

# POEMS



ROBERT BURNS

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## INTRODUCTION

(BURNS has no rival in the art of singing the soul into song and setting the heart to music. His poetry is pure passion.) Other lyrists are literary at their best: when Burns is literary he is at his worst. (His note falls like the note of the lark straight from the throat of life. It is not an imitation of life, but life itself running into laughter and tears. Being life, it is not a grey moral thing, but a lovely riot of good that is not wholly good, and evil that is not wholly evil.) There is no consistency in it save the consistent inconsistency of life. It is a beautiful energy flashing in the non-moral imagination. Its movements are beyond the venue of convention. You cannot arrest a lyric or imprison a song. The conduct of Burns morality may lash: his poetry is unscourgeable. In it life flaunts her deathless rebellion, for life goes on from generation to generation without heeding the wisdom of the wise or the goodness of the good. Her force breaks out afresh in every child that is born. In Burns it charges with irresistible violence, chanting a ringing challenge to the past, for it is against the past that life is always fighting, against the bequeathed prudence of dead men, the legacy of crafty experience called "virtue."

Burns was so full of life that he could not drug his imagination with theology or literature, although he persistently dosed himself with Shenstone and the Shorter Catechism. (He saw the world as not one of his contemporaries saw it. He saw it without their illusions and without ours.) He saw it bathed in that clear air of philosophic humour which is the perspective of the imagination. He looked neither up nor down on god or man, louse or lord, daisy or devil. He looked all round all the shows of existence and laughed at the sweet witchery and ripe wonder of conscious being.

He saw the map of life on so large a scale that the minor opportunisms shrank into nothingness. He broke the tables of stone to the sound of his lyre. He challenged everything that speaks with authority, reverencing nothing save irreverence and fearing nothing save fear. Being but a man, he fell at times into cant and compromise. His hot heart was sometimes chilled by his country and his countrymen, by Calvin and custom, but not long, for his brain was a rebel and his soul an incendiary. Society idolised him because society is too stupid to fear its deadliest enemy, the poet. If it were not stupid it would have burned him alive with his living books. Society does not know that thought is more dangerous than action, imagination more dangerous than thought, and humour more dangerous than all three. It does not dread the anarchy of laughter which thunders in this stanza of "The Jolly Beggars":—

" A fig for those by law protected!  
Liberty's a glorious feast!  
Courts for cowards were erected,  
Churches built to please the priest."

Yet in those lines began the Revolution of Revolutions, compared with which the French Revolution is but a ripple on the sea of change. The Revolution of Burns is an insurrection of the naked spirit of man. It goes deeper than the pimples and blotches of wars and legislations, those cutaneous abrasions and stains on the skin of society produced by kings and soldiers, priests and politicians; for it transforms not the outer surface but the inner soul of humanity. It affects not merely the physical arrangement of units, but the unit itself. The tendency of physical science is to simplify the universe and to disintegrate the elements of matter into their ultimate ingredients. The same tendency is at work in the science which explores the form of matter which we call mind. The old revolutions sought to liberate the many from the tyranny of the individual. The new revolution seeks to liberate the individual from the tyranny of the many. The old revolutions sought to free men in the mass from physical oppressions. The new revolution seeks to free the personality of the

separate man from spiritual and intellectual oppressions. Burns foresaw the future revolt of the soul against all the external compulsions of collective opinion. (He descried the dawn of law that is lawless and lawlessness that is law. He grasped the great principle that each man ought to be a law unto himself, and ought to do that which is right in his own eyes, regulating his conduct by no outer coercions of corporate conventions, but solely by the statutes of his own conscience. He realised that the only moral law is that which is enacted in the parliament of the spirit, and that the highest standard is set up not outside but inside the soul. He perceived that there is only one person who can never forgive sin, namely, the sinner. He knew that the virtue which is rooted in conformity to external menace is an immoral cowardice, and that the free play of the free mind in the free body is the ideal goal towards which man is marching over the ruins of philosophies and civilisations, moralities and creeds.

