Robert Fergusson's Auld Reikie and the Poetry of City Life

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Robert Fergusson's *Auld Reikie*

and the Poetry of City Life

The most famous poem in British literature devoted wholly to description of city life is John Gay's *Trivia*. But this fascinating work stands by no means alone; rather it is representative of a vast body of little-known poetry in this genre, extending from the time of Chaucer to the present. William H. Irving in the final chapter of *John Gay's London* (Cambridge, Mass., 1928), an encyclopedic and eminently useful study of this kind of verse, notes that prior to the Romantic movement which brought more personal, humanitarian, symbolic, or even mystic poetic interpretations of the city into fashion, the city poetry of earlier eras is marked by more or less objective descriptive technique: the poet observes the life of the city and describes it for purposes of eulogy (as in Dunbar's *The Flour of Cities All*, or in passages of Spenser or Herrick); or for purposes of satire and exposure of folly (as in Swift's savage little sketches of street life); or for the sheer fun and fascination of it all (as in *Trivia*). A long-neglected work in this earlier tradition and a direct successor of *Trivia* chiefly concerns us here. This is *Auld Reikie*, an extraordinary portrait of life in eighteenth-century Edinburgh by the brilliant Scots poet Robert Fergusson (1750-1774). Fergusson, whose career was tragically cut short in the first flush of his genius by death in the Edinburgh mad-house at the age of twenty-four, is remembered as the author of some thirty Scots poems (mostly graphic sketches of life in his beloved city) which were destined, a decade later, to have a profound and decisive impact upon the creative imagination of Burns. *Auld Reikie*, a poem of 368 lines in tetrameter couplets, is Fergusson's longest and most ambitious treatment of the Edinburgh scene, and deserves to be recognized as one of the finest poetic renderings of city life in our literature.

Matthew P. McDermid, in the notes to his splendid edition of Fergusson, declares curtly of *Auld Reikie* that “the main suggestion for the poem came from Gay's *Trivia.*”¹ This statement is unquestionably accu-

¹ *The Poems of Robert Fergusson*, Scottish Text Soc., 3rd Ser. 4 (Edinburgh, 1916), II, 276. All quotations from Fergusson are taken from this definitive edition; for the text of *Auld Reikie* see II, 109-120.
rate, since it is clear that Ferguson was thoroughly familiar with the work of Gay\(^2\) (and also with that of Dryden, Pope, and Swift), and that in *Auld Reikie* he was obviously trying to do for Edinburgh something on the order of what Gay had already done for London. But *Auld Reikie* bears the stamp of Ferguson's distinctive originality, and is anything but a servile imitation of Gay; in fact, the differences between the two poems are more striking than their similarities. At this point, then, a brief comparison of the two, in structure, subject matter and style, will help to elucidate the characteristics of both poems, before we turn to a more detailed analysis of *Auld Reikie*.

Gay evidently conceived *Trivia* partly as a sort of "town-georgic" adapted from the Virgilian rural georgics, and partly as a burlesque on the versified "Arts," the habit, very popular in his day, of composing pompous poetic treatises on the most mundane of arts.\(^3\) Accordingly, he provides his poem with a subtitle, "The Art of Walking the Streets of London," though Gay's original satiric motive seems soon to have become subordinated to his zest for his subject matter. The idea of burlesquing the "Arts" poems, however, supplied Gay with a convenient framework for his material which is neatly organized in three books: "Of the Implements for Walking the streets, and Signs of the weather"; "Of Walking the Streets, by Day"; and "Of Walking the Streets, by Night." Within this overall scheme, the structure of *Trivia* is firm and satisfying.

*Auld Reikie*, on the other hand, suffers from a certain looseness of structure. Dealing with the same kind of miscellaneous, kaleidoscopic materials, Ferguson's poem lacks an overall structural bond such as Gay's street-walking device which gives to *Trivia* a logical pattern. Ferguson simply shifts his focus from one vignette to another without reference to any single scheme, although it is possible that a more definite structure would have emerged had Ferguson completed his original conception. The fact is that *Auld Reikie*, as we have it, is essentially a fragment. The first 328 lines were published separately in 1773, "for the author," in a slim pamphlet, with a dedication to Sir William Forbes in some of the copies, and the subtitle "Canto I" which suggests that further installments were to follow. The original design was never completed, however, presumably because Ferguson met with no encouragement from Sir William Forbes. After publication of his first "Canto," the poet merely added forty lines

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\(^1\) For evidence of Ferguson's admiration of Gay, see his poem *To Sir John Fielding, on his Attempt to suppress the Beggar's Opera* in Poems, II, 201-203.

