the least that of a bard in his singing-robes; it is that of a man addicted to the love of women ('*ae wee faut*'), to poetical friendship, and to conviviality. Indeed, the deep spring of his finest poetry was not literary at all—not even the vernacular tradition—but what he called his 'social disposition'; a heart 'completely tinder, and . . . eternally lighted up by some Goddess or other'; and 'a strong appetite for sociability, as well from native hilarity as from a pride of observation and remark'. This appetite led him often into 'scenes of swaggering riot and roaring dissipation', the orgiastic, hellish world of the Jolly Beggars. It also gave him the chance and the capacity to see the rustic society about him with the sympathy and critical clarity of a Brueghel; to write some of the most natural and generous verse letters in the language; and to give the world some of its best songs. What makes Burns's songs great is not only intensity of feeling, and sheer craftsmanship in wedding words and music; it is also his *range* of feeling—his wit as well as his passion and despair, his sensuality as well as his purity of emotion, his laughter as well as his tenderness, his facility in expressing not only a man's feeling for a woman but also a woman's for a man. There are many minor miracles among the songs; I remark here only the group for women—*The Banks o' Doon, I'm o'er Young to Marry yet, Tam Glen, O Wha my Babie-clouts will buy?*, and *John Anderson my Jo* among them (and, in parenthesis, the bawdy lyrics for women). All this was grounded in the experience of Rab Mossgiel, in kitchens and taverns, in barns and at hedge-roots under the moon, where Thomson and Shenstone and Gray would have been ill at ease.

The poetry of Burns's *annus mirabilis*, 1785, springs from his 'social disposition'. There are the warm and witty epistles to 'Davy, a brother Poet, Lover, Ploughman and Fiddler', to John Lapraik, 'An Old Scotch Bard', to 'winsome Willie' Simson and James Smith. There are songs celebrating the 'regardless' course of his sensuality, and the affectionate welcome to his first 'Bastart Wean'. There are the attacks on the life-denying 'Unco Guid' who have 'nought to do but mark and tell [Their] Neebours' fauts and folly', and on the morally deformed members of the Kirk, the Calvinist 'Auld Lichts' and Holy Willie. These were provoked partly by the outrage of hypocritical puritanism and theological idiocy—

. . . I gae mad at their grimaces,
Their sighan, cantan, grace-prood faces, (sanctimonious

Their three-mile prayers, an' hauf-mile graces,
 Their raxan conscience, (elastic
 Whase greed, revenge, an' pride disgraces
 Waur nor their nonsense. (worse than

They were provoked partly too by Burns's 'native hilarity' and 'pride of observation and remark'. 'Polemical divinity', he says, 'about this time was putting the country half-mad; and I, ambitious of shining in conversation parties on Sundays between sermons, funerals, &c. used . . . to puzzle Calvinism with so much heat and indiscretion that I raised a hue and cry of heresy against me.' Finally, there is the splendid group of poems in Burns's 'manners-painting strain'—*The Cotter's Saturday Night*, *The Twa Dogs*, *The Holy Fair*, *Halloween*, *The Mauchline Wedding*, and *Love and Liberty*.

Superficially *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, in the Spenserian stanza, stands apart. For the social commentary by the *Twa Dogs*, in couplets, has an obvious model in Fergusson's *Mutual Complaint of Plainstones and Causey, in their Mother-Tongue*; *The Holy Fair* and *Halloween* are written in a modified form of the old *Chrystis Kirk* stanza, and are firmly in the Scotch folk-life tradition; *Love and Liberty* combines narrative recitativo in various native stanzas with songs set to popular airs: but *The Cotter's Saturday Night* belongs to the essentially English Spenserian revival inaugurated by Prior and given a turn towards manners-painting by Shenstone and Beattie. Even here, however, Burns's immediate model was Fergusson's *The Farmer's Ingle* (1773), a vivid and sympathetic picture of rural life within the Spenserian frame, assimilating stock Augustan *sententiae* from Gray, Shenstone, and others in strong Scotch vernacular. Yet, while *The Farmer's Ingle* is generally taken to be Fergusson's masterpiece, *The Cotter's Saturday Night* is for modern critics a conspicuous failure: an 'exhibition piece' 'showing off the simple virtues of the Scottish peasants' way of life to the Edinburgh patricians'; 'the most imitative and artificial of [Burns's] major works', says David Daiches, in which he is writing 'with one eye on his subject and another squinting at the sort of audience he sought to please by imitating' Pope, Goldsmith, Thomson, and others. Such critical attitudes are seriously unhistorical. Early reviewers praised the poem's naturalism. The *English Review* for February 1787 thought it the best in the Kilmarnock collection, 'a domestic picture of rustic simplicity, natural tenderness, and innocent passion that must please every reader whose feelings are not perverted'. This

