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Peter Zenzinger

Low Life, Primitivism and Honest Poverty: A Socio-cultural Reading of Ramsay and Burns

Associating the eighteenth-century Scottish vernacular tradition with “low” subject matter and style may seem little more than stating the obvious. After all, Scots had declined from a literary language to a series of spoken dialects in the seventeenth century, and in spite of the great variety of poems contained in James Watson’s *Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems both Ancient and Modern*, only *Christis Kirk on the Green* and Robert Sempill’s “The Life and Death of the Piper of Kilbarchan” (often called “Habbe Simpson”), both centering on scenes of rustic festivities, had a truly seminal influence on the Scottish poetry of Allan Ramsay. Ramsay, says Allan MacLaine, “gave to the eighteenth-century Scots revival both its original impetus and its final direction,”¹ echoing Sir William Craigie’s suggestion that it is “unnecessary to trace the . . . progress in Scottish dialect poetry from Ramsay to its culmination in Burns, as the advance is not so much in kind as in quality.”² The seemingly self-evident link between Scots verse and “low life” and the relationship of Burns’s work to that of his lesser predecessor will be the focus of my essay.

In point of fact, opinions on the socio-cultural aspects and literary affiliations of eighteenth-century Scots poetry vary considerably. Thomas Carlyle’s view of Burns as a “Volksdichter” is still occasionally repeated, though with

¹Allan Ramsay (Boston, 1985), p. 1.

²William Craigie, *The Northern Element in English Literature* (Toronto, 1933), pp. 41-2.

different ideological and aesthetic implications. In his discussion of the Scottish vernacular revival, David Craig employs the terms "folk poetry," "the people's poetry," and "national poetry" as quasi-synonyms; like John Speirs, David Daiches and, more recently, Robert Thompson and David Sampson, he stresses the communal nature of Scottish verse as opposed to the genteel, predominantly English tradition of eighteenth-century poetry.³ At the other end of the scale there is Carol McGuirk, who suggests close links between Ramsay and the English Augustan poets and points out the influence of sensibility on Burns's work, following the positions developed by Matthew McDiarmid, R. D. S. Jack and Thomas Crawford:⁴ their critical emphasis is on the British, or European, context of eighteenth-century vernacular poetry, on interaction and historical development rather than insulation and stasis. The evidence they have produced can no longer be neglected. A brief note on Burns in Germany at the end of my paper will corroborate their arguments from the reception side of his work.

Let me sketch the literary and cultural contexts of Ramsay's early vernacular poems. These include his two additional cantos to *Christ's Kirk on the Green*, and his mock elegies and familiar epistles in the Habbie Simson stanza, all published in 1718 and 1719 alongside his "Richy and Sandy, A Pastoral on the Death of Joseph Addison," a volume entitled *Scots Songs* and several poems in conventional English. Before that Ramsay had made himself a modest reputation with three poems published in English containing more than a faint echo of Milton, Waller and Pope. As a member of the Edinburgh Easy Club, Ramsay had deliberately attempted to acquire "a Taste of polite Writing," following the advice given by Addison and Steele in the *Spectator*,⁵ which he eagerly read and discussed with his friends, and to show "Great

³David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People: 1680-1830* (London, 1961); John Speirs, *The Scots Literary Tradition*, rev. edn. (London, 1962); David Daiches, *Robert Burns*, rev. edn. (London, 1966); Robert Thompson, "The Functioning of Folklore in the Dialect Poems of Robert Burns," PhD diss. U. of Oregon (1976), *Dissertation Abstracts*, 37/06, p. 3654; David Sampson, "Robert Burns: The Revival of Scottish Literature?" *Modern Language Review*, 80 (1985), 16-38.

⁴Carol McGuirk, "Augustan Influences on Allan Ramsay," *SSL*, 16 (1981), 97-109, and *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens, GA, 1985); *The Poems of Robert Fergusson*, ed. Matthew McDiarmid. STS, 3rd Series, 21 (1954), Introduction, esp. pp. 118-73; R. D. S. Jack, *The Italian Influence on Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh, 1972); Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh, 1960) and *Society and the Lyric: A Study of the Song Culture of Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1979). See also the present writer's study of Allan Ramsay, *My Muse is British: Allan Ramsay und die Neubelebung der schottischen Dichtkunst im 18. Jahrhundert* (Grossen-Linden, 1977).

⁵*Spectator*, No. 58 (1711).

Sence and Wit" in order to distinguish himself from "thoughtless Fools" and "unlearn'd Clowns."⁶ His Easy Club poems leave no doubt that Ramsay's cultural ideal was that of an Augustan gentleman. Like William Hamilton of Gilbertfield, Alexander Pennecuik and other poets of his time, Ramsay ascribed the low esteem he thought Scottish literature was held in to the neglect of the best models by his contemporaries.

