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William C. Strange

The Fire Argument in
The Jolly Beggars and *The Cotter's Saturday Night*



If we are to avoid limiting the full seriousness of either, *The Jolly Beggars* and *The Cotter's Saturday Night* probably are read best as they were written, side by side. What follows is an exercise in such a reading focusing on the theme of warmth in the two poems in order to demonstrate that *The Jolly Beggars* is neither simply an anarchy nor a satire directed against anarchies, that *The Cotter* is neither simply a piety nor a sermon, and that the old notion of the pre-romantic was and is remarkably apt to poems such as these.

For a long time *The Jolly Beggars* was held to be the very spit of anarchy: Thomas Carlyle talked of "the strong pulse of life" vindicating "its right to gladness" even in Poosie Nancie's, and the amens trailed after from Matthew Arnold to Maurice Lindsay, David Daiches, Christina Keith, though with varying degrees of fervor.¹ However, these claims have been challenged recently, and this challenge seems to be well on its way to establishing itself as received opinion. Not that anarchy doesn't show its face in *The Jolly Beggars* any more but that its claims and energies are manifest within the poem as the but of a withering irony directed against them from without, as it were, and based conventionally enough on the funded assumptions and sanities of eighteenth century society.

John C. Weston is the most accessible of these recent

ironists in his handsomely turned-out edition of selections from Burns, and Thomas Crawford certainly is the fullest and father of them all in the reading he develops in *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs*.² In Weston's view the structure of the cantata is strongly dramatic so that its texture may be more or less discontinuously ironic. The poem as a whole "must be read as a miniature comic opera" with "three parts: an overture (the maimed veteran and the camp follower), an action (the rivalry between the fiddler and the tinker...with the resolution provided by the bard...) and a finale (the bard's second, climactic song)."³ Once one has grasped this necessary dramatic structure, then one is free to nibble at a series of similar but not necessarily related ironies within it. For instance, the doxie in the overture begins her song by flaunting her delight "in proper young men." Weston comments

The word [*proper*] in context has both the archaic meaning of "handsome" and the ironic meaning of "polite"; this instance of ironic ambiguity illustrates the basic contrast in the poem, ironically expressed in its diction from the polite world, sometimes from the sentimental novel: the contrast between the decorous life of respectability and the permissive life of social deviation. See, for instance, the contrast in the brilliant "rags regimental" [in the same song] (p. 214).

Crawford, too, sees the cantata as a dramatically motivated ordering of characters and songs from which ironies depend, and like Weston he deals with those ironies as they come, one at a time, like random charms on a bracelet. For example, in introducing the soldier's whore, Burns calls her "the martial Chuck." Crawford seizes upon the phrase as a "stupendous impudence...illuminating all the paradoxes of eighteenth century society" and comments

The term "chuck" ought by rights to describe an ordinary wife or maiden, but Burns applies it to a soldier's drab who has had hundreds of men in her career and he qualifies it with a high-sounding adjective from the language of patriots and men of letters. The result is an intuitive and instantaneous comparison of the low with the great, not necessarily to the detriment of the low--and perhaps with the drawing of certain parallels between officers' ladies and privates' whores (p. 136).

Clearly, Crawford and Weston read in the same ironic mode.

And together they do give us something to think about, for considerably more is claimed by both readings than is in fact delivered.

The reason is not far to seek. It takes two to paradox, or, to vary the metaphor, a loose irony is like a loose rope: pull too hard and you'll fall on your promises. One end of the irony Crawford observes in "martial Chuck" is fastened outside the poem to a distinction between the grandeur that flashes off the aristocratic *martial* as against the bourgeois comforts of *Chuck* which "ought by rights to describe an ordinary wife or maiden"; the other end is firmly tied to the substantial lower class realities of the tavern scene that are not immediately appropriate to the decorums of either upper or middle class usage. The irony is pulled taut, stupendously so we are told, and nothing much happens, except that we are left with what is really a rather limp irony in our hands: officers' ladies and citizens' wives are sometime sisters to beggars' whores. So what's new, Dido?

