Poetry Criticism

VOLUME 114

Poetry Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature

Volume 114

Michelle Lee
Project Editor

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Poetry Criticism, Vol. 114

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Gale
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI, 48331-3535

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 81-640179

ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-7126-6
ISBN-10: 1-4144-7126-2

ISSN 1052-4851

Preface

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.*" In *Interpreting Blake,* edited by Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism.* Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Robert Burns
1759-1796

(Born Robert Burnes) Scottish poet and lyricist.

For further information on Burns's career, see *PC,* Volume 6.

INTRODUCTION

A pre-Romantic poet revered as the Bard of Scotland, Burns is renowned for giving voice to the common people of his country. He was a champion of liberty and democratic values, and was widely admired for his sense of humor and his down-to-earth, even bawdy, lyrics expressing his love for women and drink. His reputation as a self-taught rustic became greatly exaggerated by some of his later biographers and has been challenged by a number of recent scholars.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The eldest of seven children, Burns was born in southwestern Scotland in Alloway, South Ayrshire, on January 25, 1759. His parents, William Burnes and Agnes Broun Burnes, were poor tenant farmers who moved around from one unprofitable farm to another throughout Burns's childhood—a childhood marked by backbreaking farm work and economic hardship. Burns's mother was illiterate, but his father was self-educated and he taught his children to read and write and introduced them to the basics of arithmetic, history, and geography. Burns learned mathematics, Latin, and French at John Murdoch's school in Alloway, where he gained his first knowledge of English literature, including Shakespeare, Milton, and Pope. He later briefly attended the Dalrymple Parish School, and was tutored at Kirkoswald, but his education was frequently interrupted by the demands of farming. It is believed that the hard physical labor he engaged in during his early years contributed to his poor health and early death.

Burns began composing romantic lyrics at the age of fifteen, inspired by his first love; by the early 1780s, manuscripts of his poems, all written in Scots, were being circulated. His literary influences, according to the poet himself, were Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson, both of whom wrote in the vernacular language of Scotland. In 1786, the publication of his first volume of poems brought him instant fame as the book was a huge critical and popular success. He then turned his attention to Scottish folk songs, and began collecting, revising, and adapting them. He declined payment for any of this work, although he was desperately poor; he considered the project a labor of love for his native country.

In his personal life, Burns was reviled by both his community and church for his many love affairs. In 1785, his mother's servant bore his child (Elizabeth Paton Burns) and the following year Jean Armour presented him with twins. He and Armour were eventually married and had nine children together, although all but three died in infancy. During this same time, Burns professed his love for Mary Campbell (Highland Mary), dedicating two poems and a song to her. In Edinburgh, he pursued Agnes 'Nancy' McLehose, but took up with her servant, Jenny Clow, when McLehose rejected his physical advances. Clow gave birth to his son, Robert Burns Clow, in 1788. In the 1790s, Burns's health began to deteriorate, a result of his intemperate lifestyle according to some of his contemporaries, and he was given to spells of despondency. Burns succumbed to rheumatic heart failure on July 21, 1796; he was thirty-seven years old.

MAJOR WORKS

Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect, a collection of forty-four poems, was Burns's first publication, published in Kilmarnock in 1786; it was an immediate success. The second edition, published in Edinburgh, appeared the following year and included twenty-two additional poems. Nineteen more poems were added to the 1793 two-volume version, again published in Edinburgh. While some of his poems were devoted to love and friendship, many of them—such as the oft-quoted "For A' That and A' That"—expressed his belief in equality and political freedom. Satirical pieces aimed at the restrictions on freedom imposed by organized religion include "Holy Willie's Prayer" and "The Holy Fair." Burns demonstrated his appreciation of the pleasures of companionship, drink, love, and sex in such poems as "A Red, Red Rose" and "The Fornicator." His best known works are the narrative poem "Tam o' Shanter," and the New Year's Eve classic "Auld Lang Syne."

