

2007

## A Highly-Textual Affair: The Sylvander-Clarinda Correspondence

Kenneth Simpson

*University of Strathclyde, Emeritus*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Simpson, Kenneth (2007) "A Highly-Textual Affair: The Sylvander-Clarinda Correspondence," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 35: Iss. 1, 258–269.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol35/iss1/20>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

Kenneth Simpson

## A Highly Textual Affair: The Sylvander-Clarinda Correspondence

I like to have quotations ready for every occasion.— They give one's ideas so pat, and save one the trouble of finding expression adequate to one's feelings.<sup>1</sup>

These words are from Robert Burns's thirteenth letter to Mrs. Agnes McLehose. It is something of a back-handed compliment to Clarinda, mistress of his soul, to admit that she is beyond the compass of his originality; hence he has quoted 2 stanzas from the anonymous song "What art thou Love!" published in *The Hive*, 1724. Elsewhere in this letter he quotes from Pope's "Prologue to the Satires," Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village," the anonymous song "Goodnight and joy be wi' you a," and—from himself—his scathing epigram on Elphinstone's translation of Martial. A letter of 19 January 1788 contains nine quotations (*Letters*, I, 209-11); and in his letter of the following night he cites a couplet from Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard" but with the genders transposed: "'Hide it my heart, within that close disguise,/ Where mix'd with God's her lov'd idea lies'" (*Letters*, I, 213).

Mrs. McLehose endorses Burns's view: "I agree with you in liking quotations. If they are apt, they often give one's ideas more pleasantly than our own language can at all times."<sup>2</sup> From the outset she responds in kind, citing

---

<sup>1</sup>*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 207. Henceforth *Letters*.

<sup>2</sup>*The Correspondence Between Burns and Clarinda*, ed. W. C. McLehose (Edinburgh, 1843), p. 195. Henceforth *Clarinda*.

Sterne's Yorick ("Tut! are we not all relations?") (Clarinda, p. 83), Locke (Clarinda, pp. 83; 165), Shakespeare's Desdemona (Clarinda, p. 116), Fielding's Amelia (Clarinda, p. 128), Goethe's Werther (Clarinda, p. 195), and Sterne's Uncle Toby (Clarinda, pp. 86; 238). Literature is everywhere in this correspondence.

There are 52 extant letters from Burns to Mrs. McLehose. Of these 42 were written in 14 weeks of the winter of 1787-8, all but the first four bearing the pseudonym "Sylvander," to which she responded as "Clarinda." The correspondence has divided critics. Undoubtedly it contributed to Francis Jeffrey's broad disparagement of Burns's letters, which "seem to have been nearly all composed as exercises, and for display";<sup>3</sup> and for Allan Cunningham, the "raptures [of Sylvander] are artificial and his sensibility assumed."<sup>4</sup> J. DeLancey Ferguson terms the affair "that somewhat preposterous episode" (*Letters*, I, lviii). Yet for Catherine Carswell, for whom Burns's life was the stuff of a Lawrentian novel, the correspondence rings so true as to confirm the consummation of the relationship.

This paper will challenge literalist readings of Burns, a reflection of the extent to which nineteenth-century classic realism served to reinforce the "Heaven-taught ploughman"<sup>5</sup> myth, and will argue that these letters should be read as works of conscious literary artistry rather than autobiographical testimony. Here, as elsewhere, Burns revised until he got the desired effect (the number of deletions bears witness). J. DeLancey Ferguson noted that early critics

sought in [Burns's] letters a rural *naïveté*, and were correspondingly taken aback at finding instead deliberate artistry. The artistry, as it happened, was often of the wrong sort, but artistry it was, and at the furthest remove from *naïveté*. (*Letters*, I, xlv).

Agnes McLehose first met Burns at a tea-party at Miss Erskine Nimmo's on 4 December 1787. She had read his poems after his first visit to the capital the previous winter, though she had been discouraged from meeting "that

---

<sup>3</sup>Francis Jeffrey, review of R. H. Cromek's *Reliques of Robert Burns* in *Edinburgh Review*, XIII (Jan. 1809), 256.