may be merely a 'patrician' evaluation; but we have the depreciatory comment by Mrs. Dunlop's Ayrshire housekeeper: 'Nae doubt gentlemen and ladies think mickle o' this, but for me its naething but what I saw i' my father's house every day, and I dinna see how he could hae tauld it ony other way.' What strikes modern readers as artificial in this poem derives in part from eighteenth-century ideas of imitation—strong echoes of other poets were at best not plagiarism or convention, but enrichment by association; it derives in part from pre-Wordsworthian ways of writing about rural life, and perhaps above all from the novel movement of the diction between Scots and poetical English. Burns, it is said, had to contend with a 'linguistic dichotomy' in the Scotch culture of his day. But this kind of sympathy he does not need. Down at least to my own boyhood, cottage families in lowland Scotland made a clear enough distinction between the vernacular, as the medium of ordinary social (and intimate) exchange, and English as the language of the Bible, prayer, education, and moral discourse. This was for us a matter of Presbyterian tradition, of linguistic function, and indeed of propriety. So Burns describes manners and feelings in Scots, following Fergusson; his moral comment is in English; and there is often a subtle movement between the two levels of discourse within single stanzas. The theme of *The Cotter's Saturday Night* is the douce and pious aspect of Scottish life, depicted with the observation and sympathy of a poet to whom the scene was home, and expressed in a linguistic convention appropriate to it. We have the reminiscence of the poet's brother Gilbert, to whom he read his verses during a Sunday walk: 'I do not recollect to have read or heard any thing by which I was more highly electrified. The fifth and sixth stanzas, and the eighteenth, thrilled with peculiar extasy through my soul. I mention this . . . that you may see what hit the taste of unlettered criticism.' Nothing that I have said makes *The Cotter's Saturday Night* into a really good poem. But it fails for me, not on the ground of artifice or literary posturing; rather because Burns is by temperament less fully engaged here than in the other poems in the group. As a social poet, he thrives on ironies of character and situation, on action and on farce. It fails too in energy; notably in the opening, the slow, heavy Spenserian stanza obstructs the natural impetuosity of Burns's mind.

During the same winter of 1785 he was finding his true medium for the illustration of rural manners in a much older,

almost wholly Scotch tradition, in the fragmentary *Mauchline Wedding* and in *The Holy Fair*. Burns's link with this tradition was, I think, first recognized almost casually by John Gibson Lockhart in 1828. *The Holy Fair*, he said,

was, indeed, an extraordinary performance: no partisan of any sect could whisper that malice had formed its principal inspiration . . . it was acknowledged, amidst the sternest mutterings of wrath, that national manners were once more in the hands of a national poet; and hardly denied . . . even by those who justly regretted a too prevailing tone of levity in the treatment of a subject essentially solemn, that the Muse of *Christ's Kirk on the Green* had awakened, after the slumber of ages . . . in 'the auld clay biggin' of Mossgiel.

In 1953 G. F. Jones related *Chrystis Kirk* and other Scotch poems to the medieval genre of the peasant-brawl; in 1960, taking my hint from Lockhart, I drew a tentative line forward through Fergusson to Burns's *Holy Fair*; and in 1964-5 Allan MacLaine assiduously traced the whole Scotch tradition.