Pennecuik is quite explicit in this respect: the modern English poets, he wrote, have "displayed immortal Capacities, an Elation of Mind which Scales the Meridian of Poesy, delivered to Posterity massy Thoughts in a splendid Dress, chang'd its Complexion, and made it shine with a beautiful Visage, gain'd a miraculous Conquest over Ignorance, and Left a perfect Pattern for Imitation."⁷

In his satiric poem *The Scriblers Lash'd* (1718; I, 83-9), which reached six editions and was included in eight collections by 1733, Ramsay harshly criticizes the uneducated Scottish "rhymers" of street ballads, panegyrics and elegies, who write, he says, "what the polite ne'er read" and "debauch our taste" (ll. 102, 140). Scotland as "an old Virtuoso Nation" (l. 189) should strive to produce elegant literature along the lines of English refinement and silence "vile Mungels of Parnassus" (l. 11).

How do Ramsay's vernacular poems, particularly his early attempts, where images of low life abound, fit into the picture then? The *Familiar Epistles* that Ramsay exchanged with Hamilton of Gilbertfield in 1719 give us some clues as to his attitude towards vernacular verse. Any claim to serious poetry is immediately thwarted by the playfulness and slight mockery that permeates these epistles. "Wanton Willy" calls the vernacular poetry "Crambo" (ll. 49, 66; I, 117), "honest Allie" (l. 43; I, 123) refers to them as "innocent auldfarren Jokes" (l. 2; I, 131). In ironic contrast to their own sense of urbanity, both poets pretend to write "rural Rhyme" (ll. 2, 73; I, 128, 134).

A similar attitude is already discernible behind Ramsay's first published poems in Scots, his two additional cantos to *Christ's Kirk on the Green*. The fifteenth-century original describing a peasant brawl was an art poem dealing with a folk theme written for the amusement of an upper-class audience.⁸

⁶"On the Great Eclipse of the Sun," ll. 18, 42. *The Works of Allan Ramsay*, ed. Burns Martin and John W. Oliver (I-III); Alexander M. Kinghorn and Alexander Law (IV-VI), STS, 3rd Series, 19, 20, 29; 4th Series, 6-8 (1951-74), I, 198. Further references will be to line number, volume and page number, and will appear in the text.

⁷Alexander Pennecuik [Merchant], Dedication "Unto the R. H. Thomas Earl of Haddington," *Streams from Helicon* (Edinburgh, 1720). For Ramsay's early poetry and its socio-cultural context see my comments in *My Muse is British*, ch. I, and on primitivism, ch. III.1.d.

⁸Allan MacLaine, "The Christis Kirk Tradition: Its Evolution in Scots Poetry to Burns," *SSL*, 2 (1964), 3-18, esp. p. 13.

While in the case of James I there was no risk of identifying the poet's persona with the low-life characters he depicts, Ramsay, as a middle-class poet aspiring to social recognition by the upper classes, was in a position that required more deliberate distancing from his subject matter; he therefore tried to widen the gap between his world and that of the "vulgar" rustics, which explains the exaggerated coarseness of the low-life images in his additional cantos. In the Advertisement to the first edition of *Christ's Kirk* (Cantos I and II, 1718), he speaks of his ambition to emulate the royal author of "this admirable Poem" and underlines his educated standpoint by adding a motto from Gavin Douglas's *Eneados*, which he even transcribed into Greek in later editions. His images of excessive drinking, pissing, vomiting and farting are ironically offered to the reader as Pope wrote "a Grace beyond the reach of Art" (VI, 31). Ramsay's condescension is even more obvious in the next edition of the same year, containing an additional canto from his pen, where he presents the poem to his readers as a comic satire,

. . . having Gentlemens Health and Pleasure, and the good Manners of the Vulgar in View: The main Design of Comedy being to represent *the Folies and Mistakes of Low Life in a just Light*, making them appear as Ridiculous as they really are; that each who is a Spectator, may evite his being the Object of Laughter (VI, 31).

According to the rules of neoclassical decorum, a satire dealing with low life was appropriately written in the low, or humble, style. Ramsay obviously regarded Scots as a low variant of English, for when he ridicules upper-class characters (e.g. the pedant, the fop, the fashionable belle, the corrupt courtier, or the traveler on the Grand Tour) as he does in *Tartana*, *Content*, *Health*, *The Rise and Fall of Stocks* and other poems of that period, he turns to conventional English as a matter of course.

Ramsay's "Elegy on Maggie Johnston" (I, 10-13), his earliest mock elegy in the Habbie Simson tradition, was written in 1711 but only published seven years later. To the young self-consciously urban gentleman the comic elegy in Scots was no more than a hoax, "an entertainment of the same order as macaronic or Hudibrastic verse," as Matthew McDiarmid has observed.⁹ After Ramsay had read the poem to his fellow members of the Easy Club, they jokingly discussed the question "Whether Maggie Johnstouns death or Elegy be ye more Lamentable accident" (V, 14); one of his friends comments somewhat grossly on the worth of the poem:

Thy muse with ye same Ease doth write
as Constipated dogs do shite (V, 10).

⁹Introduction to *The Poems of Robert Fergusson*, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-19.