Burns's acquaintance with James Johnson, editor of *The Scots Musical Museum* led to his pursuit of the great passion that occupied his later career—the collection

and restoration of the old Scottish folk songs passed down orally from parents to children. The result was the six-volume *Scots Musical Museum* (1787-1803), consisting of approximately two hundred songs and fragments of songs that Burns either wrote or edited. This was followed by a collection of approximately seventy original songs by Burns, *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice* (1793-1818). Posthumously published collections include *The Works of Robert Burns* (1800); *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* (1968); and *The Songs of Robert Burns* (1993).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Burns's self-fashioned literary persona as an untutored peasant or "rustic genius" has been embellished and exaggerated since his own time—with his admirers stopping just short of referring to him as a Noble Savage. However, recent critics have begun to refute the "image of the humble but heaven-taught peasant, which he wished to present to the world," according to Ian Campbell. Christopher A. Whatley also reports that the mythology surrounding the poet has now been dismissed and that "Burns was well-read and self-consciously a poet," and "an enigmatic and highly complex individual whose various poetic personae did not necessarily reflect his views when stripped of their self-dramatised garb." For David Daiches, Burns was "a tightrope walker" struggling even in his early work "to balance two very different traditions, the folk and the sophisticated genteel." Daiches suggests that his self-representation as a rustic and the acceptance of that representation by the Edinburgh literary community, was a trap from which he had difficulty extricating himself. The critic sums up the problem: "Was he a rustic phenomenon or a poet not only of natural genius but of refined taste and cultivated mind?" Campbell notes that despite Burns's apparent sophistication among the drawing-room crowd, he was definitely more comfortable in Ayrshire, where he was "the centre of his social community." Campbell maintains that to understand fully poems like "Tam o' Shanter" and "Holy Willie's Prayer" it is necessary to keep in mind that Burns "had the power of adapting his world-view to the values of that community [Ayrshire], without *limiting* it to the values thus expressed." Terryli McMillan Raine also finds an inseparable connection between Burns's writing and his rural heritage, noting that the poet "concentrates on things with which he is immediately concerned—rural Scotland—and his descriptions are 'highly specific.'"

Burns wrote a number of poems of social criticism, such as "Love and Liberty," also known as "The Jolly Beggars," a version of pastoral wherein the beggars act, not as victims of society, but as its moral spokespersons. "Society with its hypocritical rules and regulations is on trial, not the man or woman who is trapped by these rituals," reports Raine, who contends that conservative Calvinism was the primary target of the satire. Burns also took aim at the rich landowners responsible for the conditions under which his father and other tenant farmers operated, barely subsisting despite their best efforts. Whatley points out that one such poem is "The Twa Dogs," which is "lashed by anger and a hatred clearly born of intimate personal experience of the difficulties of the smaller tenant-farmer." His views on local, national, and international politics also entered into his poetry; approximately one-quarter of his poems expressed his thoughts on such subjects as the American and French Revolutions, his responses to local political situations and to British policies, and to general views on "hierarchy, class and cultural authority," according to Marilyn Butler. Norman Elrod compares his beliefs on liberty to those of Thomas Paine, noting that although they shared a number of ideas, Burns's devotion to Scotland and in particular, Ayrshire, was in direct contrast to Paine's apparently divided allegiance to England, France, and America. Andrew Noble contends that the contrast between his radical politics and the conservativism of his upper-class audience caused him to tone down his views—particularly after the French Revolution. "As he increasingly hardened in his opposition to that audience and as the political situation became darker and, finally, dangerous he felt curbed in what he could say," reports Noble.

Many scholars have commented on Burns's love of life and on the joy he felt in the activities of everyday existence in Ayrshire—the companionship of friends, the comforts of the local pub, the delights of physical love. David Perkins finds that Burns's love of life even extended to affection for animals "as fellow mortals"—an unusual notion in his time—and contends that "no poet writes of animals with more sympathy than Robert Burns." His poems advocating kindness to all fellow creatures include the celebrated "To a Mouse," "A Winter Night," "On Seeing a Wounded Hare Limp by Me," and "Poor Mailie's Elegy," the latter mourning the death of his pet sheep. It was Burns's deliberate decision to return to his rural home after gaining acceptance among the Edinburgh literati, but his return to the countryside marked him as a failure in the minds of many of his successors, including Wordsworth. James Treadwell reports that just before and just after Burns's death, a myth of "genius extinguished by circumstances, art falling prey to life: and not just any life, but the ribald life of rural Ayrshire" became attached to the poet and persisted for some years. Nonetheless, his work has influenced a great number of poets and lyricists over the last two centuries, from the most famous of the Romantic poets, particularly Samuel

Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, to twentieth-century writers and composers such as John Steinbeck and Bob Dylan.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect 1786
**The Scots Musical Museum.* 6 vols. (songs) 1787-1803
***A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice.* 8 vols. (songs) 1793-1818
The Works of Robert Burns 1800
The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns. 3 vols. 1968
The Songs of Robert Burns (songs) 1993

Other Major Works

The Letters of Robert Burns. 2 vols. (letters) 1985

*This collection contains approximately two hundred songs and fragments written or edited by Burns.