That Burns the Man was meaner than Burns the Poet need not dismay us, for the imagination is always greater than the will. He never mistook his weakness for strength, although the late Mr. Henley fell a victim to that delusion, being in this respect more royalist than the king. Burns knew better than he builded. He fought against the incompetence of facts and the brutality of nature. He dashed himself to pieces against the insanity of an illogical world. If man were a perfect machine, like a chronometer or a gas-meter, his physical passions would not war against his spiritual pride. Nature would be natural. Sex would be normal. There would be no duel between the brain and the body. But nature is fiendishly unnatural and sex is diabolically abnormal in the only animal which suffers from the disease of thought and the cancer of imagination. Man's super-cerebration has sophisticated with shame the supreme function of life, while leaving unsophisticated the minor physical absurdities of alimentation and excretion. But nature cares nothing for man's self-critical brain and fastidious soul. She tramples upon his spiritual pride. It is only the non-moral functions

that she consigns to atrophy. Our caudal and aural muscles are almost extinct. The olfactory nerve is vanishing. But the disease of thought and the cancer of imagination serve only to stimulate sex and to retard the elimination of passion, that far-off divine event towards which the whole creation moves. It is, therefore, not extravagant to assert that asceticism is a pander and chastity a procuress. Burns, with his volcanic vision, pierced through the filmy makeshifts and makebelieves of provisional morality. He saw sex as Blake and Shelley saw it, a splendour and not a shame. He sided with hard-pressed nature. He envisaged an impossible harmony between the obscenity of nature and the decency of man. He postulated the impossible and tried to live it. Like Samson, he blindly tugged at the pillars of Philistia's chief temple, and was buried in its ruins. Before we knout him, let us try to see what he saw and look beyond the squalor of his debauchery to the sublimity of his dreams.

Steeped as we are in moral acquiescence, we cannot easily purge our sight of conventional cataract. But we can, at least, measure the advance of man since Burns wrote "Holy Willie's Prayer," "The Holy Fair," "The Jolly Beggars," and "The Address to the Deil." Where is Calvin to-day? Where is Calvin's Deity, Calvin's Hell, and Calvin's Devil? Let the Churches answer which have slain that triple horror. If Burns has been so swiftly justified in his assault upon a ferocious theology, may he not also be justified before time expires in his assault upon a no less ferocious morality? The superstition of licensed parentage has survived its cognate superstitions. How much longer will it survive? Already it is crumbling before the silent sap and mine of its chief martyr, womanhood. The revolt of womanhood against its hallowed ferocities is no longer a figment. It is a fact. Throughout the civilised world womanhood is in full rebellion against a system which immolates one half of her on the other half. Womanhood is out on strike. Neither patriotism nor religion can overcome her passive resistance. Revolutions are not made with rose-water, and this

insurrection of womanhood is more merciless than any Reign of Terror. Deplore it we may: ignore it we cannot.

Burns proclaimed the legitimacy of the illegitimate. His "Welcome to his Illegitimate Child" is not mere bravado. It is a noble vindication of fatherhood, motherhood, and childhood against the ban of the Church and the penal code of the State. It repudiates their right to grant or to refuse moral licences and indulgences. It rejects their right to permit or to prohibit parentage. It annuls alike their veto and their exequatur. It excommunicates their excommunication, and anathematises their anathema. We no longer defend the monstrous barbarism of bastardy, but we still acquiesce in it. The licensed parent is the keystone of a social order which is founded upon the anguish of womanhood and childhood. Burns sanctified the unmarried parent and the uncertificated child. If we hold that he was wrong, we must be logical and penalise the unlicensed father as severely as the unlicensed mother and the unlicensed infant. Otherwise our conscience must condemn what our cowardice condones.

It may be said that Burns put nothing in the place of the morality he destroys. But that is not the poet's business, which is simply to see and to sing. He saw and sang with dauntless purity of vision and of voice. He did not barter new lies for old. He bade the soul suffice. Nature may abhor a vacuum, but truth does not. She exults in the ungyved light and the unchained air. She does not see licence in liberty. She shuns the vassalage of the dungeoned spirit. She rejoices in the infinite space of the open conscience.