<sup>4</sup>Allan Cunningham, *The Works of Robert Burns; With his Life*, 8 vols. (London, 1834), I, 184.

<sup>5</sup>Henry Mackenzie designated Burns "this Heaven-taught Ploughman" in his review of the Kilmarnock edition in *Lounger*, No. 97 (9 Dec. 1786), 388.

ploughman with pretensions to poetry"<sup>6</sup> by her cousin, William (later Lord) Craig. Invited by her to tea on 6 December, Burns opted for another engagement and wrote a letter of apology rescheduling their meeting to Saturday 8 December. On that day he wrote her, "Tonight I was to have had that very great pleasure—I was intoxicated with the idea—but an unlucky fall from a coach has so bruised one of my knees that I can't stir my leg, off [the cushion]" (*Letters*, I, 182). In subsequent references to the accident the blame is placed on "a drunken coachman" (*Letters*, I, 183; I, 200). With a dislocated knee diagnosed by Dr. Alexander Wood, it would be a full month before they were re-united. Painful and disabling as the condition is (and Burns makes frequent references in his letters to his immobility) it is tempting to suggest that if he was as smitten as his letters claim he would have got there somehow before 4 January. Is Burns in love with the lady or in love with the idea of conducting an affair by letter? Are the days of disability enlivened by relishing his role as man of feeling in love, where he is dramatist, actor (on paper at least), and spectator?

The terms of the short letter in which he reports the fall are revealing: "I was vexed to the soul I had not seen you sooner; I determined to cultivate your friendship with the enthusiasm of Religion" (*Letters*, I, 182) (cf., aged 21, Burns writing to William Niven of "the cultivation of the finer feelings of the heart" (*Letters*, I, 5)). For Burns, feelings are something that can be nurtured. The introduction of religion into the correspondence with Mrs. McLehose at the outset is a masterstroke. Albeit long separated from her husband, she is a married lady with 3 children and known in polite society. To imbue the relationship with an aura of religiosity will reinforce the sense of propriety (or, absence of impropriety) which physical separation fosters. And should any mark be over-stepped, there is an escape-clause in the shape of poetic license.

It is the literariness of the correspondence that is its most striking feature. Poetry is the linchpin in that it accounts for the initial meeting and attraction and also impregnates the correspondence with its modes, terms, and situations. In the first letter, cunningly recalling that Miss Nimmo has told him that she is "not only a Critic but a Poetess" (*Letters*, I, 181), he sends her a "bagatelle as a tolerable off-hand *jeu d'esprit*." In a later letter he assures her, "the only *unity* (a sad word with Poets & Critics) in my ideas, is Clarinda" (*Letters*, I, 207). And, revealingly, he stresses "Fiction, you know, is the native region of Poetry" (*Letters*, I, 181). It is significant that twelve days earlier in a letter to Mrs. Dunlop he had slightly quoted from *As You Like It* the lines, "All the world's a stage, / and all the men and women merely players" (Act II, sc. 7—*Letters*, I, 175). The comment to Mrs. McLehose may well have been inspired by this exchange in Act III, sc. 3, of Shakespeare's comedy:

---

<sup>6</sup>James Mackay, *R B: A Biography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1992), p.371. Henceforth Mackay.

- Audrey: I do not know what poetical is: Is it honest in deed, and word? Is it a true thing?
- Touchstone: No, truly; for the truest poetry is the most feigning and lovers are given to poetry; and what they swear in poetry, may be said, as lovers, they do feign.

