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# EARLY CRITICAL REVIEWS

ON

## ROBERT BURNS

EDITED BY

JOHN D. ROSS, LL.D.

AUTHOR OF "A CLUSTER OF POETS, SCOTTISH AND AMERICAN," EDITOR OF  
"THE MEMORY OF BURNS," "THE BURNS ALMANAC," ETC.

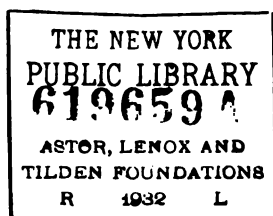
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**Dedicated**  
**TO**  
**THE OFFICERS AND MEMBERS**  
**OF**  
**The Rosebery Burns Club**





## TO THE READER

THIS volume contains the best of the early critical Reviews on Robert Burns. Many of these reviews are difficult to obtain at this date, and I feel confident that the student, as well as the lover of Burns, will appreciate the bringing of them together in this handy and accessible form.

The first notice accorded to the poet is not included in the collection, as it contained little of a strictly critical character. It was printed in the *Edinburgh Magazine* for October, 1786, and opens with the query—

“Who are you, Mr. Burns? Will some surly critic say: at what university have you been educated? What languages do you understand? What authors have you particularly studied? Whether has Aristotle or Horace directed your taste? Who has praised your poems, and under whose patronage are they published? In short, what qualifications entitle you to instruct or entertain us?”

To the questions of such a catechism, perhaps, honest Robert Burns would make no satisfactory answer. “My good man,” he might say, “I am a poor countryman. I was bred up at the school of Kilmarnock; I understand no language but my own. I have studied Allan Ramsay and Fergusson. My poems have been praised at many a fireside, and I ask no patronage for them if they deserve none. I have not looked at mankind through the spectacles of books. ‘An ounce of mother wit,’ you know, ‘is worth a pound of clergy.’” The author is, indeed, a

striking example of native genius, bursting through the obscurity of poverty and the obstructions of laborious life.

This notice is supposed to have been written by James Sibbald, the proprietor of the *Magazine* and the author of a work in four volumes, entitled *The Chronicle of Scottish Poetry*.

Like nearly all other works on Burns, this volume could easily have been enlarged to twice its present proportions; but my object has been simply to bring a few of the most prominent reviews together instead of compiling a volume of all kinds of criticisms on the subject. I have spent many happy and profitable hours over the Reviews here reproduced, and they will certainly prove a source of delight to anyone who has not already had the pleasure of perusing them.

JOHN D. ROSS.

NEW YORK, *January*, 1900.

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# EARLY CRITICAL REVIEWS ON ROBERT BURNS.

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By HENRY MAACKENZIE.

*From "THE LOUNGER," December, 1786.*

To the feeling and susceptible there is something wonderfully pleasing in the contemplation of genius, of that super-eminent reach of mind by which some men are distinguished. In the view of highly superior talents, as in that of great and stupendous natural objects, there is a sublimity which fills the soul with wonder and delight, which expands it, as it were, beyond its usual bounds, and which, investing our nature with extraordinary honours, interests our curiosity and flatters our pride.

This divinity of genius, however, which admiration is fond to worship, is best arrayed in the darkness of distant and remote periods, and is not easily acknowledged in the present times, or in places with which we are perfectly acquainted. Exclusive of all the deductions which envy or jealousy may sometimes be supposed to make, there is a familiarity in the near approach of persons around us, not very consistent with the lofty ideas which we wish to form of him who has led captive our imagination in the triumph of his fancy, overpowered our feelings with the tide of passion, or enlightened our reason with the investigation of hidden truths. It may be that, "in the olden time," genius had some advantages which tended to its vigour and its growth; but it is not unlikely

that, even in these degenerate days, it rises much oftener than it is observed; that in "the ignorant present time" our posterity may find names which they will dignify, though we neglected, and pay to their memory those honours which their contemporaries have denied them.

There is, however, a natural, and, indeed, a fortunate vanity in trying to redress this wrong which genius is exposed to suffer. In the discovery of talents generally unknown, men are apt to indulge the same fond partiality as in all other discoveries which themselves have made; hence we have had repeated instances of painters and of poets, who have been drawn from obscure situations, and held forth to public notice and applause by the extravagant encomiums of their introducers, yet in a short time have sunk again to their former obscurity; whose merit, though perhaps somewhat neglected, did not appear much under-valued by the world, and could not support, by its own intrinsic excellence, the superior place which the enthusiasm of its patrons would have assigned it. I know not if I shall be accused of such enthusiasm and partiality when I introduce to the notice of my readers a poet of our own country, with whose writings I have lately become acquainted; but, if I am not greatly deceived, I think I may safely pronounce him a genius of no ordinary rank. The person to whom I allude is Robert Burns, an Ayrshire ploughman, whose poems were some time ago published in a country town in the West of Scotland, with no other ambition, it would seem, than to circulate among the inhabitants of the country where he was born, to obtain a little fame from those who have heard of his talents. I hope I shall not be thought to assume too much if I endeavour to place him in a higher point of view, to call for a verdict of his country on the merit of his works, and to claim for him those honours which their excellence appears to deserve.

In mentioning the circumstances of his humble station, I mean not to rest his pretensions solely on that title or to urge the merits of his poetry when considered in relation to the lowness of his birth, and the little opportunity of

improvement which his education could afford. These particulars, indeed, might excite our wonder at his productions; but his poetry, considered abstractly, and without the apologies arising from his situation, seems to me fully entitled to command our feelings and to obtain our applause.

One bar, indeed, his birth and education have opposed to his fame—the language in which most of his poems are written. Even in Scotland the provincial dialect which Ramsay and he have used is now read with a difficulty which greatly damps the pleasure of the reader; in England it cannot be read at all, without such a constant reference to a glossary as nearly to destroy the pleasure.

Some of his productions, however, especially those of the grave style, are almost English. From one of these I shall first present my readers with an extract, in which I think they will discover a high tone of feeling, a power and energy of expression particularly and strongly characteristic of the mind and the voice of a poet. 'Tis from his poem entitled "The Vision," in which the genius of his native county, Ayrshire, is thus supposed to address him :

With future hope, I oft would gaze,  
Fond on thy little early ways.  
Thy rudely caroll'd chiming phrase,  
In uncouth rhymes,  
Fired at the simple artless lays  
Of other times.

I saw thee seek the sounding shore,  
Delighted with the dashing roar;  
Or when the north his fleecy store  
Drove thro' the sky,  
I saw, grim nature's visage hoar  
Struck thy young eye.

Or when the deep-green mantled earth  
Warm cherish'd ev'ry flow'ret's birth,  
And joy and music pouring forth  
In ev'ry grove,  
I saw thee eye the general mirth  
With boundless love.



When ripen'd fields, and azure skies,  
 Called forth the reaper's rustling noise,  
 I saw thee leave their evening joys,  
     And lonely stalk,  
 To vent thy bosom's swelling rise,  
     In pensive walk.

When youthful love, warm-blushing, strong,  
 Keen-shivering shot thy nerves along,  
 Those accents, graceful to thy tongue,  
     Th' adorèd name,  
 I taught thee how to pour in song,  
     To sooth thy flame.

I saw thy pulse's maddening play,  
 Wild send thee pleasure's devious way,  
 Mised by fancy's meteor ray,  
     By passion driven;  
 But yet the light that led astray  
     Was light from heaven.

Of strains like the above, solemn and sublime, with that rapt and inspired melancholy in which the poet lifts his eye "above this visible diurnal sphere," the poems entitled "Despondency," "The Lament," "Winter, a Dirge," and the "Invocation to Ruin" afford no less striking examples. Of the tender and the moral, specimens equally advantageous might be drawn from the elegiac verses entitled "Man was made to mourn," from "The Cottar's Saturday Night," the stanzas "To a Mouse," or those "To a Daisy," on turning it down with the plough in April, 1786. This last poem I shall insert entire, not from its superior merit, but because its length suits the bounds of my paper:

Wee, modest, crimson-tipp'd flow'r,  
 Thou's met me in an evil hour,  
 For I maun crush amang the stoure  
     Thy slender stem;  
 To spare thee now is past my pow'r,  
     Thou bonnie gem.

Alas! it's no thy neibor sweet,  
 The bonnie lark, companion meet!  
 Bending thee 'mang the dewy weat!  
     Wi' spreckl'd breast,  
 When upward-springing, blithe, to greet  
     The purpling east.

Cauld blew the bitter-biting north  
 Upon thy early, humble birth;  
 Yet cheerfully thou glinted forth  
     Amid the storm,  
 Scarce rear'd above the parent earth  
     Thy tender form.

The flaunting flow'rs our gardens yield,  
 High shelt'ring woods and wa's maun shield:  
 But though beneath the random bield  
     O' clod or stane,  
 Adorn the histie stibble-field,  
     Unseen, alane.

There, in thy scanty mantle clad,  
 Thy snawie bosom sunward spread,  
 Thou lifts thy unassuming head  
     In humble guise;  
 But now the share uptears thy bed,  
     'And low thou lies!

Such is the fate of artless maid,  
 Sweet floweret of the rural shade!  
 By love's simplicity betray'd,  
     And guileless trust,  
 Till she, like thee, all soil'd is laid  
     Low i' the dust.

Such is the fate of simple bard,  
 On life's rough ocean luckless starr'd!  
 Unskilled he to note the card  
     Of prudent lore.  
 Till billows rage, and gales blow hard,  
     And whelm him o'er!

Such fate to suffering worth is giv'n,  
 Who long with wants and woes has striv'n,  
 By human pride or cunning driv'n  
     To mis'ry's brink,  
 Till wrenched of every stay but heaven,  
     He, ruin'd, sink!

Ev'n thou who mourn'st the daisy's fate,  
 That fate is thine—no distant date;  
 Stern Ruin's ploughshare drives, elate  
     Full on thy bloom.  
 Till crushed beneath the furrow's weight,  
     Shall be thy doom!

I have seldom met with an image more truly pastoral  
 than that of the lark in the second stanza. Such strokes

as these mark the pencil of the poet, which delineates nature with the precision of intimacy, yet with the delicate colouring of beauty and of taste. The power of genius is not less admirable in tracing the manners than in painting the scenery of nature. That intuitive glance with which a writer like Shakespeare discerns the characters of men, with which he catches the many changing lines of life, forms a sort of problem in the science of mind, of which it is easier to see the truth than to assign the cause.

Though I am far from meaning to compare our rustic bard to Shakespeare, yet whoever will read his lighter and more humorous poems, his "Dialogue of the Dogs," his "Dedication to G—— H——, Esq.," his "Epistle to a Young Friend," and "To W. S——n," will perceive with what uncommon penetration and sagacity this heaven-taught ploughman, from his humble and unlettered station, has looked upon men and manners.

Against some passages of these last-mentioned poems it has been objected that they breathe a spirit of libertinism and irreligion. But, if we consider the ignorance and fanaticism of the lower class of the people in the country where these poems were written, a fanaticism of that pernicious sort which sets faith in opposition to good works, the fallacy and danger of which a mind so enlightened as our poet's could not but perceive, we shall not look upon his lighter muse as the enemy of religion (of which in several places he expresses the justest sentiments), though she has been somewhat ungarded in her ridicule of hypocrisy.

In this, as in other respects, it must be allowed that there are exceptional parts of the volume he has given to the public which caution would have suppressed or correction struck out; but poets are seldom cautious, and our poet had, alas! no friends or companions from whom correction could be obtained. When we reflect on his rank in life, the habits to which he must have been subject, and the society in which he must have mixed, we regret, perhaps, more than wonder that delicacy should be so

often offended in perusing a volume in which there is so much to interest and please us.

Burns possesses the spirit as well as the fancy of a poet. That honest pride and independence of soul which are sometimes the muse's only dower break forth on every occasion in his works. It may be, then, I shall wrong his feelings while I indulge my own, in calling the attention of the public to his situation and circumstances. That condition, humble as it was, in which he found content, and wooed the muse, might not be deemed uncomfortable; but grief and misfortunes have reached him there; and one or two of his poems hint, what I have learned from some of his countrymen, that he has been obliged to form the resolution of leaving his native land to seek, under a West Indian clime, that shelter and support which Scotland has denied him. But I trust means may be found to prevent this resolution from taking place; and I do my country no more than justice when I suppose her ready to stretch out her hand to cherish and retain this native poet, whose "wood-notes wild" possess so much excellence. To repair the wrongs of suffering or neglected merit; to call forth genius from the obscurity in which it had pined indignant, and place it where it may profit or delight the world—these are exertions which give to wealth an enviable superiority, to greatness and to patronage a laudable pride.

From "THE MONTHLY REVIEW," December, 1786.

*Poeta nascitur non fit* is an old maxim, the truth of which has been generally admitted; and although it be certain that, in modern times, many verses are manufactured from the brain of their authors with as much labour as the iron is drawn into form under the hammer of the smith, and required to be afterwards smoothed by the file with as much care as the burnishers of Sheffield employ to give the last finish to their wares; yet, after all, these verses, though ever so smooth, are nothing but *verses*, and have no genuine title to the name of *Poems*. The humble bard, whose work now demands our attention, cannot claim a place among these polished *versifiers*. His simple strains, artless and unadorned, seem to flow without effort from the native feelings of the heart. They are always nervous, sometimes inelegant, often natural, simple, and sublime. The objects that have obtained the attention of the author are humble; for he himself, born in a low station, and following a laborious employment, has had no opportunity of observing scenes in the higher walks of life; yet his verses are sometimes struck off with a delicacy and artless simplicity that charms like the bewitching though irregular touches of a Shakespeare. We much regret that these poems are written in some measure in an unknown tongue, which must deprive most of our readers of the pleasure they would otherwise naturally create; being composed in the Scottish dialect, which contains many words that are altogether unknown to an

English reader: beside, they abound with allusions to the modes of life, opinions, and ideas of the people in a remote corner of the country, which would render many passages obscure, and consequently uninteresting, to those who perceive not the forcible accuracy of the picture of the objects to which they allude. This work, therefore, can only be fully relished by the natives of that part of the country where it was produced; but by such of *them* as have a taste sufficiently refined to be able to relish the beauties of nature, it cannot fail to be highly prized.

By what we can collect from the poems themselves, and the short preface to them, the author seems to be struggling with poverty, though cheerfully supporting the fatigues of a laborious employment. He thus speaks of himself in one of the poems—

The star that rules my luckless lot,  
Has fated me the russet coat,  
And damn'd my fortune to the groat;  
But, in requite,  
Has blest me with a random shot  
Of country wit.

He afterwards adds—

This life, sae far's I understand,  
Is an enchanted fairy land,  
Where pleasure is the magic wand,  
That, wielded right,  
Makes hours and minutes hand in hand  
Dance by fu' light.

The magic wand then let us wield;  
For ance that five-and-forty's speeld  
See crazy, weary, joyless Eild,  
With wrinkled face,  
Comes hostan, hirplan owre the field,  
With creeping pace.

When ance life's day draws near the gloamin',  
Then farewell vacant, careless roamin',  
And farewell cheerful tankards foamin',  
And social noise;  
And farewell dear, deluding woman,  
The joy of joys!

Fired with the subject, he then bursts into a natural, warm, and glowing description of youth—

O life! how pleasant in thy morning,  
 Young Fancy's rays the hills adorning!  
 Cold-pausing Caution's lesson scorning,  
     We frisk away,  
 Like school-boys, at th' expected warning,  
     To joy and play.

We wander there, we wander here,  
 We eye the rose upon the brier,  
 Unmindful that the *thorn* is near,  
     Among the leaves;  
 And though the puny wound appear,  
     Short time it grieves.

"None of the following works" (we are told in the preface) "were ever composed with a view to the press. To amuse himself with the little creations of his own fancy, among the toil and fatigues of a laborious life; to transcribe the various feelings, the loves, the griefs, the hopes, the fears in his own breast; to find some kind of counterpoise to the struggles of a world, always an alien scene, a task uncouth to the poetical mind—these were his motives for courting the muses, and in these he found poetry its own reward."

These poems are chiefly in the comic strain. Some are of the descriptive cast, particularly "Hallowe'en," which contains a lively picture of the magical tricks that still are practised in the country at that season. It is a valuable relic which, like Virgil's eighth Eclogue, will preserve the memory of these simple incantations long after they would otherwise have been lost. It is very properly accompanied with notes explaining the circumstances to which the poem alludes. Sometimes the poems are in the elegiac strain, among which class the reader will find much of nature in the lines "To a Mouse," on turning up her nest with the plough, in November, 1785, and those "To a Mountain Daisy," on turning one down with the plough in April, 1786. In these we meet with a strain of that delicate tenderness which renders the Idylls of

Madame Deshouliers so peculiarly interesting. Some of the poems are in a more serious strain; and as these contain fewer words that are not pure English than the others, we shall select one as a specimen of our author's manner.

The poem we have selected exhibits a beautiful picture of that simplicity of manners which still, we are assured on the best authority, prevails in those parts of the country where the author dwells. That it may be understood by our readers, it is accompanied by a Glossary and Notes, with which we have been favoured by a friend who thoroughly understands the language, and has often, he says, witnessed with his own eyes that pure simplicity of manners which are delineated with the most faithful accuracy in this little performance. We have used the freedom to modernise the orthography a little, wherever the measure would permit, to render it less disgusting to our readers south of the Tweed.\*

These stanzas are *serious*. But our author seems to be most in his own element when in the sportive, humorous strain. The poems of this cast, as hath been already hinted, so much abound with provincial phrases and allusions to local circumstances, that no extract from them would be sufficiently intelligible to our English readers.

The modern ear will be somewhat disgusted with the measure of many of these pieces, which is faithfully copied from that which was most in fashion among the ancient Scottish bards, but hath been, we think with good reason, laid aside by later poets. The versification is, in general, easy, and it seems to have been a matter of indifference to our author in what measure he wrote. But, if ever he should think of offering anything more to the public, we are of opinion his performances would be more highly valued were they written in measures less antiquated. The few Songs, Odes, Dirges, &c., in this collection are very poor in comparison with the other pieces. The

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\* Here follows an Anglified version of the *Cottar's Saturday Night*.—EDITOR.



author's mind is not sufficiently stored with brilliant ideas to succeed in that line.

In justice to the reader, however, as well as the author, we must observe that this collection may be compared to a heap of wheat carelessly winnowed. Some grain of a most excellent quality is mixed with a little chaff and half-ripened corn. How many splendid volumes of poems come under our review, in which, though the mere chaff be carefully separated, not a single atom of perfect grain can be found, all being light and insipid! We never reckon our task fatiguing when we can find, even among a great heap, a single pearl of price; but how pitiable is our lot when we must toil and toil and can find nothing but tiresome uniformity, with neither fault to rouse nor beauty to animate the jaded spirits!

By DR. JAMES CURRIE.

From "THE WORKS OF ROBERT BURNS," 1800.

As the reader becomes better acquainted with the poet, the effects of his peculiarities lessen. He perceives in his poems, even on the lowest subjects, expressions of sentiment and delineations of manners which are highly interesting. The scenery he describes is evidently taken from real life; the characters he introduces and the incidents he relates have the impression of nature and truth. His humour, though wild and unbridled, is irresistibly amusing, and is sometimes heightened in its effects by the introduction of emotions of tenderness, with which genuine humour so happily unites. Nor is this the extent of his power. The reader, as he examines further, discovers that the poet is not confined to the descriptive, the humorous, or the pathetic; he is found, as occasion offers, to rise with ease into the terrible and the sublime. Everywhere he appears devoid of artifice, performing what he attempts with little apparent effort, and impressing on the offsprings of *his fancy the stamp of his understanding*. The reader capable of forming a just estimate of poetical talents discovers in these circumstances marks of uncommon genius, and is willing to investigate more minutely its nature and its claims to originality. This last point we shall examine first.

That Burns had not the advantages of a classical education or of any degree of acquaintance with the Greek or Roman writers in their original dress has appeared in the history of his life. He acquired, indeed,

some knowledge of the French language, but it does not appear that he was ever much conversant in French literature, nor is there any evidence of his having derived any of his poetical stores from that source. With the English classics he became well acquainted in the course of his life, and the effects of this acquaintance are observable in his later productions; but the character and style of his poetry were formed very early, and the model which he followed, in so far as he can be said to have had one, is to be sought for in the works of the poets who have written in the Scottish dialect—in the works of such of them more especially as are familiar to the peasantry of Scotland. Some observations on these may form a proper introduction to a more particular examination of the poetry of Burns. The studies of the editor in this direction are, indeed, very recent and very imperfect. It would have been imprudent for him to have entered on this subject at all, but for the kindness of Mr. Ramsay of Ochertyre, whose assistance he is proud to acknowledge, and to whom the reader must ascribe whatever is of any value in the following imperfect sketch of literary compositions in the Scottish idiom.

It is a circumstance not a little curious, and which does not seem to be satisfactorily explained, that in the thirteenth century the language of the two British nations, if at all different, differed only in dialect, the Gaelic in the one, like the Welch and Armoric in the other, being confined to the mountainous districts.\* The English under the Edwards, and the Scots under Wallace and Bruce, spoke the same language. We may observe also that in Scotland the history of poetry ascends to a period nearly as remote as in England. Barbour, and Blind Harry, James the First, Dunbar, Douglas, and Lindsay, who lived in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, were coeval with the fathers of poetry in England; and, in the opinion of Mr. Wharton, not inferior to them in genius or in composition. Though the language of the two countries gradually deviated from each

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\* *Historical Essay on Scottish Song*, p. 20, by Mr. Ritson.

other during this period, yet the difference on the whole was not considerable; not perhaps greater than between the different dialects of the different parts of England in our own time.

At the death of James the Fifth, in 1542, the language of Scotland was in a flourishing condition, wanting only writers in prose equal to those in verse. Two circumstances, propitious on the whole, operated to prevent this. The first was the passion of the Scots for composition in Latin; and the second, the accession of James the Sixth to the English throne. It may easily be imagined that if Buchanan had devoted his admirable talents, even in part, to the cultivation of his native tongue, as was done by the revivers of letters in Italy, he would have left compositions in that language which might have incited other men of genius to have followed his example,\* and given duration to the language itself. The union of the two crowns in the person of James overthrew all reasonable expectation of this kind. That monarch, seated on the English throne, would no longer suffer himself to be addressed in the rude dialect in which the Scottish clergy had so often insulted his dignity. He encouraged Latin or English only, both of which he prided himself on writing with purity, though he himself never could acquire the English pronunciation, but spoke with a Scottish idiom and intonation to the last. Scotsmen of talents declined writing in their native language, which they knew was not acceptable to their learned and pedantic monarch; and at a time when national prejudice and enmity prevailed to a great degree, they disdained to study the niceties of the English tongue, though of so much easier acquisition than a dead language. Lord Stirling and Drummond of Hawthornden, the only Scotsmen who wrote poetry in those times, were exceptions. They studied the language of England, and composed in it with precision and elegance. They were, however, the last of their countrymen who deserved to be considered as poets in that century. The muses of Scotland sunk into silence,

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\* e.g. The Authors of the *Deliciae Poetarum Scotorum*, &c.

and did not again raise their voices for a period of eighty years.

To what causes are we to attribute this extreme depression among a people comparatively learned, enterprising, and ingenious? Shall we impute it to the fanaticism of the Covenanters, or to the tyranny of the house of Stuart after their restoration to the throne? Doubtless these causes operated, but they seem unequal to account for the effect. In England similar distractions and oppression took place, yet poetry flourished there in a remarkable degree. During this period Cowley and Waller and Dryden sung, and Milton raised his strain of unparalleled grandeur. To the causes already mentioned, another must be added in accounting for the torpor of Scottish literature—the want of a proper vehicle for men of genius to employ. The civil wars had frightened away the Latin muses, and no standard has been established of the Scottish tongue, which was deviating still further from the pure English idiom.

The revival of literature in Scotland may be dated from the establishment of the Union, or rather from the extinction of the rebellion in 1715. The nations being finally incorporated, it was clearly seen that their tongues must in the end incorporate also; or rather, indeed, that the Scottish language must degenerate into a provincial idiom, to be avoided by those who would aim at distinction in letters, or rise to eminence in the united legislature.

Soon after this a band of men of genius appeared, who studied the English classics and imitated their beauties in the same manner as they had studied the classics of Greece and Rome. They had admirable models of composition lately presented by the writers of the reign of Queen Anne; particularly in the periodical papers published by Steele, Addison, and their associated friends, which circulated widely through Scotland, and diffused everywhere a taste for purity of style and sentiment and for critical disquisition. At length, the Scottish writers succeeded in English composition, and a union was formed of the literary talents, as well as of the legislatures of the

two nations. On this occasion the poets took the lead. While Henry Home,\* Dr. Wallace, and their learned associates were only laying in their intellectual stores, and studying to clear themselves of their Scottish idioms, Thomson, Mallet, and Hamilton of Bangour had made their appearance before the public, and been enrolled on the list of English poets. The writers in prose followed—a numerous and powerful band—and poured their ample stores into the general stream of British literature. Scotland possessed her four universities before the accession of James to the English throne. Immediately before the Union she acquired her parochial schools. These establishments combining happily together, made the elements of knowledge of easy acquisition, and presented a direct path by which the ardent student might be carried along into the recesses of science or learning. As civil broils ceased, and faction and prejudice gradually died away, a wider field was opened to literary ambition, and the influence of the Scottish institutions for instruction, on the productions of the press, became more and more apparent.

It seems, indeed, probable that the establishment of the parochial schools produced effects on the rural muse of Scotland also, which have not hitherto been suspected; and which, though less splendid in their nature, are not, however, to be regarded as trivial, whether we consider the happiness or the morals of the people.

There is some reason to believe that the original inhabitants of the British Isles possessed a peculiar and an interesting species of music, which, being banished from the plains by the successive invasions of the Saxons, Danes, and Normans, was preserved with the native race in the wilds of Ireland and in the mountains of Scotland and Wales. The Irish, the Scottish, and the Welsh music differ, indeed, from each other, but the difference may be considered as in dialect only, and probably produced by the influence of time, and like the different dialects of their common language. If this conjecture be true, the

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\* Lord Kaimes.

Scottish music must be more immediately of a Highland origin, and the Lowland tunes, though now of a character somewhat distinct, must have descended from the mountains in the remote ages. Whatever credit may be given to conjectures, evidently involved in great uncertainty, there can be no doubt that the Scottish peasantry have been long in possession of a number of songs and ballads composed in their native dialect, and sung to their native music. The subjects of these compositions were such as most interested the simple inhabitants, and in the succession of time varied probably as the condition of society varied. During the separation and the hostility of the two nations these songs and ballads, as far as our imperfect documents enable us to judge, were chiefly warlike, such as the *Huntis of Cheviot*, and the *Battle of Harlaw*. After the union of the two crowns, when a certain degree of peace and tranquillity took place, the rural muse of Scotland breathed in softer accents. "In the want of real evidence respecting the history of our songs," says Mr. Ramsay of Ochtertyre, "recourse may be had to conjecture. One would be disposed to think that the most beautiful of the Scottish tunes were clothed with new words after the union of the crowns. The inhabitants of the Borders, who had formerly been warriors from choice and husbandmen from necessity, either quitted the country or were transformed into real shepherds, easy in their circumstances and satisfied with their lot. Some sparks of that spirit of chivalry, for which they are celebrated by Froissart, remained, sufficient to inspire elevation of sentiment and gallantry towards the fair sex. The familiarity and kindness which had long subsisted between the gentry and the peasantry could not all at once be obliterated, and this connection tended to sweeten rural life. In this state of innocence, ease, and tranquillity of mind the love of poetry and music would still maintain its ground, though it would naturally assume a form congenial to the more peaceful state of society. The minstrels, whose metrical tales used once to rouse the borderers like the trumpet's sound, had been, by an order

of the Legislature (in 1579), classed with rogues and vagabonds, and attempted to be suppressed. Knox and his disciples influenced the Scottish Parliament, but contended in vain with her rural muse. Amidst our Arcadian vales, probably on the banks of the Tweed, or some of its tributary streams, one or more original geniuses may have arisen who were destined to give a new turn to the tastes of their countrymen. They would see that the events and pursuits which chequer private life were the proper subjects for popular poetry. Love, which had formerly held a divided sway with glory and ambition, became now the master passion of the soul. To portray in lively and delicate colours, though with a hasty hand, the hopes and fears which agitate the breast of the love-sick swain or forlorn maiden, affords ample scope to the rural poet. Love songs, of which Tibullus himself would not have been ashamed, might be composed by an uneducated rustic with a slight tincture of letters; or if in these songs the character of the rustic be sometimes assumed, the truth of character and the language of nature are preserved. With unaffected simplicity and tenderness topics are urged most likely to soften the heart of a cruel and coy mistress, or to regain a fickle lover. Even in such as are of a melancholy cast a ray of hope breaks through and dispels the deep and settled gloom which characterises the sweetest of the Highland *luenings* or vocal airs. Nor are these songs all plaintive; many of them are lively and humorous, and some appear to us coarse and indelicate. They seem, however, genuine descriptions of the manners of an energetic and sequestered people in their hours of mirth and festivity, though in their portraits some objects are brought into open view which more fastidious painters would have thrown into shade.

“As those rural poets sung for amusement, not for gain, their effusions seldom exceeded a love song or a ballad of satire or humour, which, like the works of the elder minstrels were seldom committed to writing, but treasured up in the memory of their friends and neighbours.



Neither known to the learned nor patronised by the great, these rustic bards lived and died in obscurity; and by a strange fatality, their story, and even their very names, have been forgotten.\* When proper models for pastoral songs were produced, there would be no want of imitators. To succeed in this species of composition, soundness of understanding and sensibility of heart were more requisite than flights of imagination or pomp of numbers. Great changes have certainly taken place in Scottish song-writing, though we cannot trace the steps of this change; and few of the pieces admired in Queen Mary's time are now to be discovered in modern collections. It is possible, though not probable, that the music may have remained nearly the same, though the words to the tunes were entirely new modelled."†

These conjectures are highly ingenious. It cannot, however, be presumed that the state of ease and tranquillity described by Mr. Ramsay took place among the Scottish peasantry immediately on the union of the crowns, or, indeed, during the greater part of the seventeenth century. The Scottish nation, through all its ranks, was deeply agitated by the civil wars and the religious persecutions which succeeded each other in that disastrous period; it was not till after the Revolution in 1688, and the subsequent establishment of their beloved form of church government, that the peasantry of the Lowlands enjoyed comparative repose; and it is since that period that a great number of the most admired Scottish songs have been produced, though the tunes to which they are sung are in general of much greater antiquity. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the peace and security derived from the Revolution and the Union produced a favourable change on the rustic poetry of Scotland; and it can

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\* In the Pepys Collection there are a few Scottish songs of the last century, but the names of the authors are not preserved.

† Extract of a letter from Mr. Ramsay of Ochertyre to the Editor, Sept. 11, 1799. In the *Bee*, vol. ii., is a communication to Mr. Ramsay, under the signature of J. Runcole, which enters into this subject somewhat more at large. In that paper he gives his reasons for questioning the antiquity of many of the most celebrated Scottish songs.

scarcely be doubted that the institution of parish schools in 1696, by which a certain degree of instruction was diffused universally among the peasantry, contributed to this happy effect.

Soon after this appeared Allan Ramsay, the Scottish Theocritus. He was born on the high mountains that divide Clydesdale and Annandale, in a small hamlet by the banks of Glengonar, a stream which descends into the Clyde. The ruins of this hamlet are still shown to the inquiring traveller.\* He was the son of a peasant, and probably received such instruction as his parish school bestowed, and the poverty of his parents admitted.† Ramsay made his appearance in Edinburgh in the beginning of the present century in the humble character of an apprentice to a barber or peruke maker; he was then fourteen or fifteen years of age. By degrees he acquired notice for his social disposition, and his talents for the composition of verses in the Scottish idiom; and, changing his profession for that of a bookseller, he became intimate with many of the literary, as well as of the gay and fashionable characters of his time.‡ Having published a volume of poems of his own in 1721, which was favourably received, he undertook to make a collection of ancient Scottish poems, under the title of the *Ever Green*, and was afterwards encouraged to present to the world a collection of Scottish songs. "From what sources he procured them," says Mr. Ramsay of Ochertyre, "whether from traditions or manuscript, is uncertain. As in the *Ever Green* he made some rash attempts to improve on

\* See *Campbell's History of Poetry in Scotland*, p. 185.

† The father of Ramsay was, it is said, a workman in the lead mines of the Earl of Hopetoun at Leadhills. The workmen in those mines at present are of a very superior character to miners in general. They have only six hours of labour in the day, and have time for reading. They have a common library, supported by contribution, containing several thousand volumes. When this was instituted I have not learnt. These miners are said to be of a very sober and moral character. Allan Ramsay, when very young, is supposed to have been a washer of ore in these mines.

‡ "He was coeval with Joseph Mitchell, and his club of *small wits*, who, about 1719, published a very poor miscellany, to which Dr. Young, the author of the *Night Thoughts*, prefixed a copy of verses."—Extract of a letter from Mr. Ramsay of Ochertyre to the Editor.

the originals of his ancient poems, he probably used still greater freedom with the songs and the ballads. The truth cannot, however, be known on this point till manuscripts of the songs printed by him, more ancient than the present century, shall be produced; or access be obtained to his own papers if they are still in existence. To several tunes which either wanted words or had words that were improper or imperfect, he, or his friends, adapted words worthy of the melodies they accompanied, worthy, indeed, of the golden age. These verses were perfectly intelligible to every rustic, yet justly admired by persons of taste, who regarded them as the genuine offspring of the pastoral muse. In some respects Ramsay had advantages not possessed by poets writing in the Scottish dialect in our days. Songs in the dialect of Cumberland or Lancashire could never be popular, because these dialects have never been spoken by persons of fashion. But till the middle of the present century every Scotsman, from the peer to the peasant, spoke a truly Doric language. It is true the English moralists and poets were by this time read by every person of condition, and considered as the standards for polite composition. But, as natural prejudices were still strong, the busy, the learned, the gay, and the fair continued to speak their native dialect, and that with an elegance and poignancy of which Scotsmen of the present day can have no just notion. I am old enough to have conversed with Mr. Spittal of Leuchat, a scholar and a man of fashion, who survived all the members of the Union Parliament, in which he had a seat. His pronunciation and phraseology differed as much from the common dialect as the language of St. James' from that of Thames Street. Had we retained a Court and Parliament of our own, the tongues of the two sister kingdoms would, indeed, have differed like the Castilian and Portuguese; but each would have had its own classics, not in a single branch, but in the whole circle of literature.

"Ramsay associated with the men of wit and fashion of his day, and several of them attempted to write poetry

in his manner. Persons too idle or too dissipated to think of compositions that required much exertion succeeded very happily in making tender sonnets to favourite tunes in compliment to their mistresses, and, transforming themselves into impassioned shepherds, caught the language of the characters they assumed. Thus, about the year 1731, Robert Crawford of Auchinames wrote the modern song of *Tweed Side*,\* which has been so much admired. In 1743, Sir Gilbert Elliot, the first of our lawyers who both spoke and wrote English elegantly, composed, in the character of a love-sick swain, a beautiful song, beginning, *My sheep I neglected, I lost my sheep-hook*, on the marriage of his mistress, Miss Forbes, with Ronald Crawford. And about twelve years afterwards the sister of Sir Gilbert wrote the *ancient* words to the tune of the *Flowers of the Forest*,† and supposed to allude to the battle of Flowden. In spite of the double rhyme, it is a sweet and, though in some parts allegorical, a natural expression of natural sorrow. The more *modern* words to the same tune beginning, *I have seen the smiling of fortune beguiling*, were written long before by Mrs. Cockburn, a woman of great wit, who outlived all the first group of literati of the present century, all of whom were very fond of her. I was delighted with her company, though, when I saw her, she was very old. Much did she know that is now lost."

In addition to these instances of Scottish songs produced in the earlier part of the present century may be mentioned the ballad of *Hardiknute* by Lady Wardlaw; the ballad of *William and Margaret*; and the song entitled *The Birks of Endermay*, by Mallet; the love song beginning, *For ever, Fortune, wilt thou prove*, produced by the youthful muse of Thomson; and the exquisite pathetic ballad, *The Braes of Yarrow*, by Hamilton of Bangour. On the revival of letters in Scotland, subsequent to the Union, a very general taste seems to have prevailed for the national songs and music. "For many years," says Mr. Ramsay, "the singing of songs was the great delight of

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\* Beginning—"What beauties does Flora disclose?"

† Beginning—"I have heard a lilting at our ewes milking."

the higher and middle order of the people, as well as of the peasantry; and though a taste for Italian music has interfered with this amusement, it is still very prevalent. Between forty and fifty years ago, the common people were not only exceedingly fond of songs and ballads, but of metrical history. Often have I, in my cheerful morn of youth, listened to them with delight, when reading or reciting the exploits of Wallace and Bruce against the Southrons. Lord Hailes was wont to call Blind Harry their Bible, he being their great favourite next the Scriptures. When, therefore, one in the vale of life felt the first emotions of genius, he wanted not models *sui generis*. But though the seeds of poetry were scattered with a plentiful hand among the Scottish peasantry, the product was probably like that of pears and apples—of a thousand that spring up, nine hundred and fifty are so bad as to set the teeth on edge; forty-five or more are passable and useful; and the rest of an exquisite flavour. Allan Ramsay and Burns are wildings of this last description. They had the example of the elder Scottish poets; they were not without the aid of the best English writers; and, what was of still more importance, they were no strangers to the book of nature, and to the book of God."

From this general view it is apparent that Allan Ramsay may be considered as in a great measure the reviver of the rural poetry of his country. His collection of ancient Scottish poems under the name of the *Ever Green*, his collection of Scottish songs, and his own poems, the principal of which is the *Gentle Shepherd*, have been universally read among the peasantry of his country, and have, in some degree, superseded the adventures of Bruce and Wallace, as recorded by Barbour and Blind Harry. Burns was well acquainted with all these. He had also before him the poems of Fergusson in the Scottish dialect, which have been produced in our own times, and of which it will be necessary to give a short account.

Fergusson was born of parents who had it in their power to procure him a liberal education, a circumstance, however, which in Scotland implies no very high

rank in society. From a well-written and apparently authentic account of his life,\* we learn that he spent six years at the schools of Edinburgh and Dundee, and several years at the universities of Edinburgh and St. Andrews. It appears that he was at one time destined for the Scottish Church; but, as he advanced towards manhood, he renounced that intention, and at Edinburgh entered the office of a Writer to the Signet, a title which designates a separate and higher order of Scottish attorneys. Fergusson had sensibility of mind, a warm and generous heart, and talents for society of the most attractive kind. To such a man no situation could be more dangerous than that in which he was placed. The excesses into which he was led impaired his feeble constitution, and he sunk under them in the month of October, 1774, in his twenty-third or twenty-fourth year. Burns was not acquainted with the poems of this youthful genius when he himself began to write poetry; and when he first saw them he had renounced the muses. But while he resided in the town of Irvine, meeting with Fergusson's *Scottish Poems*, he informs us that he "strung his lyre anew with emulating vigour." Touched by the sympathy originating in kindred genius, and in the forebodings of similar fortune, Burns regarded Fergusson with a partial and an affectionate admiration. Over his grave he erected a monument, as has already been mentioned; and his poems he has, in several instances, made the subjects of his imitation.

From this account of the Scottish poems known to Burns, these who are acquainted with them will see that they are chiefly humorous or pathetic; and under one or other of these descriptions most of his own poems will class. Let us compare him with his predecessors under each of these points of view, and close our examination with a few general observations.

It has frequently been observed that Scotland has produced, comparatively speaking, few writers who have excelled in humour. But this observation is true only

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\* In the Supplement to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. See also, *Campbell's Introduction to the History of Poetry in Scotland*, p. 288.

when applied to those who have continued to reside in their own country, and have confined themselves to composition in pure English; and in these circumstances it admits of an easy explanation. The Scottish poets who have written in the dialect of Scotland have been at all times remarkable for dwelling on subjects of humour, in which, indeed, many of them have excelled. It would be easy to show that the dialect of Scotland, having become provincial, is now scarcely suited to the more elevated kinds of poetry. If we may believe that the poem of *Christis Kirk of the Grene* was written by James the First of Scotland,\* this accomplished monarch who had received an English education under the direction of Henry the Fourth, and who bore arms under his gallant successor, gave the model on which the greater part of the humorous productions of the rustic muse of Scotland has been formed. *Christis Kirk of the Grene* was reprinted by Ramsay somewhat modernised in the orthography, and two cantos were added by him, in which he attempts to carry on the design. Hence the poem of King James is usually printed in Ramsay's works. The royal bard describes in the first canto a rustic dance, and afterwards a contention in archery, ending in an affray; Ramsay relates the restoration of concord and the renewal of the rural sports with the humours of a country wedding. Though each of the poets describes the manners of his respective age, yet in the whole piece there is a very sufficient uniformity; a striking proof of the identity of character in the Scottish peasantry at the two periods, distant from each other three hundred years. It is an honourable distinction to this body of men that their character and manners, very little embellished, have been found to be susceptible of an amusing and interesting species of poetry, and it must appear not a little curious

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\* Notwithstanding the evidence produced on this subject by Mr. Tytler, the Editor acknowledges his being somewhat of a sceptic on this point. Sir David Dalrymple inclines to the opinion that it was written by his successor, James the Fifth. There are difficulties attending this supposition also. But on the subject of Scottish Antiquities, the Editor is an incompetent judge.

that the single nation of modern Europe which possesses an original rural poetry should have received the model, followed by their rustic bards, from the monarch on the throne.

The two additional cantos to *Christis Kirk of the Grene*, written by Ramsay, though objectionable in point of delicacy, are among the happiest of his productions. His chief excellence, indeed, lay in the description of rural characters, incidents, and scenery, for he did not possess any very high powers either of imagination or of understanding. He was well acquainted with the peasantry of Scotland, their lives and opinions. The subject was in a great measure new; his talents were equal to the subject, and he has shown that it can be happily adapted to pastoral history. In his *Gentle Shepherd*, the characters are delineations from nature; descriptive parts are in the genuine style of beautiful simplicity; the passions and affections of rural life are finely portrayed; and the heart is pleasingly interested in the happiness that is bestowed on innocence and virtue. Throughout the whole there is an air of reality which the most careless reader cannot but perceive; and, in fact, no poem ever, perhaps, acquired so high a reputation, in which truth received so little embellishment from the imagination. In his pastoral songs, and in his rural tales, Ramsay appears to less advantage, indeed, but still with considerable attraction. The story of the *Monk and the Miller's Wife*, though somewhat licentious, may rank with the happiest productions of Prior or La Fontaine. But when he attempts subjects from higher life, and aims at pure English composition, he is feeble and uninteresting, and seldom even reaches mediocrity.\* Neither are his familiar epistles and elegies in the Scottish dialect entitled to much approbation. Though Fergusson had higher powers of imagination than Ramsay, his genius was not of the highest order; nor did his learning, which was considerable, improve his genius. His poems, written in pure English, in which he often follows classical models,

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\* See *The Morning Interview*, &c.



though superior to the English poems of Ramsay, seldom rise above mediocrity; but in those composed in the Scottish dialect he is often very successful. He was in general, however, less happy than Ramsay in the subjects of his muse. As he spent the greater part of his life in Edinburgh, and wrote for his amusement in the intervals of business or dissipation, his Scottish poems are chiefly founded on the incidents of a town life, which, though they are susceptible of humour, do not admit of those delineations of scenery and manners which vivify the rural poetry of Ramsay, and which so agreeably amuse the fancy and interest the heart. The town eclogues of Fergusson, if we may so denominate them, are, however, faithful to nature, and often distinguished by a very happy vein of humour. His poems entitled *The Daft Days*, *The King's Birthday in Edinburgh*, *Leith Races*, and *The Hallow Fair*, will justify this character; in these, particularly in the last, he imitated *Christis Kirk of the Grene*, as Ramsay had done before him. His *Address to the Tron Kirk Bell* is an exquisite piece of humour, which Burns has scarcely excelled. In appreciating the genius of Fergusson, it ought to be recollected that his poems are the careless effusions of an irregular though amiable young man, who wrote for the periodical papers of the day, and who died in early youth. Had his life been prolonged under happier circumstances of fortune, he would probably have risen to much higher reputation. He might have excelled in rural poetry; for, though his professed pastorals on the established Silician model are stale and uninteresting, *The Farmer's Ingle*,\* which may be considered as a Scottish pastoral, is the happiest of all his productions, and certainly was the archetype of the *Cotter's Saturday Night*. Fergusson, and more especially Burns, have shown that the character and manners of the peasantry of Scotland of the present times are as well adapted to poetry as in the days of Ramsay or of the author of *Christis Kirk of the Grene*.

The humour of Burns is of a richer vein than that of

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\* The farmer's fireside.

Ramsay or Fergusson, both of whom, as he himself informs us, he had "frequently in his eye, but rather with a view to kindle at their flame than to servile imitation." His descriptive powers, whether the objects on which they are employed be comic or serious, animate or inanimate, are of the highest order. A superiority of this kind is essential to every species of poetical excellence. In one of his earlier poems his plans seems to be to inculcate a lesson of contentment on the lower classes of society, by showing that their superiors are neither much better nor happier than themselves; and this he chooses to execute in the form of a dialogue between two dogs. He introduces this dialogue by an account of the persons and characters of the speakers. The first, whom he has named *Cæsar*, is a dog of condition—

His locked, letter'd, braw brass collar,  
Show'd him the gentleman and scholar.

High-bred though he is, he is, however, full of condescension—

At kirk or market, mill or smiddie,  
Nae tawted tyke, tho' e'er so duddie,  
But he wad stan't as glad to see him,  
And stroan't on stanes an' hillocks wi' him.

The other, *Luath*, is a "ploughman's collie," but a cur of a good heart and a sound understanding—

His honest, sonsie, bawsn't face,  
Ay gat him friends in ilka place;  
His breast was white, his towsie back  
Weel clad wi' coat o' glossy black;  
His gawcie tail, wi' upward curl,  
Hang o'er his hurdies wi' a swirl.

Never were *two dogs* so exquisitely delineated. Their gambols before they sit down to moralise are described with an equal degree of happiness, and through the whole dialogue the character, as well as the different condition of the two speakers, is kept in view. The speech of *Luath*, in which he enumerates the comforts of the poor, gives the

following account of their merriment on the first day of the year:—

That merry day the year begins,  
 They bar the door on frosty winds;  
 The nappy reeks wi' mantling ream  
 And sheds a heart-inspiring stream;  
 The luntin' pipe, and sneeshin' mill,  
 Are handed round wi' right guid will;  
 The canty auld folks crackin' crouse,  
 The young anes rantin' thro' the house—  
 My heart has been sae fain to see them,  
 That I for joy hae barkit wi' them.

Of all the animals who have moralised on human affairs since the days of Æsop, the dog seems best entitled to this privilege, as well from his superior sagacity as from his being more than any other the friend and associate of man. The dogs of Burns, excepting in their talent for moralising, are downright dogs, and not like the horses of Swift, or the *Hind and Panther* of Dryden, men in the shape of brutes. It is this circumstance that heightens the humour of the dialogue. The "twa dogs" are constantly kept before our eyes, and the contrast between their form and character as dogs, and the sagacity of their conversation, heightens the humour and deepens the impression of the poet's satire. Though in this poem the chief excellence may be considered as humour, yet great talents are displayed in its composition; the happiest powers of description and the deepest insight into the human heart.\* It is seldom, however, that the humour of Burns appears in so simple a form. The liveliness of his sensibility frequently impels him to introduce into subjects of humour emotions of tenderness or of pity; and, where occasion admits, he is sometimes carried on

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\* When his poem first appeared, it was thought by some very surprising that a peasant, who had not an opportunity of associating even with a simple gentleman, should have been able to portray the character of high life with such accuracy. And when it was recollected that he had probably been at the races of Ayr, where nobility as well as gentry are to be seen, it was concluded that the race-ground had been the field of his observation. This was sagacious enough; but it did not require such instruction to inform Burns that human nature is essentially the same in the high and the low; and a genius which comprehends the human mind easily comprehends the accidental varieties introduced by situation.

to exert the highest powers of imagination. In such instances he leaves the society of Ramsay and of Fergusson, and associates himself with the masters of English poetry, whose language he frequently assumes.

Of the union of tenderness and humour, examples may be found in *The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie*, in *The Auld Farmer's New-Year's Morning Salutation to his Mare Maggie*, and in many of his other poems. The praise of whisky is a favourite subject with Burns. To this he dedicates his poem of *Scotch Drink*. After mentioning its cheering influence in a variety of situations, he describes with singular liveliness and power of fancy its stimulating effects on the blacksmith working at the forge—

Nae mercy, then, for airn and steel;  
The brawnie, bainie, ploughman chiel,  
Brings hard owre-hip, wi' sturdy wheel,  
The strong fore-hammer,  
Till block an' studdie ring an' reel  
Wi' dinsome clamour.

On another occasion,\* choosing to exalt whisky above wine, he introduces a comparison between the natives of more genial climes, to whom the vine furnishes their beverage, and his own countrymen who drink the spirit of malt. The description of the Scotsman is humorous—

But bring a Scotsman frae his hill,  
Clap in his cheek a Highland gill,†  
Say, such is royal George's will,  
An' there's the foe,  
He has nae thought but how to kill  
Twa at a blow.

Here the notion of danger rouses the imagination of the poet. He goes on thus—

Nae cauld, faint-hearted doubtings tease him;  
Death comes—wi' fearless eye he sees him;  
Wi' bluidy hand a welcome gies him,  
An' when he fa's,  
His latest draught o' breathing les'es him  
In faint huzzas.

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\*The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer to the Scotch Representatives in Parliament.

† Of whisky.

Again, however, he sinks into humour, and concludes the poem with the following most laughable but most irreverent apostrophe:—

Scotland, my auld, respected mither!  
 Tho' whyles ye moistify your leather,  
 Till whare ye sit, on craps o' heather,  
     Ye tine your dam:  
*Freedom and whiskey gang thegither,*  
     Tak' aff your dram!

Of this union of humour with the higher powers of imagination, instances may be found in the poem entitled *Death and Dr. Hornbook*, and in almost every stanza of the *Address to the Deil*, one of the happiest of his productions. After reproaching this terrible being with all his "doings" and misdeeds, in the course of which he passes through a series of Scottish superstitions, and rises at times into a high strain of poetry, he concludes this address, delivered in a tone of great familiarity, not altogether unmixed with apprehension, in the following words:—

But, fare ye weel, auld Nickie ben!  
 O wad ye tak' a thought an' men'!  
 Ye aiblins might—I dinna ken—  
     Still hae a stake—  
 I'm wae to think upo' yon den  
     E'en for your sake!

Humour and tenderness are here so happily intermixed that it is impossible to say which preponderates.

Fergusson wrote a dialogue between the *Causeway* and the *Plainstones*\* of Edinburgh. This probably suggested to Burns his dialogue between the Old and New Bridge over the river Ayr. The nature of such subjects requires that they shall be treated humorously, and Fergusson has attempted nothing beyond this. Though the *Causeway* and the *Plainstones* talk together, no attempt is made to personify the speakers. A "cadie"† heard the conversation and reported it to the poet.

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\* The middle of the street and the side-way.

† A messenger.

In the dialogue between the *Brigs of Ayr*, Burns himself is the auditor, and the time and occasion on which it occurred is related with great circumstantiality. The poet, "pressed by care," or "inspired by whim," had left his bed in the town of Ayr and wandered out alone in the darkness and solitude of a winter night to the mouth of the river, where the stillness was interrupted only by the rushing sound of the influx of the tide. It was after midnight. The Dungeon clock had struck two, and the sound had been repeated by Wallace Tower.\* All else was hushed. The moon shone brightly, and

The chilly frost, beneath the silver beam,  
Crept gently-crusting, o'er the glittering stream.

In this situation the listening bard hears the "clanging sugh" of wings moving through the air, and speedily perceives two beings, reared the one on the Old, the other on the New Bridge, whose form and attire he describes, and whose conversation with each other he rehearses. These genii enter into a comparison of the respective edifices over which they preside, and afterwards, as is usual between the old and the young, compare modern characters and manners with those of past times. They differ, as may be expected, and taunt and scold each other in broad Scotch. This conversation, which is certainly humorous, may be considered as the proper business of the poem. As the debate runs high and threatens serious consequences, all at once it is interrupted by a new scene of wonders—

. . . . . All before their sight  
A fairy train appeared in order bright;  
Adown the glittering stream the featly danc'd;  
Bright to the moon their various dresses glanc'd;  
They footed o'er the wat'ry glass so neat,  
The infant ice scarce bent beneath their feet;  
While arts of Minstrelsy among them rung,  
And soul-ennobling Bards heroic ditties sung.

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\*The two steeples of Ayr.

The Genius of the Stream in front appears—  
 A venerable chief, advanc'd in years;  
 His hoary head with water-lilies crown'd,  
 His manly leg with garter-tangle bound.

Next follow a number of allegorical beings, among whom are the four seasons, Rural Joy, Plenty, Hospitality, and Courage.

Benevolence, with mild benignant air,  
 A female form, came from the tow'rs of Stair;  
 Learning and Wealth in equal measures trode,  
 From simple Catrine, their long-lov'd abode:  
 Last, white-rob'd Peace, crown'd with a hazel-wreath,  
 To rustic Agriculture did bequeath  
 The broken iron instruments of Death;  
 At sight of whom our Sprites forgot their kindling wrath.

This poem, irregular and imperfect as it is, displays various and powerful talents, and may serve to illustrate the genius of Burns. In particular, it affords a striking instance of his being carried beyond his original purpose by the powers of imagination.

In Fergusson's poems, the *Plainstones and Causeway* contrast the characters of the different persons who walked upon them. Burns probably conceived that, by a dialogue between the Old and New Bridges, he might form a humorous contrast between ancient and modern manners in the town of Ayr. Such a dialogue could only be supposed to pass in the stillness of the night, and this led our poet into a description of a midnight scene, which excited in a high degree the powers of his imagination. During the whole dialogue the scenery is present to his fancy, and at length it suggests to him a fairy dance of ærial beings under the beams of the moon, by which the wrath of the Genii of the *Brigs of Ayr* is appeased. Incongruous as the different parts of this poem are, it is not an incongruity that displeases, and we have only to regret that the poet did not bestow a little pains in making the figures more correct, and in smoothing the versification.

The epistles of Burns, in which may be included his

*Dedication to G. H., Esq.*, discover, like his other writings, the powers of a superior understanding. They display deep insight into human nature, a gay and happy strain of reflection, great independence of sentiment, and generosity of heart. It is to be regretted that in his *Holy Fair*, and in some of his other poems, his humour degenerates into personal satire, and that it is not sufficiently guarded in other respects. The *Halloween* of Burns is free from every objection of this sort. It is interesting, not merely from its humorous description of manners, but as it records the spell and charms used in the celebration of a festival, now, even in Scotland, falling into neglect, but which was once observed over the greater part of Britain and Ireland.\* These charms are supposed to afford an insight into futurity, especially on the subject of marriage, the most interesting event of rural life. In the *Halloween* a female, in performing one of the spells, has occasion to go out by moonlight to dip her shift sleeve into a stream *running towards the south*.† It was not necessary for Burns to give a description of this stream. But it was the character of his ardent mind to pour forth not merely what the occasion required but what it admitted, and the temptation to describe so beautiful a natural object by moonlight was not to be resisted—

Whyles o'er a lin the burnie plays  
 As thro' the glen it wimpl't;  
 Whyles round a rocky scaur it strays;  
 Whyles in a weil it dimpl't;  
 Whyles glitter'd to the nightly rays,  
 Wi' bickering, dancing dazzle;  
 Whyles cookit underneath the braes,  
 Beneath the spreading hazel,  
 Unseen that night.

Those who understand the Scottish dialect will allow this to be one of the finest instances of description which the records of poetry afford. Though of a very different nature, it may be compared in point of excellence with

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\* In Ireland it is still celebrated. It is not quite in disuse in Wales.

† See *Halloween*, stanzas xxiv. and xxv.



Thomson's description of a river swollen by the rains of winter, bursting through the streights that confine its torrent, "boiling, wheeling, foaming, and thundering along." \*

In pastoral or, to speak more correctly, in rural poetry of a serious nature, Burns excelled equally as in that of a humorous kind, and, using less of the Scottish dialect in his serious poems, he becomes more generally intelligible. It is difficult to decide whether the *Address to the Mouse*, whose nest was turned up with the plough, should be considered as serious or comic. Be this as it may, the poem is one of the happiest and most finished of his productions. If we smile at the "bickering brattle" of this little flying animal, it is a smile of tenderness and pity. The descriptive part is admirable, the moral reflections beautiful, and arising directly out of the occasion; and in the conclusion there is a deep melancholy, a sentiment of doubt and dread, that rises to the sublime. *The Address to a Mountain Daisy*, turned down with the plough, is a poem of the same nature, though somewhat inferior in point of originality, as well as in the interest produced. To extract out of incidents so common and seemingly so trivial as these so fine a train of sentiment and imagery is the surest proof, as well as the most brilliant triumph, of original genius. *The Vision*, in two cantos, from which a beautiful extract is taken by Mr. Mackenzie in the 97th number of *The Lounger*, is a poem of great and various excellence. The opening, in which the poet describes his own state of mind, retiring in the evening, wearied from the labours of the day, to moralise on his conduct and prospects, is truly interesting. The chamber, if we may so term it, in which he sits down to muse, is an exquisite painting—

There, lanely, by the ingle-cheek  
I sat and ey'd the spewing reek,  
That fill'd, wi' hoast-provoking smeeek,  
The auld clay biggin';  
An' heard the restless rattons squeak  
About the riggin'.

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\* See Thomson's *Winter*.

To reconcile to our imagination the entrance of an aerial being into a mansion of this kind required the powers of Burns—he, however, succeeds. Coila enters, and her countenance, attitude, and dress, unlike those of other spiritual beings, are distinctly portrayed. To the painting on her mantle, on which is depicted the most striking scenery, as well as the most distinguished characters of his native country, some exceptions may be made. The mantle of Coila, like the cup of Thyrsis,\* and the shield of Achilles, is too much crowded with figures, and some of the objects represented upon it are scarcely admissible, according to the principles of design. The generous temperament of Burns led him into these exuberances. In his second edition he enlarged the number of figures originally introduced that he might include objects to which he was attached by sentiments of affection, gratitude, or patriotism. The second *Duan* or canto of this poem, in which Coila describes her own nature and occupations, particularly her superintendence of his infant genius, and in which she reconciles him to the character of a bard, is an elevated and solemn strain of poetry, ranking in all respects, excepting the harmony of numbers, with the highest productions of the English muse. The concluding stanza, compared with that already quoted, will show to what a height Burns rises in this poem from the point at which he set out—

*And wear thou this—she solemn said:—  
And bound the holly round my head;  
The polished leaves, and berries red,  
Did rustling play:  
And like a passing thought, she fled  
In light away.*

In various poems Burns has exhibited the picture of a mind under the deep impression of real sorrow. *The Lament*, the *Ode to Ruin*, *Despondency*, and *Winter, a Dirge*, are of this character. In the first of these poems, the 8th stanza, which describes a sleepless night from anguish of mind, is particularly striking. Burns often

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\* See the first *Idyllium* of Theocritus.

indulged in those melancholy views of the nature and condition of man, which are so congenial to the temperament of sensibility. The poem entitled *Man was made to Mourn* affords an instance of this kind, and *The Winter Night* is of the same description. The last is highly characteristic, both of the temper of mind and of the condition of Burns. It begins with a description of a dreadful storm on a night in winter. The poet represents himself as lying in bed and listening to its howling. In this situation he naturally turns his thoughts to the *Owrie*\* *Cattle and the Silly*† *Sheep* exposed to all the violence of the tempest. Having lamented their fate, he proceeds in the following manner:—

Ilk happing bird—wee, helpless thing!  
That in the merry months o' spring,  
Delighted me to hear thee sing,  
What comes o' thee?  
Whare wilt thou cow'r thy chittering wing,  
An' close thy e'e?

Other reflections of the same nature occur to his mind, and as the midnight moon "muffled with clouds" casts her dreary light on the window, thoughts of a darker and more melancholy nature crowd upon him. In this state of mind he hears a voice pouring through the gloom a solemn and plaintive strain of reflection. The mourner compares the fury of the elements with that of man to his brother man, and finds the former light in the balance.

See stern Oppression's iron grip,  
Or mad Ambition's gory hand,  
Sending, like blood-hounds from the slip,  
Woe, want, and murder o'er the land.

He pursues this train of reflection through a variety of particulars, in the course of which he introduces the following animated apostrophe:—

O ye! who, sunk in beds of down,  
Feel not a want but what yourselves create,  
Think, for a moment, on his wretched fate,  
Whom friends and fortune quite disown;

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\* *Owrie*, out-lying. *Owrie-cattle*, cattle that are unhoused all winter. *Owrie*, drooping, shivering.

† *Silly* is in this, as in other places, a term of compassion and endearment.

Ill-satisfied keen Nature's clam'rous call,  
 Stretched on his straw he lays him down to sleep,  
 While thro' the ragged roof and chinky wall,  
 Chill o'er his slumbers piles the drifts heap.

The strain of sentiment which runs through the poem is noble, though the execution is unequal, and the versification is defective.

Among the serious poems of Burns, *The Cotter's Saturday Night* is perhaps entitled to the first rank. *The Farmer's Ingle* of Fergusson evidently suggested the plan of this poem, as has been already mentioned; but after the plan was formed Burns trusted entirely to his own powers for the execution. Fergusson's poem is certainly very beautiful. It has all the charms which depend on rural characters and manners happily portrayed and exhibited under circumstances highly grateful to the imagination. *The Farmer's Ingle* begins with describing the return of evening. The toils of the day are over, and the farmer retires to his comfortable fireside. The reception which he and his men servants receive from the careful housewife is pleasingly described. After their supper is over, they begin to talk on the rural events of the day.