*This collection contains approximately seventy songs by Burns, most altered by later editors.

CRITICISM

Ian Campbell (essay date 1975)

SOURCE: Campbell, Ian. "Burns's Poems and Their Audience." In *Critical Essays on Robert Burns,* edited by Donald A. Low, pp. 39-53. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975.

[*In the following essay, Campbell argues that an understanding of Burns's place at the center of his local social (and drinking) community leads to a clearer appreciation of the value of his poetry.*]

Robert Burns announced himself to the world as a rustic genius. In the preface to the **'Kilmarnock Burns',** he begged his readers, 'particularly the Learned and the Polite, who may honor him with a perusal, that they will make every allowance for Education and Circumstances of Life'. The learned and the polite took him at his word, and the tradition of the noble peasant Burns has grown from that day to this. Recent criticism has balked at this oversimplification; critics like David Daiches and Tom Crawford have pointed out Burns's learning, his reading, his very subtle understanding of society, of human nature, of the relationship between words and music, between folk-tales and the acceptable literary forms of his time. Burns emerges from his letters a man fully conscious of his very considerable gifts and learning, yet fully aware of the limitations his environment and station in society placed on the full development of these powers. The critical exploration of a poem like **'Tam o' Shanter'** is a fine process of disentangling the genuinely naïve from the subtle and well-engineered manipulation of the reader's response, the rhetorical (in the technical sense) from the *simpliste* or merely inspired.

Burns's visit to Edinburgh was the great testing-point of the image of the humble but heaven-taught peasant which he wished to present to the world. His poems were published, they had achieved a modest success, Henry Mackenzie had been captivated by them and in the *Lounger* he had given them a lengthy notice which put their commercial success beyond doubt. At this point the author emerged from western obscurity, and made a public appearance under eastern eyes. It was November 1786. Edinburgh was prepared to be charmed by Burns, and it was. His social career was hectic, as he wryly noted to Gavin Hamilton. 'By all probability I shall soon be the tenth Worthy, and the eighth Wise Man, of the world.'[1] His acquaintance ranged through all parts of Edinburgh, including not only those eminent in literature (such as Dugald Stewart and Dr Blacklock) but also those socially eminent. His behaviour and deportment were universally admired.[2]

> His manners were then, as they continued ever afterwards, simple, manly, and independent; strongly expressive of conscious genius and worth; but without anything that indicated forwardness, arrogance, or vanity. He took his share in conversation, but not more than belonged to him; and listened with apparent attention and deference, on subjects where his want of education deprived him of the means of information.

This behaviour delighted his Edinburgh hosts, for to many it seemed that he not only wrote as one conscious of his social station, and not trying to break out of it, but also that he had sufficient 'natural breeding' in real life to keep within his social station while being lionized. Yet it is here that a closer look at this familiar tale may reveal a useful critical point. Dugald Stewart, even while describing Burns's well-judged social behaviour, did quibble that 'If there had been a little more of gentleness and accommodation in his temper, he would, I think, have been still more interesting'.[3] Burns, it is very clear from the descriptions of him which were made at the time of this Edinburgh visit, lost not a bit of his reserve or self-sufficiency under the glare of publicity, or the pressure of city life. He went there self-possessed, and to a large extent self-made, and he

remained thus through it all. Walter Scott, only sixteen, noticed 'a strong expression of sense and shrewdness in all his lineaments'.[4] Dugald Stewart opined that although 'the attentions he received during his stay in town from all ranks and descriptions of persons, were such as would have turned any head but his own', Burns survived unscathed. 'He retained the same simplicity of manners and appearance which had struck me so forcibly when I first saw him in the country.'[5]

There is an ironical appearance to these descriptions now. The literati were pleased to see how little difference their city had made to the rustic genius. Burns's place, after all, was in their eyes to remain in the country, and there to produce more poems of the same general kind, although tempered in their excess by the literary advice of Edinburgh critics. Burns's respectful bearing, his power of remaining untouched by the experience of city life, were hopeful signs. Yet the modern reader, with the advantage of hindsight, sees these things in a different light. The modern reader is helped too by Burns's correspondence, which shows how little overawed he was by the company of literati and social eminences he met in Edinburgh. Commonplace romantic stories tell how he moved from mingling with the great and famous to the company of some disreputable lover, but the real point of his social mobility is not to emphasize Burns the Great Lover, but to show how intensely self-possessed he was. Edinburgh affected him with excitement, with understandable pride at being lionized for his talents, but it did not shine before him as any promised land. The low literary quality of **'Edina, Scotia's Darling Seat'** is some indication of this. Others might be quoted from his correspondence. Even while still there, on his first visit, he wrote home clear-sightedly.[6]