Ramsay's praise of the Edinburgh alehouse keeper and her "pauky Knack / Of brewing Ale amaist like Wine" (ll. 46-7) leads to a description of urban low life, of conviviality and drinking orgies, which the poet's persona participates in as one of the tipplers. John Speirs argues that the comic elegies "allow no feeling of something not quite assimilated,"¹⁰ and David Craig praises them as some of the few works where Ramsay is not "blatantly aspiring to Literature" but "is writing close to life."¹¹ Yet Ramsay's attitude towards Maggie Johnston and the drinking-bouts in her alehouse is equivocal. After all, the comic effect of the elegy in the Habbie Simson tradition is based on the ironic contrast between the low social status of the departed and the worthiness of the dedicatee of a serious elegy. Towards the end of the poem Ramsay wonders whether Maggie is "in Heaven or Hell" (l. 89), and he expresses his superior position in the concluding epitaph "*O Rare MAGGY JOHNSTON*," ironically evoking the famous epitaph on Ben Jonson. To underline his aloofness, Ramsay adds a footnote to the poem in which he distinguishes between Maggie Johnston's "frequent Customers . . . who lov'd to have a good Pennyworth for their Money," i. e. the characters described in the poem, and "many others of every Station [who], sometimes for Diversion, thought it no Affront to be seen in her Barn or Yard." (I, 10) Jokingly he can pose as a member of the first group, as he is certain of his real place with those that look down upon the common people's merry-making for their diversion.

Quite obviously Ramsay's attitude towards the tradition of low-life poetry—just like Swift's and Gay's—is divided into the "official" aloofness of the Augustan poet and his "unofficial" enjoyment of this tradition. Ramsay's comic elegies soon become less self-consciously jocular, and reach a rare degree of perfection in the portrait of Patie Birnie,¹² the fiddler who, in conjunction with the dwarfish dancer Jonny Stocks, served Burns as a model for the "pigmy Scaper" in *The Jolly Beggars*. Ramsay's skillful handling of the Habbie tradition shows best in the satiric poems "Lucky Spence's Last Advice" (I, 22-6) and "The Last Speech of a Wretched Miser" (II, 62-8), comparing favorably with the host of "last words and dying speeches" of his time. The nihilism of the dying brothel keeper and the squalor of a prostitute's life in Edinburgh evoked in "Lucky Spence" strike a note hitherto unheard in this genre. "The Last Speech of a Wretched Miser" projects the low-life pattern onto the life of a rich man, whose extreme avarice has not only reduced him to living conditions worse than a beggar's but has also killed all human emotions in him. The miser is a grotesque caricature that contrasts starkly with the

¹⁰*The Scots Literary Tradition*, p. 108.

¹¹*Scottish Literature and the Scottish People*, p. 25.

¹²"The Life and Acts of, or An Elegy on Patie Birnie," I, 186-91.

idealized figures of the enlightened gentleman and the happy plowman who increasingly turn up in Ramsay's poems of the 1720s.

Even though Ramsay had made a neat distinction between the Scots and the English literary traditions at the beginning of his career, he soon became aware of certain loopholes within the Augustan aesthetics that allowed him to use Scots in forms of poetry beyond the "comic Tale and sonnet slee."¹³ Following closely the literary debates of his day, Ramsay clearly saw a chance of introducing Scots verse into the mainstream of British poetry, and he took it. Neoclassical decorum still reduced the possibilities of the use of Scots for serious purposes,¹⁴ and Ramsay's middle-class ideas occasionally clashed with Augustan tenets rooted in the aristocratic world-picture, so that some misconceptions and arbitrary interpretations of the rules arose, but on the whole Scots and English complemented and reinforced each other in his mature poetry and largely influenced the further development of eighteenth-century Scottish verse.

The English, and European, influence shows most clearly in the concept of primitivism, which was to become Ramsay's major frame of reference. He interprets Pope's "First follow Nature" as an all-encompassing rule, "nature," like the contrasting notion of "art," having both aesthetic and ethical connotations. Low life is sublimated and turned into joyful and honest poverty. According to Ramsay, one of the charms of *The Tea-Table Miscellany* is its "merry Images of the low Character";¹⁵ indicative of this tendency are songs such as "The Happy Clown," "The Cobler's Happiness," and "The Happy Beggars."¹⁶ In *Health*, which, together with *Content*, is one of the programmatic works of Ramsay's primitivism, the poet speaks of "The whistling Ploughman's artless Tune" (l. 341; II, 12). A country girl like "The Lass of Peatie's Mill" trying to win her lover "without the Help of Art" (l. 17; I, 40) not only shows her superior taste in doing without any cosmetics but is also morally superior to the sophisticated lady of the town who thinks she depends on these decoys. "Bonny Bessie" suggests that a poor but virtuous girl is preferable by

¹³"To Mr. William Aikman," l. 29; I, 226.

¹⁴"Ramsay used Scots in no verse form an Augustan would think incompatible with his 'Doric' diction." McGuirk, "Augustan Influences on Allan Ramsay," p. 98.