'Bout kirk and market eke their tales gae on,  
 How Jock woo'd Jenny here to be his bride;  
 And there how Marion for a bastard son,  
 Upo' the cutty-stool was forced to ride,  
 The wae'fu' scauld o' our Mess John to bide.

The "Guidame" is next introduced as forming a circle round the fire in the midst of her grandchildren, and while she spins from the rock and the spindle plays on her "russet lap," she is relating to the young ones tales of witches and ghosts. The poet exclaims—

O mock na this, my friends! but rather mourn;  
 Ye in life's brawest spring wi' reason clear,  
 Wi' eild our idle fancies a' return,  
 And dim our dolefu' days wi' bairnly fear;  
 The mind's aye cradled when the grave is near.

In the meantime the farmer, wearied with the fatigues of the day, stretches himself at length on the *settle*, a sort

of rustic couch which extends on one side of the fire, and the cat and house dog leap upon it to receive his caresses. Here resting at his ease he gives his directions to his men servants for the succeeding day. The housewife follows his example and gives her orders to the maidens. By degrees the oil in the cruse begins to fail, the fire runs low, sleep steals on this rustic group, and they move off to enjoy their peaceful slumbers. The poet concludes by bestowing his blessings on the "husbandman and all his tribe."

This is an original and truly interesting pastoral. It possesses everything required in this species of composition. We might have perhaps said everything that it admits had not Burns written his *Cotter's Saturday Night*.

The cottager, returning from his labours, has no servants to accompany him to partake of his fare, or to receive his instructions. The circle which he joins is composed of his wife and children only; and if it admits of less variety, it affords an opportunity for representing scenes that more strongly interest the affections. The younger children running to meet him and clambering round his knee, the elder, returning from their weekly labours with the neighbouring farmers, dutifully depositing their little gains with their parents and receiving their father's blessing and instructions; the incidents of the courtship of Jenny, their eldest daughter, "woman grown," are circumstances of the most interesting kind, which are most happily delineated; and, after their frugal supper, the representation of these humble cottagers forming a wider circle round the hearth and uniting in the worship of God is a picture, the most deeply affecting of any which the rural muse has ever presented to the view. Burns was admirably adapted to this delineation. Like all men of genius he was of the temperament of devotion, and the powers of memory co-operated in this instance with the sensibility of his heart and the fervour of his imagination.\* *The Cotter's Saturday Night* is tender and moral, it is solemn and devotional, and rises at length into

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\* The reader will recollect that the Cotter was Burns's father.

a strain of grandeur and sublimity which modern poetry has not surpassed. The noble sentiments of patriotism with which it concludes correspond with the rest of the poem. In no age or country have the pastoral muses breathed such elevated accents, if the *Messiah* of Pope be excepted, which is, indeed, a pastoral in form only. It is to be regretted that Burns did not employ his genius on other subjects of the same nature, which the manners and customs of the Scottish peasantry would have amply supplied. Such poetry is not to be estimated by the degree of pleasure which it bestows; it sinks deeply into the heart, and is calculated far beyond any other human means for giving permanence to the scenes and characters it so exquisitely describes.

Before we conclude, it will be proper to offer a few observations on the lyric productions of Burns. His compositions of this kind are chiefly songs, generally in the Scottish dialect, and always after the model of the Scottish songs, on the general character and moral influence of which some observations have already been offered. We may hazard a few more particular remarks.

Of the historic or heroic ballads of Scotland it is unnecessary to speak. Burns has nowhere imitated them—a circumstance to be regretted—since in this species of composition, from its admitting the more terrible as well as the softer graces of poetry, he was eminently qualified to have excelled. The Scottish songs which served as a model of Burns are almost, without exception, pastoral, or rather rural. Such of them as are comic frequently treat of a rustic courtship or a country wedding, or they describe the differences of opinion which arise in married life. Burns has imitated this species, and surpassed his models. The song beginning *Husband, husband, cease your strife*, may be cited in support of this observation.\*

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\* The dialogues between husbands and their wives, which form the subjects of the Scottish songs, are almost all ludicrous and satirical, and in these contests the lady is generally victorious. From the collections of Mr. Pinkerton we find that the comic muse of Scotland delighted in such representations, from very early times, in her rude dramatic efforts, as well as in her rustic songs.

His other comic songs are of equal merit. In the rural songs of Scotland, whether humorous or tender, the sentiments are given to particular characters, and very generally the incidents are referred to particular scenery. This last circumstance may be considered as the distinguishing feature of the Scottish songs, and on it a considerable part of their attraction depends. On all occasions the sentiments, of whatever nature, are delivered in the character of the person principally interested. If love be described, it is not as it is observed, but as it is felt; and the passion is delineated under a particular aspect. Neither is it the fiercer impulse of desires that are expressed, as in the celebrated ode of Sappho, the model of so many modern songs, but those gentler emotions of tenderness and affection, which do not entirely absorb the lover, but permit him to associate his emotions with the charms of external nature, and breathe the accents of purity and innocence as well as of love. In these respects the love songs of Scotland are honourably distinguished from the most admired classical compositions of the same kind; and by such associations a variety, as well as liveliness, is given to the representation of this passion, which are not to be found in the poetry of Greece or Rome, or perhaps of any other nation. Many of the love songs of Scotland describe scenes of rural courtship; many may be considered as invocations from lovers to their mistresses. On such occasions a degree of interest and reality is given to the sentiments by the spot destined to these happy interviews being particularised. The lovers perhaps meet at the Bush aboon Traquair, or on the Banks of Ettrick; the nymphs are invoked to wander among the wilds of Roslin or the woods of Invermay. Nor is the spot merely pointed out; the scenery is often described as well as the characters, so as to present a complete picture to the fancy.\* Thus the maxim of Horace *ut pictura poesis* is

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\* One or two examples may illustrate this observation. A Scottish song, written about a hundred years ago, begins thus:—

On Ettrick banks, on a summer's night  
At gloaming, when the sheep drove hame,  
I met my lassie, braw and tight,  
Come wading barefoot a' her lane:

faithfully observed by those rustic bards, who are guided by the same impulse of nature and sensibility which influenced the father of epic poetry, on whose example the precept of the Roman poet was, perhaps, founded. By this means the imagination is employed to interest the feelings. When we do not conceive distinctly, we do not sympathise deeply in any human affection; and we conceive nothing in the abstract. Abstraction, so useful in morals and so essential in science, must be abandoned when the heart is to be subdued by the powers of poetry or of eloquence. The bards of a ruder condition of society paint individual objects; and hence, among other causes, the easy access they obtain to the heart. Generalisation is the vice of poets whose learning overpowers their genius, of poets of a refined and scientific age.

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My heart grew light, I ran, I flang  
 My arms about her lily neck,  
 And kiss'd and clasped there fu' lang,  
 My words they were na mony feck.\*

The lover, who is a Highlander, goes on to relate the language he employed with his Lowland maid to win her heart, and to persuade her to fly with him to the Highland hills, there to share his fortune. The sentiments are in themselves beautiful. But we feel them with double force while we conceive that they were addressed by a lover to his mistress, whom he met all alone, on a summer's evening, by the banks of a beautiful stream, which some of us have actually seen, and which all of us can paint to our imagination. Let us take another example. It is now a nymph that speaks. Hear how she expresses herself—

How blythe each morn was I to see  
 My swain come o'er the hill!  
 He skipt the burn, and flew to me,  
 I met him with guid will.

Here is another picture drawn by the pencil of Nature. We see a shepherdess standing by the side of a brook, watching her lover as he descends the opposite hill. He bounds lightly along; he approaches nearer and nearer; he leaps the brook, and flies into her arms. In the recollection of these circumstances, the surrounding scenery becomes endeared to the fair mourner, and she bursts into the following exclamation:—

O the broom, the bonnie, bonnie broom,  
 The broom of the Cowdenknowes;  
 I wish I were with my dear swain,  
 With his pipe and my ewes.

Thus the individual spot of this happy interview is pointed out, and the picture is completed.

\* *Mony feck*, not very many.



The dramatic style which prevails so much in the Scottish songs, while it contributes greatly to the interest they excite, also shows that they have originated among a people in the earlier stages of society. Where this form of composition appears in songs of a modern date, it indicates that they have been written after the ancient model.\*

The Scottish songs are of very unequal poetical merit, and this inequality often extends to the different parts of the same song. Those that are humorous or characteristic of manners have in general the merit of copying nature; those that are serious are tender and often sweetly interesting, but seldom exhibit high powers of imagination, which, indeed, do not easily find a place in this species of composition. The alliance of the words of the Scottish songs with the music has, in some instances, given to the

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\* That the dramatic form of writing characterises the productions of an early, or, what amounts to the same thing, of a rude stage of society, may be illustrated by a reference to the most ancient compositions that we know of, the Hebrew scriptures and the writings of Homer. The form of dialogue is adopted in the old Scottish ballads even in narration, whenever the situations described become interesting. This sometimes produces a very striking effect, of which an instance may be given from the ballad of *Edom o' Gordon*, a composition apparently of the sixteenth century. The story of the ballad is shortly this:—The castle of Rhodes, in the absence of its lord, is attacked by the robber Edom o' Gordon. The lady stands on her defence, beats off the assailants, and wounds Gordon, who, in his rage, orders the castle to be set on fire. That his orders are carried into effect, we learn from the expostulation of the lady, who is represented as standing on the battlements and remonstrating on this barbarity. She is interrupted—

O then bespake her little son,  
Sate on his nourice knee;  
Says, "Mither dear, gi' owre this house,  
For the reek it smithers me."

"I wad gie a' my gowd, my childe,  
Sae wad I a' my fee,  
For ae blast o' the westlin' wind,  
To blaw the reek frae thee."

The circumstantiality of the Scottish love songs, and the dramatic form which prevails so generally in them, probably arises from their being the descendants and successors of the ancient ballads. In the beautiful modern song of *Mary of Castle-Cary*, the dramatic form has a very happy effect. The same may be said of *Donald and Flora*, and *Come under my Plaidie*, by the same author, Mr. Macniel.

former a popularity which otherwise they would not have obtained.

The association of the words and the music of these songs with the more beautiful parts of the scenery of Scotland contributes to the same effect. It has given them not merely popularity but permanence; it has imparted to the works of man some portion of the durability of the works of nature. If, from our imperfect experience of the past, we may judge with any confidence respecting the future, songs of this description are of all others least likely to die. In the changes of language they may, no doubt, suffer change, but the associated strain of sentiment and of music will perhaps survive while the clear stream sweeps down the vale of Yarrow, or the yellow broom waves on Cowdenknowes.

The first attempts of Burns in song-writing were not very successful. His habitual inattention to the exactness of rhymes and to the harmony of numbers, arising probably from the models on which his versification was formed, were faults likely to appear to more disadvantage in this species of composition than in any other, and we may also remark that the strength of his imagination and the exuberance of his sensibility were with difficulty restrained within the limits of gentleness, delicacy, and tenderness, which seemed to be assigned to the love songs of his nation. Burns was better adapted by nature for following in such compositions the model of the Grecian than that of the Scottish muse. By study and practice he, however, surmounted all these obstacles. In his earlier songs there is some ruggedness, but this gradually disappears in his successive efforts, and some of his later compositions of this kind may be compared in polished delicacy with the finest songs in our language, while in the eloquence of sensibility they surpass them all.

The songs of Burns, like the models he followed and excelled, are often dramatic, and, for the greater part, amatory, and the beauties of rural nature are everywhere associated with the passions and emotions of the mind. Disdaining to copy the works of others, he has not,

like some poets of great name, admitted into his descriptions exotic imagery. The landscapes he has painted, and the objects with which they are embellished, are, in every single instance, such as are to be found in his own country. In a mountainous region, especially when it is comparatively rude and naked, the most beautiful scenery will always be found in the valleys and on the banks of the wooded streams. Such scenery is peculiarly interesting at the close of a summer day. As we advance northward the number of the days of summer, indeed, diminishes; but from this cause, as well as from the mildness of the temperature, the attraction of the season increases, and the summer night becomes still more beautiful. The greater obliquity of the sun's path on the ecliptic prolongs the grateful season of twilight to the midnight hours, and the shades of evening seem to mingle with the morning's dawn. The rural poets of Scotland, as may be expected, associate in their songs the expressions of passion with the most beautiful of their scenery in the fairest season of the year, and generally in those hours of the evening, when the beauties of nature are most interesting.\*

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\* A lady, of whose genius the editor entertains high admiration (Mrs. Barbauld), has fallen into an error in this respect. In her prefatory address to the works of Collins, speaking of the natural objects that may be employed to give interest to the descriptions of passion, she observes, "They present an inexhaustible variety, from the Song of Solomon, breathing of cassia, myrrh, and cinnamon, to the *Gentle Shepherd* of Ramsay, whose damsels carry their milking-pails through the frosts and snows of their less genial, but not less pastoral country." The damsels of Ramsay do not walk in the midst of frost and snow. Almost all the scenes of the *Gentle Shepherd* are laid in the open air, amidst beautiful natural objects, and at the most genial season of the year. Ramsay introduces all his acts with a prefatory description to assure us of this. The fault of the climate of Britain is not that it does not afford us the beauties of summer, but that the season of such beauties is comparatively short, and even uncertain. There are days and nights, even in the northern division of the island, which equal, or, perhaps, surpass, what are to be found in the latitude of Sicily or of Greece. Buchanan, when he wrote his exquisite *Ode to May*, felt the charm as well as the transiency of these happy days—

Salve fugacis gloria seculi,  
Salve secunda digna dies nota,  
Salve vetustæ vitæ imago,  
Et specimen venientis Ævi.

To all these adventitious circumstances, on which so much of the effect of poetry depends, great attention is paid by Burns. There is scarcely a single song of his in which particular scenery is not described, or allusions made to natural objects, remarkable for beauty or interest; and though his descriptions are not so full as are sometimes met with in the older Scottish songs, they are in the highest degree appropriate and interesting. Instances in proof of this might be quoted from the *Lea Rig*, *Highland Mary*, *The Soldier's Return*, *Logan Water*; from that beautiful pastoral, *Bonnie Jean*, and a great number of others. Occasionally the force of his genius carried him beyond the usual boundaries of Scottish song, and the natural objects introduced have more of the character of sublimity. An instance of this kind is noticed by Mr. Syme, and many others might be adduced—

Had I a cave on some wild distant shore,  
Where the winds howl to the waves' dashing roar;  
There would I weep my woes,  
There seek my lost repose,  
Till grief my eyes should close,  
Ne'er to wake more.

In one song, the scene of which is laid in a winter night, the "wan moon" is described as "setting behind the white waves"; in another the "storms" are apostrophised, and commanded to "rest in the cave of their slumbers." On several occasions the genius of Burns loses sight entirely of his archetypes and rises into a strain of uniform sublimity. Instances of this kind appear in *Libertie*, a *Vision*; and in his two war songs, *Bruce to his Troops* and the *Song of Death*. These last are of a description of which we have no other in our language. The martial songs of our nation are not military, but naval. If we were to seek a comparison of these songs of Burns with others of a similar nature, we must have recourse to the poetry of ancient Greece or of modern Gaul.

Burns has made an important addition to the songs of Scotland. In his compositions the poetry equals and some-

times surpasses the music. He has enlarged the poetical scenery of his country. Many of her rivers and mountains, formerly unknown to the muse, are now consecrated by his immortal verse. The Doon, the Lugar, the Ayr, the Nith, and the Cluden will in future, like the Yarrow, the Tweed, and the Tay, be considered as classic streams, and their borders will be trodden with new and superior emotions.

The greater part of the songs of Burns were written after he removed into the county of Dumfries. Influenced, perhaps, by habits formed in early life, he usually composed while walking in the open air. While engaged in writing these songs his favourite walks were on the banks of the Nith or of the Cluden, particularly near the ruins of Lincluden Abbey; and this beautiful scenery he has very happily described under various aspects as it appears during the softness and serenity of evening, and during the stillness and solemnity of the moonlight night.

There is no species of poetry, the productions of the drama not excepted, so much calculated to influence the morals as well as the happiness of a people as those popular verses which are associated with national airs, and which, being learnt in the years of infancy, make a deep impression on the heart before the evolution of the powers of the understanding. The compositions of Burns of this kind, now presented in a collected form to the world, make a most important addition to the popular songs of his nation. Like all his other writings, they exhibit independence of sentiment; they are peculiarly calculated to increase those ties which bind generous hearts to their native soil, and to the domestic circle of their infancy; and to cherish those sensibilities which, under due restriction, form the purest happiness of our nature. If in his unguarded moments he composed some songs on which this praise cannot be bestowed, let us hope that they will speedily be forgotten. In several instances where Scottish airs were allied to words objectionable in point of delicacy, Burns has substituted others of a purer character. On such occasions, without changing the subject, he has changed the sentiments. A proof of this may be seen in the air of *John*

*Anderson, my Joe*, which is now united to words that breathe a strain of conjugal tenderness that is as highly moral as it is exquisitely affecting.

Few circumstances could afford a more striking proof of the strength of Burns's genius than the general circulation of his poems in England, notwithstanding the dialect in which the greater part are written, and which might be supposed to render them here uncouth or obscure. In some instances he has used this dialect on subjects of a sublime nature, but, in general, he confines it to sentiments or descriptions of a tender or humorous kind; and, where he rises into elevation of thought, he assumes a purer English style. The singular faculty he possessed of mingling in the same poem humorous sentiments and descriptions, with imagery of a sublime and terrific nature, enabled him to use this variety of dialect on some occasions with striking effect. His poem of *Tam o' Shanter* affords an instance of this. There he passes from a scene of the lowest humour to situations of the most awful and terrible kind. He is a musician that runs from the highest to the lowest of his keys, and the use of the Scottish dialect enables him to add two additional notes to the bottom of his scale.

Great efforts have been made by the inhabitants of Scotland of the superior ranks to approximate in their speech to the pure English standard, and this has made it difficult to write in the Scottish dialect without exciting in them some feelings of disgust, which in England are scarcely felt. An Englishman who understands the meaning of the Scottish words is not offended, nay, on certain subjects he is perhaps pleased, with the rustic dialect, as he may be with the Doric Greek of Theocritus.

But a Scotchman inhabiting his own country, if a man of education, and more especially if a literary character, has banished such words from his writings, and has attempted to banish them from his speech; and being accustomed to hear them from the vulgar daily, does not easily admit of their use in poetry, which requires a style elevated and ornamental. A dislike of this kind is, however, accidental, not natural. It is of the species of disgust

which we feel at seeing a female of high birth in the dress of a rustic; which, if she be really young and beautiful, a little habit will enable us to overcome. A lady who assumes such a dress puts her beauty, indeed, to a severer trial. She rejects—she, indeed, opposes the influence of fashion; she possibly abandons the grace of elegant and flowing drapery; but her native charms remain the more striking, perhaps, because the less adorned; and to these she trusts for fixing her empire on those affections over which fashion has no sway. If she succeeds, a new association arises. The dress of the beautiful rustic becomes itself beautiful, and establishes a new fashion for the young and the gay. And when, in after ages, the contemplative observer shall view her picture in the gallery that contains the portraits of the beauties of successive centuries, each in the dress of her respective day, her drapery will not deviate more than that of her rivals from the standard of his taste, and he will give the palm to her who excels in the lineaments of nature.

Burns wrote professedly for the peasantry of his country, and by them their native dialect is universally relished. To a numerous class of the natives of Scotland of another description, it may also be considered as attractive in a different point of view. Estranged from their native soil and spread over foreign lands, the idiom of their country unites with the sentiments and the descriptions on which it is employed to recall to their minds the interesting scenes of infancy and youth—to awaken many pleasing, many tender recollections. Literary men residing at Edinburgh or Aberdeen cannot judge on this point for one hundred and fifty thousand of their expatriated countrymen.\*

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\* These observations are excited by some remarks of respectable correspondents of the description alluded to. This calculation of the number of Scotchmen living out of Scotland is not altogether arbitrary, and it is probably below the truth. It is, in some degree, founded on the proportion between the number of the sexes in Scotland, as it appears from the invaluable Statistics of Sir John Sinclair. For Scotchmen of this description, more particularly, Burns seems to have written his song beginning *Their groves o' sweet myrtle*, a beautiful strain, which, it may be confidently predicted, will be sung with equal, or superior, interest on the banks of the Ganges or of the Mississippi as on those of the Tay or the Tweed.

To the use of the Scottish dialect in one species of poetry, the composition of songs, the taste of the public has been for some time reconciled. The dialect in question excels, as has already been observed, in the copiousness and exactness of its terms for natural objects; and in pastoral or rural songs it gives a Doric simplicity, which is very generally approved. Neither does the regret seem well founded which some persons of taste have expressed, that Burns used this dialect in so many other of his compositions. His declared purpose was to paint the manners of rustic life among his humble compeers, and it is not easy to conceive that this could have been done with equal humour and effect if he had not adopted their idiom. There are some, indeed, who will think the subject too low for poetry. Persons of this sickly taste will find their delicacies consulted in many a polite and learned author; let them not seek for gratification on the rough and vigorous lines, in the unbridled humour, or in the overpowering sensibility of this bard of nature.

To determine the comparative merit of Burns would be no easy task. Many persons, afterwards distinguished in literature, have been born in as humble a situation of life; but it would be difficult to find any other who, while earning his subsistence by daily labour, has written verses which have attracted and retained universal attention, and which are likely to give the author a permanent and distinguished place among the followers of the muses. If he is deficient in grace, he is distinguished for ease as well as energy; and these are indications of the higher order of genius. The father of epic poetry exhibits one of his heroes as excelling in strength, another in swiftness—to form his perfect warrior, these attributes are combined. Every species of intellectual superiority admits, perhaps, of a similar arrangement. One writer excels in force, another in ease; he is superior to them both in whom both these qualities are united. Of Homer himself it may be said that, like his own Achilles, he surpasses his competitors in mobility as well as in strength.

The force of Burns lay in the powers of his understanding



and in the sensibility of his heart; and these will be found to infuse the living principle into all the works of genius which seem destined to immortality. His sensibility had an uncommon range. He was alive to every species of emotion. He is one of the few poets that can be mentioned who have at once excelled in humour, in tenderness, and in sublimity; a praise unknown to the ancients, and which, in modern times, is only due to Ariosto, to Shakespeare, and perhaps to Voltaire. To compare the writings of the Scottish peasant with the works of these giants in literature might appear presumptuous; yet it may be asserted that he has displayed the *foot of Hercules*. How near he might have approached them by proper culture, with lengthened years, and under happier auspices, it is not for us to calculate. But while we run over the melancholy story of his life it is impossible not to heave a sigh at the asperity of his fortune; and as we survey the records of his mind it is easy to see that out of such materials have been reared the fairest and most durable of the monuments of genius.

By DAVID IRVING, LL.D.

1804.

BURNS was possessed of a versatility and strength of genius which might have conducted him to eminence in any department of science or literature. His senses were acute; his affections warm and generous; his imagination was vivid and excursive; his judgment prompt and penetrating. His poetry is the effusion of a vigorous and susceptible mind powerfully affected by the objects of its contemplation. The external beauties of nature, the pleasures and disappointments of love, the characteristics of the peasant's fate, the ridiculous features of hypocrisy and superstition, furnish the principal subjects on which he has exercised his bold and original talents. Most of the occasions which awakened his poetical powers were not fictitious but real; and his sentiments and language are generally those of a man who obeys the strong impulses of unsophisticated feeling. Although he laboured under the disadvantages of a very imperfect education, yet some circumstances of his very early life were not altogether unfavourable to the nurture of a poetical genius. The peculiarity of his fate tended to impress every sentiment more deeply on his mind, and to familiarise him with the habits of profound meditation. The lessons which his father taught him were those of piety, virtue, and independence; lessons which are scarcely of less importance to the poet than to the man. His early years were, indeed, consumed in depressing toil; but even while the young peasant followed the plough, his intellectual eye was fixed on immortality.

Many of his poems were composed during the hours when he was actually engaged in manual labour: his native energy was unsubdued by illiberal toil, by perpetual mortification, and by his total seclusion from that intercourse which is most calculated to fan the sparks of generous emulation. "This kind of life," says Burns, "the cheerless gloom of a hermit, with the unceasing moil of a galley-slave, brought me to my sixteenth year; a little before which period I first committed the sin of rhyme." Love, he informs us, was the original source of his poetry: "I never had the least thought or inclination of turning poet till I got once heartily in love; and then rhyme and song were in a manner the spontaneous language of my heart."

His principal models of composition were Ramsay and Fergusson. In his letter to Dr. Moore he remarks that he had nearly abandoned poetry, when in his twenty-third year, having become acquainted with the works of Fergusson, he "strung anew his wildly-sounding lyre with emulating vigour." Of classical learning he was totally destitute; and it is not apparent that he was much indebted to his knowledge of the French language. With the best English writers he was, however, sufficiently conversant: he read them with avidity, and for the most part with wonderful discernment. Nor was he altogether unacquainted with science: he had at least studied Euclid, Locke, and Smith; he read and understood Mr. Alison's *Essays on the Principles of Taste*.

The most beautiful of his poems are professedly written in the Scottish dialect: but in general they are not deeply tinctured with provincial idioms; many of the stanzas are almost purely English. His verses, though not very polished or melodious, are commonly distinguished by an air of originality which atones for every deficiency. His rhymes are often imperfect, and his expression indelicate; he passes from ease to negligence and from simplicity to coarseness. But these peculiarities we may ascribe to his early habits of association.

The poems of Burns, though most remarkable for the

quality of humour, exhibit various proofs of his imagination, and the soundness of his understanding enabled him to attain a variety of excellence which can only be traced in the production of original genius. Some of his subjects are sufficiently mean; but he never fails to illumine them with brilliant flashes of intellect. His flights, however, are sudden and irregular; the strong impulses of his mind were not sufficiently chastened and directed by the wholesome discipline of the schools. His compositions, however, beautiful in detached parts, are very often defective in their general plan.

The most exquisite of his serious poems is *The Cotter's Saturday Night*. The character and incidents which the poet here describes in so interesting a manner are such as his father's cottage presented to his observation; they are such as may everywhere be found among the virtuous and intelligent peasantry of Scotland. "I recollect once he told me," says Professor Stewart, "when I was admiring a distant prospect in one of our morning walks, that the sight of so many smoking cottages gave a pleasure to his mind, which none could understand who had not witnessed, like himself, the happiness and the worth which they contained." With such impressions as these upon his mind, he has succeeded in delineating a charming picture of rural innocence and felicity. The incidents are well selected, the character skilfully distinguished, and the whole composition is remarkable for the propriety and sensibility which it displays. To transcribe every beautiful passage which the poem contains would be to transcribe almost every stanza; the following may be selected on account of its moral as well as its poetical effect:—

But hark! a rap comes gently to the door.

Jenny, wha kens the meaning o' the same,

Tells how a neebor lad cam' o'er the moor,

To do some errands, and convoy her hame.

The wily mother sees the conscious flame

Sparkle in Jenny's e'e, and flush her cheek;

Wi' heart-struck, anxious care, inquires his name,

While Jenny haffins is afraid to speak;

Weel pleas'd the mother hears it's nae wild, worthless rake.

Wi' kindly welcome, Jenny brings him ben;  
 A strappin' youth; he takes the mother's eye;  
 Blythe Jenny sees the visit's no ill ta'en;  
 The father cracks of horses, pleughs, and kye.  
 The youngster's artless heart o'erflows wi' joy,  
 But blate and laithfu', scarce can weel behave;  
 The mother, wi' a woman's wiles, can spy  
 What makes the youth sae bashfu' an' sae grave;  
 Weel-pleased to think her bairn's respected like the lave.

O happy love! where love like this is found!  
 O heart-felt raptures! bliss beyond compare!  
 I've paced much this weary, mortal round,  
 And sage experience bids me this declare—  
 If Heaven a draught of heavenly pleasure spare,  
 One cordial in this melancholy vale,  
 'Tis when a youthful, loving, modest pair,  
 In other's arms breathe out the tender tale,  
 Beneath the milk-white thorn that scents the ev'ning gale.

Is there, in human form, that bears a heart—  
 A wretch! a villain! lost to love and truth!  
 That can, with studied, sly, ensnaring art,  
 Betray sweet Jenny's unsuspecting youth?  
 Curse on his perjurd arts! dissembling smooth!  
 Are honour, virtue, conscience, all exil'd?  
 Is there no pity, no relenting ruth,  
 Points to the parents fondling o'er their child?  
 Then paints the ruin'd maid, and their distraction wild!

The stanzas *To a Mountain Daisy on turning one down with the plough* have always been acknowledged as beautiful and interesting. His address *To a Mouse, on turning her up in her nest with the plough*, evinces the fertility of his genius and the unbounded benevolence of his heart. These two poems derive additional interest from the attitude in which the writer is himself presented to our view; we behold him engaged in the labour of the field, and moving in his humble sphere with all the dignity of honest independence and conscious genius. The exordium of his very poetical production entitled *The Vision* is also rendered interesting by the same circumstances; it exhibits Burns in the retirement of his homely cottage:—

The sun had clos'd the winter day,  
 The curlers quat their roarin' play,  
 An' hunger'd Maukin ta'en her way  
     To kail-yards green,  
 While faithless snaws ilk step betray  
     Whare she has been.

The thresher's weary flingin'-tree  
 The lee-lang day had tired me;  
 And whan the day had clos'd his e'e  
     Far i' the west,  
 Ben i' the spence, right pensivelie,  
     I gaed to rest.

There, lanely, by the ingle-cheek,  
 I sat and ey'd the spewing reek,  
 That fill'd, wi' hoast-provoking sneek,  
     The auld clay biggin';  
 An' heard the restless rattons squeak  
     About the riggin'.

All in this mottie, misty clime,  
 I backward mus'd on wasted time,  
 How I had spent my youthfu' prime,  
     An' done nae-thing,  
 But stringin' blethers up in rhyme,  
     For fools to sing.

Others of his serious poems are distinguished by beauties of no vulgar kind. Many passages rise to sublimity; and his moral reflections are often solemn, pathetic, and perspicacious.

But it is, perhaps, in his humorous and satirical poems that he appears to most advantage. Nature had endowed him with an uncommon degree of sagacity; and his perpetual disappointments and mortification rendered him a more keen observer of the follies of mankind. His satire, however, when he refrains from personalities, is seldom unmerciful; his general opinion of human nature was by no means unfavourable; and he commonly exposes vice and folly with a kind of gay severity.

*Halloween* exhibits a humorous and masterly description of some of the remarkable superstitions of his countrymen. The incidents are selected and the characters discriminated with his usual felicity. His *Address to the Deil*, as well as

*Death and Dr. Hornbook*, is distinguished by an original vein of satirical humour. *The Holy Fair* is entitled to every praise except that of scrupulous decency. The subsequent stanzas may serve to discover with what efficiency Burns could wield the shafts of ridicule:—

Now a' the congregation o'er  
Is silent expectation;  
For Moodie speels the holy door,  
Wi' tidings o' damnation.  
Should Hornie, as in ancient days,  
'Mang sons o' God present him,  
The vera sight o' Moodie's face  
To's ain het hame had sent him  
Wi' fright that day.

Hear how he clears the points o' faith  
Wi' rattlin' an' wi' thumpin'!  
Now meekly calm, now wild in wrath,  
He's stampin' an' he's jumpin'!  
His lengthen'd chin, his turned-up snout,  
His eldritch squeel an' gestures,  
O how they fire the heart devout,  
Like cantharidian plasters,  
On sic a day!

But, hark! the tent has chang'd its voice;  
There's peace an' rest nae langer:  
For a' the real judges rise,  
They canna sit for anger.  
Smith opens out his cauld harangues  
On practice and on morals;  
An' aff the godly pour in thrangs,  
To gie the jars an' barrels  
A lift that day.

What signifies his barren shine  
Of moral pow'rs an' reason?  
His English style, an' gesture fine,  
Are a' clean out o' season.  
Like Socrates or Antonine,  
Or some auld pagan Heathen,  
The moral man he does define,  
But ne'er a word o' faith in  
That's right that day.

In guid time comes an antidote  
Against sic poison'd nostrum;  
For Peebles, frae the water-fit,  
Ascends the holy rostrum:

See, up he's got the word o' God  
 An' meek an' mim has view'd it,  
 While Common Sense has ta'en the road,  
 An' aff, an' up the Cowgate  
     Fast, fast, that day.

*The Ordination* is another ecclesiastical satire remarkable for its wit and humour. The following lines are pregnant with meaning:—

There, try his mettle on the creed,  
 And bind him down wi' caution,  
 That Stipend is a carnal weed  
 He takes but for the fashion.

*Holy Willie's Prayer*, which is excluded from Dr. Currie's edition, and the *Address to the Unco Guid, or the Rigidly Righteous*, are wholesome satires on hypocrisy; but the former is reprehensible for the extreme indecency which it occasionally exhibits. *The Twa Dogs*, *The Dream*, and the *Dedication to Gavin Hamilton, Esq.*, may also be classed among his happier efforts.

The tale entitled *Tam o' Shanter* displays a rich vein of humorous description, and even high powers of invention. "I have seldom in my life," says Lord Woodhouselee in a letter to Burns, "tasted of higher enjoyments from any work of genius than I have received from this composition; and I am much mistaken if this poem alone, had you never written another syllable, would not have been sufficient to have transmitted your name down to posterity with high reputation. In the introductory part where you paint the character of your hero, and exhibit him in the ale-house *ingle*, with tippling cronies, you have delineated nature with a humour and *naïveté* that would do honour to Mathew Prior; but when you describe the unfortunate orgies of the witches' Sabbath and the hellish scenery in which they are exhibited, you display a power of imagination that Shakespeare himself could not have exceeded." One of the most striking passages which the works of Burns contain is to be found in this production:—

The swats sae ream'd in Tammie's noddle,  
 Fair play, he car'd na deils a boddle.  
 But Maggie stood right sair astonish'd,  
 Till, by the heel and hand admonish'd,



She ventur'd forward on the light;  
 And, wow! Tam saw an unco sight!  
 Warlocks and witches in a dance;  
 Nae cotillion brent new frae France,  
 But hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys, and reels,  
 Put life and mettle in their heels.  
 A winnock-bunker in the east,  
 There sat auld Nick, in shape o' beast;  
 A towzie tyke, black, grim, and large,  
 To gie them music was his charge:  
 He screw'd the pipes and gart them skirl,  
 Till roof and rafters a' did dirl.  
 Coffins stood round like open presses,  
 That ahaw'd the dead in their last dresses;  
 Each in its cauld hand held a light—  
 And by some devilish cantraip slight  
 By which heroic Tam was able  
 To note upon the haly table  
 A murderer's bane in gibbet airns;  
 Twa span-lang, wee, unchristen'd bairns;  
 A thief, new-cutted frae the rape,  
 Wi' his last gasp his gab did gape;  
 Five tomahawks, wi' blude red rusted;  
 Five scymitars, wi' murder crusted;  
 A garter, which a babe had strangled;  
 A knife, a father's throat had mangled,  
 Whom his ain son o' life bereft,  
 The grey hairs yet stack to the heft.

The songs of Burns which are chiefly of the pastoral and rural kind are frequently distinguished by strokes of genuine poetry. The versification, indeed, is not always sufficiently smooth; but the arch simplicity, the delicacy, pathos, and even sublimity, which are so often displayed, leave the author nearly without a rival in this department of literature. The songs which I here select as specimens are written in the military spirit: the first is entitled *Robert Bruce's Address to his Army*:—

Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled,  
 Scots, wham Bruce has aften led;  
 Welcome to your gory bed,  
 Or to glorious victorie.

Now's the day, and now's the hour;  
 See the front o' battle lower;  
 See approach proud Edward's power—  
 Edward! chains and slaverie!

Wha will be a traitor knave?  
 Wha can fill a coward's grave?  
 Wha sae base as be a slave?  
 Traitor! coward! turn and flee!

Wha for Scotland's King and law  
 Freedom's sword will strongly draw,  
 Free-man stand, or free-man fa'?  
 Caledonian! on wi' me!

By oppression's woes and pains!  
 By your sons in servile chains!  
 We will drain our dearest veins,  
 But they shall—they *shall* be free!

Lay the proud usurpers low!  
 Tyrants fall in every foe!  
 Liberty's in every blow!  
 Forward! let us do, or die!

The following song is supposed to be sung by the wounded and dying of a victorious army. It was composed during the late war with France:—

Farewell, thou fair day, thou green earth, and ye skies,  
 Now gay with the broad setting sun!  
 Farewell, loves and friendships, ye dear, tender ties,  
 Our race of existence is run!

Thou grim King of Terrors, thou life's gloomy foe,  
 Go, frighten the coward and slave!  
 Go, teach them to tremble, fell Tyrant! but know,  
 No terrors hast thou for the brave!

Thou strik'st the dull peasant—he sinks in the dark,  
 Nor saves e'en the wreck of a name:  
 Thou strik'st the young hero—a glorious mark!  
 He falls in the blaze of his fame!

In the field of proud honour—our swords in our hands,  
 Our King and our Country to save—  
 While victory shines on life's last ebbing sands,  
 O! who would not die with the brave!

The last of these specimens is sufficient to evince that Burns could employ the English language with considerable efficacy; but the advice which he received from Dr. Moore can hardly be considered as altogether judicious.

"It is evident," says his correspondent, "that you already possess a great variety of expression and command of the English language; you ought therefore to deal more sparingly for the future in the provincial dialect: why should you, by using that, limit the number of your admirers to those who understand the Scottish, when you can extend it to all persons of taste who can understand the English language?" The situation and studies of Burns had prepared him for excelling in Scottish poetry; but it is far from being evident that he was qualified to contend with the mighty masters of the English lyre. It was therefore with sufficient prudence that he chiefly confined himself to a department in which he was without a rival. His superiority to Ramsay and Fergusson is manifest; he possesses in an infinitely higher degree the power of captivating the heart, and of arresting the understanding.

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By LORD JEFFREY.

*From "THE EDINBURGH REVIEW," January, 1809.*

A REVIEW OF "RELIQUES OF ROBERT BURNS."

BURNS is certainly by far the greatest of our poetical prodigies—from Stephen Duck down to Thomas Dermody. *They* are forgotten already; or only remembered for derision. But the name of Burns, if we are not mistaken, has not yet "gathered all its fame," and will endure long after those circumstances are forgotten which contributed to its first notoriety. So much, indeed, are we impressed with a sense of his merits, that we cannot help thinking it a derogation from them to consider him as a prodigy at all, and are convinced that he will never be rightly estimated as a poet till that vulgar wonder be entirely repressed which was raised on his having been a ploughman. It is true, no doubt, that he was born in a humble station, and that much of his early life was devoted to severe labour, and to the society of his fellow-labourers. But he was not himself either uneducated or illiterate, and was placed in a situation more favourable, perhaps, to the development of great poetical talents, than any other which could have been assigned him. He was taught at a very early age to read and write, and soon after acquired a competent knowledge of French, together with the elements of Latin and geometry. His taste for reading was encouraged by his parents and many of his associates; and, before he had ever composed a single stanza, he was not only familiar with many prose writers, but far more intimately acquainted with Pope, Shakespeare, and Thomson than nine-tenths of the youth that

now leave our schools for the university. Those authors, indeed, with some old collections of songs, and the lives of Hannibal and Sir William Wallace, were his habitual study from the first days of his childhood, and, co-operating with the solitude of his rural occupations, were sufficient to rouse his ardent and ambitious mind to the love and the practice of poetry. He had about as much scholarship, in short, we imagine, as Shakespeare; and far better models to form his ear to harmony, and train his fancy to graceful invention.

We ventured, on a former occasion, to say something of the effects of regular education, and of the general diffusion of literature, in repressing the vigour and originality of all kinds of mental exertion. That speculation was perhaps carried somewhat too far; but if the paradox have proof anywhere, it is in its application to poetry. Among well-educated people, the standard writers of this description are at once so venerated and so familiar, that it is thought equally impossible to rival them, as to write verses without attempting it. If there be one degree of fame which excites emulation, there is another which leads to despair: nor can we conceive any one less likely to be added to the short list of original poets, than a young man of fine fancy and delicate taste, who has acquired a high relish for poetry by perusing the most celebrated writers and conversing with the most intelligent judges. The head of such a person is filled, of course, with all the splendid passages of ancient and modern authors, and with the fine and fastidious remarks which have been made even on those passages. When he turns his eyes, therefore, on his own conceptions or designs, they can scarcely fail to appear rude and contemptible. He is perpetually haunted and depressed by the ideal presence of those great masters, and their exacting critics. He is aware to what comparisons his productions will be subjected among his own friends and associates, and recollects the derision with which so many rash adventurers have been chased back to their obscurity. Thus, the merit of his great predecessors chills, instead of encouraging, his ardour;

and the illustrious names which have already reached to the summit of excellence act like the tall and spreading trees of the forest, which overshadow and strangle the saplings which may have struck root in the soil below—and afford efficient shelter to nothing but creepers and parasites.

There is, no doubt, in some few individuals, “that strong divinity of soul”—that decided and irresistible vocation to glory, which, in spite of all these obstructions, calls out, perhaps once or twice in a century, a bold and original poet from the herd of scholars and academical literati. But the natural tendency of their studies, and by far their most common effect, is to repress originality, and discourage enterprise, and either to change those whom nature meant for poets into mere readers of poetry, or to bring them out in the form of witty parodists or ingenious imitators. Independent of the reasons which have been already suggested, it will perhaps be found, too, that necessity is the mother of invention in this as well as in the more vulgar arts; or, at least, that inventive genius will frequently slumber in inaction, where the preceding ingenuity has, in part, supplied the wants of the owner. A solitary and unrestricted man, with lively feelings and an inflammable imagination, will often be irresistibly led to exercise those gifts, and to occupy and relieve his mind in poetical composition; but if his education, his reading, and his society supply him with an abundant store of images and emotions, he will probably think but little of those internal resources, and feed his mind contentedly with what has been provided by the industry of others.

To say nothing, therefore, of the distractions and the dissipation of mind that belong to the commerce of the world, nor of the cares of minute accuracy and high finishing which are imposed on the professed scholar, there seem to be deeper reasons for the separation of originality and accomplishment; and for the partiality which has led poetry to choose almost all her prime favourites among the recluse and uninstructed. A youth of quick parts,

in short, and creative fancy—with just so much reading as to guide his ambition, and rough-hew his notions of excellence—if his lot be thrown in humble retirement, where he has no reputation to lose, and where he can easily hope to excel all that he sees around him, is much more likely, we think, to give himself up to poetry, and to train himself to habits of invention, than if he had been encumbered by the pretended helps of extended study and literary society.

If these observations should fail to strike of themselves, they may perhaps derive additional weight from considering the very remarkable fact, that almost all the great poets of every country have appeared in an early stage of their history, and in a period comparatively rude and unlettered. Homer went forth, like the morning star, before the dawn of literature in Greece, and almost all the great and sublime poets of modern Europe are already between two and three hundred years old. Since that time, although books and readers and opportunities of reading are multiplied a thousandfold, we have improved chiefly in point and terseness of expression, in the art of railery, and in clearness and simplicity of thought. Force, richness, and variety of invention are now, at least, as rare as ever. But the literature and refinement of the age does not exist at all for a rustic and illiterate individual; and, consequently, the present time is to him what the rude times of old were to the vigorous writers which adorned them.

But though, for these and for other reasons, we can see no propriety in regarding the poetry of Burns chiefly as the wonderful work of a peasant, and thus admiring it much in the same way as if it had been written with his toes; yet there are peculiarities in his works which remind us of the lowness of his origin, and faults for which the defects of his education afford an obvious cause, if not a legitimate apology. In forming a correct estimate of these works, it is necessary to take into account those peculiarities.

The first is, the undisciplined harshness and acrimony of his invective. The great boast of polished life is the

delicacy, and even the generosity of its hostility—that quality which is still the characteristic, as it furnishes the denomination, of a gentleman—that principle which forbids us to attack the defenceless, to strike the fallen, or to mangle the slain—and enjoins us, in forging the shafts of satire, to increase the polish exactly as we add to their keenness or their weight. For this, as well as for other things, we are indebted to chivalry; and of this Burns had none. His ingenious and amiable biographer has spoken repeatedly in praise of his talents for satire—we think, with a most unhappy partiality. His epigrams and lampoons appear to us, one and all, unworthy of him—offensive from their extreme coarseness and violence, and contemptible from their want of wit or brilliancy. They seem to have been written not out of playful malice or virtuous indignation, but out of fierce and ungovernable anger. His whole raillery consists in railing; and his satirical vein displays itself chiefly in calling names and in swearing. We say this mainly with a reference to his personalities. In many of his more general representations of life and manners, there is no doubt much that may be called satirical, mixed up with admirable humour, and description of inimitable vivacity.

There is a similar want of polish, or at least of respectfulness, in the general tone of his gallantry. He has written with more passion, perhaps, and more variety of natural feeling on the subject of love, than any other poet whatever—but with a fervour that is sometimes indelicate, and seldom accommodated to the timidity and “sweet austere composure” of women of refinement. He has expressed admirably the feelings of an enamoured peasant, who, however refined or eloquent he may be, always approaches his mistress on a footing of equality; but has never caught that tone of chivalrous gallantry which uniformly abases itself in the presence of the object of its devotion. Accordingly, instead of suing for a smile or melting in a tear, his muse deals in nothing but locked embraces and midnight *rencontres*; and, even in his complimentary effusions to ladies of the highest rank, is



for straining them to the bosom of her impetuous votary. It is easy, accordingly, to see from his correspondence, that many of his female patronesses shrank from the vehement familiarity of his admiration; and there are even some traits in the volumes before us from which we can gather that he resented the shyness and estrangement to which those feelings gave rise, with at least as little chivalry as he had shown in producing them.

But the leading vice in Burns's character, and the cardinal deformity, indeed, of all his productions, was his contempt, or affectation of contempt, for prudence, decency, and regularity; and his admiration of thoughtlessness, oddity, and vehement sensibility—his belief, in short, in the *dispensing power* of genius and social feeling in all matters of morality and common sense. This is the very slang of the worst German plays, and the lowest of our town-made novels; nor can anything be more lamentable than that it should have found a patron in such a man as Burns, and communicated to many of his productions a character of immorality at once contemptible and hateful. It is but too true that men of the highest genius have frequently been hurried by their passions into a violation of prudence and duty; and there is something generous, at least, in the apology which their admirers may make for them, on the score of their keener feelings and habitual want of reflection. But this apology, which is quite unsatisfactory in the mouth of another, becomes an insult and an absurdity whenever it proceeds from their own. A man may say of his friend that he is a noble-hearted fellow—too generous to be just, and with too much spirit to be always prudent and regular. But he cannot be allowed to say even this of himself; and still less to represent himself as a hare-brained, sentimental soul, constantly carried away by fine fancies and visions of love and philanthropy, and born to confound and despise the cold-blooded sons of prudence and sobriety. This apology, indeed, evidently destroys itself, for it shows that conduct to be the result of deliberate system, which it affects at the same time to justify as the fruit of mere

thoughtlessness and casual impulse. Such protestations, therefore, will always be treated, as they deserve, not only with contempt, but with incredulity; and their magnanimous authors set down as determined profligates, who seek to disguise their selfishness under a name somewhat less revolting. That profligacy is almost always selfishness, and that the excuse of impetuous feeling can hardly ever be justly pleaded for those who neglect the ordinary duties of life, must be apparent, we think, even to the least reflecting of those sons of fancy and song. It requires no habit of deep thinking, or anything more, indeed, than the information of an honest heart, to perceive that it is cruel and base to spend, in vain superfluities, that money which belongs of right to the pale, industrious tradesman and his famishing infants; or that it is a vile prostitution of language to talk of that man's generosity or goodness of heart who sits raving about friendship and philanthropy in a tavern, while his wife's heart is breaking at her cheerless fireside and his children pining in solitary poverty.

This pitiful cant of careless feeling and eccentric genius, accordingly, has never found much favour in the eyes of English sense and morality. The most signal effect which it ever produced was on the muddy brains of some German youths, who are said to have left college in a body to rob on the highway, because Schiller had represented the captain of a gang as so very noble a creature. But in this country, we believe, a predilection for that honourable profession must have preceded this admiration of the character. The style we have been speaking of, accordingly, is now the heroics only of the hulks and the house of correction, and has no chance, we suppose, of being greatly admired, except in the farewell speech of a young gentleman preparing for Botany Bay.

It is humiliating to think how deeply Burns has fallen into this debasing error. He is perpetually making a parade of his thoughtlessness, inflammability, and imprudence, and talking with much complacency and exultation of the offence he has occasioned to the sober

and correct part of mankind. This odious slang infects almost all his prose and a very great proportion of his poetry, and is, we are persuaded, the chief, if not the only, source of disgust with which, in spite of his genius, we know that he is regarded by many very competent and liberal judges. His apology, too, we are willing to believe, is to be found in the original lowness of his situation and the slightness of his acquaintance with the world. With his talents and powers of observation, he could not have seen *much* of the beings who echoed this raving, without feeling for them that distrust and contempt which would have made him blush to think he had ever stretched over them the protecting shield of his genius.

Akin to this most lamentable trait of vulgarity, and indeed in some measure arising out of it, is that perpetual boast of his own independence, which is obtruded upon the readers of Burns in almost every page of his writings. The sentiment itself is noble, and it is often finely expressed; but a gentleman would only have expressed it when he was insulted or provoked, and would never have made it a spontaneous theme to those friends in whose estimation he felt that his honour stood clear. It is mixed up, too, in Burns with too fierce a tone of defiance, and indicates rather the pride of a sturdy peasant than the calm and natural elevation of a generous mind.

The last of the symptoms of rusticity which we think it necessary to notice in the works of this extraordinary man is that frequent mistake of mere exaggeration and violence for force and sublimity, which has defaced so much of his prose composition, and given an air of heaviness and labour to a good deal of his serious poetry. The truth is, that his *forte* was in humour and in pathos—or rather in tenderness of feeling; and that he has very seldom succeeded either where mere wit and sprightliness or where great energy and weight of sentiment were requisite. He had evidently a very false and crude notion of what constituted *strength* of writing; and instead of

that simple and brief directness which stamps the character of vigour upon every syllable, has generally had recourse to a mere accumulation of hyperbolical expressions, which encumber the diction instead of exalting it, and show the determination to be impressive without the power of executing it. This error also we are inclined to ascribe entirely to the defects of his education. The value of simplicity in the expression of passion is a lesson, we believe, of nature and of genius; but its importance in mere grave and impressive writing is one of the latest discoveries of rhetorical experience.

With the allowances and exceptions we have now stated, we think Burns entitled to the rank of a great and original genius. He has in all his compositions great force of conception, and great spirit and animation in its expression. He has taken a large range through the region of Fancy, and naturalised himself in almost all her climates. He has great humour—great powers of description—great pathos—and great discrimination of character. Almost everything that he says has spirit and originality; and everything that he says well is characterised by a charming facility which gives a grace even to occasional rudeness, and communicates to the reader a delightful sympathy with the spontaneous soaring and conscious inspiration of the poet.

Considering the reception which these works have met with from the public, and the long period during which the greater part of them have been in their possession, it may appear superfluous to say anything as to their characteristic or peculiar merit. Though the ultimate judgment of the public, however, be always sound, or at least decisive as to its general result, it is not always very apparent upon what grounds it has proceeded; nor in consequence of what, or in spite of what, it has been obtained. In Burns's works there is much to censure, as well as much to praise; and as time has not yet separated his ore from its dross, it may be worth while to state, in a very general way, what we presume to anticipate as the result of this separation. Without pretending to

enter at all into the comparative merit of particular passages, we may venture to lay it down as our opinion that his poetry is far superior to his prose; that his Scottish compositions are greatly to be preferred to his English ones; and that his songs will probably outlive all his other productions. A very few remarks on each of these subjects will comprehend almost all that we have to say of the volumes now before us.

The prose works of Burns consist almost entirely of his letters. They bear, as well as his poetry, the seal and the impress of his genius; but they contain much more bad taste, and are written with far more apparent labour. His poetry was almost all written primarily from feeling, and only secondarily from ambition. His letters seem to have been nearly all composed as exercises, and for display. There are few of them written with simplicity or plainness; and though natural enough as to the sentiment, they are generally very strained and elaborate in the expression. A very great proportion of them, too, relate neither to facts nor feelings peculiarly connected with the author or his correspondent, but are made up of general declamation, moral reflections, and vague discussions—all evidently composed for the sake of effect, and frequently introduced with long complaints of having nothing to say, and of the necessity and difficulty of letter-writing.

By far the best of those compositions are such as we should consider as exceptions from this general character—such as contain some specific information as to himself, or are suggested by events or observations directly applicable to his correspondent. One of the best, perhaps, is that addressed to Dr. Moore, containing an account of his early life, of which Dr. Currie has made such a judicious use in his biography. It is written with great clearness and characteristic effect, and contains many touches of easy humour and natural eloquence. We are struck, as we open the book accidentally, with the following original application of a classical image by this unlettered rustic. Talking of the first vague aspirations of his own gigantic mind, he says—we think very finely—"I had felt some

early stirrings of ambition; but they were the blind gropings of Homer's Cyclop round the walls of his cave!" Of his other letters, those addressed to Mrs. Dunlop are, in our opinion, by far the best. He appears, from first to last, to have stood somewhat in awe of this excellent lady; and to have been no less sensible of her sound judgment and strict sense of propriety, than of her steady and generous partiality. The following passage we think is striking and characteristic:—

I own myself so little a Presbyterian, that I approve of set times and seasons of more than ordinary acts of devotion, for breaking in on that habituated routine of life and thought which is so apt to reduce our existence to a kind of instinct, or even sometimes, and with some minds, to a state very little superior to mere machinery.

This day; the first Sunday of May; a breezy, blue-skied noon, some time about the beginning, and a hoary morning and calm sunny day about the end of autumn—these, time out of mind, have been with me a kind of holiday.

I believe I owe this to that glorious paper in the *Spectator*, "The Vision of Mirza"; a piece that struck my young fancy before I was capable of fixing an idea to a word of three syllables. "On the 5th day of the moon, which, according to the custom of my forefathers, I always *keep holy*, after having washed myself, and offered up my morning devotions, I ascended the high hill of Bagdat, in order to pass the rest of the day in meditation and prayer."

We know nothing, or next to nothing, of the substance or structure of our souls, so cannot account for those seeming caprices in them, that one should be particularly pleased with this thing, or struck with that, which, on minds of a different cast, makes no extraordinary impression. I have some favourite flowers in spring; among which are the mountain daisy, the harebell, the foxglove, the wild brier-rose, the budding birch, and the hoary hawthorn, that I view and hang over with particular delight. I never hear the loud, solitary whistle of the curlew in a summer noon, or the wild, mixing cadence of a troop of grey plover in an autumnal morning, without feeling an elevation of soul, like the enthusiasm of devotion or poetry. Tell me, my dear friend, to what can this be owing? Are we a piece of machinery, which, like the Eolian harp, passive, takes the impression of the passing accident? Or do these workings argue something within us above the trodden clod?—Vol. ii., pp. 195-197.

To this we may add the following passage, as a part, indeed, of the same picture:—

There is scarcely any earthly object gives me more—I do not know if I should call it pleasure—but something which exalts me,

something which enraptures me—than to walk in the sheltered side of a wood, or high plantation, in a cloudy winter day, and hear the stormy wind howling among the trees and raving over the plain! It is my best season for devotion: my mind is wrapped up in a kind of enthusiasm to *Him*, who, in the pompous language of the Hebrew bard, “walks on the wings of the wind.”—Vol. ii., p. 11.

The following is one of the best and most striking of a whole series of eloquent hypochondriasm:—

After six weeks' confinement, I am beginning to walk across the room. They have been six horrible weeks—anguish and low spirits made me unfit to read, write, or think.

I have a hundred times wished that one could resign life as an officer resigns a commission; for I would not *take in* any poor, ignorant wretch by *selling out*. Lately I was a sixpenny private; and, God knows, a miserable soldier enough: now I march to the campaign, a starving cadet—a little more conspicuously wretched.

I am ashamed of all this; for though I do want bravery for the warfare of life, I could wish, like some other soldiers, to have as much fortitude or cunning as to dissemble or conceal my cowardice.—Vol. ii., pp. 127, 128.

One of the most striking letters in the collection, and, to us, one of the most interesting, is the earliest of the whole series, being addressed to his father in 1781, six or seven years before his name had been heard of out of his own family. The author was then a common flax-dresser, and his father a poor peasant; yet there is not one trait of vulgarity either in the thought or expression, but, on the contrary, a dignity and elevation of sentiment, which must have been considered as of good omen in a youth of much higher condition. The letter is as follows:—

Honoured Sir,—I have purposely delayed writing, in the hope that I should have the pleasure of seeing you on New Year's Day; but work comes so hard upon us, that I do not choose to be absent on that account, as well as for some other little reasons, which I shall tell you at meeting. My health is nearly the same as when you were here, only my sleep is a little sounder, and, on the whole, I am rather better than otherwise, though I mend by very slow degrees. The weakness of my nerves has so debilitated my mind, that I dare neither review past wants, nor look forward into futurity; for the least anxiety or perturbation in my breast produces most unhappy effects on my whole frame. Sometimes, indeed, when for an hour or two my spirits are a little lightened,

I *glimmer* a little into futurity; but my principal, and indeed my only pleasurable employment, is looking backwards and forwards, in a moral and religious way. I am quite transported at the thought that ere long, perhaps very soon, I shall bid an eternal adieu to all the pains, and uneasinesses, and disquietudes of this weary life; for I assure you I am heartily tired of it; and, if I do not very much deceive myself, I could contentedly and gladly resign it.

The soul, uneasy, and confin'd at home  
Rests and expatiates in a life to come.

It is for this reason I am more pleased with the 15th, 16th, and 17th verses of the 7th chapter of the Revelation, than with any ten times as many verses in the whole Bible, and would not exchange the noble enthusiasm with which they inspire me for all that this world has to offer. As for this world, I despair of ever making a figure in it. I am not formed for the bustle of the busy, nor the flutter of the gay. I shall never again be capable of entering into such scenes. Indeed, I am altogether unconcerned for the thoughts of this life. I foresee that poverty and obscurity probably await me; and I am in some measure prepared, and daily preparing, to meet them. I have but just time and paper to return to you my grateful thanks for the lessons of virtue and piety you have given me; which were too much neglected at the time of giving them, but which, I hope, have been remembered ere it is yet too late.—Vol. i., pp. 99-101.

Before proceeding to take any particular notice of his poetical compositions, we must take leave to apprise our Southern readers that all his best pieces are written in Scotch, and that it is impossible for them to form any adequate judgment of their merits, without a pretty long residence among those who still use that language. To be able to translate the words is but a small part of the knowledge that is necessary. The whole genius and idiom of the language must be familiar, and the characters, and habits, and associations of those who speak it. We beg leave, too, in passing, to observe that the Scotch is not to be considered as a provincial dialect—the vehicle only of rustic vulgarity and rude local humour. It is the language of a whole country—long an independent kingdom, and still separate in laws, character, and manners. It is by no means peculiar to the vulgar, but is the common speech of the whole nation in early life, and, with many of its most exalted and accomplished individuals, through-



out their whole existence; and, though it be true that in later times it has been, in some measure, laid aside by the more ambitious and aspiring of the present generation, it is still recollected, even by them, as the familiar language of their childhood, and of those who were the earliest objects of their love and veneration. It is connected, in their imagination, not only with that olden time which is uniformly conceived as more pure, lofty, and simple than the present, but also with all the soft and bright colours of remembered childhood and domestic affection. All its phrases conjure up images of school-day innocence, and sports, and friendships which have no pattern in succeeding years. Add to all this that it is the language of a great body of poetry, with which almost all Scotchmen are familiar, and, in particular, of a great multitude of songs, written with more tenderness, nature, and feeling than any other lyric compositions that are extant—and we may perhaps be allowed to say that the Scotch is, in reality, a highly poetical language; and that it is an ignorant as well as an illiberal prejudice which would seek to confound it with the barbarous dialects of Yorkshire or Devon. In composing his Scottish poems, therefore, Burns did not merely make an instinctive and necessary use of the only dialect he could employ. The last letter which we have quoted proves that before he had penned a single couplet he could write in the dialect of England with far greater purity and propriety than nine-tenths of those who are called well educated in that country. He wrote in Scotch, because the writings which he most aspired to imitate were composed in that language; and it is evident, from the variations preserved by Dr. Currie, that he took much greater pains with the beauty and purity of his expressions in Scotch than in English, and every one who understands both must admit with infinitely better success.

But though we have ventured to say thus much in praise of the Scottish poetry of Burns, we cannot presume to lay many specimens of it before our readers; and in the few extracts we may be tempted to make from the volumes before us shall be guided more by a desire to

exhibit what may be intelligible to all our readers than by a feeling of what is in itself of the highest excellence.

We have said that Burns is almost equally distinguished for his tenderness and his humour: we might have added for a faculty of combining them both in the same subject, not altogether without parallel in the older poets and ballad-makers, but altogether singular, we think, among modern writers. The passages of pure humour are entirely Scottish—and untranslatable. They consist in the most picturesque representations of life and manners, enlivened and even exalted by traits of exquisite sagacity and unexpected reflection. His tenderness is of two sorts—that which is combined with circumstances and characters of humble and sometimes ludicrous simplicity, and that which is produced by gloomy and distressful impressions acting on a mind of keen sensibility. The passages which belong to the former description are, we think, the most exquisite and original, and, in our estimation, indicate the greatest and most amiable turn of genius; both as being accompanied by fine and feeling pictures of humble life, and as requiring that delicacy, as well as justness of conception, by which alone the fastidiousness of an ordinary reader can be reconciled to such representations. The exquisite description of *The Cotter's Saturday Night* affords, perhaps, the finest example of this sort of pathetic. Its whole beauty cannot, indeed, be discerned but by those whom experience has enabled to judge of the admirable fidelity and completeness of the picture. But, independent altogether of national peculiarities, and even in spite of the obscurity of the language, we think it impossible to peruse the following stanzas without feeling the force of tenderness and truth:—

November chill blows loud wi' angry sough;  
The short'ning winter-day is near a close;  
The miry beasts retreating frae the pleugh;  
The black'ning trains o' craws to their repose:  
The toil-worn Cotter frae his labour goes,  
This night his weekly moil is at an end,  
Collects his spades, his mattocks, and his hoes,  
Hoping the morn in ease and rest to spend,  
And weary, o'er the moor, his course does hameward bend.