> Novelty may attract the attention of mankind a while; to it I owe my present eclat: but I see the time not distant far when the popular tide which has borne me to a height of which I am perhaps unworthy shall recede with a silent celerity and leave me a barren waste of sand, to descend at my leisure to my former station.—I do not say this in the affectation of modesty; I see the consequence is unavoidable and am prepared for it.—I had been at a good deal of pains to form a just, impartial estimate of my intellectual Powers before I came here; I have not added, since I came to Edr, any thing to the account; and I trust, I shall take every atom of it back to my shades, the coverts of my unnoticed, early years.

So little was he bowled over by Edinburgh life, which he was later to describe as 'houses building, bucks strutting, ladies flaring, blackguards sculking, whores leering, &c. in the old way'.[7] To Mrs Dunlop he was very scathing, too, in writing of the 'pomp of Princes street',[8] and the ridiculous pride of many he saw there. Although he met many people in Edinburgh whose friendship he admired and appreciated: 'I am afraid my numerous Edin[r] friendships are of so tender a construction that they will not bear carriage with me.'[9] No, Burns kept his head in Edinburgh. 'In reality,' he wrote, 'I have no great temptation to be intoxicated with the cup of Prosperity.'[10] When he got back to Mauchline, he felt an initial depression very understandable after the excitement of Edinburgh, aggravated, as he told William Nicol, by 'the stateliness of the Patricians in Edin[r], and the servility of my plebeian brethren, who perhaps formerly eyed me askance, since I returned home'.[11] Burns was genuinely hurt, as the letters show, to find that he might be no longer part of the community from which he had produced the poems which made him famous.

Burns's early story is a familiar one; he was well known all round his part of Ayrshire for his powers of speech, his conviviality (which led to the Tarbolton Bachelors), a great popularity in Masonic circles which opened doors to him (even among the Canongate masons, in Edinburgh), his strenuous social and amorous pursuits, his activities as a local poet and punster whose reputation spread out from local beginnings to national recognition. Burns was very firmly rooted in his locality, and criticism of his work must take continuous account of this fact, or poems like **'Holy Willie's Prayer'** and **'Tam o' Shanter'** lose enormously. To remove to Edinburgh was to gain experience, to receive just critical acclaim for work done in Ayrshire. He was not to settle in Edinburgh, but to enjoy himself and return to the scene of his labours. To find himself eyed askance by his friends and equals thus stung as much as the patronage of some of the literati. What is very interesting indeed is to see that he was (in the letter just quoted) quite aware of patronage, which stung him. Yet the literati testify to the fact that he did not show his chagrin, but bore himself with perfect good manners during his stay in Edinburgh. Once again, we come to the point of Burns's self-control and self-possession. It was fitting that, when he felt out of sorts on his return to Dumfriesshire, he should try to console himself with *Paradise Lost,* particularly admiring 'the dauntless magnanimity; the intrepid unyielding independence; the desperate daring, and noble defiance of hardship, in that great personage, Satan'.[12] 'I have very little dependance on mankind', he added later in the same paragraph,[13] and completed the testimony to his own independence of mind.

Along with independence went acute sociability. Burns, in his famous autobiographical letter to Dr John Moore, wrote of his[14]

> strong appetite for sociability, [and] . . . a constitutional hypocondriac taint which made me fly solitude, add to all these incentives to social life, my reputation for bookish knowledge, a certain wild, logical talent, and a strength of thought something like the rudiments of good sense, made me generally a welcome guest; so

> 'tis no great wonder that always 'where two or three were met together, there was I in the midst of them'.