An historical chart is now easy to draw. A number of medieval poems survive, differing widely in scale and complication, in which peasant merrymaking is celebrated; in which the poets anticipate the visual achievement of 'Boeren' Brueghel in such pictures as *The Wedding Feast*, *Peasants Dancing*, and *The Battle between Carnival and Lent*. The theme of the 'brawl' is usually a dance and a feast for May Day, a country wedding, or some other public occasion, degenerating into violence and licentious farce. Some early French lyrics have elements of the brawl, and so has the work of the thirteenth-century *minnesinger* Neidhart von Reuenthal; but the main Continental exemplar is Heinrich Wittenwiler's *Ring*, a fifteenth-century German brawl of epic scale. I know of no medieval English example except *The Tournament of Tottenham* printed in Percy's *Reliques* (1886 edn., ii. 17-28), though there are some middling-coarse wedding poems in English as late as Dufey's *Wit and Mirth* (1719-20; i. 230 and 276, iii. 102). In Scotland, however, there is a long and almost continuous sequence: *Chrystis Kirk of the Grene* (perhaps by James I, King of Scots, who died in 1437), accessible to Burns in Allan Ramsay's modified version; *Peblis to the Play*, of similar provenance, and accessible to Burns in Pinkerton's *Select Scottish Ballads* (1783); Dunbar's *Tournament* 'betuix a telzour and ane sowtar' (before 1520); Sir David Lindsay's *Justing betuix James Watsoun and Jhone Barbour* (1538); Alexander Scott's *Justing and Debait* . . . *betuix William Adamsonsone and Johine Sym* (c. 1560); the macaronic *Polemo-Middinia* or 'Midden-Fight'

attributed to Drummond of Hawthornden (published in the 1640s and twice reprinted before 1700 with *Chrystis Kirk*); *The Blythsome Bridal*, based partly on *Polemo-Middinia*, and uncertainly attributed to Francis Sempill of Beltrees (d. 1682); Allan Ramsay's edition of *Chrystis Kirk* (1718) and his two additional cantos, which carried the poem through over a dozen reprints before 1800; John Skinner's *Monymusk Christmas Ba'ing* (c. 1739);¹ Robert Fergusson's three poems, *Hallow-Fair*, *Leith Races*, and *The Election* (1772–3); *Airdrie Fair* by 'W. Y—' (David Nichol Smith's copy was dated 1792, but the poem may be earlier); and Burns.

What binds much of this sequence together—and it is probably incomplete, as the evidence for Scotch traditions tends to be—is not merely the theme of rustic revelry and licence, or the convention of hilarious and often sardonic observation, but also the old *Chrystis Kirk* stanza: a persistent association, over three centuries, of theme and form. This long, dancing stanza is patterned in rhyme, but from its earliest appearance it is marked by older, alliterative phrasing which reinforces the measure like the emphatic repetitions of a reel-tune; and I think it may have originated in the fertility songs and dances of May and the wedding-feast. The convoluted, progressive build-up of the stanza, its medial break, and its witty twist away at the end seem to have enthralled the Scotch mind at a primitive level. This and other verse-forms in the brawl tradition which show the influence of *Chrystis Kirk* remained conventional for manners-poetry down to the eighteenth century, when poets had got used to shorter, simpler measures. They carried associations of ritual, celebration, and shared physical delight.

Allan Ramsay added two cantos to *Chrystis Kirk*. In an antiquary's footnote, risible from a native of Leadhills, he describes the poem as a comedy illustrating 'the Follies and Mistakes of low Life in a just Light, making them appear as ridiculous as they really are, that each who is a Spectator, may evite his being the Object of Laughter'. Fergusson's *Hallow-Fair*, a lively account of a public holiday, is also written from the outside; conveying the uproar of the fair, with its press of bargain-

¹ Skinner, the Episcopalian author of *Tullochgorum*, wrote to Burns on 14 November 1787: 'It is as old a thing as I remember, my fondness for "Chryste-Kirk on the Green", which I had by heart ere I was twelve years of age, and which, some years ago, I attempted to turn into Latin verse' (*Songs and Poems*, 1859, p. xxx).

seeking wives, lovers, chattering children, and roaring recruiting-sergeants and drunks, in strong Scots, but held away from the life of the folk by a slightly condescending humour. *Leith Races* is a more elaborate and literary poem, with a dramatic prologue in which, on a July morning, the narrator falls in with a 'braw buskit laughing lass', Mirth,

The fairest 'neath the lift; (sky
Her Een ware o' the siller sheen,
Her Skin like snawy drift,
Sae white that day.