At length his lonely cot appears in view,  
 Beneath the shelter of an aged tree;  
 Th' expectant *wee-things*, toddling, stacher thro'  
 To meet their Dad, wi' flicherin' noise an' glee.  
 His wee bit ingle, blinkin' bonnily,  
 His clean hearth-stane, his thriftie *wife's* smile,  
 The lispin' infant prattling on his knee,  
 Does a' his weary carking cares beguile,  
 An' makes him quite forget his labour an' his toil.

Belyve the elder bairns come drapping in,  
 At service out, amang the farmers roun';  
 Some ca' the pleugh, some herd, some tentie rin  
 A canna errand to a neebor town:  
 Their eldest hope, their *Jenny*, woman grown,  
 In youthfu' bloom, love sparkling in her e'e,  
 Comes hame, perhaps, to shew a braw new gown,  
 Or deposite her sair-won penny fee,  
 To help her parents dear, if they in hardship be.

But hark! a rap comes gently to the door;  
*Jenny*, wha kens the meaning o' the same,  
 Tells how a neebor lad came o'er the moor,  
 To do some errands, and convoy her hame.  
 The wily mother sees the conscious flame  
 Sparkle in *Jenny's* e'e, and flush her cheek;  
 With heart-struck anxious care, inquires his name,  
 While *Jenny* haffins is afraid to speak;  
 Weel pleased, the mother hears its nae wild, worthless rake.

Wi' kindly welcome *Jenny* brings him ben:  
 A strappin' youth; he tak's the mother's eye;  
 Blythe *Jenny* sees the visit's no ill ta'en;  
 The father cracks of horses, pleughs, and kye,  
 The youngster's artless heart o'erflows wi' joy.  
 But blate and laithfu', scarce can weel behave,  
 The mother, wi' a woman's wiles, can spy  
 What makes the youth sae bashfu' an' sae grave;  
 Weel pleas'd to think her *bairn's* respected like the lave.

The cheerfu' supper done, wi' serious face,  
 They, round the ingle, form a circle wide;  
 The sire turns o'er, wi' patriarchal grace,  
 The big *ha'-Bible*, ance his father's pride:  
 His bonnet rev'rently is laid aside,  
 His lyart haffets wearing thin an' bare;  
 Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide,  
 He wales a portion with judicious care;  
 And "Let us worship God!" he says, with solemn air.

They chaunt their artless notes in simple guise;  
 They tune their hearts, by far the noblest aim, &c.

Then homeward all take off their sev'ral way;  
 The youngling cottagers retire to rest:  
 The parent pair their *secret homage* pay,  
 And proffer up to Heaven the warm request  
 That *He* who stills the raven's clam'rous nest,  
 And decks the lily fair in flow'ry pride,  
 Would, in the way His wisdom sees the best,  
 For them and for their little ones provide;  
 But chiefly, in their hearts, with *grace divine* preside.  
 Vol. iii., pp. 174-181.

The charm of the fine lines written on turning up a mouse's nest with a plough will also be found to consist in the simple tenderness of the delineation.

Thy wee bit *housie*, too, in ruin!  
 Its silly wa's the win's are strewin'!  
 An' naething, now, to big a new ane,  
     O' foggage green!  
 An' bleak December's winds ensuin',  
     Baith snell and keen!

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' waste,  
 An' weary winter comin' fast,  
 An' cosie here beneath the blast,  
     Thou thought to dwell,  
 'Till crash! the cruel *coulter* past  
     Out thro' thy cell.

That wee bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,  
 Has cost thee mony a weary nibble!  
 Now thou's turned out, for a' thy trouble,  
     But house or hald,  
 To thole the winter's sleety dribble,  
     And cranreuch cauld!

Vol. iii., p. 147.

The verses *To a Mountain Daisy*, though more elegant and picturesque, seem to derive their chief beauty from the same tone of sentiment.

Wee, modest, crimson-tipped flow'r,  
 Thou's met me in an evil hour;  
 For I maun crush amang the stoure  
     Thy slender stem;  
 To spare thee now is past my pow'r,  
     Thou bonnie gem!

Alas! it's no thy neebor sweet,  
 The bonnie *Lark*, companion meet!  
 Bending thee 'mang the dewy weest!  
     W! spreckl'd breast,  
 When upward-springing, blythe to greet  
     The purpling east.

Cauld blew the bitter-biting north  
 Upon thy early, humble birth;  
 Yet cheerfully thou glinted forth  
     Amid the storm,  
 Scarce rear'd above the parent earth,  
     Thy tender form.

There, in thy scanty mantle clad,  
 Thy snawie bosom sun-ward spread,  
 Thou lifts thy unassuming head  
     In humble guise;  
 But now the *share* uptears thy bed,  
     And low thou lies!

Vol. iii., pp. 201, 202.

There are many touches of the same kind in most of the popular and beautiful poems in this collection, especially in the *Winter Night*, *The Address to his old Mare*, *The Address to the Devil*, &c.—in all which, though the greater part of the piece be merely ludicrous and picturesque, there are traits of a delicate and tender feeling, indicating that unaffected softness of heart which is always so enchanting. In the humorous address to the devil, which we have just mentioned, every Scottish reader must have felt the effect of this relenting nature in the following stanzas:—

Lang syne in *Eden's* bonie yeard,  
 When youthfu' lovers first were pair'd,  
 An' all the soul of love they shar'd,  
     The raptur'd hour,  
 Sweet on the fragrant, flow'ry swaird,  
     In shady bower:

Then you, ye auld, snic-drawing dog!  
 Ye came to Paradise incog.,  
 An' gied the infant warld a shog,  
     'Maist ruin'd a'.

But, fare you weel, auld *Nickie-ben*!  
 O wad ye tak' a thought an' men'!  
 Ye aiblins might—I dinna ken—  
     Still hae a *stake*—  
 I'm wae to think upo' yon den,  
     Ev'n for your sake!

Vol. iii., pp. 74-76.

The finest examples, however, of this simple and unpretending tenderness is to be found in those songs which are likely to transmit the name of Burns to all future generations. He found this delightful trait in the old Scottish ballads which he took for his model, and upon which he has improved with a felicity and delicacy of imitation altogether unrivalled in the history of literature. Sometimes it is the brief and simple pathos of the genuine old ballad; as,

But I look to the West when I lie down to rest,  
 That happy my dreams and my slumbers may be;  
 For far in the West lives he I love best,  
 The lad that is dear to my baby and me.

Or, as in this other specimen—

Drumossie moor, Drumossie day!  
 A waefu' day it was to me;  
 For there I lost my father dear,  
 My father dear, and brethren three.

Their winding sheet the bluidy clay,  
 Their graves are growing green to see;  
 And by them lies the dearest lad  
 That ever blest a woman's e'e!  
 Now wae to thee, thou cruel lord,  
 A bluidy man I trow thou be;  
 For mony a heart thou hast made sair,  
 That ne'er did wrong to thine or thee.

Vol. iv., p. 337.

Sometimes it is animated with airy narrative, and adorned with images of the utmost elegance and beauty. As a specimen taken at random, we insert the following stanza:—

And aye she wrought her mammie's wark:  
 And aye she sang sae merrilie:  
 The blythest bird upon the bush  
 Had ne'er a lighter heart than she.

But hawks will rob the tender joys  
 That bless the little lintwhite's nest;  
 And frost will blight the fairest flowers,  
 And love will break the soundest rest.

Young Robie was the brawest lad,  
 The flower and pride of a' the glen;  
 And he had owsen, sheep, and kye,  
 And wanton naigies nine or ten.

He gaed wi' Jeanie to the tryste,  
 He danc'd wi' Jeanie on the down;  
 And lang ere witless Jeanie wist,  
 Her heart was tint, her peace was stown.

As in the bosom o' the stream  
 The moonbeam dwells at dewy e'en;  
 So trembling, pure, was infant love  
 Within the breast o' bonie Jean!

Vol. iv., p. 80.

Sometimes, again, it is plaintive and mournful—in the same strain of unaffected simplicity.

O stay, sweet warbling woodlark, stay,  
 Nor quit for me the trembling spray!  
 A hapless lover courts thy lay,  
 Thy soothing fond complaining.

Again, again that tender part  
 That I may catch thy melting art;  
 For surely that would touch her heart,  
 Wha kills me wi' disdaining.

Say, was thy little mate unkind,  
 And heard thee as the careless wind?  
 Oh, nocht but love and sorrow join'd  
 Sic notes o' woe could wauken.

Thou tells o' never-ending care;  
 O' speechless grief, and dark despair;  
 For pity's sake, sweet bird, nae mair!  
 Or my poor heart is broken!

Vol. iv., pp. 226, 227.

We add the following from Mr. Cromek's new volume, as the original form of the very popular song given at p. 325 of Dr. Currie's fourth volume:—

Ye flowery banks o' bonie Doon,  
 How can ye blume sae fair;  
 How can ye chant, ye little birds,  
 And I sae fu' o' care!

Thou'll break my heart, thou bonie bird  
 That sings upon the bough;  
 Thou minds me o' the happy days  
 When my fause luv was true.

Thou'll break my heart, thou bonie bird  
 That sings beside thy mate;  
 For sae I sat, and sae I sang,  
 And wist na o' my fate.

Aft hae I rov'd by bonie Doon,  
 To see the woodbine twine,  
 And ilka bird sang o' its love,  
 And sae did I o' mine.

Wi' lightsome heart I pu'd a rose  
 Frae aff its thorny tree,  
 And my fause luv staw the rose,  
 But left the thorn wi' me.

Vol. v., pp. 17, 18.

Sometimes the rich imagery of the poet's fancy overshadows and almost overcomes the leading sentiment.

The merry ploughboy cheers his team,  
 Wi' joy the tentie seedsman stalks,  
 But life to me's a weary dream,  
 A dream of aye that never wauks.

The wanton coot the water skims,  
 Among the reeds the ducklings cry,  
 The stately swan majestic swims,  
 And every thing is blest but I.

The sheep-herd steeks his faulding slap,  
 And owre the moorlands whistles shrill;  
 Wi' wild, unequal, wand'ring step  
 I meet him on the dewy hill.

And when the lark, 'tween light and dark,  
 Blythe waukens by the daisy's side,  
 And mounts and sings on flitting wings,  
 A woe-worn ghaist I hameward glide.

Vol. iii., pp. 284, 285.

The sensibility which is thus associated with simple imagery and gentle melancholy is to us the most winning and attractive. But Burns has also expressed it when it



is merely the instrument of torture—of keen remorse, and tender and agonising regret. There are some strong traits of the former feeling in the poems entitled the *Lament, Despondency, &c.*; when, looking back to the times

When love's luxurious pulse beat high,

he bewails the consequences of his own irregularities. There is something cumbrous and inflated, however, in the diction of these pieces. We are infinitely more moved with his *Elegy upon Highland Mary*. Of this first love of the poet we are indebted to Mr. Cromeek for a brief but very striking account from the pen of the poet himself. In a note on an early song inscribed to this mistress, he had recorded in a manuscript book—

My Highland lassie was a warm-hearted, charming young creature as ever blessed a man with generous love. After a pretty long tract of the most ardent reciprocal attachment, we met, by appointment, on the second Sunday of May, in a sequestered spot by the Banks of Ayr, where we spent the day in taking a farewell before she should embark for the West Highlands, to arrange matters among her friends for our projected change of life. At the close of autumn following, she crossed the sea to meet me at Greenock: where she had scarce landed when she was seized with a malignant fever, which hurried my dear girl to the grave in a few days!—before I could even hear of her illness.—Vol. v., pp. 237, 238.

Mr. Cromeek has added, in a note, the following interesting particulars, though without specifying the authority upon which he details them:—

This adieu was performed with all those simple and striking ceremonials which rustic sentiment has devised to prolong tender emotions and to inspire awe. The lovers stood on each side of a small purling brook; they laved their hands in its limpid stream, and holding a Bible between them, pronounced their vows to be faithful to each other. They parted—never to meet again!

The anniversary of Mary Campbell's death (for that was her name) awakening in the sensitive mind of Burns the most lively emotion, he retired from his family, then residing on the farm of Ellisland, and wandered, solitary, on the banks of the Nith, and about the farmyard, in the extremest agitation of mind, nearly the whole of the night. His agitation was so great that he threw himself on the side of a corn stack, and there conceived his sublime and tender elegy—his address *To Mary in Heaven*.—Vol. v., p. 238.

The poem itself is as follows:—

Thou lingering star, with less'ning ray,  
That lov'st to greet the early morn,  
Again thou usher'st in the day  
My Mary from my soul was torn!

O Mary! dear departed shade!  
Where is thy place of blissful rest?  
See'st thou thy lover lowly laid?  
Hear'st thou the groans that rend this breast?

That sacred hour can I forget,  
Can I forget the hallowed grove,  
Where by the winding Ayr we met,  
To live one day of parting love!

Eternity will not efface  
Those records dear of transports past;  
Thy image at our last embrace;  
Ah! little thought we 'twas our last!

Ayr gurgling kiss'd his pebbled shore,  
O'erhung with wild woods, thickening, green,  
The fragrant birch, and hawthorn hoar,  
Twin'd amorous round the raptured scene.

The flowers sprang wanton to be prest,  
The birds sang love on every spray,  
Till too, too soon, the glowing west  
Proclaim'd the speed of winged day!

Still o'er these scenes my mem'ry wakes,  
And fondly broods with miser care;  
Time but the impression stronger makes,  
As streams their channels deeper wear.

My Mary, dear departed shade!  
Where is thy place of blissful rest?  
See'st thou thy lover lowly laid?  
Hear'st thou the groans that rend his breast?

Vol. i., pp. 125, 126.

Of his pieces of humour, the tale of *Tam o' Shanter* is probably the best: though there are traits of infinite merit in *Scotch Drink*, *The Holy Fair*, *The Halloween*, and several of the songs, in all of which it is very remarkable that he rises occasionally into a strain of beautiful description or lofty sentiment, far above the pitch of his

original conception. The poems of observation on life and characters are the *Twa Dogs* and the various Epistles—all of which show very extraordinary sagacity and powers of expression. They are written, however, in so broad a dialect that we dare not venture to quote any part of them. The only pieces that can be classed under the head of pure fiction are the *Two Bridges of Ayr* and *The Vision*. In the last there are some vigorous and striking lines. We select the passage in which the Muse describes the early propensities of her favourite rather as being more generally intelligible than as superior to the rest of the poem.

I saw thee seek the sounding shore,  
 Delighted with the dashing roar;  
 Or when the North his fleecy store  
     Drove through the sky,  
 I saw grim Nature's visage hoar  
     Struck thy young eye.

Or when the deep-green mantl'd earth  
 Warm cherish'd ev'ry flow'ret's birth,  
 And joy and music pouring forth  
     In ev'ry grove,  
 I saw thee eye the gen'ral mirth  
     With boundless love.

When ripen'd fields, and azure skies,  
 Cal'd forth the reapers' rustling noise,  
 I saw thee leave their ev'ning joys,  
     And lonely stalk,  
 To vent thy bosom's swelling rise  
     In pensive walk.

When youthful love, warm, blushing, strong,  
 Keen-shivering shot thy nerves along,  
 Those accents grateful to thy tongue,  
     Th' adored Name,  
 I taught thee how to pour in song,  
     To sooth thy flame.

I saw thy pulse's maddening play,  
 Wild send thee Pleasure's devious way,  
 Misled by Fancy's meteor-ray,  
     By Passion driven;  
 But yet the *light* that led astray  
     Was *light* from heaven!

Vol. iii., pp. 109, 110.

There is another fragment, called also a *Vision*, which belongs to a higher order of poetry. If Burns had never written anything else, the power of description and the vigour of the whole composition would have entitled him to the remembrance of posterity.

The winds were laid, the air was still,  
The stars they shot along the sky;  
The fox was howling on the hill,  
And the distant-echoing glens reply.

The stream adown its hazelly path,  
Was rushing by the ruin'd wa's,  
Hasting to join the sweeping Nith,  
Whase distant roaring swells an' fa's.

The cauld blue north was streaming forth  
Her lights, wi' hissing eerie din;  
Athort the lift they start and shift,  
Like fortune's favours, tint as win!

By heedless chance I turn'd mine eyes,  
And by the moonbeam, shook, to see  
A stern and stalwart ghaist arise,  
Attir'd as minstrels wont to be.

Had I a statue been o' stane,  
His darin' look had daunted me;  
And on his bonnet grav'd was plain  
The sacred posy—Liberty!

And frae his harp sic strains did flow,  
Might rous'd the slumbering dead to hear;  
But oh, it was a tale of woe,  
As ever met a Briton's ear!

He sang wi' joy the former day,  
He weeping wail'd his latter times;  
But what he said, it was nae play,  
I winna ventur't in my rhymes.

Vol. iv., 344-346.

Some verses written for a Hermitage sound like the best parts of *Grongar Hill*. The reader may take these few lines as a specimen—

As thy day grows warm and high,  
Life's meridian flaming nigh,  
Dost thou spurn the humble vale?  
Life's proud summits wouldst thou scale?

Dangers, eagle-pinion'd, bold,  
Soar around each cliffy hold,  
While cheerful peace, with linnet song,  
Chants the lowly dells among.

Vol. iii., p. 299.

There is a little copy of *Verses upon a Newspaper* at p. 355 of Dr. Currie's fourth volume, written in the same condensed style, and only wanting translation into English to be worthy of Swift.

The finest piece of the strong and nervous sort, however, is undoubtedly the address of Robert Bruce to his army at Bannockburn, beginning *Scots wha hae wi' Wallace Bled. The Death Song* beginning—

Farewell, thou fair day, thou green earth and ye skies,  
Now gay with the bright setting sun,

is to us less pleasing. There are specimens, however, of such vigour and emphasis scattered through his whole works as are sure to make themselves and their author remembered; for instance, that noble description of a dying soldier—

Nae cauld, faint-hearted doubtings tease him;  
Death comes! wi' fearless eye he sees him;  
Wi' bluidy hand a welcome gi'es him;  
An' when he fa's,  
His latest draught o' breathin' lea'es him  
In faint huzzas!

Vol. iii., p. 27.

The whole song of *For a' that* is written with extraordinary spirit. The first stanza ends—

For rank is but the guinea stamp;  
The *man's* the goud, for a' that.

—All his songs, indeed, abound with traits of this kind. We select the following at random:—

O woman, lovely woman, fair!  
An angel form's faun to thy share;  
'Twad been o'er meikle to've gi'en thee mair,  
I mean an angel mind.

Vol. iv., p. 330.

We dare not proceed further in specifying the merits of pieces which have been so long published. Before

concluding upon this subject, however, we must beg leave to express our dissent from the poet's amiable and judicious biographer in what he says of the general harshness and rudeness of his versification. Dr. Currie, we are afraid, was scarcely Scotchman enough to comprehend the whole prosody of the verses to which he alluded. Most of the Scottish pieces are, in fact, much more carefully versified than the English; and we appeal to our southern readers whether there be any want of harmony in the following stanza:—

Wild beats my heart to trace your steps,  
Whose ancestors, in days of yore,  
Thro' hostile ranks and ruin'd gaps,  
Old *Scotia's* bloody lion bore:  
Even *I* who sing in rustic lore,  
Haply *my sires* have left their shed,  
And fac'd grim danger's loudest roar,  
Bold-following where *your* fathers led!

Vol. iii., p. 233.

The following is not quite English, but it is intelligible to all readers of English, and may satisfy them that the Scottish song-writer was not habitually negligent of his numbers:—

Their groves o' sweet myrtle let foreign lands reckon,  
Where bright-beaming summers exalt the perfume;  
Far dearer to me yon lone glen o' green breckan,  
Wi' the burn stealing under the lang yellow broom.  
Far dearer to me are yon humble broom bowers,  
Where the bluebell and gowan lurk lowly unseen:  
For there, lightly tripping amang the wild flowers,  
A-listening the linnet, aft wanders my Jean.

Tho' rich is the breeze in their gay sunny valleys,  
And cauld, Caledonia's blast on the wave;  
Their sweet-scented woodlands that skirt the proud palace,  
What are they? The haunt o' the tyrant and slave!  
The slave's spicy forests, and gold-bubbling fountains,  
The brave Caledonian views wi' disdain;  
He wanders as free as the winds of his mountains,  
Save love's willing fetters, the chains o' his Jean.

Vol. iv., pp. 228, 229.

If we have been able to inspire our readers with any portion of our own admiration for this extraordinary

writer, they will readily forgive us for the irregularity of which we have been guilty, in introducing so long an account of his whole works under colour of the additional volume of which we have prefixed the title to this article. The truth is, however, that, unless it be taken in connection with his other works, the present volume has little interest, and could not be made the subject of any intelligible observations. It is made up of some additional letters of middling merit; of complete copies of others, of which Dr. Currie saw reason to publish only extracts; of a number of remarks by Burns on old Scottish songs; and, finally, of a few additional poems and songs, certainly not disgraceful to the author, but scarcely fitted to add to his reputation. The world, however, is indebted, we think, to Mr. Cromek's industry for this addition to so popular an author; and the friends of the poet, we are sure, are indebted to his good taste, moderation, and delicacy, for having confined it to the pieces which are now printed. Burns wrote many rash, many violent, and many indecent things, of which we have no doubt many specimens must have fallen into the hands of so diligent a collector. He has, however, carefully suppressed everything of this description, and shown that tenderness for his author's memory, which is the best proof of the veneration with which he regards his talents. We shall now see if there be anything in the volume which deserves to be particularly noticed.

The preface is very amiable, and well written. Mr. Cromek speaks with becoming respect and affection of Dr. Currie, the learned biographer and first editor of the poet, and with great modesty of his own qualifications.

As an apology (he says) for any defects of my own that may appear in this publication, I beg to observe that I am by profession an artist, and not an author. In the manner of laying them before the public, I honestly declare that I have done my best; and I trust I may fairly presume to hope that the man who has contributed to extend the bounds of literature, by adding another genuine volume to the writings of Robert Burns, has some claim on the gratitude of his countrymen. On this occasion, I certainly feel something of that sublime and heart-swelling gratification which he experiences who casts another stone on the CAIRN of a great and lamented chief.—Preface, pp. xi., xii.

Of the letters, which occupy nearly half the volume, we cannot, on the whole, express any more favourable opinion than that which we have already ventured to pronounce on the prose compositions of this author in general. Indeed they abound, rather more than those formerly published, in ravings about sensibility and prudence; in common swearing and in professions of love for whisky. By far the best are those which are addressed to Miss Chalmers, and that chiefly because they seem to be written with less effort and, at the same time, with more respect for his correspondent. The following was written at a most critical period of his life, and the good feelings and good sense which it displays only make us regret more deeply that they were not attended with greater firmness:

Shortly after my last return to Ayrshire, I married "my Jean." This was not in consequence of the attachment of romance perhaps; but I had a long and much lov'd fellow-creature's happiness or misery in my determination, and I durst not trifle with so important a deposite. Nor have I any cause to repent it. If I have not got polite tattle, modish manners, and fashionable dress, I am not sickened and disgusted with the multiform curse of boarding-school affectation; and I have got the handsomest figure, the sweetest temper, the soundest constitution, and the kindest heart in the county! Mrs. Burns believes, as firmly as her creed, that I am *le plus bel esprit, et le plus honnête homme* in the universe; although she scarcely ever in her life, except the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, and the Psalms of David in metre, spent five minutes together on either prose or verse. I must except also from this last a certain late publication of Scots Poems, which she has perused very devoutly, and all the ballads in the country, as she has (O the partial lover! you will cry) the finest "wood-note wild" I ever heard. I am the more particular in this lady's character, as I know she will henceforth have the honour of a share in your best wishes. She is still at Mauchline, as I am building my house: for this hovel that I shelter in, while occasionally here, is pervious to every blast that blows, and every shower that falls; and I am only preserved from being chilled to death, by being suffocated with smoke. I do not find my farm that pennyworth I was taught to expect; but I believe, in time, it may be a saving bargain. You will be pleased to hear that I have laid aside idle *éclat*, and bind every day after my reapers.

To save me from that horrid situation of at any time going down, in a losing bargain of a farm, to misery, I have taken my Excise instructions, and have my commission in my pocket for any emergency of fortune! If I could set *all* before your view, what-



ever disrespect you, in common with the world, have for this business, I know you would approve of my idea.—Vol. v., pp. 74, 75.

We may add the following for the sake of connection:—

I know not how the word exciseman, or still more opprobrious, gauger, will sound in your ears. I, too, have seen the day when my auditory nerves would have felt very delicately on this subject; but a wife and children are things which have a wonderful power in blunting these kind of sensations. Fifty pounds a year for life, and a provision for widows and orphans, you will allow, is no bad settlement for a poet. For the ignominy of the profession, I have the encouragement which I once heard a recruiting serjeant give to a numerous, if not a respectable audience, in the streets of Kilmarnock—"Gentlemen, for your further and better encouragement, I can assure you that our regiment is the most blackguard corps under the crown, and consequently with us an honest fellow has the surest chance of preferment."—Vol. v., pp. 99, 100.

It would have been as well if Mr. Cromek had left out the history of Mr. Hamilton's dissensions with his parish minister; Burns's apology to a gentleman with whom he had a drunken squabble; and the anecdote of his being used to *ask for more liquor* when visiting in the country, under the pretext of fortifying himself against the terrors of a little wood he had to pass through in going home. The most interesting passages, indeed, in this part of the volume are those for which we are indebted to Mr. Cromek himself. He informs us, for instance, in a note—

One of Burns's remarks, when he first came to Edinburgh, was, that between the men of rustic life and the polite world he observed little difference—that in the former, though unpolished by fashion and unenlightened by science, he had found much observation and much intelligence; but a refined and accomplished woman was a being almost new to him, and of which he had formed but a very inadequate idea.—Vol. v., pp. 68, 69.

He adds also in another place, that "the poet, when questioned about his habits of composition, replied—'All my poetry is the effect of easy composition but of laborious correction.'" It is pleasing to know those things, even if they were really as trifling as to a superficial observer they may probably appear. There is a very amiable letter from Mr. Murdoch, the poet's early preceptor, at p. 111, and a very splendid one from Mr. Bloomfield, at p. 135.

As nothing is more rare among the minor poets than a candid acknowledgment of their own inferiority, we think Mr. Bloomfield well entitled to have his magnanimity recorded.

The illustrious soul that has left amongst us the name of Burns has often been lowered down to a comparison with me; but the comparison exists more in circumstances than in essentials. That man stood up with the stamp of superior intellect on his brow; a visible greatness: and great and patriotic subjects would only have called into action the powers of his mind, which lay inactive while he played calmly and exquisitely the pastoral pipe.

The letters, to which I have alluded in my preface to the *Rural Tales*, were friendly warnings, pointed with immediate reference to the fate of that extraordinary man. "Remember Burns" has been the watchword of my friends. I do remember Burns; but I *am not* Burns! I have neither his fire to fan, or to quench, nor his passions to control! Where then is my merit, if I make a peaceful voyage on a smooth sea, and with no mutiny on board?—Vol. v., pp. 135, 136.

The observations on Scottish songs, which fill nearly one hundred and fifty pages, are, on the whole, minute and trifling, though the exquisite justness of the poet's taste and his fine relish of simplicity in this species of composition is no less remarkable here than in his correspondence with Mr. Thomson. Of all other kinds of poetry he was so indulgent a judge that he may almost be termed an indiscriminate admirer. We find, too, from these observations, that several songs and pieces of songs which he printed as genuine antiques were really of his own composition.

The commonplace book, from which Dr. Currie had formerly selected all that he thought worth publication, is next given entire by Mr. Cromek. We were quite as well, we think, with the extracts; at all events, there was no need for reprinting what had been given by Dr. Currie, a remark which is equally applicable to the letters of which we had formerly extracts.

Of the additional poems which form the concluding part of the volume we have but little to say. We have little doubt of their authenticity, for though the editor has omitted, in almost every instance, to specify the source

from which they were derived, they certainly bear the stamp of the author's manner and genius. They are not, however, of his purest metal or marked with his finest die; several of them have appeared in print already, and the songs are, as usual, the best. This little lamentation of a desolate damsel is tender and pretty—

My father put me frae his door,  
My friends they hae disown'd me a';  
But I hae ane will tak' my part,  
The bonnie lad that's far awa'.

A pair o' gloves he gave to me,  
And silken snoods he gave me twa;  
And I will wear them for his sake,  
The bonnie lad that's far awa'.

The weary winter soon will pass,  
And spring will clead the birkenshaw;  
And my sweet babie will be born,  
And he'll come hame that's far awa'.

Vol. v., pp. 432, 433.

We now reluctantly dismiss this subject. We scarcely hoped, when we began our critical labours, that an opportunity would ever occur of speaking of Burns as we wished to speak of him, and therefore we feel grateful to Mr. Cromek for giving us this opportunity. As we have no means of knowing with precision to what extent his writings are known and admired in the southern part of the kingdom, we have perhaps fallen into the error of quoting passages that are familiar to most of our readers, and dealing out praise which every one of them had previously awarded. We felt it impossible, however, to resist the temptation of transcribing a few of the passages which struck us the most on turning over the volumes, and reckon with confidence on the gratitude of those to whom they are new, while we are not without hopes of being forgiven by those who have been used to admire them.

We shall conclude with two general remarks—the one national, the other critical. The first is, that it is impossible to read the productions of Burns along with his

history without forming a higher idea of the intelligence, taste, and accomplishments of our peasantry than most of those in the higher ranks are disposed to entertain. Without meaning to deny that he himself was endowed with rare and extraordinary gifts of genius and fancy, it is evident from the whole details of his history, as well as from the letters of his brother and the testimony of Mr. Murdoch and others to the character of his father, that the whole family and many of their associates, who never emerged from the native obscurity of their condition, possessed talents, and taste, and intelligence, which are little suspected to lurk in those humble retreats. His epistles to brother poets in the rank of small farmers and shopkeepers in the adjoining villages, the existence of a book society and debating club among persons of that description, and many other incidental traits in his sketches of his youthful companions—all contribute to show that not only good sense and enlightened morality, but literature and talents for speculation are far more generally diffused in society than is commonly imagined, and that the delights and the benefits of those generous and humanising pursuits are by no means confined to those whom leisure and affluence have courted to their enjoyment. That much of this is peculiar to Scotland, and may be properly referred to our excellent institutions for parochial education, and to the natural sobriety and prudence of our nation, may certainly be allowed; but we have no doubt that there is a good deal of the same principle in England, and that the actual intelligence of the lower orders will be found there also very far to exceed the ordinary estimates of their superiors. It is pleasing to know that the sources of rational enjoyment are so widely disseminated, and in a free country it is comfortable to think that so great a proportion of the people is able to appreciate the advantages of its condition, and fit to be relied on in all emergencies where steadiness and intelligence may be required.

Our other remark is of a more limited application, and is addressed chiefly to the followers and patrons of that

new school of poetry, against which we have thought it our duty to neglect no opportunity of testifying. Those gentlemen are outrageous for simplicity, and we beg leave to recommend to them the simplicity of Burns. He has copied the spoken language of passion and affection, with infinitely more fidelity than they have ever done, on all occasions which properly admitted of such adaptation; but he has not rejected the helps of elevated language and habitual associations, nor debased his composition by an affectation of babyish interjections and all the puling expletives of an old nursery-maid's vocabulary. They may look long enough among his nervous and manly lines before they find any "Good lacks!" "Dear hearts!" or "As a body may says" in them, or any stuff about dancing daffodils and sister Emmelines. Let them think with what infinite contempt the powerful mind of Burns would have perused the story of Alice Fell and her duffle cloak, of Andrew Jones and the half-crown, or of Little Dan without breeches and his thievish grandfather. Let them contrast their own fantastical personages of hysterical schoolmasters and sententious leech-gatherers with the authentic rustics of Burns's *Cotter's Saturday Night* and his inimitable songs, and reflect on the different reception which those personifications have met with from the public. Though they will not be reclaimed from their puny affectations by the example of their learned predecessors, they may perhaps submit to be admonished by a self-taught and illiterate poet, who drew from Nature far more directly than they can do, and produced something so much liker the admired copies of the masters whom they have abjured.

By SIR WALTER SCOTT.

*From "THE QUARTERLY REVIEW," February, 1809.*

A REVIEW OF "RELIQUES OF ROBERT BURNS."

WE opened a book bearing so interesting a title with no little anxiety. Literary reliques vary in species and value almost as much as those of the Catholic or of the antiquary. Some deserve a golden shrine for their intrinsic merit; some are valued from the pleasing recollections and associations with which they are combined; some, reflecting little honour upon their unfortunate authors, are dragged by interested editors from merited obscurity. The character of Burns, on which we may perhaps hazard some remark in the course of this article, was such as to increase our apprehensions. The extravagance of genius with which this wonderful man was gifted, being in his later and more evil days directed to no fixed or general purpose, was, in the morbid state of his health and feelings, apt to display itself in hasty sallies of virulent and unmerited severity—sallies often regretted by the bard himself; and of which justice to the living and to the dead alike demanded the suppression. Neither was this anxiety lessened when we recollected the pious care with which the late excellent Dr. Currie had performed the task of editing the works of Burns. His selection was limited, as much by respect to the fame of the living as of the dead. He dragged from obscurity none of those satirical effusions which ought to be as ephemeral as the transient offences which called them forth. He excluded everything approaching to licence, whether in morals or religion, and

thus rendered his collection such as, doubtless, Burns himself, in his moments of sober reflection, would have most highly approved. Yet applauding, as we do most highly applaud, the leading principles of Dr. Currie's selection, we are aware that they sometimes led him into fastidious and over-delicate rejection of the bard's most spirited and happy effusions. A thin octavo published at Glasgow in 1801, under the title of "Poems ascribed to Robert Burns, the Ayrshire bard," furnishes valuable proofs of this assertion. It contains, among a good deal of rubbish, some of his most brilliant poetry. A cantata in particular, called *The Jolly Beggars*, for humorous description and nice discrimination of character, is inferior to no poem of the same length in the whole range of English poetry. The scene, indeed, is laid in the very lowest department of low life, the actors being a set of strolling vagrants met to carouse and barter their rags and plunder for liquor in a hedge ale-house. Yet even in describing the movements of such a group, the native taste of the poet has never suffered his pen to slide into anything coarse or disgusting. The extravagant glee and outrageous frolic of the beggars are ridiculously contrasted with their maimed limbs, rags, and crutches—the sordid and squalid circumstances of their appearance are judiciously thrown into the shade. Nor is the art of the poet less conspicuous in the individual figures than in the general mass. The festive vagrants are distinguished from each other by personal appearance and character, as much as any fortuitous assembly in the higher orders of life. The group, it must be observed, is of Scottish character, and doubtless our northern brethren are more familiar with its varieties than we are; yet the distinctions are too well marked to escape even the Southron. The most prominent persons are a maimed soldier and his female companion, a hackneyed follower of the camp, a stroller, late the consort of a Highland ketterer or sturdy beggar—"but weary fu' the waefu' woodie!" Being now at liberty she becomes an object of rivalry between a "pigmy scraper with his fiddle" and a strolling tinker. The latter, a desperate bandit, like

most of his profession, terrifies the musician out of the field, and is preferred by the damsel, of course. A wandering ballad-singer, with a brace of doxies, is last introduced upon the stage. Each of these mendicants sings a song in character, and such a collection of humorous lyrics, connected by vivid poetical description, is not, perhaps, to be paralleled in the English language. As the collection and the poems are very little known in England, and as it is certainly apposite to the *Reliques of Robert Burns*, we venture to transcribe the concluding ditty, chanted by the ballad-singer at the request of the company, whose "mirth and fun have now grown fast and furious," and set them above all sublunary terrors of jails, stocks, and whipping posts. It is certainly far superior to anything in the *Beggars' Opera*, where alone we could expect to find its parallel—

Then ou're again, the jovial thrang  
The poet did request,  
To loose his pack an' wale a sang,  
A ballad o' the best:

He rising, rejoicing  
Between his twa Deborahs,  
Looks round him, an' found them  
Impatient for the chorus.

## AIR.

TUNE—*Jolly mortals, fill your glasses.*

## I.

See! the smoking bowl before us,  
Mark our jovial ragged ring!  
Round and round take up the chorus,  
And in raptures let us sing.

## Chorus.

A fig for those by law protected!  
Liberty's a glorious feast!  
Courts for cowards were erected,  
Churches built to please the priest.

## II.

What is title? what is treasure?  
What is reputation's care?  
If we lead a life of pleasure,  
'Tis no matter *how* or *where*!  
A fig, &c.



## III.

With the ready trick and fable,  
 Round we wander all the day;  
 And at night, in barn or stable,  
 Hug our doxies on the hay.  
 A fig, &c.

## IV.

Does the train-attended carriage  
 Through the country lighter rove?  
 Does the sober bed of marriage  
 Witness brighter scenes of love?  
 A fig, &c.

## V.

Life is all a variorum,  
 We regard not how it goes;  
 Let them cant about decorum  
 Who have characters to lose.  
 A fig, &c.

## VI.

Here's to budgets, bags, and wallets!  
 Here's to all the wandering train!  
 Here's our ragged brats and callets!  
 One and all cry out, Amen!  
 A fig, &c.

We are at a loss to conceive any good reason why Dr. Currie did not introduce this singular and humorous cantata into his collection. It is true that in one or two passages the muse has trespassed slightly upon decorum, where, in the language of the Scottish song—

High kilted was she  
 As she gaed ower the lea.

Something, however, is to be allowed to the nature of the subject, and something to the education of the poet; and if, from veneration to the names of Swift and Dryden, we tolerate the grossness of the one and the indelicacy of the other, the respect due to that of Burns may surely claim indulgence for a few light strokes of broad humour. The same collection contains *Holy Willie's Prayer*, a piece of satire more exquisitely severe than any which Burns afterwards wrote, but, unfortunately, cast in a form too

daringly profane to be received into Dr. Currie's collection.

Knowing that these, and hoping that other compositions of similar spirit and terror, might yet be recovered, we were induced to think that some of them, at least, had found a place in the collection now given to the public by Mr. Cromek. But he has neither risked the censure nor laid claim to the applause which might have belonged to such an undertaking. The contents of the volume before us are more properly gleanings than reliques, the refuse and sweepings of the shop, rather than the commodities which might be deemed contraband. Yet even these scraps and remnants contain articles of curiosity and value, tending to throw light on the character of one of the most singular men by whose appearance our age has been distinguished.

The first portion of the volume contains nearly two hundred pages of letters addressed by Burns to various individuals, written in various tones of feeling and modes of mind, in some instances exhibiting all the force of the writer's talents, in others only valuable because they bear his signature. The avidity with which the reader ever devours this species of publication has been traced to the desire of seeing the mind and opinions of celebrated men in their open and undisguised moments, and of perusing and appreciating their thoughts, while the gold is yet rude ore, ere it is refined and manufactured into polished sentences or sounding stanzas. But notwithstanding these fair pretences we doubt if this appetite can be referred to any more honourable source than the love of anecdote and private history. In fact, letters, at least those of a general and miscellaneous kind, very rarely contain the real opinions of the writer. If an author sits down to the task of formally composing a work for the use of the public, he has previously considered his subject and made up his mind both on the opinions he is to express and on the mode of supporting them. But the same man usually writes a letter only because the letter must be written, is probably never more at a loss than when looking for a subject, and treats it when found, rather so as to gratify his corre-

spondent than communicate his own feelings. The letters of Burns, although containing passages of great eloquence, and expressive of the intense fire of his disposition, are not exceptions from this general rule. They bear occasionally strong marks of affectation, with a tinge of pedantry rather foreign from the bard's character and education. The following paragraphs illustrate both the excellences and faults of his epistolary composition. Nothing can be more humorously imagined and embodied than the sage group of wisdom and prudence in the first, while the affectation of the second amounts to absolute rant.

Do tell that to Lady M'Kenzie, that she may give me credit for a little wisdom. "I, Wisdom, dwell with Prudence." What a blessed fireside! How happy should I be to pass a winter evening under their venerable roof! and smoke a pipe of tobacco, or drink water-gruel with them! What solemn, lengthened, laughter-quashing gravity of phiz! What sage remarks on the good-for-nothing sons and daughters of indiscretion and folly! And what frugal lessons, as we straitened the fireside circle, on the uses of the poker and tongs!

Miss N. is very well, and begs to be remembered in the old way to you. I used all my eloquence, all the persuasive flourishes of the hand, and heart-melting modulation of periods in my power, to urge her out to Herveiston, but all in vain. My rhetoric seems quite to have lost its effect on the lovely half of mankind. I have seen the day—but that is a "tale of other years." In my conscience I believe that my heart has been so oft on fire that it is absolutely vitrified. I look on the sex with something like the admiration with which I regard the starry sky in a frosty December night. I admire the beauty of the Creator's workmanship; I am charmed with the wild but graceful eccentricity of their motions, and—wish them good night. I mean this with respect to a certain passion *dont j'ai eu l'honneur d'être un miserable esclave*; as for friendship, you and Charlotte have given me pleasure, permanent pleasure, "which the world cannot give, nor take away" I hope, and which will out-last the heavens and the earth.

In the same false taste, Burns utters such tirades as this—

Whether in the way of my trade, I can be of any service to the Rev. Doctor,\* is, I fear, very doubtful. Ajax's shield consisted, I think, of seven bull hides and a plate of brass, which altogether set Hector's utmost force at defiance. Alas! I am not a Hector,

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\* Dr. M'Gill, of Ayr. The poet gives the best illustration of this letter in one addressed to Mr. Graham, Dr. Currie's Ed., No. 86.

and the worthy Doctor's foes are as securely armed as Ajax was. Ignorance, superstition, bigotry, stupidity, malevolence, self-conceit, envy—all strongly bound in a massy frame of brazen impudence. Good God, Sir! to such a shield, humour is the peck of a sparrow, and satire the pop-gun of a schoolboy. Creation disgracing *scelerats* such as they, God only can mend, and the Devil only can punish. In the comprehending way of Caligula, I wish they had all but one neck. I feel impotent as a child to the ardour of my wishes! O for a withering curse to blast the germins of their wicked machinations. O for a poisonous tornado, winged from the Torrid Zone of Tartarus, to sweep the spreading crop of their villainous contrivances to the lowest hell!

These passages, however, in which the author seems to have got the better of the man, in which the desire of shining and blazing and thundering supersedes the natural expressions of feeling and passion, are less frequent in the letters of Burns than perhaps of any other professed writer. Burns was in truth the child of passion and feeling. His character was not simply that of a peasant exalted into notice by uncommon literary attainments, but bore a stamp which must have distinguished him in the highest as in the lowest situation in life. To ascertain what was his natural temper and disposition, and how far it was altered or modified by the circumstances of birth, education, and fortune, might be a subject for a long essay; but to mark a few distinctions is all that can be here expected from us.

We have said that Robert Burns was the child of impulse and feeling. Of the steady principle which cleaves to that which is good, he was, unfortunately, divested by the violence of those passions which finally wrecked him. It is most affecting to add that while swimming, struggling, and finally yielding to the torrent, he never lost sight of the beacon which ought to have guided him to land, yet never profited by its light.

We learn his opinion of his own temperament in the following emphatic burst of passion:—

God have mercy on me! a poor d-mned, incautious, duped, unfortunate fool! The sport, the miserable victim, of rebellious pride, hypochondriac imagination, agonizing sensibility, and bedlam passions!

“Come, stubborn pride and unshrinking resolution,

accompany me through this to me miserable world!" In such language did this powerful but untamed mind express the irritation of prolonged expectation and disappointed hope, which slight reflection might have pointed out as the common fate of mortality. Burns neither acknowledged adversity as the "tamer of the human breast," nor knew the golden curb which discretion hangs upon passion. He even appears to have felt a gloomy pleasure in braving the encounter of evils which prudence might have avoided, and to have thought that there could be no pleasurable existence between the extremes of licentious frenzy and of torpid sensuality. "There are two only creatures that I would envy—a horse in his wild state traversing the forests of Asia, and an oyster on some of the desert shores of Europe. The one has not a wish without enjoyment; the other has neither wish nor fear." When such a sentiment is breathed by such a being, the lesson is awful; and if pride and ambition were capable of being taught, they might hence learn that a well-regulated mind and controlled passions are to be prized above all the glow of imagination and all the splendour of genius.

We discover the same stubborn resolution rather to endure with patience the consequences of error than to own and avoid it in future, in the poet's singular choice of a pattern of fortitude.

I have bought a pocket Milton, which I carry perpetually about with me, in order to study the sentiments—the dauntless magnanimity; the intrepid, unyielding independence; the desperate, daring, and noble defiance of hardship in that great personage, SATAN.

Nor was this a rash or precipitate choice, for in a more apologetic mood he expresses the same opinion of the same personage.

My favourite feature in Milton's Satan is his manly fortitude in supporting what cannot be remedied—in short, the wild, broken fragments of a noble, exalted mind in ruins. I meant no more by saying he was a favourite hero of mine.

With this lofty and unbending spirit were connected a

love of independence and a hatred of control, amounting almost to the sublime rant of Almanzor.

He was as free as Nature first made man,  
Ere the base laws of servitude began,  
When wild in woods the noble savage ran.

In general society Burns often permitted his determination of vindicating his personal dignity to hurry him into unjustifiable resentment of slight or imagined neglect. He was ever anxious to maintain his post in society, and to extort that deference which was readily paid to him by all from whom it was worth claiming. This ill-judged jealousy of precedence led him often to place his own pretensions to notice in competition with those of the company who, he conceived, might found theirs on birth or fortune. On such occasions it was no easy task to deal with Burns. The power of his language, the vigour of his satire, the severity of illustration with which his fancy instantly supplied him, bore down all retort. Neither was it possible to exercise over the poet that restraint which arises from the chance of further personal consequences. The dignity, the spirit, the indignation of Burns was that of a plebeian, of a high-souled plebeian indeed, of a citizen of Rome or Athens, but still of a plebeian untinged with the slightest shade of that spirit of chivalry which, since the feudal times, has pervaded the higher ranks of European society. This must not be imputed to cowardice, for Burns was no coward. But the lowness of his birth and habits of society prevented rules of punctilious delicacy from making any part of his education; nor did he, it would seem, see anything so rational in the practice of duelling as afterwards to adopt or to effect the sentiments of the higher ranks upon that subject. A letter to Mr. Clarke, written after a quarrel upon political topics, has these remarkable, and, we will add, manly expressions.

From the expressions Capt. — made use of to me, had I had nobody's welfare to care for but my own, we should certainly have come, according to the manners of the world, to the necessity of murdering one another about the business. The words were such

as, generally, I believe, end in a brace of pistols; but I am still pleased to think that I did not ruin the peace and welfare of a wife and a family of children in a drunken squabble.

In this point, therefore, the pride and high spirit of Burns differed from those of the world around him. But if he wanted that chivalrous sensibility of honour which places reason upon the sword's point, he had delicacy of another sort, which those who boast most of the former do not always possess in the same purity. Although so poor as to be ever on the very brink of absolute ruin, looking forwards now to the situation of a foot-soldier, now to that of a common beggar, as no unnatural consummation of his evil fortune, Burns was, in pecuniary transactions, as proud and independent as if possessed of a prince's revenue. Bred a peasant, and preferred to the degrading situation of a common exciseman, neither the influence of the low-minded crowd around him, nor the gratification of selfish indulgence, nor that contempt of futurity which has characterised so many of his poetical brethren, ever led him to incur or endure the burden of pecuniary obligation. A very intimate friend of the poet, from whom he used occasionally to borrow a small sum for a week or two, once ventured to hint that the punctuality with which the loan was always replaced at the appointed time was unnecessary and unkind. The consequence of this hint was the interruption of their friendship for some weeks, the bard disdaining the very thought of being indebted to a human being one farthing beyond what he could discharge with the most rigid punctuality. It was a less pleasing consequence of this high spirit that Burns was utterly inaccessible to all friendly advice. To lay before him his errors, or to point out their consequences, was to touch a string that jarred every feeling within him. On such occasions, his, like Churchill's, was

The mind which starting, heaves the heartfelt groan,  
And hates the form she knows to be her own.

It is a dreadful truth, that when racked and tortured by the well-meant and warm expostulations of an intimate friend, he at length started up in a paroxysm of frenzy,

and drawing a sword cane, which he usually wore, made an attempt to plunge it into the body of his adviser—the next instant he was with difficulty withheld from suicide.

Yet this ardent and irritable temperament had its periods not merely of tranquillity, but of the most subduing tenderness. In the society of men of taste, who could relish and understand his conversation, or whose rank in life was not so much raised above his own as to require, in his opinion, the assertion of his dignity, he was eloquent, impressive, and instructing. But it was in female circles that his powers of expression displayed their utmost fascination. In such, where the respect demanded by rank was readily paid as due to beauty or accomplishment; where he could resent no insult, and vindicate no claim of superiority, his conversation lost all its harshness, and often became so energetic and impressive as to dissolve the whole circle into tears. The traits of sensibility which, told of another, would sound like instances of gross affectation, were so native to the soul of this extraordinary man, and burst from him so involuntarily, that they not only obtained full credence as the genuine feelings of his own heart, but melted into unthought-of sympathy all who witnessed them. In such a mood they were often called forth by the slightest and most trifling occurrences; an ordinary engraving, the wild turn of a simple Scottish air, a line in an old ballad, were, like “the field mouse’s nest” and “the uprooted daisy,” sufficient to excite the sympathetic feelings of Burns. And it was wonderful to see those who, left to themselves, would have passed over such trivial circumstances without a moment’s reflection, sob over the picture when its outline had been filled up by the magic art of his eloquence.

The political predilections—for they could hardly be termed principles—of Burns were entirely determined by his feelings. At his first appearance he felt, or affected, a propensity to Jacobitism. Indeed, a youth of his warm imagination and ardent patriotism, brought up in



Scotland thirty years ago, could hardly escape this bias. The side of Charles Edward was the party, not surely of sound sense and sober reason, but of romantic gallantry and high achievement. The inadequacy of the means by which that prince attempted to regain the crown, forfeited by his fathers, the strange and almost poetical adventures which he underwent, the Scottish martial character honoured in his victories and degraded and crushed in his defeat, the tales of the veterans who had followed his adventurous standard, were all calculated to impress upon the mind of a poet a warm interest in the cause of the house of Stuart. Yet the impression was not of a very serious cast, for Burns himself acknowledges in one of these letters that, "to tell the matter of fact, except when my passions were heated by some accidental cause, my Jacobitism was merely by way of *vive la bagatelle*" (p. 240). The same enthusiastic ardour of disposition swayed Burns in his choice of political tenets, when the country was agitated by revolutionary principles. That the poet should have chosen the side on which high talents were most likely to procure celebrity; that he, to whom the factitious distinctions of society were always odious, should have listened with complacency to the voice of French philosophy, which denounced them as usurpations on the rights of man, was precisely the thing to be expected. Yet we cannot but think that if his superiors in the Excise department had tried the experiment of soothing rather than of irritating his feelings, they might have spared themselves the disgrace of rendering desperate the possessor of such uncommon talents. For it is but too certain that from the moment his hopes of promotion were utterly blasted, his tendency to dissipation hurried him precipitately into those excesses which shortened his life. We doubt not that in that awful period of national discord he had done and said enough to deter, in ordinary cases, the servants of Government from countenancing an avowed partisan of faction. But this partisan was Burns! Surely the experiment of lenity might have been tried, and perhaps successfully. The conduct of Mr. Graham of

Fintry, our poet's only shield against actual dismissal and consequent ruin, reflects the highest credit upon that gentleman. We may dismiss these reflections on the character of Burns with his own beautiful lines—

I saw thy pulse's maddening play,  
Wild send thee pleasure's devious way,  
By passion driven;  
But yet the light that led astray  
Was light from heaven.

The second part of this volume contains a number of memoranda by Burns concerning the Scottish songs and music published by Johnstone, in six volumes 8vo. Many of these appear to us exceedingly trifling. They might, indeed, have adorned with great propriety a second edition of the work in question, or any other collection of Scottish songs; but, separated from the verses to which they relate, how can anyone be interested in learning that *Down the Burn*, *Davie* was the composition of David Maigh, keeper of bloodhounds to the Laird of Riddell; that *Tarry woo* was, in the opinion of Burns, a "very pretty song"; or even that the author of *Polwarth on the Green* was "Captain John Drummond MacGrigor, of the family of Bochalddie"? Were it of consequence, we might correct the valuable information thus conveyed in one or two instances, and enlarge it in many others. But it seems of more importance to mark the share which the poet himself took in compiling or embellishing this collection of traditional poetry, especially as it has not been distinctly explained either by Dr. Currie or Mr. Cromek. Tradition, generally speaking, is a sort of perverted alchemy which converts gold into lead. All that is abstractly poetical, all that is above the comprehension of the merest peasant, is apt to escape in frequent recitation; and the *lacunæ*, thus created, are filled up either by lines from other ditties, or from the mother wit of the reciter or singer. The injury in either case is obvious and irreparable. But with all these disadvantages the Scottish songs and tunes preserved for Burns that inexpressible charm which they have never afforded to his

countrymen. He entered into the idea of collecting their fragments with all the zeal of an enthusiast; and few, whether serious or humorous, passed through his hands without receiving some of those magic touches which, without greatly altering the song, restored its original spirit, or gave it more than it had ever possessed. So dexterously are these touches combined with the ancient structure that the *rifacciamento*, in many instances, could scarcely have been detected without the avowal of the bard himself. Neither would it be easy to mark his share in the individual ditties. Some he appears entirely to have re-written; to others he added supplementary stanzas; in some he retained only the leading lines and the chorus, and others he merely arranged and ornamented. For the benefit of future antiquaries, however, we may observe that many of his songs, claimed by the present editor as the exclusive composition of Burns, were, in reality, current long before he was born. Let us take one of the best examples of his skill in imitating the old ballad. *M'Pherson's Lament* was a well-known song many years before the Ayrshire bard wrote those additional verses which constitute its principal merit. This noted freebooter was executed at Inverness about the beginning of the last century. When he came to the fatal tree he played the tune to which he has bequeathed his name upon a favourite violin, and holding up the instrument, offered it to any one of his clan who would undertake to play the tune over his body at his lyke-wake; as none answered, he dashed it to pieces on the executioner's head, and flung himself from the ladder. The following are the wild stanzas, grounded, however, upon some traditional remains\* which Burns had put into the mouth of this desperado:—

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\* We have heard some of these recited, particularly one, which begins—

Now farewell house and farewell friends,  
And farewell wife and bairns;  
There's nae repentance in my heart,  
The fiddle's in my arms—  
\* \* \*

## M'PHERSON'S FAREWELL.

Farewell, ye dungeons dark and strong,  
 The wretch's destiny!  
 M'Pherson's time will not be long,  
 On yonder gallows tree.

Sae rantingly, sae wantonly,  
 Sae dauntingly gaed he;  
 He play'd a spring, and danc'd it round,  
 Below the gallows tree.

Oh, what is death but parting breath?—  
 On mony a bloody plain  
 I've dar'd his face, and in this place  
 I scorn him yet again!  
 Sae rantingly, &c.

Untie these bands from off my hands,  
 And bring to me my sword;  
 And there's no a man in all Scotland,  
 But I'll brave him at a word.  
 Sae rantingly, &c.

I've liv'd a life of sturt and strife;  
 I die by treacherie;  
 It burns my heart I must depart  
 And not avenged be.  
 Sae rantingly, &c.

Now farewell light, thou sunshine bright,  
 And all beneath the sky!  
 May coward shame distain his name,  
 The wretch that dares not die!  
 Sae rantingly, &c.

How much Burns delighted in the task of eking out the ancient melodies of his country appears from the following affecting passage in a letter written to Mr. Johnstone shortly before his death:—

You are a good, worthy, honest fellow, and have a good right to live in this world—because you deserve it. Many a merry meeting this publication has given us, and possibly it may give us more, though, alas! I fear it. This protracting, slow, consuming illness which hangs over me, will, I doubt much, my ever dear friend, arrest my sun before he has well reached his middle career, and will turn over the poet to far other and more important concerns than studying the brilliancy of wit, or the pathos of sentiment! However, *hope* is the cordial of the human heart, and I endeavour to cherish it as well as I can.

Notwithstanding the spirit of many of the lyrics of Burns, and the exquisite sweetness and simplicity of others, we cannot but deeply regret that so much of his time and talents was frittered away in compiling and composing for musical collections. There is sufficient evidence both in the edition of Dr. Currie and in this supplemental volume that even the genius of Burns could not support him in the monotonous task of writing love verses on heaving bosoms and sparkling eyes, and twisting them into such rhythmical forms as might suit the capricious evolutions of Scotch reels, ports, and strathspeys. Besides, this constant waste of his fancy and power of verse in small and insignificant compositions must necessarily have had no little effect in deterring him from undertaking any grave or important task. Let no one suppose that we undervalue the songs of Burns. When his soul was intent on suiting a favourite air with words, humorous or tender, as the subject demanded, no poet of our tongue ever displayed higher skill in marrying melody to immortal verse. But the writing of a series of songs for large musical collections degenerated into a slavish labour, which no talents could support, led to negligence, and above all, diverted the poet from his grand plan of dramatic composition.

To produce a work of this kind, neither perhaps a regular tragedy nor comedy, but something partaking of the nature of both, seems to have been long the cherished wish of Burns. He had even fixed on the subject, which was an adventure in low life said to have happened to Robert Bruce while wandering in danger and disguise after being defeated by the English. The Scottish dialect would have rendered such a piece totally unfit for the stage; but those who recollect the masculine and lofty tone of martial spirit which glows in the poem of Bannockburn will sigh to think what the character of the gallant Bruce might have proved under the hand of Burns! It would undoubtedly have wanted that tinge of chivalrous feeling which the manners of the age, no less than the disposition of the monarch, imperiously demanded; but

this deficiency would have been more than supplied by a bard who could have drawn from his own perceptions the unbending energy of a hero sustaining the desertion of friends, the persecution of enemies, and the utmost malice of disastrous fortune. The scene, too, being partly laid in humble life, admitted that display of broad humour and exquisite pathos with which he could interchangeably and at pleasure adorn his cottage views. Nor was the assemblage of familiar sentiments incompatible in Burns with those of the most exalted dignity. In the inimitable tale of *Tam o' Shanter*, he has left us sufficient evidence of his ability to combine the ludicrous with the awful and even the horrible. No poet, with the exception of Shakespeare, ever possessed the power of exciting the most varied and discordant emotions with such rapid transitions. His humorous description of the appearance of Death (in the poem on Dr. Hornbook) borders on the terrific, and the witches' dance in the Kirk of Alloway is at once ludicrous and horrible. Deeply must we then regret those avocations which diverted a fancy so varied and so vigorous, joined with language and expression suited to all its changes, from leaving a more substantial monument to his own fame and to the honour of his country.

The next division is a collection of fugitive sentences and commonplaces, extracted partly from the memorandum book of the poet, and partly, we believe, from letters which could not be published in their entire state. Many of these appear to be drawn from a small volume, entitled *Letters to Clarinda*, by Robert Burns, which was printed at Glasgow, but afterwards suppressed. To these, the observations which we offered on the bard's letters in general apply with additional force; for in such a selection, the splendid patches, the showy, declamatory, figurative effusions of sentimental affectation are usually the choice of the editor. Respect for the mighty dead prevents our quoting instances in which Burns has degraded his natural eloquence by these meretricious ornaments. Indeed, his style is sometimes so forced and

unnatural that we must believe he knew to whom he was writing, and that an affectation of enthusiasm in platonic love and devotion was more likely to be acceptable to the fair Clarinda than the true language of feeling. The following loose and laboured passages show that the passion of Sylvander (a name sufficient of itself to damn a whole file of love letters) had more of vanity than of real sentiment:—

What trifling silliness is the childish fondness of the everyday children of the world! 'Tis the unmeaning toying of the younglings of the fields and forests; but where sentiment and fancy unite their sweets; where taste and delicacy refine; where wit adds the flavour, and good sense gives strength and spirit to all, what a delicious draught is the hour of tender endearment!—beauty and grace in the arms of truth and honour, in all the luxury of mutual love!

The last part of the work comprehends a few original poems. We were rather surprised to find in the van the beautiful song called *Evan Banks*. Mr. Cromek ought to have known that this was published by Dr. Currie in his first edition of Burns's works, and omitted in all those which followed, because it was ascertained to be the composition of Helen Maria Williams, who wrote it at the request of Dr. Wood. Its being found in the handwriting of Burns occasioned the first mistake, but the correction of that leaves no apology for a second. The remainder consists of minor poems, epistles, prologues, and songs, by which, if the author's reputation had not been previously established, we will venture to say it would never have risen above the common standard. At the same time, there are few of them that do not, upon minute examination, exhibit marks of Burns's hand, though not of his best manner. The following exquisitely affecting stanza contains the essence of a thousand love tales:—

Had we never loved sae kindly,  
Had we never loved sae blindly,  
Never met or never parted,  
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.

There are one or two political songs, which for any wit or humour they contain might have been very well

omitted. The satirical effusions of Burns, when they related to persons or subjects removed from his own sphere of observation, were too vague and too coarse to be poignant. We have seen, indeed, some very pointed stanzas in two political ballads, mentioned p. 174; but Mr. Cromek apparently judged them too personal for publication. There are a few attempts at English verse, in which, as usual, Burns falls beneath himself. This is the more remarkable, as the sublimer passages of his *Saturday Night*, *Vision*, and other poems of celebrity, always swell into the language of classic English poetry. But although in these flights he naturally and almost unavoidably assumed the dialect of Milton and Shakespeare, he never seems to have been completely at his ease when he had not the power of descending at pleasure into that which was familiar to his ear and to his habits. In the one case his use of the English was voluntary, and for a short time; but when assumed as a primary and indispensable rule of composition, the comparative penury of rhymes and the want of a thousand emphatic words which his habitual acquaintance with the Scottish supplied, rendered his expression confined and embarrassed. No man ever had more command of this ancient Doric dialect than Burns. He has left a curious testimony of his skill in a letter to Mr. Nicol, published in this volume, an attempt to read a sentence of which would break the teeth of most modern Scotchmen.