¹⁵Preface to the 1730 edition, IV, 239.

¹⁶One of the most detailed recent studies of *The Tea-Table Miscellany*, which stresses the primitivistic aspect, is Johann Assbeck's *Why Are My Country-Men Such Foes to Verse? Untersuchungen zur schottischen Dichtung des frühen 18. Jahrhunderts in ihrem Verhältnis zum englischen Klassizismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1986), pp. 300-429.

far to mere beauty and wealth.¹⁷

The simple people of rural Scotland celebrated by Ramsay epitomize the natural, healthy, modest and happy way of life. By way of contrast, the gentry and townspeople are frequently shown as having lost their primitive instincts:

Then let's to Lairds and Ladies leave the Spleen,
While we can dance and whistle o'er the Green,

says the blithe highland lad in the epistle "To Mr. William Starrat" (ll. 34-5; II, 73). This contrast is also a central topic in the pastoral eclogue *Patie and Roger*, which was to become the first scene of *The Gentle Shepherd*.

Such images of the country life reflect a mental attitude rather than the actual facts. Thomas Crawford refers in this context to the pastoral theory of Fontenelle and his English followers Addison, Tickell, Philips and Purney and speaks of "dreams of the cultivated classes," because, he says, "the country is not in the last analysis necessary for exciting the pastoral emotions, since all that is essential is the quiet life."¹⁸ The enlightened upper classes—Ramsay's ideal reading public—are indeed described in much the same terms as the "natural" country people. *The Fair Assembly*, for example, moves the dancing scene mentioned above into the splendid halls of fashionable Edinburgh society, and in spite of its different social context contains the same primitivistic comment as the other poem: "DISEASES, Heaviness and Spleen, / And ill things mony mae" (ll. 17-18; II, 129) are warded off by dancing! Elsewhere the Countess of Wigtown, like the lass of Peatie's Mill, is praised as a woman whose "native Sweetness sought nae Help frae Art."¹⁹

The art versus nature issue also permeated Ramsay's poetic theory of the twenties.

With more of Nature than of Art,
From stated Rules I often start,
Rules never studied yet by me,

he says in one of his verse epistles.²⁰ "Pursue your own natural Manner, and be an original," is the advice of his noble patrons he claims to have followed in the Preface to the 1721 edition of his poems (I, xviii), and both *The Tea-Table*

¹⁷Ramsay's *Fables and Tales* of 1722 contain numerous poems with a similar moral.

¹⁸*Society and the Lyric*, p. 73. Henceforth Crawford.

¹⁹"Keitha: A Pastoral, Lamenting the Death of the Right Honourable Mary Countess of Wigtoun," l. 58; I, 206.

²⁰"To William Somerville, of Warwick-shire Esq," ll. 7-19; III, 123.

Miscellany and *The Ever Green* are explicitly offered to his audience as examples of "artless" poetry.

In Ramsay's pastoral comedy, Patie, the gentle shepherd, and Peggy, his future wife, combine the best of the two realms: they have been raised as shepherds but are of high degree, although they and we do not know this at first. Again, Ramsay's vantage point is that of the upper classes, whose tastes he tries to cater for. The young couple's superiority among the country people, at first seen as a sign of their natural nobility, is eventually interpreted as a consequence of their noble blood. Basically, Ramsay here follows the classical *beatus ille* tradition, which made the noblemen in his country retreat a moral example to be followed by the whole nation. In topical poems with a slighter degree of stylization, like in the song "On our Ladies being dressed in Scots Manufactory at a publick Assembly," this is quite evident:

When such first beauties lead the way,
The inferiour rank will follow soon (*ll.* 37-8; III, 79).

Real country people are normally excluded from Ramsay's fashionable poetry, and when they appear at all, as in "The Daft Bargain" or "The Twa Cut-Purses," they are similar to the clowns and bumpkins in the tradition of Restoration comedy. In his Dedication to *The Fair Assembly* Ramsay confesses openly to the traditional attitude when he contrasts "Politeness" with "barbarous Rusticity" (VI, 80).

But even if, on the whole, Ramsay's images of country life are paradigms of a state of mind, the use of dialect in *The Gentle Shepherd* and his other pastoral poems connects them with the notion of a "realistic" description of the world of shepherds. This is where the Scottish element comes in. Ramsay's pastoral comedy refers to a definite place—the Pentland Hills near Edinburgh—and creates the sense of a real local community. Images of poverty, misery and domestic strife are inserted in the Jenny and Meggy eclogue (later made the second scene of the first act), and although the pleasant aspects eventually prevail, the glimpses of the real-life conditions of the poor are remarkable in themselves as a seminal force. These scenes may not carry the main weight of the argument, but they must doubtless have made a great impact on audiences who recognized their own situation in them.