In short, Burns was the centre of his social community in Ayrshire, a sociable man who loved fun and conviviality. He looked at life, often, from inside such a community, and he had the power of adapting his world-view to the values of that community, without *limiting* it to the values thus expressed. An outstanding example is the opening section of **'Tam o' Shanter'**, in which the world is seen from the cosy shelter of a convivial group by the inn fireside. The first four lines

> When chapman billies leave the street,
> And drouthy neebors, neebors meet,
> As market-days are wearing late,
> An' folk begin to tak the gate

are purely descriptive of the conditions *leading up to the opening*—the opening itself is in the fifth line,

> While we sit bousing at the nappy,

a line actually descriptive of the conditions in the poem at the time, as they affect Tam. The other things belong to the world outside the social group, and by the time Tam actually ventures into the outside world, in the story of this poem, the day has gone, it is dark, and none of the initial description is of any relevance. What counts is what is going on in Tam's own social circle, and it is this which is introduced in the fifth line. Very significantly, it is introduced with the word 'we'—'While *we* sit bousing at the nappy'. At once, the audience is drawn in, for it is necessary for the reader to share Tam's world-view in order fully to appreciate his contempt for the world-values outside the howff, and particularly for him to share in the drunken contempt Tam feels for the devil and the witches. Insulated from the full horror (a horror still real to Burns's contemporaries) of witchcraft and wizardry, Tam sees it all through an alcoholic haze, which lasts undisturbed till his drunken

> Weel done, Cutty-sark!

breaks the spell, and simultaneously the witches become aware of his presence as an onlooker, and his drunken stupor gives way to fear, and flight. A dramatic monologue-rendering of **'Tam o' Shanter'** would reinforce this interpretation very strongly. Tam is unaware of the danger of the world—

> The storm without might rair and rustle,
> Tam didna mind the storm a whistle.

—not till he sees the witches actually heading for him does he turn in flight, and Burns makes the pace of the remainder of the poem (up to the mock *sententia*) headlong flight, expressive of the real pace of life which replaces the drunken maundering, the half-stultified looking around and noting of lurid detail without actual comprehension. The pace of the poem, in short, is not tied to the real-life situation described, or to real-life events, but to the subject's powers of comprehension: as the subject is drunk, or half-drunk, this means that the poem has to convince the reader to see things at this pace, if he is to share in the recreation of the story. We know that Burns composed the poem at speed, re-living with delight the action as he embodied it in verse; the reader is invited to share in this delighted re-creation, and in order to achieve this is invited to see the action through the drunken eyes of Tam, and to share his befuddled incomprehension.

This point is an important one, I believe, in the proper criticism of Burns. We know Burns enjoyed drink—his powers in this field belong to the folklore of Scottish literature—and much of his poetry emerges from the human contact he achieved in the social situation which accompanied this drinking. This does not so much apply to Edinburgh, where Burns was on his best behaviour, at least part of the time, but to the Ayrshire community to which he was proud to belong, and from which he drew his inspiration and poetical strength. The community embraced all orders, holy and unholy, sober and drunken, rich and poor, but we have a good idea from poems such as **'The Twa Dogs'**, **'Tam o' Shanter'** and **'The Holy Fair'** what part of the community pleased Burns most. He felt he belonged to it, and his hurt when he returned from Edinburgh and found himself alienated is proof of this.

In a small country like Scotland, the power of the community is not one to be underestimated. In the tenth and eleventh chapters of *The House with the Green Shutters,* George Douglas Brown brilliantly evokes the closed nature of these communities. In this specific example, an outsider, formerly a member of the community, returns to his childhood scenes, and is met by the hostility of the outstanding member of the community—John Gourlay. The resulting enmity is one of the mainsprings of the hostility which eventually brings about the downfall of the House with the Green Shutters. Yet throughout the book the community is brilliantly used by the author, who was himself estranged from his childhood community by prosperity (although to surprisingly small an extent), and who grew up never quite accepted by it, as a result of illegitimate birth and a proud independence which made him unpopular. Brown was hypersensitive to this feeling of being apart from his community,[15] and he used it throughout his book to show how characters could be rebuffed by a village, in its corporate form of the 'bodies'. A stranger, or someone unpopular, need not necessarily be met with rudeness, but with bland politeness, by perfect civility, yet by a complete lack of communication. Within themselves the gossips of the community share their news impartially, they communicate with little

reserve and (in this case) startling spite,[16] yet when confronted by a stranger the shutters go up. The result is not rudeness; it is perfect civility and politeness, yet complete self-possession. The stranger is not rebuffed, he is simply excluded from the community, treated with complete self-possession and reserve. In chapter five Jock Gilmour is dismissed from the service of John Gourlay in the House with the Green Shutters, and as he staggers down the hill, his chest on his shoulder, the first persons he meets are the 'bodies', who treat him exactly in this way. He is not one of them, but he is interesting (he has gossip they would like to share) so he is humoured and his information is extracted deftly.

> 'Aye man, Dyohn!' lisped Deacon Allardyce, with bright and eagerly enquiring eyes. 'And what did he thay to that, na? *That* wath a dig for him! I'the warrant he wath angry.'
>
> 'Angry? He foamed at the mouth! But I up and says to him, "I have had enough o' you," says I, "you and your Hoose wi' the Green Shutters," says I, "you're no fit to have a decent servant," says I. "Pay *me my* wages and I'll be redd o' ye," says I. And wi' that I flang my kist on my shouther and slapped the door ahint me.'
>
> 'And *did* he pay ye your wages!' Tam Wylie probed him slily, with a sideward glimmer in his eye.
>
> 'Ah, well; no; not exactly,' said Gilmour, drawing in. 'But I'll get them right enough for a' that. He'll no get the better o' me.' Having grounded unpleasantly on the question of the wages he thought it best to be off ere the bloom was dashed from his importance, so he shouldered his chest and went. The bodies watched him down the street.
>
> 'He's a lying brose, that,' said the baker. 'We a' ken what Gourlay is. He would have flung Gilmour out by the scruff o' the neck, if he had daured set his tongue against him!'
>
> 'Faith, that's so,' said Tam Wylie and Johnny Coe together.

As soon as the stranger has gone, the community lets down its barriers, and free interchange is again possible. The process operates elsewhere in the book, even when members of the community are alone. It could be seen at work, too, in the works of Lewis Grassic Gibbon where, in *Sunset Song,* the inhabitants of Kinraddie act with composure and self-possession in the presence of strangers because they are conscious of belonging to a community, whose values they uphold (while freely criticizing individual members). Incomers meet with cool polite reserve, and they withdraw baffled. John Guthrie confronting the rich motorist, the villagers confronting the minister (especially Long Rob), Chris dealing with strangers after her father's death, all display the calm and the self-possession of people who know the way of life of their community intimately, and find that by conforming to its values they can face the unexpected with calm.

What relevance has this to the study of Burns? The point has already been made that Burns belonged to such a community as Barbie and Kinraddie, and that he valued his membership of it highly. It has been suggested that Tam o' Shanter sees the world from the cosy intimacy of such a community, and that the best position a reader may adopt is to place himself in the position of such a person, and try to follow Tam's thought-processes at their own speed. I believe that the premises outlined so far, applied to **'Death and Doctor Hornbook',** illustrate how such an application of biography and social history may assist the criticism of literature.

'Death and Doctor Hornbook' tells, in thirty-one six-line stanzas, of an encounter between a tipsy farmer, on his way home, and a supernatural creature, who is shown as the poem progresses to be Death. After a wary initial exchange of pleasantries and threats, for the narrator (whom we can call, for convenience, Burns) is more than a little befuddled, the two sit down to chat, and after much recorded conversation a sudden warning of dawn (in the form of a clock striking) makes the ghostly figure of Death retreat precipitately to the nether regions whence he came. The poem is light-hearted, sufficiently so for the supernatural being never to assume terrifying proportions. Like Tam's witches, he is too distanced by Burns's befuddlement to be seen as the Grim Reaper, but rather as a chance passer-by who has a crack with a stranger on the road.

The resemblances between **'Tam o' Shanter'** and **'Death and Doctor Hornbook'** are well developed. Both poems are a form of the dramatic monologue; in both cases the speaker is a little drunk, in both he meets with supernatural beings who emerge as figures of fun and folk-tale, but with their gruesome aspects not quite submerged beneath the glazed drunken understanding of the teller. Tam's catalogue of gruesome sights in Kirk-Alloway is matched by the bloody exploits of Death in this poem. To Burns's readers, as much as to the modern ones (perhaps more), Death would be a familiar visitant, with life-expectancies low and wars a frequent occurrence. Death was no joke, however lightheartedly Burns could treat it.

The poem opens on a note of ambiguity; a passing dig at ministers is part of the ironic protestation that this poem is serious, matching perfectly the mock pulpit-seriousness of the ending of **'Tam o' Shanter'.** Burns protests, too much, that this is a serious poem; at once we suspect its bona fides. This suspicion is heightened by the description of befuddlement. The self-excusing tone—

> I was na fou, but just had plenty:
> I stachered whiles, but yet took tent aye
> To free the ditches;

> And hillocks, stanes, an' bushes, kend aye
> Frae ghaists an' witches—

convinces no one; Burns clearly was tipsy. Yet he was not altogether drunk; rather he was initially garrulous, and in a right mood to talk to any passing stranger. Death cannot be taken seriously in these circumstances. Burns is not fit to take him seriously, and as we are being told what happened through Burns's eyes, we can no more be terrified by the apparition than Burns was. Yet Burns's artistry is at its finest here, for he borrows the ballad technique in his initial description of Death—

> I there wi' *Something* does foregather—

leaving the details absolutely to the reader's imagination, till he offers a few clues in the following stanza. The effect is very much like (quite possibly borrowed from)

> About the middle o' the night,
> They heard the bridles ring—

What bridles, what horses, we never find out. The details are entirely supplied from the darker depths of the reader's imagination. Admittedly, Burns does add a few touches about the thinness of Death, and the length of his sickle, but the description is vague. Artistically, this is excellent; and it is in keeping with Burns's dull state that he does not look more closely, nor remark on it more than that it had

> The queerest shape that e'er I saw.

He greets it with openness, without effusiveness.

> 'Guid-een,' quo' I; 'Friend! hae ye been mawin,
> When ither folk are busy sawin?'

The reference to the sickle is boorish, the reader laughs, the potential tension is removed. The whole situation is reduced to two country people talking of the weather, of the crops. It could be one of a thousand Scottish short stories, instead of a supernatural event. (It is noticeable that Stevenson employs just the same low-level technique in the similar confrontation in *Markheim.*)

Death does not fit into this tone.

> It spak right howe: 'My name is Death,
> But be na fleyed.' Quoth I, 'Guid faith,
> Ye're maybe come to stap my breath;
> But tent me, billie:
> I red ye weel, take care o' skaith,
> See, there's a gully!'

Two points concern Burns's retort to Death. One is the drunken stupidity of it (of course death is incorporeal); the other is the devaluing of death in the whole poem, for the announcement of Death's identity is greeted not by awestruck silence, or anguished cries, but by calm *insouciance,* followed by a self-possessed threat. It may be drunken, but there is no mistaking the self-possession of Burns's attitude. Death does not worry him. He is on home ground (emphasized in stanzas 3, 4 and 5) and he fears nothing.

Death and Burns sit down together for a crack. From stanza 10 onwards, the poem is occupied by an increasingly querulous monologue by Death, punctuated by occasional half-ironic observations by Burns. Several comic techniques are employed: the catalogue of experiences and of medical remedies, rising to the ridiculous (and falling to the pathetic by over-emphasis and over-detailed repetition); the ironic juxtaposition on Burns's part of local gossip and old-wives'-tales with Death, the Great Reaper, and with local gossip winning. Death cannot get the better of local medicine, however primitive or ridiculous. The Jonsonesque terms of alchemy and the ridiculously local are put side by side:

> Forbye some new, uncommon weapons,
> *Urinus spiritus* of capons;
> Or mite-horn shavings, fillings, scrapings,
> Distill'd *per se*;
> *Sal-alkali* o' midge-tail-clippings,
> And monie mae.

The two languages, like the two sciences, clash ludicrously, and as there is so much emphasis, repetition and catalogue, the effect is finally pathetic. And it comes from Death, into whose mouth the ridiculous catalogue is put. Burns's speeches are, by comparison, calm, cool and collected; he is the drunkard, supposedly half-tipsy, but it is Death who babbles.

Why this unexpected division of speeches? Surely it is because Burns's calm self-possession drives Death to more and more self-justification, more and more detail in an effort to impress. Twenty-two stanzas pass, and the death-figure is still talking, too much, too fluently, too exaggeratedly. Burns's reply shows how completely unimpressed he is. All that concerns him is the possible effect on a neighbour's field, which may be ploughed up to provide all the doctor's remedies. The effect on his neighbour affects Burns much more strongly than Death's vision of a world where people live to old age because Death's power has been cancelled out. Burns's philosophical calm, of course, drives the death-figure to still wilder claims and more extravagant speeches. He points out how Hornbook kills as well as cures—usurping his own prerogative:

> Whare I kill'd ane, a fair strae death
> By loss o' blood or want o' breath,
> This night I'm free to take my aith,
> That Hornbook's skill
> Has clad a score i' their last claith
> By drap an' pill.

Ironic examples follow. Again there is excess everywhere, too many examples, too ridiculous, all drawn from local gossip, rich in Ayrshire allusion. Death is almost apoplectic.