He invites her to join him at the races:

We'll reel an' ramble thro' the sands,
And jeer wi' a' we meet;
Nor hip the daft and gleesome bands (miss
That fill Edina's street
Sae thrang this day.

The poet is here much more involved, not only observing but enjoying the occasion with satiric enthusiasm. 'Meeting with Fergusson's Scotch Poems', Burns told Dr. Moore, 'I strung anew my wildly-sounding, rustic lyre with emulating vigour.' It was on the foundation of *Leith Races* that he went to work, in *The Holy Fair*, giving the manners tradition a new dimension and power, and outreaching Fergusson and the rest.

A man of less genius might have settled, profitably enough, for another conventional fair-scene: sober prose descriptions of the bustle and press of Ayrshire fairs at this time, the drunken dances, brawling, and outrageous licence, read like glosses on Wittenwiler's *Ring*. But the 'farcical scene' of the annual open-air Sacrament, says Gilbert Burns, was 'often a favourite field of [the poet's] observation': a Presbyterian variant of Langland's field full of folk, in which 'superstition, traffic, and amusement, used to be strangely intermingled'. Burns transcends tradition by making his fair holy. He was doubtless instructed by English Augustan demonstrations of the comic force of rhetorical antithesis and thematic contrast; but he learnt more from the Scotch comic tradition, at the heart of which lie deep contrasts of tone, of appearance and reality (Dunbar's *Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* is the prime example). In the Sacrament at Mauchline in the autumn of 1785 Burns had a richer social-satiric theme than any fair or wedding: a preposterous marriage of flesh and spirit, of piety and lechery. *The Holy*

Fair is built out of the basic irony of worship, drunkenness, hypocrisy, and sensuality; and Burns's elaboration of this irony transforms the brawl convention.

He opens with an easy, personal narrative on the Fergusson model; but he meets not with one, but with three 'hizzies' dressed up for the fair. Two are blackly clad for the pieties of the occasion—Hypocrisy and Superstition; the third is Fun—a twin of Fergusson's Mirth, but rustic, non-Augustan, unpredictable, and a bit of a devil (Dr. Johnson glossed *fun* as 'a low cant word'). These three are the warring spirits of the day's events. Fun invites the poet to the holy fair and, having set the tone of the poem, like Chaucer's conductors Affrican and the Eagle discreetly withdraws. The crowd thickens on the road, as in *Peblis to the Play* and other brawls, with noise, energy, and colour—the young 'swankies . . . springan owre the gutters' and 'lasses, skelpen barefit . . . in silks an' scarlets'. We follow the poet to a Hogarthian scene within the tent: a gaggle of whores at the entry, a row of jades 'wi' heaving breasts an' bare neck', a batch of webster-lads 'blackguarding frae Kilmarnock'—and the 'unco guid'. The rhetorical antitheses sustain the moral antitheses:

Here, some are thinkan on their sins,
 An' some upo' their claes;
 Ane curses feet that fyl'd his shins,
 Anither sighs an' pray's:
 On this hand sits a Chosen swatch (sample
 Wi' screw'd-up, grace-proud faces;
 On that, a set o' chaps, at watch,
 Thrang winkan on the lasses
 To chairs that day.

'O happy is that man, an' blest!', sings the poet in the words of the metrical psalm; but the blessedness is here sensual: the *beatus vir* has his arms round a girl's shoulders, 'An's loof [palm] upon her bosom / Unkend that day'. After this amiable parody of faith, hope, and charity, the first preaching begins.

The sermons are the metamorphosis of the medieval tournament. The prowess of the protagonists is now merely rhetorical; the contest is a war of words—'tidings of damnation', 'cauld harangues on *practice* and on *morals*', and a demented roaring into deaf ears. 'The great trumpet shall be blown, and they shall come which were ready to perish', says Isaiah, 'and shall worship the Lord in the holy mount at Jerusalem'. From among the crowd Burns wields this image to the destruction of Black

Jock Russell, the Boanerges of Kilmarnock, who terrorized revellers at holy fairs:

But now the L—'s ain trumpet touts,
 Till a' the hills are rairan,
 An' echos back return the shouts,
 Black [Russel] is na spairan:
 His piercin words, like highlan swords,
 Divide the joints an' marrow;
 His talk o' H—ll, whare devils dwell,
 Our vera 'Sauls does harrow'
 Wi' fright that day.