Three or four letters from William Burns, a brother of the poet, are introduced for no purpose that we can guess, unless to show that he wrote and thought like an ordinary journeyman saddler. We would readily have believed, without positive proof, that the splendid powers of the poet were not imparted to the rest of his family.

We scarcely know, upon the whole, in what terms we ought to dismiss Mr. Cromek. If the reputation of Burns alone be considered, this volume cannot add to his fame; and it is too well fixed to admit of degradation. The cantata already mentioned is, indeed, the only one of his productions not published by Dr. Currie, which we con-



sider as not merely justifying, but increasing his renown. It is enough to say of the very best of those now published that they take nothing from it. What the public may gain by being furnished with additional means of estimating the character of this wonderful and self-taught genius we have already endeavoured to state. We know not whether the family of the poet will derive any advantage from this publication of his remains. If so, it is the best apology for their being given to the world; if not, we have no doubt that the editor, as he is an admirer of Chaucer, has read of a certain pardoner, who

. . . With his *relics*, when that he fond  
A poor persone dwelling up on lond,  
Upon a day he gat him more moneie  
Than that the persone got in monethes tweie.

By JOSIAH WALKER.

*Miscellaneous Remarks on the Writings of Burns, 1811.*

WHEN we call Burns an original poet we give him a very high station in the scale of intellectual excellence, the greatness of the praise being proportioned to the smallness of the number with whom it is shared. In all ages, the genuine poet is a character of rare appearance. During the century which has recently expired, distinguished as it was by mental exertion, it may be doubted if more than five or six were justly entitled to this honourable appellation. The poets of inferior power were such as had been guided, by their admiration of others, to a species of composition which they would not of themselves have discovered. But the bard of nature would have been a poet though none had preceded him. Even before the invention of metrical language, his superior portion of fancy and feeling would probably have found a vent in discourse and given an interesting peculiarity to his character.

Persons of this description possess qualities of which it is difficult to give a complete enumeration, but of which a few may be specified. The discriminating vivacity of their perception, the exquisite delicacy of their intellectual tact, and the ease with which they trace every motion to its origin and object, produce effect which ordinary men more willingly ascribe to an additional faculty than to the superior excellence or improvement of powers which

are common to all. Hence, either from a natural facility with which certain operations of his mind are performed, or from habits of peculiar activity in recollecting and analysing his feelings, a man of sensibility perceives in every scene a multitude of little circumstances which, to a mind of grosser structure, are either unobserved or, if observed, uninteresting. In viewing a landscape, the latter is conscious of a pleasing result from the whole, and contents itself with this state of aggregate gratification; while the former draws an appropriate delight from every part, and can appreciate to himself and others the share of the general effect which belongs to each particular feature of the scene. But the power of observing and distinguishing the finer or the nobler lineaments of nature is not sufficient. This constitutes only taste, which numbers enjoy without being able to impart their impressions. For the last purpose, the aid of genius is required, which invents the means of communicating to others, by a warm and faithful transcript of its objects, the emotions which these objects had awakened in itself. The taste of a painter enables him to discern the great lines on which grace or sublimity depend; but it is by his genius that he traces them with such a truth of execution as to secure their effect. In like manner the poet is led, by a nice perception of the circumstances which had affected himself, to make choice of these, and of these alone, for conveying the affection to others; and the introduction of a circumstance included in no former enumeration is accompanied with that pleasure which it is the province of genius, by novelty of discovery, to create. Still, however, he may fail from imperfect execution if he do not possess a masterly command of language, which is his only medium of expression; but when he selects, from an exuberant store, words and phrases of the most significant power for conveying ideas, selected with equal felicity, he then approaches the consummation of imitative art. To genius of this character, the pretensions of Burns may be maintained from numberless passages of his writings. In what poet shall we find a more concise yet

more complete representation of a visible scene, than is presented in the four following lines:—

The cauld blue north was streaming forth  
Her lights wi' hissing eirie din;  
Athort the lift they start and shift,  
Like fortune's favours, lost and win.

Here every word is big with emphatic meaning. It is a separate stroke of that slight but skilful outline, which brings the whole scene to the eye with greater force and distinctness than a picture filled with the most ample and elaborate finishing. So powerfully does it affect the imagination that we almost seem to grow chill as we read. The last line is rather complementary, the mind being so intensely engaged by the material objects that the moral analogy comes upon it unexpectedly. But it was the practice of Burns to let the current of his ideas flow with little restraint; and hence we find him mingling the pathetic with the sprightly, the solemn with the ludicrous, and, in the present instance, the sentimental with the descriptive.

A passage no less striking we meet with in a stanza most happily picturing a furious snowstorm, where the same discriminating sensibility, and the same power of verbal execution, will be perceived by all to whom the language is intelligible—

Now biting Boreas, fell and dour,  
Sharp, shivers through the leafless bower,  
And Phœbus gi'es a short liv'd glour,  
Far south the lift,  
Dim-dark'ning through the flaky shower,  
Or whirling drift.

Who can read these lines without beholding the dun and labouring gloom, with all its adjuncts, before his eyes? The few circumstances exhibited are marked with a strength and preferred with a judgment, which rouse the activity of the mind and introduce whatever association can supply.

Though the lofty and energetic spirit of Burns appears to have delighted more in the sublime than in the beauti-

ful, yet, in his delineations of softer and brighter scenery, we shall easily discover the pencil of genius. A summer morning is thus described—

The rising sun o'er Galston muirs  
Wi' glorious light was glitin',  
The hares were hirplin' down the furrs,  
The lavrocks they were chauntin'.

Here only three images are introduced, yet more are not required to place the reader where the poet was placed when he wrote. Thomson gives a description of a summer morning, enriched with details and embellished with splendid elaboration, yet it presents (at least to my mind) nothing which does not offer itself as a natural accompaniment to the stenographic sketch, if I may use the metaphor, thrown off by his countryman with such rapid facility. In this passage we have an example of the skill of Burns in his nice adaptation of words. Of all the terms which any language affords few could so significantly express the peculiar motion of the hare, when she moves with caution but without alarm, as the word *hirplin'*. In this manner language is extended. A number of words, which are little else than synonyms to persons who are at no pains or who have no power to define and discriminate, convey to one more anxious for the enjoyment produced by variety and precision of thought, different shades of significance, which he separates with ease. He afterwards employs them to express the meaning which they had conveyed to himself, and they come by his authority and adoption to be legitimised. In almost every page of Burns we may find examples of unusual skill in his choice of words. As I have been accidentally led to point out a term descriptive of peculiar motion, I shall subjoin a few more of the same class, and if I succeed under this restriction, it will naturally be inferred that, on all subjects, instances of similar felicity are equally abundant in the works of the poet. "When Hughoc he came doytin by," "Down some trottin' burn's meander," "Awa' ye squatter'd like a drake," "The wheels o' life gae down-

hill screevin'." The two following passages are singularly rich in terms of the same description:—

Here farmers gaah, in ridin' graith,  
 Gaed hoddin' by their cotters;  
 There swankies young, in braw braid-claith,  
 Are springin' o'er the gutters;  
 The lasses skelpin' barefit, thrang, &c.

Thou never braindg't, an' fecht an' fliskit,  
 But thy auld tail thou wad hae whiskit,  
 And spread abreed thy weel-fill'd brisket,  
     Wi' pith and pow'r,  
 Till spritty knowes wad rair't and risket,  
     And slypet owre.

In representations of human character the power of Burns was no less conspicuous than in his portraits of external nature. When describing with satirical humour the character of country squires, he recollects that they are in general disposed to treat their rustic dependants with affable liberality and indulgence, and that there are but a few unpardonable offences which never fail to kindle their resentment and to call forth their power of oppression. These he catches with penetrating observation and enumerates with happy brevity in six lines, of which the descriptive truth will be recognised from Caithness to Cornwall—

For thae frank, rantin', ramblin' billies,  
 Fient haet o' them's ill-hearted fellows:  
 Except for cutting o' their trimmer,  
 Or speaking lightly o' their limmer,  
 Or shooting o' a hare or muircock,  
 The ne'er a bit they're ill to poor fock.

Here we have the usual subjects of aristocratic jealousy, and the common character created by common circumstances in a particular order of men, expressed with a rapidity and resemblance which may be compared to the sudden effect produced by the cast of a mould, rather than to the tardy labour of the pencil. To the same species of characteristic writing, where the description of an individual describes a class, may be referred the poaching sportsman in *Tam Samson's Elegy*. Few can

have passed through life without meeting some of this numerous family, who are rewarded for their insignificance in the sober departments of gainful industry by an undisputed supremacy in all the scenes of profitless recreation which furnish amusements for idle activity.

Another province of the genuine poet is to seize with interesting accuracy the practices and modes of life which prevail in certain subdivisions of society; and all of those, to which Burns had access, are reflected from the mirror of his writings with the most circumstantial fidelity. In his *Two Dogs* and *Halloween* we have the interior of a peasant's cottage, with all its appropriate manners and customs at the season of merry-making; and in *The Cotter's Saturday Night* we have the same scene under a more affecting and impressive aspect. The *Holy Fair* is a representation of practices which arise out of institutions peculiar to a single country, and which, though abundantly open to ridicule, are consecrated by traditionary usage. Those who know the original must acknowledge it to be a caricature of exquisite humour; and even those who do not will be diverted by its exhibition of characters and customs, the truth of which derives sufficient evidence from their probability. The nocturnal revels in the ale-house which was the darling resort of Tam o' Shanter may stand a comparison with the scenes at the Boar's Head tavern, so admirably delineated by Shakespeare; but, in making this comparison, one difference cannot fail to strike us in favour of the immortal dramatist. Falstaff and his associates are characters which we have never met with, yet they are adjusted with such philosophical skill to the varieties possible in human nature—they are made up of parts, which form compounds so congruous, that they are as interesting as if their prototypes were familiarly known. To render a fiction pleasing, it must both resemble and differ from reality. In the happy balance of these two qualities the excellence of the fiction in a great measure consists, the resemblance giving interest to the difference as the difference to the resemblance; and in the fictitious characters alluded to

we see this balance admirably managed. But similar inventions were perhaps beyond the enterprise of Burns. All his toppers are copies, not compounds, from real life. To pursue this speculation a little further—though Burns succeeds in making us sympathise with the mirth and happiness of his hero, though he disposes us to forgive the dissipation which created so much kindness and cordiality, he would probably have shrunk from an attempt to exhibit vices less venial, as anything else than odious or disgusting. It was only the invincible powers of a Shakespeare that, in Falstaff, could give a singular sort of interest to falsehood, debauchery, and cowardice, and make them, with the aid of wit and sociality, seduce us even into an indescribable feeling of mirthful and companionable affection.

From the power of Burns in delineating character, if we ascend to a higher region of poetry and try his pretensions to genius by his exhibition of the stronger affections of the mind, we still shall find our scrutiny successful. Here he had, unfortunately, no occasion to go far in search of an original, as in his own breast he might always find some passion domineering with a force, and indulged with a freedom which rendered its operations singularly distinct. Of love he had abundant experience, and no man was better qualified to describe and discriminate its various emotions than one who had run through the whole, from the gentle languishment of dubious and nascent preference to the fury of impatient and ungovernable ardour. Nor was his mind more a stranger to the risings of indignation, the loathings of contempt, the throes of grief, or the meltings of pity: if the assertion of Roscommon be just—

No poet any passion can excite,  
But what they feel transport them, when they write.

Burns possessed this poetical qualification in no ordinary degree. He had a title to rely with certainty on communicating the infection, when the disease was so strong in himself. In opposition to Roscommon, it may be asked how Shakespeare could delineate to the life the



passions of Hamlet or Othello, when he was neither the Prince of Denmark nor the General of Venice; neither the son of a murdered king, nor the husband of a suspected wife; and when he, therefore, could never have actually felt the passions excited by circumstances in which he had never been placed. It must have been from the united force of imagination and passion. The former was sufficiently powerful to transform him, for the moment, into the very person of his hero; and the latter, to make him feel precisely what his hero must have felt. Had either of these powers been defective, the effect would have been imperfect and unsatisfactory. Had his imagination been feeble, he could not have gone out of himself and assumed the being of another; and had his passions been languid, though he might have placed himself in the proper situation, he would not have been moved by the proper feelings, and would have produced a character very different, and probably far less interesting, than what he had designed.

In like manner Burns could, by the force of his fancy, identify himself with Bruce at the head of his army, or with the dying soldier in the field of battle; and by the power of his passions he could glow with those feelings of patriotism and cravings for glory which vent themselves in language so appropriate to the situation. It was seldom, however, that he made such efforts. On most occasions he had no need to call in the aid of imagination, or to assume any other character than his own. The events of his life, and the manner in which they had affected him, furnished abundant exercise for his power of displaying the passions. The book of human nature may be read by all human beings, however stationary or obscure: and it is probable that Burns was a better practical scholar in the workings of his heart before he quitted the narrow precinct of his native parish, than numbers whose cool observation had been far more extensive but, at the same time, less personal. He who engages deeply in the game of life will much sooner reach proficiency than one who has studied it at a greater variety of tables, but only as a spectator. Where do love

and sorrow breathe their mingled streams in more touching unison than in the verses addressed *To Mary in Heaven*? Where does the quiet and complacent warmth of parental affection smile with a more gentle benignity than in the figure of the mother in the *The Cotter's Saturday Night*? Where can we find a more exhilarating enumeration of the enjoyments of youth, contrasted with their successive extinction as age advances, than in *The Epistle to J. S.*—? The views of human life which Burns habitually indulged were dark and cheerless; and in those hours of depression, to which all are occasionally subject, or under the pressure of misfortunes of which we are always ready to shift the blame from ourselves by charging it to the treachery or injustice of the world, we shall acknowledge the fidelity with which our feelings have been expressed by the bard in the *Lament*, in *Despondency*, and in those pathetic reflections on the fugacity of pleasure which are scattered through his writings, and which he is unable to suppress even in the liveliest frolics of his genius. Most of them, too, have a seasoning of tenderness and pity for his fellow-creatures, both rational and irrational, by which readers even of the most obtuse sensibility cannot fail to be affected. Nor is this the traditional cant which one poet inherits from another, and which floats past the attention, as the mere expletive or professional style of the art. It has a penetrating and original poignancy, which genius alone can bestow. The poet often touches a new string with a pathos which instantly awakens a corresponding tone in the heart of his reader. Thus, in his *Winter Night* he contrives, by a masterly description of its severity, to lead us gradually on from the sufferings of the innocent songsters to commiserate those even of the kite and the carrion crow, and to acknowledge that their voracious cruelty has been more than expiated by the merciless lash of the elements.

Ilk happing bird, wee, helpless thing,  
 That in the merry months o' spring  
 Delighted me to hear thee sing,  
     What comes o' thee?  
 Whare wilt thou cow'r thy chittering wing  
     And close thy e'e?

Ev'n you on murd'ring errands toil'd,  
Lone from your savage homes exil'd,  
The blood-stain'd roost, and sheep-cote spoil'd,  
My heart forgets,  
While pitiless the tempest wild  
Sore on you beats.

It was a daring attempt in Shakespeare to reconcile with probability the gradual submission of Lady Anne to the flattery of Richard; yet Burns shows almost equal confidence in his own powers, when he expects to succeed in claiming our pity for the devil, or our protection for the tyrants of the grove.

In richness and vigour of imagination, Burns has rarely been surpassed. This power is commonly considered to be the principal constituent of genius, as it is the instrument of invention, and the parent of novelty both in science and art. The sciences and arts, while in a state of progression, appear to advance rather by sudden and occasional starts than by regular periodical steps, and to receive their increments not from the collective efforts of all who engage them, but from the extraordinary and unexpected exertion of a single mind, by which something that was unknown before is discovered in the one or executed in the other. To the power of making this solitary exertion the denomination of genius should, perhaps, in strictness of language, be confined. If the preceding idea be just, it is by the production of novelty that pretensions to genius must be tried: and to this test Burns may, without any apprehension, be subjected. His writings, both in prose and verse, abound with original thoughts and with images of his own creation. And it must be remembered that an author, whose reading was so limited, might frequently produce by a second invention what, unknown to him, had been invented before. Even when a common idea occurs to him, it serves only as a hint to put his fancy in motion, or as the medium through which he passes to some new conception. Thus in his song of *John Anderson*, the comparison of life to the ascent and declivity of a hill is common and familiar,

but when Burns has begun it, he pursues it beyond the usual limits, and by making his aged couple "sleep together at the fit," extends it to an idea which is altogether new, and which, at the same time, harmonises finely with the serene, affectionate, and pathetic spirit of this beautiful piece. Thus, too, when speaking of the unfitness of genius for ordinary affairs, he employs a trite idea in comparing life to a voyage, but he employs it only as the stem on which he grafts another of his own invention to illustrate the helpless unskilfulness of poets, whom he calls "timid landmen on life's stormy main." In his metaphors he shows himself always ready to rely on the coinage of his own fancy. His fish with ruddy spots are "bedropt with crimson hail." The loss of a valuable fellow-citizen is "paying kane to death"; the hour of twelve is "the keystone of night's black arch"; and the acquisition of immortal fame by a poet is to "warsle time, and lay him on his back."

The conceptions of Burns, it may also be observed, were no less remarkable for their clearness than for their strength. This enabled him to sustain all his similes correctly, and to avoid that incongruity in the progress of the parallel to which less discriminating minds are exposed. We may refer, as examples, to the ludicrous comparisons of Kilmarnock to a cow in the *Ordination*, and of the life of the "unco guid" to a mill in the *Address*, and also to the whole allegorical song of *John Barleycorn*.

The strength and vivacity of his conceptive faculties may be still better estimated by the distinctness with which he places himself and his readers in fictitious situations. He appears, by a kind of sorcery, to disengage us from the power of the senses and to transport us to imaginary scenes, where the vision for the time has all the power of actual existence.

*Modo me Thebis, modo ponit Athenis.* We feel ourselves become spectators of the *Holy Fair*, and members of the party at the sports of *Halloween*, or at the prayers and supper of the Cotter! We find ourselves seated with

Tam o' Shanter at the blazing fire of the ale-house, and grow familiarly acquainted with the jovial group. We enter into all the warmth of the fraternal friendship between Tam and the Souter, "who had been fou for weeks thegither"; and we perceive our spirits rise as the bowl goes round. We accompany the hero through the tempest; we gaze with him at the window of the illuminated ruin, and shudder at the strange mixture of unearthly horror and heaven-defying merriment. Nor can we at once resume our own persons, and withdraw from the contemplation of objects, which by superior vivacity compensate for their want of reality.

The mind of Burns was a magazine of ideas, collected by the activity of his observation, aided by a memory which treasured only what possessed some species of interest. From this affluence of materials which, by a power of quick association, were always at command, his fancy was ready to frame a variety of pleasing images, and the sensibility which accompanied all his views supplied that warmth of sentiment with which his writings are so richly seasoned. In these there is nothing indifferent: no frigid description where mind is absent, and feeling asleep; no thought "which plays round the head but comes not to the heart"; no figurative expression, which serves only to decorate, without increasing the warmth and vigour of what it clothes. Everything, under the aspect in which he presents it, becomes an object of sympathy, and receives animation from the touch of his pen. Even between his *Brigs* our hearts make an instant preference. We take part with the venerable and insulted ancient, as with the reduced but dignified representative of an honourable ancestry; while we scorn and resent the petulance of its rival, as of the disgusting triumph of upstart ostentation and prosperous vulgarity. In the same manner we enter into the feelings of his Daisy and his Mouse, his Dog and his Mare; for on all the subjects of his pencil Burns never failed to spread the hues of passion.

The power ascribed to the music of Timotheus is

ascribable also to the power of Burns, which instantly transmits the varied and successive emotions of its author, and infects the reader with all the enthusiasm of his mirth or despondency, his affection or resentment, his applause or derision. Even where he deviates into a strain which we disapprove, we may condemn but cannot quit him, and generally find the attraction of his talent stronger than the repulsion of his immorality.

His poems have been so frequently and so judiciously analysed, that any new attempt of a similar kind must be attended with the double danger of repeating stale remarks, or of directing attention to beauties and defects of comparative unimportance. It is fortunate, therefore, that the public has already decided so distinctly for itself as to render the attempt officious and unbecoming. If the excellence of an author may be estimated by the frequency with which his sentiments are echoed in quotation; if this be the stamp by which the public sanctions the currency of its favourite verses, a high station among the poets has been assigned to Burns, and his beauties, without the aid of italics or inverted commas, have become nearly as proverbial among all by whom the language is understood as the striking passages of Pope or Milton. Yet, without presuming to assist a choice which has been already made, I shall perhaps be indulged in a few desultory reflections, which, if they miss the assent of the reader, may furnish him with amusement in detecting their futility.

It is remarkable that the writings of Burns, unlike to those of other poets, exhibit few traces of progressive improvement in his art. The *Epistle to Davie*, which is the earliest of those compositions where his powers seem to have been seriously put forth, is little inferior to his latest productions. Its difficult measure, borrowed from *The Cherry and the Slae*, he probably chose to try his dexterity in rhyming; and it is astonishing that, under this unusual constraint, he should have clothed his thoughts in expression so natural, flowing, and familiar. This poem, which was written about the period of his father's

death, presents an affecting specimen of his reflections under a singular accumulation of distresses. It seems to be a sort of effort to accustom his thoughts to the very darkest possibilities of evil, and to a recollection of the consolations which will be left when his anticipations are realised. His consciousness of superior talents, to which his attention at the time had perhaps been drawn by their exertion in conversation with his "brother poet," makes him consider with regret, and not without some of that indignation which was more congenial to his character, the peculiar discomforts of his situation. These are admirably described in the opening stanza, which represents the northern blast as drifting the snow to the very hearth of his wretched cottage. He then anticipates the period to which he seems so near, when the unequal distribution of external advantages may reach its extreme, and when his friend and he may be reduced to the condition of itinerant beggars. Evils of this condition he does not palliate, but soothes himself with the reflection that, after all the gifts of fortune are gone, those of nature will remain, and that they may still be happy in the possession of health, taste, ingenuity, and affection, and above all, in the cessation of fear, the chief poisoner of enjoyment, from having reached the lowest point of depression. The lines in which the mendicant poets are imaged, as exulting in the charms of creation, and in the exercise of a talent from which they had derived so little apparent benefit, are extremely pleasing—

What tho', like commoners of air,  
We wander out, we know not where,  
But either house or hal' ?  
Yet Nature's charms, the hills and woods,  
The sweeping vales, and foaming floods,  
Are free alike to all.  
In days when daisies deck the ground,  
And blackbirds whistle clear,  
With honest joy our hearts will bound,  
To see the coming year.  
On braes when we please, then,  
We'll sit and sowth a tune;  
Syne rhyme till't, we'll time till't,  
And sing't when we hae done.

The last two lines are among the few in which the difficulty of the measure produces a little feebleness. In a subsequent stanza, he describes the advantages to be derived from adversity, with the facility of a practised versifier, and with a philosophy worthy of Epictetus—

And, even should misfortunes come,  
 I, here wha sit, hae met wi' some,  
 An's thankfu' for them yet :  
 They gie the wit of age to youth ;  
 They let us ken oursel' ;  
 They make us see the naked truth,  
 The real guid and ill.  
 Tho' losses and crosses  
 Be lessons right severe,  
 There's wit there, ye'll get there,  
 Ye'll fin' nae other where.

He concluded by employing the common fable of Pegasus to express his fatigue and the necessity of repose from the exertion he had made; but by the strength of his conception and his happy choice of epithets, even this hackneyed allegory gains original interest under this management. No writer could set before our eyes, with greater brevity and at the same time with more distinctness, the picture of a jaded steed at the end of his stage.

Prior to the *Epistle*, Burns had produced *Poor Maillie* and *Winter, a Dirge*, in the introductory stanza of which there is abundant proof of his talent for descriptive poetry. From these first fruits of the genius of Burns we see that it very suddenly shot up to maturity, and that in the use of the Scottish dialect little subsequent improvement was to be expected. In one department, however, room was still left for a further progress. By the diligent study and frequent composition of English verse, he might have attained a wider range of expression, and have thus found more latitude for the originality of his conceptions and the vagrancy of his fancy in a language, through the medium of which he would have greatly extended the circle of his admirers. To this he does not appear to have paid very serious attention; and therefore the last of his English productions, which is a prologue, written eight months before his death, evinces



no remarkable accession of power during the ten preceding years. It is a fair imitation of that style of genteel and chastened sprightliness which is generally adopted in those dramatic addresses; but when contrasted with the humour of his other poems, it serves to confirm a remark which has frequently been made, that few can give full effect to a witty conception, unless by a language with which they are most familiar and in which they naturally think. Many Scotchmen, in companies where they can take the aid of their own vernacular dialect, show a rich vein of humour, which appears to desert them when restricted to English. This, perhaps, more than any constitutional or characteristic indisposition to liveliness, may be the cause why few Scotch writers have been eminent for humour. To the northern division of the empire English is in some measure a foreign tongue; while Irish authors, who often excel in humour, enjoy the advantage of speaking from their cradle and being accustomed to couch their thoughts in the language which they are afterwards to write, with little more peculiarity than may be perceived in some of the provincial inhabitants of England. The Irish enjoy a further advantage in the similarity of their institutions, ecclesiastical and literary, political and legal, and of the terms and phrases connected with them, to those of the metropolitan country. On such topics a Scotchman might furnish many pleasantries highly amusing to his countrymen, but equally dull and unmeaning to the English public (which every subject of the empire is now ambitious of addressing), from its total ignorance of the professional usages and technical words on which his wit might be exercised.

But to return from this digression: if we do not find in Burns indications of a regular and progressive improvement, we are certainly still further from finding anything of a contrary nature. *Tam o' Shanter*, one of his latest compositions, is also one of the most perfect and of the best sustained in the whole collection, combining, as an excellent critic has observed, the comic archness of Prior with the terrific sublimity of Shakespeare. His minor

productions nearly of the same period, such as the *Whistle* and the poem on Captain Gorse, evince at least no abatement of his former humour or ease of expression.

The humour of Burns was original and successful. He had a strong propensity to view under a ludicrous aspect subjects which he thought zeal or superstition had invested with unnecessary or questionable sanctity. When beating for game, he delighted to push to the very confines of propriety, and to sport on the debatable line between sacred and profane. He was indeed scarcely excelled by Lucian himself, in that species of humour which is produced by debasing objects of the most serious and solemn magnitude to the level of easy and indifferent familiarity. In the verses of *Dr. Hornbook*, where the poet relates his interview and social chat with Death, whose bony figure is drawn with equal drollery and correctness, how is the scythe of that dreaded being stripped of its terrors, when it only serves to suggest this homely and neighbourly address—

Guid e'en t'ye, friend! ha'e ye been mawin'  
When ither folks are busy sawin'?

Nor is the familiarity less, when Death, like the starved apothecary, pleads his poverty as an excuse for following an unpopular calling—

Folk maun do something for their bread,  
And sae maun Death.

This poem has all the excellence of which its description admits; and though humour be its groundwork, it is occasionally streaked with a vein of sublimity, as in the expression, "it spak right howe," and in the incident when "the auld kirk hammer strak the bell." This stroke puts the train of risible emotions to flight, and suddenly introduces another, more akin to apprehension, and a recollection of the tremendous personage who had been amusing us with his jokes.

Nor was the power of Burns inferior in that description of humour which exalts insignificant things to a ludicrous dignity. Whether he addresses, or supplies language to,

inanimate and irrational objects, it is so suitable and unforced, and appears so gravely in earnest, as to render the fable more delusive and the personification more credible than is commonly the case in similar attempts. His *Twa Dogs* exercise their reason with the most sober propriety. His *Ewe* is a sagacious and affectionate matron. His *Louse* is a well-scolded intruder. His *Haggis* a fair and portly personage, whose countenance beams good humour and good cheer; and his *Toothache* an imp of torture, practised in all the arts of excruciation. On high pretensions, especially to devotional austerity, Burns had no mercy; nor on that popular weakness which lets fancy's reverence for religion beget a sort of coaxing and effeminate tenderness for the person of its ministers. This appears in a variety of his poems, where he applies the scourge of irony with all the force and cordiality of Butler. Even follies, which had more of his approbation, do not escape entirely; and it is amusing to observe how dexterously he contrives, by way of a nominal execution of the law, to touch, but not to wound, them with the rod; for in his praises of thoughtless dissipation there is frequently a shade of ridicule, though so thin and slight as to be scarcely perceptible.

In the lyrical effusions of Burns, we find examples of the light and airy, the plaintive and pathetic, and the animating and exalted. The few which he left of the last description are in so noble a spirit that we cannot help regretting the smallness of their number; but he was led by the old Scottish ballads, which he proposed to himself as models, into a preference of the style of Anacreon to that of Tyrtaeus. Without departing from his models, however, he found room for admission of those tender sentiments to which his heart was always open. Separation from what we love, either by distance of time or distance of place, is a circumstance of which the recollection most powerfully awakens that "joy of grief" so often felt by minds of sensibility. In this feeling there is more pleasure from the certainty of what we have formerly enjoyed than pain from regretting that it is past. It is partly

owing to the consciousness of having secured our natural portion of the blessings of life, that we can look with benignity, and even with superiority on the young who are enjoying them at present, but whose portion is still uncertain. This species of sentiment, in which triumph is softened by a "not unpleasing melancholy," Horace expresses beautifully in the following lines:—

. . . Ille potens sui  
Laetusque deget, cui licet in diem  
Dixisse vixi.

Or in the spirited version of Dryden—

Happy the man, and happy he alone,  
He who can call to-day his own,  
He who, secure within, can say  
To-morrow do thy worst, for I have liv'd to-day.

Sentiments akin to that which I have described, harmonising so happily with the mixture of vivacity and pensiveness which prevails in the Scottish airs, were also suited to the mind of Burns, in which mirth and melancholy were almost co-existent. They accordingly appear with exquisite effect in many of his songs, as in *Auld Lang Syne* and *John Anderson*, where the characters at once regret and exult in the mutual pleasure of former days. It was the felicity of Burns, as it is the province of genius, to exhibit the whole state of the mind by a single expression; and when the two friends recall their "paidling in the burn," or the old couple their feelings of satisfied recollection, shaded by graver thoughts in the one case, of the troubles by which they had long been separated; and in the other, of the speedy dissolution of their union, for which a common grave is but a melancholy consolation.

In like manner, when the force of affection is softened down by the distance of its objects to a mild and wistful tenderness of thought, which is disposed to enliven its vivacity, by laying hold of every association, it produces a sentiment congenial to the mind of the poet and to the music of his country. This sentiment is finely brought out in *Of a' the Airts the Wind can blaw, I look to the West*

when I gae to my rest, *Musing on the Roaring Ocean*, and several more of the songs. In some, the poet surrenders himself entirely to sadness without the slightest mixture of gaiety, as in the touching strain of *Highland Mary*, of which it may be said, in his own words—

O nocht but love and sorrow join'd  
Sic notes of woe could wauken.

Here the vein of grief is pure from any harsh or reproachful emotion, as he mourns no breach of affection but merely a blow of Providence. But in the *Banks of Doon* a tone of accusation is mingled with that of complaint; and in *Had I a cave on some wild distant shore*, he rises to a burst of despair so indignant, that for the perfidy of a single individual he would abandon the whole of her species. He can thus vary the note of amatory anguish without any failure of execution.

In personating more fortunate lovers, he shows no less ability and acquaintance with all the shapes and shades of his subject. Whether he pour forth effusions of impassioned admiration, vows of fidelity, or fears for the safety of their object; and whether he assume the male or female character, his expressions are so penetrating and faithful to nature, as to show that his experience in the first of these characters, and his observation of the last, had been equally extensive and exact.

When he gives exclusive indulgence to his perception of the ludicrous, his representations are as amusing by their variety as they are admirable for their comic truth. In *Duncan Gray* we see the fear of prolonging coyness beyond the prudent point, and in *Last May a braw wooer*, the operation of jealousy in a vulgar mind exhibited with amusing archness; while in *Whistle o'er the lave o't* and *Husband, husband, cease your strife* we have specimens of nuptial antipathy, not surpassed by anything which this fertile subject has suggested to ancient or modern epigrammatists.

Every reader must have observed with what strokes of delicate and original description the songs, as well as the other performances of Burns, are embellished; and in

the former, poetical description is in its proper place, being subservient and auxiliary to sentiment. Thus, in *Bonny lassie, will ye go*, we have this fine picture—

White o'er the linn the burnie pours,  
And rising weets wi' misty showers  
The birks of Aberfeldie.

And in *Ca' the Ewes*—

We'll gae down by Clouden side,  
Thro' the hazels spreading wide,  
O'er the waves that sweetly glide,  
To the moon sae clearly.  
Yonder Clouden's silent towers,  
Where at moonshine's midnight hours,  
O'er the dewy bending flowers  
Fairies dance sae cheery.

It were endless to enumerate the beauties of these charming ballads, but it is impossible to pass without notice the convivial songs, such as *Willie brew'd a peck of malt*, in which the whole spirit of good fellowship seems to be concentrated; or the martial odes of *Wallace* and *Farewell, thou fair day*, in which, from their vehemence and grandeur, more than in any of his other compositions, we see the poet placed on the tripod and swelling with the Pythian afflatus.

The songs of Burns are consecrated by a popularity, against the decisions of which it is idle to dispute. From the cottage to the palace, and from the Ganges to the Ohio, they are in the mouths of all by whom the British language is spoken; and the Scottish melodies are now employed to introduce the verses, as the verses formerly sung to them were employed to introduce the music.

Yet with all their excellence, it is perhaps among the songs of Burns that we shall find his least successful attempts as a poet. He seems to have tasked himself to their composition, without waiting for the moment of inspiration or for that propitious disposition of mind and body, when ideas and expressions meet with co-operating fluency. From those, for example, beginning *O saw ye bonnie Leslie* and *O saw ye my dear, my Phely*, had they been anonymous, we should certainly have been led to form

no high idea of the powers of the writer. Many of the songs, too, which would have appeared delightful, standing singly, lose a part of their charm when collected, from a monotony in their subjects, images, and thoughts. The subject in most of them is praise or description of a young woman, and though the poet has done his utmost to vary his portraits they still retain an unavoidable likeness. The recurrence of the same images is also observable. We meet with "the rose-bud," "the daisy," and the "scented birks," the freshness of morning and the fairness of spring, the "graceful air," and the "een of bonny blue," with a frequency which weakens their interest; and it may be added that the efforts of the author to diversify his assertions of constancy, and his description of love pangs, betray him sometimes into hyperbolical adjurations and comparisons, with which few of his readers can sympathise. Such, at least in my mind, are some passages of the verses to *Clarinda* and of the song, *Where braving angry winter's skies*.

It is unpleasant to observe that Burns can scarcely ever introduce a female into his verses without stating himself in the character of her lover. This appears chiefly in his songs, many of which are intended as complimentary to some female acquaintance, and his love is the unfailing compliment to all. But his excessive subdivision of this exhaustless article reduces any single portion of it to a very insignificant value. We have no other alternative than to suppose that he either adorned a plurality of these idols at once, or passed with unusual rapidity from one to another, or that his feelings were altogether fictitious, and his amatory polytheism employed merely by way of poetical machinery. All of these suppositions are offensive, yet all of them, in part, admissible. Burns was certainly so lavish of this admiration as to justify the belief that he could shift it very easily from one object to another, or that, by a sort of superfetation of passions, he could direct it to more than one at a time. But it is probable that he might be led into this style chiefly by catching the spirit of the popular Scotch songs, which he

was desirous to imitate; and having avoided, according to the wish of his employers, their vulgarity and grossness, he might think himself entitled to indulgence in retaining all their warmth of passion which was so congenial to his own taste.

There is a certain feeling of which every man is more or less conscious, but of which the degree is extremely different in different individuals. This is the distinction which our affections, in all cases, make between the sexes. Even when age or consanguinity must exclude the slightest sentiment of love, there is still in our regard for a female a delicate peculiarity, imperceptibly borrowed from that sentiment which is never blended even with the strongest of our male attachments. Our affection for a mother, a sister, or a niece is different from what we feel for the corresponding connections of our own sex. We do not only desire the esteem of the former, but we wish to stand favourably in their eye for those qualities which are exclusively masculine; qualities which women are formed to admire, without wishing to rival, and prone to encourage by the tacit flattery of looking up to them for protection. This instinct and innocent gallantry is, in one case, finely discriminated by Gibbon:—"The relation," says he, "of a brother and a sister, especially if they do not marry, appears to me of a very singular nature. It is a familiar and tender friendship with a female mind about our own age; an affection, perhaps, softened by the secret influence of sex, but pure from any mixture of sensual desire, the sole species of Platonic love that can be indulged with truth and without danger." To this it may be added that, if the "secret influence of sex" at all assist in the pleasure of the connection which Gibbon describes, it will operate with much less secrecy, though more or less modified and subdued by the character of the individual, when its only check is one so easily surmountable as difference of station.

In no man was this sentiment of sexuality more powerful or apparent than in Burns. The presence of women, whatever were their age or rank, produced an evident



and instant revolution in his manner. The tone of his conversation and demeanour changed, and he endeavoured to recommend himself to their preference by other powers of pleasing than he had practised before. Nor were these powers employed without success; for even to those who could not for a moment have admitted a thought of Burns as a lover, they were accompanied with an undefined and ambiguous gratification, of which a lady could find no clearer description than saying "that she had been completely carried off her feet by the bard." To the strength of this sentiment, unqualified by proper discipline, may be imputed that constant tendency to the language of love which the productions of Burns betray. He could view no woman as an object of poetical praise without viewing her also as an object of tender passion. In his mind the two ideas were almost inseparable, owing to that adoration of the other sex which made an important part of his character, and which was increased by a pride which we see him indulge in the consciousness of its vehemence, even when affecting to confess it as a weakness.

The prose writings of Burns consist almost solely of his correspondence, and are therefore to be considered as presenting no sufficient criterion of his powers. Epistolary effusions, being a sort of written conversation, participate in many of the advantages and defects of discourse. They materially vary both in subject and manner with the character of the person addressed, to which the mind of their author, for the moment, assumes an affinity. To equals they are familiar and negligent, and to superiors they can scarcely avoid that transition to careful effort and studied correctness, which the behaviour of the writer would undergo when entering the presence of those to whom his talents were his only introduction. Burns, from the lowness of his origin, found himself inferior in rank to all his correspondents except his father and brother; and although the superiority of his genius should have done more than correct this disparity of condition, yet between pretensions so incommensurable it is difficult to produce a perfect equality. Burns evidently labours

to reason himself into a feeling of his completeness, but the very frequency of his efforts betrays his dissatisfaction with their success, and he may therefore be considered as writing under the influence of a desire to create, or to preserve, the admiration of his correspondents. In this object he must certainly have succeeded, for if his letters are deficient in some of the charms of epistolary writing the deficiency is supplied by others. If they occasionally fail in colloquial ease and simplicity, they abound in genius—in richness of sentiment and strength of expression. The taste of Burns, according to the judgment of Professor Stewart, was not sufficiently correct and refined to relish chaste and artless prose, but was captivated by writers who labour their periods into a pointed and antithetical brilliancy. What he preferred he would naturally be ambitious to imitate, and though he might have seen better models, yet those which were his choice he has imitated with success. Even in poetry, if we may judge from his few attempts in English heroic measure, he was as far from attaining, and perhaps from desiring to attain, the flowing sweetness of Goldsmith, as he is in his letters from aiming at the graceful ease of Addison, or the severe simplicity of Swift. Burns, in his prose, seems never to have forgotten that he was a poet; but though his style may be taxed with occasional luxuriance and with the admission of crowded, and even of compounded, epithets, few will deny that genius is displayed in their invention and application, as few will deny that there is eloquence in the harangue of an Indian Sachem, although it may not be in the shape to which we are accustomed, nor pruned of its flowers by the critical exactness of a British orator.

It is to be observed, however, that Burns could diversify his style with great address to suit the taste of his various correspondents, and that, when he occasionally swells it into declamation or stiffens it into pedantry, it is for the amusement of an individual whom he knew it would amuse, and should not be mistaken for the style which he thought most proper for the public. The letter to

his father, for whom he had a deep veneration, and of whose applause he was no doubt desirous, is written with care but with no exuberance. It is grave, pious, and gloomy, like the mind of the person who was to receive it. In his correspondence with Dr. Blair, Mr. Stewart, Mr. Graham, and Mr. Erskine, his style has a respectful propriety and a regulated vigour, which show a just conception of what became himself and suited his relation with the persons whom he addressed. He writes to Mr. Nicol in a vein of strong and ironical extravagance, which was congenial to the manner and adapted to the taste of his friend. To his female correspondents, without excepting the venerable Mrs. Dunlop, he is lively and sometimes romantic, and a skilful critic may perceive his pen under the influence of that tenderness for the feminine character which has been already noticed. In short, through the whole collection we see various shades of gravity and care, or of sportive pomp and intentional affectation, according to the familiarity which subsisted between the writer and the person for whose exclusive perusal he wrote. And, before we estimate the merit of any single letter, we should know the character of both correspondents and the measure of their intimacy. These remarks are suggested by the objections of a distinguished critic to a letter which was communicated to Mr. Cromek, without its address, by the author of this memoir, and which occurs at p. 116 of the *Reliques*. The censure would, perhaps, have been softened had the circle been aware that the tumidity which he blames was no serious attempt at fine writing, but merely a playful effusion in mock-heroic to divert a friend whom he had formerly succeeded in diverting with similar sallies.

Burns was sometimes happy in short complimentary address, of which a specimen is subjoined. It is inscribed on the blank leaf of a book presented to Mrs. Graham of Fintry, from which it was copied by that lady's permission.

To Mrs. Graham of Fintry.

It is probable, madam, that this page may be read when the hand that now writes it shall be mouldering in the dust. May it

then bear witness that I present you these volumes as a tribute of gratitude, on my part ardent and sincere, as your and Mr. Graham's goodness to me has been generous and noble! May every child of yours, in the hour of need, find such a friend, as I shall teach every child of mine that their father found you.

ROBERT BURNS.

The letters of Burns may, on the whole, be regarded as a valuable offering to the public. They are curious as evidences of his genius, and interesting as keys to his character, and they can scarcely fail to command the admiration of all who do not measure their pretensions by an unfair standard.

Having been so copious in proof and in praise of the genius of Burns, I may be more easily pardoned for noticing some of his literary defects. The most striking of these was incorrectness of taste and carelessness in exercising the judgment which he possessed. Of the thoughts which occurred to him he did not instantly perceive, or take any pains to examine, which should be retained and which rejected; nor could he, without reluctance, sacrifice ingenuity to a sense of decorum which he had taught himself to deride. He surrendered himself too loosely to the stream of his reflections, and in the act of writing forgot the precaution of stating himself in the situation of a reader. The good sense which guided his conversation would have been equally serviceable had he chosen to consult it in guiding his composition, and if he had carried in his mind the idea of reciting his poems to a company of all sexes and descriptions, many a passage of too gross and naked a character would have been surpassed. Apologists may urge that his poems were originally written without any prospect of their publication, and that, to the circle of his acquaintance, from the rusticity of the lower class and the libertinism of the higher, he knew by their taste in conversation the indelicacy of his wit would be half its charm. But it is not to be denied that, after he had reached a distinction, which must have convinced him that whatever he wrote was written for the public, he shows little amendment,

some of his latest productions being as offensive as the earliest.

He was likewise too apt to introduce into a poem a thought which did not harmonise with the rest, and which interrupts the train of sentiment that had been previously excited. A desire to pay compliments to his friends made him sometimes choose improper and unexpected places for them, without considering how far he would be accompanied by the feelings of his reader. In this manner he disturbs the process of imagination in the *Brigs of Ayr* to praise a favourite fiddler, and he injures the unity of that poem, as well as of his *Vision*, by mixing real and fancied persons. The effect is nearly the same as if a painter of some historical event should injudiciously compose his group of portraits of his friends whether their physiognomy might suit the characters or not.

In one or two passages we see Burns grappling with an idea which appears to master him, and which, either from perplexity in the conception or from a defect of expression, he fails to bring out with distinctness. This is always displeasing. In works of genius, as in the works of nature, the limit of power should never appear; the imagination being thus led to conceive it much greater than its effects display. A poet should therefore abandon every idea which he has not expressed both with clearness and with energy, because the boundaries of his ability are thus discovered, and the deception of its indefinite extent removed. Yet, in the two last lines of the following passage, Burns seems to have violated this maxim, for their meaning (to me at least) is far from being obvious:—

And when the bard, or hoary sage,  
Charm or instruct the future age,  
They bind the wild, poetic rage,  
In energy,  
Or point the inconclusive page  
Full on the eye.—*Vision*.

To another stanza, which occurs in *An Earnest Cry and Prayer*, the same objection may be made—

Sages their solemn een may steek,  
 And raise a philosophic reek,  
 And physically causes seek,  
     In clime and season;  
 But tell me whisky's name in Greek,  
     I'll tell the reason.

The bad effect of this stanza is heightened by its position between a passage of exalted pathos and one of exquisite humour. Other instances of the same kind might be added, but I shall content myself with observing, that on three different occasions he endeavours to illustrate or enliven his meaning by comparisons borrowed from a pack of cards, and in each, to my apprehension, he is unsuccessful, with the additional disadvantage of being compelled, by the rhyme, to pronounce the word carts, which to all but the inhabitants of the south-west of Scotland will appear a forced and arbitrary accommodation.

Burns, like Milton, Butler, and many others, was sometimes led to display his knowledge at the hazard of impairing the progressive admiration of his reader. We have instances of this kind in his verses to J. S., where he introduces the technical terms in music, and in the poem on Dr. Hornbook, where he enumerates the *materia medica* of the doctor's shop. He was likewise unreasonable in showing his acquaintance with the politics and public characters of the day; as in the same verses to J. S., where he enfeebles a very animated passage by introducing the names of Pitt and Dempster. Such allusions may, no doubt, please when they offer some striking illustration of important characters or events, but for this apology the information of Burns was too slight and casual; or, as Dr. Blair once observed to me, "His politics had too much of the smith's shop." In several of his productions, especially in his letters, he occasionally glances at classical and scientific topics with an ease and familiarity which may lead some to suspect that he wished to gain credit for more erudition than he possessed. It must be remembered, however, that he was an intense, though irregular, reader, and that the knowledge which he had accumulated before the end of his life was by no means contemptible.

In the more mechanical part of poetry, or that which relates to rhyme and measure, Burns permitted himself to be too easily satisfied. His rhymes, particularly in his songs, are often extremely imperfect, and his lines sometimes eked out with expletive syllables which are offensive to the least fastidious ear. These defects displease the reader and depreciate the writer, from the same principle which was stated in the preceding paragraph. They betray a want of power in the poet to accomplish what he aims at, and a practical confession that his command of language is not unlimited. If rhymes are employed at all, they ought to be exact, and, if not so, we conclude that the difficulty of couching his meaning in the desirable form is one which the poet was unable to surmount. When, for example, we meet with sounds so ill suited as *tocher* and *water*, with such abbreviations as *Caledonie*, or with *inspir'd bards* feebly drawn out from three to five syllables in *inspired bardies*, we see genius driven to its shifts, and suspend that astonishment and admiration which we felt while every difficulty appeared to sink before it. It is evident that Burns had great confidence in the facility of his versification, for he boldly undertakes any measure, however arduous or complicated, and, in general, he is singularly successful.

Notwithstanding the demands of metrical convenience, both halves of his couplets are commonly of equal vigour, yet the following lines in *Tam o' Shanter* may, perhaps, appear an exception, every idea contained in the first being, with a very unimportant difference, repeated in the second—

Five tomahawks wi' blude red-rusted,  
Five scymitars wi' murder crusted.

Instances of imitation may be discovered in the poems of Burns, but they are neither numerous nor unpleasant. Pretenders to genius are frequently detected by their false judgments of the productions of rival artists, and by envious struggles to lower to their own level that merit to which they perceive themselves unable to rise. But

the characteristic of true genius is to feel with vehemence, to admire with enthusiasm, and to emulate with vigour and with hope the excellence of those who have preceded them in their favourite department. If their judgment err at all, it will probably be in ascribing, from excessive admiration of the art, an excess of merit to the artist. In Burns this mark of genius was very perceptible. His love of poetry was such as to call forth a predilection, not very justly measured, for those who, in attempting the practice of it, had shown themselves affected by the same passion. The poets who fell first into his hands were not the best, but as they were the best he knew he admired them with his natural ardour; and though he afterwards rose himself far beyond them, they seem to have always retained a portion of his early regard. It is commonly in imitation that genius, if preceded by any near approaches to his own conception of excellence, begins its exertions. It rises first from the ground by the aid and example of others, but when fairly launched into the air and made sensible of its own intrinsic buoyancy, exultation in the discovery urges it to a higher flight than had been achieved by its instructors. We need not be surprised, therefore, if in the most original poets vestiges of imitation are occasionally observed. In Virgil they are frequent, and not less so in Milton, though he was superior in invention, perhaps, to all other poets. In Burns they are wonderfully rare, when we consider the comparative disadvantages under which he laboured. The great writers just mentioned were by a regular education in some measure bred to poetry. The best models were put into their hands: they were taught what to attempt and what to avoid, and, above all, to beware of the servility of imitation. But Burns set out without a guide; his understanding had to discriminate and form rules for itself; and the spark of his genius, with no gentle breath to cherish it into a flame, waited to be kindled by the passing breeze. He seems always to have been conscious of a strength of talents beyond what he observed around him, but he was ignorant of its extent and afraid to listen



to the persuasions of his consciousness. While other poets, therefore, began with imitating the masters of their art, the first aspirations of Burns were to make some approximation to the songs of the *Evergreen*, or the poems of Fergusson and Ramsay. Yet, though he borrowed from these authors the form of some of his earlier compositions, the moment he began to write and to feel the impulse of his own original powers, he scorned to be indebted to them for anything more. Having once entered the path which they had opened to him, he trod it in a manner entirely his own, and can no more be charged with imitation in adopting what others had found a convenient vehicle for their thoughts, than the epic or dramatic poets who divide their works after the common example into books or acts. It might be expected that the ideas of those authors whom Burns had read with so voracious a relish, at an age when impressions are strongest, should have blended themselves with his own, and when he began to write have been insensibly produced as original notions. This has seldom happened, but in a few instances we find a resemblance to prior compositions strong enough to justify a presumption that it may have proceeded from the cause which has been described. On comparing the two following quotations, the similarity of the thought is apparent:—

But gallant Roger, like a soger,  
 Stood, and bravely fought, man;  
 I'm wae to tell, at last he fell,  
 But me down wi' him brought, man.  
 At point of death, wi' his last breath,  
 Some standing round in ring, man,  
 On's back lying flat, he wav'd his hat,  
 And cried, God save the King, man.—*Skirving*.

But bring a Scotchman frae his hill,  
 Clap in his cheek a Highland gill,  
 Say, such is Royal George's will,  
 And there's the foe;  
 He has nae thought but how to kill  
 Twa at a blow.

Nae could faint-hearted doubtings tease him,  
 Death comes, wi' fearless e'e he sees him;

Wi' bluidy hand, a welcome gies him;  
 And when he fa's,  
 His latest draught o' breathing lea'es him  
 In faint huzzas!—*Burns*.

The first of these passages presents the picture of an individual, and the second that of a class. Both are highly animated; but in the warmth of poetical imagery that of Burns must be allowed the superiority.

There is a considerable similarity between the elegy on *Poor Maillie* and the ballad of the *Ewie wi' the crooked horn*, though it consists rather in the general strain and spirit of the piece than in particular passages. The ewes of both poets seem to have been on the same footing of companionable familiarity and objects of the same domestic tenderness.

The following lines bear a slight resemblance both in the sentiment and in the turn of expression:—

It's no the claes that we hae worn,  
 Frae aff her back sae often shorn,  
 The loss o' thae we could ha'e borne, &c.—*Skinner*.

It's no the loss o' warl's gear  
 That could sae bitter draw the tear, &c.—*Burns*.

Indeed, I think that our guidwife  
 Will never get aboon't ava'.—*Skinner*.

His heart will never get aboon  
 His Maillie dead.—*Burns*.

I once asked Burns if, in composing the passages which have been quoted, he had not been insensibly indebted to the verses which are compared with them, and he answered (if I rightly recollect) that he suspected he had.

This ballad is quoted as it was usually sung in Ayrshire about the time of Burns's appearance.

It may be observed that when Burns employs the English exclusively, even on sublime and serious subjects, he seems to think under constraint; and that the finest of his poems are either wholly in his native dialect, which he could wield at will, or those where he gradually slides into English, only after his fancy had been elevated to

a contempt of obstruction, and his ideas had begun to flow in the channel which his mind had selected while enjoying the utmost ease and freedom in its operations. Of this description are the *Vision* and *The Cotter's Saturday Night*. It may be doubted, however, if the change, even when he excels in both styles, be altogether agreeable, as it implies an acknowledgment that English is the language best suited to the occasion, and that the best has not been uniformly adopted.

Burns once informed me, in describing his mode of composition, that, having the advantage of a most exact and retentive memory, he never committed his verses to writing till he had touched and re-touched them in his mind, and had brought them to that state in which he would admit of no further alteration. This by no means contradicts his assertion that they were "the effect of easy composition, but of laborious correction." It only shows that the labour was mentally performed. The same method of composing is said to have been preferred by Gray, and it is remarkable that, notwithstanding all their care, both these poets abound, more than most of their eminent contemporaries, with imperfect rhymes. The ear is perhaps less scrupulous than the eye, and a false rhyme may have escaped from the attention not being called to the appearance and orthography of the words during the process of revision.

The aversion of Burns to adopt alterations which were proposed to him, after having fully satisfied his own taste with the state of his productions, is apparent from his letters. In one passage he says that he never accepted any of the corrections of the Edinburgh literati, except in the instance of a single word. If his admirers should be desirous to know this single word I am able to gratify them, as I happened to be present when the criticism was made. It was at the table of a gentleman of literary celebrity, who observed that, in two lines of the *Holy Fair*, beginning "For M—— speels the holy door," the last word, which was originally salvation, ought from his description of the preacher to be damnation. This change,

both embittering the satire and introducing a word to which Burns had no dislike, met with his instant and enthusiastic approbation. "Excellent!" he cried, with great warmth; "the alteration shall be made; and I hope you will allow me to say in a note from whose suggestion it proceeds"; a request which the critic, with great good humour but with equal decision, refused. On the subject of correction, however, Burns was not always so inflexible as he represents himself. We see him frequently yielding to the taste of Mr. Thomson, and he bent, though with "murmuring reluctance," even to the "iron justice" of Dr. Gregory.

In contemplating the genius of Burns, we are naturally disposed to consider whether it could have been successfully directed to some longer and more elaborate work than any which he has left. For various reasons I am inclined to think that of this there was but little probability. His want of a regular education, and of those habits of periodical study by which the mind can pause without breaking the continuity of a work and easily resume it at the point where it had been suspended, would have been unfavourable to his prosecution of an operose or extensive design. His hours of composition were desultory and uncertain. When a favourite idea laid hold of his mind, he would cherish it till his heated imagination threw it off in verse, and when the paroxysm ceased he was done with it. The patient and progressive execution of an epic or dramatic work requires an apprenticeship to the art of writing, a steady discipline of the thoughts, and a power of putting them daily in motion from the hope of a distant reversion of fame. For such qualifications Burns was by no means remarkable. We can perceive in some of his pieces that when he had been prevented from finishing them during the first effervescence of fancy, his original ideas had evaporated, and before he returned to his composition the state of his mind had undergone such a change as to render the sequel very different from what the outset had led us to expect. This is particularly observable in his *Brigs of Ayr* and in the

*Winter Night.* The first of these poems opens with a description, to which nothing superior can be found in the records of poetry. The spirits of the brigs then begin their controversy, which is no less admirable, but the altercation breaks off and the poem makes a transition into a different strain. A train of allegorical beings are introduced in a dance upon the ice, and though this part contains some beautiful lines, yet it does not harmonise exactly with what follows; for, had the poet foreseen that his group was to contain personages of so grave and dignified a character as Learning, Worth, and Peace, he would scarcely have engaged them in the violent and merry movements of a strathspey. This piece exhibits very plainly the *disjectae membrae poetae*, but it is surely deficient in unity of design.

The *Winter Night*, like the *Brigs*, sets out with description very powerfully executed, and in language decidedly Scotch, but it passes abruptly to English, and, in my apprehension, to a tone more nearly within the compass of an ordinary poet. On this point it is with great diffidence I allow my judgment to disagree with that of Dr. Currie, yet it has always appeared to me that we might conceive the two different portions of this poem to be the work of different authors, or of the same author at hours when the tide of inspiration had risen to very unequal heights. Other writers are no doubt liable to similar inequalities, but in Burns they were greater, from the superior vehemence and proportional remission of feeling, under the pressure of which he was urged to composition. When a subject ceased to interest him strongly, it was abandoned for a new one which possessed this power; and when he did not write with all the *vivida vis animi*, he was apt to let the vigour of his conceptions relax with the vivacity of his emotions, a circumstance which must have weakened his chance of excellence as a dramatic or even as a didactic poet.

To this view it may be objected that Ramsay and Bloomfield, without the habits of systematic study, have succeeded in these two departments of composition. But it would

be doing Burns injustice to reduce him to the level of either of those writers, whose genius wanted force to reach the elevation to which the former could occasionally soar, and whose humbler flight could be longer and more steadily maintained. In any species of writing Burns would certainly have produced passages to the splendour of which neither Ramsay nor Bloomfield could aspire; but it may be doubted whether he could have finished a work of equal length, and at the same time so uniformly supported, as the *Gentle Shepherd*, or the *Farmer's Boy*. A long poem becomes at times a task; and from some of the songs of Burns, which he obliged himself to compose even under unpropitious circumstances, we may perceive marks of compulsory exertion, by which, if they had occurred in a longer essay, the effect of the finer passages would have been impaired.

In making these remarks, I am led to conjecture what alterations might have been produced on the character and destiny of the poet if he had been regularly trained as a man of letters. It may, at first sight, have an air of paradoxical absurdity to compare the dissipated and irreverent ploughman of Kyle with the strict and orthodox moralist of Lichfield; yet, on further consideration, the absurdity will perhaps be diminished. In the radical characters of Burns and Johnson there were some points of close resemblance, and though they terminated in a wide disparity, yet we must remember that a slight deviation at the centre becomes great at the circumference, and that at their outset they were turned into paths which took a direction almost diametrically opposite. Both were endowed by nature with the same intellectual grasp, with the same richness of imagination, the same tenacity of memory, the same appetite for knowledge, the same preference for exploring human nature, the same colloquial supremacy, the same atrabilious temperament, the same desire to resist it by convivial exertion, the same stern independence, the same natural partiality, and the same violence of passion and obstinacy of prejudice. Had Burns spent his boyhood in the shop of a bookseller, or among

the members of a cathedral; had he afterwards removed to college with nothing to depend upon but regularity of conduct and force of application; and had he finally, with all the power of talent thus acquired, become a daily labourer in the literary vineyard, it seems by no means unlikely that the natural resemblance which has been stated might have been confirmed and increased by the operation of similar causes. In poetry, both humorous and pathetic, he would certainly have been superior to Johnson, and probably equal to him in prose. His conversation would have been distinguished by a piercing insight into the heart, and by pointed and luminous expression; and that predominance which he would have enjoyed, he might have had no scruple occasionally to exert with tyrannical severity on an opponent. Neither does it seem at all impossible that his dark and luxuriant sensibility, under the constant check of learned and virtuous society, and of principles or prejudices derived from early discipline, might have overflowed in devotional ardour, religious terrors, and jealous predilection for the national Church, and for the ecclesiastical order of which he would probably have been a member. On the other hand, to borrow illustration from reversing the picture, had Johnson been bred among the lowest peasantry of a district where the prevalence of illicit trade had almost annihilated all medium between a total debauchery of moral feeling and a puritanical austerity, in which reflecting minds could with difficulty acquiesce, I see little to prevent the supposition that he might have been as remarkable as Burns for extraordinary strength and frequent misdirection of native intellect. By some it may be thought that the devotion of Burns to female beauty would have disturbed this process; but it appears from all the views of Johnson's character which we have received, that his appetites were as gross and his passions as importunate as those of the poet, though varied causes had enabled him to govern them with greater power. Burns, indeed, was more favoured in personal appearance and had acquired by early practice more of that insinuating gaiety and tender-

ness which wind their way into the hearts of the fair, but if he had been immured till twenty-five within the monastic precincts of a college, the shyness and awkwardness, so common in professional scholars, would have diminished his qualifications for a companionable intercourse with women, and his pride would have deterred him from soliciting their favour while conscious that the disgrace of a repulse was so probable. Even if this had not been its effect, a gallantry begun so late and under such restraints as have been supposed, would only have supplied that gentleness in which Johnson was deficient, and might have polished the surface without altering the substance of the character. We know that, like the strongest plants, the most decided minds preserve with singular obstinacy the flexure which are, or accident has given them; and I can therefore think it no extravagant conjecture that the congenial vigour of these two extraordinary men might, under similar training, in some essential points have assumed a similar appearance.

The train of reflection having led me to compare Burns with one great modern writer, I am tempted to indulge myself a little further in this mode of illustration and to measure him with another, where the parallel will be conducted more by contrariety than by resemblance.