Many of Burns's letters, including those to women (perhaps *especially* those to women) are masterpieces of rhetoric, the artifice that conceals artificiality, the subtly disguised means of shaping reader-response. Schooled by Murdoch in the arts of rhetoric, he manifested the legacy of his tutor's main text-book, Arthur Masson's *Collection of English Prose and Verse*, 2nd edition (1767), which included extracts from Mrs. Elizabeth Rowe's *Letters Moral and Entertaining*. Like the early letters to former school-mates, William Niven and Thomas Orr, the amorous letters, conjecturally dated 1781 and addressed to Alison Begbie, reflect his education. They clearly anticipate the Sylvander letters in the use of the modesty and impossibility topoi and in rhetorical strategies such as the stressing of the writer's honesty, as here:

There is one rule which I have hitherto practised, and which I shall invariably keep with you, and that is, honestly to tell you the plain truth. There is something so mean and unmanly in the arts of dissimulation and falsehood, that I am surprised they can be acted by any one in so noble, so generous a passion as virtuous love (*Letters*, I, 12).

Later, Burns candidly acknowledged the importance of rhetoric in his dealings with the fair sex. In a letter to Margaret Chalmers, 21 October 1787, he asserts at the outset, "I hate dissimulation in the language of the heart" (*Letters*, I, 164); a page later we find, "I used all my eloquence, all the persuasive flourishes of the hand, and heart-melting modulation of periods in my power, to urge her [Miss Nimmo] out to Hervieston, but all in vain. My rhetoric seems quite to have lost its effect on the lovely half of mankind" (*Letters*, I, 165). Within six weeks the letters to Clarinda would prove otherwise.

In her second letter Clarinda chided him for writing "in a romantic style," reminding him, "she whom you address is a married woman" (*Clarinda*, p. 87). In his reply (*Letters*, I, 185-6) he feigns astonishment; offers a vivid metaphor on his "handsome troop of Follies," of which this is not one; loftily defends the nobility of concern for someone in her situation; feigns casualness (he has written because he had nothing else to do; she responded with a poem using these words as its refrain); invites her to find fault with his letter; demeans it as "a chaos of nonsense."

His next letter (*Letters*, I, 188-9) is his first as Sylvander. "I do love you if possible still better for having so fine a taste and turn for Poesy," he writes, only to apologize immediately for the word "love" and invite her to erase it "and put esteem, respect, or any other tame Dutch expression you please in its

place." This then allows him to hold forth in defense of love. Telling her, "I like the idea of Arcadian names in a commerce of this kind," he assures her, "I don't know if you have a just idea of my character, but I wish you to see me *as I am*." As Sylvander, Burns then projects his favorite self-images: "I am, as most people of my trade are, a strange will o' wisp being; the victim too frequently of much imprudence and many follies. My great constituent elements are Pride and Passion."

In Masson's *Collection* Burns had early experience of pastoral dialogue. Stewart's edition of Burns's letters to Clarinda cites parallels with Swift and Vanessa,<sup>7</sup> while James Mackay has offered Pope's letters to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu as a further influence (Mackay, p. 392). Sterne is an equally likely model: *Letters from Yorick to Eliza* (10 letters to Mrs. Draper) appeared in 1773, reprinted 1775; Lydia de Medalle published 114 of her father's letters with a memoir in 1775; and Sterne's *Works*, published 1780, included 126 of his letters. When Burns writes to Clarinda, "I see you laughing at my fairy fancies, and calling me a voluptuous Mahometan" (*Letters*, I, 214), there are echoes of Sterne's writing to Eliza as "her Bramin."<sup>8</sup> When in amorous vein, Burns made full use of the Sternean precedent: of the song, "Craigieburnwood," Burns later wrote to George Thomson:

The Lady on whom it was made, is one of the finest women in Scotland; and in fact (*entre nous*) is in a manner to me what Sterne's Eliza was to him—a Mistress, or Friend, or what you will, in the guileless simplicity of Platonic love (*Letters*, II, 315).

This lady was not Clarinda but Jean Lorimer, the "Chloris" celebrated in various songs. Burns was never sparing in his utilization of a fertile inspirational source.