A vast, unbottom'd, boundless *Pit*,
 Fill'd fou o' *lowan brunstane*,
 Whase raging flame, an' scorching heat,
 Wad melt the hardest whunstane!
 The *half-asleep* start up wi' fear,
 An' think they hear it roaran,
 When presently it does appear,
 'Twas but some neebor *snoran*
 Asleep that day.

The fair ends with the traditional picture of lovers going home. In the context of piety, and by the interplay of spiritual and sensual language, Burns gives this convention new satiric life (the parody is on St. Paul's three theological virtues, and Ezekiel's opposition of a stony heart and a heart of flesh):

Wi' *faith* an' *hope*, an' *love* an' *drink*,
 They're a' in famous tune
 For crack that day. (chat

How monie hearts this day converts,
 O' Sinners and o' Lasses!
 Their hearts o' stane, gin night are gane
 As saft as ony flesh is.
 There's some are fou o' *love divine*;
 There's some are fou o' *brandy*;
 An' monie jobs that day begin,
 May end in *Houghmagandie* (fornication
 Some ither day.

The poet opposes the force of sexual and social instinct to the shams of pulpit oratory and 'polemical divinity'. He is not only recorder but (in that last stanza) parodist of Presbyterian rhetoric; not only narrator but sardonic participant. The long tradition of the peasant-brawl has reached a new level of complexity, social significance, and satiric art.

Halloween, Burns's longest poem in the *Chrystis Kirk* stanza, has been described as 'a paradise for the folklorist, but rather a bore for the lover of poetry . . . self-conscious antiquarianism'. Burns does at first seem to be stepping back here, disengaging from his social theme—not quite faithful to his claim in the Kilmarnock preface that 'he sings the sentiments and manners, he felt and saw *in himself* [my italics] and his rustic compeers around him, in his and their native language'. He supplies footnotes on Ayrshire superstitions—in the Kilmarnock edition made more circumstantial, comprehensive, and 'literary'; and in his introductory note he presents his rustic compeers as something of a spectacle:

. . . The passion of prying into Futurity makes a striking part of the history of Human-nature, in it's rude state, in all ages and nations; and it may be some entertainment to a philosophic mind, if any such should honor the Author with a perusal, to see the remains of it, among the more unenlightened in our own.

But Burns was not representing himself as a 'philosophic mind', standing (as W. P. Ker curiously saw him) 'apart . . . not the voice of the people'. In the Kilmarnock printing he was portraying an aspect of his own society first to itself, and thereafter to any philosophic minds that might otherwise believe, with Dr. Johnson, that

The state of a man confined to the employments and pleasures of the country, is so little diversified, and exposed to so few of those accidents which produce perplexities, terrors, and surprises, in more complicated transactions, that he can be shown but seldom in such circumstances as attract curiosity (*Rambler*, 1750, no. 36).

The notion that this is a consciously antiquarian poem has led some to assert that the manners portrayed in it were antique in Burns's time. We have, however, the sober assurance of the Kilmarnock lawyer William Aiton, younger than the poet by a year, that *Halloween* 'properly exposed' superstitions still being practised in 1811. I have been able to show in my Oxford commentary that most of the spells and rituals in the poem persisted in rural Scotland in the nineteenth century, and some I recollect (in a debased form) from my own childhood. But what of the standard criticism that Burns really stands outside this company of 'merry, friendly, countra folks' that 'haud their *Halloween* / Fu' blythe that night'? Burns wrote to Dr. Moore of the family servant's tales of 'devils, ghosts, fairies . . . and other trumpery'. Trumpery perhaps; but all this, he went