Burns and Cowper may be regarded as contemporary, for, though the former was much younger than his brother bard, yet the genius of both burst forth upon the world nearly about the same period. *The Task* was published in 1784 and the poems of Burns in 1786. Seldom has a greater contrast been exhibited than by these two masterly writers in many prominent circumstances of condition and character. Cowper, descended of high and literary lineage, had all the advantage of a careful and complete education; Burns, sprung from the most sordid hovel of a peasant, was deprived, by poverty and accident, of the measure of instruction which even peasants enjoy. The latter was vigorous and robust in body, and in spirit hardy, intrepid, and independent; the former, with a delicate and distempered frame, was timid to excess,



tremblingly alive to his own defects, and so dependent for aid that he leant on the support of elderly females as beings stronger than himself. Burns was eager to indulge his powers of conversation even in tumultuous and intemperate scenes; Cowper shrank from the eye of man, and preferred burying those high endowments of which he was conscious to encountering even the most correct and gentle society. The former ridiculed every species of fanaticism with a force so unsparing as scarcely to avoid the sacred root from which these fantastic branches spring. The latter was so impressed by the power of religion as to let it frequently overwhelm him with visionary terrors, which are the offspring of fanaticism. The one, after an early blaze of reputation, rushed into dangerous pleasures with an ardour which destroyed in the middle of his career a constitution apparently formed for long duration. The other, by flying even from the most innocent gratifications, lengthened out a life which was always precarious, and reserved sufficient vigour to earn all his fame at its close. Burns was like a river that sparkles over rocks and rapids, but is soon exhausted by its own impetuosity; Cowper, like a quiet stream, that by long husbanding its scanty strength in a silent subterraneous channel, comes forth at last with unexpected beauty into open day. Yet, with all these disparities, their genius possessed many features in common. Both derived the most ardent enjoyment from the sublime and beautiful spectacles of nature, and possessed a peculiar capacity of analysing their delight by fixing at once on the minute and circumstantial appearances from which it sprung, and both had the power of portraying, in poetical language, the objects which had caused them—Burns by a few daring and decisive strokes, and Cowper by patient touches of more softness, delicacy, and grace. Both seem to have been chiefly enamoured of creation in its wintry attire, and have succeeded with most felicity in catching the characteristics of that gloomy season: Burns delighting in the awful terrors of the nocturnal tempest; and Cowper in all that is pleasing and picturesque in the morning

without doors, or soothing and secluded in the evening within. Both felt the acutest sentiment of tenderness for the animal tribes, and strongly interposed their voice for the innocent and persecuted: Burns in the tone of indignant execration, and Cowper in that of mild complaint. Both took penetrating views of human character, and their veneration for what worth it possesses gave them a satirical tendency against its vicious errors, but still preserving the original difference of their characters, it shows itself in Burns with a vigorous coarseness, and in Cowper with an arch and polished *naïveté*. Both were singularly happy in conceiving and in delineating the domestic delights to which they had been severally accustomed, and it is difficult to say whether the interior of Burns's cottage or of Cowper's drawing-room has most admirers. They are exquisite pictures, and each most fortunately suited to the pencil which it had engaged. Both had a rich vein of humour and the power of depicting ludicrous manners, as the pleasuring cit of Cowper and the revelling beggars of Burns will testify for ages; but, owing to the difference of their taste and education, the former is uniformly chaste in his playfulness, while the latter shows a constant propensity to overstep the bounds of decency. To illustrate this parallel some passages from each may be compared. In the following we see the poets describe themselves in the same state of grave and almost involuntary rumination, or in that twilight of the mind which corresponded with the dubious illumination of the scene:—

First when our drawing-rooms begin to blaze,  
 . . . My pleasures too begin. But me, perhaps,  
 The glowing hearth may satisfy awhile.  
 With faint illumination, that uplifts  
 The shadow to the ceiling, there by fits  
 Dancing uncouthly to the quiv'ring flame.  
 Nor undelighted is an hour to me  
 So spent in parlour twilight: Such a gloom  
 Suits well the thoughtful or unthinking mind,  
 The mind contemplative, with some new theme  
 Pregnant, or indispos'd alike to all.

Me oft has fancy, ludicrous and wild,  
 Sooth'd with a waking dream of houses, towers,  
 Trees, churches, and strange visages, express'd  
 In the red cinders, while with poring eye  
 I gaz'd, myself creating what I saw.  
 Nor less amus'd, have I, quiescent, watched  
 The sooty films that play upon the bars,  
 Pendulous, and foreboding, in the view  
 Of superstition, prophesying still,  
 Though still deceiv'd, some stranger's near approach.  
 —*Cowper.*

. . . When the day had clos'd his e'e,  
 Ben i' the spence right pensively,  
 I gaed to rest.  
 Where lanely, by the ingle-cheek,  
 I sat and eyed the spewing reek,  
 That filled, wi' hoast-provoking smeeke,  
 The auld clay biggin',  
 An' heard the restless rattons squeak  
 About the riggin'.  
 All in this motlie, misty clime,  
 I backward mus'd on wasted time, &c.—*Burns.*

We may compare their manner of introducing the same picturesque object in the following passages:—

The redbreast warbles still, but is content  
 With slender notes and more than half-suppress'd,  
 Pleas'd with his solitude, and flitting light  
 From spray to spray, wher'er he rests, he shakes  
 From many a twig the pendant drops of ice,  
 That tinkle in the wither'd leaves below.—*Cowper.*

Nae mair the grove with airy concert rings,  
 Except perhaps the robin's whistling glee,  
 Proud o' the height o' some bit half-lang tree.—*Burns.*

To those the reader may add (for the passages are too well known to require quotation) a comparison of the tame hare and the woodman's dog of Cowper with the wounded hare and the shepherd's dog of Burns; and of the delineations of winter scenery with which the works of both abound. From the whole of this estimate, it will probably appear that Burns excels Cowper in genius less than he is excelled in taste. If, therefore, the admirers of the one be superior in zeal, those of the other are probably superior in number; both having many

friends, but Cowper no foes. The latter, it may likewise be added, writing under a deep conviction of his own demerits, delights to enumerate with grateful humility and to dwell on every little pleasing circumstance of his condition; while Burns, under a contrary impression, betrays in the effusions of his genius a stern and haughty discontent with a portion so unworthy of his claims and capacity of enjoyment. The comparison shall be closed by remarking that both its celebrated subjects occasionally indulge in relaxing the elaboration of their compositions and sliding into a carelessness which renders some passages very unequal to the excellence of the rest.

By ALEXANDER PETERKIN.

*A Review of the Life of Robert Burns and of various Criticisms  
on his Character and Writings, 1813.*

WE do not intend in the following remarks either to repeat merely what has been already said by others or to anticipate the contents of the volumes now presented to the public. Our object is to supply defects where these seem to exist—to correct errors, and to expose misrepresentations. To this task we wish to carry feelings uninfluenced by any unworthy purposes. We engage in it, we trust, with a temper suited to the object; and if we venture to applaud or condemn aught which presents itself for consideration, this shall not be done without exhibiting the evidence on which our opinions rest.

It is a remark too trite, perhaps, to require repetition, that the writings of Robert Burns are, in Scotland, the most popular of any works of fancy, ancient or modern—that there is scarcely a house in the kingdom which does not contain a copy of his poems—and that there are few individuals elevated above the clods of the valley who are not familiar with the productions of his muse. The tendency of works so widely circulated and so highly esteemed is evidently a matter of no trivial moment. But the personal character of the poet has, since his death, been in some measure inseparably blended with that of his writings; and in attempting to form an accurate estimate of the latter it is necessary to consider the former, and the influence on public feeling which belongs to their united power.

Various individuals, who talk and write with authority, have affected to represent the joint tendency of Burns's personal character and writings as morally pernicious. Much unwarrantable assumption, calumny, and drivelling fanaticism have been wasted to stain unworthily the memory of Burns; while the sweetest flowers in his writings have yielded to the enemies of his fame the venom which issues from their stings. We do not mean to insinuate that all the shallow moralisings which we have heard and read are on a level, or spring from malignity; but it is impossible to dissemble our conviction that a great portion of that debasing passion has been indulged by many at the expense of truth and of Burns. But whether those personages have been animated by correct motives, or the reverse, in the statements which they have rather too rashly hazarded, we think we shall be able, in some very important instances, to show that those statements are untrue—to strip them of the pure robe which is thrown around them as a disguise, and to expose in light the naked deformity of their aspect. We do not dream of asserting that Robert Burns was immaculate and perfect; he was a man like his censors, and had his failings; but with all his faults he was not a bad man, nor can we silently allow him to be gibbeted to our countrymen as “a blackguard,” tarnished with blemishes which his heart and his conduct never knew. We cannot suffer his foibles to be displayed as the vital part of a character distinguished for many excellences; and we aspire to the interesting task of examining, without scruple, the genuine character of Burns and of his writings, and trying, by the test of proof, the moral and literary critiques which have been put forth with a specious and somewhat ostentatious seeming of reverence for religion and virtue.

Some of the strictures on Burns's life and writings, to which we shall advert, have been ascribed to gentlemen of high note among the periodical authors of the day. This matters little. It, indeed, only serves to rouse a keener purpose of correcting their errors, for which we have not

the slightest degree of veneration. We know not even by whom they were written, except in the instances where the names of the authors are given. We are confident that some of them have been misled by erroneous information, and are equally confident they will be happy to see evidence of the truth. But those who have shown by their own unceremonious conduct that they consider the press free to injure must learn that it is also free to vindicate, if not to avenge. While we regard the attainments and the talents of some of those whose remarks (according to common report) we are about to subject to a public scrutiny, with all reasonable respect; while, indeed, we cherish for some of them a sincere personal regard, we frankly avow our belief that their unfortunate attempts to stain will brighten the character of Burns, and that the effects of their hurried and ill-judged lucubrations will perish with the day that gave them birth, and ultimately be lost "in the blaze of his fame!"

We have not, however, ventured on our present undertaking from any love of controversy, or from any Quixotic passion for literary adventures. We hold the adversaries of Burns to be aggressors—misguided, we are inclined to think, and ready, we trust, in charity to renounce their errors on satisfactory proof that they have been misinformed, or have misconstrued the conduct and writings of Burns. But by their public and voluntary assertions and reflections, however, of an injurious tendency, they have thrown down the gauntlet to every Scotchman who takes an interest in the honour of his country, of its literature, and of human nature. We accept the challenge, and will hazard the proof. Nor do we reckon this a very heroical or high achievement; the most "plebeian" mind in the land is competent to a plain matter-of-fact inquiry, which should assuredly not have been so long delayed had not the obnoxious critiques appeared too insignificant, separately considered, to merit notice. But from the system of reiterated critical preaching, which has become fashionable in all the recent

publications about Burns—from all the slang which has been employed by the busybodies of the day remaining uncontradicted and unexposed, we are afraid that future biographers might be misled by longer silence, and adopt declamatory ravings as genuine admitted facts. The most celebrated literary journal of which Britain can boast, and of which, as Scotchmen, we are proud, began the cry; all the would-be moralists in newspapers, magazines, and reviews have taken it up, and have repeated unauthenticated stories as grave truths; at length these have found a resting-place in large and lasting volumes. It is time, however, that the torrent of prejudice should be stemmed; and that while it is yet in the power of living men who knew Robert Burns, and can give testimony as to the real qualities of his character and conduct, they should come forth to settle the value of anonymous statements, to tell the truth, and to vindicate his memory from unqualified dishonour.

In order to render the following investigation so far entire as to exhibit, in itself, a view of the character of Burns, it will be necessary to give a very general outline of the events of his life, unclogged with any collateral episodes, which are detailed with greater fulness and variety of illustration in Dr. Currie's work, and in the biographical sketches which it comprises by the poet himself, by his brother Gilbert, by Mr. Murdoch, and by Professor Stewart. These, indeed, are documents of a character so peculiarly precious and interesting that it is probable they will go down to future times, even in the diffuse and disjointed form which they have assumed under Dr. Currie's hand, as the favoured memoirs of Robert Burns. A short connected narrative, however, drawn from these fragments, seems to be the requisite precursor of the additional facts and illustrations which are now offered to the public, and which will, perhaps, be blended hereafter with the story of the Scottish bard.

Robert Burns, the eldest son of William Burns or Burness and Agnes Brown, was born on the 25th of



January, 1759,\* in the vicinity of Ayr, and in a clay-walled cottage inhabited by his father. This cottage was constructed with his father's hands on a small patch of land, of which he had taken a perpetual lease for a public garden while he was in the service of a neighbouring gentleman. In this condition of life did the father of Burns remain during the first six or seven years of the poet's life; he was, indeed, "born a very poor man's son." William Burns continued in the service of Mr. Ferguson of Doonholm as gardener and overseer until the year 1766, but lived in his own humble dwelling, of which, and of his small piece of ground, he also retained possession.

In his sixth year Robert was sent for a few months to a school at Alloway Miln, which was kept by a Mr. Campbell. For a period of about two years and a half after May, 1765, he was taught by Mr. Murdoch in his father's neighbourhood to read English and to write. English grammar, too, formed part of his school exercises, and he afterwards, in 1773, was boarded with the same teacher three weeks, "one of which was spent entirely in the study of English, and the other two chiefly in that of French." When about thirteen or fourteen he was sent to improve his hand-writing, "week about," with his brother Gilbert, "during a summer quarter, to the parish school of Dalrymple," and one "summer quarter" he attended the parish school of Kirkoswald to learn surveying. This was all his school education. The whole time he spent at school cannot be computed at much more than three years. Of the manner, however, in which his education was conducted, and of the value of the instructions which he received under his father's roof, an estimate can be formed only by the result; the particulars need not be here anticipated.

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\* Dr. Currie (1st edition) says Burns was born on the 29th January; but Dr. Irvine, in his *Lives of the Scots Poets* (1810), gives the 25th, on the authority, as he states, of the parish register of Ayr. In *An Account of the Life, Character, and Writings of Robert Burns*, ascribed to Josiah Walker, Esq., Perth, and published with an edition of the *Poems* by Mr. Morrison, the 25th is given as the date of his birth.

At Whitsunday, 1766, Mr. Burns took the farm of Mount Oliphant from Mr. Ferguson. He had no capital, nor could he get his own little property sold to stock his farm; but his landlord lent him £100 for this purpose. This sum, though a sufficient proof of Mr. Ferguson's confidence in William Burns's honest industry, was totally inadequate to the profitable occupancy of a farm extending to seventy acres of bad land, for which a rent was payable of £40 annually during the first six years, and £45 afterwards. This farm, Gilbert Burns says, is "almost the very poorest soil I know of in a state of cultivation," and, "notwithstanding the extraordinary rise in the value of lands in Scotland, it was, after a very considerable sum laid out in improving it by the proprietor, let a few years ago £5 per annum lower than the rent paid for it by my father thirty years ago." The picture which follows is too affecting to be touched by the hand of a stranger.

"My father," continues Gilbert, "in consequence of this, soon came into difficulties, which were increased by the loss of several of his cattle by accidents and disease. To the buffetings of misfortune we could only oppose hard labour and the most rigid economy. We lived very sparingly. For several years butchers' meat was a stranger in the house, while all the members of the family exerted themselves to the utmost of their strength, and rather beyond it, in the labours of the farm. My brother, at the age of thirteen, assisted in thrashing the crop of corn, and at fifteen was the principal labourer on the farm, for we had no hired servant, male or female. The anguish of mind we felt at our tender years under these straits and difficulties was very great. To think of our father growing old (for he was now above fifty), broken down with the long-continued fatigues of his life, with a wife and five other children, and in a declining state of circumstances; these reflections produced in my brother's mind and mine sensations of the deepest distress. I doubt not but the hard labour and sorrow of this period of his life was, in a great measure, the cause of that depression of spirits with

which Robert was so often afflicted through his whole life afterwards. At this time he was almost constantly afflicted in the evenings with a dull headache, which at a future period of his life was exchanged for a palpitation of the heart, and a threatening of fainting and suffocation in his bed in the night-time. By a stipulation in my father's lease, he had a right to throw it up if he thought proper at the end of every sixth year. He attempted to fix himself in a better farm at the end of the first six years, but failing in that attempt, he continued where he was for six years more. He then took the farm of Lochlee, of 130 acres, at the rent of twenty shillings an acre, in the parish of Tarbolton, of Mr. —, then a merchant in Ayr, and now (1797) a merchant in Liverpool. He removed to this farm at Whitsunday, 1777, and possessed it only seven years. No writing had ever been made out of the conditions of the lease; a misunderstanding took place respecting them; the subjects in dispute were submitted to arbitration, and the decision involved my father's affairs in ruin. He lived to know of this decision, but not to see any execution in consequence of it. He died on the 13th of February, 1784."

Previously to the death of his venerable and unfortunate father, Burns and his brother Gilbert, with the view of rendering this farm more productive, attempted to raise a little flax; and an establishment for the sale of it in Irvine was projected. Thither, therefore, Robert went in 1781 to superintend the sales, and to carry on the business of a flax-dresser; but after a few months' residence the shop was accidentally burnt, and that speculation being thus terminated, he returned to Lochlee and participated in the anguish and the toil which his father's unsuccessful struggles, poverty, and death left as the portion of his widow and children.

William Burns's family were now bereaved of his affectionate protection, and were, indeed, without a home in which to shelter their heads. Robert and Gilbert, in anticipation of adversity, had previously taken the farm

of Mossiel as an asylum for them all. This was intended to be a joint establishment, in which every member of the family should contribute a proportion of what they could give; and in calculating the value of their respective contributions, Robert's services were rated as worth £7 per annum of wages—a sum so entirely adequate to all his wants that his expenses never exceeded its scanty amount, although his acquaintance with scenes beyond the circle of domestic worth and innocence began to open up to him new and less salutary channels of expenditure.

During his residence at Mossiel he formed an acquaintance with Jean Armour, his future wife. This led to an intimacy which was to be regretted on account of its immediate consequences; but although the familiarity which ensued was, in any point of view, imprudent, it was characterised from first to last by every feature of a guileless and honourable attachment. It became expedient, however, that a marriage should be declared; and Burns avowed, by a written document, and by appearing in presence of a magistrate—circumstances sufficient according to the law of Scotland—that his intercourse with Miss Armour had been in the privileged and legal, though for a time unacknowledged, relation of a husband.

The farm occupied by the family was unprofitable, notwithstanding all their exertions: being destitute of capital, and four bad crops occurring in succession, they were obliged to relinquish the lease of Mossiel. Robert was therefore quite unable at the time to support a wife and family, and having manfully and honestly rescued the reputation of his wife from reproach, he proposed to leave her under her father's protection until better fortune, which he expected to shine on him in Jamaica, should enable him to place her in a situation better suited to his wishes; but her parents expressed such a repugnance to the union that they induced their daughter to dissolve her connection with Burns, by destroying the evidence of her marriage, and submitting to the inevitable disrepute of such a measure. Burns, in agony and distraction, under

such untoward circumstances, was willing to remain at home and provide as he best could for his family; but, with a peculiarity of views quite unaccountable, her relatives spurned all connection with a poor man, and even employed legal measures against him for aliment to the fruits of his marriage; for in the eye of morality and of law, Burns and Jean Armour must be regarded as married at the period to which we allude, although the ceremony was not formally celebrated until more fortunate occurrences had removed the objections of his wife's relations. In this situation he resolved to persevere in his Jamaica adventure, and procured the promise of a situation as overseer on an estate belonging to Dr. Douglas. But when nothing prevented his departure but want of money to pay the expense of his voyage, he was rescued, by the expedient which he adopted to procure it, from the pestilential life and death of a West Indian slave driver, and appeared before his country as an author of such uncommon power as to have rendered the most minute details of his short and eventful life a subject of extraordinary and still undiminished interest.

Without, however, entering on these, we shall merely state that in the year 1786 he published at Kilmarnock a volume of *Poems, chiefly in the Scottish dialect*—that their excellence was immediately acknowledged by the rapid sale of six hundred copies and the warm commendation of every class of readers into whose hands they found their way—that he made £20 of profit on the sale; and, although he had taken leave of his friends, was induced by this gleam of success, and at the suggestion of Dr. Blacklock, to relinquish his plan of going abroad, and came to Edinburgh in November, 1786, for the purpose of publishing another edition of his poems. In Edinburgh he was applauded, caressed, and befriended by the most eminent characters for rank, learning, or benevolence; and no similar instance, perhaps, ever occurred in the history of genius of a transition so rapid from the very depths of distress and obscurity into an overwhelming blaze of admiration.

The second edition of his poems was published at Edinburgh in the year 1787. During his stay he adorned the circles of literature and fashion in Edinburgh with the native charms of his unaffected and masculine powers of sociality, newly awakened to the world, and displayed the wonders of his genius more impressively, perhaps, in his conversational eloquence than even in his poetry. Not to copy details which will be found in other parts of this volume, we shall only glance at the subsequent events in his life, which serve as landmarks for tracing out the lineaments of his moral and poetic character.

In February, 1788, he settled accounts with his bookseller, and after defraying all the expenses recently incurred, he found himself worth £500 sterling. To his brother Gilbert, the brother of his warmest affections, and the protector of the little family group, he lent £200, intending with the remainder to commence a separate establishment, and receive Mrs. Burns into his own house. He accordingly took a farm, and at Whitsunday, 1788, entered on Ellisland, on the estate of Mr. Millar of Dalswinton, about six miles distant from Dumfries. The virtual marriage of Burns had been disguised by the intervention of his wife's relatives, and every proof of it destroyed; but the incorruptible honour of his spirit prompted him when he felt himself able in a pecuniary sense to proclaim with all legal solemnity the existence of a union with Mrs. Burns, which, indeed, had all along legally existed. "Her happiness or misery were in my hands," said he, "and who could trifle with such a deposit?"

In order to eke out the emoluments of his farm, Burns conceived the unhappy design of adding to the pursuits which it required the income of a revenue officer—a situation which was extremely unfit for him, if we consider his social propensities, the tone of his mind, and the high place which he was destined to fill in the estimation and literature of his country. He was soon enabled to realise his wishes, and became an Excise officer; but the constant attention to minute concerns, which alone

can render farming lucrative or safe, was not practicable amidst the avocations of his new employment or the flattering incense which surrounded him in the never-ending intrusion of curious and too often dissipated admirers of his genius. He found it expedient ere long to renounce his lease. After possessing it about three years and a half he left Ellisland, and in the end of the year 1791 removed to the town of Dumfries, trusting solely to his office and to promotion in the Excise for his present support and the future hopes of his children. This was a disastrous choice; it placed him in the hands of merciless power—it exposed him to frequent deviations from soberness of life, it fastened on his heart the painful alternatives of mental degradation which he spurned, or of turning his family adrift “to all the horrors of want.” It affected his spirits, his habits, and his health; and he sunk at length prematurely into the grave under the hopelessness of his prospects, the victim of disappointment and exasperated feelings.

The season at which he became exclusively an Excise officer was the very worst perhaps in which he could have been cast on society in that capacity. The French Revolution had begun to agitate the moral world; and Burns was not a man who could be unmoved by a commotion so tremendously new in its character. With many of the best and greatest men of the present age, he hailed that event as the opening of the prison doors to the captive, and as the triumph of that liberty which, as a Briton, he had been accustomed to cherish and admire. But the equivocal aspect which it soon assumed, and which, we believe, excited the horror of Burns to its atrocities, naturally produced a jealousy in the British Government and all the devotees of Ministry, which rendered it dangerous for any man, especially an official man, to express the slightest satisfaction in the limitation of an absolute tyranny. Burns suffered in the intolerance of the times. The understrappers of faction surrounded him; an inquiry was made even into his unguarded language in private society; his promotion was barred, his bread

was only not broken, and he was admonished by some silly Board of Excise "to act, not to think." Yes, will it be believed, Burns was told that he was not to think!

Burns died at Dumfries on the 21st day of July, 1796, in the thirty-eighth year of his age. Of his conduct and character various accounts have been given. These we shall now examine; and the statement and examination which we subjoin will fill up the chasms in our narrative more satisfactorily than any dogmatism and reflections, founded on mere conjectures, which our fancy or folly might have interwoven in the foregoing sketch. Burns's excellences and defects are matters susceptible of proof; and on which side soever to applause or censure the weight of evidence shall lean, we are quite contented that its influence should preponderate.

Having thus collected such particulars as are requisite for preparing the readers of the more diffuse memoirs of Burns's life to understand the following illustrations of his character, we shall now submit to the public the various lucubrations by biographers and critics which suggested this review, and subjoin the strictures and evidence which we deem it expedient to offer to the notice of our countrymen.

In Dr. Currie's remarks on the character of Burns, the following statements are to be found:—

Previous to his removal to Dumfries, "Burns, though addicted to excess in social parties, had abstained from the habitual use of strong liquors, and his constitution had not suffered any permanent injury from the irregularities of his conduct. In Dumfries temptations to the sin that so easily beset him continually presented themselves; and his irregularities grew by degrees into habits. These temptations unhappily occurred during his engagements in the business of his office, as well as during his hours of relaxation; and though he clearly foresaw the consequence of yielding to them, his appetites and sensations, which could not pervert the dictates of his judgment, finally triumphed over the powers of his will. Yet this victory was not obtained without many obstinate struggles,



and at times temperance and virtue seemed to have obtained the mastery. Besides his engagements in the Excise, and the society into which they led, many circumstances contributed to the melancholy fate of Burns. His great celebrity made him an object of interest and curiosity to strangers, and few persons of cultivated minds passed through Dumfries without attempting to see our poet, and to enjoy the pleasure of his conversation. As he could not receive them under his own humble roof, these interviews passed at the inns of the town, and often terminated in those excesses which Burns sometimes provoked, and was seldom able to resist. And among the inhabitants of Dumfries and its vicinity there were never wanting persons to share his social pleasures; to lead or accompany him to the tavern; to partake in the wildest sallies of his wit; to witness the strength and the degradation of his genius.

“Endowed by nature with great sensibility of nerves, Burns was, in his corporeal as well as in his mental system, liable to inordinate impressions, to fever of body as well as of mind. This predisposition to disease, which strict temperance in diet, regular exercise, and sound sleep might have subdued, habits of a very different nature strengthened and inflamed. Perpetually stimulated by alcohol in one or other of its various forms, the inordinate actions of the circulating system became at length habitual, the process of nutrition was unable to supply the waste, and the powers of life began to fail. Upwards of a year before his death there was an evident decline in our poet's personal appearance; and though his appetite continued unimpaired, he was himself sensible that his constitution was sinking. In his moments of thought he reflected with the deepest regret on his fatal progress, clearly foreseeing the goal towards which he was hastening, without the strength of mind necessary to stop or even to slacken his course. His temper now became more irritable and gloomy; he fled from himself into society, often of the lowest kind. And in such company that part of the convivial scene, in which wine increases sensibility and

excites benevolence, was hurried over to reach the succeeding part, over which uncontrolled passion generally presided. He who suffers the pollution of inebriation, how shall he escape other pollution? But let us refrain from the mention of errors over which delicacy and humanity draw the veil."

The following passages are quoted from *The Lives of the Scottish Poets, &c.*, by David Irvine, LL.D., 2 vols., 8vo, Edinburgh, 1810:—

"Till he (Burns) fixed his residence in Dumfries his irregularities, though by no means unfrequent, had not become inveterately habitual; the temptations, however, to which he was now exposed proved too powerful for his better impressions. After various struggles against the stream of dissipation, which was gradually surrounding him, he at length suffered himself to be rapidly carried along by its fatal current. A large proportion of the more genteel, or more idle, inhabitants of Dumfries consists of men connected with the profession of law; and in some of these, as well as in other inhabitants of the town and its vicinity, Burns found associates from whom it was not to be expected that he should learn sobriety. The fame of his literary character also exposed him to the company of every stranger who professed a respect for poetry. As their interviews commonly took place in taverns, his familiarity with riotous excess was daily increasing. In the midst of such distractions it must have been impossible for him to discharge the duties of his office with that regularity which is almost indispensable."

In allusion to the French Revolution, it is remarked that "Burns was one of those who openly rejoiced at the apparent emancipation of so large a proportion of the human species. His feelings were naturally violent, and the stimulus of intoxication inevitably increased his imprudence of speech. They who admitted the principles and applauded the exertions of the French politicians were generally led to entertain extravagant schemes of premature reformation in the constitution of their native

country. The flame of innovation was widely kindled, but its lustre was obscured by a cloud of smoke. In the administration of the British Government Burns perceived, or fancied he perceived, multifarious abuses; nor did he hesitate to declaim with unbridled freedom concerning the urgent necessity of a radical reformation.

"Surmises, however, which he, indeed, had not been sufficiently careful to prevent, were ungenerously propagated to his disadvantage; and the Board of Excise deemed it necessary to appoint a superior officer to investigate his conduct. In an eloquent letter, addressed to one of their number, he exculpated himself with becoming dignity from the charges which had been preferred against him; and the officer who had been commissioned to institute a formal inquiry could discover no substantial grounds of accusation. Mr. Graham of Fintry, in whom he had always found a steady and zealous friend, was ready on the present occasion to secure him from the threatened consequences of his imprudence. Of imprudence he was undoubtedly guilty, and the Board, although they suffered him to retain his present office, sent him an intimation that his advancement must now be determined by his future behaviour.

"In 1795 he exhibited public proofs of his loyalty—he enrolled himself among the Dumfries volunteers, and by his poetical effusions endeavoured to excite them to patriotic exertion. Notwithstanding his increasing habits of dissipation, he still devoted some of his more rational hours to the composition of poetry, but his productions now began to assume a deeper tinge from the altered character of the author.

"About this period he began to present indications of declining health, and although his appetite was still unimpaired, he seems to have been aware of the gradual approach of dissolution; of the madness of his late career he was deeply sensible, but was now without the power of retreat. His constitution was deprived of its native energies, and could only be preserved from overwhelming languor by the aid of stimulant liquors. In this deplorable

state of body, as well as of mind, he was eager to avoid the pangs of solitary reflection, and was even incapable of relishing domestic or rational society. He rushed into the company of men whom, in his purer days, he would have despised and shunned; he degraded his noble faculties to so mean a level that many of his earlier friends became half-ashamed of having contracted such an intimacy. From the shelter of his domestic retreat he was not, however, expelled by the upbraidings of the still affectionate object of his youthful attachment; whatever errors he might himself be conscious of having committed, the bitterness of remorse was not augmented by her murmurs or complaints. Often did he acknowledge his numerous breaches of the duties of a husband and a father, and her promptitude to forgive his offences was undiminished by the frequency of their repetition. His penitential declarations were accompanied by promises of amendment; but the task of reformation being still deferred till some future day, his habits gradually became more pernicious.

"He died in the thirty-eighth year of his age. The glaring follies of the man were now forgotten, and the premature and melancholy fate of the poet was alone remembered."

The reflections in the *Edinburgh Review*, which we are about to transcribe as a delineation of the defects of Burns's moral character, are given entire, and in connection as they appear in the thirteenth volume of that work, second edition, January, 1809.

"But the leading vice in Burns's character, and the cardinal deformity, indeed, of all his productions, was his contempt, or affectation of contempt, for prudence, decency, and regularity, and his admiration of thoughtlessness, oddity, and vehement sensibility—his belief, in short, in the dispensing power of genius and social feeling in all matters of morality and common sense. This is the very slang of the worst German plays and the lowest of our town-made novels, nor can anything be more lamentable than that it should have found a patron in

such a man as Burns, and communicated to a great part of his productions a character of immorality, at once contemptible and hateful. It is but too true that men of the highest genius have frequently been hurried by their passions into a violation of prudence and duty, and there is something generous at least in the apology which their admirers may make for them, on the score of their keener feelings and habitual want of reflection. But this apology, which is quite unsatisfactory in the mouth of another, becomes an insult and an absurdity whenever it proceeds from their own. A man may say of a friend that he is a noble-hearted fellow—too generous to be just, and with too much spirit to be always prudent and regular. But he cannot be allowed to say even this of himself, and still less to represent himself as a hare-brained sentimental soul, constantly carried away by fine fancies and visions of love and philanthropy, and born to confound and despise the cold-blooded sons of prudence and sobriety. This apology evidently destroys itself, for it shows that conduct to be the result of deliberate system, which it affects at the same time to justify as the fruit of mere thoughtlessness and casual impulse. Such protestations, therefore, will always be treated as they deserve, not only with contempt, but with incredulity, and their magnanimous authors set down as determined profligates, who seek to disguise their selfishness under a name somewhat less revolting. That profligacy is almost always selfishness; and that the excuse of impetuous feeling can hardly ever be justly pleaded for those who neglect the ordinary duties of life must be apparent, we think, even to the least reflecting of those sons of fancy and song. It requires no habit of deep thinking, nor anything more, indeed, than the information of an honest heart, to perceive that it is cruel and base to spend, in vain superfluities, that money which belongs of right to the pale, industrious tradesman and his famishing infants; or that it is a vile prostitution of language to talk of that man's generosity or goodness of heart who sits raving about friendship and philanthropy in a tavern, while his wife's heart is breaking at her cheerless fireside and his children pining in solitary poverty.

"This pitiful cant of careless feeling and eccentric genius, accordingly, has never found much favour in the eyes of English sense and morality. The most signal effect that ever it produced was on the muddy brains of some German youths who left college in a body to rob on the highway, because Schiller had represented the captain of a gang as so very noble a creature. But in this country we believe a predilection for that honourable profession must have preceded this admiration of the character. The style we have been speaking of, accordingly, is now the heroics only of the hulks and the house of correction, and has no chance, we suppose, of being greatly admired, except in the farewell speech of a young gentleman preparing for Botany Bay. It is humiliating to think how deeply Burns has fallen into the debasing error. He is perpetually making a parade of his thoughtlessness, inflammability, and imprudence, and talking with much complacency and exultation of the offence he has occasioned to the sober and correct part of mankind. This odious slang infects almost all his prose and a very great proportion of his poetry, and is, we are persuaded, the chief, if not the only source of the disgust with which, in spite of his genius, we know that he is regarded by many very competent and liberal judges. His apology, too, we are willing to believe, is to be found in the original lowness of his situation, and the slightness of his acquaintance with the world. With his talents and powers of observation, he could not have seen much of the beings who echoed this raving without feeling for them that distrust and contempt which would have made him blush to think that he had ever stretched over them the protecting shield of his genius.

"Akin to this most lamentable trait of vulgarity, and, indeed, in some measure arising out of it, is that perpetual boast of his own independence, which is obtruded upon the readers of Burns in almost every page of his writings. The sentiment itself is noble, and it is often finely expressed; but a gentleman would only have expressed it when he was insulted or provoked, and would never

have made it a spontaneous theme to those friends in whose estimation he felt that his honour stood clear. It is mixed up, too, in Burns with too fierce a tone of defiance, and indicates rather the pride of a sturdy peasant than the calm and natural elevation of a generous mind."

We shall now patiently quote a most memorable instance of brotherly kindness and charity in an English Review.\*

"The extravagance of genius with which this wonderful man was gifted, being in his later and more evil days directed to no fixed or general purpose, was, in the morbid state of his health and feelings, apt to display itself in hasty sallies of virulent and unmerited severity—sallies often regretted by the bard himself, and of which justice to the living and the dead alike demanded the suppression." "Burns was in truth the child of passion and feeling. His character was not simply that of a peasant, exalted into notice by uncommon literary attainments, but bore a stamp which must have distinguished him in the highest as in the lowest situation in life. To ascertain what was his natural temper and disposition, and how far it was altered or modified by the circumstances of birth, education, and fortune, might be a subject for a long essay; but to mark a few distinctions is all that can be here expected from us. We have said that Robert Burns was the child of impulse and feeling. Of the steady principle which cleaves to that which is good, he was, unfortunately, divested by the violence of those passions which finally wrecked him. It is most affecting to add that while swimming, struggling, and finally yielding to the torrent, he never lost sight of the beacon which ought to have guided him to land, yet never profited by its light."

"In general society Burns often permitted his determination of vindicating his personal dignity to hurry him into unjustifiable resentment of slight or imagined neglect. He was ever anxious to maintain his post in society, and

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\* *Quarterly Review*, February, 1809, vol. i., 2nd edition.

to extort that deference which was readily paid to him by all from whom it was worth claiming. This ill-judged jealousy of precedence led him often to place his own pretensions to notice in competition with those of the company who, he conceived, might found theirs on birth or fortune. On such occasions it was no easy task to deal with Burns. The power of his language, the vigour of his satire, the severity of illustration with which his fancy instantly supplied him bore down all retort. Neither was it possible to exercise over the poet that restraint which arises from the chance of further personal consequences. The dignity, the spirit, the indignation of Burns was that of a plebeian—of a high-souled plebeian, indeed, of a citizen of Rome or of Athens—but still of a plebeian, untinged with the slightest shade of that spirit of chivalry which, since the feudal times, has pervaded the higher ranks of European society. This must not be imputed to cowardice, for Burns was no coward; but the lowness of his birth and habits of society prevented rules of punctilious delicacy from making any part of his education." He is elsewhere represented as "so poor as even to be on the very brink of absolute ruin, looking forward now to the situation of a foot soldier, now to that of a common beggar, as no unnatural consummation of his fortune." The reviewer, forsaking generalities, ventures at length to state something like a specific fact:—"A very intimate friend of the poet, from whom he used occasionally to borrow a small sum for a week or two, once ventured to hint that the punctuality with which the loan was always replaced at the appointed time was unnecessary and unkind. The consequence of this hint was the interruption of their friendship for some weeks, the bard disdaining the very thought of being indebted to a human being one farthing beyond what he could discharge with the most rigid punctuality. It was a less pleasing consequence of this high spirit that Burns was utterly inaccessible to all friendly advice. To lay before him his errors, or to point out their consequences, was to touch a



string that jarred every feeling within him. On such occasions his, like Churchill's, was—

The mind, which, starting, heaves the heartfelt groan,  
And hates the form she knows to be her own.

“It is a dreadful truth that when racked and tortured by the well-meant and warm expostulations of an intimate friend he at length started up in a paroxysm of frenzy, and drawing a sword-cane, which he usually wore, made an attempt to plunge it into the body of his adviser; the next instant he was with difficulty withheld from suicide.”

“The same enthusiastic ardour of disposition swayed Burns in his choice of political tenets, when at a later period the country was agitated by revolutionary principles. That the poet should have chosen the side on which high talents were most likely to procure celebrity—that he, to whom the factitious distinctions of society were always objects of jealousy, should have listened with complacency to the voice of French philosophy, which denounced them as usurpations on the rights of man, was precisely to be expected.”

From the *Life*, ascribed to Mr. Walker, we now present ample extracts.

“Though he had already failed of success as a farmer, he took refuge from the disquiet of indecision in the project of taking another farm—a project which showed him to be little aware of the change which the last eighteen months had wrought upon his character. There is ground to suspect that even formerly he had not been sufficiently regular and steady in his agricultural pursuits, and had allowed them to be too easily interrupted by poetical, amatory, or convivial avocations.”

“After becoming the idol of the fashionable toppers of Edinburgh and Dumfriesshire, the challenges to exhibit his Bacchanalian prowess grew so frequent that practice at last degenerated into habit.”

“On subjects of this nature (politics) Burns does not seem to have arranged his notions with much deliberation or correctness. He surrendered his mind to one leading

idea, by which many collateral and qualifying considerations were excluded. He was likewise disposed from constitutional temper, from education, and from the accidents of life to a jealousy of power, and a keen hostility against every system which enabled birth and opulence to intercept those rewards which he conceived to belong to genius and virtue. He had, therefore, I suspect, without taking principles rigidly into view, a secret wish for the mortification of those who were in the exercise of authority at the moment, and a tendency to cheer the party, whatever it might be, by which they were opposed."

"He lost all sense of danger, and had in public uttered sentiments which were thought the more alarming and infectious as they would receive currency from the celebrity of his name and force from the energy of his expression. His dependent situation being known, information was given to the Board of Excise, who instituted an inquiry into his conduct, during which his mind was harassed with agitation and suspense. The report was less unfavourable than had been expected, and Mr. Graham taking care, by his powerful arguments, that justice alone, without any mixture of prejudice, should prevail among his judges, Burns, though rebuked, escaped dismissal, but his protector was obliged to compound for this issue by forbearing to press his removal to a better office."

"Burns, as has been already remarked, was instigated by an emulation, and an impatience of being outshone, unworthy of his discriminating understanding, and more intent on measuring the degree than the value of the exertion. This unfortunate dread of inferiority showed itself in companies where he could indulge his natural propensities without restraint; and not content with easily distancing every competitor in wit, he would also strain his faculties for a degrading pre-eminence in colloquial libertinism."

"As he was daily in society, and not without enemies, his conduct quickly became known, and many respectable persons who, on his settlement in Dumfriesshire, had shown themselves willing to cultivate his acquaintance

and to support him with their countenance, were gradually obliged to abridge their attentions. In their presence he probably constrained himself to correctness, yet they would naturally resent the practical avowal implied in his preference of other company, that he estimated theirs at an inferior rate. In a town like Dumfries, however, after deducting the sober and self-respecting part of the society, enough can still be found, and that, too, neither uninteresting nor unfashionable, by a man who has no dread of dissipation or impurity. In company of this description Burns continued welcome to the last, but towards the close of his life even this was not enough; and it is to be suspected that his aversion from domestic privacy and his craving for convivial tumult drove him sometimes to associates who disgraced him no less by the sordidness of their condition than by the laxity of their characters."

"Soured by disappointment, and stung with occasional remorse, impatient of finding little to interest him at home, and rendered inconstant from returns of his hypochondriacal ailment, multiplied by his irregular life, he saw the difficulty of keeping terms with the world, and abandoned the attempt in a rash and regardless despair."

"Circumstances having at that time \* led me to Scotland after an absence of eight years, during which my intercourse with Burns had been almost suspended, I felt myself strongly prompted to visit him. For this purpose I went to Dumfries, and called upon him early in the forenoon. I found him in a small house of one storey. He was sitting on a window-seat reading with the doors open and the family arrangements going on in his presence, and altogether without that appearance of snugness and seclusion which a student requires. After conversing with him for some time he proposed a walk, and promised to conduct me through some of his favourite haunts. We accordingly quitted the town and wandered a considerable way up the beautiful banks of the Nith. Here he gave me an account of

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\* November, 1795.

his latest productions, and repeated some satirical ballads which he had composed to favour one of the candidates at the last burgh election. These I thought inferior to his other pieces, though they had some lines in which vigour compensated for coarseness. He repeated also his fragment of an *Ode to Liberty* with marked and peculiar energy, and showed a disposition, which, however, was easily repressed, to throw out political remarks of the same nature with those for which he had been reprehended. On finishing our walk he passed some time with me at the inn, and I left him early in the evening to make another visit at some distance from Dumfries."

"On the second morning after, I returned with a friend who was acquainted with the poet, and we found him ready to pass a part of the day with us at the inn. On this occasion I did not think him quite so interesting as he had appeared at his outset."

"When it began to grow late he showed no disposition to retire, but called for fresh supplies of liquor with a freedom which might be excusable, as we were in an inn, and no condition had been distinctly made, though it might easily have been inferred had the inference been welcome that he was to consider himself as our guest; nor was it till he saw us worn out that he departed about three in the morning with a reluctance which probably proceeded less from being deprived of our company than from being confined to his own. Upon the whole I found this last interview not quite so gratifying as I had expected, although I discovered in his conduct no error which I had not seen in men who stand high in the favour of society, or sufficient to account for the mysterious insinuations which I heard against his character. He, on this occasion, drank freely without being intoxicated, a circumstance from which I concluded not only that his constitution was still unbroken, but that he was not addicted to solitary cordials; for if he had tasted liquor in the morning, he must have easily yielded to the excess of the evening."

"If he easily yielded to the seductions of licentious intemperance, it was in some measure owing to the

incorrect and partial views which his understanding had adopted. When an enthusiastic mind is not cautious to guard against prejudice in comparing moral qualities, when it limits its praise to certain favourite virtues, it is in danger of letting these serve to open a way for the introduction of certain favourite vices."

"This view of the character of Burns may be collected from his writings, which abound with the highest ecomiums on warmth of heart to man and woman, while they sometimes appear to confound in the same execrations sobriety, caution, and religious decency with churlishness, avarice, and imposture. He makes frequent confessions of his faults, but they are always faults deducible from the qualities which he so vehemently applauds; and on some occasions we may suspect him of a desire to confess himself into a measure of forgiveness, rising nearly to approbation. From these remarks it is meant to infer that though Burns, without doubt, was chiefly led astray by impetuous passions, yet in his ideas of duty he had not all the exactness and comprehension of a systematic moralist."

"To the same defect of perceiving the relative value of different virtues we may impute his constant tendency to extol and expatiate on some which he was conscious of possessing. The praises of a stubborn and inflexible independence, and the assertion of his own personal claim to this exalted quality, are repeated in his writings with a frequency which is injudicious. Laborious endeavours to establish a certain opinion respecting ourselves seem to imply a conviction that it requires establishment, as the quality for which we are most distinguished is rarely that which we are most eager to gain the character of possessing. Respecting endowments of which we are thoroughly conscious the mind is at rest, and therefore seldom reflects on them; while those whose existence is more equivocal, and which we are naturally jealous of being questioned, are seldom absent from our thoughts. 'Pope's scorn of the great,' says Johnson, 'is repeated too often to be real; no man thinks much of that which he despises.' On this principle we might be warranted in

suspecting that the independence was less perfect than he wished it to be supposed, and that his dread of incurring obligations proceeded partly from the necessity under which he found himself, of supporting a character to which his claims had been so numerous and decisive. I am rather disposed, however, to give full credit to his own representations, and to impute their boastful style to his want of that refinement of manners which prohibits egotism, to his constant jealousy of the superior rank of his correspondents, and his desire to remind them of the respect which he was determined to exact; and, perhaps, more than all, to his overweening preference of certain virtues on which he had fixed as sufficient in themselves, though the rest were neglected, to give dignity to man."

"When his contemplations had by any circumstance been turned to the nobler and more general truths of theology, for to such alone his remarks are confined, he feels them with ardour and expresses them with sublimity; yet, when the paroxysm is past, he is so unsparing in his ridicule of certain local fashions of religion that we cannot avoid suspecting his reverence for the substance. In the same manner, when he employs his mind in giving rules for moral and prudential conduct, no man is a sounder philosopher. But when he quits his pen, he quits his precepts, and lends to their violation the same enthusiasm under which they were composed."

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The short question, after all these highly wrought representations of the habits and fate of Burns, is, whether they be true? The short and decisive answer, which we do not hesitate to give, is, that not one of them is correct either in the qualities which they have absolutely and without qualification ascribed to him, or in the degrees of moral demerit which have been affixed to his character in the quotations now given. In thus peremptorily challenging the fidelity of these fanciful exhibitions let us not be misunderstood. We do not mean to say that Burns has been malevolently or designedly misrepresented by all the writers in question; that he had not some

lamentable defects in his character; that he had not errors of conduct over which his greatest friends and admirers must ever mourn; that he bore not something like a resemblance in some points to the biographical pictures which have been given of him; but that his defects were of the precise kind assumed—that his errors were to the extent affirmed—that the caricatures which we have been contemplating are genuine likenesses of him, we distinctly deny; they have no closer resemblance to Burns than a monkey has to a man, or than the most worthless have to the worthiest of our species. It is not an absolute exemption from all the frailties of our common nature to which any individual that exists or ever existed can be justly allowed to lay claim; the relative attributes of character are to be measured by the kind and the degree of excellence and defect which are unequivocally presented to consideration. And every motive of prudence and of charity requires rigorous and exact discrimination between the different shades of error in human conduct when we are forming an estimate not of our own, but of our neighbour's aberrations from the paths of duty. Above all, we are never at liberty, in a state of society where numberless motives prompt and facilitate the circulation of scandal, to take the whispers of gossips, the distorted and magnified stories of vulgar report, or the tales of malice, of party spirit, and of revenge for injuries, real or supposed, as good moral evidence, or decisive of the character of an ordinary and insignificant acquaintance, much less of men who are an honour to their country. These principles, however, seem to have been disregarded altogether by many in judging of Burns; he has been condemned without evidence—contrary to evidence—and by the perversion of such evidence as really existed. Over his grave a kind of holy but unhallowed shout has been heard—

. . . Here shall thy triumph, genius, cease.

Of the various delineations of Burns's character which have been given to the public, that by Dr. Currie is

executed on the whole with uncommon fidelity, circumspection, and delicacy; and if we cannot accede to the justice of all that he has written, we feel the most sincere respect for the motives by which he seems to have been guided, and readily ascribe the few errors he has committed to the circumstances under which he formed his opinion. But it is an opinion only which he has given, and not his testimony to a fact within his own knowledge, when he represents Burns towards the close of his life as perpetually and habitually under the influence of alcohol in one or other of its forms, and liable to all the moral irregularities which such a state of existence implies. This is too broadly stated. Dr. Currie, it will be recollected, had not an opportunity of knowing, by personal observation, anything of the general tenor of Burns's behaviour. We know not that he ever saw him more than once in his life, that he had more than a single interview with him, or that he had any evidence before him sufficient to warrant such a statement. Of Burns's early life his proofs, as published, are abundant and satisfactory; but of the latter there are none of a similar description. From what private information Dr. Currie framed his statement that Burns was perpetually inflamed with liquor, and in the practice of such vices as humanity and delicacy veil from description, we know not. But we have authority to state that Dr. Currie's MS. was not shown to the brother or friends of Burns at Dumfries previously to publication, so as to afford them an opportunity of correcting so fatal an error. And with every reverence for the candour and decorum of the worthy biographer, we are inclined to think he should either have been more specific or altogether silent. One part of the picture leaves busy and well-stored imaginations to fill up the void which he shuts out from actual vision with the most hideous images of depravity; and thus we are as effectually led to conclusions of an abhorrent nature as if an explicit and well-established case of utter and unmingled vice had been made out. Fortunately, however, we are not constrained to adopt the suggestions of fancy; for as that part of the statement



which regards perpetual drunkenness is known to be quite erroneous, we are warranted to infer that the more revolving fiction connected with and arising chiefly from it is nearly all a dream. That Burns was very frequently in company is most true; that he was often in festive company addicted, according to the taste of those times even in the most respectable and elevated spheres of society, to hard drinking, is also true; and that he was not always, when under the influence of convivial feelings, so circumspect and demure as a puritan, is most cheerfully admitted; but after all this is granted, it is far short of the conduct of a daily and habitual drunkard, "perpetually" under the dominion of wine and every degrading and ungovernable passion. It may well be said of Burns's irregularities that they were generally

Things light or lovely in their acted time,  
But now, to stern reflection, each a crime.

That even Dr. Currie's friendly statement is greatly overcharged we have the satisfaction of producing direct and explicit evidence, which not only invalidates that statement, but must put such allegations and innuendos completely to rest, until some persons equally respectable as those who now give their testimony and state their means of knowledge shall come forward and put their names to reports of what they saw with their eyes and heard with their ears; not merely to repeat the tittle-tattle hearsay of a foul-breathed mob. When charges of immoral conduct are distinctly stated and fairly proved against Burns we shall be ready to yield our belief and our reprobation of the evil; but until we see something entitled to the name of evidence, we cannot allow our scepticism to be shaken.

The truth is that the convivial excesses or other errors of Robert Burns were neither greater nor more numerous than those which we every day see in the conduct of men who stand high in the estimation of society—of some men who, like Burns, have, in their peculiar spheres, conferred splendid gifts of genius on their country, and whose names

are breathed in every voice with pride and enthusiasm as the benefactors of society. Are their errors officiously dragged from the tomb, or emblazoned amidst the trophies of victory without universal reprobation? All we ask is the same measure of justice and of mercy for Burns. The cause of morality is never truly served by hunting for and exhibiting the faults of a splendid character; for they are generally found combined with qualities which it is impossible not to love or admire; it were better to bury them in oblivion. If their errors are exhibited, however, let them be fairly stated and established, and no one will conceive himself bound to imitate or admire what is odious, although he may yield his admiration to excellence. No rank, genius, or greatness in any character can sanctify or alter the nature of vice, or protect from its merited condemnation; nor is any man so foolish as to pretend that the faults of another can justify his own moral delinquencies. It is all a pretext to disguise the basest passions when we are told that it is necessary to blast Robert Burns's name because, forsooth, he was occasionally addicted to pleasures which are too prevalent in the world. Nor can we view the avidity with which scandalous stories have been sought and circulated about him as very creditable to the manliness or spirit of the times. We have seen the greatest men of this age guilty of all that has been even imputed to Burns; yet the eye of inquiry is shut, and the voice of censure is unheard. We have seen undisguised vices enthroned in power without one countervailing virtue, in comparison with which the blemishes of Burns were like a glowing twilight to utter darkness. We have seen warriors and statesmen, and men of patrician rank; we have seen even the presidents of Bible societies, the committee-men of prayer and missionary associations, and an innumerable herd of those who have something to give or to say indulging without rebuke from our writing moralists in all the practices which have been imputed to Burns, and to a much greater extent; yet, instead of clamour, we have heard nothing burst from respectful silence except adulation. But Burns

was a poor ploughman, a humble Excise officer. His hands had not the distribution of wealth and of honour; his tongue is now mute, and cannot, as when he lived, awe the boldest assailants of his fame. And, therefore, the feelings of his surviving friends and relations are to be lacerated by the publication of defamatory libels, which, had he been in life, would have entitled him to seek redress in a court of justice. To rake up the faults, we repeat, of any great man we consider of doubtful utility; but to do so when his head is laid low is an action equally destitute of usefulness, of courage, and of generosity. Dr. Currie might have spared the statement to which we allude without any deviation from that integrity by which a biographer should be guided; but having made it, the measure of its truth is a legitimate subject of investigation. Combined, indeed, with the rest of Dr. Currie's observations, and the many well-authenticated facts of Burns's life, it is not calculated, perhaps, to produce on any charitable mind a very harsh impression, but it has been fixed on by the reptiles whom Burns's satire stung as a concession suitable to their malign tempers, and has been embodied in the prejudices of the learned and the vulgar so strongly that nothing will cure the evil but a radical application of facts to the assumptions of Dr. Currie.

The doctor insinuates that Burns associated with company of the lowest kind. The terms employed are relative. Nothing can be more arbitrary in construction than the phrase "low company." There is a kind of pedantry in all ranks and professions, and in every town and province, which induces persons of circumscribed habits to regard all beyond the little circle of their own movement or under the mark of a title as low. Burns had his own opinions on the subject. He paid very little regard to distinctions merely adventitious, and possessing himself no factitious claim to rank in society above the level of a peasant or the humblest order of revenue officers, he may well be forgiven for looking to the standard of merit in all ranks—to talent and worth—as the only rule for guiding him in the choice of his friends and companions.

In his estimate he was, no doubt, sometimes wrong; and in the keenness to observe character, very unworthy personages must often have intruded themselves on his society—men who were base enough to seduce the masculine energies of his mind and body into occasional excess, and then to proclaim the triumphs of their baseness. He was exposed inevitably by the humbleness of his occupation to daily intercourse with persons whose habits of life and pursuits were of the most sordid description; and everyone situated as he was must necessarily be obliged, in a greater or less degree, to mingle familiarly and professionally with the very lowest classes of society. But the daily, chosen, and cherished associates of Burns, even “on evil days, through fallen and evil tongues,” were not such as can justly be termed low, if respectability of character and attainments in the middle ranks of life entitle men to hold up their heads in society and claim an exemption from the reproach of abject lowness. The friends of Robert Burns—those who cherished him in his original obscurity—those who rejoiced in his fame, and who were attached to him by stronger influences than the fumes of a drunken revel, were the steady and unaltered friends and associates of Burns till the day of his death. They forsook him not, but clung to him with undiminished regard in all the vicissitudes of his fortune. They have not yet forgotten him.

Although we have thus freely, and perhaps some may think sharply, animadverted on Dr. Currie’s exceptionable remarks, we put the present edition of his works into the hands of the public as an interesting collection of the works of Burns, exhibiting with exceptions, in as far as Dr. Currie is concerned, a mind discriminating, elevated, and benevolent, and a tone of feeling which awakens sympathy with the author and his subject. If we have written a sentence that can be construed into a greater degree of disrespect for Dr. Currie’s character and labours than was necessary to explain the truth, we shall have exceeded our object and violated our intentions.

It is unnecessary to say a great deal about Dr. Irvine’s

statements. He does not seem to have sought or obtained any information beyond what he found in Dr. Currie's work. His *Life of Burns* is to be regarded merely as a specimen of the consequences of such statements as those of Dr. Currie being permitted from false delicacy to stand uncorrected. The fictions and the facts are both copied; and, as uniformly happens in the repetition of anything marvellous, all the faults vaguely ascribed to Burns by Dr. Currie are exaggerated by Dr. Irvine. We find it stated accordingly that his irregularities after he resided in Dumfries became "unalterably habitual," and as a theoretical deduction, which we know to be inconsistent with fact, we are told that "it must have been impossible for him to discharge the duties of his office with that regularity which is almost indispensable." We find Dr. Currie's notice of the circumstances which barred the promotion of Burns in the Excise put in rather a new light. Burns is involved in the general accusation of having, with the early admirers of the French Revolution in this country, entertained "extravagant schemes of premature reformation in the constitution of their native country"—of having declaimed "with unbridled freedom concerning the urgent necessity of a radical reformation"; and yet we are assured, as a matter of fact, that "the officer who had been commissioned to institute a formal inquiry could discover no substantial grounds of accusation." These statements we need not attempt to reconcile. But we must contradict the asseverations that Burns was ever in such a horrible state that he "could only be preserved from overwhelming languor by the aid of stimulant liquors—that he was eager to avoid the pangs of solitary reflection, and was even incapable of relishing domestic or rational society—or that he degraded his noble faculties to so mean a level that many of his earlier friends became half-ashamed of having contracted such an intimacy." We have no evidence that he was doomed, in the bitterness of remorse, to acknowledge numerous breaches of the duties of a husband and a father. The hand of disease, and the gnawings of disappointment, pressed heavily on the body

and mind of Burns towards the close of his life; and there is no doubt that even then he imprudently allowed himself to be seduced into company and hard drinking; but that he ever sought refuge from physical languor or solitary reflection in the "bane and antidote" of stimulating liquors, apart from social enjoyment (as this statement clearly implies), is utterly without foundation in truth. It was not the love of stimulant liquors, it was society which misled Burns into any wanderings. On this subject we have the most unquestionable testimony. That "he was incapable of relishing domestic or rational society" is equally an error in fact; for within until a few days of his death, when disease overpowered his mind, no man relished or more truly adorned domestic and rational society. His domestic life, if not the most splendid in the world's eye, was unruffled; for, though extremely limited in the means of life, frugality and good temper at home peculiarly endeared his conjugal enjoyments; and we have the best testimony—the testimony of Mrs. Burns—that she never heard a harsh word from her husband, and never saw a frown upon his brow. Nor was he ever brought so low as to be incapable of enjoying rational society. For proof to the contrary, we need only to refer to Mrs. Dunlop's letter, to Mr. Walker's statement, and to the various documents in the *Supplement*. Who the "earlier friends were that found it expedient to be half-ashamed" of his acquaintance we cannot tell; but it is probable they are now altogether ashamed to give their names to such an avowal. This, however, we can say, that his earliest were his best and his latest friends, and that it would have been well for Burns if he had shaken off such friends as could insinuate themselves into his confidence and then betray it by exaggerating the effusions of his gay and unguarded moments. Of the "numerous breaches of the duties of a husband and a father," which Burns is represented as acknowledging, we have been unable to obtain the slightest information. Every man who has such duties to perform, if he be candid and ingenuous, must, in the course of his life, have occasion to confess that he has not

done every duty; and we will not aver that Burns had not his share of confessions, but we can assert, without the fear of contradiction, that no man had less cause of self-reproach for unkindness to his wife and children than Robert Burns. That their interest, that his own interest, as connected with their worldly prosperity, was not a matter on which all his thoughts were bent, and to which all his exertions were devoted, is certainly true, and we regret that he was not perhaps a little more like the men of the world around him in this respect. But no man was or could be more affectionately attentive to every conjugal and parental duty which he had the power of performing. Upon this subject we refer with much satisfaction to the testimony of a gentleman who possessed, and deserved to possess, the friendship of Burns in those days, when he is exhibited as grovelling perpetually in the most brutal scenes of life—whose opportunities of knowing the truth were ample, and whose evidence derives peculiar value from the purity and respectability of his own character.

Dr. Irvine remarks, on his notice of the death of Burns, "that the glaring follies of the man were now forgotten, and the premature and melancholy fate of the poet was alone remembered." Had this been the case we should not now have been employed in removing the glare which has been thrown around his follies, nor in the ungrateful task of examining with a rigour, which is perhaps unavoidable, the blunders of his biographers. To offer any apology for criticising a published book is neither necessary nor in our contemplation; but we may be permitted to say that we have no motive and no feeling of personal unkindness, and that we know and respect the learning which Dr. Irvine has displayed in various illustrations of Scottish literature.

We now approach the *Edinburgh Review*—the most tremendous battery which has been erected on "the ponderous tomes of Dr. Currie" against the moral fame of Burns. We shall, nevertheless, venture among its fire, which seems false, and do not utterly despair of shaking, though we cannot hope on this point to raze, its founda-

tions. We do not affect to consider this review as either too high or too low for notice; it is entitled to a respectful and gentlemanlike approach, but not to our criticism in a state of prostration. Its speciousness is adapted to produce the most unfavourable impressions of Burns; but the high talent and principle it displays merit our attempt to disabuse its author.

The article, indeed, from which we have given an extract, afforded us pleasure and pain when we first read it; and though years have since elapsed, we still experience a mixed emotion in the reperusal. There is a felicity in some of the criticisms, and a moral eloquence which captivated and commands our sincere assent, even though it is blended with assumptions and errors in reference to "the Scottish rustic," which have always extorted from us sorrow and something like indignation. In the very first sentence of the critique, the reviewer speaks sneeringly of Burns as a poetical prodigy on a level with Stephen Duck and Thomas Dermody—men, the glimmerings of whose genius are extinct. Assuredly there never was a more unhappy or a more ungentle similitude. Perhaps we misunderstand the meaning of the critic.