A similarly ambiguous perspective blending primitivistic pose and serious social comment characterizes Ramsay's dedication of his *Scots Proverbs* (1737) to the tenantry of Scotland. True, "Ramsay's address . . . was calculated," as Kinghorn and Law maintain (V, 59), and the literary cliché of the apostrophe "Ye happy Herds" (V, 61) makes the modern reader wince; but for all this Ramsay's praise of the vital role of the peasantry and the appreciation of "their toils obscure" anticipates the social consciousness of Thomas Gray and his generation:

. . . I scruple not to tell you that you are the Props of the Nation's Profit. It is you that are the Store-keepers of Heaven's Bountiths. Frae your Barns and Byres we enjoy the necessaries of Life; ye not only nourish your sells, but a' the idle and insignificant; ye are the Bees that make the Honey, that mony a Drone licks mair of than ye do. How nither'd and hungry wad the gentle Board look without the Product of your Riggs and Faulds? How toom wad the Landlard's Coffers be, if ye didna rug his Rent frae the Plough-gang and the green Sward? How naked wad we a' be obliged to skelp without your Lint-sheaf and Woo-pack? And alake, how sair wad it harden the braw Lad and bonny Lass's saft Looks, were they obliged to labour for their ain Meat and Claiiths? Ye take that Burden aff their Backs by laying ilka Thing to their Hand *like a peel'd Egg*, while they without Toil reap the Bennisons of your Care (V, 62).

The images of the bee and the drone establish a link with Ramsay's fables, in which he had expressed similarly advanced social views drawn from *La Motte* and *La Fontaine*.²¹ There is a new bias in Ramsay's defensive attitude towards the use of "our Landwart Language" in the *Scots Proverbs*. As early as 1721 he had claimed that "good Poetry may be in any Language" (I, xix);²² now, in 1737, this aesthetic principle is invested with direct social implications: "a brave Man can be as meritorious in Hodden-gray as in Velvet," says Ramsay, sneering at the elitist views of "the Gentle Vulgar" (V, 61). This is a far cry from Ramsay's fawning on his rich patrons discernible in his earlier work.

In Robert Burns, the revaluation of the simple country folk is paramount, though it would be beside the point to interpret this attitude as the straightforward expression of a newly gained self-confidence on the part of the Scottish peasantry. What we are offered instead is, often enough, primarily an echo of traditional literary formulas that appealed to Burns for their wish-fulfillment. Especially in his early poems, Burns falls behind the advanced position noted above. "The Twa Dogs," contrasting the life of the lairds on the one hand and "Poor *tenant-bodies*, scant o' cash",²³ on the other, tries to convince the reader that the latter are "maistly wonderfu' contented" (l. 84), while the rich, "curst" with "want o' wark" (l. 206), lead a pitiful life of languor and boredom. "The Cotter's Saturday Night" is a similar reservoir for the store of primitivistic concepts Ramsay had helped popularize, topped up with "a measure of stock Augustan reflection from Gray, Shenstone and others" (*Poems*, III, 1111).

²¹See esp. "The Twa Books" (embedded in "Epistle to the Honourable Duncan Forbes, Lord Advocate") and "The Twa Lizards," *Works*, II, 26-7 and 48.

²²The argument in the 1721 preface is that "British," Ramsay's "Mother Tongue," is as valuable as "the dead or foreign Languages."

²³*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 140. Henceforth *Poems*.

found in Fergusson's "The Farmer's Ingle." Rather than claiming to present a distinct, realistic portrait of a cotter's family, Burns frames an idealistic model ("From Scenes like these," *l.* 163) connecting simplicity and happiness:

To you I sing, in simple Scottish lays,
 The *lowly train* in life's sequester'd scene;
 The native feelings strong, the guileless ways,
 What A[itken] in a *Cottage* would have been
 Ah! tho' his worth unknown, far happier there I ween! (*ll.* 5-9)

Robert Aitken was a solicitor, not a cotter. The poem blends the old *beatus ille* topos with more recent motifs, such as the sequestered country scene (rather than the closeness to the town, which Ramsay preferred), the piety of the cotter, the ruined maid, and the basic depravity of the upper classes. R. D. S. Jack has argued that "Burns is using [the] sentimental tradition to advance [an] attack on social divisions in his country," that "indirectly . . . indict the ruling classes," and that "'The Cotter's Saturday Night' as much as 'A Man's a Man' is a poem advocating that the lower classes seize social and political liberty and do so by force if necessary."²⁴ I find it difficult to follow this argument. Admittedly, "The Cotter's Saturday Night," like Gray's "Elegy," makes the ruling classes appear in an unfavorable light and is, in this respect, political; however, the calm rhythm of both Gray's heroic quatrains and Burns's Spenserian stanza counteract any incitement to social change by force. The landlord in Burns's poem may be "Studied in arts of Hell, in wickedness refin'd" (*Poems*, I, 151) but, like the bad weather, he remains outside the cottage, serving as a foil to enhance the atmosphere of warmth and contentment inside. A real cotter would surely have drawn quite a different picture of his situation from the one we find here. And this is the point: Burns, who experienced hard work, poverty and degradation as a farmer, does not speak in his own voice in this poem, but, for all his indignation, adopts the leisured classes' view of rural happiness.

What a different image of the Scottish peasantry Burns conveys in "The Holy Fair"! This poem also celebrates the healthy, natural attitude towards life, but has the sensuous richness of *Christ's Kirk*, whose simplified stanza it employs while avoiding Ramsay's grossness. The young country folk "mind baith *saul* an' *body*" and are "weel content" (*Poems*, I, 135); they are "happy . . . an' blest" (*Poems*, I, 132) without being mere ciphers of a primitivist theory; nor are they paragons of virtue. Saints and sinners have their place in this world, "some are fou o' *love divine*" and "some are fou o' *brandy*" (*Poems*, I, 137), and there are many ways of converting and softening a human heart, as the poem demonstrates. Rarely has the democratic principle of equality found

²⁴"Robert Burns: Poet of Freedom," *Scotia: American-Canadian Journal of Scottish Studies*, 8 (1982), 46, 47, 49. Henceforth Jack.

such an admirable expression. There is no condescension, no attack against those who think or live differently. The only quarreling comes from those who ascend “the *holy rostrum*” (*Poems*, I, 133)—as Kinsley remarks, “The medieval brawl is metamorphosed in the Mauchline preachings” (*Poems*, III, 1099), so that it is the ministers of the Kirk who are now the laughing stock rather than the country yokels. Siding with the simple peasants, “The Holy Fair” has serious ideological implications, though its pervasive lightheartedness allows the criticism of clerical hypocrisy and combativeness to be no more than a faint echo of that expressed in, say, “Holy Willie’s Prayer” of the same year (1785).

Love and Liberty (The Jolly Beggars) also belongs to the same period. This important work has received ample critical attention in recent years²⁵ and can therefore be surveyed briefly. As Thomas Crawford has pointed out, Burns’s cantata is an art poem “drawing its sustenance from (i) the vernacular narrative tradition going back to *Christis Kirk on the Green*...and (ii)...popular lyric culture,” Burns’s most immediate models being the songs “The Happy Beggars” and “The Merry Beggars” from Ramsay’s *Tea-Table Miscellany*. The night Burns spent with the beggars in the Mauchline dive Poosie Nancy’s that is said to have sparked off the cantata follows the traditional pattern according to which a member of a higher social group joins the beggars “for a frolic,” (Crawford, pp. 207, 192, 195), an attitude not unlike Ramsay’s on his occasional “descents” to Maggie Johnston’s tavern. Any exaggerated claim to realism must therefore be checked against the poem’s generic context, for quite early in its history “some of the values of the pastoral tradition have become attached to the figure of the Beggar, and are beginning to move forward towards the praise of anarchy.”²⁶ Gay rendered this tendency particularly manifest in *The Beggar’s Opera*. The anarchic wishfulfillment of the tradition culminates, in Burns’s example, in the final chorus:

A fig for those by LAW protected,
LIBERTY’s a glorious feast!
COURTS for Cowards were erected,
CHURCHES built to please the Priest (*Poems*, I, 209)

Henley and Henderson’s often-quoted formula of “humanity caught in the act and summarised for ever in terms of art”²⁷ suggests that the “merry core /

²⁵Crawford examines the major trends in recent criticism in his lucid analysis of this poem in *Society and the Lyric*, pp. 187-212.

²⁶Crawford, p. 194. The reference is to John Fletcher’s *Beggar’s Bush* (?1622).

²⁷*The Poetry of Robert Burns*, ed. W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson. 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1896-7), II, 291.

O' randie, gangrel bodies" (ll. 7-8) in this poem are mythopoetic figures and that, as Maurice Lindsay puts it, "their cantata is the expression of that revolt against 'the scheme of things' which finds a sympathetic echo at some time or another in even the most decorous heart."²⁸ The idealization of "those who are already outside the social structure" in *Love and Liberty* patently corresponds to that of "the down-trodden labourer" in "The Cotter's Saturday Night" (Jack, p. 50), what has not always been noticed, though, is that the same authorial detachment and restrictions regarding the incentive to riot apply here too. "Love and Liberty" is a very complex work; one of Burns's "exercises in romantic escapism," it "can still show a kind of heroic idealism none the less heroic for being inverted" (Lindsay, p. 92).