Yet another example was almost certainly provided by his beloved Fergusson who, as Damon, engaged in pastoral dialogue with an anonymous married lady, Stella by pseudonym. Matthew P. McDiarmid commented,

Fergusson's contribution to the pale recitative of their loves is no more inspiring than his pupil's, but it should be noticed here if only to support the lady in her defiance of what she calls elsewhere 'Suspicion's green eye.'<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>*Letters Addressed to Clarinda, by Robert Burns, the Ayrshire Poet, Never before Published* (Glasgow, 1801), p. iv.

<sup>8</sup>Laurence Sterne, *Letters*, ed. Lewis P. Curtis (Oxford, 1935), p. 299.

<sup>9</sup>*The Poems of Robert Fergusson*, ed. Matthew P. McDiarmid, Scottish Text Society, Third Series, 21, 14 (1954-56), I, 31-32. Henceforth Fergusson.

Drawing comparison with the Sylvander-Clarinda correspondence, McDiarmid astutely remarks, "Both episodes seem to illustrate Wilde's observation that life does its best to imitate literature, and not always the best literature."

Sylvander is certainly skilled in the strategies of amorous dalliance. To a letter in which Clarinda has stated she has faults he replies, "That you have faults, my Clarinda, I never doubted; but I knew not where they existed, and Saturday night made me more in the dark than ever" (*Letters*, I, 207-8). This is the cue to embark on a lengthy eulogy.

Beginning another letter with a catalogue of her virtues, he then speculates, using the modesty topos, as to why the "coquettish goddess," Fortune, should have introduced her to "a poor hairum-scairum Poet" (*Letters*, I, 217). Or, to take another example of agility in the literary love-games: Clarinda, troubled by conscience and a strong religious sense, sounds this warning note:

I do not blame you, but myself. I must not see you on Saturday, unless I can depend on myself acting otherwise. Delicacy, you know, it was which won me to you at once: take care you do not loosen the dearest, most sacred tie that unites us.

She ends, "Happy Sylvander! that can be attached to Heaven and Clarinda together. Alas! I feel I cannot serve two masters. God pity me!!" (Clarinda, p. 164). Having written this on Thursday forenoon, and failing to hear from him in the course of the same day, she then adds several pages beginning,

Why have I not heard from you, Sylvander? Everything in nature seems tinged with gloom to-day. Ah! Sylvander \_

The heart's ay the part ay  
That makes us right or wrang!

How forcibly have these lines recurred to my thoughts!

How revealing, and how strategic, it is that, in the absence of a letter from him, she can find the appropriate lines from his verses (in this case, "Epistle to Davie, a Brother Poet").

Sylvander then responds: "Clarinda, my life, you have wounded my soul"; acknowledges that while he may have offended against the letter of Decorum's law, he abided by "the spirit of her strictest statute"; assures her, "I have marked the line of conduct, a line I know exactly to your taste, and which I will inviolably keep"; then diverts his energies into verbal gesturing: "O Love and Sensibility, ye have conspired against My Peace! I love to madness, and I feel to torture" (*Letters*, I, 218-9). Shrewdly, Robert Louis Stevenson observed,

The design may be that of an Old Hawk, but the style is more suggestive of a Bird of Paradise. It is sometimes hard to fancy they are not gravely making fun of each other as they write.<sup>10]</sup>

Probably the most extreme manifestation of the posturing attendant on the communion of sensibility is the letter in which Burns contrives to blot the page with his suitably large tear in his letter beginning, "You talk of weeping Clarinda; some involuntary drops wet your lines as I read them" (*Letters*, I, 205).<sup>11</sup>