But we must speak to the main charge of the reviewer—that "the leading vice in Burns's character and the cardinal deformity, indeed, of all his productions was his contempt, or affectation of contempt, for prudence, decency, and regularity, and his admiration of thoughtlessness, oddity, and vehement sensibility—his belief, in short, in the dispensing power of genius and social feeling in all matters of morality and common sense." Now, this proposition is just as easily denied as affirmed, and as we do deny it, evidence is the only means of extricating the asserter from a dilemma. And what is the reviewer's evidence? Broad assertion, illustrated by declamations which have no more application to Burns than to the reviewer. Let us see whether the tenor of Burns's life and all his productions tend to support or to overthrow the reviewer's averment.

If we take the events of Burns's life and his actions as



the best means of discovering whether or not he held mere genius and social feeling to be clothed with a dispensing power in all matters of morality and common sense, we shall be led to a conclusion very different, indeed, from the reviewer's position. Burns was conscious that he possessed genius, and if he had not, the unanimous voice of his countrymen must have convinced him. He also possessed social feeling; but is there any action of his life which betrays a grave and deliberate opinion, or an affectation of it, that such endowments and propensities exempted him from the discharge of any duty or justified his departure from rectitude in any important matters of morality and common sense? Not one that we can recollect. It is the practical opinions, as exemplified in conduct, by which we are to judge of every man's principles of action; and although he used the *licentia vatam* in talking and writing freely about the minor breaches of decorum, we never find him resorting to any sophisticated slang about feelings when the more important parts of actual duty are concerned. While only a boy, at a time of life when some of our high-bred youths have scarcely escaped from the nursery, Robert Burns was doing the work of a man, and assisting his father and brother with all the devotedness of generous affection in the labours of the field, and in supporting a virtuous family. Nor was this a transient fit of animal kindness; during the whole of his father's life he continued, until twenty-five years of age, in almost utter seclusion from society, struggling on in his "toils obscure" with the most meagre food for sustenance, and borne down not merely by premature bodily labour, but by the unspeakable anguish of contemplating a beloved father sinking into the grave in penury and broken-hearted.\* Was such conduct the slang of the

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\* . . . Look not for virtuous deeds  
In history's arena, where the prize  
Of fame or power prompts to heroic acts;  
Peruse the *lives* themselves of men obscure:  
There charity that robs itself to give,  
There fortitude in sickness nursed by want,  
There courage that expects no tongue to praise,  
There virtue lurks, like purest gold, deep hid,  
With no alloy of selfish motive mixed.—*Grahame*.

worst German plays and the lowest town-made novels? Was this generosity without justice? Was this a deliberate system of determined profligacy and selfishness, or the fruit of mere thoughtlessness and casual impulse? Was this the pitiful cant of careless feeling and eccentric genius, fitted for the hulks and the house of correction, or was it conduct corresponding to the farewell speech of a Botany Bay convict? Much common sense has often been sacrificed to the turning of a period, and the plainest facts have been generally overlooked in striving to give colouring to a doubtful cause; really we cannot entirely acquit the reviewer of a determined purpose of shutting his eyes to every fact in the life of Burns, when he indited his tirade against the barren and unfruitful sentimentality of the circulating library. It is quite out of place, though very good, no doubt, if it had been properly applied; but on what point does all this touch Burns?

Even after his father's death Burns most religiously discharged, to the utmost of his ability, all the duties of a son and of a brother, of a husband and a father; and in his professional and public capacities, as a faithful servant of the Crown and an honest man, his name is without a stain. If, like other men, he was occasionally the victim of "those ills that flesh is heir to," it is quite impossible, by any warrantable construction of any of his actions, to say that he considered mere poetical genius and love of company as a sanction for injustice or immorality in many of its forms. Of the leading vice, as it is called, in Burns's character, we know not where to find a shadow of evidence. He never spent in vain superfluities, as is stated by unavoidable implication, "that money which belongs in right to the pale, industrious tradesman and his famishing infants"—he never vaunted of his generosity and goodness of heart, and sat "raving about friendship and philanthropy in a tavern while his wife's heart was breaking at her cheerless fireside, and his children pining in solitary poverty."

But the "cardinal deformity of all his productions is, it seems, akin to the 'leading vice of his character'—a


style which, 'in the eyes of English sense and morality,' is only adapted to the 'honourable profession' of a highwayman—which constitutes 'the heroics only of the hulks and the house of correction,' and which has 'no chance of being admired except in a farewell speech of a young gentleman preparing for Botany Bay.' Lest the reader should think the critic had diverged into a region totally unconnected with Burns, and should also wander in the same path, he is told, to prevent the possibility of any mistake, that 'it is humiliating to think how deeply Burns has fallen into this debasing error.' Burns, it is averred, is perpetually making a parade of his thoughtlessness, inflammability, and imprudence, and talking with much complacency and exultation of the offence he has occasioned to the sober and correct part of mankind." The only commentary which all this needs is simply that the statement thus made, without limitation, is absolutely erroneous. It is quite impossible for any man at all conversant with Burns's writings to make such a charge; we defy any man, except by misconstruction, to torture all, or almost any, of his compositions, in prose or in verse, into such miserable trash as is thus described. Some of the more venial peccadillos of animal life Burns, it must be allowed, views with too much lenity, if he finds in the sinner any redeeming qualities of good-heartedness; nor will we defend either the habits or language which are occasionally graced with the witchery of his genius. But setting a few of these bagatelles aside, the characteristic qualities of Burns's poetry and letters are as completely different from those which have now, for the first time, been discovered in them, as it is possible for the imagination of man to conceive. The poetry of Burns and his letters, which reveal all the workings of his heart and his fancy, bear the strong stamp of consistency with sound common sense and sound common feeling, if by these we are to understand a sense evinced in the faithful discharge of what is due to our relations, our friends, to society, and to ourselves. Neglect, systematic neglect of the ordinary duties of life, under the specious but hollow pretext of

spirit and genius, and so forth, never, except in manifest jest and intended balderdash, found in him a defender or an example. And although he was apt to view with abundant toleration the frailties in others, from which no man can altogether claim an exemption, he is, in a striking degree, the adversary of false sentiment, of all kinds of slang, hypocrisy, and dissimulation in every possible shape when these pollute the realities of life; he has also painted in the most captivating aspect every amiable and manly virtue, and it is impossible to open a page of his works and not discover something which either delights the imagination or tends to the honour of pure and rational morality. To defend Burns's writings nowadays would, indeed, be as idle as, in the true spirit of knight-errantry, to fight with a windmill. His poems have triumphed over criticism—they need no defence; we only appeal to them. We do not, however, defend the publishers of all his writings.

But he is accused of another "lamentable trait of vulgarity"—"a perpetual boast of his own independence, which is obtruded upon the readers of Burns in almost every page of his writings." This is a form of expression which we recollect to have heard a reverend divine employ when apologising for a little looseness in his statements—it is "speaking wide." We have read many pages of Burns's writings and do not recollect any instance in which he made his own independence a "spontaneous theme to those friends in whose estimation he felt that his honour stood clear," without being prompted to the utterance of his feelings by something in the circumstances or subject with which his expressions were connected. We very often, indeed, find him in his poetry and in his letters expressing an ardent admiration of an independent spirit; but it is uniformly, if we be not much mistaken, in consequence of the subject being thrown in his way. Should it, however, in any instance be found spontaneously brought forward, it is not a thing to be greatly wondered at if a feeling, which undoubtedly animated his whole heart and characterised his whole conduct, should, in his very peculiar

circumstances, escape from him on occasions when it was not strictly necessary. The reviewer says with great truth that a gentleman only talks of his independence when insulted or provoked; it was only on such occasions, or on occasions when his jealous eye saw a tendency to underrate him, that Burns did so; but without wasting words on this topic we take our leave of the *Edinburgh Review* with offering an advice to the critic (whoever he be), in all meekness and lowliness of spirit, that he will read the whole and not merely turn over some of the leaves of Burns's works, or glance at a few of the poet's lyrical compositions. There is in the works of Robert Burns an inexhaustible store of delight to every man who does not read for the exclusive purpose of finding fault, and displaying his own acumen and fine writing.

We are now under the necessity of treating, with as little ceremony as may be, an English critic who has audaciously crossed the Tweed, and, like the Borderers of old, committed depredations on our best treasures. A writer in the London *Quarterly Review*, with the caustic disposition evinced by our Edinburgh critics (for whom, after all, we have a clannish regard), and with its own peculiar heaviness, has gone the very greatest lengths in every kind of misrepresentation with respect to Robert Burns. And if the spirit of chivalry, an emanation of which we have caught from their review of Cromek's *Reliques*, did not mingle itself with the gall necessarily in our pen, we should assuredly write down one hard word and apply it to the gentleman who has attempted, poorly attempted, to trample on the grave of our national poet. We must therefore adopt a circumlocution to express our meaning—the “few distinctions,” as they are called, which we have copied from the *Quarterly Review* with respect to Burns are devoid of truth, in fact. Never, indeed, have we seen a more audacious and incredible fiction than the assertions that Burns was totally divested of the principle which cleaves to that which is good, and that though he never lost sight of the beacon which ought to have guided him, yet he never profited by its light; that is, in plain English,



that Burns was utterly destitute of every moral principle, and that his life was one unvaried scene of vices or crimes—that he never even did one good action in the whole course of it! Such is the plain and unequivocal import of the metaphorical prattle about wreck and torrents, and swimming and beacons, in which this abominable falsehood is clothed; it is quite impossible to give it another name so as to distinguish suitably its character. It were mere drivelling to soften our language. We do not desire to give a fine edge to satire; our sole object is to assert truth.

The only other proposition in this precious criticism which bears the aspect of a fact really injurious to Burns's memory is denominated a "dreadful truth," that Burns, when a friend was offering him well-meant and warm expostulation, attempted to destroy that friend by plunging a sword into his breast; and in the next instant he was with difficulty withheld from suicide! What atonement can any man make for publishing so foul a calumny as this? What apology can a professed guardian of literature and morals, a self-constituted censor of immorality, offer to an insulted public for going out of the book under his review, for manufacturing to his own taste, and then gravely printing and publishing a story which he either knew, or ought to have known, is, by exaggeration, cruel untruth? What kind of a head must he possess who could hazard his credibility and the reputation of the work with which he was connected by asserting what he can never prove? What kind of heart must he have who could wring the hearts of the widow and the fatherless by such false, revolting pictures of a tender husband and an affectionate parent, whose fame and honour were all the earthly treasures which he left them? Shame, shame! Is this criticism? It is a libel which deserves the pillory; and if the author of it were known, which, fortunately for him, is not the case, he would doubtless fill that space in public opinion which a good man would not desire to occupy.

We have ascertained by actual inquiry at the gentlemen alluded to in this story how much of it is fact and how

much embellishment. The charge is that Burns made an attempt to plunge a sword-cane into the body of his friend, and was with difficulty prevented afterwards from killing himself. To attempt, in the ordinary acceptation of our language, imports a full purpose in the agent of accomplishing some design, followed forth by an act which his own will alone does not check, but which, if baffled, is counteracted by some external force; and if this be a correct view of the expression, we are warranted to deny flatly that Burns attempted to plunge a sword into the body of his friend, or to destroy himself. That friend, Mr. John Syme, in a written statement now before us, gives an account of this murderous-looking story, which we shall transcribe verbatim, that the nature of this attempt may be precisely known. "In my parlour at Ryedale one afternoon Burns and I were very gracious and confidential. I did advise him to be temperate in all things. I might have spoken daggers, but I did not mean them. He shook to the inmost fibre of his frame, drew the sword-cane, when I exclaimed, 'What! wilt thou thus, and in my own house?' The poor fellow was so stung with remorse that he dashed himself down on the floor." And this is gravely laid before the world at second-hand as an attempt by Burns to murder a friend and to commit suicide, from which "he was with difficulty withheld!" So much for the manner of telling a story. The whole amount of it, by Mr. Syme's account—and none else can be correct—seems to be that being "gracious" one afternoon (perhaps a little "glorious" too, according to *Tam o' Shanter*), he, in his own house, thought fit to give Burns a lecture on temperance in all things; in the course of which he acknowledges that he "might have spoken daggers"—and that Burns, in a moment of irritation, perhaps of justly offended pride, merely drew the sword (which, like every other Excise officer, he wore at all times professionally in a staff), in order, as a soldier would touch his sword, to repel indignity. But by Mr. Syme's own testimony, Burns only drew the sword from the cane; nothing is said of an attempt to stab; but on the contrary,

Mr. Syme declares expressly that a mock-solemn exclamation, pretty characteristic, we suspect, of the whole affair, wound up the catastrophe of this tragical scene. Really it is a foolish piece of business to magnify such an incident into a "dreadful truth," illustrative of the "untamed and plebeian" spirit of Burns. We cannot help regretting that Mr. Syme should unguardedly have communicated such an anecdote to any of his friends, considering that this ebullition of momentary irritation was followed, as he himself states, by a friendship more ardent than ever betwixt him and Burns. He should have been aware that the story, when told again and again by others, would be twisted and tortured into the scandalous form which it at last assumed in the *Quarterly Review*. The antics of a good man in the delirium of a fever might with equal propriety be narrated in blank verse, as a proof that he was a bad man when in perfect health. A momentary gust of passion, excited by acknowledged provocation, and followed by nothing but drawing or brandishing a weapon accidentally in his hand, and an immediate and strong conviction that even this was a great error, cannot, without the most outrageous violence of construction, be tortured into an attempt to commit murder and suicide. All the artifice of language, too, is used to give a horrible impression of Burns. The sword-cane is spoken of without explanation as a thing "which he usually wore," as if he had habitually carried the concealed stiletto of an assassin. The reviewer should have been much more on his guard. We think we could pierce him on an unguarded and vulnerable side, but we scorn the combat with a man in a mask. What has become of his chivalry?

The other "distinctions" of this redoubted review provoke only derision. It is really quite amusing to see the critic mistake the merely jocular rhapsodies of Burns for "absolute rant," and give an example of professed bombast as a proof that he was desirous of "shining, and blazing, and thundering." The critic's sagacity, too, is quite marvellous in discovering the poet's "opinion of his own temperament," from certain rhetorical flourishes, and



particularly from his having, in absolute jest, said he envied the condition of a wild horse in the deserts of Asia, and an oyster! Like other fabulists, the *Quarterly* reviewer must have his moral; and having prefigured the poor poet as a horse, which acknowledged not adversity as the tamer of the human breast, and knew not "the golden\* curb which discretion hangs upon passion"; having, moreover, assumed that this horse-oyster bard "believed that there could be no pleasurable existence between the extremes of licentious frenzy and torpid sensuality," he closes a very poetical series of remarks with an oracular conclusion "that if pride and ambition were capable of being taught, they might hence learn that a well-regulated mind and controlled passions are to be prized above all the glow of imagination and all the splendour of genius!" This is very glowing and very splendid, no doubt; but really there is too much of "the spirit of chivalry" for commonplace and "vulgar" taste. The British public would have infinitely preferred honest truth and charity to that chivalry which insults a dead man, whose living touch would have withered the hand that is lifted up in impotence to hurt, over the wreck of his manly frame.

Sick as we are of the nauseating inventions of the *Quarterly Review*, we cannot pass over the observations applied to the "plebeian" spirit of Burns, as if it had been something inferior to "that spirit of chivalry which since the feudal times has pervaded the higher ranks of European society." This is a conceit of the reviewer's own, adopted, it would seem, for no other purpose than to vent a sarcasm against Burns and the humbler ranks of the community; the epithet "plebeian" is repeated with an air of self-gratulation not unworthy of some silly lord. Diversities of rank, political and hereditary honours, are the unavoidable results of a well-regulated state of society, and we are ever ready to give honour to whom honour is due, but we have no notion of tolerating a supercilious

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\* What does the critic mean by a *golden curb*?

assumption of lordliness in an anonymous reviewer, who, perhaps, has no claim whatever to public notice, which is not founded solely on qualities altogether personal. Nor can we ever reckon that condition of life ignoble which could nurture in our "land of brown heath" the high soul, the manly, sublime, and truly British spirit of Robert Burns. If the reviewer means to say that Burns had not the manners of a courtier, or the flippancy of a Parisian *petit maitre*, we will not dispute the position; but if he means to insinuate that he was destitute of that purest remnant of feudal manners, the "grace of life," which springs from an union of habitual self-possession and benevolence in society, and which constitutes true politeness and honest urbanity, we will tell him that no man had it in a more eminent degree than Burns. The ladies are on this subject no bad judges; they are unanimous against the reviewer, and the testimony, indeed, of all who ever came within the reach of his social influence is that it was something like sorcery. But really for this reviewer to talk of chivalry, and to write such ungentelemanly stuff as we have been noticing, is like an old Border bandit speaking of honesty.

This unknown personage represents Burns as ever so poor "as to be on the very brink of absolute ruin, looking forward now to the situation of a foot-soldier, now to that of a common beggar, as no unnatural consummation of his evil fortune." Such a statement is really ludicrous. It is a construction of facts and of passages in the poet's letters akin to the sublime notion that Burns had fixed upon the devil as the model of his own character. But we will not fatigue the reader of these notes with further animadversion on the errors of this blundering scribbler, who seems to have looked to payment by the sheet as his reward for this effusion of malevolence. Before taking our leave, however, we may only deny (as is necessary, of course, when the "extravagance of genius," by which this critic is distinguished, ever touches or adorns a fact) that Burns was either a political partisan, or listened with complacency to what has been termed French philo-

sophy—if any definite meaning can be affixed to these expressions. Burns was of too sturdy a temper to be a partisan; he was destined to take a lead in anything to which his soul was devoted, and though he submitted to make his bread as an inferior officer of Excise, he never yielded to the meanness of abetting miserable political clubs by his orations, or of composing bad songs to stimulate their prejudices and passions when it was thought requisite to create and strengthen principles by the force of alcohol. The transient meaning given to “French philosophy” is now unintelligible, since the howl of liberty and equality ceased to alarm. Nothing can be more contrary to fact, or inconsistent with various averments, that Burns was the mere organ of feeling, than the assertion that he had imbibed what was universally understood at the time as the true character of notions, termed by some Frenchmen and their adversaries philosophy—a brutal dereliction of every sentiment and affection native to the heart of Burns. That in his private sentiments, and in his ordinary intercourse with society, he favoured the French Revolution, in so far as it promised to lead to that blessed consummation which we have lived to behold—a limited monarchy on the ruins of an absolute despotism—is quite true; but it is about as logical to infer from thence that he wished to overturn the limited monarchy and established liberty of his native country, as to conclude that he was a habitual drunkard because he sometimes took a cheerful glass with his friends. Whenever truth is forsaken there are no bounds to absurdity, and the critic before us has given an ample measure. But we leave him to his fate—not without some pity blended in our resentments.

Of the *Life* attributed to Mr. Walker, of Perth, we really wish we could speak in terms of approbation; but we cannot, in the present instance, indulge our personal feelings at the expense of Robert Burns. His representation of Burns’s life and character is inconsistent with itself. It is constructed on what appears to us an erroneous notion of biography; it contains statements of fact which must derive all their credibility from the individual

testimony of the narrator; and yet that individual is to the public a nonentity—for the publication is anonymous. It contains, instead of facts and evidence, and reflections drawn from and warranted by these, a great deal of conjecture and assumption and split-hair philosophising about possibilities, of very little moment in themselves, and as foreign to the life and character of Burns as of Bonaparte. It represents Burns in one page as in fact a very good man, and damns him by hypothesis in the next. Altogether, it seems to have been written with sickly fastidiousness of taste, and in terror lest on any topic the author should have got out of order. Too much is sacrificed to a false public appetite for sermonising and scandal; and when we see the moral part of Burns falling, as it were, under the daggers of literary patriots, when we see a friend among the number, we can imagine that we hear the parting spirit of the bard utter the last and deep reproach of Cæsar.

We need not go beyond the passages we have quoted for proof of our general objections to this specimen of biography. There is scarcely a page in which we do not stumble on a proposition coupled with such phrases as "there is ground to suspect," "I suspect," and "it is to be suspected." And it is very curious that in almost every case all these suspicions are at once injurious to Burns and contrary to notorious facts. No better illustration can be given of this unsatisfactory style of biography than the "suspicion" which is excited against the unspotted worth of William Burns, the poet's father. We are instructed by a philosophical reverie that the misfortunes of that worthy man must probably have arisen from some radical defect in his own character or conduct, since uniform mischance, it is assumed, always implies as much! How silly and cruel are such insinuations! God knows, there are many pressed down in adversity for life without the slightest cause existing in their conduct or personal characters. We have known individuals possessing every quality that we can conceive of human worth destined, like William Burns, to drink deeply in the cup of affliction,

to struggle through life with poverty and disappointment and sorrow, and to descend like him into the grave with few other consolations than the prospects beyond it. The cause of William Burns's uniform misfortune is very obvious to an ordinary observer: he had not money; that was his defect. And the want of capital alone fettered him to all the disasters which he experienced in his affectionate anxiety to keep his family around him in their tender years. There is no occasion for a refinement in speculation when a fact stands manifestly in view sufficient to account for occurrences. We will not notice all the may-be sentences of which we disapprove, and to which we could only give a contradiction; nor shall we swell these remarks by selecting the inconsistencies which are involved in the views of the biographer; but there is one part of his own conduct which we cannot overlook, which we notice with regret, and which many will reprobate in stronger terms than we are inclined to employ. We allude to the visit which the biographer paid to Burns a few months before his death, and whatever the memory of Burns may suffer from the account given of that visit, the biographer, whoever he be, must suffer infinitely more in public opinion.

The biographer tells the public that, after a separation of eight years, he went to Dumfries on purpose to pay a visit to his old friend Burns, only a few months before the death of Burns; that the first of two days, which, on this occasion, they spent together, was nearly all consumed in a manner indicative of entire correctness in the poet's conduct, and distinguished by no peculiarity, except that he "showed a disposition, which, however, was easily repressed (being overawed, no doubt), to throw out political remarks of the same nature with those for which he had been reprehended." The day following, however, he is described as "ready" to attend the biographer and a friend to the inn, where "he called for fresh supplies of liquor," for which, he being their invited guest, his companions were, of course, to pay; and the narrator adds, "nor was it till he saw us worn out that he departed about three in

the morning, with a reluctance which probably proceeded less from being deprived of our company than from being confined to his own!" Really this is the very shabbiest business recorded in any of the biographical garrulities we have ever seen. We never could have dreamt that any man, accustomed to the courtesies of decent society, would have violated the rules of hospitality and friendship so egregiously as to invite a friend to his table, for it is the same thing whether that be in a private house or a tavern, and then publish to the world a narration of the quantities of food and drink of which he may choose to make use. If there be anything in the scene described obnoxious to real spirit, it is all on one side. Why brand as meanness the warmth and frank ingenuousness of Burns's kindness on meeting with an old acquaintance by insinuating that he drank freely, because he was not to pay a few paltry shillings, which he did not value? Why dare to say that he left the social board reluctantly, because he was "probably" less delighted with his companions than apprehensive of being confined to his own solitary reflections? What grounds, what temptation can warrant a supposition so violent and so repugnant to all the probabilities of the case? And what motives can justify such pitiful gossiping? We gladly turn from this vile thing—this unmatched outrage on charity and friendship—and call to remembrance the writings of Burns, and the spirit by which they are characterised.

It is not our intention to say much on the subject of Burns's works, further than to affirm that they are eminently friendly to good morals. A proposition so decidedly in the face of numerous assertions to the contrary, requires a little explanation; and in giving it we shall not go over the beaten path by indulging in high-flown panegyrics on his genius. The man that cannot discern the excellences of Burns's poetry is far beyond the reach of our poor abilities to point them out, and perhaps beyond the consciousness of anything except mere animal existence.

The writings of Burns may be considered in two points

of view—either as indicative of his real personal character, and therefore possessing an influence over society on the score of example, or as having a tendency in their intrinsic qualities to affect the morals of the community in which they circulate. If they are regarded in the first of these lights, we ought to consider strictly whether, even with all their blemishes as published since his death, they afford conclusive evidence with respect to his character. The writings of no man afford such evidence. It is quite a commonplace fact that authors, like other men, are very artificial animals—that they are not always what they seem in their writings; and that the force of any presumptions arising as to personal qualities from the mere complexion of their compositions, whether published or not, must be modified by the circumstances under which they exist. A man may divest himself of all sincerity, and write a book or paper in discordance with his real sentiments. Another may, in a moment of elevation, or thoughtlessness, or confidence, write a letter to an intimate friend, either in jest or under casual and passing emotions, not accordant with the ordinary tenor of his feelings and opinions; and therefore any inferences as to personal character deduced from writings of any description must be drawn with great limitations. Many of Burns's compositions were written in such circumstances as to render it impossible to learn anything very decisive from them concerning his moral feelings—for opposite conclusions may easily be drawn from different parts of his works. To assume dogmatically any positions on the subject is absurd, and to assert that he was irreligious or vicious, or that he must afford a pernicious example, because he satirised some of the fanatical clergy and wrote private letters to his confidential friends, in which there are occasional deviations from the circumspection observed in the works that he published, is by no means a legitimate mode of induction. The indications of character disclosed in the public and private writings of Burns, to the effect of operating as an example, are so equivocal, therefore, as to afford no satisfactory proof, without a collateral view of his life.

The obvious, the consolatory, and we think the irresistible conclusion to be deduced from the remarks and proof which we now take the liberty of submitting to the public, is that Burns has been cruelly wronged. It matters little whether this evil has arisen from credulity, misinformation, or malicious purpose. It is fit that the error should be corrected, not merely because it is fair that the dead as well as the living should have justice in every individual instance, but because the general interests of society and literature are outraged if calumny is permitted in such a case to circulate in triumphant dogmatism. By calumny we mean injurious accusation without proof. And if ever calumny of the most dastardly kind poisoned public opinion, it has been in the case of Burns. It is not enough to say that he frequently indulged in convivial propensities, and therefore was a habitual debauchee, and every way abominable as a man; it is absolute imbecility, savouring of the tabernacle, to say that because he satirised and painted hypocrisy truly he was a blasphemer, and a profligate as an author; and no man shall be permitted to assert, without evidence in support of his allegation, that Burns was a worthless wretch if there be one untrammelled press in Scotland. Some of the rigidly righteous tremble at the mere sound of praise to his genius, and seem to think that because he had the failings of humanity there should be no monument to his memory. It is not to his failings that a monument can be consecrated by any rational being, but to his transcendent genius as the Poet of Nature, for no one who can discover excellence and distinguish it from the dross of mortality in his own frame can overlook the high pre-eminence of Burns in all the faculties and feelings which raise man from the dust into the temple of fame. To the broad, the general and unqualified accusations which have been brought against him, we offer a valid defence that there is no proof; we also give exculpatory evidence of the most satisfying nature, and we retire from public notice with a perfect conviction that as Burns has been tried he will be acquitted by his country.



By PROF. JOHN WILSON.

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A REVIEW OF "LOCKHART'S LIFE OF BURNS."

THERE is probably not a human being come to the years of understanding in all Scotland who has not heard of the name of Robert Burns. It is indeed a household word. His poems are found lying in almost every cottage in the country—on the "window-sole" of the kitchen, spence, or parlour; and even in the town-dwellings of the industrious poor, if books belong to the family at all, you are sure to see there the dear Ayrshire ploughman, the Bard of Coila. The father or mother, born and long bred, perhaps, among banks and braes, possesses in that small volume a talisman that awakens in a moment all the sweet visions of the past, and that can crowd the dim abode of hard-working poverty with a world of dear rural remembrances that awaken not repining but contentment. No poet ever lived more constantly and more intimately in the heart of a people. With their mirth, or with their melancholy, how often do his "native wood-notes wild" affect the sitters by the ingles of low-roofed homes, till their hearts overflow with feelings that place them on a level, as moral creatures, with the most enlightened in the land; and more than reconcile them with, make them proud of, the condition assigned them in life by Providence! In his poetry, they see with pride the reflection of the character and condition of their own order. That pride is one of the best natural props of poverty; for, supported by it, the poor envy not the rich. They exult to know and to feel that they have had treasures

bequeathed to them by one of themselves—treasures of the intellect, the fancy, and the imagination, of which the possession and the enjoyment are one and the same, as long as they preserve their integrity and their independence. The poor man, as he speaks of Robert Burns, always holds up his head, and regards you with an elated look. A tender thought of *The Cotter's Saturday*, or a bold thought of *Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled*, may come across him; and he who, in such a spirit, loves home and country, by whose side may he not walk an equal in the broad eye of daylight as it shines over our Scottish hills?

This is true popularity. Thus interpreted, the word sounds well and recovers its ancient meaning. No need of puffing the poetry of Robert Burns. The land "blithe with plough and harrow"; the broomy or the heathery braes; the holms by the river's side; the forest where the woodman's ringing axe no more disturbs the cushat; the deep dell where all day long sits solitary plaided boy or girl, watching the kine or the sheep; the moorland hut, without any garden; the lowland cottage, whose garden glows a very orchard, even more crimsoned with pear-blossoms, most beautiful to behold; the sylvan homestead, sending its reek aloft over the huge sycamore that blackens on the hillside; the straw-roofed village, gathering with small bright crofts its many white gable-ends round and about the modest manse, and the kirk-spire covered with the pine-tree that shadows its horologe; the small, sweet, slated, rural town, low as Peebles, or high as Selkirk, by the clear flowings of Tweed or Ettrick, rivers whom *Maga* loves—there, there, and in such sacred scenes resides, and will for ever reside, the immortal genius of Burns! This is in good truth "the consecration and the poet's dream." Oh that he, the prevailing poet, could have seen this light breaking in upon the darkness that did too long and too deeply overshadow his living lot! Some glorious glimpses of it his prophetic soul did see: witness *The Vision*, or that somewhat humbler but yet high strain in which, bethinking him of the undefined aspirations of his boyish genius that had bestirred itself in the dark-

ness, as if the touch of an angel's hand were to awaken a sleeper in his cell, he said to himself—

Even then a wish—I mind its power—  
A wish that to my latest hour  
Shall strongly heave my breast,  
That I, for poor auld Scotland's sake,  
Some useful plan or book could make,  
Or sing a sang at least!

Such hopes were with him in his “bright and shining youth,” surrounded as it was with toil and trouble, that could not bend down the brow of Burns from its natural upward inclination to the sky; and such hopes, let us doubt it not, were also with him in his dark and faded prime, when life's lamp burned low indeed, and he was willing at last, early as it was, to shut his eyes on this dearly beloved but sorely distracting world.

With what strong and steady enthusiasm is the anniversary of Burns's birthday celebrated, not only all over his own native land, but in every country to which her adventurous spirit has carried her sons? On such occasions nationality is a virtue. For what else is the memory of Burns but the memory of all that dignifies and adorns the region that gave him birth? Not till that bright and beautiful region is shorn of all its beams—its honesty, its independence, its moral worth, its genius, and its piety—will the name of Burns

Die on her ear, a faint, unheeded sound.

To him the Genius of Scotland points in triumph as the glorious representative of her people. And were he not, in all the power of his genius, truly so, how could his poetry have, as we know it has, an immortal life in the hearts of young and old, whether sitting at gloaming by the ingle-side, or on the stone seat in the open air as the sun is going down, or walking among the summer mists on the mountain or the blinding winter snows?

In the life of the poor there is an unchanging and a preserving spirit. The great elementary feelings of human nature there disdain fluctuating fashions; pain and pleasure are alike permanent in their outward shows as in

their inward emotions; there the language of passion never grows obsolete; and at the same passage you hear the child sobbing at the knee of her grandame, whose old eyes are somewhat dimmer than usual, with a haze that seems almost to be of tears. Therefore the poetry of Burns will continue to charm as long as Nith flows, Criffel is green, and the bonny blue of the sky of Scotland meets with that in the eyes of her maidens, as they walk up and down her many hundred hills, silent or singing, to kirk or market.

Of one so dear to Scotland—as a poet and a man—we, of course, have many biographies. There is not one of them without much merit, and some are almost all that could be desired. Yet, perhaps, one was wanted that should, in moderate bulk, contain not only a lucid narrative of the life of Burns, so full of most interesting incidents, but criticisms worthy of his poetry, and, above all, a fair, candid, impartial, and manly statement of his admitted frailties, which is all that is needed for the vindication of his character. Within these last ten years that character has been placed permanently in its true light. It has been regarded not only with a truly philosophical, but with a truly religious, spirit in connection with the causes that acted upon it, from the earliest to the latest years of this wonderful being—causes inherent in his condition. Thus all idly babbling tongues have been put to silence. The many calumnies of the mean-spirited and malignant, who were under a natural incapacity of understanding the character of such a man as Burns, and almost under a natural necessity of hating or disliking him, are all sinking, or have already sunk, into oblivion; blame falls now where blame was due, and even there it falls in pity rather than in anger; it is felt now to be no part of Christian charity to emblazon the errors of our brother, for no better reason than because that brother was one of the most highly gifted among the children of men. It will not now be endured that any man, however pure his own practice, shall unmercifully denounce the few vices of a character redeemed by so

many virtues; it is universally acknowledged now that "if old judgments keep their sacred course," the life and the death of each one among us, who has been as a light and a glory among the nations, will be regarded by the wise and good in the blended light of admiration and forgiveness, and Burns in his grave may well abide the sentence of such a solemn tribunal. Nor "breathes there the man with soul so dead" as to lift up an often-handled and sore-soiled Burns's *Poems* from the side of the "Big Ha' Bible, ance his father's pride," from the small "window-sole" of the peasant's hut, without having upon his lips the spirit breathing through the beautiful lines of Wordsworth—high-souled champion of the character of his great dead compeer, and who, with a spirit different, but divine, has bound men's spirits in love to the beauty that is in the green earth and the blue sky, and the cottage homes, whose spiral smoke seems to blend them together in the charm of a kindred being.

Blessings be with them, and eternal praise,  
The poets, who on earth have made us heirs  
Of truth, and pure delight, by heavenly lays.

The clouds that too long obscured the personal character of Burns—for his genius has always burned bright—have been, after all, blown away chiefly by the breath of the people of Scotland. Their gratitude would not suffer such obscuraton, nor would their justice. But the feelings of the whole people have been nobly expressed by many of the first men of the land. All her best poets have triumphantly spoken in his vindication, and his new biographer has well said—"Burns has been appreciated duly, and he has had the fortune to be praised eloquently by almost every poet who has come after him. To accumulate all that has been said of him, even by men like himself, of the first order, would fill a volume—and a noble monument, no question, that volume would be—the noblest, except what he has left us in his own immortal verses, which, were some dross removed and the rest arranged in a chronological order, would, I believe, form to the intelligent a more perfect and vivid history of his

life than will ever be composed out of all the materials in the world besides."

Among the men of power who have written worthily of our great national poet, Mr. Lockhart himself will now be numbered, and his *Life of Burns* will occupy a high place in our biographical literature. His own achievements in many departments of literature give him a right to speak on such a theme. He has himself illustrated with great power in several works the national character of his countrymen. His Roman story, *Valerius*, so full of classical grace and elegance, has stamped him the accomplished scholar no less than a writer of rare genius; and though not a professed poet, his Spanish ballads have given the world assurance that his soul is full of poetry, and poetry, too, of a very high kind, such as breathes and burns in that of his illustrious father-in-law, the great poet of chivalry.

The volume now before us is written—we were about to say with great skill, but we must use a better word—with perfect understanding and feeling of Burns's genius and character. The narrative binds together, closely and naturally, all the chief incidents in his life, giving to each its appropriate place and prominence. The critical remarks on the several kinds of poetry are distinguished by the finest tact; the summing up of his genius is eloquent and characteristic; and his picture of the man himself true to the life, in all its lights and shadows. There is no commonplace declamation, none of the exaggeration of weak enthusiasm; but every sentence tells, because head and heart are always at work together, and the biographer trusts to the consciousness of his own powers and to the grandeur of his subject. Many of Burns's noblest strains of thought and emotion, as he loved to pour himself out to the friends he honoured, are intermingled with the narrative; and with the free admiration of kindred intellectual power and moral feeling, Mr. Lockhart has given us, along with his own vigorous and original reflections, many of the finest passages about Burns from the panegyrics bestowed on him by such men as Scott, Wordsworth, Gray, and Cunningham.

Indeed, this biography is animated throughout with a benignant spirit. During the controversy that was carried on for some years respecting the general character of Burns, it was natural to expect that men, anxious but to speak the truth, would occasionally in a case of some difficulty and darkness give utterance to opinions formed on uncertain and untenable grounds; that those opinions should be often found contradictory and conflicting; that praise and blame should sometimes be bestowed unduly, according as the brighter or darker side of Burns's character met the view—according to the mood in which it was contemplated, and according, too, to the writer's habitual judgments of human life. So that the opinions of many men, all wishing to speak truth and to do justice, might be set in array against each other and no unfrequent occasions given even for mutual recrimination. All unnecessary allusions to any such unpleasant differences of opinion or feeling, Mr. Lockhart has wisely avoided, and he has, in a spirit of humanity that cannot be too much commended, given the credit of good intention to all who meant well towards Robert Burns. We verily believe that many erroneous and mistaken things have been said by men of genius and virtue about the fortunate and unfortunate bard, but no man of genius and virtue has ever written about him without also having given vent to much generous and enthusiastic admiration of his character. That will be remembered for ever; let all else be, as far as possible, forgotten; nor is there any fear now that Burns's failings will be remembered, except as a warning to other gifted beings, and as a heartfelt lesson, too, to those who, without being gifted, as he was, with transcendent genius, may have shared in the temptations and troubles of his passions, and been saved from the public blame which they brought on his head by the comparative obscurity of their own lot which, though in one sense higher than his, had been less eminent, and not conspicuous from afar in the light of genius.

It will not be expected of us that we should, at this time of day, launch out into any very long discussion

either of the genius or the character of this extraordinary man. We have done so on many former and fitting occasions, and we trust that we too have always spoken of Burns in the right spirit, as indeed, we boldly say it, we have ever done of all true men. Yet a few words will be allowed us, if merely to bring before our readers some of the very fine things contained in this most interesting and instructive volume.

The life of Burns divides itself into five eras—that passed beneath his father's roof at Mount Oliphant and Lochlea; the years he lived with his brother Gilbert at Mossiel; his visit to Edinburgh; his residence at Ellisland; and, finally, his closing years in Dumfries.

Of the first period, Mr. Lockhart gives such memorials both in prose and verse—it would be hard to say which the more beautiful—furnished by the bard himself and his brother, as best illustrate the nature of their life. But they need not be quoted here, for they are familiar to all who know anything about Burns. His youth was full of hidden poetry and passion, but as yet the one had but rarely burst forth into the forms of genius, the other had not overflowed his life with any disastrous influence. His love in those days was ardent, but it was pure. Notwithstanding the luxurious tone of some of his pieces produced in those times, we are assured by himself that no positive "vice mingled in any of his loves." "His numerous connections," says Gilbert, "were governed by the strictest rules of virtue and modesty, from which he never deviated till his twenty-third year, when he became anxious to marry."

Long before the earliest of Burns's productions were known beyond the domestic circle, the strength of his understanding and the keenness of his wit, as displayed in his ordinary conversation, and more particularly at masonic meetings and debating clubs (of which he formed one in Mauchline, on the Tarbolton model, immediately on his removal to Mossiel), has made his name known to some considerable extent in the country about Tarbolton,



Mauchline, and Irvine. He was known to be a genius. Every Scotch peasant who makes any pretensions to understanding is a theological critic—at least such *was* the case—and Burns, no doubt, had long ere this time “distinguished himself considerably among those hard-headed groups that may be usually seen gathered together in the churchyard after the sermon is over.” It may be guessed, from the time of his residence in Irvine, his strictures were too often delivered in no reverent vein. The bard himself, in his famous letter to Dr. Moore, tells us that Polemical Divinity was about that time putting the country half-mad, and that he was ambitious of shining—and all who ever heard him speak know how he shone—in conversation parties on Sundays, at funerals, &c., puzzling Calvinism with so much heat and indiscretion, that he raised against himself a loud and lasting hue and cry of heresy. But, to understand Burns’s situation at this time, at once patronised—which he was—by a number of clergymen, and attended with a hue and cry of heresy, we must remember these his own words, that “Polemical Divinity was putting the country half-mad.”

No wonder that Burns under such causes of excitement overstepped the bounds of propriety and decency in his satirical pictures of what he considered superstition; that he was not sensible of the dangerous ground on which he was recklessly treading; and that with a deep sense of religion and a habitual reverence of its most sacred institutions, whether public or private, he should have written much that must shock the best and highest feelings of the religious mind.

In conversational powers, it is universally allowed that Burns, fresh from the plough-tail and the ingle-reek, far excelled all the most distinguished persons in Edinburgh, whether professors, ministers, or advocates, and that, too, in all kinds of company, mixed or unmixed, select or miscellaneous, principally male or principally female, sacred or profane. The reason is plain. He possessed ten times the genius of any one among them all; his reading of good prose and poetry had been extensive; his

heart and his soul, as well as his mind, were in all he had ever read; his feelings, impulses, passions—all were vivid, untamed, and triumphant. The worst miseries of his life were for a while suddenly flung by him into oblivion, and hope, joy, and glory claimed him for their own. The power of poetry within him nothing had as yet cowed. That new world, whose false glitter he had not had time to see through and thoroughly to despise, was set before his eyes in dazzling and attractive beauty, and woman appeared before his senses and his imagination in more than the ideal loveliness that had ever haunted his dreams, while many a fairest idol smiled, delighted to receive his fervent and impassioned worship. One of the poet's remarks, as Cromek tells us, "when he first came to Edinburgh was, that between the men of rustic life and the polite world he observed little difference. That in the former, though unpolished by fashion and unenlightened by science, he had found much observation and much intelligence; but a refined and accomplished woman was a thing almost new to him, and of which he formed but a very inadequate idea." Hence, as the late beautiful and fascinating Duchess of Gordon said, "his conversation carried her off her feet!"

Tavern-life was then in full vigour in Edinburgh, and there can be no doubt that Burns rapidly familiarised himself with it during his residence. He had, after all, tasted but rarely of such excesses in Ayrshire. His nocturnal revels, like those of our own *Noctes Ambrosianæ*, were not wholly indeed of the imagination, but fancy poured out many an airy brimmer; and it has been long well known that "Auld Nanse Tinnock," or "Poosie Nancie," the Mauchline landlady, declared that "Robert Burns might be a very clever lad, but he certainly, to the best of her belief, had never taken three half-mutchkins in her house in all his life." In addition, too, to Gilbert's testimony to the same purpose, we have on record that of Mr. Archibald Bruce (qualified by Heron as a gentleman of great worth and discernment), that he had observed Burns closely during that period of his life, and seen him

steadily resist such solicitations and allurements to excessive convivial enjoyment as hardly any other person could have withstood. That in Edinburgh he indulged in dissipation is certain; and it would, as Mr. Lockhart allows, "be idle now to attempt passing over these things in silence"; but that his indulgences were grossly exaggerated we also know, and most shamefully bruited abroad by the voice of the public, who, then-a-days as now, thinks herself entitled to make free with the fair fame of every one who delights and astonishes her, more especially if he be, as Burns was, a peasant and a prodigy.

The spirit of these remarks of Mr. Lockhart's is excellent, but they might have been even more strongly expressed. Robert Burns was not the man to have degraded himself everlastingly by one moment's seeming slight or neglect of friends, new or old, belonging either to his own condition, or to a rank in life somewhat higher, perhaps, than his own, although not to that "select society" to which the wonder awakened by his genius had given him a sudden introduction. Persons in that middle or inferior rank were his natural and his best and his truest friends; and many of them, there can be no doubt, were worthy of his happiest companionship, either in the festal hour or the hour of closer communion. He had no right, with all his genius, to stand aloof from them; and with a heart like his he had no inclination. Why should he have lived exclusively with lords and ladies—paper or land lords, ladies by descent or courtesy—with aristocratic advocates, philosophical professors, clergymen, wild or moderate, Arminian or Calvinistic? A few of such persons were doubtless not inerudite, and a few not unwitty in their own esteem; and Burns greatly enjoyed their society, in which he met with an admiration that must have been to him the pleasure of a perpetual triumph. But more of them were dull and pompous, we must believe, incapable of rightly estimating or feeling the power of his transcendent genius; and when the glitter and the gloss of novelty were worn off, to their shallow eyes, from the Genius who bore them all down into insignificance by the ceaseless cataract of his eloquence,

then, no doubt, they got offended and shocked with his rusticity or rudeness, and sought refuge in the distinction of ranks and the laws, not to be violated long with impunity, of "select society." Burns rejoiced in admiration, as a great poet, bright from and with nature, should do; but he had too much pride to love being gazed at, when roaring or feeding, as a lion. The patronage he received was honourable, and he felt it to be so, but it was still patronage; and had he, for the sake of it or its givers, forgotten for a day the humblest, lowest, meanest of his friends, or even his acquaintances, how could he have read, when written, his own two bold lines—

The rank is but the guinea stamp;  
The man's the gowd for a' that?

Besides, we know from Burns's poetry what was then the character of the people of Scotland, for they were its materials—its staple. Her peasantry were a noble race, and their virtues moralised his song. The inhabitants of the towns were of the same family, the same blood, one kindred, and many—most of them—had been born, or in some measure bred, in the country. Their ways of thinking, feeling, and acting were much alike; and the shopkeepers of Edinburgh and Glasgow were as proud of Robert Burns as the ploughmen and shepherds of Ayrshire and Galloway. He saw in them friends and brothers. Their admiration of him was perhaps fully more sincere and heartfelt, nor accompanied with less understanding of his merits, than that of persons in higher place; and most assuredly among the respectable citizens of Edinburgh Burns found more lasting friends than he ever did among her gentry or *noblesse*. Nor can we doubt that then, as now, there were in that order great numbers of men of well-cultivated minds whom Burns, in his best hours, did right to honour, and who were perfectly entitled to seek his society, and to open their hospitable doors to the brilliant stranger. That Burns, whose sympathies were keen and wide, and who never dreamt of looking down on others as beneath him merely because he was conscious of his own vast superiority to the common run of men in

genius and talents, should have shunned or been shy of such society, would have been something altogether unnatural and incredible; nor is it at all wonderful or blameable that he should even have preferred such society to that which has been called "more select," and which was superior to his natural and proper condition of estate. Admirably as he, in general, behaved in the higher circles, in those humbler ones alone could he, ought he, ever to have felt himself completely at home. His demeanour among the rich, the great, the learned, or the wise must always have been subject to some restraint, and all restraint of that sort is ever painful—or, what is worse still, his talk must often have been of the nature of display and ostentation. With companions and friends who claimed not nor possessed superiority in anything, the sensitive mind of Burns must have always been at its best and happiest, because always at its ease, and free movement given to the play of all its feelings and faculties; and in such companies we cannot but believe that his wonderful conversational powers shone forth in their brightest and most various splendour. He must have given vent there to a thousand familiar fancies, in all their freedom and all their force, which, in the more fastidious and stately society of high life, his imagination would have been too much fettered even to conceive, and which, had they flowed from his lips, would either not have been understood or would have given, perhaps, offence to that delicacy of breeding which is often hurt, even by the best manners of those whose manners are all of nature's teaching and unsubjected to the salutary restraints and rules of artificial life. Indeed, we know that Burns sometimes burst suddenly and alarmingly the restraints of "select society," and that on one occasion he called a clergyman an idiot for misquoting Gray's *Elegy*—a truth that ought not to have been promulgated in presence of the parson, especially at so early a meal as breakfast; and he confesses a hundred times, in his most confidential letters, that he never was truly and entirely happy at rich men's feasts. If so, then never could he have displayed there his genius in full power and lustre. His noble rage must in

some measure have been repressed—the genial current of his soul in some slight degree frozen. He never was, never could be, the free, bold, fearless, irresistible, overpowering Robert Burns that nature made him—no, not even although he carried the Duchess of Gordon off her feet, and silenced two Moderators of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

But further, Burns, we know, had many excellent friends out of the “select society” who loved him better than probably any in it, and from whom he could learn nothing evil and everything that was good—such men, for example, as Mr. Robert Ainslie, son to Mr. Ainslie of Berrywell, in Berwickshire, of whom Mr. Lockhart speaks with the kindness and respect due to his worth and talents. That gentleman was at no period of his life any other than he is now—a person altogether unexceptionable, and moving in the most respectable circles. We could name twenty others, of the same spotless character, with whom Burns was intimate; and, indeed, it is rather too much to wish to confine, even in a hint, however delicate, such a man as Robert Burns, or any other man of genius, to a self-elected select society, as if it alone contained all that was interesting and instructive in the humanity then extant in our metropolis.

Far be it from us to utter one syllable that could, by any possibility, be construed into seeming disrespect of such a man as Dugald Stewart, whom we regard with the greatest respect and admiration; yet we have commented freely on what we humbly conceive to be a somewhat too exclusive judgment of his respecting the society which Burns did or did not chiefly affect during his residence in Edinburgh. Had Burns cut all his equals or inferiors in rank, and all those, too, who, without being in the very highest set, were yet, in every sense of the word, gentlemen, and associated only with people of fashion or philosophy, his conduct would have been at once pitiful and monstrous. It was right that the range of such a poet's society should have been comprehensive. Had it been otherwise by his own will, he would have been false to his glorious birth, his glorious nature, and his glorious calling—for he was born

for sympathies "wide and general as the casing air"; and pity, grief, and shame it would have been—

Had he given up to Ton what was meant for mankind!

It has been stupidly and basely said by the paltry in general that Burns, while in Edinburgh, was fond of low life, and that he loved always to be what is elegantly called "the cock of the company." From the terms in which we have heard and read this charge conveyed, one might have imagined that Burns got drunk with caddies and creel-carriers, tavern-waiters, candle-snuffers, tenth-rate orchestra fiddlers, the lowest class of bagmen, discharged advocates' clerks, persons pretending to have been pursers in the navy, forenoon frequenters of billiard-rooms, and bill-stickers retired from the duties of public life. Now, all this is a mere lie. Burns, before his visit to Edinburgh, had at all times and places been in the habit of associating with the best men of his order—the best in everything, in station, in manners, in moral and intellectual character—such men as William Tell and Hofer, for example, associated with in Switzerland and the Tyrol. Even the persons he got unfortunately too well acquainted with (whose company he soon shook off) at Irvine and Kirkoswald—smugglers and their adherents—were, though a lawless and dangerous set, men of spunk and spirit and power, both of mind and body; nor was there anything the least degrading in an ardent, impassioned, and imaginative youth becoming for a time too much attached to such daring and adventurous and even interesting characters. They had all a fine strong poetical smell of the sea, mingled to precisely the proper pitch with that of Bordeaux brandy. As a poet, Burns must have been much the better for such temporary associates; as a man, let us hope, notwithstanding Gilbert's fears, not greatly the worse. The passions that boiled in his blood would have overflowed his life, often to disturb and destroy him, had there never been an Irvine and its steeple. But Burns's friends, up to the time he visited Edinburgh, had been chiefly his admirable brother, a few of the ministers round

about, farmers, ploughmen, and farm-servants, and workers in the winds of heaven, blowing over moors and mosses, cornfields and meadows, beautiful as the very blue skies their blessed selves; and if you call that low company you had better fling your copy of Burns, *Cotter's Saturday Night*, *Mary in Heaven*, and all, into the fire. He, the noblest peasant that ever trode the greensward of Scotland, sought the society of other peasants whose nature was like his own; and then, were the silken-snooded maidens whom he wooed on lea-rig and 'mang the rigs o' barley; were they, who inspired at once his love and his genius, his passion and his poetry, till the whole land of Coila overflowed with his immortal song, so that now to the proud native's ear every stream murmurs a music not its own but given it by sweet Robin's lays, and the lark, more lyrical than ever, seems singing his songs at the gates of heaven for the shepherd, as through his half-closed hand he eyes the musical mote in the sunshine, remembers him who

Sung her new-waken'd by the daisy's side;

were they, the virgin daughters of Scotia, we demand of you on peril of your life, low company? Was Mary Morrison,\* with whom "he lived one hour of parting love" on the banks of the Ayr, and then as that last, dear, dim, delicious hour of sinless passion was over, put into her hand on her bosom—both so often pressed by him who hoped on her return from the far-off Highlands, in the transport of enamoured boyhood, to become her husband—put into her bosom a Bible with his own name inscribed and a holy text, silently swearing her soul to truth beneath the all-seeing eye of Heaven—was she, whose beauty and whose innocence Burns saw never more on earth, but whom haply he has now seen again in heaven, was Mary Morrison, a simple name indeed, but a name sacred for ever and ever over all the hills and vales of happy Scotland—was she, sir, or madam, dressed as you may be in silks and satins, broadcloth and casimere, low company?

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\* A mistake for Mary Campbell.



Was Jean Armour—the daughter, it is true, of a stonemason—she to whom the soul of Burns clave with a lover's wild passion, a husband's deep affection, and whose sweet breath came to him at gloaming on the wind of the west, so that that was to him the dearest airt till his heart was stifled for ever—she who trained up his children in the way that they should go—and they have not in distant regions departed from it—and even now in her grey hairs, proudly, and better than proudly, remembers her of all the virtues and all the kindnesses of her beloved husband, illustrious now and for evermore while time shall endure—is Mrs. Robert Burns, formerly Miss Jean Armour, low company? If they be so—one and all—then let Scotland hang down her head and veil her eyes, ashamed to look either at flower or star.

How was it possible that a man, and that man Robert Burns, who had lived thus, could have been fond of low company in Edinburgh or elsewhere? Impossible! God and nature forbade. But his great heart had a wide and a close grasp. Poor men love poor men, for the bonds that link them together are the bonds of a common humanity, strong as steel, and that will bend but never break, for though both ends are stuck into the earth the crown of the arch is towards heaven. Therefore, Burns ceased not to shake the hand of any honest man, nor to sit at his board any more than you, who we trust are a Christian, fear to sit in the same pew with a low-born and low-bred fellow-creature in church, singing from one Psalm-book, reading the text from one Bible.

As to the charge of loving to be “cock of the company,” what does that mean when brought against Robert Burns? In what company, pray, could not Burns, had he chosen it, and he often did choose it, have easily been The First? No need had he to crow among dunghills. If you liken him to a bird at all, let it be the eagle, or the nightingale, or the bird of paradise. James Montgomery has done this in some most exquisite verses, which are clear in our hearts but indistinct in our memory, and therefore we cannot adorn our pages with their beauty. The truth is,

that Burns, though when his heart burned within him one of the most eloquent men that ever set the table in a roar or a hush, was always a modest man, often a silent man, and would sit for hours together, even in company, with his broad forehead on his hand and his large laming eyes sobered and tamed in profound and melancholy thoughts. Then his soul would "spring upwards like a pyramid of fire," and send "illumination into dark deep holds," or brighten the brightness of the brightest hour in which feeling and fancy ever flung their united radiance over the common ongoings of this our commonplace world and everyday life. How could Burns, then, help being the sun of every circle, round which all lesser orbs revolved, "from his golden urn drawing light"? Was this the man to desire, with low longings and base aspirations, to shine among the obscure or rear his haughty front or giant stature among pigmies?

He walk'd in glory and in joy,  
Following his plough upon the mountain side;

and he sat in glory and in joy at the festal board, when mirth and wit did most abound, and strangers were strangers no more within the fascination of his genius, for

One touch of nature makes the whole world kin;

or at the frugal board, surrounded by his wife, and children, and servants, lord and master of his own happy and industrious home—the frugal meal preceded and followed by thanksgiving to the Power that spread his table in the wilderness.

What is low company? All people not in the highest and most select society in a metropolitan city at the time flourishing in fashionable and philosophic pride? And this in a Christian land—a land not overflowing with milk and honey, but with the principles of the reformed faith, and with much human and divine knowledge! Show us any series of works of genius, in prose or verse, in which man's being is so illustrated as to lay it bare and open for the benefit of man, and the chief pictures they contain

drawn from "select society." There are none such; and for this reason, that in such society there is neither power to paint them, nor materials to be painted, nor colours to lay on, till the canvas speaks a language which all the world as it runs may read. What would Scott have been had he not loved and known the people? What would his works have been had they not shown the many-coloured change of life of the people? What would Shakespeare have been had he not turned majestically from kings and "lords and mighty earls" to their subjects and vassals and lowly bondsmen, and "counted the beatings of lonely hearts" in the obscure but impassioned life that stirs every nook of this earth where human beings abide? What would Wordsworth have been had he disdained, with his high intellect and imagination, "to stoop his anointed head" beneath the wooden lintel of the poor man's door? His lyrical ballads, "with all the innocent brightness of the new-born day," had never charmed the meditative heart—his *Churchyard Among the Mountains* had never taught men how to live and how to die. These are men who have descended from ærial heights into the humblest dwellings, who have shown the angel's wing equally when poised near the earth or floating over its cottaged vales, as when seen sailing on high through the clouds and azure depth of heaven, or hanging over the towers and temples of great cities. They would not have shunned a parley with the blind beggar by the wayside; they knew how to transmute, by divinest alchemy, the base metal into the fine gold. Whatever company of human beings they have ever mingled with, they lent it colours and did not receive its shade, and hence their mastery over the "wide soul of the world," and their name magicians. Burns was born, bred, lived, and died in that condition of this mortal life to which they paid but visits; his heart lay wholly there; and that heart, filled as it ever was with all the best human feelings and with thoughts divine, had no fears about entering into places which timid moralists might have thought forbidden and unhallowed ground, but which he, wiser far, knew were inhabited by creatures

of conscience, bound there in much darkness by the inscrutable decrees of God.

Ask Allan Cunningham, a kindred spirit, if Burns kept low society. He has answered that question in his noble communications to this volume. He has answered it in the fine tribute he has paid to Burns in his *Songs of Scotland*. Not in direct reply, for the question did not deserve that, but in the spirit of his judicious and yet impassioned praise. It rouses the heart to hear a man like Allan Cunningham speaking of a man like Robert Burns. For when death had hushed the lips of Genius, let every surviving brother right his memory by the side of his grave. He himself was, like Burns, the son of a humbly-born and high-souled sire; and like Burns, too, in different but often in no inferior degree, has he revealed the inner history of the huts and hearts of Scotland's peasantry. Scotland, too, is proud of him, for he is, as Sir Walter has said, an honour to Scotland. From the failings of Burns's character his is free, but in that freedom he rejoices to bow down not only before the genius of the bard, but the virtues of the man, and to glory in having, when a boy, seen his face, though that face was then lying in the majesty of the shadow of death.

A hot-house plant is in "select society"; and most beautiful it often is, surrounded by creatures that in their beauty scarcely seem insensate. But we have seen a rose-tree "full in bearing" in the wilderness, to our startled imagination, laden "with the beauty still more beauteous," and shedding far and wide around it the glory of its solitary presence over the very commonest weeds native to the soil of Scotland, and the many almost nameless flowers that, single or in families, grass-hidden, or as a breeze came by dancing in the sun, till it smiled the desert into Paradise and its coldest nook into Eden's own garden, ere man sinned and this earth was darkened.

Allan Cunningham and the author of *The Queen's Wake* are the only poets, born in the same or a similar condition, and in a great measure bred in it too, whose names, "without offering a show of violence to a thing so

majestical," can be united in one brotherhood with that of Burns. Had they lived when Burns did, and each been more conspicuous than now, because standing alone, and subjected to the law of "select society," who can say that both of them might not have had cause to rue the folly and the malignity that assail Genius when it has "clomb the steep where Fame's proud temple shines afar"? They, too, would have had their most secret hours subjected to that base inquisition which makes the whole world a Spain, of which the lay members are as cruel as the priests, and would fain dress up the poet who has sinned against their bigoted faith in all his laurels and burn him at an *Auto-da-Fe*.

Would we could say that either the world or ourselves are getting wiser as we grow old! Yet surely there is more mercy, more justice shown in this than in a former age to the character and conduct of men to whom God has given the gift of genius. We do not now long to divorce Genius and Virtue, to put asunder those whom Heaven has united. When we see them wedded we bestow a nuptial benediction, and a benediction in good time, on what Plato and Socrates have called "a progeny of noble thoughts"; and when we know that such holy union is not, we turn our eyes away and yet shut not our hearts to hope that it may be otherwise ere the shades of night descend, for human life is long—many feel it to be so—and many are the changes for better and for worse in every man that breathes, from the impetuous panting of passion in life's prime to the feeble gaspings that stop in a moment, and leave us but a lump of clay.

Finally, that Burns did sometimes associate while in Edinburgh with persons not altogether worthy, or perhaps altogether unworthy of him, need not be denied, nor yet wondered at, for that was inevitable. He was not for ever beset with thoughts of his own excellence. His soul was too noble for that; nor was prudence, in his system of morality, the queen of virtues. His genius, so far from separating him from his kind, impelled him towards it without fear and without suspicion. What

saint or prude was he to shun the society of "jolly companions every one"? Though never addicted to drinking, he had often set the table in a roar at Tarbolton, Mauchline, Kirkoswald, Irvine, and Ayr; and was he all at once to appear in the character of a dry Quaker in Edinburgh? Were the joys that circle round the flowing bowl to be interdicted to him, the wittiest, the brightest, the most original and eloquent of all the men, rich or poor, high or low, of his day? Ought he to have confined himself to port-wine negus and black tea? To cards and literary discussion, at bed and board? Enacted the part of a student of divinity, third year at the hall, and looked among the "sma' hours" as if destined for holy orders? But every glass of wine he drank, like mere ordinary men fond of the festal hour, seems to have been set down against him as a separate sin; and the world of fashion, and philosophy too, we fear, both of which used him rather scurvily at last, would not be satisfied unless Burns could be made out to be a drunkard, which he never was, neither when, at Lochlea, for his father's sake, his boyish years were "the cheerless gloom of a hermit with the unceasing moil of a galley-slave," or when at Dumfries, for his wife's and children's sake, he consumed his noble heart with the mean miseries of an exciseman, and dropped into the grave, the glory and the shame of his country.