on, 'had so strong an effect on my imagination, that to this hour, in my nocturnal rambles, I sometimes keep a sharp look-out in suspicious places; and though nobody can be more sceptical in these matters than I, yet it often takes an effort of Philosophy to shake off these idle terrors'. As I have said elsewhere, of *Tam o' Shanter*: 'the suspension of disbelief by a mind thus conditioned in childhood is different in kind, as well as in degree, from any suspension of disbelief that is possible to the "philosophic mind" which has never lain open to magic.' The narrator in *Halloween* is admittedly again an observer, and not the quietly ribald participator of *The Holy Fair*; but the dance and drive of the stanza, and the energetic colloquial Scots, keep the responsive reader from feeling that even he is left out of the party. At its best *Halloween* has the same sense of hilarious imaginative involvement as *Love and Liberty* and *Tam o' Shanter*, though the comedy is far shallower. Mr. Tom Crawford complains not merely of 'too much whimsical rusticity disporting itself for the amusement of . . . educated readers'—a view perhaps conditioned by Burns's notes, which I sometimes suspect are an elaborate joke—but of 'elements of superciliousness, of conscious superiority, and even of thinly disguised cruelty' in the poem. These things are there; but they are part of Burns's nature, and indeed of the nature of any peasant whose talents have made him critically aware of his society. A man may laugh at the community in which he lives, without ceasing to laugh with it and feel with it. Ridicule and affection are complementary aspects of one kind of Scotch mind—including my own; and they interact at the level of genius in *Tam o' Shanter* and *Love and Liberty*.

In theme, the 'Cantata' *Love and Liberty* (commonly known as *The Jolly Beggars*) is a return to the simple medieval mixture of drunken frolic and lust in brawl-poetry, though the participants are socially a bit outwith the pale of the peasantry. More important, this is the most original and dramatic illustration of Burns's interacting affection and ridicule among the social poems of 1785-6: a Chaucerian blend of naturalistic observation, powerful response to the risible and repulsive, and at the same time sustained, sympathetic engagement with human character and attitude. Burns did not include it in his Kilmarnock volume, though it would have made an excellent companion-piece to *The Holy Fair* and a devastating antithesis to *The Cotter's Saturday Night*. The omission was doubtless prudent, for some deplored 'the spirit of libertinism' in the

book. But *Love and Liberty* was among the additions Burns proposed, with new-found assurance, for the Edinburgh edition of 1787; and its rejection was one of the signal disservices rendered to Scotch literature by the Revd. Dr. Hugh Blair, first professor of belles-lettres at Edinburgh and arbiter of taste in the New Athens. 'The Whole of What is called the Cantata', said Blair, 'the Songs of the Beggars and their Doxies, with the Grace at the end of them', was 'altogether unfit for publication. They are by much too licentious; and fall below the dignity which Mr Burns possesses in the rest of his poems.' But the judgement of Matthew Arnold, within a century of Blair, has prevailed:

In the world of *The Jolly Beggars* there is more than hideousness and squalor, there is bestiality; yet the piece is a superb poetic success. It has a breadth, truth, and power which make the famous scene in Auerbach's cellar, of Goethe's *Faust*, seem artificial and tame beside it, and which are only matched by Shakespeare and Aristophanes.

The occasion of *Love and Liberty* was a night on the splore, late in 1785, at a tavern in Mauchline kept disorderly by Agnes Gibson, 'Poosie Nansie'. Burns's human material was the vagrant population of Ayrshire who, according to William Aiton's *View of the Agriculture of . . . Ayr* (1811),

sorn and thieve, and pilfer and extort alms, from the weak and timid, to the disgrace of the police [i.e. civil order], the terror of the inhabitants, and discredit of humanity. In several of the towns and villages, houses are open at all times, for the reception of these vagrant beggars. . . . At night they return . . . to consume their spoils, in feasting, drinking, swearing, and carousing at the expense of the simple, whom they have duped, or the timid whom they have terrified. . . . The lodgers often exhibit a motley group of people, from different nations, and of different religions, ages, and occupations.

The literary machinery by which Burns gives this unlovely company a lasting 'breath, truth, and power' is the tradition of vagabond song. Perhaps he knew Gay's *Beggar's Opera*; he certainly knew a number of songs on beggars in Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany*, celebrating 'simple nature', promiscuity, drunkenness, and 'liberty':

Who'er would be merry and free,
Let him list, and from us he may learn;
In palaces who shall you see
Half so happy as we in a barn?

Burns transforms these popular clichés into high art in (1) a

rich, fluid, Brueghelesque picture of the tavern scene; (2) a range of vagabond characters who reveal their histories and their natures in an unfolding sequence of songs set to traditional airs; (3) a linking narrative of violence and lust culminating in a profane hymn to 'love and liberty'; and (4) in the narrative and the songs, a sustained inversion of the language of chivalry and love. His achievement in the prelude (he was as good as Dryden at verse openings) has been much admired, and need not detain us; nor need his distinctions of character and their interplay, which have been finely analysed by Tom Crawford. I have one general comment on the airs. From his earliest work in lyric, Burns shows a unique skill in the interpretation—'expression'—of musical line and tone in poetic terms; but the songs in *Love and Liberty* are uncharacteristically simple and monotonous. We may assume that this is deliberate. The style of the cantata—and the tone of the party—are set by the first singer, a battered soldier in 'auld, red rags' with a doxie in his arm:

An' ay he gies the tozie drab (tipsy whore
 The tither skelpan kiss,
 While she held up her greedy gab,
 Just like an aumous dish: (alms
 Ilk smack still, did crack still,
 Just like a cadger's whip; (hawker's
 Then staggering, an' swaggering,
 He roar'd this ditty up—
 I am a Son of Mars who have been in many wars,
 And show my cuts and scars wherever I come;
 This here was for a wench, and that other in a trench,
 When welcoming the French at the sound of the drum.
 Lal de daudle etc. . . .

Noise and violence, stagger and swagger and bawdy hilarity run through the songs and their tunes, to the final chorus, almost unmodified by any shifts of feeling, by moments of pathos or passion. The Highland Widow, for instance, laments that her husband was banished and ultimately executed; but she takes her consolation in a 'hearty can' and a lecherous tinker, and her 'sighs an' sobs' are carried with farcical briskness on the runs of a reel-tune. The music is a significant part of Burns's total statement about the indiscriminating, unfeeling animality of the 'merry core'.

Modern critics offer us close analyses of the language and style of the cantata. *Love and Liberty*, says Mr. Crawford, 'partly

by the interpenetration of colloquial and literary diction, and partly by the humour of incongruity, effectively demolishes the presuppositions of eighteenth-century society': in the passage beginning

The Caird prevail'd—th' unblushing fair (tinker
 In his embraces sunk;
 Partly wi' Love o'ercome sae sair,
 An' partly she was drunk,

the fusion of 'violently opposed "levels of usage"' is a kind of social criticism—an 'assault upon the reader's conventional morality'. This way of reading the poem is at first as persuasive as it is fashionable. But I now believe it to be over-subtle, misleading us as to Burns's relation to his theme. Folk-poetry constantly mixes common speech and romance (and romantic) diction, and it usually does this innocently. (Contrast Dunbar's deliberate satiric opposition of vocabularies and styles in the *Tretis* and elsewhere, on the base of an *established* courtly Scots.) There is indeed much linguistic variety and paradox in *Love and Liberty*, and it is vastly amusing—a concomitant of the mock-heroic posturing of the beggars; but I do not read it as deliberate social criticism. It seems to me only the kind of stylistic comedy Burns often indulged in just for fun; one way of looking at the beggars; and a means of taking part in the action by verbal proxy. The victims of his irony, indeed, are not his moral readers, but the beggars themselves.

What then is Burns's relationship, in the poem, to the society at Poesie-Nansie's? It is easy to draw parallels between sentiments and attitudes in *Love and Liberty* and passages in Burns's familiar epistles; but many of these are the common coin of eighteenth-century popular literature, and Burns's principles were 'abundantly motley'. He certainly did not think of *Love and Liberty* as a significant personal manifesto; he wrote casually to George Thomson in September 1793:

I have forgot the Cantata you allude to, as I kept no copy, and indeed did not know that it was in existence; however, I remember that none of the songs pleased myself, except the last—something about,

Courts for cowards were erected,
 Churches built to please the priest—.

There is some heady criticism which reads *Love and Liberty* as a dramatic statement of Burns's social faith, with the choric climax as its hymn. But his views on sex, politics, and drink were not always libertine. He could celebrate fornication and

bastardry, though often with that bravado which betrays moral anxiety; but in late 1785 he was offering marriage to Jean Armour ('I would gladly have covered my Inamorata from the darts of Calumny with the conjugal shield, nay, had actually made up some sort of Wedlock'); and he knew from his youth that

To make a happy fireside clime
 To weans and wife,
 That's the true *Pathos* and *Sublime*
 Of Human life.

He could celebrate drink and brilliantly characterize drunkenness—but always wittily, or farcically. And although he wrote on occasion to friends about the consolations of freedom in the vagabond life, he knew very well that the reality was nasty, brutish, and too long. The passage in the *Epistle to Davie* is carelessly romantic:

To lye in kilns and barns at e'en,
 When banes are craz'd, and bluid is thin,
 Is, doubtless, great distress!
 Yet then *content* could make us blest;
 Ev'n then, sometimes we'd snatch a taste
 Of truest happiness.

What tho', like Commoners of air,
 We wander out, we know not where,
 But either house or hal'? (without . . . refuge
 Yet *Nature's* charms, the hills and woods,
 The sweeping vales, and foaming floods,
 Are free alike to all . . .

Burns was too serious and responsible a man to be content with the beggars' 'life of pleasure . . . no matter how or where'; or to subscribe, except in moments of abandon or despair, to their declaration that

Life is all a *Variorum*,
 We regard not how it goes;
 Let them cant about *Decorum*,
 Who have character to lose.
 A fig for those by law protected!
 Liberty's a glorious feast!

This final chorus seems to me ironic. It celebrates, in finely simple rhetoric, ideals which are in themselves dubious and are anyhow not practised by the beggars. Logically

considered, the chorus is nonsense; and even if it is taken merely as a mindless cheer for liberty, what liberty do its singers enjoy? None of them is free of his or her past. All are economically dependent on the stable, relatively innocent society outside. All are escapist, and are delivered into the slavery of drink:

They toom'd their pocks, they pawn'd their duds, (emptied (rags
 They scarcely left to coor their fuds (cover (backsides
 To quench their lowan drouth. (raging

The communion blasphemously enacted in the ring round the common cup, the creed, and the grace, are far more of a charade than *The Holy Fair*. What the poet has described is not charity but greed, not tenderness but lust, not compassion but violence, not society but anarchy. 'Does the sober bed of Marriage', ask the beggars, 'Witness brighter scenes of love?' We should hope so: for although the sexual strain in *Love and Liberty* is naturally strong, sensual, elemental, it is also maudlin, selfishly promiscuous, suddenly and shortly animal. There is no more love in the cantata than there is liberty; there is only libertinism masquerading as both.¹

It is a fashion (in which I have shared) to talk about *Love and Liberty* as Burns's distinctive contribution to the pastoral tradition: its people noble savages of a kind, its theme a variant of the old myth of simple pleasure and content. But *Love and Liberty* is not mythopoeic; its character is energetic and satiric realism. The old Soldier ventures with pathetic, drunken swagger to 'clatter on my stumps at the sound of a drum' and 'meet a troop of Hell'; his 'tozie drab' pledges his health in a song which tells of a life of promiscuous opportunism, and therefore guarantees *him* nothing; the Widow commemorates her 'Highland lad' in lechery and liquor; the Fiddler and the Tinker strike stock attitudes of gallantry to grace their lust; the Bard cynically fuses 'mutual love' and animal 'inclination': and these senseless, violent, disordered lives are given the ironic sanction of a choric rite. The poet does not mean us to be deluded by musical and narrative force, or drunken farce. Like Chaucer, he makes no didactic statement; and there is an indulgent, humorous affection in the way he presents the beggars—again Chaucerian. Burns confessed in his First Commonplace Book

¹ With the cold brutality of *Love and Liberty*, ll. 192-3, 'The Fiddler rak'd her, fore and aft, / Behint the Chicken cavie', contrast Burns's exuberant celebration of his own lust in his letter to Ainslie, 3 March 1788.

in March 1784 that 'I have often coveted the acquaintance of that part of mankind commonly known by the ordinary phrase of Blackguards, sometimes farther than was consistent with the safety of my character; those who by thoughtless Prodigality, or headstrong Passions have been driven to ruin.' *Love and Liberty* expresses that powerful fascination. But the poet does not join *this* 'jovial thrang'; his ironic vision is his *cordon sanitaire*.