For her part, Clarinda shows herself far from guileless. In her first letter (Clarinda, p. 84) she deprecates her poetry, inducing the desired reaction from him: "Your lines, I maintain it, are Poetry, and good Poetry" (*Letters*, I, 184). On 3 January 1788 she writes of her loneliness at the festive season, contradicting her statement of 28 December that she was going to the country until 1 January. Informing him that she is off again on 7 January, she asks, "Do you think that you could venture this length in a coach, without hurting yourself?... I long for a conversation with you, and lameness of body won't hinder that" (Clarinda, p. 107). Then, as if aware of having revealed her hand: "'Tis really curious—so much *fun* passing between two persons who saw one another only *once!*"; and, teasingly, she signs herself "A. M." Her letters indicate her mastery of the vocabulary and the tactics of amorous exchange: for instance, she describes herself in the third person as "too often the victim of sensibility" (Clarinda, p. 142). Models of sensibility were to be found in the novels that were Burns's "bosom favorites" (*Letters*, I, 141), *Tristram Shandy* and *The Man of Feeling*. From Sterne, primarily, comes the notion of the victimization of sensibility by hostile Providence. In Shandean mode Burns alludes to "that evil Planet which has almost all my life shed its baleful rays on my devoted head" (*Letters*, I, 203); and in his next letter he might be speaking for Tristram's Uncle Toby (whom Mrs. McLehose has mentioned in only her second letter, having cited Yorick in her first): "mine is the Religion of the bosom" (*Letters*, I, 204).

Sylvander and Clarinda share the agonies of love. The price of sensibility is suffering. "Nature has been too kind to you for your happiness," writes Sylvander. "Your Delicacy, your Sensibility. O why should such glorious qualifications be the fruitful source of woe! You have 'murder'd sleep' to me last night" (*Letters*, I, 222); after *Macbeth*, Act II, scene 2, next up is Addison's *Cato*, Act V, scene 4. If they are not sharing each other's woe they

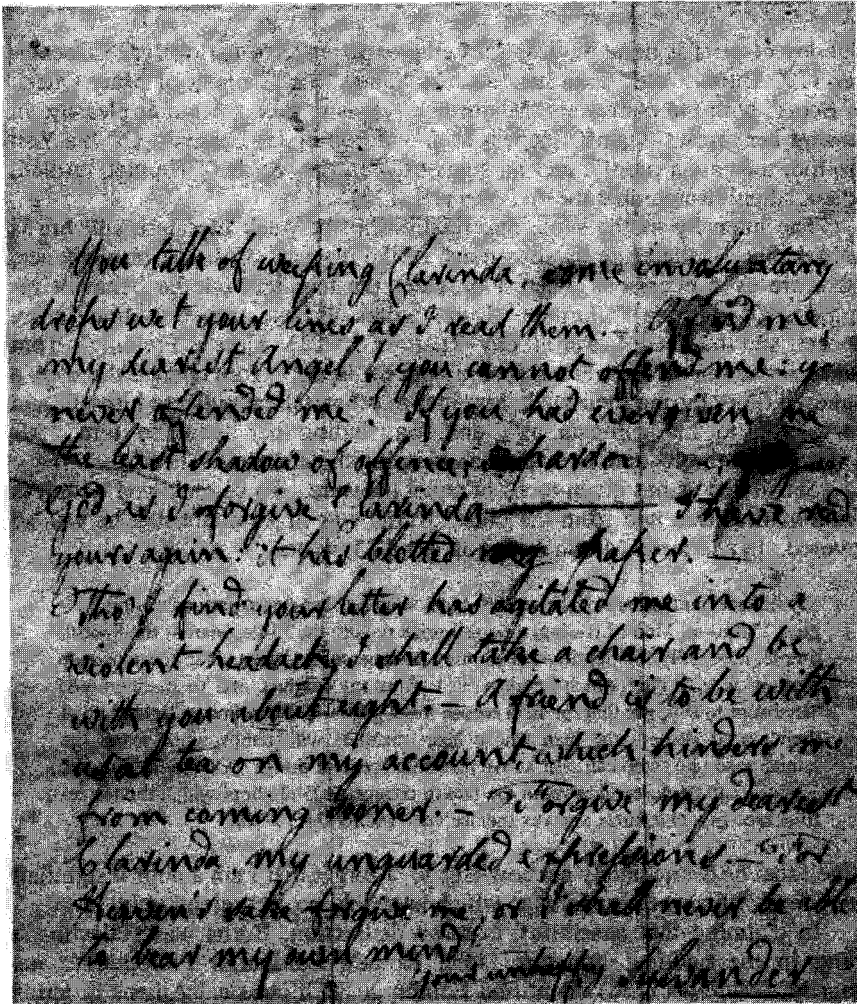
---

<sup>10</sup>Robert Louis Stevenson, "Some Aspects of Robert Burns" in *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (London, 1920), p. 47. Henceforth Stevenson.