\(^2\) Among the more pedestrian of the titles cited by Irving (pp. 62-87) are John Durant Breval's *The Art of Dress* (1717), Robert Dodley's *The Art of Preaching* (1718), an anonymous *Art of Stock-Jobbing* (1746), and *The Art of Making Hearty-Pudding* by Dr. Wm. King (1663-1712).
to round off the work, and it was reprinted in its final form five years after Ferguson’s death in the 1779 edition of his poems. Hence the total design for the poem, if Ferguson had one, remains unknown.

Nevertheless, this apparent lack of an overall unifying structure in the poem as we have it does not mean that *Auld Reikie* is altogether without organization. Actually, the first half of the poem, after the introduction, is neatly divided into morning, afternoon, and night scenes (lines 23-58, 59-66, and 67-194 respectively). This arrangement was no doubt suggested to Ferguson by Gay’s separation of day from night scenes in Books II and III of *Trivis*. But at line 194 there is an abrupt break in the smooth development of *Auld Reikie* as Ferguson abandons his morning-afternoon-night scheme, and turns to treatment of other aspects of Edinburgh life which do not fit into this scheme. The second half of the poem falls into five sections on the following topics: contrasted description of the attractive vegetable market and the repulsive meat market (lines 195-230); Sunday in Edinburgh (lines 231-270); Holyrood House and poverty (lines 271-312); tribute to the late George Drummond as contrasted to the present corrupt civic leaders (lines 313-350); and a concluding eulogy on Edinburgh (lines 351-368). It should be noted, however, that the three central sections of this second half of the poem—on Edinburgh Sundays, on Holyrood and poverty, and on the city government—are ingeniously linked, one developing naturally out of the other. The section on the markets is the weakest part of the poem from a structural point of view, being more or less unrelated to what precedes and follows it. Thus, although *Auld Reikie* contains long passages which are carefully organized around related themes and linked by smooth transitions, the poem as a whole suffers from lack of an overall structural principle.

As for subject matter, *Trivis* and *Auld Reikie* show inevitable similarities. Many of the characters to be encountered in the streets of any eighteenth-century city are treated in both poems—bullies, fops (“macaronis” in Ferguson), housemaids, chairmen, link-boys (“caddies” in Ferguson), whores, and so forth. One brief passage on funerals in *Auld Reikie* (lines 163 ff.) is clearly modelled on *Trivis* (III, lines 255ff.). Apart from this instance of direct indebtedness and one or two other minor hints, however, Ferguson’s treatment of the same characters or scenes is entirely independent of Gay’s in detail and phrasing. In general, it may be said that the far greater length of *Trivis* (over three times that of *Auld Reikie*) enables Gay to present more wealth of cumulative illustration and detail than is possible to Ferguson within the scope of *Auld Reikie*. At the same time, Gay’s use of the street-walking device limits
his material mainly to outdoor scenes, whereas Fergusson is able to move indoors to portray the lively tavern life of old Edinburgh. For this reason, Fergusson's poem is more comprehensive than Gay's in that it attempts to recreate the whole life of the city, not just its street scenes. Finally, whereas Gay includes several extended and detailed scenes, a large proportion of his poem is taken up with brief, undeveloped illustrations or suggestive glimpses. Fergusson, on the other hand, within his narrower space tends to concentrate upon a few sharply realized vignettes.

More striking than the differences in structure and subject matter, however, are the differences in the style of these two poems. Gay chose the mock-heroic technique for *Trivia* probably for two reasons: the mock-heroic was then very much in vogue; furthermore, this style enabled his neo-classical sense of decorum to remain inviolate. He could thus render poetically a subject which might otherwise seem to his fashionable readers intrinsically unpoetic and unpleasant. For purposes of outright satire or burlesque the mock-heroic style, especially in the hands of a master like Pope (in *The Rape of the Lock*, for example), may do wonderfully well. But *Trivia*, though it does contain satiric elements, is not basically a satire. The poem is too long and too miscellaneous in subject matter, and Gay's attitudes toward his material are too varied for a consistent mock-heroic technique. As a result there is a certain sense of strain in *Trivia*, or at least so it seems to modern readers accustomed to realistic treatment of city themes. But the delicately artificial quality of his style is doubtless part of Gay's conscious purpose. Through copious use of classical allusion, myth, and pseudo-myth, together with Latinate diction and euphemisms, Gay deliberately softens the harsh realities of his subject matter and achieves a gently ironic, urbane, and pleasantly humorous effect.