How dubious it is to treat Burns as a simple "folk-poet" and his images of low life as authentic records emerges from the numerous parallels existing between *Love and Liberty* and "Tam o' Shanter." As well as the traditional evocation, in the opening scenes, of conviviality heightened by the foul weather outside, both poems contain elements of that inverted heroic idealism, the "drouthy neebors" in Ayr appearing as ill-reputed in the eyes of well-meaning moralists as the beggars in the Mauchline tavern. The contradictory discursive positions²⁹ in "Tam o' Shanter" admit of both ironically reflecting the traditional aloofness towards the simple country people and glorifying their natural grandeur, or "honesty." Burns uses the honest-man motif in many contexts and moods. As shown in the narratorial comment following the announcement of the "gathering [domestic] storm" over Tam's late hours, these include the jocular and parodistic:

This truth fand honest *Tam o' Shanter*,
As he frae Ayr ae night did canter,
(Auld Ayr, wham ne'er a town surpasses,
For honest men and bonny lasses.) (*Poems*, II, 557)

Christopher Whyte regards the use of "honest" and "heroic" (*Poems*, II, 561) as "markers of the mock-heroic style adopted by Burns in 'Tam o' Shanter,'" as hyperboles culminating in the lines:

Kings may be blest, but *Tam* was glorious,
O'er a' the ills o' life victorious!
(*Poems*, II, 559; Whyte, pp. 12-13)

²⁸Robert Burns: *The Man, his Work, the Legend*, 2nd edn., rptd. with corrections (London, 1971), p. 93. Henceforth Lindsay.

²⁹See Christopher Whyte, "Defamiliarising 'Tam o' Shanter,'" *Scottish Literary Journal*, 20:1 (1993), 5-18.

This is convincing enough when we consider that Burns raises a hen-pecked husband getting drunk to escape domestic tyranny for a while, above the level of royalty. But the implicit questioning of the divine right of the (Hanoverian) kings in "Kings may be blest, but *Tam* was glorious" and the ironic use of the rhymes "glorious" and "victorious" from the English anti-Jacobite song "God Save the King,"³⁰ which was being adopted as the British national anthem in Burns's days,³⁰ produce occasional political undertones, however carefully muted under the cover of humor.

"For a' that and a' that," which Crawford calls the "apotheosis...of the songs inspired by the French revolution and Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*" (Crawford, pp. 185-6), is more outspoken in this respect. Reinterpreting conventional concepts from a radical point of view, it is, in fact, one of Burns's most overtly political pronouncements, an accumulation of his most cherished ideas set to the tune of a Jacobite song. Clearly reminiscent of the lines from "Tam o' Shanter" quoted above is the following:

The honest man, though e'er sae poor,
Is king o' men for a' that.—³¹

The honest-man motif has been traced back to various sources, including the seventeenth-century ideal of the *honnête homme* and Pope's *Essay on Man*.³² In his second "Epistle to John Lapraik" Burns quotes Pope to the effect that

'The social, friendly, honest man,
'Whate'er he be,
'Tis *he* fulfils *great Nature's plan*,
'And none but *he* (*Poems*, I, 92).

While Burns here acknowledges Pope's claim that honesty is a quality basically to be found in any man regardless of his social rank ("Whate'er he be"), he

³⁰First performed by a patriotic bandmaster at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, after the defeat by Bonnie Prince Charlie's troops of the Hanoverian army at Prestonpans in September 1745, "God Save the King" "came to be referred to as the national anthem from about the beginning of the nineteenth century," *The Monarchy* (London, 1991), p. 68. According to the *Cambridge Encyclopedia* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 833, the time of adoption as a national anthem was the eighteenth century.

³¹*Poems*, II, 762. Cf. the song "My father was a farmer upon the Carrick border" (*Poems*, I, 26-8), where we find the stereotypical "cheerful honest-hearted clown" who "had ne'er a farthing" and "Thus all obscure, unknown, and poor, thro' life [was] doom'd to wander" though still contending, "I am as well as a Monarch in a palace."

³²*Poems*, III, 1467-8. Quotations from *An Essay on Man*, with references to epistle and line numbers, will henceforth be credited as *EM*.

elsewhere finds it necessary to specify that the poor are also included. His "Epistle to a Young Friend," for example, maintains:

A man may hae an *honest heart*,
Tho' Poortith hourly stare him (*Poems*, I, 249).

This defensive attitude arises from the clash between honesty as an aesthetic concept claiming universal validity and verifiable social reality. Only seemingly did Augustan generalizations such as "universal," "all mankind" contradict the deep-rooted belief in hierarchy, all major Augustan writers agreeing that those who had to do manual work to earn their living were, as a matter of course, excluded from this category.³³ It would hardly have occurred to Pope or Ramsay to emphasize poverty in their images of the simple and honest man the way Burns does, nor would they have given the aspect of social injustice any serious consideration in this context.³⁴ "The poor, oppressed, honest man" in "Man Was Made to Mourn" (*Poems*, I, 119), and poems such as "The Cotter's Saturday Night" and "For a' that and a' that" reflects a new social consciousness based on sensibility, enlightened political theory and, in Burns's case, personal experience. As mentioned above, the simple man in Ramsay's poetry was no more than a mask of the aristocrat. Even in *The Gentle Shepherd*, where Ramsay interprets the pastoral tradition in realistic terms and distinguishes between the roles of Patie, the shepherd, and Patie, the young laird, their physical identity is maintained through the cleverly devised plot: nobility of mind and gentle blood go naturally together. In Burns, the nobleman and the simple man have evolved not only into two distinct persons, but into opposing forces.³⁵ The links between simplicity and honesty still exist, but, simplicity now being increasingly seen as a realistic social reference and identified with poverty, the upper-class person has become a figure of contrast, and this contrast includes the question of moral integrity.

If poverty is honest, it is a cause for pride; consequently it is only the "coward-slave" who shamefully "hings his head," while "we dare be poor." As Pope had it, "Honour and shame from no condition rise" (*EM*, iv, 191). What establishes a man's worth is his "independent mind" rather than an independent income. Arguing from an upper-class point of view, Pope had dismissed

³³Cf. the parallels in my discussion of the concept of "taste" and its application to the fictitious reader of eighteenth-century poetry in *My Muse is British*, ch. ii.2, esp. p. 160.

³⁴Pope's equation of "guilt and greatness" (*EM*, iv, 293) refers to war heroes.

³⁵Thomas Paine's distinction between "the artificial Noble" and "the Noble of Nature" is pointed out by Thomas Crawford in *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs*, p. 365. Henceforth *Study*.

inequality in social status as “some small difference,” reasoning that the significant distinction is between “a wise man and a fool” (*EM*, iv, 195, 200).

Worth makes the man, and want of it the fellow:
The rest is all but leather or prunella. (*EM*, iv, 203-4)

Following Pope’s philosophical argument, Burns condemns the “tinsel show” of “fools” and “knaves,” expressing confidence in the “higher rank,” and eventual victory, of “Sense and Worth”; going beyond Pope and his own earlier position and connecting these abstract categories with Paine’s comments on the French Revolution and the unnaturalness of hereditary titles, Burns implicitly advocates a reversal of the existing social structure when he elevates the “honest man, though e’er sae poor” to the rank of “king o’ men” and degrades the “birkie, ca’d a lord” to the level of a “coof.” This is the basis, Crawford says, for Burns’s final egalitarian utopia, in which the “Masonic concept of Brotherhood” and the “French revolutionary ideal of Fraternity” mingle (*Study*, p. 365):

That Man to Man the warld o’er,
Shall brothers be for a’ that (*Poems*, II, 763).

My discussion of the representation of low life in Ramsay and Burns, and, in more general terms, some of the socio-cultural aspects of eighteenth-century Scottish vernacular literature has raised the issue of the relationship between literary discourse and extra-literary reality and the potential of literature to further social and political change. I have briefly sketched how Ramsay interpreted the aristocratic ideals of English Augustan culture and neoclassical poetry from his Scottish middle-class point of view, bringing them into contact with the themes and modes of Scots vernacular poetry and, in the process, changing them both. Burns took over Ramsay’s middle-class patterns and in turn reinterpreted them from the point of view of a self-educated Scottish farmer, steeped in the cult of sensibility and fascinated by the ideas of the French Revolution. For all his reliance on literary cliché, and his caution to take the edge off his most radical ideas, Burns has succeeded in sharpening his readers’ social consciousness and occasionally contributed to political change, as the German reception of his work shows.

When, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the reactionary forces of the German *Grossbourgeoisie* increased their pressure on the lower classes, Burns’s songs of liberty became a great incentive to the revolutionary movement of *Vormärz*. Ferdinand Freiligrath translated “For a’ that and a’ that” twice, in his second version adapting Burns’s song to the contemporary conditions in Germany. “Trotz alledem” was printed in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, a journal edited by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in 1848 and soon gained a

central position in the song repertoire of the communist movement in Germany.³⁶ Freiligrath's adaptation contains the lines:

Wir sind das Volk, die Menschheit wir,
Sind ewig drum, trotz alledem,

which, retranslated, read,

We are the people, we are humanity,
And therefore are eternal, for a' that.

Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht frequently referred to this song when they tried to establish communist rule in Germany after the First World War, and after the Second World War every young person in East Germany was brought up with it. Its indictment of injustice and repression eventually turned it into an instrument of criticism of communist rule itself. "Trotz alledem" is associated with singer Wolf Biermann, expelled from the GDR in 1976 for his critical stance;³⁷ and when during the 1989 upheavals, which rang in the demise of the East German state, thousands of people marched through the streets of East Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden, their slogan was "Wir sind das Volk!"—"We are the people!"

Burns, naturalized by Freiligrath and reinterpreted by those who had been brought up by professed admirers of his faith in liberty and equality, helped overthrow a system of oppression! What better proof is there of his internationalism and unbroken vitality two hundred years after his death.

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³⁶Freiligrath's adaptations have been made available again by Rudi Camerer in his bilingual edition of *Robert Burns: Liebe und Freiheit* (Heidelberg, 1988), pp. 243-5. In the Soviet Union, too, the song played a central role in communist education. Ian Nimmo's book *Robert Burns: His Life and Tradition in Words and Sound* (London, 1965) contains a record with a version of "Is there, for honest Poverty" in English and Russian from a Moscow kindergarten.

³⁷Wolf Biermann, *Trotz alledem!* CBS Germany, 1978. For a list of further German recordings see Camerer, p. 333.