<sup>11</sup>The manuscript is in the private collection of G. Ross Roy, to whom I am grateful for access to it.



are empathizing with the suffering of literary or historical figures. Clarinda testifies,



You talk of weeping Clarinda, some involuntary  
drops wet your lines as I read them. - Oh! and me,  
my dearest Angel! you cannot offend me: you  
never offend me! If you had ever given me  
the least shadow of offence, I pardon  
you, as I forgive Clarinda. - I have read  
yours again! it has blotted my paper. -  
Tho' I find your letter has agitated me into a  
violent headache, I shall take a chair and be  
with you about eight. - A friend is to be with  
us at tea on my account, which hinders me  
from coming sooner. - I forgive my dearest  
Clarinda, my unguarded expressions. - We  
Heaven's sake forgive me, or I shall never be able  
to bear my own mind.  
your unhappy Sylvander

Jan. 12. 1788. - Paderborn.

All my life I loved the unfortunate, and ever will. Did you ever read Fielding's *Amelia*? If you have not, I beg you would. There are scenes in it, tender, domestic scenes, which I have read over and over, with feelings too delightful to describe (Clarinda, p. 128).

The joy of grief is none the less for being experienced vicariously. In December 1791 Burns would send his "dearest Nancy" his "Lament of Mary Queen of Scots" with the comment, "Misfortune seems to take a peculiar pleasure in darting her arrows against 'Honest Men and bony [*sic*] Lasses'. Of this You are too, too just a proof"; and he signs off, "In the words of Hamlet, 'Adieu, adieu, adieu! Remember me'" (*Letters*, II, 123).

The intensity of the symbiotic relationship between literature and life is remarkable. If literature inspires much of the material of the correspondence, there are even occasions when it provides the template for the behavior recorded. Of his song, "Clarinda," Burns writes, "I have carried it about in my pocket, and thumbed it over all day" (*Letters*, I, 221). Here is Fielding's Tom Jones's reaction on recovering Sophia's pocket-book: "Tom opened the book a hundred times during their walk, kissed it as often, talked much to himself, and very little to his companions"; and, on finding her letter to him, "Mr Jones...spent three hours in reading and kissing the aforesaid letter."<sup>12</sup>

Sensibility is not given to all in equal measure. To be endowed with it is to be marked out, and from the outset Burns was in no doubt that he was so favored. In a letter to Murdoch, Burns, aged 23, wrote,

My favorite authors are of the sentml. kind, such as Shenstone, particularly his Elegies, Thomson, Man of feeling, a book I prize next to the Bible, Man of the World, Sterne, especially his Sentimental journey, Mcpherson's Ossian, & c. these are the glorious models after which I endeavour to form my conduct, and 'tis incongruous, 'tis absurd to suppose that the man whose mind glows with sentiments lighted up at their sacred flame - the man whose heart distends with benevolence to all the human race - he 'who can soar above this little scene of things' [Thomson, *Autumn*, l. 964] - can he descend to mind the paulty concerns [*sic*] about which the terrae-filial race fret, and fume, and vex themselves? (*Letters*, I, 17-18).

Albeit that he immediately acknowledges, "I forget that I am a poor insignificant [*sic*] devil," this was a self-image which he would project relentlessly.