That tug we recognize in irony either topples something or it doesn't. When towers fall like Peachum's clientele, we recognize the emptiness of their tall claims. When they don't fall, like Polly, we recognize how firmly they were founded. Either way we learn something. The trouble with Crawford's gloss on "martial Chuck" is that one end of the irony he sees is not really anchored at all so there can be no useful tension in it. As Burns' Oxford editor points out, the end outside the poem hangs loose: *chuck* may be "an innocent term of endearment" or a colloquial term as in "*To chuck*. To show a propensity for a man. *The mort chucks*; the wench wants to be doing," and "'martial' is precisely used, without paradox: the chuck is a camp whore."⁴ The same kind of point may be made against Weston's example as well. *Proper* is, within the poem, more a leering inversion quite consistent with the doxie's character than an irony based without it, and as long as an ensign was spoken of as a rag carrier and *Rag Fair* meant "an inspection of the linen and necessaries of a company of soldiers, commonly made by their officers on Mondays or Saturdays," "rags regimental" was a commonplace. Apparently, no norms or standards lie hidden in the detritus of eighteenth century manners and lost English styles ready to transform with the touch of a footnote isolated phrases into stupendous paradoxes and brilliant contrasts. If Burns wanted irony, he had to work for it. And work he did to produce a peculiar kind of irony resting to a surprising degree upon discoveries made within the poem rather than expectations of one kind or another that precede it, an irony that operates out of the poem's anarchy rather than against it as a second look at

"martial Chuck" and "rags regimental" will demonstrate if we consider them as we come upon them in context within the progress of the poem.

The cantata begins, as Scottish verse so often does, describing a warm place in a cold world, the beggars in their tavern. One expects to find the familiar sharp contrast between cold Boreas' realm and a haven like Poosie Nancie's, but in this instance *The Jolly Beggars* surprises, for within and without are drawn in images that seem to mirror each other. The leaping and driven leaves in the storm that begin the first stanza of the first recitative and the beggars jumping and thumping inside the tavern at the stanza's close suggest these human leaves, though blown from the social tree, still have not found a refuge from the blast. The hail stone's "skyte" [lash] again in the first stanza and the soldier's kisses in the next, each one cracking "like a cadger's whip," are a second surprising echo; and a third, more fearful resonance between life in the storm and life in the tavern starts from the infant frosts that are beginning to bite. These infants are properly in and of the storm, along with Macbeth's babe perhaps, for there are no children in Poosie Nansie's. Yet there are teeth in the harlot's "greedy gab" awaiting the soldier's snapping kiss. And that her mouth is also like an alms dish simply fixes the fact that few alternatives to the world's chill are to be found anywhere in these opening stanzas. The simile surely damages official organs of charity and warmth in church and state, but it also must call into question the holy licentiousness the beggars offer as moral counter-balance to frosty institutions. In fact, the only suggestion of an alternative to the cold world that seems to hold up here is the soldier's "auld red rags" and the fire he sits next to; both images mark him as a kind of human fire, an apparent source of warmth in this cold world, and this is just what he claims to be as he sings the first song. Here, Crawford's suggestion that the soldier describes his life and profession as if he had been "an ordinary petty artisan" (p. 134)--apprentice, journeyman practitioner of his bloody trade, and now retiree--is well taken, for "I am a son of Mars" is a straight-forward example of mind rape. The soldier not only accepts, he glories in English song in the values and forms of a society that has used him, maimed him, cast him aside. "Yet let my Country need me, with Eliott to head me / I'd clatter on my stumps at the sound of the drum." Only the governors and the generals have proper names in "Soldier's Joy," and what they do is quite literally to "head" the mindless ranks that follow them. Is it meaningless, then, that despite his bravura, the last stanza of this

hot soldier's song depicts him as "hoary," i.e., a frosty private in winter's army, and willing to meet as enemy "a troop of Hell," i.e., a troop of soldiers from the fire? He has learned to make war on warmth quite willingly, and his doxie is no different than he is.

"But the Peace it reduc'd me to be in despair" suggests, along with the obvious social fact of peace putting camp followers out of work, that her love is itself like war, specifically in the near total anonymity with which she practices it. The lovers she celebrates in her song have as little distinctive human presence as the soldier's enemies who are "the Moro," once, and nothing more. They are a fit pair, this frozen soldier and his snow-blind love, for despite their claims there is no fire in them. And what could be more sharply ironic than cold people who think they are warm?