Fergusson's aim in *Auld Reikie* is very different. Though he brings in touches of mock heroic here and there in comic or satiric passages, for the most part Fergusson employs a far more direct and unvarnished style to render his brilliant vision of eighteenth-century Edinburgh. The contrast can be illustrated by the fact that Fergusson introduces only eight classical allusions and eight personified abstractions, whereas Gay's poem is filled with scores of these devices. Moreover, Fergusson employs a stylistic method based upon dramatic contrast, thereby achieving a style which is wholly his own and which may be unique in the poetry of city life. A detailed examination of this style will be given later. In summary, it may be said that although *Auld Reikie* was clearly suggested

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by Trivia and in several ways resembles it (being like Trivia neither wholly satiric nor wholly eulogistic in point of view), Auld Reikie is distinguished from it and from other city poems chiefly by the method of dramatic contrast which Ferguson uses. And this method is perfectly suited to the unique city which Ferguson celebrates—Edinburgh.

In Ferguson's day Edinburgh was a relatively small city, squeezed within ancient walls with open country on all sides. The overflow of population to the New Town was just barely beginning in 1773; the Old Town, dramatically perched upon its narrow ridge from the Castle to Holyrood House was still the focal center of Edinburgh life. The old capital was an incredibly crowded place, a gray stone jungle of tall tenements (called "lands") huddled on either side of a single mile-long street, penetrated by a fantastic network of narrow, evil smelling closes and wynds which gave access to the High Street. So cramped were housing conditions, whole families often living in single rooms, that most of the business and social life of the city had to be carried on in the High Street or in the many taverns. Tavern life was, in fact, the heart and soul of eighteenth-century Edinburgh. Despite the filth and squalor, the city had a strange and impressive kind of beauty which coexisted with this ugliness. No doubt its dramatic location on a narrow ridge with magnificent views of high hills nearby and the Firth of Forth glistening in the distance, has much to do with this impression. At any rate, this unique juxtaposition of beauty and squalor has always fascinated visitors to Edinburgh, and continues to do so. Unfortunately much of the Old Town, the ancient closes of the High Street and the Cowgate, has degenerated since Ferguson's time into something of a slum. This fact is graphically expressed by the contemporary Scots poet Maurice Lindsay in his poem entitled *In the High Street, Edinburgh*:

Warriston's Close, Halkerston's Wynd!
Crookit and cramped, dim, drauky, blind . . . .
Fega, and you're gey romantic places
for thae wha ainly pree your faces!

In Ferguson's day, however, the Old Town was anything but a backwater. It was a dynamic community, bustling with energy, full of stirring life. Unlike London with its sprawling suburbs, Edinburgh was a compact and homogeneous kind of community in which all classes lived together in very close contact. Its intellectual as well as its social life was lively and generally uninhibited. Smollett in *Humphrey Clinker* characterized it as "a hotbed of genius." This, then, was the city full

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of bewildering contradictions which Ferguson attempted to recreate in all of its contrasting moods, its robust and dissipated life, in *Auld Reikie*.

In a poem of this length it is, of course, manifestly impractical to attempt to treat all of its noteworthy passages and lines in detail, but a few typical examples will perhaps be enough to illustrate the important features of Ferguson's style and method. He opens, appropriately, with a rousing salute to Edinburgh:

*Auld Reikie,* *wive o' ilk Town*
That Scotland kens beneath the Moon;
Where couthy Chieft as E'en'ing meet
Their bizziness Craigs and Mous to weet;
And blythly gar auld Care gae bye
Wi' blinkit and wi' bleering Eye . . .

These lines are notable for their warmth and vigor, expressing as they do Ferguson's hearty and unchanging love for the old gray city. It is significant that he begins his poem with this reference to drinking, always a dominant feature of Edinburgh social life in his time.

The next section of the poem, on morning scenes, begins with a splendid couplet portraying sunrise over the city, followed by lines describing the early activities of housemaids and the foul morning smells of sewage (which Ferguson ironically refers to as *Edina's Rosset*'). This passage is photographic in its terse and impressive realism, as the following extracts will show:

Now Morn, with bonny Purpie-smiles,
Kisses the Air-cock o' St. Giles;
Rakin their Ein, the Servant Lasses
Early begin their Lies and Clashes . . .

On Stair wi' Tub, or Pat in hand
The Barefoot Housemaids loo' to stand,
That antrin Fock may ken how Snell
Auld Reikie will at Morning Smell.