In claiming that sensibility bestows distinction, Burns was reflecting a trend in the national literature. John Home's Edinburgh Prologue to his tragedy, *Douglas* (1756), identified Edinburgh with classical Athens in terms of culture, heroism, and sensibility, and enjoined the audience, "This night our

---

<sup>12</sup>Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones*, ed. R. P. C. Mutter (Harmondsworth, 1966), Bk. XII, ch. 4, p. 563; Bk., XVI, ch. 5, p. 756. Henceforth Fielding.

scenes no common tear demand,/ He comes, the hero of your native land!"<sup>13</sup> With Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* (1761) Scotland strengthened its claim to be home of the descendants of the Noble Savage (thus apparently solving the problem of post-Union national identity). Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771) demonstrates in the self-conscious benevolist Harley the satisfaction derived from contemplating oneself in the role of benefactor. Here is the most extreme expression of the belief, deriving from Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), that, since the capacity for feeling is an index to moral worth, it is natural to display one's feelings.

The problem for both personal and national self-images is that the elitist nature of sensibility is at odds with the egalitarianism in which Burns and Scots take such pride. Sylvander's distinction between "coarse minds" and "people of nice sensibility and generous minds" (*Letters*, I, 197) sits ill alongside "A Man's a Man for a' that"; likewise Clarinda's claim, "Few, extremely few, are formed to relish such refined enjoyment" (Clarinda, p. 141); or Sylvander's wish, "O for a little of the cart-horse part of human nature" (*Letters*, I, 203). Yet, eleven days later, Sylvander refers to them as "a Poet and Poetess of Nature's making, two of Nature's noblest productions," and advises, "Attempt not, ye coarser stuff of Human-nature, profanely to measure enjoyment ye never can know" (*Letters*, I, 211). One detects a separation of the mental and spiritual from the corporeal and sensual, the idealized from the real; and the high-flown claims for their communion of sensibility sound suspiciously like an attempt to compensate for the lack of physical consummation.

Consummation of a kind *was* achieved. "Through all else," wrote DeLancey Ferguson, "runs the unifying thread of his devotion to his 'Muse'" (*Letters*, I, liii). Appropriately, consummation occurs within the hallowed walls of Poetry. If John Donne and his mistress are united in the mingled blood of the flea that has bitten them both, Burns and Nancy achieve a union of a kind in their poems. Her "Talk not of Love! it gives me pain" (Clarinda, p. 106) prompts him to enthuse, "I have copied [your verses] in among some of my own most valued pieces, which I keep sacred for my own use. Do, let me have a few now and then" (*Letters*, I, 194). While "the latter half of the first stanza would have been worthy of Sappho; I am in raptures with it" (*Letters*, I, 196)—the lines are "He bound me with an iron chain,/And sunk me deep in woe"—he ventures to replace an entire line in stanza 2, to substitute an entirely new third stanza (perhaps he didn't like "Virtue our intercourse direct"?), and to invite her to collaborate on a fourth. So their lines commingled be. Her "To a Blackbird Singing on a Tree" elicits this response: "I am just going to take your Blackbird, the sweetest, I am sure, that ever sung, and prune its wings a little" (*Letters*, I, 215). In fact he revised it and added four lines. Ironically, it

---

<sup>13</sup>John Home, *Douglas*, ed. Gerald D. Parker (Edinburgh, 1972), p. 21.

was the occasion of their parting in December 1791 that produced the only poetry of real note to emerge from the affair—the song, “Ae Fond Kiss.” Walter Scott is claimed to have said of the fourth stanza that it contains “the essence of a thousand love songs”:

Had we never lov'd sae kindly,  
 Had we never lov'd sae blindly!  
 Never met—or never parted,  
 We had ne'er been broken-hearted.<sup>14</sup>