His last thrust is a pathetic one:

> But hark! I'll tell you of a plot,
> Tho' dinna ye be speakin' o't:
> I'll nail the self-conceited sot,
> As dead's a herrin;
> Niest time we meet, I'll wad a groat,
> He gets his fairin!

But alas, he has no chance to elaborate. At this point the clock strikes, and, again borrowing from ballad tradition, the death-figure is made to shift uneasily, to see that his hour is almost past and he must return to his proper place. It might be, if it were more serious, 'The Wife of Usher's Well'. But it is not serious. It is the last thrust at the death-figure, who can only go off uttering empty threats, leaving Hornbook in victorious possession of the field.

It is a doubly ridiculous plot. In the first place, Hornbook's local fame as dilettante apothecary is too insubstantial to bear the fabric of a thirty-one-stanza poem, too local and unimportant to take seriously. This poem is a *jeu d'esprit,* using a snatch of local gossip and parodying larger forms, larger ideas, by ironic contrast with the littleness of the subject. Gray's 'Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat' employs the same technique, as does Fielding's *Tom Thumb.* In the second place, it is a ridiculous poem because it inverts the expected order. Death makes an appearance on earth, an event which in a ballad would have been recognized for what it was, an omen of evil and a matter for real fear, because actual human death was sure to follow. Here the situation is the same, but the reaction is all wrong. Burns takes it too calmly; he fails to respond to Death's speeches, and so Death literally talks himself out of the audience's respect.

The point to note is that the effect, in both ways, is achieved by taking the reader into the position of the writer as member of a small and closed community. As in **'Tam o' Shanter',** Burns is inviting (indeed, forcing) the reader down to the level of a tipsy crony, one of Souter Johnnie's friends, and making him see the events through the blurred and sleepy eyes of a man just this side of drunkenness. This is the intention of the poem, and the artistic means used to achieve it, if less obvious than in the opening of **'Tam o' Shanter',** are no less clever.

If the individual perception is that of a half-drunk individual, the perceptions surrounding the story—the world-values, they might be called—are those of the other members of the community, probably those who share his love of sociable drinking and story-telling. The manner of the poem is that of a story retold to friends, among friends; the elaborate self-justification and explanation of the third stanza is that of a crony explaining to his cronies that they knew how much drink he had had, that he was not drunk, and so that the following was a true story and the details were to be trusted. Yet the attitude is faithfully maintained. He was half-drunk, and unable to provide close detail of Death's description. What he can remember is the details of local gossip, ribald, bawdy, ridiculous to a close group who would be familiar with the personalities involved, and would relish the long drawn-out joke on Doctor Hornbook. It is a tissue of jokes to be told to friends, in a local situation; it is told in the manner of a convivial recitation, lubricated by drink; its teller, and its audience, are in the same group, share the same values and knowledge.

Death does not. This is the ultimate comic device of the poem. Death tries in vain to break down this self-sufficient, self-complacent barrier which Burns, as part of his friendly group, erects in his way. Burns cannot be impressed. He is prevented by tipsiness, by rustic reserve in the presence of strangers. It is something the reader would quite easily recognize; he would see what Burns was trying to portray; he would take the poem, indeed he still can take the poem, in this sense. Burns is approaching a familiar situation, familiar because of its ballad associations, namely the confrontation of a mortal with Death. **'Thrawn Janet'** derives its central situation from exactly the same confrontation. Burns could have dramatized it, he could have added horrendous details, but instead he chose to limit the poem to the world-values of his clique, and make it comic, which he succeeds in doing, marvellously simply, by the limitations he deliberately imposes on the world-values of the poem, and the techniques of narration. It is a friendly clique poem, and by employing these techniques succeeds in being a great comic one. It is a technique, and a success, which is shown also in the **'Address to the Deil'.**

Which brings us back to Burns in Edinburgh. A man slightly aloof, slightly reserved, definitely a man self-possessed and not swept off his feet by the adulation and the sudden contact with both literary high-life and social intercourse of a kind quite outwith his common experience. He retained through it his earlier possession of what he had brought to Edinburgh, a sense of belonging to a community. It is perhaps significant that **'Death and Doctor Hornbook'** was written before the visit to Edinburgh, and **'Tam o' Shanter'** afterwards. Both display, consistently, the same artistic poise which Edinburgh neither gave nor destroyed. He looked forward to rejoining this community; he felt hurt when a barrier rose between him and it on his return from Edinburgh. Both before and after his first visit, he was noted for his