(lines 23-6, 33-6)

This passage is typical of Ferguson's comprehensive realism: he does not allow his profound affection for Auld Reikie to blind him to the city's more obnoxious characteristics; while, at the same time, his description of the foul smells and of the sordid side of Edinburgh social life and customs is softened and modified by his emotional response to the strange and unique beauty of this grimy old city, a beauty which coexists with its squalor. It is this balance, this double vision which distinguishes Ferguson's style in *Auld Reikie* from that of Swift in his fiercely realistic satires on London life. Ferguson perceives that the unique atmosphere, the essence of old Edinburgh, lies in the startling and
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unusual contrasts, both physical and social, which the city presents; and he recreates that atmosphere, with remarkable precision and intimacy, in terms of these contrasts. This double vision, reconciling beauty and ugliness, and unifying thought and feeling so that each modifies the other, is ever present in Auld Reikie and is the basic artistic principle of the poem. This principle is clearly discernible in the lines quoted above, where Ferguson, in a single charming couplet, suggests the fragile, fleeting loveliness of sunrise over the ancient spire of St. Giles, and follows it immediately with lines on the slovenly housemaids and the nauseous morning smells of the city.

In his fifth verse paragraph Ferguson makes a direct and trenchant attack on the vanity and small-mindedness of the idle “wits” of the town who gather at the Luckenbooths to observe the passing crowds and sneer at all they see. The passage is worth noting for its biting sarcastic force:

Now Steadfast Critics, senseless Fools,
Censure their Aim, and Praise their Rules,
In Luckenbooths, wi’ glistening Eye,
Their Neighbours sma’est Faults descry:  
  smallest
If any Loan should dander there,
Of awkward Gate, and foreign Air,
They trace his Steps, till they can tell
His Pedigree as weil’s himself.

(lines 51-8)

Fergusson, it will be seen, has no sympathy with sham, affectation, false pride, or meanness of soul; and these are the qualities which become the objects of his severest satire whenever he observes them, as in these lines and elsewhere in the poem.

The section on Edinburgh night life is perhaps the most brilliantly executed part of the poem. Here Ferguson describes in sharp, vivid detail typical characters and scenes of the city, when “Night, that’s cumzied [invented] chief for Fun,” begins. Out of doors in the narrow streets the “cadies” and Highland chairmen go about their respective businesses, the latter working hand in glove with prostitutes. Next we are shown the belligerent ramble of a drunken “Bruiser” or puigleis, in a passage which is a brilliant example of Ferguson’s descriptive method, of his balanced realism. It begins as follows:

Frae joyous Tavern, reeling drunk,
Wi’ serry Phizz, and Ein half sunk,
Behide the Bruiser, Fae to a’
That in the reek o’ Gardies fa’:
  faces; eyes
  behold; foe
  reach; arms; fall

*A narrow range of buildings which once stood in the middle of the High Street near St. Giles Cathedral.
In these lines Fergusson portrays the “Bruiser” from a satiric point of view, emphasizing the coarseness of the man, his crude, primitive instincts and blind brutality. The picture of him being egged on to “Glory” by the “feckless Race” of cowardly toadies is disgusting enough in itself. But Fergusson does not allow this feeling of disgust at the bruiser to develop any further in the reader’s mind. He immediately modifies it in the very next couplet, and places the bruiser’s behavior in another light:

This is a brilliant and sensitive stroke; Fergusson, in this single couplet, controls his reader’s reaction to the whole scene, and reveals his own attitude toward and judgment on the conduct of both bruiser and macaronies. The point that Fergusson is making here is that whereas the behavior of the bruiser is far from admirable, that of the macaronies who have goaded him on is a great deal worse. The bruiser is an ignorant and barbarous creature, but at least he has courage and a certain sense of honor; he is not contemptible. The macaronies, on the other hand, who take advantage of the bruiser and leave him in the lurch, have neither courage nor honor and are wholly despicable. Fergusson exposes this “feckless Race” of parasites and frauds, while at the same time he elicits sympathy for the bruiser. The passage is remarkable both for the moral judgment it implies and for the brilliant way in which Fergusson modifies and changes our original impression of the bruiser by contrasting his conduct with that of the macaronies. Fergusson’s realism here, as elsewhere, is of a sane and comprehensive kind, involving both rational and emotional response to the situation, the one balancing and modifying the other.

In his next verse paragraph Fergusson portrays the macaroni in another situation. For relentless realism and sharp satiric power these lines are unsurpassed in Fergusson:

When Feet in dirty Gutters splash,
And Fock to wale their Fisstaps fash;
At night the Macaroni drunk,
In Pools or Gutters a’times sunk:

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High! What a Fright he now appears,
When he his Corpse dejected rears!
Look at that Head, and think if there
The Pomatum; plastered,

The Cheeks observe, where now cou'd shine
The scancing Glories o' Carmine?
Ah, Legs! in vein the Silk-worm there
Display'd to View her eldant Care;

For Stink, instead of Perfumes, grow,
And clarty Odours fragrant flow.

(lines 117-130)

As John Speirs very acutely observes of this passage, "the richness of this magnificent comic poetry arises from its unusual combinations of images and sharp contrasts." The "Corpse" and "Gutter" associations contrast with the idea of pomatum and rouge, suggestive of elegance and finery; while at the same time Ferguson's choice of word and idiom, especially "slaister'd up his Hair" and "scancing Glories o' Carmine," conveys an impression of the messiness and unpleasantness of these cosmetics, as well as of their "Glories." These contrasts culminate, as Speirs points out, in the last two couplets, in the superbly restrained and suggestive "Ah, Legs!" image, and in final juxtaposition of "Stink" and "Perfumes," "clarty" and "fragrant." Through his skillful use of these contrasts Ferguson succeeds, without explicit description of the scene, in rendering an astonishingly precise and powerful impression of its filth and loathsome as seen from a satiric and semi-humorous point of view. Perhaps the most striking thing about the passage is its admirable restraint. At least half of the power and vividness of this description lies in what Ferguson does not tell the reader. He merely suggests certain aspects of the scene in such a way that the reader's imagination is stirred and induced to fill in the rest of the details.

The principle of contrast operates in Auld Reikie on two levels: in the imagery of individual passages, as in the lines just cited, where it is an inherent characteristic of the style; and, on a larger scale, in the overall arrangement of the poem. They way in which this principle of contrast works out on the structural level may be illustrated from Ferguson's arrangement of his night scenes in this major section of the poem and of the morning scenes which follow. In his verse paragraphs on the bruizer and on the drunken macaroni rising from the gutter Ferguson is treating the more sordid and disgusting aspects of Edinburgh night life. Yet in his next passage, when he begins to tell of the clubs and societies, the mood suddenly changes as Ferguson starts to develop another side of the picture. Here the emphasis is on a more wholesome conviviality:

"The Scots Literary Tradition" (London, 1940), pp. 120-121.
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Now mony a Club, jocose and free,
Gie s' to Merriment and Glee . . . give all
(lines 135 ff.)

At the end of this same verse paragraph, however, Fergusson introduces
a rather ominous note in commenting on the inspiring qualities of
liquor:

It makes you stark, and bauld, and brave, stout; bold
Ev'n when descending to the Grave.

This reference to "the Grave" casts only a momentary shadow on this
generally sunny part of the poem. In his next two paragraphs Fergusson
describes and commends the activities of two famous Edinburgh social
societies, the Pandemonium Club, and his own Cape Club. But the genial,
light-hearted mood of these passages abruptly changes once again at the
end of the lines on the Cape Club where Fergusson suddenly pauses to
describe in gruesome detail a passing funeral (lines 161-194). Even
though the poet has partially prepared for this passage in his previous
incidental reference to "the Grave," it comes as a shock to the reader,
especially since Fergusson lays on the horrid details with rather too
heavy a hand. These lines, with their references to "a painted Corp" and
the "Dead-deal" (a board for laying out corpses), and their excessive
emphasis on the frightfulness of death, smack of morbidity and are
suggestive of that neurotic streak in Fergusson which caused him to feel
an unnatural terror at the thought of sickness and death and which
undoubtedly contributed to his final mental collapse. Yet this ghastly
funeral scene is immediately followed by a charming description of the
vegetable market which was in those days held in the High Street between
St. Giles and the Tron-kirk. He then touches on the bits of pastoral
freshness, the trees and greenery, which brighten even the grimy old
city and "Ca' [drive] far awa' the Morning Smell." Next comes an
extraordinary lyrical outburst apostrophizing "Nature":

O Nature! candy, blyth and free, happy
Where is there Reeking-glass like thee? looking-glass
Is there on Earth that can compare
Wit' Mary's Shape, and Mary's Air,
Save the empurple'd Spock, that grows
In the saft Faulds of yonder Rose? soft folds

(lines 209-214)

The lyric tone and emotional quality of these lines are unusual in Fer-
gusson and are strongly suggestive of the lyrical style of Burns. They
are followed, significantly, by a passage on the filth and nauseating smells
of the Edinburgh "flesh-market."

The summary given above of two major sections of the poem
should be enough to show how basic is the method of dramatic contrast

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in *Auld Reikie*. Ferguson is attempting to catch the essential spirit of the old city and to fix it forever in terms of its strangely contrasting moods. He shows the sordidness and bestiality of Edinburgh night life side by side with its friendliness, its genial goodfellowship and spirited conviviality; he contrasts the greenery of the vegetable stalls in the High Street and the sweet freshness of trees and flowers with the foul stink and filth of the "flesh-market." The constant shifting of scene and mood and the bold juxtaposition of ugliness and beauty give the poem a high degree of actuality and dramatic force. The imagination of the reader is excited by the sharpness and suggestiveness of the poem’s details, as one keenly-etched portrait after another flashes before his eyes and the whole bustling, colorful panorama of eighteenth-century Edinburgh gradually takes shape.

Two or three passages of the latter part of the poem demand special comment. Ferguson’s attack on Sunday hypocrisy is one of the most biting satiric passages in the poem. It reads, in part, as follows:

On Sunday here, an alter’d Scene
O’ Men and Manners meets our Ein:
Ane wad maist trow some People chose
To change their Faces wi’ their Clo’es,
And fain wad gae ilk Neighbour think
They thirt for Goodness, as for Drink:
But there’s an unco Dearth o’ Grace,
That has nae Mansion but the Face,
And never can obtain a Part
In benmost Corner of the Heart.

(lines 231-240)

Ferguson here uses a more direct method of attack than is usual with him. The effectiveness of the passage is undeniable, however, and lies chiefly in its sharply satiric phrasing, skillful use of rime, and, above all, in its imaginative force, especially in the brilliant simile, "They thirst for Goodness, as for Drink." The same kind of direct, keen-edged satire is evident again a few lines later in the poem, where Ferguson derides the pretentious Sunday strollers:

WHILE dandring Cits delight to stray
To Castlehill, or Public Way,
Where they use other Purpose mean,
Than that Fool Caus o’ being seen . . .

(lines 259-262)

The terse, biting, epigrammatic quality of these touches of direct satire in *Auld Reikie* remind one of the polished couplets of the great English neo-classical satirists, especially of Pope, Swift, and Gay, to whom Ferguson is unquestionably indebted in a general way.
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The poem ends fittingly on a note of inimitable wit in a short verse paragraph which is worth quoting in full:

Rkehr, farewell! I ne'er cou'd part
Wi' thee but wi' a dowy heart;
Aft frae the Fisis coast, I've seen,
Thee tow'ring on thy summit green;
So gloar the saints when first is given
A fav'rite keek o' gloar and heaven;
On earth nae mair they bend their ein,
But quick assume angelic mein;
So I on Fife wad gloar no more,
But gallop'd to Edin's shore.

(lines 359-368)

The humorous force of this farewell is irresistible. Fergusson's affection for the old gray city is here given comical, half-satiric expression through his use of a mock epic simile. In its irrepressible waggery and imaginative daring the passage seems to epitomize Fergusson's whole poetic personality. The scintillating wit of the passage, its richness in humorous suggestiveness, arise from the comic irony of Fergusson's comparison of Edinburgh and heaven in the light of what has gone before, and from the impish tone of his phrasing in such superb lines as "A fav'rite keek o' gloar and heaven." The ironical force of the comparison, it may be noted, is underlined by his happy choice of the adjective "angelic." Yet, in spite of the conscious irony of his praise of Auld Reikie, Fergusson manages to convey in these lines the impression that he sincerely loves this strangely beautiful, historic, battered, incredibly crowded and squalid old city of his birth.

Auld Reikie is an extraordinarily attractive and powerful poem and, as Fergusson's last major work, forms a fitting climax to his poetic career. It ranks as one of his four or five very best poems, and is certainly the most comprehensive and impressive of Fergusson's many treatments of eighteenth-century life in Edinburgh. As we have seen, the poem owes much to Trivia, but its overall effect is strikingly different, its style far more vividly realistic though no less sophisticated than that of Gay's pleasantly artificial work. Had Fergusson been given the time and encouragement to complete his original design of the poem, it would probably have developed to epic proportions; and, in view of the quality of what he actually did get on paper, it might well have become one of the major classics of eighteenth-century poetry. As it stands, Auld Reikie is a little classic, and deserves to stand beside Trivia as one of the most distinguished treatments of city life in British poetry.

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