Revealingly, Burns alluded to his fathering poems (*Letters*, I, 164), and references to offspring and poems are often juxtaposed. “I look on your little Namesake [Francis Wallace Burns] to be my chef d’oeuvre in that species of manufacture, as I look on ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ to be my standard performance in the Poetical line” (*Letters*, II, 83), he would later inform Mrs. Dunlop. Creation and procreation function in tandem: he fathers poems and songs by Nancy McLehose and a son by her maid, Jenny Clow. Clarinda wrote on 24 January 1788, “My servant (who is a good soul) will deliver you this...I have ordered her to call then, in case you have ought to say to Clarinda today” (Clarinda, pp. 166-7). Jenny proved to be a very good soul, and Burns did say something, albeit indirectly. As James Mackay has noted, “If [Burns] could not have Nancy McLehose he would have to work off his pent-up emotions somewhere else. Young Jenny, a waif-like innocent, might serve his immediate needs” (Mackay, p. 390). Yet again, Burns’s reading provides an analogy: aroused by thinking of his beloved Sophia, Tom Jones relieves his pent-up emotions by leaping into the bushes with the first woman he meets, who happens to be Molly Seagrim, fresh (or not so fresh) from a day’s dung-spreading in the fields (Fielding, V, ch. 10, pp. 239-40).

So...what are we to make of the whole affair? One can see why Nancy McLehose attracted Burns: a young woman, a few months his elder, like him vulnerable in Edinburgh, still married but available on paper for a communion of sensibilities via the common ground of Poetry. This was a perfect opportunity for him to indulge further in projection of self-images—in this case that of the man of feeling in love. It seems likely that, after the month’s separation in which he amused himself via the correspondence, he did become smitten, though not to the same extent as she. Stevenson commented wryly, “though [Burns] could share the symptoms...he had never shared the disease” (Stevenson, p. 47).

Such is the range of reference and the mastery of rhetoric (by Burns in particular) that there is a case for reading the letters as literature, not biogra-

---

<sup>14</sup>*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), II, 592.

phy, not life. In Sylvander, Burns appears as a mentality created by his reading. The one thing Burns is true to is his consummate literariness. Here we find a personality constructed out of literature which is, in effect, a barrier to access to the man. Or perhaps Burns the man became the sum of his personae?

The trouble is that the ramifications of the affair have real-life implications. Can we really excuse the less noble aspects of Burns's conduct by citing poetic license? Was he playing with her emotions? When Nancy wrote that Jenny was near to death was it appropriate that he resume the flirtatious tone in his reply (*Letters*, II, 122)? How can one justify this maligning of Jean Armour—again pregnant—to Clarinda:

Now for a little news that will please you. I, this morning as I came home, called for a certain woman. I am disgusted with her; I cannot endure her! I, while my heart smote me for the prophanity, tried to compare her with my Clarinda: 'twas setting the expiring glimmer of a farthing taper beside the cloudless glory of the meridian sun. Here was tasteless insipidity, vulgarity of soul, and mercenary fawning; there, polished good sense, heaven-born genius, and the most generous, the most delicate, the most tender Passion (*Letters*, I, 244).

Perhaps it is explicable as an attempt to offer Clarinda some consolation, given that he is returning to Jean (despite his assurance, "I have done with her, and she with me"). Explicable perhaps, but beyond justification. And what are we to make of the fact that to the Glenriddell copy of his penultimate letter to Clarinda, in which he again raved amorously, he added, "I need scarcely remark that the foregoing was the fustian rant of enthusiastic youth" (*Letters*, II, 190)?

Perhaps the penultimate words should be Burns's. Of the song, "The Banks of Devon," he commented, "What is not always the case with compliments to ladies, it is not only *sincere* but *just*" (*Letters*, I, 179). With all writers, but especially so with Burns, given his iconic status and popular appeal, it is crucial to distinguish sincerity of text from truth in terms of the lived reality.

*University of Strathclyde  
Emeritus*

Grants from the British Academy and the Research Committee of the Department of English Studies, University of Strathclyde, enabled me to present the nucleus of this paper at the conference entitled "Robert Burns in his time and after," celebrating fifteen years of the G. Ross Roy Collection, at the University of South Carolina, 20-21 August 2004. I acknowledge with gratitude the invaluable assistance of staff of Special Collections, The Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina.