



CRITICISM

VOLUME

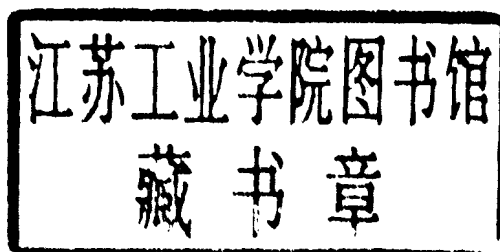
89

Poetry Criticism

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

Volume 89

Michelle Lee
Project Editor



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Preface

Poetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, PC offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by PC supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

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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.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

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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, 32-69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*. Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 34-51. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

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Stephen Duck

1705?-1756

English poet.

INTRODUCTION

Best known for *The Thresher's Labour*, a long poem about the brutally monotonous and difficult work performed by seasonal farm workers, published in *Poems on Several Subjects* (1730), Duck has been a literary and social curiosity for critics and readers ever since his own time. Transformed from agricultural laborer to literary celebrity as a result of being "discovered" by a local clergyman, he ultimately received the patronage of Queen Caroline enabling him to devote himself to writing poetry. Duck is of particular interest to modern scholars because his career reveals much about social attitudes toward working-class writers and their works in the eighteenth century. He inspired many later working-class poets, notably Robert Burns and John Clare, with his example.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Duck was born in Charlton St. Peter, in Wiltshire, England, to poor parents who were farm workers, mostly on land owned by others. Duck attended the local charity school until he was thirteen and then left to work as an itinerant day laborer, principally a thresher. He married a woman named Ann when he was nineteen and around that time also became interested in furthering his education. He invested in some books on arithmetic, studying them, along with the Bible, in the evenings when his work was done. With his friend John Lavington, he eventually built up a small library that included, among other volumes, the works of John Milton, Seneca, Ovid, William Shakespeare, and Samuel Butler, as well as issues of *The Spectator*. Duck began to compose poetry, modeling it on his reading and burning his pieces when he finished them. He eventually came to the attention of the Rev. Stanley who, fascinated by Duck's "primitivism," self-education, and poetic ambitions, introduced him to numerous wealthy and influential patrons; one of these, Lord Maclesfield, read Duck's poems to Queen Caroline, who in turn invited the author to live at court and work as her gardener. While he was on his way to court, Duck's wife died, leaving him a widower with three children. Expected to participate in the public life of the court, Duck became more and more estranged from his background as he

advanced through his various royal appointments—yeoman of the Guard, Queen's librarian, and master of Duck Island at St. James Park. He married Sarah Big, the Queen's housekeeper, in 1735 and was installed that same year in a house in Richmond Gardens. Having published his first collection of poetry, *Poems on Several Subjects* in 1730, Duck continued to write, but his poetry, as critics have noted, lost its naturalness and organic quality in favor of a more formal, courtly style. While he was certainly considered a phenomenon of success, many commentators, including Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, disparaged his humble beginnings and his rustic poetry. Still, his poems were popular with the reading public and there were numerous pirated editions of his first collection. Left without a patron after Queen Caroline died, Duck took holy orders in 1746 and, with the help of influential friends, became preacher at Kew Chapel, attracting huge crowds of curious churchgoers. Some biographers have speculated that Duck suffered from depression and despair as a result of the extreme change in his circumstances; whether or not this was true, he apparently drowned himself in a local river in the spring of 1756.

MAJOR WORKS

Commentators agree that Duck's early poem, *The Thresher's Labour*, written in 1729 or 1730 while he was still employed as a thresher, is his masterpiece. Written in the georgic style, it is characterized by abundant realistic detail and sometimes-rough versification, and is a vivid, unadorned evocation of agricultural labor as well as a tribute to the dignity of the worker. Duck's tone is humble throughout, notably in his dedication to his patron, but the poem also reflects the workers' complaints about their situation in general and about the demanding field master in particular. Focusing on summer and fall, when the bulk of the itinerant workers' labor is performed, the poem suggests the pleasant natural rhythms of the outdoor life as well as the painful monotony of farm work. The poem also treats the theme of economic exploitation as the vast wealth of the farmowner is attained through the deadening hard work of the laborers. His later poems, written after he came to live at court, are considered inferior in style and theme to *The Thresher's Labour*, and critics note that his abandonment of his old way of life, the source of his poetic inspiration, led Duck to produce poetry that reads almost like a parody of his earlier style. Many of his later compositions are occasional

and commemorative. For example, *The Vision* (1737) is an elegy on the death of Queen Caroline, *Every Man in His Own Way* (1741) is a reply to a friend's letter suggesting he end his poetic career, and *Caesar's Camp* (1755) is a patriotic celebration of England's agricultural wealth and national standing, ending with a tribute to the infamous Duke of Cumberland.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critical assessment of Duck's poetry has always been intertwined with commentary about his life. Rose Mary Davis, one of the first twentieth-century scholars to write a detailed study of Duck and his work, readily acknowledged the psychological and sociological questions presented by Duck's life, writing "one wonders whether his life as protégé of royalty brought out the best that was in him any more than his life as a farm-laborer had done." Other critics have analyzed Duck's role in other social contexts: Linda Zionkowski, for instance, explores the effects of the expanding book trade in eighteenth-century England on the publication of his poetry, while Moira Ferguson and E. P. Thompson compare *The Thresher's Labour* with *The Woman's Labour* (1739), Mary Collier's sharp response to Duck's passages disparaging women workers in his poem. Jennifer Batt compares two contemporary biographical accounts of Duck, noting the extent to which fact, legend, and reportage are intertwined in the pieces. More recently, the elements of Duck's style have received closer critical scrutiny. Bridget Keegan asserts that in *The Thresher's Labour* Duck made a notable contribution to the eighteenth-century debate about the nature and purpose of georgic poetry, adding that the "multiplication of speaking voices in the poem argues a sophistication that most critics have been unwilling to acknowledge." Similarly, Peggy Thompson analyzes Duck's use of the heroic couplet, noting that it sometimes undermines his intent, while James Mulholland writes about Duck's transformation of the pastoral form that enabled him "to reconcile his dual status as an agrarian and as a poet." Focusing on the narrative and descriptive aspects of Duck's style, Steve VanHagen suggests that Duck's verse partakes of both pastoral and georgic but in fact remains "generically distinct" due to his gift for evoking the sights and sounds of physical labor, while at the same time preserving the dignity of the laborer.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Poems on Several Subjects (also published as *Poems on Several Occasions* and *Curious Poems on Several*

Occasions) 1730; revised and enlarged editions published 1732, 1733, 1736, and 1753
Royal Benevolence: A Poem 1730
To His Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland, on His Birth-Day, April the 15th, 1732 1732
A Poem on the Marriage of His Serene Highness the Prince of Orange, with Ann Princess-Royal of Great Britain 1733-34
Truth and Falsehood: A Fable 1734
A Poem on Her Majesty's Birth-Day 1735
The Vision: A Poem on the Death of Her Most Gracious Majesty Queen Caroline 1737
Alrick and Isabel; or, The Unhappy Marriage: A Poem 1740
Every Man in His Own Way: An Epistle to a Friend 1741
An Ode on the Battle of Dettingen, Humbly Inscrib'd to the King 1743
Caesar's Camp; or, St. George's Hill 1755
The Thresher's Labour by Stephen Duck and The Woman's Labour by Mary Collier (edited by Moira Ferguson) 1985

CRITICISM

Rose Mary Davis (essay date 1926)

SOURCE: Davis, Rose Mary. "The Thresher." In *Stephen Duck, the Thresher-Poet*, pp. 1-39. Orono, Maine: The University Press, 1926.

[In the following excerpt from her detailed study of Duck, Davis presents an overview of the poet's life, his rise to fame, and the reception of his poetry up to the time he secured the patronage of Queen Caroline.]

The eighteenth century was an age of verse-writers; and the writing of the verse was by no means confined to such persons as we would today dignify by the name of poets, but rather as Havens points out in his *Influence of Milton* ". . . any person interested in literature was likely to publish a long, ambitious poem,—an epic, a satire, or a treatise on religion, gardening, or the art of doing something that the author had never done." Continuing, he notes that interest in poetry had permeated all social levels and all occupations: "clergymen, lawyers, physicians, university fellows, or country gentlemen," and adds that "a considerable number were produced by cobblers, tailors, carpenters, by threshers like Stephen Duck and milkwomen like Ann Yearsley, and even by children of thirteen or fifteen years. Chatterton and Burns showed what boys and ploughmen might do; while Southey's *Lives of Uneducated Poets*

indicates that there were many others who won temporary success in a field where today they would probably not venture." He quotes Saintsbury to the effect that "Poetry has hardly ever received more, and rarely so much honour" and that "for anybody who would give it [the eighteenth century] verse after its own manner it had not infrequent rewards, dignities . . . and almost always praise, if not pudding, given in the most liberal fashion."¹ In *Nature's Simple Plan* Tinker takes a similar stand in disputing the charge against the eighteenth century of "chilling poets into silence." If this was the case, he believes it was not wilful or conscious: "England awaited the advent of a poet with impatience and even sought for poetic genius in the most unlikely places."²

A contemporary statement, confirming this view appears in the works of the Reverend Joseph Spence, who believed that in the period one might "easily distinguish a greater Propensity, than seems to have been usual in other Ages, towards rewarding such as have particularly deserved it: and this goes so far, that I myself can have the Pleasure at present of reckoning two or three, in the little circle of my own most intimate Friends, who have been rais'd purely by their literary Merit and good Character from inconsiderable or no Circumstances, to considerable, or at least very easy ones."³

Not all the comment of the time, however, reflects such a complacent view. The poet, Edward Young, in 1730 seems to be regretting the literary tendencies of the proletarian classes:

His hammer this, and that his trowel quits,
And wanting sense for tradesmen, serve for wits:
By thriving men subsists each other trade;
Of ev'ry broken craft a writer's made:⁴

The author of an article abstracted from the *Grubstreet Journal*, in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1731 sees no cause for rejoicing in the fact that ". . . nothing has increased their society so much as Poetry. We are taught it at school; if not, believe we are born Poets. Every Corner abounds with its Professors; the Bellman nightly salutes his Master and Mistress; the Marshal, his Gentlemen soldiers every Christmas; Every street rings with Ballads, the Royal Palace resounds with Odes, and every Churchyard with its productions."⁵

Richard West, writing to Horace Walpole in January 1736-7, gives his view of the situation: "Poetry, I take it, is as universally contagious as the small-pox; every one catches it once in their life at least, and the sooner the better; for methinks an old rhymester makes as ridiculous a figure as Socrates dancing at fourscore. But I can never agree with you that most of us succeed alike;" and later in the same letter, he continues: "It is a difficult matter to account why but certain it is that all people from the duke's coronet to the thresher's flail are desirous to be poets". . . ."

Undoubtedly these comments were largely inspired by the success and prominence of Stephen Duck, the thresher poet, who, beginning life as a farm laborer, attracted so much attention from persons of distinction that he was brought to court in 1730, given a house to live in, and awarded an annual pension by Queen Caroline, consort of George II. Moreover, numerous attempts, usually less successful, to emulate Duck's success, were made by other persons of the laboring classes. That poetical aspiration among the lower orders still persisted, even twenty odd years later at the time of Duck's death, is indicated in a passage from *The Adventurer* for December 11, 1753: "They who have attentively considered the history of mankind, know that every age has its peculiar character . . . THE present age, if we consider chiefly the stage of our own country, may be stiled with great propriety THE AGE OF AUTHORS; for, perhaps, there never was a time, in which men of all degrees of ability, of every kind of education, of every profession and employment, were posting with ardour so general to the press. The province of writing was formerly left to those, who by study, or appearance of study, were supposed to have gained knowledge unattainable to the busy part of mankind; but in these enlightened days, every man is qualified to instruct every other man, and he that beats the anvil or guides the plough, not contented with supplying corporal necessities, amuses himself in the hours of leisure with providing intellectual pleasures for his countrymen." Further on in the same article, the suggestion previously quoted from the *Grubstreet Journal* is repeated, i. e., that these aspiring toilers should be urged back into the occupations for which they were obviously better fitted: "It is, indeed, of more importance to search out the cure, than the cause of this intellectual malady; and he would deserve well of his country, who, instead of amusing himself with conjectural speculations, should find means of persuading the peer to inspect his steward's accounts, or repair the rural mansion of his ancestors, who could replace the tradesman behind his counter, and send back the farmer to the mattock and the flail."⁶ The reference to the thresher's flail indicates that, even at this late date, Duck's origin had by no means been forgotten.

There is little to excite admiration in Duck's poetry; and one's first thought is to look for an explanation of his success in the social and artistic theories of the age; Tinker, working apparently on this assumption, seems to seek it in the beginnings of Romantic primitivism. He suggests that Thomas Gray may have had Duck in mind when he wrote of the "mute inglorious Milton."⁷ Except for a possible trace of this attitude in Spence, however, it is very difficult to discover it in any contemporary comment on Duck. The poetic efforts of the thresher seem to have aroused interest for three reasons: such a poet was a curiosity⁸; he was a worthy and pious man who, both because of his excellent

character and his poetic gifts which had flowered in spite of, and not because of his homely environment, deserved a better fate than that of a thresher¹⁰; and finally he evidently had a winning personality which inspired confidence and made friends for him among all classes with whom he came in contact.

In regard to Duck's parents,¹¹ all record seems to be silent. Andrew Kippis, in an article on Duck in the 1793 edition of *Biographia Britannica*, states that the names of his parents cannot be ascertained, and that his biographers do not mention the place or county of his birth, but that "it is well known he was a native of Wiltshire."¹² The Reverend H. B. M. Smith, present vicar of Charlton, Wiltshire, has informed me in a letter that there are "no entries of the name of Duck in the parish Registers here, which were very imperfectly kept at that time." There is ample corroboration of the statement that Duck was born at Charlton, on the River Avon, near Marlborough, Wiltshire,¹³ but about the date there seems to be room for question. The account of Duck by Leslie Stephen in the *Dictionary of National Biography* [D. N. B.] gives the year as 1705, but the only original source to which this date can be traced is the account of Duck's life prefixed to the pirated *Poems on Several Subjects*. At the beginning of this account, which Duck in the *Preface* to the first authorized collections of his works brands as "very false" and "by a Person who seems to have had as little Regard for Truth, as he had for Honesty, when he stole my Poems,"¹⁴ we are told that the poet was born in 1705 near the seat of Peter Bathurst, Esq., at Clarendon Park in the County of Wilts "of Parents remarkable only for their Honesty and Industry."¹⁵ This edition, which is dated 1730, is signed at the end of the poems "Stephen Duck, Ann. Aetat. 25."¹⁶ It may be mentioned in passing that Duck's statement as to the falsity of this account need not apply to every item of it. It probably reflected the rumour of the day.¹⁷

The authorized source for information about Duck's early life is the *Full and Authentick Account of Stephen Duck, the Wiltshire Poet* by Joseph Spence. It was published as a pamphlet in 1731 in the form of "a letter to a member of Parliament," (who may have been Henry Rolle of Stevenstone, North Devon),¹⁸ and was later revised and prefixed to the various editions of Duck's *Poems on Several Occasions*. In neither version does Spence have anything to say of the place or date of Duck's birth. Several writers, notably the *Supplement* to the 1766 edition of *Biographia Britannica*, imply the possibility of a date as early as 1700 and suggest that Duck was born about the beginning of the century.¹⁹

To the fact that he was born of agricultural parents, we have Duck's own testimony. In the poem called "**Gratitude, a Pastoral**," Duck, speaking in the character of Colin, says:

O You, Menalcas, know my abject Birth,
Born in a Cot, and bred to till the Earth . . .²⁰

Of his childhood and early education, Spence remarks:

My Friend *Stephen* had originally no other Teaching than what enabled him to read and write English, nor that any otherwise than at a Charity-School²¹. . . . About his Fourteenth Year, he was taken from this School; and work'd with his Father, at Day-Labour, for Two or Three Months. After that his Father took a little Farm, and kept *Stephen* constantly at work; and that generally in the Field. This lasted for about three Years: when his Father being forc'd to quit the Farm again, poor *Stephen* went to Service. He had then several little Revolutions in his Fortunes: liv'd sometimes with one Farmer, and sometimes with another: in low Employments always; generally as a Thresher: Which you know was his Post when he came to be talk'd of and to be sent for by some Persons of Distinction, who added very much to the Character that had been giv'n of him.²²

The gossiping and unreliable chronicler already referred to tells us that Duck had "a small Share of Reading and Writing bestowed on him, with very little or no Grammar," and that before he reached Syntaxis, his mother received a complaint from the schoolmaster: "*That he took his Learning too fast, even faster than the Master could give it to him.*" His mother thereupon "removed her Son from School to the Plow, lest he might become too fine a Gentleman for the Family that produced him."²³

The *Dictionary of National Biography* says that at fourteen the boy was employed as an agricultural laborer at 4s 6d a week. The statement on the title-page of the pirated *Poems on Several Subjects* states that this was his wage when he was "lately a poor Thresher;" and one might infer that the *Dictionary* accepted as authentic the material contained in this very dubious source.

The next important event in Duck's career was his marriage, which, if we accept 1705 as the correct date of his birth, took place when he was only nineteen. A correspondent in *Notes and Queries* for 1869, signing himself "E. W.," has copied the following entries from the parish registers of Charlton, near Pewsey (Pewsey is also near Marlborough):

Stephen Duck and Ann his wife married 22d June, 1724

Erney Duck baptized 1725

Wm. Duck baptized 1725²⁴

Ann Duck baptized 1729

Ann Duck buried 1730²⁵

The last item probably refers to Mrs. Duck, as she is known to have died in that year.

The unauthorized account speaks as follows with regard to Duck's first helpmate: ". . . our Poet is to be unhappily number'd amongst those Men, whose *Learning* and *fine Parts* are not able to give their Yoke-mates that *Satisfaction* and *Content*, which a weak Mind with a vigorous Constitution is generally apt to do. However, he has had three Children born to him in Wedlock." Speaking in a later passage of the thrasher's first literary efforts, he tells us that Stephen "went on writing and burning, and his Wife continually scolding, because he neglected his Labour." When he tried to scan his lines, she would "run out and raise the whole Neighborhood, telling the People, *That her Husband dealt with the Devil, and was going mad because he did nothing all day but talk to himself, and tell his Fingers.*"²⁶ The unreliable source of this story does not prevent its repetition by Robert Southey in his *Lives of the Uneducated Poets*²⁷ and by other writers.

In addition to Duck's characterization of the whole account as "very false" we have some interesting comments in letters from Dr. Alured Clarke, Prebendary of Winchester Cathedral and an early patron of Duck, to Mrs. Charlotte Clayton, Lady Sundon, lady of the bed-chamber to Queen Caroline, who interested herself in Duck's behalf with her royal mistress. In a letter dated August 18, 1730 he writes: "My Lord Tankerville having carried some of the Thrasher's poetry from this country to Windsor, I fancy you will not dislike the account you'll find of him in another cover. . . . I am told the Curate's letter was written about two years ago."²⁸ On September 19, he has more to say on the subject: "I find, upon examination, there are some mistakes in the written accounts of him, which I sent before I had seen him, as there are in the verses, which he will correct when you give him leave. He speaks so well of his wife, that I believe it would give him pain to see so indifferent a character of her in writing."²⁹ Mrs. Thomson in the introduction to these letters states that the Curate referred to is Mr. Stanley. Spence in the *Full Account of Duck* refers in a footnote to an account by the Reverend Mr. Stanley, one of Duck's early patrons. The passage quoted from Dr. Clarke above makes it seem likely that this account was the source used by the unauthorized biographer; and apparently neither is to be accepted as authoritative and dependable.

Duck is represented as discussing his domestic life of this period in a poem called "**On Providence**," appended to the one called "**Royal Benevolence**," which was published under his name in 1730. It was probably a pirated publication, and there is some doubt even as to whether it was written by Duck.³⁰ The passage referred to, bears a close resemblance to the statements of the spurious biography:

The Wife would say, How can you be content?
I know not how to pay your Quarter's Rent.

I bid her look on Birds in Bushes there,
And see the little silly Insect here;
Behold the Order of the Universe,
And ask the Hen and Chickens for a Purse.
She talked, like Woman, guided by a Will,
Who nothing knew of real Good or Ill:
But when she had the Course of Things survey'd,
She own'd, what all must own, Heav'n sends its Aid
To all its Creatures, Reason and Instinct join,
And both, with Care, compleat our God's Design.

However good a comrade in adversity Ann Duck may have been, she did not live to share Stephen's good fortune. The poet left his native village to be presented to the Queen some time about October 4, 1730,³¹ and on October 15, Dr. Clarke wrote to Mrs. Clayton from Winchester: "I received the inclosed account of the death of Stephen's wife this morning, and I supposed (by the name) it comes from the young farmer with whom she used to read." He had answered this communication by a countryman "who promised to deliver it into Mr. Lavinton's own hand. I told him I could not say with any certainty where Stephen was at present and that I believed he could hardly get to Charlton³² again this fortnight; and did not doubt of his care in doing everything proper to the children till Stephen came." He questions the advisability of letting Stephen know of his misfortune until after his first interview with the Queen. ". . . I could not be sure you would think it proper to deject him with such ill news before her Majesty had seen him, for which, in my letter to Mr. Lavinton, I thought it best to set his return home at some little distance of time. I suppose this alteration in his family will incline him to send his children to some friend in the country where they are, till they are grown up, rather than bring them into a more expensive place."³³ He writes further on October 25: "By some expressions that fell from him here, I was apprehensive he would be very much affected by the death of his wife, for he was very solicitous about the long journey she was to take, and had resolved to ask her Majesty's leave to return home in order to bear her company to Kew, that she might be under no fears on the road. I hope he has by this time recovered his temper. I do not know but we may promise ourselves one of his best strains of poetry on this occasion, from the natural and constant correspondence there is between the mind and the affections."³⁴

Duck, with his usual desire to be obliging, tried to rise to Dr. Clarke's expectations on this occasion by writing *A Pastoral Elegy*.

As thus I spake, around I cast my Eye,
And saw celestial Celia drawing nigh:³⁵
I saw; but wonder'd why her heav'nly Mein
Was clouded o'er, that us'd to be serene.
Celia's the Mistress of the flow'ry Plain
Whose Bounty's known to ev'ry worthy Swain: . . .

"Thy pleasing Hopes are blasted all at home;
Thy Sylvia, O!"—She said, and dropt the rest;
But my presaging Heart too rightly guess'd:
I silent stood, and spoke my Grief with Tears;
You know, my Heart was firmly link'd to her's.³⁶

This forced lamentation is only too typical of the way in which Duck maltreated his poetic talent for the sake of meeting the expectations of patrons.

The Thresher's Labour,³⁷ in addition to being the best poem Duck ever wrote, is valuable as autobiographical material, giving us a bird's-eye-view of a typical year of his life as an agricultural laborer. He begins his account at the end of the harvest season when the master calls his laborers together and assigns them their posts for the threshing:

Divested of our Cloaths, with Flail in Hand,
At proper Distance, Front to Front we stand:
And first the Threshal's gently swung, to prove,
Whether with just Exactness it will move:
That once secure, we swiftly whirl them round;
From the strong Planks our Crab-tree Staves rebound,
And echoing Barns return the rattling Sound.
Now in the Air our knotty Weapons fly,
And now with equal Force descend from high; . . .
In briny Streams our Sweat descends apace,
Droops from our Locks, or trickles down our Face.
No Intermission in our Work we know;
The noisy Threshal must for ever go.
Their Master absent, others safely play;
The sleeping Threshal does itself betray.
And yet, the tedious Labour to beguile,
And make the passing Minutes sweetly smile,
Can we, like Shepherds, tell a merry Tale;
The Voice is lost, drown'd by the louder Flail.

But when the work is completed, the Master is far from satisfied:

"Why, look ye, Rogues, d'ye think that this will do?
Your Neighbours thresh as much again as you."

Winter passes, and the changing seasons bring their own peculiar labours:

But soon as Winter hides his hoary Head.
And Nature's Face is with new Beauty spread:
The lovely Spring appears, refreshing Show'rs
New cloath the Field with Grass, and blooming
Flow'rs.
Next her the rip'ning Summer presses on,
And Sol begins his longest Race to run.
Before the Door our welcome Master stands;
Tells us the ripen'd Grass requires our Hands.
The grateful Tiding presently imparts
Life to our Looks, and Spirits to our Hearts.
We wish the happy Season may be fair;
And joyful, long to breathe in op'ner Air.
This Change of Labour seems to give such Ease,
With Thoughts of Happiness ourselves we please. . . .

This happiness, however, is short-lived:

But when the scorching Sun is mounted high,
And no kind Barns with friendly Shade are nigh;
Our weary Scythes entangle in the Grass,
While Streams of Sweat run trickling down apace.
Our sportive Labour we too late lament;
And wish that Strength again, we vainly spent.

Noon-time affords but little relief, for their weariness is so great that they can scarcely swallow their food, nor is the beer a more efficient source of satisfaction. Evening finds them almost too fatigued to find their way home:

Homewards we move, but spent so much with Toil,
We slowly walk, and rest at ev'ry Stile.
Our good expecting Wives, who think we Stay,
Go to the Door, soon eye us in the Way.
Then from the Pot the Dumplin's catch'd in Haste,
And homely by its Side the Bacon plac'd.³⁸

Women are employed in preparing the hay, and about their usefulness Duck is not very optimistic:

Our Master comes, and at his Heels a Throng
Of prattling Females, arm'd with Rake and Prong;
Prepar'd, whilst he is here, to make his Hay;
Or, if he turns his Back, prepar'd to play;
But here, or gone, sure of this Comfort still;
Here's Company, so they may chat their Fill.
Ah! were their Hands so active as their Tongues,
How nimbly then would move the Rakes and Prongs!

The haying over, they work in the barns for a short time, and welcome the respite from the parching sun. The harvest is soon ready for reaping, and the laborers are awakened early:

His hasty Summons we obey; and rise,
While yet the Stars are glimm'ring in the Skies.
With him our Guide we to the Wheat-field go,
He to appoint, and we the Work to do.

Stephen is not blind to the beauties of Nature among which he toils:

Ye Reapers, cast your Eyes around the Field;
And view the various Scenes its Beauties yield.
They look again, with a more tender Eye,
To think how soon it must in Ruin lie!

but they in no way lessen the dreariness and hardship of his labors:

Think what a painful Life we daily lead;
Each Morning early rise, go late to Bed:
Nor, when asleep, are we secure from Pain;
We then perform our Labours o'er again:
Our mimic Fancy ever restless seems;
And what we act awake, she acts in Dreams.
Hard Fate! our Labours ev'n in Sleep don't cease;
Scarce Hercules e'er felt such Toils as these!

The harvest done, there is the brief enjoyment of the feast given by the master before the annual round of toil begins again:

A Table plentifully spread we find,
 And Jugs of humming Ale, to cheer the Mind;
 Which he, too gen'rous, pushes round so fast,
 We think no Toils to come, nor mind the past.
 But the next Morning soon reveals the Cheat,
 When the same Toils we must again repeat;
 To the same Barns must back again return,
 To labour there for Room for next Year's Corn.

It was in dealing with this familiar material that Duck approached the status of a genuine poet, but he had not the wisdom to continue dealing with such subject-matter; and references to agricultural life and labor are very rare in the works of his maturer years. Crabbe, some fifty years later, realized the difficulty of utilizing actual experience in agricultural occupations for the purposes of poetry, and in this connection, bore Duck in mind:

Yes, thus the Muses sing of happy swains,
 Because the Muses never knew their pains:
 They boast their peasants' pipes; but peasants now
 Resign their pipes and plod behind the plough;
 And few, amid the rural tribe, have time
 To number syllables, and play with rhyme;
 Save honest Duck, what son of verse could share
 The poet's rapture, and the peasant's care?
 Or the great labours of the field degrade,
 With the new peril of a poorer trade?³⁹

The most interesting portions of Spence's account have to do with Duck's efforts at self-education, resumed several years after his schooling had ended:⁴⁰

These constant Employments had taken up so much of his Time and Thoughts, that he had forgot almost all the Arithmetick he had learn'd at School. However he read sometimes a little by chance, and thought oft'ner. He had a longing after Knowledge; and when he reflected within himself on his want of Education, he begun to be particularly uneasy, that he shou'd have forgot even something of what he had learnt, at the little School he was at. He thought of this so often, that at last he resolv'd to try his own Strength, and if possible to recover his Arithmetick again.

His first Attempt of this Kind I take to have been almost Six Years ago [probably in 1724]. Considering the Difficulties the poor Fellow lay under, this Inclination for Knowledge must have been very strong in him. He was then Married, and at Service: he had little Time to spare; he had no Books, and no Money to get any. But he was resolv'd to go through with it; and accordingly us'd to work more than other Day-Labourers, and by that means got some little matter added to his Pay.

This he invested in three volumes: a Book of Vulgar Arithmetic, one of Decimals, and one of Measuring of Land. And these he mastered by studying at night.

He was fortunate in having the friendship of at least one kindred spirit. "I have asked him," his biographer continues, "whom he had that he cou'd Talk and

Converse with in the Country; and was Pleased to find him, in this Particular, happier than I expected. He said, He had one Dear Friend, that he mention'd with uncommon Affection. They used to Talk and Read together, when they cou'd steal a little Time for it. I think too, they sometimes studied their Arithmetick together." This friend had during some two or three years of service in London acquired some standards of literary taste and a small library, "which by this time possibly may be encreas'd to two or three Dozen of Books." Stephen in his simplicity confided to Spence: "That his Friend can Talk better than him, as having been more used to Company; but that he himself has been more used to Poetry, and in that can do better than his Friend." This naïve remark makes it appear as if the friend were one of Duck's fellow-laborers, but there seems to be some reason for identifying him with the Menalcas of Duck's pastorals. Menalcas reappears in Duck's works as having entertained the poet on his return visit to Wiltshire in 1735, and Duck in this connection refers to him as "kind Menalcas, partner of my Soul."⁴¹ In a footnote to the same poem, he identifies him as "a Farmer, once the Author's Master, and still his Friend."

Without such encouragement, Spence considers that Stephen's improvement would agree better with a Romance than with reality, particularly with the account of Hai Ebn Yokdhan and the young Hermes in Mr. Ramsay's *Cyrus*.⁴² The reading and discussion with this friend seem to have been, during this period, the principal sources of happiness in Stephen's life. "We may imagine 'em both to have had very good natural Sense, and a few good Books in common between them: Their Minds were their own; neither improv'd, nor spoil'd, by laying in a Stock of Learning:" Spence furnishes us with a rather lengthy list of the books familiar to Duck up to this period:

I need not mention those of Arithmetick again; nor his Bible. *Milton*, the *Spectators*, and *Seneca* were his first Favourites: *Telemachus*, and another Piece by the same Hand,⁴³ and *Addison's* Defence of Christianity, his next. They had an *English Dictionary*⁴⁴, a sort of an *English Grammar*; an *Ovid* of long standing with them, and a *Bysshe's* Art of Poetry of later acquisition. *Seneca's* Morals had made the Name of *L'Estrange* dear to them; and as I imagine might occasion their getting his *Josephus* in Folio, which was the largest Purchase in their Collection. They had one Volume of *Shakespear*, with Seven of his Plays in it. *Stephen* had read Three or Four other Plays; some of *Epictetus*, *Waller*, *Dryden's* *Virgil*; *Pryor*, *Hudibras*; *Tom Brown*,⁴⁵ and the *London Spy*.⁴⁶

It was probably with this list in Mind that Dr. Clarke, writing of Duck to Mrs. Clayton, remarks: ". . . he has, accidentally, had much greater advantages from his want of education, than he could possibly have had otherwise: for it seems he has only read the best books,

and has contracted no false turn of mind by such writings as cost other people . . . more pains to forget than they can prevail with themselves to take. . . .”⁴⁷

Of the works enumerated *Paradise Lost* seems to have had the most important influence on Duck’s mental development and later work. Spence tells us that he was obliged to read it “twice or thrice with a Dictionary”:

Indeed it seems plain to me, that he has got English just as we get Latin. Most of his Language in Conversation, as well as in his Poems, is acquir’d by reading. The Talk he generally met with has been so far from helping him to the manner in which he speaks that it must have put him even to the difficulty of forgetting his Premier-Language. . . . His common Talk is made up of the good Stile, with a mixture of the Rustick: tho’ the latter is but very small in proportion to the former.

He studied *Paradise Lost*, as we study the Classics. The new Beauties in that Poem, that were continually opening upon his Mind, made all his Labour easy to him. He work’d all Day for his Master; and, after the Labour of the Day, set to his Books at Night. The Pains he has taken for the Pleasure of Improving himself are incredible; but it has answer’d too beyond what one cou’d imagine: for he seems to understand even the great and deeper Beauties of that Poem tolerably well; and points out several particular Beauties, which it requires a nice and just Eye to discover.

After some discussion of Duck’s methods of working, Spence returns to the subject of Milton’s influence:⁴⁸ “’Tis not yet three Year ago that he first met with *Milton*; and I believe that was the first Poet of real value that he ever studied in earnest.” Stephen assured him “that when he came afterwards to read *Addison’s* Criticisms on *Milton* in the *Spectators*, ’Twas a high Pleasure to him, to find many things mention’d there, in the Praise of *Milton*, exactly as he had before thought in reading him. . . . Upon his being ask’d, Which Part he lik’d best in the *Paradise Lost*, he nam’d the Angel’s account of the Creation, in the Seventh Book;”. . . . The great admiration he had for Milton, however, could not, apparently, bring him to a liking for *Paradise Regained*: “He wonder’d how Milton cou’d write so incomparably well, where he had so little to lead him; and so very poorly, where he had more.” In regard to the rumor that Stephen could repeat most of *Paradise Lost* by heart, Spence says: “I am sure, he can repeat a great deal of it; and he says, that (before these late Hurries) he could repeat a great deal more.” He considered that in repeating Duck sometimes improved on the original by mistake, as in the following lines:

His words here ended; but his meek Aspect
Silent yet spoke, and breath’d immortal Love
To mortal Man. . . .

(Book III, lines 266ff)

Stephen in attempting to repeat this passage could not remember it exactly, but thought it ran something like this:

. . . His Aspect meek
Breath’d Love immortal to Mankind.

After Milton, the author exercising most influence on Duck was Addison in the *Spectator*, which the thrasher acquired from his friend. “*Stephen* tells me that he has frequently carried them with him to his Work. When he did so, his method was to labour harder than any Body else, that he might get Half an Hour to read a *Spectator* without injuring his Master. By this means he used to sit down all over Sweat and Heat; and has several times caught Colds by it.”⁴⁹

When Spence accidentally referred to the *Spectator* as prose, Stephen was ready with a comment: “’Twas true, they were *Prose*; but there was something in ’em that pleas’d almost like *Verse*.” he mentioned particularly the “Critical Papers on Wit, those on *Milton*; the *Justum & Tenacem* from *Horace*, Mr. *Pope’s* *Messiah*; and the several scatter’d ones, written in the Cause of Virtue and Religion.” The more Romantic Spence wondered “how he came to miss those on the Pleasures of the Imagination.”⁵⁰

Duck has a tribute to Addison in his poem *Description of a Journey*, etc. probably written in 1735, that runs as follows:

If Pride, or Passion check my doubtful Sail,
Let thy Instructions lend a friendly Gale,
To waft me to the peaceful, happy Shore,
Where thou, immortal Bard! art gone before:
Then those who grant me not a Poet’s Name,
Shall own I left behind a better Fame.⁵¹

Familiarity with Milton and Addison had given the thrasher standards by which he was enabled to judge other literary productions:

He had formerly met with *Tom Brown’s* *Letters from the Dead*, and the *London Spy*, and read ’em, not without some Pleasure: but after he had been some time conversant with the *Spectators*, he said, ‘He did not care much to look into them. He spoke of *Hudibras* in another manner: he saw a great deal of Wit in it, and was particularly pleas’d with the Conjuror’s Part in that Burlesque; but after all, ’tis not a Manner of writing that he can so sincerely delight in, as in the Moral, the Passionate, or the Sublime.

Telemachus he admires much; and has taken some fine Strokes from it. Upon asking him what Plays he had read, He nam’d particularly *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Cato*, *Venice Preserv’d*, and the *Orphan*. *Venice Preserv’d* he said gave him the most horror; a word which I took notice he used sometimes for Concern, and sometimes in its proper Sense. He cou’d not bear the Comick Parts in it. *Hamlet* he lik’d better than *Ju-*