In such a context "martial Chuck" does become a stupendous impudence: a woman who fucks the way her soldier fights, who makes love like war with weapons and upon things not persons. After her first dalliance with "a swaggering blade...from the gilded Spontoon [pike] to the Fife I was ready." And "rags regimental" is a brilliant contrast. "Auld red rags": the world is cold but Red Coats think they are warm, even clinging to this fiction when it's windowed. However, these ironies do not depend upon foreign norms and imported decorums. The context that supports them is scarcely larger than Burns' poem. It is close up, intimate, and Scottish, and there is no better way of establishing this fact than by looking at *The Jolly Beggars'* companion piece, *The Cotter's Saturday Night*. Both were written in the same cold season, winter 1785-6, but how the bawdries of the one and the pieties of the other could ever have flowed from the same pen or originated in the same heart and mind has seemed a puzzlement most often eased by not taking the *Cotter* very seriously. Together, these two poems look like a remarkable act of bad faith or an even more remarkable act of forgetfulness, that is until one sets them both next to the fire.

The Cotter's Saturday Night supplies exactly what was sought for in *The Jolly Beggars*; warmth, and in exactly the same terms, as the carefully progressive development of an image of fire. Stanzas 2 and 3 begin this pattern with that familiar opposition of the frozen work-world to the ingle-centered cottage with an interesting metaphoric extension lingering in the "expectant wee-things" that like the wee bit ingle's "blinking flame" are "flichterin" round the hearth. This time the children are inside the shelter and around the fire almost as if they belonged to it or were of it. Stanza 4 adds to this metaphor as Jenny enters with "Love sparking in

her e'e" and stanza 7 fixes this link quite explicitly with the line about the wily Mother who sees "the conscious flame / Sparkle in Jenny's e'e." The intervening stanzas, 5 and 6, are devoted to the theme of warmth with mention of the worn but mended clothes that protect this family from the cold--no "auld red rags" here--and of the God within that protects them from temptation, a juxtaposition that suggests the warmth you put on is the warmth you have in or, more radically, simple flesh, the shirt Christ died in, is the only coat to keep us warm. The body is both the object of the cold and our best defense from it. No wonder in the *Cotter* chastity is a trim garb, and persons worry that it may become tattered. Such pieties are firmly based in the imagery and argument of the poem.

Stanza 9 brings the development of image begun in 1 to a climax and initiates a new movement by transmuting the conscious flame of love into heaven's pleasure draught, a remarkable domesticating of the fire communion Burns usually finds in booze. The account in stanza 11 of the family's evening meal may glance back at a simple private communion, but twelve with the "circle wide" formed round the ingle to hear the father read from the Bible launches boldly into what might be called the public half of this poem, demonstrating the social graces of the inner light as it were. Again, the fire imagery is consistent and progressive. In stanza 13, as at the close of *The Jolly Beggars*, song and hymn are fire: "noble Elgin beets the heaven-ward flame." In stanza 14 the literal father reads of a series of Old Testament figures that seem an echo, now, of him with the last being "rapt Isaiah's wild, seraphic fire." Stanza 15 takes up the New Testament as fire vision, this time that of John on Patmos. Stanza 16 insists explicitly with its second line--"The Saint, the Father, and the Husband prays"--on the identity of the cotter with all these roles and goes on to develop his own vision of basking "in uncreated rays...While circling Time moves round in an eternal sphere." "Uncreated rays": what the Bible and the hearth are now, the central fire; "circling Time": what the family is around this center.

Unless "incensed" is an outrageous pun, the Power offended by lots of smoke and little fire, stanza 17 does not move the fire argument forward, nor does 18 except for the parents' "warm request" that "Grace" live in their children's hearts. But stanza 20 brings this fire argument to a wonderful close with a vision of Scotland ringed by her virtuous people who are a wall of fire. Sometimes it is hard to sense the pressure of an active intelligence in *The Cotter's Saturday Night*; it all seems so pat and easy until one becomes aware

of the fire argument organizing the poem and follows its steady course from simple domestic bliss to a vision of Scotland ablaze that Blake, Ramsay, or Milton might have envied:

O Scotia! my dear, my native soil!
For whom my warmest wish to Heaven is sent!
Long may thy hardy sons of rustic toil,
Be blest with health, and peace, and sweet
content!
And O! may Heaven their simple lives prevent
From Luxury's contagion, weak and vile!
Then, howe'er crowns and coronets be rent,
A virtuous Populace may rise the while,
And stand a wall of fire around their much-loved Isle.

And for a demonstration that all the evil ones--the seducer, Scotland's enemies--are cold, one needs only to turn to *A Winter Night*, either the whole poem or just Burns' remarkably accurate sense of what the play *Lear* is about with his use of Lear's prayer to the poor, "Poor naked wretches...." as its epigraph.

Do *The Cotter's Saturday Night* and *The Jolly Beggars* read well together? Most probably, and small questions satisfied sometimes hint at larger answers whose presence however dim at least should be acknowledged. In learning to recognize the fire sense of *The Jolly Beggars* and *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, one does catch a glimpse of something more than just two poems in isolation. One sees again, for an instant, that historical moment that once made sense of the old concept of the pre-romantic. Certainly, the term was ill-chosen, arrogant and acquisitive as southron scholarship can often be when it looks north or east or west, yet the thing it named was real and important and we must not lose sight of it now. In his delight in and mastery of the forms of satire, Burns is very much of the eighteenth century; that's self-evident. It may not be so clear that he is very much of the eighteenth century as well in his attempt to imagine fire. Gaston Bachelard has written a fascinating brief history of such imaginings, finding "in the course of our endless readings in the old scientific books of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" that "we are far removed from the pre-positive mentality that writers grant too indiscriminately to the experimenters of the eighteenth century."⁵ But in marrying these attempts to know the fire with satire, Burns made something new, an elemental satire rather than a social or cultural one. Like the young Blake, who had felt that the sound was forced and the notes were few and had turned to seek out new muses in earth, air, water, and

fire, Burns rests *The Jolly Beggars* not on the stabilities of a social nature settled and known but on a modelling of the action and the consequences of fire; it is cold not counterfits that angers him. What Burns has invented will bear fruit as his discovery is repeated or imitated after him in other elemental satires such as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* or Byron's great ocean-mock, *Don Juan*. Ernst Fischer has observed that in matters of literary history content is the innovative term while form trips slowly after.⁶ What one sees in *The Jolly Beggars*, as Carlyle and Arnold once read it, are contents that had been relatively new earlier in the eighteenth century starting to generate the radically altered forms they require. That distinctive moment is what we used to mark off with some justification as the pre-romantic.

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Notes

¹Carlyle's "Burns" and Arnold's "The Study of Poetry" in which his remarks on *The Jolly Beggars* appear have been reprinted often: both, and much else, are to be found handily in *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Donald Low (London, 1974). The others in order of publication are David Daiches, *Robert Burns* (New York, 1950); Maurice Lindsay, *Robert Burns, the Man, his Work, the Legend* (London, 1954); and Christina Keith, *The Russet Coat; a Critical Study of Burns' Poetry and of its Background* (London, 1956).

²Weston's reading is to be found piece-meal in his introduction and notes to *The Jolly Beggar* in *Robert Burns: Selections* (Indianapolis and New York, 1967), pp. 207-225; Crawford's is developed in his chapter "Poet of the Parish" (Stanford, 1960), pp. 130-146.

³Much the same kind of dramatic structure is described by Herman Nibblink in his "Society at Possie-Nancie's," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 7 (1969), 124-127.

⁴James Kinsley, *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns: Commentary* (Oxford, 1968), III, 1154-5. Kinsley's slang references are taken from Frances Grose, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London, 1785). My own references to *ensign* and *rag fair* used in extending Kinsley's argument to Weston have been taken from *1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, A

Dictionary of Buckish Slang, University Wit, and Pickpocket Eloquence (London, 1811). This dictionary silently absorbed Grose's and added to it.

⁵*The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, tr. Alan C.M. Ross (Boston, 1968), pp. 6, 81.

⁶"Content and Form," *The Necessity of Art, A Marxist Approach*, tr. Anna Bostock (Baltimore, 1963), pp. 116-196.