{Liberty, then, is the lyric cry of Burns. He flings the hot riot of life in the cold face of cant. Enough for him the rapture of being, the exuberance of the senses. No poet sings so triumphantly the joy of the exulting flesh. He is the flesh made word. The senses sing in his voice. His bitter Calvinistic breeding serves only to edge his appetites and spur his lusts. He is the Puritan Pantagruel. It is a singular fact that Pantagruelism is the

common offspring of belief and disbelief. In order to drain the cup of life to the lees you must either believe everything or believe nothing. You must attain either the blessedness of absolute faith or the blessedness of absolute scepticism. Between these two blessed moods lie the torments of all the Hamlets of humanity. The Middle Ages accepted the protection of Holy Church against the jealous anger of the supernatural. They insured themselves against hell-fire by taking a policy from the priest and paying a moderate premium. They revelled in absolute immunity from moral retribution. That is the mood of Rabelais. The antithesis of this mood is the mood of Burns. He insured himself. He accepted the protection of his own reason against the jealous anger of the supernatural. He issued his own bulls and his own indulgences. He administered plenary absolution to his own soul. The difference between the Pantagruelism of Rabelais and the Pantagruelism of Burns is simply the difference between spiritual slavery and spiritual freedom, between servile reliance and frank defiance, between absolute acceptance and absolute rejection of authority. Pantagruelism is not possible to the intermediate mood of a Christianity which is caught in two minds and falls between two stools. When the soul is indemnified against the flesh, the flesh is set free from the rack of conscience. Whether it be indemnified by the Church or by the intellect, the result is the same, although the flesh defiant probably fails to achieve the ripe serenity of the flesh reliant. The flesh defiant in Burns carouses madly like a condemned criminal, feverishly making the most of its hour, and stung into a delirious rapture that is less placidly joyous than your true Rabelaisian content. The hectic flush on the cheek of Burns is the virus of puritanism. There is a perpetual challenge in his hilarity, but it is a challenge hurled not at the angry unseen but at its discredited ambassadors:

"The mair they talk I'm kenned the better."

Burns, like Byron, is untroubled by the burthen of the mystery of all this unintelligible world. He does not

take earth seriously. He laughs at the hobgoblins of theology. If he had written an "Address to the Deity" it would have been in the same key as his "Address to the Deil," the key of tolerant humour. He would not even have excluded the possibility of divine amelioration which he allowed to "Auld Hornie":—

"But, fare you weel, auld Nickie-ben!  
O wad ye tak a thought an' men'!  
Ye aiblins might—I dinna ken—  
Still hae a stake—  
I'm wae to think upo' yon den  
Ev'n for your sake."

The temper of Burns is not corrosively irreligious or venomously atheistic. There is no malignity in his agnosticism, for it is based upon the imaginative humour that flies where reason crawls. His humour places the phenomena of consciousness in relation to each other by gently adjusting the lenses of the imagination. Under its scrutiny the grotesque distortions of theology silently fade away and the outline of truth shows sharp and clear. The mood of the mystic is the opposite of the mood of the humorist. The great mystics are all humourless. Theology, which is the science of mysticism, is as humourless as mathematics. The mystic looks at the universe through the prism of his own soul. The humorist looks at his own soul through the prism of the universe. The mystic regards the cosmos as a marginal note on his own life. The humorist regards his own life as a marginal note on the cosmos. The mystic conceives man as the most important being in the scheme of things. The humorist conceives man as the least important. Humour is a solvent of morality. The humorist treats ethics as a collection of by-laws which vary with time and place, climate and culture. He sees no moral sanction save collective opportunism. He desecrates no foothold in the mirage of creeds. He finds only one rock in the mist of illusions—the personality of the separate soul. The soul makes its own laws, drafts its own commandments, obeys its own behests, erects its own standards. Conduct is merely the echo of the soul. You cannot expect from every



soul the same echo. Therefore Burns upholds the right of each soul to its own echo. ("The Jolly Beggars" is the most immoral poem in all literature. It does not merely defy morality. It treats morality as a fantastic fable. It creates a world in which morality does not exist. There are few exploits of the imagination so tremendous. It would be easy to create a world in which there should be no sense of space and no sense of time, a pure world of conscious personality without fleshly envelope or gregarious propriety. But it is not so easy to create a world where the soul and the flesh are completely insulated against the forebodings of conscience and the presage of moral responsibility. Yet Burns does it without an effort. The audacity of "The Jolly Beggars" is so stupendous that it has hitherto escaped attention, for nobody takes seriously a creative act which annihilates the whole fabric of human society and rases civilisation to the ground. If the philosophy upon which "The Jolly Beggars" is based were to be established as the official religion of the earth, there would be a cataclysm such as has never been seen since the last ape turned into the first man.) This philosophy is expressed with fearless lucidity in the song which Merry Andrew sings to the tune of "Auld Sir Simon" :—

"Sir Wisdom's a fool when he's fou,  
Sir Knave is a fool in a session;  
He's there but a 'prentice, I trow,  
But I am a fool by profession."

My grannie she bought me a beuk,  
And I held awa to the school;  
I fear I my talent misteuk,  
But what will ye hae of a fool?

For drink I would venture my neck,  
A hizzie's the half o' my craft,  
But what could ye other expect  
Of ane that's avowedly daft?

I ance was ty'd up like a stirk,  
For civilly swearing and quaffin;  
I ance was abused in the kirk,  
For touzling a lass i' my daffin.

• Poor Andrew that tumbles for sport,  
Let naeboddy name wi' a jeer:  
There's ev'n, I'm tauld, i' the Court  
A Tumbler ca'd the Premier.

Observ'd ye yon reverend lad  
Mak' faces to tickle the mob?  
He rails at our mountebank squad—  
It's rivalryship just i' the job.

And now my conclusion I'll tell,  
For faith I'm confoundedly dry;  
The chiel that's a fool for himsel',  
Gude Lord! he's far dafter than I."

There is more moral cordite in that lyric than all the ethical chemists have ever manufactured since the Serpent persuaded Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. It blows all our creeds and all our philosophies into smithereens. For it classifies mankind under two heads, those who are fools and know it, and those who are fools and do not know it. The worst of it is that there is no answer to Burns, for the fool is outside the jurisdiction of religious and secular morality. The lunatic in the lunatic asylum is exempt from the pressure of ecclesiastical and social laws. For him there is no good and no evil, no virtue and no vice, no sin and no remorse. Burns simply builds a large lunatic asylum, and puts humanity into it, and turns the key. His victory is absolute. The hypothesis of folly holds the field against all the arguments of philosophy and all the theories of theology. There is only one commandment in the kingdom of the fool:—

" But for how lang the fie may stang,  
Let inclination law that."

It is well that men are not as logical as Burns, for if they were, society would be split into fragments in a week. Nothing but stupidity, which is lack of imagination, saves the human race from moral anarchy. Fortunately, imagination is a function of commonsense, and men will be universally sensible as soon as they are universally imaginative. Courage is a quality of virtue as inexorably as cowardice is a quality of vice. Therefore, when all men are courageous, all men will be virtuous. When inclination "laws" everything, everything will be lawful. Society will probably hold together for two thousand years, and before all men see as clearly as Burns the Poet, all men will be better than Burns the

Man. But the fact that we have been born two thousand years too soon need not make us shirk the duty of interpreting Burns the Poet. Too long has his poetry been diluted with falsehood, and his impeachment of diurnal morality palimpsested with lies. It is better to face the real fire and thunder of his song. If we were consistent our hypocrisy would not be degrading. Christians who dare to practise Christianity, and moralists who dare to live up to their morality, may logically denounce the message which comes from the Sinai of Burns. But a world of hedonists cannot honestly reject the Gospel of Hedonism.

I have discussed the philosophy of Burns, because it is at once the pith of his poetry and the core of his personality. His literary technique, with its relation to Scottish vernacular poetry on the one hand and the eighteenth-century English school on the other, is interesting to the expert, but comparatively unimportant. (Genius is greater than art,) and purely technical criticism yields less when applied to Burns than to any other British poet. The influence of Gray is apparent in ("The Cotter's Saturday Night," each stanza of which is a combination of two quatrains from the "Elegy," with a terminal alexandrine. But after the opening verses Burns escapes from his frigid model, and paints the homely Scottish interior with a tenderly vigorous realism unequalled by Crabbe, or Cowper, or Wordsworth himself. The human sentiment of the poem seems to be more sincere than its moral and religious temper, but here it is rash to dogmatise, for Burns passes from mood to mood with Celtic subtlety. (His imagination melted in sympathy with the humble charm of rural piety as sincerely as it hardened into hatred of hypocrisy and cant.) Apart from the artificiality of the opening and closing stanzas, (the poem remains our most vivid picture of a lowly Scottish home, and it is as true to-day as when it was written.) If we wince at the incongruity of the seducer rebuking seduction, we must remember that Burns, like the Psalmist, was human, and that in humanity there is often a great gulf between precept and practice.

In his didactic moods Burns is not so spontaneous as he is in his sentiment. His most prosaic poems are such lyrical sermons as "Man was Made to Mourn," though they are lighted by flashes of insight and imagery. "To Mary in Heaven" is redeemed by that perfect metaphor:—

"Time but th' impression deeper makes  
As streams their channels deeper wear."

(Above his didactic poems come his descriptive and narrative poems, the very flower of which is "Tam o' Shanter," the finest anecdote in literature.) (Higher still are the love-songs, clear as dew, fresh as dawn, alive with pathetic gaiety and impassioned regret.) (Above even these we must place the lines "To a Mouse" and "To a Mountain Daisy," which rival Sterne and forestall Wordsworth in their noble sympathy with animate and inanimate life. Loftier yet are the lines, "To a Louse," in which there plays one of the rarest kinds of humour. But above all rises the incomparable ironic humour of "Holy Willie's Prayer," "The Address to the Deil," and "The Jolly Beggars." It is in these masterpieces that Burns soars far beyond the ken of his great rival, Byron. The kinship between Burns and Byron is closer than criticism suspects. (They are the two great poets whose poetry is furthest from literature and nearest to life.) Byron was an English peer and Burns a Scots peasant, but if the one had been a peasant and the other a peer their personalities might not have been fundamentally modified. There is a curious resemblance between their stormy lives. It is therefore as idle to talk of the peasant-poet as it would be to talk of the peer-poet. Burns cannot be claimed by any class or any race. He is a man of genius outside social and racial categories. Of course there are many Burnses in Burns, just as there are many Byrons in Byron, and Scotland cannot be blamed for making one of them her patron saint. But the patron saint of Scotland is not the highest Burns. The Burns of "Scots Wha Hae" (that early version of "The Absent-Minded Beggar"), "Auld Lang Syne," "Ae Fond Kiss," and a hundred

peerless love-songs is a superb lyrist, but it is not easy to tell where the vernacular ends and the personal magic begins. Burns, unlike Moore, ennobled his larcenies and glorified his thefts. But it must be said that the great vitalising force of Burns is neither sentiment nor imagination, but satirical humour. Here, again, the parallel between Burns and Byron is almost exact, for just as the vitalising force in Byron is satirical wit, so in Burns the vitalising force is satirical humour. Humour is a rarer gift than wit, and therefore Burns is essentially superior to Byron. Humour is born of the free play of the soul upon external life. Wit is born of the artificial play of the mind upon the vehicle of expression. Wit is the inflected voice; humour is the inflected personality behind the voice. The inflected personality of Burns is unique in our lyrical poetry, for Blake and Shelley, being humourless, lack his large sanity of imaginative comprehension. Humour is probably the fourth dimension, for in it the soul transcends itself and surveys the universe from a region which is outside space and time. Burns is the poet of the fourth dimension.

JAMES DOUGLAS.

*February, 1906.*

The following is a list of Burns's works:—

- Poems, chiefly in the Scottish Dialect. 1786; the same, with additions, 1787; 3rd edition, 1787; 1793 (including twenty new pieces); 1794 (last edition published in Burns's lifetime).  
 The Scots Musical Museum (with songs by Burns). 1771, 1839, 1853.  
 A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs, with . . . verses. (100 new songs by Burns.) 1793-1805.  
 Poems ascribed to R. Burns. 1801. (Includes "Jolly Beggars," "Holy Willie's Prayer," etc., which had been previously published (1799) in weekly parts.)  
 Letters addressed to Clarinda. 1802. (Authorised edition, 1843.)  
 Reliques of Robert Burns, collected by R. H. Cromek. 1808.  
 Collected works: Edition, Currie, 1800, 7th edition, 1813; Aldine, 1830, 1839; with Life by Allan Cunningham, 1834; by Hogg, 1836; Life and Works in Chronological Order: Chambers, 1851, 1856; N. Scott Douglas, 1877, 1878, 1879; Centenary Edition, ed. by W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson, 4 v., 1896-7. [Lockhart's "Life of Burns" is also issued in Everyman's Library, No. 156.]

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