Burns was now about thirty-three years of age, and let us look back for a moment from this point on his by-past life. We know from his brother Gilbert and that most excellent man, Mr. Murdoch, who had the tuition of some of his very early years, that in his boyhood he was free from all vice, thoughtful and grave, yet at the same time with all the generous and endearing qualities that never fail to mark the boyhood of genius. The necessities of his father's house did not allow long schooling-time, and he began to work, and that too with little intermission, at a time when most boys, even below his condition, know but a life of play. Indeed, he began to do full-grown man's work before he was even a stripling,

and from his thirteenth year he thrashed in the barn and held the plough and wielded the scythe—labours in which, in the prime of youth or manhood, by none was he ever excelled. “We lived sparingly,” said Gilbert; “for several years butchers’ meat was a stranger in the house, while all the members of the family exerted themselves to the utmost of their strength, and rather beyond it, in the labours of the farm. My brother, at the age of thirteen, assisted in thrashing the crop of corn, and at fifteen was the principal labourer on the farm, for we had no hired servant, male or female. The anguish of mind we felt at our tender years under these straits and difficulties was very great. To think of our father growing old (for he was now above fifty), broken down with the long-continued fatigues of his life, with a wife and five other children, and in a declining state of circumstances, these reflections produced in my brother’s mind and mine sensations of the deepest distress. I doubt not but the hard labour and sorrow of this period of his life was in a great measure the cause of that depression of spirits with which Robert was so often afflicted through his whole life afterwards. At this time he was almost constantly afflicted in the evening with a dull headache, which, at a future period of his life, was exchanged for a palpitation of the heart, and a threatening of fainting and suffocation in his bed in the night-time.”

This life (it was slavery, but slavery of a noble kind) continued with little interruption, till he reached the full strength of his manhood. Here, then, from his twelfth (and we might go much further back) to his twenty-fourth year, we have a being born to delight the world by his genius helping to uphold his father’s house by wringing a scanty subsistence from the hard glebe, whose furrows he watered with the sweat of his noble brow, nor ever complaining of his lot, except because it was before his eyes fast bringing that father to the grave. Yet, what a perilous period of the passions! How few of all those who afterwards traduced his character had passed through such a pure and heroic youth! Perhaps not one! His father was

naturally an austere and stern man, and his rebuke was listened to with a kind of reverential awe. With two such sons as he had, his rebuke could not have been frequent, and, like most men of his character, he had a tender and affectionate heart. Pity, indeed, that such a household should so long have been so severely poor. Yet, "Mr. Murdoch, who became the frequent inmate and confidential friend of the family, speaks with enthusiasm of the virtues of William Burnes, and of the peaceful and happy life of his humble abode." Who, under God, supported the roof-tree, who spread the board, who smoothed the pillow of the old man? His sons, and of those sons Robert was the elder, and, for years, of the more vigorous frame to battle with poverty and misfortune. Never did mortal man better understand and obey the beautiful and benign fifth commandment.

What were the first deep stains that his being suffered? The same that have from the beginning of all time attested the power of the fairest and most fatal of all the passions. Burns sinned, but under no circumstances of aggravation. Faithless he was not, nor cruel—in uttermost distress he desired in vain to marry the woman he loved; and when his genius soon afterwards brightened the horizon of life with what he deemed a permanent but, in truth, a most transitory lustre, he made her his wife before the world who had long been so in the privacy of his heart's best affections. Was this the conduct of a profligate? Error and frailty there were on both sides, but they were far more than redeemed by life-long conjugal and parental love; and even now, after so many long widowed years, the survivor's face brightens at the name of her husband. We have seen how he conducted himself in that trying triumph of his genius, when it may be said that Scotland in her regal seat did homage to her great peasant and bid him hail as her own national poet. "Ne'er is flattery lost on poet's ear"; but it is something higher than flattery when the voice of a people is lifted up in one wide acclaim, as it was when Burns was first seen—as an apparition. It required less magnanimity



in one of the old Romans to lay aside the consular gown and return to the plough—for then such was the spirit of the whole nation—than in Burns, suddenly invested with a garb of glory, to withdraw from the gaze of admiration and wonder, and, as if Genius had never tuned his heart-strings to poetry, nor inspiration touched his lips with fire, to take his place again on the cornfield among the reapers, or in his own person to realise the picture of the cotter which, years before, he had drawn at his work, and which, when repeated by him in the silence of nature to his brother, had melted the strong man into tears!

November chill blows loud wi' angry seugh;  
 The shortening winter-day is near a close;  
 The miry beasts retreating frae the pleuch;  
 The blackening train of craws to their repose.  
 The toil-worn cotter frae his labour goes;  
 This night his weekly moil is at an end;  
 Collects his spades, his mattocks, and his hoes,  
 Hoping the morn in ease and rest to spend,  
 And weary o'er the moor his course does homeward bend.

His poetry brought relief to his poverty, and with £500 Burns was rich. The half of it he gave to his beloved brother—an act of no extraordinary virtue, but beautiful because simply done, and of a piece with every other act of his life towards kith and kindred. Such was once the prevalence of evil report against this man, that even now, in speaking of him, we insensibly put him on his defence and almost become his advocate. But his life up to this point needs no advocate. Our age towards him is now a just judge. If it be permitted to sing or say the praises of virtue—if man, knowing the weakness of his nature, may yet eulogise his brother man, in spite of many grievous failings, for the sake of what has been nobly thought and greatly done—then may we fear not to pronounce as high a panegyric on Burns as ever was earned and won by integrity struggling undismayed with wayward fortune, and striving to maintain, by suffering and sacrifice, by passive endurance and active exertion, that confederacy of nature's holiest ties and relations which it is a woeful sight to see broken beside the cold hearth

and the deserted bed-place, and beneath the straw roof no longer sending its smoke up to heaven.

At Ellisland Burns believed that at last he was about to be happy, for of all happiness the best is peace. That best happiness, we fear, he did not enjoy. Peace, to deserve the name, must be durable. A gentle rocking there may, must be, and breezes sometimes almost mustering into a blast; but no long, black, heavy swell, no howling from the far-off lurid skies, not one day of tempest, for it may be a day of wreck. His calling was not now among the furrows of the field; if it had, however scanty had been the return of the soil, Burns might have been most happy. But his calling was at best an arduous one, even to ordinary men—to him “most monstrous and unnatural.” How far it injured his moral being, it is not for us nor for anyone to say; but whatever loss he felt or suffered, or whatever degradation, still was he entitled, independently altogether of his genius, to hold high his head; all who visited him here were delighted with the unimpaired powers of his charming converse, and with what was far better still, the unostentatious exhibition of the domestic virtues, which never, even “when things ensued that wanted grace,” forsook the affectionate and manly bosom of Robert Burns. It cannot be fairly said that he neglected his farm, but that his other duties were incompatible with attention to it; his landlord, on making an arrangement with him to enable him to leave it a year before the expiration of the lease, was satisfied—and so was the Excise! Here, sitting on a turf-dyke, Burns, as we have seen, in a state of ecstatic enjoyment wrote *Tam o’ Shanter*; here, roaming at night round and round the tenement, till his wife prevailed on him to come within, he composed the address to *Mary in Heaven*! What mirth and melancholy must have visited that man’s heart, who could thus in the midst still of failing fortunes and so mean a calling, revel in fun and frolic, tinging it at the same time with absolute sublimity, and then with equal mastery unseal

The sacred source of sympathetic tears.

We come now to the few closing years of our great poet's life in Dumfries. They are at once the darkest and brightest of his career. Dumfries has always been a gay town and a pleasant one, and at that period being much the scene of public amusement, perhaps it would not be too much to say that the morals of the place were not a little corrupted. There was something like a return to his Edinburgh life on a smaller scale, and that, too, after his social habits had been polluted by pernicious intercourse with the idleness and profligacy that fell in the way of his exciseman's calling, and from which, if redeemed by the smallest portion of wit or humour, or what to his pregnant fancy seemed to be so, Burns, alas! too willingly gave up the inferior affections of his soul. Heron has truly said "that in Dumfries his dissipation became still more deeply habitual. He was there, more than in the country, solicited to share the riot of the dissolute and idle. Foolish young men, such as writers' apprentices, young lawyers, merchants' clerks, and his brother excisemen, flocked eagerly about him, and from time to time pressed him to drink with them that they might enjoy his wicked wit." The higher classes, too—the very highest—still patronised in their own way the genius who was something more than a mere nine-days' wonder. His old friends, the Caledonian Club, invited him again to enjoy their hospitality; and the Dumfries and Galloway Hunts rejoiced in his presence at their orgies as in that of their poet-laureate. Had Burns been a less extraordinary man in conversation, he might have enjoyed unhurt the fame of his poetry. The blaze of that fame, too, must, in the ordinary course of this world's thoughts and feelings, have been tamed down, and Burns, though fond, was never the fool of fame. But what was reading his poetry, full as it was of mirth or pathos, to hearing the poet? All human beings alike, whatever their rank, age, sex, or character, were kindled into delight by the flashing eyes and musical lips of Burns. When all are desirous of the company of a man of such genius and such disposi-

tions, is it in human nature to expect judicious selection or rejection of associates? Burns, we do believe, almost always, even to the very last, kept sacred his best and deepest emotions for communion with those who were held by him in honour as well as love. Profound was the well of feeling in his noble heart, and fed by a perennial spring, whose gushing waters felt neither the drought nor the frost. Read his letters, especially to his venerable benefactress Mrs. Dunlop, and you will see that he breathes but to her "the thoughts that wander through Eternity." But all his thoughts and feelings, except the deepest and most solemn of all, Burns poured out like a sea, without suspicion or restraint, in the presence of all men and all women, often most unworthy of him, a positive degradation and disgrace. Where none, or almost none, were excluded from the cordiality of him who, in the largeness of his heart, could sympathise with the wicked and even with the base, provided he could strike out by the stroke of the keentempered steel of his own nature some latent sparks of humanity from the flint of theirs: with what perpetual dangers must he have been surrounded by day and night, and how was it possible that he should have escaped deeper and deeper pollution? His genius and humour, his mirth and glee, his fun and frolic, and all the outrageous merriment of his exhilarated or maddened imagination, came to be considered almost as common property, to which all persons that did not so much as know Burns by sight had a right which they knew would, by him, not be disputed, but acknowledged with open heart and hand over the flowing bowl, either in change-house or his own home, or, on his gauging journeys, in theirs, did they even lie out of his way by miles of moors and mosses. This was indeed a perilous life for such a man, for it at once afforded constant gratification to his mirth and occasional solace to his melancholy—to that melancholy to which, by the temperament of his nature, he was prone from youth, and which often, when there was no especial cause beyond common, assumed the worst powers and privileges of despair!

Politics, too, shed over him, over his virtues and his happiness, their baleful influence! and the politics of those days were of a fierce and terrible character, newly born as they were of the French Revolution, then shaking the whole civilised world as with an earthquake. Could Burns, notwithstanding the opinion of the Excise, "that it was no business of his to think," regard without an awakened, a disturbed, an agitated spirit the progress of that great moral and intellectual commotion? No. As Cowper finely says—

A terrible sagacity informs  
The poet's heart. He looks to distant storms,  
He hears the thunder ere the tempest lowers,  
And, arm'd with strength surpassing human powers,  
Seizes events as yet unknown to man,  
And darts his soul into the drawing plan.

An event that shook the foundations on which so many old evils and abuses rested, and promised to restore to many millions their long-lost liberties, and by that restoration to benefit all mankind, must have been meditated upon by such a comprehensive and enthusiastic mind as Burns's, in moods of which ordinary intellects, vainly intermeddling with concerns far above their reach, could have formed no conception, and no wonder that in those aroused times he, with his eager and earnest spirit for ever on his lips, became to many the object of suspicion and fear, and acquired the character of a demagogue and a revolutionist.

Burns thus gave great offence to that fine, delicate, and most sensitive abstraction, the Board of Excise, and at one time there seems to have been some danger of his losing his splendid situation—no sinecure—of something less than a supervision of the district with an annual salary of £70. The Excise rebuked him for "thinking"—a vice to which from infancy he had been sadly addicted as well as to the kindred and even more dangerous one of feeling; and Burns, we believe, came under a sort of half-and-half promise and threat to do what he could to wean himself from that habit, but he made no promise at all *not to feel*, and feel he did till his heart bled at every pore with

indignation, shame, and grief—a state in which he must have been found an easier and easier prey to the evils which beset him from other quarters, and to those social seductions to which, in the heroism of his hard-working youth, he had so often shown himself superior. Mr. Lockhart enters at no inconsiderable length into the details of this paltry, but to Burns important, business, but in our sketch we must pass them by. Mr. Findlater, formerly collector at Glasgow, and who was at the period in question Burns's superior in the Dumfries district, asks—"What cause was there for depression of spirits on this account? or how should he have been hurried thereby to a premature grave? I never saw his spirit fail till he was borne down by the pressure of disease and bodily weakness, and even then it would occasionally revive, and, like an expiring lamp, emit bright flashes to the last." Mr. Findlater, as good a man as breathes, and as sensible a one too, seems here to have been correcting some eloquent but rather exaggerated assertions of Sir Walter Scott in an article in the *Quarterly Review*; yet, it is true, after all, that Burns's mind was disturbed by such proceedings—he tells us so himself very passionately—and the public feeling and opinion about him was disturbed also, and in that way he was a sufferer probably far beyond what might have been supposed from a cause so insignificant. In the general strain of sentiment pervading the passage in the review, we therefore agree with Mr. Lockhart in thinking that no one can refuse to concur, although some of the expressions may be rather too strong and the whole overcharged. But we all know well that Burns was all the while, and more especially after his enthusiasm in the cause of French freedom had been quenched by the blood atrociously spilt on its shrine, a good citizen and a true patriot.

His epistolary correspondence, that fills volumes, and would fill many more; his songs contributed to *Johnson's Museum* till within a month of his death; and the great collection of Mr. George Thomson, furnish undeniable proof, as Mr. Lockhart justly says, after the enthusiastic

and excellent Gray, that "in whatever fits of dissipation he unhappily indulged, he never could possibly have sunk into anything like that habitual grossness of manners and sottish degradation of mind which some writers have not hesitated to hold out to the deepest commiseration, if not more than this, of mankind." Not a few absurd things have, in our opinion, been said of Burns's epistolary composition. His letters are said to be too elaborate, the expression more studied and artificial than belongs to that species of composition. Now, the truth is, that Burns never considered letter-writing "a species of composition" subject to certain rules of taste and criticism. That had never occurred to him, and so much the better. Accordingly, his letters are often full of all sorts of rant and rhodomontade, which to us, reading them coldly in our closets, and but little acquainted and still less, perhaps, sympathising with the character of the facetious persons to whom they were written, not unfrequently appears too extravagant for common use and not even either humorous or witty. But such strange stuff suited those to whom it was sent, and Burns, with all his own true and genuine humour and wit, enjoyed—and it is a proof of his original genius that he did so—whatever sort of absurdity happened to be popular among his friends and boon companions. Besides, there can be no doubt that he was often tipsy when engaged in penning epistles and, we do not fear to say it, frequently intoxicated; on one occasion we know—the letter, we believe, is to Nicol, "that strong in-knee'd soul of a schoolmaster"—perfectly drunk. Vast numbers of his letters were after-dinner effusions—many after-supper ones, and we beg that our forenoon and small-beer critical brethren will, if possible, attend to that peculiarity in Burns's character as a complete letter-writer in all their future octavos. But hundreds even of his most familiar letters are perfectly artless, though still most eloquent compositions. Simple we may not call them, so rich are they in fancy, so overflowing in feeling, and dashed off, every other paragraph, with the easy boldness of a great master, conscious of his strength even at times when,

of all things in this world, he was least solicitous about display. While some there are so solemn, so sacred, so religious, that he who can read them with an unstirred heart, as he knows that they were written in the prospect of near and certain death, can have no trust, no hope of the immortality of the soul.

Then, of his songs breathed forth during these few short and troubled years from a fount of inspiration whose clear, pure waters no mortal misery could reach, or at least disturb—for never did they “roll *drumly* and dark on their way”—who shall fitly speak, unless his own hand has been taught by nature to touch that simple, few-stringed, but oh! sweetest-toned lyre that ever tinkled in the solitary silence of Nature, a-listening her own melodies among the sheep-whitened braes—that lyre, which, as he leaned close to his own maiden’s side, on the mossy stem of the old hawthorn that ever and anon let drop over their heads a shower of delicate blossoms unfelt as the gloaming dews, the inspired shepherd of old, before fatal Flodden was fought and the *Flowers of the Forest a’ veda away*, touched with a “hand that sang to the voice” till the wheeling moon hung as if chained over “broad Blacandro’s oak,” and the very stars, “with dim suffusion veiled,” looked through the tender mist as if those immortal eyes of heaven were not in that serene beatitude disinclined to tears even like the two blessed mortal creatures, weeping as they pledged eternal troth, and young as they were on earth looking forward in the prophetic power of bliss into the gates of heaven!

The old nameless song-writers, buried centuries ago in kirkyards, that have themselves, perhaps, ceased to exist—yet one sees sometimes lonesome burial-places among the hills where man’s dust continues to be deposited after the House of God has been removed elsewhere—the old nameless song-writers took hold, out of their stored hearts, of some single thought or remembrance, surpassingly sweet at the moment over all others that lay stirless beside it, and instantly words as sweet had being and breathed themselves forth along with some accordant



melody of the still more olden time; or when musical and poetical genius happily met together, both alike passion-inspired, then was born another new tune or air soon treasured within a thousand maidens' hearts, and soon flowing from lips that murmured near the living brooks a "music sweeter than their own!" Had boy or virgin faded away in untimely death, and the green mound that covered them, by the working of some secret power far within the heart, suddenly risen to fancy's eye and then as suddenly sunk away into oblivion with all the wavering burial-place? Then was framed dirge, hymn, elegy, that, long after the mourned and the mourner were forgotten, continued to wail and lament up and down all the vales of Scotland—for what vale is unvisited by such sorrow?—in one same monotonous melancholy air, varied only as each separate singer had her heart touched and her face shaded with a fainter or stronger shade of pity or grief. Had some great battle been lost and won of old, and, to the shepherd on the braes, had a faint and far-off sound seemed on a sudden to touch the horizon like the echo of a trumpet? Then had some ballad its birth, heroic, yet with dying falls, for the singer wept even as his heart burned within him over the princely head low prostrated with all its plumes, haply the lowly woodsman, whose horn had often startled the deer as together they trode the forest-chase, lying humble even in faithful death by his young lord's feet! Oh, blue-eyed maiden, so beautiful of old, yet even more beloved than beautiful, how couldst thou ever find heart to desert thy minstrel, who for thy sake could have died, without one sigh given to this disappearing happiness of the blue-braided spring sky and the green-mantled spring earth, and witched by some evil spell, how couldst thou follow an outlaw to foreign lands to find, alas! some day a burial in the great deep? Thus was enchained in sounds the complaint of disappointed, defrauded, and despairing passion, and another air filled the eyes of our Scottish maidens with a new luxury of tears—a low, flat tune, surcharged throughout with one groan-like sigh, and acknowledged, even by the gayest

heart, to be indeed the language of an incurable grief! Or, flashed the lover's raptured hour across the brain, yet, an hour in all its rapture, calm, bright, and deep as the summer sea, or the level summit of a far-flushing forest asleep in sunshine when there is not a breath in heaven? Then thoughts that breathe and words that burn, and in that wedded verse and music you feel that "love is heaven, and heaven is love!" But affection, sober, sedate, and solemn, has its sudden and strong inspirations—sudden and strong as those of the wildest and most fiery passion. Hence, the old grey-haired poet and musician, sitting haply blind in shade or sunshine and bethinking him of the days of his youth, while the leading hand of his aged Alice gently touches his arm, and that voice of hers that once lilted like the linnet is now like that of the dreaming dove asleep in the heart of its lonely tree, feels as if "the forehead of age were twined with spring-tide flowers," mourns not for the past so bright, but gladdens in the present so calm, and sings a holy song—like one of the songs of Zion—for both feel that ere the sun brings another summer their feet will be wandering by the waters of eternal life!

Thus haply might arise verse and air of Scotland's old pathetic melodies. And how her light and airy measures?

Streaks of sunshine come dancing down from heaven, on the darkest days, to bless and beautify the life of poverty dwelling in the wilderness. Labour, as he goes forth at morn from his rustic lodge, feels too the small bird's twitter, his whole being filled with joy, and, as he quickens his pace to field or wood, breaks into a song. Care is not always his black companion, but oft at evening hour Mirth—while Innocence lingers, half-afraid, behind, yet still follows with thoughtful footsteps—leads him to the circular seat beneath the tree, among whose exterior branches hangs, creaking to and fro in the wind, the sign-board creaking friendship by the close grasp of two emblematical hands. And thence the catch and troll, "Hark! the merry Christ Church bells!" while

"Laughter, holding both his sides," sheds tears to song and ballad pathetic on the woes of wedded life and all the ills that "one's flesh is heir to." Fair, rocking, harvest-home, and a hundred rural festivals are for ever giving wings to the flight of the circling year, or how could this lazy earth ever in so short a time whirl, spinning asleep on her axis, round that most attractive but distant sun? How loud, broad, deep, soul-and-body-shaking is the ploughman's or the shepherd's mirth as a hundred bold, sun-burned visages, retired from the "crown of the causey," make the rafters of the old hostel ring! Overhead the thunder of the time-keeping dance, and all the joyous tenement alive with love! The pathetic song, by genius steeped in tears, is forgotten; roars of boorish laughter reward the fearless singer for the ballad that brings burning blushes on every female face, till the snooded head can scarcely be lifted up again to meet the free kiss of affection, bold in the privilege of the festival, where bashfulness is out of season and the chariest maid withholds not, even in that presence, the harmless boon only half-granted beneath the milk-white thorn. It seems as if all the profounder interests of life were destroyed or had never existed. In moods like these Genius plays with Grief and sports with Sorrow. Broad Farce shakes hands with deep Tragedy. Vice seems almost to be Virtue's sister, the names and the natures of things are changed, and all that is most holy and most holily cherished by us strange, mortal creatures—for which thousands of men and women have died at the stake, and would die again rather than forfeit—virgin love and nuptial faith, and religion itself that saves us from being but as the beasts that perish, and equalises us with the angels that live for ever—all become for a time seeming objects of scoff, derision, and merriment. But it is not so—as God is in heaven it is not so—there has been a flutter of strange, dancing lights on life's surface, but that is all—its depths have remained undisturbed in the poor man's nature, and how deep these are you may easily know by looking in an hour or two through that small

shining pane, the only one in his hut, and beholding and hearing him, his wife and children, on their knees in prayer (how beautiful in devotion that same maiden now!), not unseen by the eye of Him who, sitting in the heaven of heavens, doth make our earth His footstool!

And thus the many broad mirth-songs, and tales, and ballads arose that enliven Scotland's antique minstrelsy.

To Burns's ears all these lowly lays were familiar, and most dear were they all to his heart; nor less so the airs in which they have, as it were, been so long embalmed, and will be imperishable unless some fatal change should ever be wrought in the national character of our people. From the first hour, and long indeed before it, that he composed his rudest verse, often had he "sung aloud old songs that are the music of the heart"; and some day or other to be able himself to breathe such strains was his dearest, his highest ambition. His "genius and his moral frame" were thus imbued with the spirit of our old traditionary ballad poetry, and as soon as all his manifold passions were ripe and his whole glorious being in full maturity, the voice of song was on all occasions of deepest and tenderest human interest, the voice of his daily, his nightly speech. He wooed each maiden in song that will, hundreds of years hence, as long as our Doric dialect is breathed by Love in Beauty's ear, be murmured close to the cheek of Innocence trembling in the arms of Passion. Was it in some such dim dream of delight, that, wandering all by himself to seek the Muse by some "trotting burn's meander," he found his face breathed upon by the wind as it was turned towards the region of the setting sun, and in a moment it was as the pure breath of his beloved, till, in that "trance ecstatic," he exclaimed to the conscious stars—

Of a' the airts the wind can blaw,  
I dearly lo'e the west;  
For there the bonnie lassie lives,  
The lass that I lo'e best!

How different, yet how congenial, too, that other strain,

which ends like the last sound of a funeral bell when the aged have been buried—

We'll sleep thegither at the foot,  
John Anderson, my joe!

Those old songs were his models, because they were models of certain forms of feeling, having a necessary and eternal existence. Feel as those who breathed them felt, and if you utter your feelings the utterance is song. Burns did feel as they felt, and looked with the same eyes on the same objects. So entirely was their language his language, that all the beautiful lines, and half-lines, and single words, that, because of something in them more exquisitely true to nature, had survived all the rest of the compositions to which they had long ago belonged, were sometimes adopted by him, almost unconsciously it might seem, in his finest inspirations, and oftener still sounded in his ear like a keynote, to which he pitched his own plaintive tune of the heart till the voice and language of the old and the new days were but as one; and the maiden who sung to herself the song by her wheel or on the brae, quite lost in a wavering world of phantasy, could not as she smiled choose but also weep!

So far from detracting from the originality of his lyrics, this impulse to composition greatly increased it, while it gave to them a more touching character than perhaps ever could have belonged to them had they not breathed at all of antiquity. Old but not obsolete, a word familiar to the lips of human beings who lived ages ago, but tinged with a slight shade of strangeness as it flows from our own, connects the speaker or the singer in a way, though "mournful, yet pleasant to the soul," with past generations, and awakens a love at once more tender and more imaginative towards "Auld Scotland." We think even, at times, when thus excited, of other Burnsese who died without their fame; and glorying in him and his name, we love his poetry the more deeply for the sake of him whose genius has given our native land a new title of honour among the nations. Assuredly Burns is felt

to be a Scotsman *intus et in cute* in all his poetry, but not more even in his *Tam o' Shanter* and *Cotter's Saturday Night*, his two longest and most elaborate compositions, than in one and all of his innumerable and inimitable songs, from *Dainty Davie* to *Thou lingering Star!* We know, too, that the composition of songs was to him a perfect happiness that continued to the close of life—an inspiration that shot its light and its heat, it may be said, into his very grave.

To write Scottish songs to be set to Scottish music was the greatest and proudest delight Burns could enjoy on this earth. He felt that by this means his name would live for ever, where it was to him most glorious to think of it living, in the bosoms of our Scottish maidens and of "a bold peasantry, their country's pride." To *John-son's Museum* he continued to contribute to the last month of his life, and, besides writing for it some dozen of excellent original songs, his diligence in collecting ancient pieces hitherto unpublished, and his taste and skill in eking out fragments, were largely and most happily exerted all along for its benefit. The connection with the more important work of Mr. Thomson began in September, 1792, and Mr. Gray justly says, that whoever considers his correspondence with the editor, and the collection itself, must be satisfied that, from that time till the commencement of his last illness, not many days ever passed over his head without the production of some new stanzas for its pages.

This was, indeed, a divine daily occupation for a habitual and confirmed drunkard! Shame on the stupid folly that could thus, in blindness and deafness, traduce the dying bard! Mr. Gray was the first who, independently of every other argument, proved the impossibility of the truth of such charges by pointing to the almost daily effusions of his clear and unclouded genius. For this, and for his otherwise triumphant vindication of the character of Burns from the worst obloquy it so long lay under, Scotland ought to be grateful to James Gray.

In a letter written to that warm-hearted man, Mr.

Alexander Cunningham, one of the very truest friends he ever had, towards the beginning of 1794, something more than a year before his death, Burns himself says, in that strong language which he sometimes used beyond the need of the occasion, but which must have meant all that met the ear—

For these two months I have not been able to lift a pen. My constitution and frame were, *ab origine*, blasted with a deep and incurable taint of hypochondria, which poisons my existence. Of late a number of domestic vexations, and some pecuniary share in the ruin of these . . . times—losses which, though trifling, were yet what I could ill bear—have so irritated me, that my feelings at times could only be envied by a reprobate spirit listening to the sentence that dooms it to perdition.

With language of this kind there may be many who, at the same time that they entertain all kindly feelings towards the memory of Burns, will be unable to sympathise. But the same letter does contain sentiments and opinions so nobly conceived and expressed, that we agree with all our hearts that “they who have been told that Burns was ever a degraded being, who have permitted themselves to believe that his only consolations were those ‘of the opiate guilt applies to grief,’ will do well to pause over it and judge for themselves.” The following passage, how beautiful—how sublime!—

Still there are two great pillars that bear us up, amid the wreck of misfortune and misery. The *ONE* is composed of the different modifications of a certain noble, stubborn something in man, known by the names of courage, fortitude, magnanimity. The *OTHER* is made up of those feelings and sentiments, which, however the sceptic may deny, or the enthusiast disfigure them, as yet I am convinced, original and component parts of the human soul; those *senses of the mind*, if I may be allowed the expression, which connect us with, and link us to, those awful obscure realities—an all-powerful and equally beneficent God—and a world to come, beyond death and the grave. The first gives the nerve of combat, while a ray of hope beams on the field; the last pours the balm of comfort into the wounds which time can never cure.

I do not remember, my dear Cunningham, that you and I ever talked on the subject of religion at all. I know some who laugh at it, as the trick of the crafty *FEW*, to lead the undiscerning *MANY*; or at most as an uncertain obscurity, which mankind can never know anything of, and with which they are fools if they

give themselves much to do. Nor would I quarrel with a man for his irreligion, any more than I would for his want of a musical ear. I would regret that he was shut out from what, to me and to others, were such superlative sources of enjoyment. It is in this point of view, and for this reason, that I will deeply imbue the mind of every child of mine with religion. If my son should happen to be a man of feeling, sentiment, and taste, I shall thus add largely to his enjoyments. Let me flatter myself that this sweet little fellow, who is just now running about my desk, will be a man of a melting, ardent, glowing heart; and an imagination, delighted with the painter, and rapt with the poet. Let me figure him wandering out in a sweet evening, to inhale the balmy gales, and enjoy the growing luxuriance of the spring; himself the while in the blooming youth of life. He looks abroad on all nature, and through nature up to nature's God. His soul, by swift, delighted degrees, is rapt above this sublunary sphere, until he can be silent no longer, and bursts out into the glorious enthusiasm of Thomson—

These, as they change, Almighty Father, these  
Are but the varied God. The rolling year  
Is full of Thee;

and so on, in all the spirit and ardour of that charming hymn. These are no ideal pleasures; they are real delights; and I ask what of the delights among the sons of men are superior, not to say equal, to them? And they have this precious, vast addition, that conscious virtue stamps them for her own; and lays hold on them to bring herself into the presence of a witnessing, judging, and approving God.

We shall not attempt the defence of the people of Scotland in their conduct towards Burns. Something, perhaps much, might, and some time or other ought and will, be said by us in its extenuation. But it was bad. Let England, however—we say it in love and admiration of her character—let England look to herself, and settle all accounts with herself on the score of her own neglect of native genius, before she wastes any more of her high-toned moral indignation on us for our treatment of him whom now we glory in as our greatest national poet. The gold coin of the genius of Burns at least, be it remembered, never sustained during his lifetime any depreciation. He had this to comfort him, this to glory in, to the last; and this, by the poet in his barest poverty, was doubtless often felt to be an exceeding great reward. And when he died—when it was known that Burns indeed was dead—



not in vain, and idle, and pompous funeral rites alone—though these were paid him, and the volleying thunders pealed over his grave—not in unavailing attempts to lament his doom by touching to elegiac strains the strings of that harp which now lay mute by its master's side, did Scotland show her remorse, her penitence, her gratitude. The widow and the fatherless became the objects of general tender concern. An ample subscription was soon raised for their behoof—a new edition of his *Poems*, by the enlightened and benevolent Currie, while it spread wider and established more firmly his fame, added to the fund of charity—and this surely, and more than this, done at the time when there was a blessing on it, and every year since his death a most earnest and universal delight in his genius, even to passion, well entitles Scotland almost to forgive and forget her offence, to sink the past in the present, and even to pride herself on being, after all, not an ungrateful mother of such a son. To have failed in any duty she ever owed to such a son when he was alive to rejoice and benefit, along with all he loved most dearly, from the bestowal of her regard, must always be set down to the discredit and disgrace of the country. Yet thus much we will say, and only thus much, that we ought to remember that the Dead Burns is more glorious than ever was the Living. He has now gathered all his fame. Nations have honoured his genius. He sits among the Immortals. This has rarely been the lot of any living man: not of Milton—not yet of Wordsworth. Can it be that man hates to honour man, till the power in which he may have wrought miracles be extinguished or withdrawn from earth, and then, when we fear, and hate, and pine, and envy about it no more, we confess its grandeur, bow down to it, and worship it? Then it was, like ourselves, human—now it is divine!

Up to the day on which Burns left his farm of Ellisland (and had such rural occupation, entire and undivided, and under ordinary happy circumstances, been always his, how different might have been the whole colour and complexion of his life!) we showed, that after fairly balancing

the accounts of conscience, he was so far from being bankrupt in character that no man was better entitled than he to hold up his head among the best of his fellow-beings at church or market. How stands he at his last earthly audit? With many more sins to be judged and forgiven by God at the great day—with not many more, although some, to be judged, may we dare to use the word forgiven?—even by man during his earthly sojourn! He had often erred—sometimes grossly and grievously—and “rueful had the expiation been.” But were the sins of poor Robert Burns so much worse than those of most other men, that it became a moral and religious duty to emblazon them for an eternal warning to human nature? Alas! his sins bore no proportion to his sorrows! Long, long before the light of heaven had ever been darkened, obscured, or eclipsed in his conscience, even for a moment, by evil thoughts or evil deeds, when the bold, bright boy, with his thick black curling hair ennobling his noble forehead, was slaving for his parents’ sake—and if the blessing of God ever falls on mortal man, it must be on toils like these—Robert Burns used often to lie by his brother’s side all night long without ever closing an eye in sleep, for that large heart of his that loved all his eyes looked upon of nature’s works, living or dead, divine as was its mechanism for the play of all lofty passions, would often get suddenly disarranged as if approached the very hour of death. Who so skilled in nature’s mysteries to dare to say that many more years could have fallen to the lot of one so framed had he all life-long drank, as in youth, but of the well-water, lain down with the dove, and risen with the lark? If excesses, in which there was much blame, did in any degree injure his health and constitution—and most probably they did so—how much more did those other excesses certainly do so, in which there was both praise and virtue—over-anxious, over-worked hours beneath the midday sun when his hot beams shot downwards like arrows, yet were faithful in that beautiful pagan poetry for a moment restored for the sake of our great pastoral, well might we

believe that Apollo would not have hurt the Muse's son. But let us not fear to confess all his faults, failings, errors, vices, sins in all their magnitude and in all their darkest colours. They are known to the whole world. Yet still the whole world loves, admires, respects, venerates the memory of Burns. Not under the power of his genius alone does the world thus feel and judge. For how much is there of good and great in the character of the man! What lessons of patience, endurance, contentment, resignation, magnanimity, devotion, does his earlier life teach! Was not his manhood, in all its better days, nay, on to the week of the final struggle, dignified, amidst all its stains, by independence, by patriotism, by integrity, by generosity—for he was generous as poor—and by the discharge of nature's primal duties under sorest difficulty and distress, for hard had he worked for that wife and those children, whom at last he piously delivered up to the care of their God on the bed of death. Who ever laid one mean, jealous, envious, unkind, or cruel thought or deed to the charge of Robert Burns? Ill-used as he had been by the world—by the great and the rich, and the learned and the wise, in short, by the powerful—who were proud to take him by the hand and lift him up for a little while on a towering and conspicuous eminence, and then did let him wander away off into what might have been utter obscurity for them, into sufferings by them unmitigated; this, we say, was to use him ill indeed, and even this might have broken many a noble heart, as we know that for a time it shook his to its very core. But in spite of all this, in spite of the "hope deferred that maketh the heart sick," Burns never became a misanthrope. A few indignant flashes his genius occasionally gave forth against the littleness of the great, but nothing so paltry as personal pique at the bad and base usage of a few, or even many, who ought not thus to have dishonoured their birth, ever inspired Burns with feelings of hostility towards the highest orders. His was an imagination that clothed high rank with that dignity and splendour which some of the degenerate descendants of old and illustrious houses had

seemed to have forgotten; and when an Athole, a Daer, or a Glencairn "reverenced the lyre" and grasped the hand of the peasant who had received it as his patrimony from nature, Burns felt it to be nowise inconsistent with the stubbornest independence that ever supported a son of the soil in his struggles with necessity, reverently to doff his bonnet and bow his head in their presence, proud in his humility.

The bridegroom may forget the bride  
Was made his wedded wife yestreen;  
The monarch may forget the crown,  
That on his head an hour hath been;

The mother may forget the child  
That smiles sae sweetly on her knee;  
But I'll remember thee, Glencairn,  
And a' that thou hast done for me!

Even this perfect freedom from uneasy, dissatisfied, and angry thoughts and feelings towards the rich and great, when we consider all things, proves the native magnanimity of Burns. After all, that is the highest eulogy which uses only the most common but the most holy words. Burns, then, was a good son, a good brother, a good friend, a good husband, and a good father.

No farther seek his merits to disclose,  
Nor draw his frailties from their dread abode;  
There they alike in trembling hope repose,  
The bosom of his Father and his God.

By THOMAS CARLYLE.

*From "THE EDINBURGH REVIEW," December, 1829.*

REVIEW OF "LOCKHART'S LIFE OF ROBERT BURNS."

IN the modern arrangements of society, it is no uncommon thing that a man of genius must, like Butler, "ask for bread and receive a stone"; for, in spite of our grand maxim of supply and demand, it is by no means the highest excellence that men are most forward to recognise. The inventor of a spinning-jenny is pretty sure of his reward in his own day; but the writer of a true poem, like the apostle of true religion, is nearly as sure of the contrary. We do not know whether it is not an aggravation of the injustice that there is generally a posthumous retribution. Robert Burns, in the course of nature, might yet have been living; but his short life was spent in toil and penury, and he died in the pride of his manhood, miserable and neglected; and yet already a brave mausoleum shines over his dust, and more than one splendid monument has been reared in other places to his fame; the street where he languished in poverty is called by his name; the highest personages in our literature have been proud to appear as his commentators and admirers, and here is the *sixth* narrative of his *Life* that has been given to the world!

Mr. Lockhart thinks it necessary to apologise for this new attempt on such a subject; but his readers, we believe, will readily acquit him, or at worst will censure only the performance of his task, not the choice of it. The character of Burns, indeed, is a theme that cannot easily become

either trite or exhausted, and will probably gain rather than lose in its dimensions by the distance to which it is removed by time. No man, it has been said, is a hero to his valet; and this is probably true; but the fault is at least as likely to be the valet's as the hero's; for it is certain that to the vulgar eye few things are wonderful that are not distant. It is difficult for men to believe that the man, the mere man whom they see, nay, perhaps, painfully feel, toiling at their side through the poor jostlings of existence, can be made of finer clay than themselves. Suppose that some dining acquaintance of Sir Thomas Lucy's, and neighbour of John a Combe's, had snatched an hour or two from the preservation of his game and written us a *Life of Shakespeare*! What dissertations should we not have had—not on *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, but on the wool trade, and deer stealing, and the libel and vagrant laws! and how the poacher became a player; and how Sir Thomas and Mr. John had Christian bowels, and did not push him to extremities! In like manner, we believe, with respect to Burns, that till the companions of his pilgrimage, the honourable Excise Commissioners and the gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt, and the Dumfries aristocracy, and all the squires and earls, equally with the Ayr writers, and the new and old light clergy, whom he had to do with, shall have become invisible in the darkness of the past, or visible only by light borrowed from his juxtaposition, it will be difficult to measure him by any true standard, or to estimate what he really was and did in the eighteenth century for his country and the world. It will be difficult, we say, but still a fair problem for literary historians; and repeated attempts will give us repeated approximations.

His former biographers have done something, no doubt, but by no means a great deal, to assist us. Dr. Currie and Mr. Walker, the principal of these writers, have both, we think, mistaken one essentially important thing—their own and the world's true relation to their author, and the style in which it became such men to think and to speak of such a man. Dr. Currie loved the poet truly,

more perhaps than he avowed to his readers, or even to himself; yet he everywhere introduces him with a certain patronising, apologetic air, as if the polite public might think it strange and half-unwarrantable that he, a man of science, a scholar, and gentleman, should do such honour to a rustic. In all this, however, we readily admit that his fault was not want of love, but weakness of faith; and regret that the first and kindest of all our poet's biographers should not have seen further, or believed more boldly what he saw. Mr. Walker offends more deeply in the same kind; and both err alike in presenting us with a detached catalogue of his several possessed attributes, virtues, and vices, instead of a delineation of the resulting character as a living unity. This, however, is not painting a portrait, but gauging the length and breadth of the several features, and jotting down their dimensions in arithmetical ciphers. Nay, it is not so much as this; for we are yet to learn by what arts or instruments the mind could be so measured and gauged.

Mr. Lockhart, we are happy to say, has avoided both these errors. He uniformly treats Burns as the high and remarkable man the public voice has now pronounced him to be; and in delineating him, he has avoided the method of separate generalities, and rather sought for characteristic incidents, habits, actions, sayings; in a word, for aspects which exhibit the whole man as he looked and lived among his fellows. The book, accordingly, with all its deficiencies, gives more insight, we think, into the true character of Burns than any prior biography; though, being written on the very popular and condensed scheme of an article for *Constable's Miscellany*, it has less depths than we could have wished and expected from a writer of such power; and contains rather more, and more multifarious, quotations than belong of right to an original production. Indeed, Mr. Lockhart's own writing is generally so good, so clear, direct, and nervous, that we seldom wish to see it making place for another man's. However, the spirit of the work is thoroughly candid, tolerant, and anxiously conciliating; compliments and praises are liberally dis-

tributed on all hands, to great and small; and, as Mr. Morris Birkbeck observes of the society in the backwoods of America, "The courtesies of polite life are never lost sight of for a moment." But there are better things than these in the volume; and we can safely testify not only that it is easily and pleasantly read a first time, but may even be without difficulty read again.

Nevertheless we are far from thinking that the problem of "Burns's biography" has yet been adequately solved. We do not allude so much to the deficiency of facts or documents—though of these we are still every day receiving some fresh accession—as to the limited and imperfect application of them to the great end of biography. Our notions upon this subject may, perhaps, appear extravagant; but if an individual is really of consequence enough to have his life and character recorded for public remembrance, we have always been of opinion that the public ought to be made acquainted with all the inward springs and relations of his character. How did the world and man's life, from his particular position, represent themselves to his mind? How did co-existing circumstances modify him from without; how did he modify these from within? With what endeavours and what efficacy rule over them; with what resistance and what suffering sink under them? In one word, what and how produced was the effect of society on him; what and how produced was his effect on society? He who should answer these questions in regard to any individual would, as we believe, furnish a model of perfection in biography. Few individuals, indeed, can deserve such a study; and many *Lives* will be written, and, for the gratification of innocent curiosity, ought to be written, and read, and forgotten, which are not in this sense biographies. But Burns, if we mistake not, is one of these few individuals; and such a study, at least with such a result, he has not yet obtained. Our own contributions to it, we are aware, can be but scanty and feeble; but we offer them with goodwill, and trust they may meet with acceptance from those for whom they are intended.



Burns first came upon the world as a prodigy, and was, in that character, entertained by it, in the usual fashion, with loud, vague, tumultuous wonder, speedily subsiding into censure and neglect, till his early and most mournful death again awakened an enthusiasm for him, which, especially as there was now nothing to be done, and much to be spoken, has prolonged itself even to our own time. It is true the "nine days" have long since elapsed; and the very continuance of this clamour proves that Burns was no vulgar wonder. Accordingly, even in sober judgments, where, as years passed by, he has come to rest more and more exclusively on his own intrinsic merits, and may now be well-nigh shorn of that casual radiance, he appears not only as a true British poet, but as one of the most considerable British men of the eighteenth century. Let it not be objected that he did little; he did much, if we consider where and how. If the work performed was small, we must remember that he had his very materials to discover; for the metal he worked in lay hid under the desert, where no eye but his had guessed its existence; and we may almost say that with his own hand he had to construct the tools for fashioning it. For he found himself in deepest obscurity, without help, without instruction, without model; or with models only of the meanest sort. An educated man stands, as it were, in the midst of a boundless arsenal and magazine, filled with all the weapons and engines which man's skill has been able to devise from the earliest time; and he works, accordingly, with a strength borrowed from all past ages. How different is his state who stands on the outside of that store-house, and feels that its gates must be stormed, or remain forever shut against him! His means are the commonest and rudest; the mere work done is no measure of his strength. A dwarf behind his steam-engine may remove mountains; but no dwarf will hew them down with the pick-axe; and he must be a Titan that hurls them abroad with his arms.

It is in this last shape that Burns presents himself. Born in an age the most prosaic Britain had yet seen,

and in a condition the most disadvantageous, where his mind, if it accomplished aught, must accomplish it under the pressure of continual bodily toil, nay, of penury and desponding apprehension of the worst evils, and with no furtherance but such knowledge as dwells in a poor man's hut, and the rhymes of a Fergusson or Ramsay for his standard of beauty, he sinks not under all these impediments; through the fogs and darkness of that obscure region his eagle eye discerns the true relations of the world and human life; he grows into intellectual strength, and trains himself into intellectual expertness. Impelled by the irrepressible movement of his inward spirit, he struggles forward into the general view, and with haughty modesty lays down before us, as the fruit of his labour, a gift which time has now pronounced imperishable. Add to all this, that his darksome, drudging childhood and youth was by far the kindest era of his whole life, and that he died in his thirty-seventh year, and then ask if it be strange that his poems are imperfect, and of small extent, or that his genius attained no mastery in its art? Alas, his sun shone as through a tropical tornado; and the pale shadow of death eclipsed it at noon! Shrouded in such baleful vapours, the genius of Burns was never seen in clear azure splendour enlightening the world; but some beams from it did, by fits, pierce through, and it tinted those clouds with rainbow and orient colours into a glory and stern grandeur, which men silently gazed on with wonder and tears!

We are anxious not to exaggerate, for it is exposition rather than admiration that our readers require of us here; and yet to avoid some tendency to that side is no easy matter. We love Burns, and we pity him; and love and pity are prone to magnify. Criticism, it is sometimes thought, should be a cold business. We are not so sure of this; but, at all events, our concern with Burns is not exclusively that of critics. True and genial as his poetry must appear, it is not chiefly as a poet, but as a man, that he interests and affects us. He was often advised to write a tragedy; time and means were not lent him for this;

but through life he enacted a tragedy, and one of the deepest. We question whether the world has since witnessed so utterly sad a scene; whether Napoleon himself, left to brawl with Sir Hudson Lowe, and perish on his rock, "amid the melancholy main," presented to the reflecting mind such a "spectacle of pity and fear" as did this intrinsically nobler, gentler, and perhaps greater soul, wasting itself away in a hopeless struggle with base entanglements, which coiled closer and closer round him, till only death opened him an outlet. Conquerors are a race with whom the world could well dispense; nor can the hard intellect, the unsympathising loftiness, and high but selfish enthusiasm of such persons inspire us in general with any affection; at best it may excite amazement; and their fall, like that of a pyramid, will be beheld with a certain sadness and awe. But a true poet, a man in whose heart resides some effluence of wisdom, some tone of the "Eternal Melodies," is the most precious gift that can be bestowed on a generation: we see in him a freer, purer development of whatever is noblest in ourselves; his life is a rich lesson to us, and we mourn his death as that of a benefactor who loved and taught us.

Such a gift had Nature in her bounty bestowed on us in Robert Burns, but with queen-like indifference she cast it from her hand like a thing of no moment, and it was defaced and torn asunder as an idle bauble before we recognised it. To the ill-starred Burns was given the power of making man's life more venerable, but that of wisely guiding his own was not given. Destiny—for so in our ignorance we must speak—his faults, the faults of others, proved too hard for him, and that spirit which might have soared, could it but have walked, soon sank to the dust, its glorious faculties trodden under foot in the blossom, and died, we may almost say, without ever having lived. And so kind and warm a soul, so full of inborn riches, of love to all living and lifeless things! How his heart flows out in sympathy over universal nature, and in her bleakest provinces discerns a beauty and a meaning! The "daisy" falls not unheeded under his ploughshare, nor the ruined

nest of that "wee, cowering, timorous beastie," cast forth after all its provident pains to "thole the sleety dribble and cranreuch cauld." The "hoar visage" of winter delights him, he dwells with a sad and oft-returning fondness in these scenes of solemn desolation, but the voice of the tempest becomes an anthem to his ears; he loves to walk in the sounding woods, for "it raises his thoughts to Him that walketh on the wings of the wind." A true poet-soul, for it needs but to be struck and the sound it yields will be music! But observe him chiefly as he mingles with his brother-men. What warm, all-comprehending fellow-feeling; what trustful, boundless love; what generous exaggeration of the object loved! His rustic friend, his nut-brown maiden, are no longer mean and homely, but a hero and a queen whom he prizes as the paragons of earth. The rough scenes of Scottish life, not seen by him in any Arcadian illusion, but in the rude contradiction, in the smoke and soil of a too harsh reality, are still lovely to him; poverty is indeed his companion, but love also and courage; the simple feelings, the worth, the nobleness that dwell under the straw roof are dear and venerable to his heart; and thus over the lowest provinces of man's existence he pours the glory of his own soul, and they rise, in shadow and sunshine, softened and brightened into a beauty which other eyes discern not in the highest. He has a just self-consciousness which too often degenerates into pride, yet it is a noble pride, for defence, not for offence, no cold, suspicious feeling, but a frank and social one. The peasant poet bears himself, we might say, like a king in exile; he is cast among the low and feels himself equal to the highest, yet he claims no rank that none may be disputed to him. The forward he can repel, the supercilious he can subdue; pretensions of wealth or ancestry are of no avail with him; there is a fire in that dark eye, under which the "insolence of condescension" cannot thrive. In his abasement, in his extreme need, he forgets not for a moment the majesty of poetry and manhood. And yet, far as he feels himself above common men, he wanders not apart from them, but

mixes warmly in their interests; nay, throws himself into their arms and, as it were, entreats them to love him. It is moving to see how, in his darkest despondency, this proud being still seeks relief from friendship, unbosoms himself often to the unworthy, and, amid tears, strains to his glowing heart a heart that knows only the name of friendship. And yet he was "quick to learn," a man of keen vision, before whom common disguises afforded no concealment. His understanding saw through the hollowness even of accomplished deceivers, but there was a generous credulity in his heart. And so did our peasant show himself among us, "a soul like an *Æolian* harp, in whose strings the vulgar wind as it passed through them changed itself into articulate melody." And this was he for whom the world found no fitter business than quarrelling with smugglers and vintners, computing Excise dues upon tallow, and gauging ale barrels! In such toils was that mighty spirit sorrowfully wasted, and a hundred years may pass on before another such is given us to waste.

All that remains of Burns, the writings he has left, seem to us, as we hinted above, no more than a poor mutilated fraction of what was in him, brief broken glimpses of a genius that could never show itself complete, that wanted all things for completeness—culture, leisure, true effort, nay, even length of life. His poems are, with scarcely any exception, mere occasional effusions poured forth with little premeditation, expressing by such means as offered the passion, opinion, or humour of the hour. Never in one instance was it permitted him to grapple with any subject with the full collection of his strength, to fuse and mould it in the concentrated fire of his genius. To try by the strict rules of art such imperfect fragments would be at once unprofitable and unfair. Nevertheless, there is something in these poems, marred and defective as they are, which forbids the most fastidious student of poetry to pass them by. Some sort of enduring quality they must have, for, after fifty years of the wildest vicissitudes in poetic taste, they still continue to be read, nay, are read more and more eagerly, more and more exten-

sively, and this is not only by literary virtuosos and that class upon whom transitory causes operate most strongly, but by all classes down to the most hard, unlettered, and truly natural class who read little and especially no poetry, except because they find pleasure in it. The grounds of so singular and wide a popularity, which extends in a literal sense from the palace to the hut and over all regions where the English tongue is spoken, are well worth inquiring into. After every just deduction, it seems to imply some rare excellence in these works. What is that excellence?

To answer this question will not lead us far. The excellence of Burns is indeed among the rarest, whether in poetry or prose, but at the same time it is plain and easily recognised, his sincerity, his indisputable air of truth. Here are no fabulous woes or joys, no hollow fantastic sentimentalities, no wire-drawn refinings either in thought or feeling; the passion that is traced before us has glowed in a living heart, the opinion he utters has risen in his own understanding and been a light to his own steps. He does not write from hearsay, but from sight and experience: it is the scenes he has lived and laboured amid that he describes; those scenes, rude and humble as they are, have kindled beautiful emotions in his soul, noble thoughts, and definite resolves, and he speaks forth what is in him not from any outward call of vanity or interest, but because his heart is too full to be silent. He speaks it, too, with such melody and modulation as he can, "in homely rustic jingle"; but it is his own and genuine. This is the grand secret for finding readers and retaining them; let him who would move and convince others be first moved and convinced himself. Horace's rule, *Si vis me flere*, is applicable in a wider sense than the literal one. To every poet, to every writer, we might say—Be true, if you would be believed. Let a man but speak forth with genuine earnestness the thought, the emotion, the actual condition of his own heart, and other men, so strangely are we all knit together by the tie of sympathy, must and will give heed to him. In culture, in extent of view, we may stand

above the speaker or below him, but in either case his words, if they are earnest and sincere, will find some response within us, for in spite of all casual varieties in outward rank, or inward, as face answers to face, so does the heart of man to man.

This may appear a very simple principle, and one which Burns had little merit in discovering. True, the discovery is easy enough, but the practical appliance is not easy—is indeed the fundamental difficulty which all poets have to strive with and which scarcely one in the hundred ever fairly surmounts. A head too dull to discriminate the true from the false, a heart too dull to love the one at all risks and to hate the other in spite of all temptations, are alike fatal to a writer. With either, or, as more commonly happens, with both, of these deficiencies, combine a love of distinction, a wish to be original, which is seldom wanting, and we have affectation, the bane of literature, as cant, its elder brother, is of morals. How often does the one and the other front us in poetry as in life! Great poets themselves are not always free of this vice; nay, it is precisely on a certain sort and degree of greatness that it is most commonly ingrafted. A strong effort after excellence will sometimes solace itself with a mere shadow of success, and he who has much to unfold will sometimes unfold it imperfectly. Byron, for instance, was no common man, yet if we examine his poetry with this view we shall find it far enough from faultless. Generally speaking, we should say that it is not true. He refreshes us not with the divine fountain, but too often with vulgar strong waters, stimulating indeed to the taste, but soon ending in dislike or even nausea. Are his Harolds and Giaours, we would ask, real men—we mean poetically consistent and conceivable men? Do not these characters, does not the character of their author, which more or less shines through them all, rather appear a thing put on for the occasion; no natural or possible mode of being, but something intended to look much grander than nature? Surely all these stormful agonies, this volcanic heroism, superhuman contempt, and moody desperation, with so

much scowling and teeth-gnashing and other sulphurous humours, is more like the brawling of a player in some paltry tragedy which is to last three hours, than the bearing of a man in the business of life which is to last three-score and ten years. To our minds there is a taint of this sort, something which we should call theatrical, false, and affected, in every one of these otherwise powerful pieces. Perhaps *Don Juan*, especially the latter parts of it, is the only thing approaching to a sincere work he ever wrote; the only work where he showed himself, in any measure, as he was, and seemed so intent on his subject as, for moments, to forget himself. Yet Byron hated this vice, we believe, heartily detested it; nay, he had declared formal war against it in words. So difficult is it even for the strongest to make this primary attainment, which might seem the simplest of all, to read its own consciousness without mistakes, without errors involuntary or wilful! We recollect no poet of Burns's susceptibility who comes before us from the first, and abides with us to the last, with such a total want of affectation. He is an honest man and an honest writer. In his successes and his failures, in his greatness and his littleness, he is ever clear, simple, true, and glitters with no lustre but his own. We reckon this to be a great virtue—to be, in fact, the root of most other virtues, literary as well as moral.

It is necessary, however, to mention that it is to the poetry of Burns that we now allude—to those writings which he had time to meditate, and where no special reason existed to warp his critical feeling or obstruct his endeavour to fulfil it. Certain of his letters and other fractions of prose composition by no means deserve this praise. Here, doubtless, there is not the same natural truth of style; but, on the contrary, something not only stiff, but strained and twisted, a certain high-flown, inflated tone, the stilted emphasis of which contrasts ill with the firmness and rugged simplicity of even his poorest verses. Thus no man, it would appear, is altogether unaffected. Does not Shakespeare himself sometimes



premeditate the sheerest bombast? But even with regard to these letters of Burns, it is but fair to state that he had two excuses. The first was his comparative deficiency in language. Burns, though for the most part he writes with singular force, and even gracefulness, is not master of English prose as he is of Scottish verse—not master of it, we mean, in proportion to the depth and vehemence of his matter. These letters strike us as the effort of a man to express something which he has no organ fit for expressing. But a second and weightier excuse is to be found in the peculiarity of Burns's social rank. His correspondents are often men whose relation to him he has never accurately ascertained; whom, therefore, he is either forearming himself against, or else unconsciously flattering, by adopting the style he thinks will please them. At all events, we should remember that these faults, even in his letters, are not the rule but the exception. Whenever he writes, as one would ever wish to do, to trusted friends and on real interests, his style becomes simple, vigorous, expressive, sometimes even beautiful. His letters to Mrs. Dunlop are uniformly excellent.

But we return to his poetry. In addition to its sincerity it has another peculiar merit, which indeed is but a mode, or perhaps a means, of the foregoing. It displays itself in his choice of subjects, or rather in his indifference as to subjects, and the power he has of making all subjects interesting. The ordinary poet, like the ordinary man, is forever seeking in external circumstances the help which can be found only in himself. In what is familiar and near at hand he discerns no form of comeliness: home is not poetical but prosaic; it is in some past, distant, conventional world that poetry resides for him; were he there and not here, were he thus and not so, it would be well with him. Hence our innumerable host of rose-coloured novels and iron-mailed epics, with their locality not on the earth, but somewhere nearer to the moon. Hence our Virgins of the Sun and our Knights of the Cross, malicious Saracens in turbans and copper-coloured chiefs in wampum, and so many other truculent figures from the

heroic times or the heroic climates, who on all hands swarm in our poetry. Peace be with them! But yet, as a great moralist proposed preaching to the men of this century, so would we fain preach to the poets "a sermon on the duty of staying at home." Let them be sure that heroic ages and heroic climates can do little for them. That form of life has attraction for us less because it is better or nobler than our own than simply because it is different, and even this attraction must be of the most transient sort. For will not our own age one day be an ancient one and have as quaint a costume as the rest, not contrasted with the rest, therefore, but ranked along with them in respect of quaintness? Does Homer interest us now because he wrote of what passed out of his native Greece and two centuries before he was born, or because he wrote of what passed in God's world and in the heart of man, which is the same after thirty centuries? Let our poets look to this; is their feeling really finer, truer, and their vision deeper than that of other men, they have nothing to fear, even from the humblest subject; is it not so, they have nothing to hope, but an ephemeral favour, even from the highest.

The poet, we cannot but think, can never have far to seek for a subject; the elements of his art are in him and around him on every hand; for him the ideal world is not remote from the actual, but under it and within it; nay, he is a poet precisely because he can discern it there. Wherever there is a sky above him, and a world around him, the poet is in his place, for here too is man's existence with its infinite longings and small acquirings, its ever-thwarted, ever-renewed endeavours, its unspeakable aspirations, its fears and hopes that wander through eternity, and all the mystery of brightness and of gloom that it was ever made of, in any age or climate, since man first began to live. Is there not the fifth act of a tragedy in every death-bed, though it were a peasant's and a bed of heath? And are wooings and weddings obsolete that there can be comedy no longer? Or are men suddenly grown wise that Laughter must no longer

shake his sides, but be cheated of his farce? Man's life and nature is as it was, and as it will ever be. But the poet must have an eye to read these things and a heart to understand them, or they come and pass away before him in vain. He is a *vates*, a seer; a gift of vision has been given him. Has life no meanings for him which another cannot equally decipher? then he is no poet, and Delphi itself will not make him one.

In this respect Burns, though not perhaps absolutely a great poet, better manifests his capability, better proves the truth of his genius, than if he had by his own strength kept the whole Minerva Press going to the end of his literary course. He shows himself at least a poet of Nature's own making, and Nature, after all, is still the grand agent in making poets. We often hear of this and the other external condition being requisite for the existence of a poet. Sometimes it is a certain sort of training: he must have studied certain things—studied, for instance, “the elder dramatists,” and so learned a poetic language, as if poetry lay in the tongue, not in the heart. At other times we are told he must be bred in a certain rank, and must be on a confidential footing with the higher classes, because, above all other things, he must see the world. As to seeing the world, we apprehend this will cause him little difficulty if he have but an eye to see it with. Without eyes, indeed, the task might be hard. But happily every poet is born in the world and sees it, with or against his will, every day and every hour he lives. The mysterious workmanship of man's heart, the true light and the inscrutable darkness of man's destiny, reveal themselves not only in capital cities and crowded saloons, but in every hut and hamlet where men have their abode. Nay, do not the elements of all human virtues and all human vices, the passions at once of a Borgia and of a Luther, lie written, in stronger or fainter lines, in the consciousness of every individual bosom that has practised honest self-examination? Truly the same world may be seen in Mossiel and Tarbolton, if we look well, as clearly as it ever came to light in Crockford's, or the Tuileries itself.

But sometimes still harder requisitions are laid on the poor aspirant to poetry, for it is hinted that he should have been born two centuries ago, inasmuch as poetry soon after that date vanished from the earth and became no longer attainable by men! Such cobweb speculations have, now and then, overhung the field of literature, but they obstruct not the growth of any plant there; the Shakespeare or the Burns unconsciously, and merely as he walks onward, silently brushes them away. Is not every genius an impossibility till he appear? Why do we call him new and original if we saw where his marble was lying, and what fabric he could rear from it? It is not the material but the workman that is wanting. It is not the dark place that hinders, but the dim eye. A Scottish peasant's life was the meanest and rudest of all lives till Burns became a poet in it and a poet of it, found it a man's life, and therefore significant to men. A thousand battlefields remain unsung, but the *Wounded Hare* has not perished without its memorial, a balm of mercy yet breathes on us from its dumb agonies because a poet was there. Our *Halloween* has passed and repassed in rude awe and laughter since the era of the Druids, but no Theocritus, till Burns, discerned in it the materials of a Scottish idyl; neither was the *Holy Fair* any Council of Trent or Roman Jubilee; but, nevertheless, Superstition and Hypocrisy, and Fun having been propitious to him, in this man's hand it became a poem, instinct with satire and genuine comic life. Let but the true poet be given us, we repeat it, place him where and how you will, and true poetry will not be wanting.

Independently of the essential gift of poetic feeling, as we have now attempted to describe it, a certain rugged sterling worth pervades whatever Burns has written, a virtue, as of green fields and mountain breezes, dwells in his poetry; it is redolent of natural life and hardy, natural men. There is a decisive strength in him, and yet a sweet native gracefulness; he is tender, and he is vehement, yet without constraint or too visible effort; he melts the heart, or inflames it, with a power which

seems habitual and familiar to him. We see in him the gentleness, the trembling pity of a woman, with the deep earnestness, the force, and passionate ardour of a hero. Tears lie in him, and consuming fire, as lightning lurks in the drops of the summer cloud. He has a resonance in his bosom for every note of human feeling—the high and low, the sad, the ludicrous, the joyful, are welcome in their turns to his “lightly-moved and all-conceiving spirit.” And observe with what a prompt and eager force he grasps his subject, be it what it may! How he fixes, as it were, the full image of the matter in his eye, full and clear in every lineament, and catches the real type and essence of it amid a thousand accidents and superficial circumstances, no one of which misleads him! Is it of reason, some truth to be discovered? No sophistry, no vain surface-logic detains him; quick, resolute, unerring, he pierces through into the marrow of the question and speaks his verdict with an emphasis that cannot be forgotten. Is it of description, some visual object to be represented? No poet of any age or nation is more graphic than Burns—the characteristic features disclose themselves to him at a glance; three lines from his hand and we have a likeness. And in that rough dialect, in that rude, often awkward metre, so clear and definite a likeness! It seems a draughtsman working with a burnt stick, and yet the burin of a Retzsch is not more expressive or exact.

This clearness of sight we may call the foundation of all talent, for in fact, unless we see our object, how shall we know how to place or prize it in our understanding, our imagination, our affections? Yet it is not in itself, perhaps, a very high excellence, but capable of being united indifferently with the strongest or with ordinary powers. Homer surpasses all men in this quality, but, strangely enough, at no great distance below him are Richardson and Defoe. It belongs, in truth, to what is called a lively mind, and gives no sure indication of the higher endowments that may exist along with it. In all the three cases we have mentioned it is combined with

great garrulity, their descriptions are detailed, ample, and lovingly exact; Homer's fire bursts through, from time to time, as if by accident; but Defoe and Richardson have no fire. Burns, again, is not more distinguished by the clearness than by the impetuous force of his conceptions. Of the strength, the piercing emphasis with which he thought, his emphasis of expression may give a humble but the readiest proof. Who ever uttered sharper sayings than his: words more memorable now by their burning vehemence, now by their cool vigour and laconic pith? A single phrase depicts a whole subject, a whole scene. Our Scottish forefathers in the battlefield struggled forward, he says, "red-wat shod," giving in this one word a full vision of horror and carnage, perhaps too frightfully accurate for art!

In fact, one of the leading features in the mind of Burns is this vigour of his strictly intellectual perceptions. A resolute force is ever visible in his judgments, as in his feelings and volitions. Professor Stewart says of him, with some surprise—"All the faculties of Burns's mind were, as far as I could judge, equally vigorous, and his predilection for poetry was rather the result of his own enthusiastic and impassioned temper than of a genius exclusively adapted to that species of composition. From his conversation I should have pronounced him to be fitted to excel in whatever walk of ambition he had chosen to exert his abilities." But this, if we mistake not, is at all times the very essence of a truly poetical endowment. Poetry, except in such cases as that of Keats, where the whole consists in extreme sensibility and a certain vague pervading tunefulness of nature, is no separate faculty, no organ which can be superadded to the rest or disjoined from them, but rather the result of their general harmony and completion. The feelings, the gifts, that exist in the poet are those that exist, with more or less development, in every human soul—the imagination which shudders at the Hell of Dante is the same faculty, weaker in degree, which called that picture into being. How does the poet speak to all men, with power, but by being

still more a man than they? Shakespeare, it has been well observed, in the planning and completing of his tragedies, has shown an understanding, were it nothing more, which might have governed states or indicted a "Novum Organum." What Burns's force of understanding may have been we have less means of judging, for it dwelt among the humblest objects, never saw philosophy, and never rose, except for short intervals, into the region of great ideas. Nevertheless, sufficient indication remains for us in his works: we discern the brawny movements of a gigantic though untutored strength, and can understand how, in conversation, his quick, sure insight into men and things may, as much as aught else about him, have amazed the best thinkers of his time and country.

But, unless we mistake, the intellectual gift of Burns is fine as well as strong. The more delicate relations of things could not well have escaped his eye, for they were intimately present to his heart. The logic of the senate and the forum is indispensable, but not all-sufficient; nay, perhaps the highest truth is that which will the most certainly elude it. For this logic works by words, and "the highest," it has been said, "cannot be expressed in words." We are not without tokens of an openness for this higher truth, also of a keen though uncultivated sense for it, having existed in Burns. Mr. Stewart, it will be remembered, "wonders," in the passage above quoted, that Burns had formed some distinct conception of the "doctrine of association." We rather think that far subtler things than the doctrine of association had from of old been familiar to him. Here, for instance—

"We know nothing," writes he, "or next to nothing, of the structure of our souls, so we cannot account for those seeming caprices in them, that one should be particularly pleased with this thing, or struck with that, which, on minds of a different cast, makes no extraordinary impression. I have some favourite flowers in spring, among which are the mountain daisy, the hare-bell, the fox-glove, the wild-brier rose, the budding birch, and

the hoary hawthorn, that I view and hang over with particular delight. I never hear the loud solitary whistle of the curlew in a summer noon, or the wild mixing cadence of a troop of gray plover in an autumnal morning, without feeling an elevation of soul like the enthusiasm of devotion or poetry. Tell me, my dear friend, to what can this be owing? Are we a piece of machinery, which, like the *Æolian* harp, passive, takes the impression of the passing accident, or do these workings argue something within us above the trodden clod? I own myself partial to such proofs of those awful and important realities—a God that made all things, man's immaterial and immortal nature, and a world of weal or woe beyond death and the grave."

Force and fineness of understanding are often spoken of as something different from general force and fineness of nature, as something partly independent of them. The necessities of language probably require this, but in truth these qualities are not distinct and independent; except in special cases and from special causes they ever go together. A man of strong understanding is generally a man of strong character, neither is delicacy in the one kind often divided from delicacy in the other. No one, at all events, is ignorant that in the poetry of Burns keenness of insight keeps pace with keenness of feeling, that his light is not more pervading than his warmth. He is a man of the most impassioned temper, with passions not strong only but noble, and of the sort in which great virtues and great poems take their rise. It is reverence, it is love towards all Nature that inspires him, that opens his eyes to its beauty and makes heart and voice eloquent in its praise. There is a true old saying, that "love furthers knowledge," but, above all, it is the living essence of that knowledge which makes poets, the first principle of its existence, increase, activity. Of Burns's fervid affection, his generous, all-embracing love, we have spoken already, as of the grand distinction of his nature seen equally in word and deed, in his life and in his writings. It were easy to multiply examples. Not man only, but all that



environs man in the material and moral universe, is lovely in his sight; "the hoary hawthorn," the "troop of gray plover," the "solitary curlew" are all dear to him—all live in this earth along with him, and to all he is knit as in mysterious brotherhood. How touching is it, for instance, that amid the gloom of personal misery, brooding over the wintry desolation without him and within him, he thinks of the "ourie cattle" and "silly sheep," and their sufferings in the pitiless storm!

I thought me on the ourie cattle,  
Or silly sheep, wha bide this brattle  
O' wintry war;  
Or thro' the drift, deep-lairing, sprattle,  
Beneath a scaur.

Ilk happing bird, wee helpless thing,  
That in the merry month o' spring  
Delighted me to hear thee sing,  
What comes o' thee?  
Where wilt thou cow'r thy chittering wing,  
And close thy e'e?

The tenant of the mean hut, with its "ragged roof and chinky wall," has a heart to pity even these! This is worth several homilies on mercy, for it is the voice of Mercy herself. Burns, indeed, lives in sympathy; his soul rushes forth into all realms of being; nothing that has existence can be indifferent to him. The very devil he cannot hate with right orthodoxy!

But fare you weel, auld Nickie-ben;  
O wad ye tak' a thought and men'!  
Ye aiblins might—I dinna ken—  
Still hae a stake;  
I'm wae to think upo' yon den,  
Even for your sake!

He did not know, probably, that Sterne had been beforehand with him. "He is the father of curses and lies," said Dr. Slop, 'and is cursed and damned already.' 'I am sorry for it,' quoth my uncle Toby! "A poet without love were a physical and metaphysical impossibility."

Why should we speak of *Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled*, since all know it, from the king to the meanest of his

subjects? This dithyrambic was composed on horseback, in riding in the middle of tempests over the wildest Galloway moor in company with a Mr. Syme, who, observing the poet's looks, forebore to speak, judiciously enough, for a man composing *Bruce's Address* might be unsafe to trifle with. Doubtless this stern hymn was singing itself, as he formed it, through the soul of Burns, but to the external ear it should be sung with the throat of the whirlwind. So long as there is warm blood in the heart of Scotchman or man, it will move in fierce thrills under this war ode, the best, we believe, that was ever written by any pen.

Another wild stormful song that dwells in our ear and mind with a strange tenacity is *Macpherson's Farewell*. Perhaps there is something in the tradition itself that co-operates. For was not this grim Celt, this shaggy Northland Cacus, that "lived a life of sturt and strife, and died by treacherie"—was not he, too, one of the Nimrods and Napoleons of the earth, in the arena of his own remote misty glens for want of a clearer and wider one? Nay, was there not a touch of grace given him? A fibre of love and softness, poetry itself must have lived in his savage heart, for he composed that air the night before his execution; on the wings of that poor melody his better soul would soar away above oblivion, pain, and all the ignominy and despair which, like an avalanche, was hurling him to the abyss! Here also, as at Thebes, and in Pelops' line, was material fate matched against man's freewill—matched in bitterest though obscure duel, and the ethereal soul sunk not, even in its blindness, without a cry which has survived it. But who except Burns could have given words to such a soul—words that we never listen to without a strange, half-barbarous, half-poetic fellow-feeling?

Sae rantingly, sae wantonly,  
Sae dauntingly gaed he;  
He play'd a spring, and danced it round,  
Below the gallows tree.

Under a lighter and thinner disguise the same principle

of love which we have recognised as the great characteristic of Burns and of all true poets occasionally manifests itself in the shape of humour. Everywhere, indeed, in his sunny moods a full, buoyant flood of mirth rolls through the mind of Burns; he rises to the high and stoops to the low, and is brother and playmate to all Nature. We speak not of his bold and often irresistible faculty of caricature, for this is drollery rather than humour; but a much tenderer sportfulness dwells in him and comes forth, here and there, in evanescent and beautiful touches, as in his *Address to a Mouse*, or the *Farmer's Mare*, or in his *Elegy on Poor Maillie*, which last may be reckoned his happiest effort of this kind. In these pieces there are traits of a humour as fine as that of Sterne, yet altogether different, original, peculiar—the humour of Burns.

Of the tenderness, the playful pathos, and many other kindred qualities of Burns's poetry, much more might be said, but now, with these poor outlines of a sketch, we must prepare to quit this part of our subject. To speak of his individual writings adequately and with any detail would lead us far beyond our limits. As already hinted, we can look on but few of these pieces as, in strict critical language, deserving the name of poems; they are rhymed eloquence, rhymed pathos, rhymed sense, yet seldom essentially melodious, ærial, poetical. *T'am o' Shanter* itself, which enjoys so high a favour, does not appear to us at all decisively to come under this last category. It is not so much a poem as a piece of sparkling rhetoric; the heart and body of the story still lies hard and dead. He has not gone back, much less carried us back, into that dark, earnest, wondering age, when the tradition was believed, and when it took its rise; he does not attempt by any new modelling of his supernatural ware to strike anew that deep mysterious chord of human nature, which once responded to such things, and which lives in us too, and will forever live, though silent or vibrating with far other notes and to far different issues. Our German readers will understand us when we say that he is not the Tieck

but the Musæus of this tale. Externally it is all green and living; yet look closer: it is no firm growth, but only ivy on a rock. The piece does not properly cohere, the strange chasm which yawns in our incredulous imaginations between the Ayr public-house and the gate of Tophet is nowhere bridged over; nay, the idea of such a bridge is laughed at, and thus the tragedy of the adventure becomes a mere drunken phantasmagoria, painted on ale-vapours, and the farce alone has any reality. We do not say that Burns should have made much more of this tradition; we rather think that, for strictly poetical purposes, not much was to be made of it. Neither are we blind to the deep, varied, genial power displayed in what he has actually accomplished, but we find far more "Shakespearean" qualities, as these of *Tam o' Shanter* have been fondly named, in many of his other pieces; nay, we incline to believe that this latter might have been written, all but quite as well, by a man who, in place of genius, had only possessed talent.

Perhaps we may venture to say that the most strictly poetical of all his "poems" is one which does not appear in Currie's edition, but has been often printed before and since under the humble title of *The Jolly Beggars*. The subject truly is among the lowest in nature, but it only the more shows our poet's gift in raising it into the domain of art. To our minds this piece seems thoroughly compacted; melted together, refined, and poured forth in one flood of true liquid harmony. It is light, airy, and soft of movement, yet sharp and precise in its details; every face is a portrait; that raucle carlin, that wee Apollo, that Son of Mars are Scottish, yet ideal; the scene is at once a dream, and the very Rag-castle of "Poosie-Nansie." Further, it seems in a considerable degree complete, a real self-supporting whole, which is the highest merit in a poem. The blanket of the night is drawn asunder for a moment; in full, ruddy, and flaming light these rough tatterdemalions are seen in their boisterous revel, for the strong pulse of life vindicates its right to gladness even here; and when the curtain closes we prolong the action without effort; the

next day, as the last, our Caird and our Balladmonger are singing and soldiering; their "brats and callets" are hawking, begging, cheating; and some other night, in new combinations, they will wring from fate an hour of wassail and good cheer. It would be strange, doubtless, to call this the best of Burns's writings; we mean to say only that it seems to us the most perfect of its kind as a piece of poetical composition, strictly so called. In the *Beggars' Opera*, in the *Beggars' Bush*, as other critics have already remarked, there is nothing which, in real poetic vigour, equals this cantata; nothing, as we think, which comes within many degrees of it.

But by far the most finished, complete, and truly inspired pieces of Burns are, without dispute, to be found among his songs. It is here that, although through a small aperture, his light shines with the least obstruction, in its highest beauty and pure sunny clearness. The reason may be that song is a brief and simple species of composition, and requires nothing so much for its perfection as genuine poetic feeling, genuine music of heart. The song has its rules equally with the tragedy—rules which, in most cases, are poorly fulfilled; in many cases are not so much as felt. We might write a long essay on the songs of Burns, which we reckon by far the best that Britain has yet produced; for, indeed, since the era of Queen Elizabeth, we know not that, by any other hand, aught truly worth attention has been accomplished in this department. True, we have songs enough "by persons of quality"; we have tawdry, hollow, wine-bred madrigals; many a rhymed "speech" in the flowing and watery vein of Ossorius, the Portugal bishop, rich in sonorous words, and, for moral, dashed perhaps with some tint of a sentimental sensuality, all which many persons cease not from endeavouring to sing, though for most part, we fear, the music is but from the throat outward, or at best from some region far enough short of the soul, not in which, but in a certain inane limbo of the fancy, or even in some vaporous debatable land on the outside of the nervous system, most of such madrigals and rhymed speeches seem to have originated. With the songs of Burns

we must not name these things. Independently of the clear, manly, heartfelt sentiment that ever pervades his poetry, his songs are honest in another point of view—in form as well as in spirit. They do not affect to be set to music, but they actually and in themselves are music; they have received their life and fashioned themselves together in the medium of harmony, as Venus rose from the bosom of the sea. The story, the feeling, is not detailed but suggested; not said or spouted in rhetorical completeness and coherence, but sung in fitful gushes, in glowing hints, in fantastic breaks, in warblings, not of the voice only, but of the whole mind. We consider this to be the essence of a song, and that no songs since the little careless catches, and, as it were, drops of song, which Shakespeare has here and there sprinkled over his plays, fulfil this condition in nearly the same degree as most of Burns's do. Such grace and truth of external movement, too, presupposes in general a corresponding force and truth of sentiment and inward meaning. The songs of Burns are not more perfect in the former quality than in the latter. With what tenderness he sings, yet with what vehemence and entireness! There is a piercing wail in his sorrow, the purest rapture in his joy; he burns with the sternest ire, or laughs with the loudest or slyest mirth; and yet he is sweet and soft—"sweet as the smile when fond lovers meet, and soft as their parting tear." If we further take into account the immense variety of his subjects—how, from the loud, flowing revel in *Willie brew'd a Peck o' Maut* to the still, rapt enthusiasm of sadness for *Mary in Heaven*; from the glad, kind greeting of *Auld Lang Syne*, or the comic archness of *Duncan Gray*, to the fire-eyed fury of *Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled*, he has found a tone and words for every mood of man's heart—it will seem a small praise if we rank him as the first of all our song-writers; for we know not where to find one worthy of being second to him.

It is on his songs, as we believe, that Burns's chief influence as an author will ultimately be found to depend; nor, if our Fletcher's aphorism is true, shall we account this a small influence. "Let me make the songs of a people,"

said he, "and you shall make its laws." Surely, if ever any poet might have equalled himself with legislators on this ground, it was Burns. His songs are already part of the mother tongue, not of Scotland only, but of Britain, and of the millions that in all the ends of the earth speak a British language. In hut and hall, as the heart unfolds itself in the joy and woe of existence, the name, the voice of that joy and that woe, is the name and voice which Burns has given them. Strictly speaking, perhaps no British man has so deeply affected the thoughts and feelings of so many men as this solitary and altogether private individual with means apparently the humblest.

In another point of view, moreover, we incline to think that Burns's influence may have been considerable—we mean as exerted specially on the literature of his country, at least on the literature of Scotland. Among the great changes which British, particularly Scottish, literature has undergone since that period, one of the greatest will be found to consist in its remarkable increase of nationality. Even the English writers most popular in Burns's time were little distinguished for their literary patriotism in this its best sense. A certain attenuated cosmopolitanism had, in good measure, taken place of the old insular home-feeling; literature was, as it were, without any local environment, was not nourished by the affections which spring from a native soil. Our Grays and Glovers seemed to write almost as if *in vacuo*; the thing written bears no mark of place; it is not written so much for Englishmen as for men—or, rather, which is the inevitable result of this, for certain generalisations which philosophy termed men. Goldsmith is an exception; not so Johnson; the scene of his *Rambler* is little more English than that of his *Rasselas*. But if such was, in some degree, the case with England, it was, in the highest degree, the case with Scotland. In fact, our Scottish literature had, at that period, a very singular aspect, unexampled, so far as we know, except, perhaps, at Geneva, where the same state of matters appears still to continue. For a long period after Scotland became British, we had no literature; at the date when Addison

and Steel were writing their *Spectators*, our good Thomas Boston was writing, with the noblest intent, but alike in defiance of grammar and philosophy, his *Fourfold State of Man*. Then came the schisms in our National Church, and the fiercer schisms in our body politic; theologic ink and Jacobite blood, with gall enough in both cases, seemed to have blotted out the intellect of the country; however, it was only obscured, not obliterated. Lord Kames made nearly the first attempt, and a tolerably clumsy one, at writing English; and ere long Hume, Robertson, Smith, and a whole host of followers attracted hither the eyes of all Europe. And yet, in this brilliant resuscitation of our "fervid genius," there was nothing truly Scottish, nothing indigenous, except, perhaps, the natural impetuosity of intellect which we sometimes claim, and are sometimes upbraided with, as a characteristic of our nation. It is curious to remark that Scotland, so full of writers, had no Scottish culture, nor indeed any English; our culture was almost exclusively French. It was by studying Racine and Voltaire, Batteux and Boileau, that Kames had trained himself to be a critic and philosopher; it was the light of Montesquieu and Mably that guided Robertson in his political speculations; Quesnay's lamp that kindled the lamp of Adam Smith. Hume was too rich a man to borrow; and perhaps he reacted on the French more than he was acted on by them, but neither had he aught to do with Scotland; Edinburgh, equally with La Flèche, was but the lodging and laboratory, in which he not so much morally lived as metaphysically investigated. Never, perhaps, was there a class of writers so clear and well ordered, yet so totally destitute, to all appearance, of any patriotic affection—nay, of any human affection whatever. The French wits of the period were as unpatriotic, but their general deficiency in moral principle, not to say their avowed sensuality and unbelief in all virtue, strictly so called, render this accountable enough. We hope there is a patriotism founded on something better than prejudice; that our country may be dear to us, without injury to our philosophy; that in loving and justly prizing all other



lands, we may prize justly, and yet love before all others, our own stern motherland, and the venerable structure of social and moral life which mind has through long ages been building up for us there. Surely there is nourishment for the better part of man's heart in all this; surely the roots that have fixed themselves in the very core of man's being may be so cultivated as to grow up not into briers, but into roses, in the field of his life. Our Scottish sages have no such propensities; the field of their life shows neither briers nor roses, but only a flat, continuous thrashing-floor for logic, whereon all questions, from the Doctrine of Rent to the Natural History of Religion, are thrashed and sifted with the same mechanical impartiality!

With Sir Walter Scott at the head of our literature, it cannot be denied that much of this evil is past, or rapidly passing away; our chief literary men, whatever other faults they may have, no longer live among us like a French colony, or some knot of propaganda missionaries, but like natural-born subjects of the soil, partaking and sympathising in all our attachments, humours, and habits. Our literature no longer grows in water, but in mould, and with the true, racy virtues of the soil and climate. How much of this change may be due to Burns, or to any other individual, it might be difficult to estimate. Direct literary imitation of Burns was not to be looked for. But his example, in the fearless adoption of domestic subjects, could not but operate from afar, and certainly in no heart did the love of country ever burn with a warmer glow than in that of Burns; "a tide of Scottish prejudice," as he modestly calls this deep and generous feeling, "had been poured along his veins, and he felt that it would boil there till the flood-gates shut in eternal rest." It seemed to him as if he could do so little for his country, and yet would so gladly have done all. One small province stood open for him—that of Scottish song—and how eagerly he entered on it, how devotedly he laboured there! In his most toilsome journeyings this object never quits him—it is the little happy valley of his careworn heart. In the gloom of his own affliction he eagerly searches after some lonely brother

of the muse, and rejoices to snatch one other name from the oblivion that was covering it. These were early feelings, and they abode with him to the end.

. . . A wish (I mind its power),  
A wish, that to my latest hour  
Will strongly heave my breast;  
That I, for poor auld Scotland's sake,  
Some useful plan or book could make,  
Or sing a sang at least.  
The rough bur thistle spreading wide  
Among the bearded bear,  
I turn'd my weeding-clips aside,  
And spared the symbol dear.

But to leave the mere literary character of Burns, which has already detained us too long, we cannot but think that the life he willed, and was fated to lead among his fellow-men, is both more interesting and instructive than any of his written works. These poems are but little rhymed fragments scattered here and there in the grand unrhymed romance of his earthly existence, and it is only when intercalated in this at their proper places that they attain their full measure of significance. And this, too, alas, was but a fragment! The plan of a mighty edifice had been sketched; some columns, porticos, firm masses of building stand completed, the rest more or less clearly indicated, with many a far-stretching tendency, which only studious and friendly eyes can now trace towards the purposed termination. For the work is broken off in the middle, almost in the beginning, and rises among us, beautiful and sad, at once unfinished and a ruin! If charitable judgment was necessary in estimating his poems, and justice required that the aim and the manifest power to fulfil it must often be accepted for the fulfilment, much more is this the case in regard to his life, the sum and result of all his endeavours, where his difficulties came upon him not in detail only, but in mass; and so much has been left unaccomplished, nay, was mistaken, and altogether marred.

Properly speaking, there is but one era in the life of Burns, and that the earliest. We have not youth and

manhood, but only youth: for to the end we discern no decisive change in the complexion of his character; in his thirty-seventh year he is still, as it were, in youth. With all that resoluteness of judgment, that penetrating insight and singular maturity of intellectual power exhibited in his writings, he never attains to any clearness regarding himself: to the last he never ascertains his peculiar aim, even with such distinctness as is common among ordinary men, and therefore never can pursue it with that singleness of will which ensures success and some contentment to such men. To the last he wavers between two purposes: glorying in his talent, like a true poet, he yet cannot consent to make this his chief and sole glory, and to follow it as the one thing needful, through poverty or riches, through good or evil report. Another far meaner ambition still cleaves to him: he must dream and struggle about a certain "rock of independence," which, natural and even admirable as it might be, was still but a warring with the world on the comparatively insignificant ground of his being more or less completely supplied with money than others, of his standing at a higher or at a lower altitude in general estimation than others. For the world still appears to him, as to the young, in borrowed colours; he expects from it what it cannot give to any man; seeks for contentment, not within himself, in action and wise effort, but from without, in the kindness of circumstances, in love, friendship, honour, pecuniary ease. He would be happy, not actively and in himself, but passively, and from some ideal cornucopia of enjoyments not earned by his own labour, but showered on him by the beneficence of destiny. Thus, like a young man, he cannot steady himself for any fixed or systematic pursuit, but swerves to and fro between passionate hope and remorseless disappointment: rushing onward with a deep, tempestuous force, he surmounts or breaks asunder many a barrier—travels, nay, advances far, but advancing only under uncertain guidance, is ever and anon turned from his path, and to the last cannot reach the only true happiness of a man, that of clear, decided activity in the sphere for which

by nature and circumstances he has been fitted and appointed.

We do not say these things in dispraise of Burns; nay, perhaps, they but interest us the more in his favour. This blessing is not given soonest to the best, but rather it is often the greatest minds that are latest in obtaining it; for where most is to be developed, most time may be required to develop it. A complex condition had been assigned him from without—as complex a condition from within; “no pre-established harmony” existed between the clay soil of Mossgiel and the empyrean soul of Robert Burns; it was not wonderful, therefore, that the adjustment between them should have been long postponed, and his arm long cumbered, and his sight confused in so vast and discordant an economy as he has been appointed steward over. Byron was, at his death, but a year younger than Burns, and through life, as it might have appeared, far more simply situated, yet in him, too, we can trace no such adjustment, no such moral manhood, but at best, and only a little before his end, the beginning of what seemed such.

By much the most striking incident in Burns's life is his journey to Edinburgh, but perhaps a still more important one is his residence at Irvine so early as in his twenty-third year. Hitherto his life had been poor and toil-worn, but otherwise not ungenial and, with all its distresses, by no means unhappy. In his parentage, deducting outward circumstances, he had every reason to reckon himself fortunate. His father was a man of thoughtful, intense, earnest character, as the best of our peasants are—valuing knowledge, possessing some, and, what is far better and rarer, open-minded for more—a man with a keen insight and devout heart, reverent toward God, friendly therefore at once, and fearless toward all that God has made—in one word, though but a hard-handed peasant, a complete and fully unfolded *man*. Such a father is seldom found in any rank in society, and was worth descending far in society to seek. Unfortunately, he was very poor; had he even been a little richer, almost ever so little,


the whole might have issued far otherwise. Mighty events turn on a straw; the crossing of a brook decides the conquest of the world. Had this William Burns's small seven acres of nursery ground anywise prospered, the boy Robert had been sent to school—had struggled forward, as so many weaker men do, to some university—come forth not as a rustic wonder, but as a regular, well-trained, intellectual workman, and changed the whole course of British literature, for it lay in him to have done this! But the nursery did not prosper: poverty sank his whole family below the help of even our cheap school system. Burns remained a hard-worked ploughboy, and British literature took its own course. Nevertheless, even in this rugged scene, there is much to nourish him. If he drudges, it is with his brother, and for his father and mother, whom he loves, and would fain shield from want. Wisdom is not banished from their poor hearth, nor the balm of natural feeling; the solemn words, "Let us worship God," are heard there from a "priest-like father"; if threatenings of unjust men throw mother and children into tears, these are tears not of grief only, but of holiest affection; every heart in that humble group feels itself the closer knit to every other: in their hard warfare they are there together, a "little band of brethren." Neither are such tears and the deep beauty that dwells in them their only portion. Light visits the heart as it does the eyes of all living: there is a force, too, in this youth, that enables him to trample on misfortune—nay, to bind it under his feet to make him sport. For a bold, warm, buoyant humour of character has been given him, and so the thick-coming shapes of evil are welcomed with a gay, friendly irony, and in their closest pressure he bates no jot of heart or hope. Vague yearnings of ambition fail not as he grows up; dreamy fancies hang like cloud-cities around him; the curtain of existence is slowly rising in many-coloured splendour and gloom, and the auroral light of first love is gilding his horizon, and the music of song is on his path, and so he walks

. . . In glory and in joy,  
Behind his plow, upon the mountain side

We know, from the best evidence, that up to this date Burns was happy—nay, that he was the gayest, brightest, most fantastic, fascinating being to be found in the world, more so even than he ever afterward appeared. But now, at this early age, he quits the paternal roof, goes forth into looser, louder, more exciting society, and becomes initiated in those dissipations, those vices, which a certain class of philosophers have asserted to be a natural preparative for entering on active life—a kind of mud-bath in which the youth is, as it were, necessitated to steep and, we suppose, cleanse himself before the real toga of manhood can be laid on him. We shall not dispute much with this class of philosophers—we hope they are mistaken—for sin and remorse so easily beset us at all stages of life, and are always such indifferent company, that it seems hard we should, at any stage, be forced and fated not only to meet, but to yield to them, and even serve for a term in their leprous armada. We hope it is not so. Clear we are, at all events, it cannot be the training one receives in this service, but only our determining to desert from it, that fits us for true manly action. We become men not after we have been dissipated and disappointed in the chase of false pleasure, but after we have ascertained, in any way, what impassable barriers hem us in through this life; how mad it is to hope for contentment to our infinite soul from the gifts of this extremely finite world! that a man must be sufficient for himself; and that “for suffering and enduring there is no remedy but striving and doing.” Manhood begins when we have in any way made truce with necessity—begins, at all events, when we have surrendered to necessity, as the most part only do; but begins joyfully and hopefully only when we have reconciled ourselves to necessity, and thus, in reality, triumphed over it and felt that in necessity we are free. Surely such lessons as this last, which in one shape or other is the grand lesson for every mortal man, are better learned from the lips of a devout mother, in the looks and actions of a devout father, while the heart is yet soft and pliant, than in

collision with the sharp adamant of fate, attracting us to shipwreck us, when the heart is grown hard, and may be broken before it will become contrite! Had Burns continued to learn this, as he was already learning it, in his father's cottage, he would have learned it fully, which he never did, and been saved many a lasting aberration, many a bitter hour and year of remorseful sorrow.

It seems to us another circumstance of fatal import in Burns's history, that at this time, too, he became involved in the religious quarrels of his district, that he was enlisted and feasted as the fighting man of the new-light priesthood in their highly unprofitable warfare. At the tables of these free-minded clergy he learned much more than was needful for him. Such liberal ridicule of fanaticism awakened in his mind scruples about religion itself, and a whole world of doubts, which it required quite another set of conjurors than these men to exercise. We do not say that such an intellect as his could have escaped similar doubts at some period of his history, or even that he could, at a later period, have come through them altogether victorious and unharmed; but it seems peculiarly unfortunate that this time, above all others, should have been fixed for the encounter. For now, with principles assailed by evil example from without, by "passions raging like demons" from within, he had little need of sceptical misgivings to whisper treason in the heat of the battle, or to cut off his retreat if he were already defeated. He loses his feeling of innocence; his mind is at variance with itself; the old divinity no longer presides there; but wild desires and wild repentance alternately oppress him. Ere long, too, he has committed himself before the world: his character for sobriety, dear to a Scottish peasant, as few corrupted worldlings can even conceive, is destroyed in the eyes of men, and his only refuge consists in trying to disbelieve his guiltiness, and is but a refuge of lies. The blackest desperation now gathers over him, broken only by the red lightnings of remorse. The whole fabric of his life is blasted asunder, for now not only his character, but his personal liberty, is to be



lost; men and fortune are leagued for his hurt—"hungry ruin has him in the wind." He sees no escape but the saddest of all—exile from his loved country to a country in every sense inhospitable and abhorrent to him. While the "gloomy night is gathering fast," in mental storm and solitude as well as in physical, he sings his wild farewell to Scotland—

Farewell, my friends, farewell, my foes!  
My peace with these, my love with those;  
The bursting tears my heart declare;  
Adieu, my native banks of Ayr!

Light breaks suddenly in on him in floods, but still a false transitory light, and no real sunshine. He is invited to Edinburgh; hastens thither with anticipating heart; is welcomed as in triumph, and with universal blandishment and acclamation; whatever is wisest, whatever is truest or loveliest there, gathers round him, to gaze on his face, to show him honour, sympathy, affection. Burns's appearance among the sages and nobles of Edinburgh must be regarded as one of the most singular phenomena in modern literature—almost like the appearance of some Napoleon among the crowned sovereigns of modern politics. For it is nowise as a "mockery king," set there by favour, transiently and for a purpose, that he will let himself be treated; still less is he a mad Rienzi, whose sudden elevation turns his too weak head; but he stands there on his own basis, cool, unastonished, holding his equal rank from Nature herself, putting forth no claim which there is not strength in him, as well as about him, to vindicate. Mr. Lockhart has some forcible observations on this point—

"It needs no effort of imagination," says he, "to conceive what the sensations of an isolated set of scholars (almost all either clergymen or professors) must have been in the presence of this big-boned, black-browed, brawny stranger, with his great flashing eyes, who, having forced his way among them from the plough-tail, at a single stride, manifested in the whole strain of his bearing and conversation a most thorough conviction that in the



society of the most eminent men of his nation he was exactly where he was entitled to be; hardly deigned to flatter them by exhibiting even an occasional symptom of being flattered by their notice; by turns calmly measured himself against the most cultivated understandings of his time in discussion; overpowered the *bon mots* of the most celebrated convivialists by broad floods of merriment, impregnated with all the burning life of genius; astounded bosoms habitually enveloped in the thrice-piled folds of social reserve by compelling them to tremble—nay, to tremble visibly—beneath the fearless touch of natural pathos; and all this without indicating the smallest willingness to be ranked among those professional ministers of excitement, who are content to be paid in money and smiles for doing what the spectators and auditors would be ashamed of doing in their own persons, even if they had the power of doing it; and last, and probably worst of all, who was known to be in the habit of enlivening societies which they would have scorned to approach, still more frequently than their own, with eloquence no less magnificent, with wit, in all likelihood, still more daring—often enough as the superiors whom he fronted without alarm might have guessed from the beginning, and had, ere long, no occasion to guess with wit pointed at themselves” (p. 131).

The further we remove from this scene the more singular will it seem to us; details of the exterior aspect of it are already full of interest. Most readers recollect Mr. Walker’s personal interviews with Burns as among the best passages of his *Narrative*. A time will come when his reminiscence of Sir Walter Scott’s, slight though it is, will also be precious.

“As for Burns,” writes Sir Walter, “I may truly say *Virgilium vidi tantum*. I was a lad of fifteen in 1786-7, when he first came to Edinburgh, but had sense and feeling enough to be much interested in his poetry, and would have given the world to know him; but I had very little acquaintance with any literary people, and still less with the gentry of the west country, the two sets

that he most frequented. Mr. Thomas Grierson was at that time a clerk of my father's. He knew Burns, and promised to ask him to his lodgings to dinner, but had no opportunity to keep his word; otherwise I might have seen more of this distinguished man. As it was, I saw him one day at the late venerable Professor Ferguson's, where there were several gentlemen of literary reputation, among whom I remember the celebrated Mr. Dugald Stewart. Of course, we youngsters sat silent, looked and listened. The only thing I remember which was remarkable in Burns's manner was the effect produced upon him by a print of Bunbury's representing a soldier lying dead on the snow, his dog sitting in misery on one side, on the other his widow, with a child in her arms. These lines were written beneath—

Cold on Canadian hills, or Minden's plain,  
Perhaps that mother wept her soldier slain;  
Bent o'er her babe, her eye dissolved in dew,  
The big drops mingling with the milk he drew  
Gave the sad presage of his future years,  
The child of misery baptised in tears.

"Burns seemed much affected by the print, or rather by the ideas which it suggested to his mind. He actually shed tears. He asked whose the lines were, and it chanced that nobody but myself remembered that they occur in a half-forgotten poem of Langhorne's, called by the unpromising title of *The Justice of Peace*. I whispered my information to a friend present; he mentioned it to Burns, who rewarded me with a look and a word, which, though of mere civility, I then received and still recollect with very great pleasure.

"His person was strong and robust, his manners rustic, not clownish—a sort of dignified plainness and simplicity which received part of its effect perhaps from one's knowledge of his extraordinary talents. His features are represented in Mr. Nasmyth's picture; but to me it conveys the idea that they are diminished, as if seen in perspective. I think his countenance was more massive than it looks in any of the portraits. I should have taken the

poet, had I not known what he was, for a very sagacious country farmer of the old Scotch school—i.e., none of your modern agriculturists who keep labourers for their drudgery, but the “douce gudeman” who held his own plough. There was a strong expression of sense and shrewdness in all his lineaments: the eye alone, I think, indicated the poetical character and temperament. It was large and of a dark cast, which glowed (I say literally *glowed*) when he spoke with feeling or interest. I never saw such another eye in a human head, though I have seen the most distinguished men of my time. His conversation expressed perfect self-confidence without the slightest presumption. Among the men who were most learned of their time and country he expressed himself with perfect firmness, but without the least intrusive forwardness; and when he differed in opinion he did not hesitate to express it firmly, yet at the same time with modesty. I do not remember any part of his conversation distinctly enough to be quoted; nor did I ever see him again, except in the street, where he did not recognise me, as I could not expect he should. He was much caressed in Edinburgh, but (considering what literary emoluments have been since his day) the efforts made for his relief were extremely trifling.

“I remember, on this occasion I mention, I thought Burns’s acquaintance with English poetry was rather limited, and also that having twenty times the abilities of Allan Ramsay and of Fergusson, he talked of them with too much humility as his models; there was, doubtless, national predilection in his estimate.

“This is all I can tell you about Burns. I have only to add that his dress corresponded with his manner. He was like a farmer dressed in his best to dine with the laird. I do not speak in *malam partem* when I say I never saw a man in company with his superiors in station or information more perfectly free from either the reality or the affectation of embarrassment. I was told, but did not observe it, that his address to females was extremely deferential, and always with a turn either to the pathetic

or humorous, which engaged their attention particularly. I have heard the late Duchess of Gordon remark this. I do not know anything I can add to these recollections of forty years since" (pp. 112-115).

The conduct of Burns under this dazzling blaze of favour, the calm, unaffected, manly manner in which he not only bore it but estimated its value, has justly been regarded as the best proof that could be given of his real vigour and integrity of mind. A little natural vanity, some touches of hypocritical modesty, some glimmerings of affectation, at least some fear of being thought affected, we could have pardoned in almost any man, but no such indication is to be traced here. In his unexampled situation the young peasant is not a moment perplexed; so many strange lights do not confuse him, do not lead him astray. Nevertheless, we cannot but perceive that this winter did him great and lasting injury. A somewhat clearer knowledge of men's affairs, scarcely of their characters, it did afford him; but a sharper feeling of fortune's unequal arrangements in their social destiny is also left with him. He had seen the gay and gorgeous arena, in which the powerful are born to play their parts—nay, had himself stood in the midst of it; and he felt more bitterly than ever that here he was but a looker-on, and had no part or lot in that splendid game. From this time a jealous, indignant fear of social degradation takes possession of him, and perverts, so far as aught could pervert, his private contentment and his feelings towards his richer fellows. It was clear enough to Burns that he had talent enough to make a fortune, or a hundred fortunes, could be but have rightly willed this; it was clear also that he willed something far different, and therefore could not make one. Unhappy it was that he had not power to choose the one and reject the other, but must halt forever between two opinions, two objects, making hampered advancement toward either. But so is it with many men; we "long for the merchandise, but would fain keep the price," and so stand chaffering with

fate in vexatious altercation, till the night come and our fair is over!

The Edinburgh learned of that period were in general more noted for clearness of head than for warmth of heart; with the exception of the good old Blacklock, whose help was too ineffectual, scarcely one among them seems to have looked at Burns with any true sympathy, or, indeed, much otherwise than as at a highly curious *thing*. By the great also he is treated in the customary fashion; entertained at their tables, and dismissed; certain modica of pudding and praise are, from time to time, gladly exchanged for the fascination of his presence, which exchange once effected, the bargain is finished, and each party goes his several way. At the end of this strange season Burns gloomily sums up his gains and losses, and meditates on the chaotic future. In money he is somewhat richer; in fame and the show of happiness infinitely richer; but in the substance of it as poor as ever. Nay, poorer, for his heart is now maddened still more with the fever of mere worldly ambition; and through long years the disease will rack him with unprofitable sufferings, and weaken his strength for all pure and nobler aims.

What Burns was next to do or avoid: how a man so circumstanced was now to guide himself toward his true advantage might at this point of time have been a question for the wisest; and it was a question which he was left altogether to answer for himself: of his learned or rich patrons it had not struck any individual to turn a thought on this so trivial matter. Without claiming for Burns the praise of perfect sagacity, we must say that his Excise and farm scheme does not seem to us a very unreasonable one, and that we should be at a loss, even now, to suggest one decidedly better. Some of his admirers, indeed, are scandalised at his ever resolving to gauge, and would have had him apparently lie still at the pool till the spirit of patronage should stir the waters, and then heal with one plunge all his worldly sorrows! We fear such counsellors knew but little of Burns, and did not consider that happiness might in all cases be cheaply had by waiting for the

fulfilment of golden dreams, were it not that in the interim the dreamer must die of hunger. It reflects credit on the manliness and sound sense of Burns that he felt so early on what ground he was standing, and preferred self-help, on the humblest scale, to dependence and inaction, though with hope of far more splendid possibilities. But even these possibilities were not rejected in his scheme; he might expect, if it chanced that he had any friend, to rise, in no long period, into something even like opulence and leisure; while again, if it chanced that he had no friend, he could still live in security, and for the rest he "did not intend to borrow honour from any profession." We think, then, that his plan was honest and well-calculated; all turned on the execution of it. Doubtless it failed, yet not, we believe, from any vice inherent in itself. Nay, after all, it was no failure of external means, but of internal, that overtook Burns. His was no bankruptcy of the purse, but of the soul; to his last day he owed no man anything.

Meanwhile, he begins well with two good and wise actions. His donation to his mother, munificent from a man whose income had lately been seven pounds a year, was worthy of him, and not more than worthy. Generous also, and worthy of him, was his treatment of the woman whose life's welfare now depended on his pleasure. A friendly observer might have hoped serene days for him; his mind is on the true road to peace with itself; what clearness he still wants will be given as he proceeds; for the best teacher of duties, that still lie dim to us, is the practice of those we see and have at hand. Had the "patrons of genius," who could give him nothing, but taken nothing from him, at least nothing more! the wounds of his heart would have healed, vulgar ambition would have died away. Toil and frugality would have been welcome, since virtue dwelt with them, and poetry would have shown through them as of old; and in her clear ethereal light, which was his own by birthright, he might have looked down on his earthly destiny, and all its obstructions, not with patience only, but with love.

But the patrons of genius would not have it so. Picturesque tourists,\* all manner of fashionable dangles after literature, and, far worse, all manner of convivial Mæcenas hovered round him in his retreat, and his good as well as his weak qualities secured them influence over him. He was flattered by their notice, and his warm, social nature made it impossible for him to shake them off and hold on his way apart from them. These men, as we believe, were proximately the means of his ruin. Not that they meant him any ill; they only meant themselves a little good; if he suffered harm, let him look to it! But they wasted his precious time and his precious talent; they disturbed his composure, broke down his returning habits of temperance and assiduous contented exertion. Their pampering was baneful to him; their cruelty, which soon followed, was equally baneful. The old grudge against fortune's inequality awoke with new bitterness in their neighbourhood, and Burns had no retreat but to the "Rock of Independence," which is but an air-castle, after all, that looks well at a distance, but will screen no one from real wind and wet. Flushed with irregular excitement, exasperated alternately by contempt of others and contempt of himself, Burns was no longer regaining his peace of mind, but fast losing it forever. There was a hallowness at the heart of his life, for his conscience did not now approve what he was doing.

Amid the vapours of unwise enjoyment, of bootless remorse, and angry discontent with fate, his true load-

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\* There is one little sketch by certain "English gentlemen" of this class, which though adopted in Currie's narrative, and since then repeated in most others, we have all along felt an invincible disposition to regard as imaginary—"On a rock that projected into the stream they saw a man employed in angling, of a singular appearance. He had a cap made of fox-skin on his head, a loose great-coat fixed round him by a belt, from which depended an enormous Highland broadsword. It was Burns." Now, we rather think it was not Burns. For, to say nothing of the fox-skin cap, loose and quite Hibernian watch-coat with the belt, what are we to make of this "enormous Highland broadsword" depending from him? More especially, as there is no word of parish constables on the outlook to see whether, as Dennis phrases it, he had an eye to his own midriff, or that of the public! Burns, of all men, had the least tendency to seek for distinction, either in his own eyes or those of others, by such poor mummeries.

star, a life of poetry, with poverty—nay, with famine, if it must be so, was too often altogether hidden from his eyes. And yet he sailed a sea where, without some such guide, there was no right steering. Meteors of French politics rise before him, but these were not his stars. An accident this, which hastened, but did not originate, his worst distresses. In the mad contentions of that time, he comes in collision with certain official superiors, is wounded by them—cruelly lacerated, we should say, could a dead mechanical implement, in any case, be called cruel: and shrinks in indignant pain into deeper seclusion, into gloomier moodiness than ever. His life has now lost its unity; it is a life of fragments, led with little aim, beyond the melancholy one of securing its own continuance—in fits of wild, false joy, when such offered, and of black despondency when they passed away. His character before the world begins to suffer; calumny is busy with him—for a miserable man makes more enemies than friends. Some faults he has fallen into and a thousand misfortunes; but deep criminality is what he stands accused of, and they that are *not* without sin cast the first stone at him! For is he not a wellwisher of the French Revolution, a Jacobin, and therefore in that one act guilty of all? These accusations, political and moral, it has since appeared, were false enough; but the world hesitated little to credit them. Nay, his convivial *Mécènes* themselves were not the last to do it. There is reason to believe that, in his later years, the Dumfries aristocracy had partly withdrawn themselves from Burns, as from a tainted person, no longer worthy of their acquaintance. That painful class, stationed, in all provincial cities, behind the outmost breastwork of gentility, there to stand siege and do battle against the intrusion of grocerdom and grazierdom, had actually seen dishonour in the society of Burns, and branded him with their veto—had, as we vulgarly say, *cut* him! We find one passage in this work of Mr. Lockhart's which will not out of our thoughts—

“A gentleman of that county, whose name I have



already more than once had occasion to refer to, has often told me that he was seldom more grieved than when, riding into Dumfries one fine summer evening about this time to attend a county ball, he saw Burns walking alone on the shady side of the principal street of the town, while the opposite side was gay with successive groups of gentlemen and ladies, all drawn together for the festivities of the night, not one of whom appeared willing to recognise him. The horseman dismounted and joined Burns, who, on his proposing to cross the street, said: 'Nay, nay, my young friend, that's all over now'; and quoted, after a pause, some verses of Lady Grizzel Baillie's pathetic ballad—

His bonnet stood ance fu' fair on his brow,  
His auld ane looked better than mony ane's new;  
But now he lets't wear ony way it will hing,  
And casts himself dowie upon the corn-bing.

O were we young, as we ance hae been,  
We sud hae been galloping down on yon green,  
And linking it ower the lily-white lea!  
And werena my heart light I wad die.

It was little in Burns's character to let his feelings on certain subjects escape in this fashion. He immediately, after reciting these verses, assumed the sprightliness of his most pleasing manner, and, taking his young friend home with him, entertained him very agreeably till the hour of the ball arrived."

Alas! when we think that Burns now sleeps "where bitter indignation can no longer lacerate his heart,"\* and that most of these fair dames and frizzled gentlemen already lie at his side, where the breastwork of gentility is quite thrown down—who would not sigh over the thin delusions and foolish toys that divide heart from heart, and make man unmerciful to his brother!

It was not now to be hoped that the genius of Burns would ever reach maturity, or accomplish aught worthy of itself. His spirit was jarred in its melody: not the soft breath of natural feeling, but the rude hand of Fate, was now sweeping over the strings. And yet what harmony

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\* *Ubi sæva indignatio cor ulterius lacerare nequit.*—Swift's epitaph.

was in him, what music even in his discords! How the wild tones had a charm for the simplest and the wisest; and all men felt and knew that here also was one of the gifted! "If he entered an inn at midnight after all the inmates were in bed, the news of his arrival circulated from the cellar to the garret, and ere ten minutes had elapsed the landlord and all his guests were assembled!" Some brief, pure moments of poetic life were yet appointed him in the composition of his songs. We can understand how he grasped at this employment, and how, too, he spurned at all other reward for it but what the labour itself brought him. For the soul of Burns, though scathed and marred, was yet living in its full moral strength, though sharply conscious of its errors and abasement; and here, in his destitution and degradation, was one act of seeming nobleness and self-devotedness left even for him to perform. He felt, too, that with all the "thoughtless follies" that had "laid him low," the world was unjust and cruel to him, and he silently appealed to another and calmer time. Not as a hired soldier, but as a patriot, would he strive for the glory of his country, so he cast from him the poor sixpence a day, and served zealously as a volunteer. Let us not grudge him this last luxury of his existence; let him not have appealed to us in vain! The money was not necessary to him—he struggled through without it; long since these guineas would have been gone, and now the high-mindedness of refusing them will plead for him in all hearts forever.

We are here arrived at the crisis of Burns's life; for matters had now taken such a shape with him as could not long continue. If improvement was not to be looked for, Nature could only for a limited time maintain this dark and maddening warfare against the world and itself. We are not medically informed whether any continuance of years was, at this period, probable for Burns, whether his death is to be looked on as in some sense an accidental event, or only as the natural consequence of the long series of events that had preceded. The latter seems to be the likelier opinion, and yet it is by no means a certain

stands the fact; friendship, in the old heroic sense of that term, no longer exists, except in the cases of kindred or other legal affinity; it is in reality no longer expected or recognised as a virtue among men. A close observer of manners has pronounced "patronage," that is, pecuniary or other economic furtherance, to be "twice cursed," cursing him that gives and him that takes! And thus in regard to outward matters also, it has become the rule, as in regard to inward it always was and must be the rule, that no one shall look for effectual help to another, but that each shall rest contented with what help he can afford himself. Such, we say, is the principle of modern honour—naturally enough growing out of that sentiment of pride which we inculcate and encourage as the basis of our whole social morality. Many a poet has been poorer than Burns, but no one was ever prouder: we may question whether, without great precautions, even a pension from royalty would not have galled and encumbered more than actually assisted him.

Still less, therefore, are we disposed to join with another class of Burns's admirers, who accuse the higher ranks among us of having ruined Burns by their selfish neglect of him. We have already stated our doubts whether direct pecuniary help, had it been offered, would have been accepted, or could have proved very effectual. We shall readily admit, however, that much was to be done for Burns; that many a poisoned arrow might have been warded from his bosom; many an entanglement in his path cut asunder by the hand of the powerful; and light and heat shed on him from high places would have made his humble atmosphere more genial; and the softest heart then breathing might have lived and died with some fewer pangs. Nay, we shall grant further, and for Burns it is granting much, that with all his pride he would have thanked, even with exaggerated gratitude, anyone who had cordially befriended him: patronage, unless once cursed, need not have been twice so. At all events, the poor promotion he desired in his calling might have been granted: it was his own scheme, therefore likelier than any

one. At all events, as we have said, some change could not be very distant. Three gates of deliverance, it seems to us, were open for Burns—clear poetical activity, madness, or death. The first, with longer life, was still possible, though not probable, for physical causes were beginning to be concerned in it; and yet Burns had an iron resolution, could he but have seen and felt that not only his highest glory but his first duty, and the true medicine for all his woes, lay here. The second was still less probable, for his mind was ever among the clearest and firmest. So the milder third gate was opened for him; and he passed, not softly, yet speedily, into that still country where the hail-storms and fire-showers do not reach, and the heaviest-laden wayfarer at length lays down his load!

Contemplating this sad end of Burns, and how he sank unaided by any real help, uncheered by any wise sympathy, generous minds have sometimes figured to themselves, with a reproachful sorrow, that much might have been done for him—that by counsel, true affection, and friendly ministrations he might have been saved to himself and the world. We question whether there is not more tenderness of heart than soundness of judgment in these suggestions. It seems dubious to us whether the richest, wisest, most benevolent individual could have lent Burns any effectual help. Counsel, which seldom profits anyone, he did not need; in his understanding he knew the right from the wrong as well, perhaps, as any man ever did; but the persuasion which would have availed him lies not so much in the head as in the heart, where no argument or expostulation could have assisted much to implant it. As to money, again, we do not really believe that this was his essential want, or well see how any private man could, even pre-supposing Burns's consent, have bestowed on him an independent fortune, with much prospect of decisive advantage. It is a mortifying truth, that two men in any rank of society could hardly be found virtuous enough to give money, and to take it as a necessary gift, without injury to the moral entireness of one or both. But so

stands the fact; friendship, in the old heroic sense of that term, no longer exists, except in the cases of kindred or other legal affinity; it is in reality no longer expected or recognised as a virtue among men. A close observer of manners has pronounced "patronage," that is, pecuniary or other economic furtherance, to be "twice cursed," cursing him that gives and him that takes! And thus in regard to outward matters also, it has become the rule, as in regard to inward it always was and must be the rule, that no one shall look for effectual help to another, but that each shall rest contented with what help he can afford himself. Such, we say, is the principle of modern honour—naturally enough growing out of that sentiment of pride which we inculcate and encourage as the basis of our whole social morality. Many a poet has been poorer than Burns, but no one was ever prouder: we may question whether, without great precautions, even a pension from royalty would not have galled and encumbered more than actually assisted him.

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other to be of service. All this it might have been a luxury—nay, it was a duty—for our nobility to have done. No part of all this, however, did any of them do, or apparently attempt, or wish to do: so much is granted against them. But what then is the amount of their blame? Simply that they were men of the world, and walked by the principles of such men; that they treated Burns as other nobles and other commoners had done other poets; as the English did Shakespeare; as King Charles and his cavaliers did Butler; as King Philip and his Grandees did Cervantes. Do men gather grapes of thorns? or shall we cut down our thorns for yielding only a fence and haws? How, indeed, could the “nobility and gentry of his native land” hold out any help to this “Scottish bard, proud of his name and country”? Were the nobility and gentry so much as able rightly to help themselves? Had they not their game to preserve, their borough interests to strengthen; dinners, therefore, of various kinds, to eat and give? Were their means more than adequate to all this business, or less than adequate? Less than adequate in general: few of them in reality were richer than Burns; many of them were poorer; for sometimes they had to wring their supplies, as with thumb-screws, from the hard hand, and in their need of guineas, to forget their duty of mercy, which Burns was never reduced to do. Let us pity and forgive them. The game they preserved and shot, the dinners they ate and gave, the borough interests they strengthened, the little Babylons they severally builded by the glory of their might, are all melted, or melting back into the primeval chaos, as man’s merely selfish endeavours are fated to do; and here was an action extending, in virtue of its worldly influence, we may say, through all time—in virtue of its moral nature, beyond all time, being immortal as the Spirit of Goodness itself; this action was offered them to do, and light was not given them to do it. Let us pity and forgive them. But, better than pity, let us go and do otherwise. Human suffering did not end with the life of Burns; neither was the solemn mandate, “Love one another, bear

one another's burdens," given to the rich only, but to all men. True, we shall find no Burns to relieve, to assuage by our aid or our pity; but celestial natures, groaning under the fardels of a weary life, we shall still find; and that wretchedness which Fate has rendered voiceless and tuneless is not the least wretched, but the most.

Still we do not think that the blame of Burns's failure lies chiefly with the world. The world, it seems to us, treated him with more rather than with less kindness than it usually shows to such men. It has ever, we fear, shown but small favour to its teachers; hunger and nakedness, perils and reviling, the prison, the cross, the poison-chalice, have in most times and countries been the marketplace it has offered for wisdom, the welcome with which it has greeted those who have come to enlighten and purify it. Homer and Socrates and the Christian apostles belong to old days, but the world's martyrology was not completed with these. Roger Bacon and Galileo languish in priestly dungeons, Tasso pines in the cell of a madhouse, Camoens dies begging on the streets of Lisbon. So neglected, so "persecuted they the prophets," not in Judea only, but in all places where men have been. We reckon that every poet of Burns's order is, or should be, a prophet and teacher to his age—that he has no right, therefore, to expect great kindness from it, but rather is bound to do it great kindness—that Burns, in particular, experienced fully the usual proportion of the world's goodness, and that the blame of his failure, as we have said, lies not chiefly with the world.

Where then does it lie? We are forced to answer, With himself; it is his inward, not his outward misfortunes, that bring him to the dust. Seldom, indeed, is it otherwise—seldom is a life morally wrecked, but the grand cause lies in some internal mal-arrangement, some want less of good fortune than of good guidance. Nature fashions no creature without implanting in it the strength needful for its action and duration; least of all does she so neglect her masterpiece and darling, the poetic soul. Neither can we believe that it is in the power of any

external circumstances utterly to ruin the mind of man—nay, if proper wisdom be given him, even so much as to affect its essential health and beauty. The sternest sum-total of all worldly misfortunes is death—nothing more can lie in the cup of human woe; yet many men, in all ages, have triumphed over death, and led it captive, converting its physical victory into a moral victory for themselves, into a seal and immortal consecration for all that their past life had achieved. What has been done may be done again—nay, it is but the degree and not the kind of such heroism that differs in different seasons; for without some portion of this spirit, not of boisterous daring, but of silent fearlessness, of self-denial, in all its forms, no good man, in any scene or time, has ever attained to be good.

We have already stated the error of Burns, and mourned over it rather than blamed it. It was the want of unity in his purposes, of consistency in his aims, the hapless attempt to mingle in friendly union the common spirit of the world with the spirit of poetry, which is of a far different and altogether irreconcilable nature. Burns was nothing wholly, and Burns could be nothing—no man formed as he was can be anything by halves. The heart, not of a mere hot-blooded, popular versemonger, or poetical restaurateur, but of a true poet and singer, worthy of the old religious heroic times, had been given him; and he fell in an age, not of heroism and religion, but of scepticism, selfishness, and triviality, when true nobleness was little understood, and its place supplied by a hollow, dissocial, altogether barren and unfruitful principle of pride. The influences of that age, his open, kind, susceptible nature, to say nothing of his highly untoward situation, made it more than usually difficult for him to repel or resist; the better spirit that was within him ever sternly demanded its rights, its supremacy; he spent his life in endeavouring to reconcile these two, and lost it, as he must have lost it, without reconciling them here.

Burns was born poor, and born also to continue poor, for he would not endeavour to be otherwise: this it had



been well could he have once for all admitted and considered as finally settled. He was poor, truly; but hundreds even of his own class and order of mind have been poorer, yet have suffered nothing deadly from it—nay, his own father had a far sorer battle with ungrateful destiny than his was; and he did not yield to it, but died courageously warring, and to all moral intents prevailing against it. True, Burns had little means, had even little time for poetry, his only real pursuit and vocation; but so much the more precious was what little he had. In all these external respects his case was hard, but very far from the hardest. Poverty, incessant drudgery, and much worse evils it has often been the lot of poets and wise men to strive with, and their glory to conquer. Locke was banished as a traitor, and wrote his *Essay on the Human Understanding*, sheltering himself in a Dutch garret. Was Milton rich or at his ease when he composed *Paradise Lost*? Not only low, but fallen from a height; not only poor, but impoverished; in darkness and with dangers compassed round, he sang his immortal song, and found fit audience, though few. Did not Cervantes finish his work a maimed soldier and in prison? Nay, was not the *Araucana*, which Spain acknowledges as its epic, written without even the aid of paper, on scraps of leather, as the stout fighter and voyager snatched any moment from that wild warfare?

And what, then, had these men which Burns wanted? Two things, both which, it seems to us, are indispensable for such men: they had a true religious principle of morals, and a single, not a double aim, in their activity. They were not self-seekers and self-worshippers, but seekers and worshippers of something far better than self. Not personal enjoyment was their object; but a high, heroic idea of religion, of patriotism, of heavenly wisdom, in one or the other form, ever hovered before them; in which cause they neither shrank from suffering, nor called on the earth to witness it as something wonderful, but patiently endured, counting it blessedness enough so to spend and be spent. Thus the "golden calf of self-love,"

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however curiously carved, was not their Deity, but the Invisible Goodness, which alone is man's reasonable service. This feeling was as a celestial fountain, whose streams refreshed into gladness and beauty all the provinces of their otherwise too desolate existence. In a word, they willed one thing, to which all other things were subordinated and made subservient, and therefore they accomplished it. The wedge will rend rocks, but its edge must be sharp and single; if it be double, the wedge is bruised in pieces and will rend nothing.

Part of this superiority these men owed to their age, in which heroism and devotedness were still practised, or at least not yet disbelieved in; but much of it likewise they owed to themselves. With Burns, again, it was different. His morality in most of its practical points is that of a mere worldly man; enjoyment in a finer or a coarser shape is the only thing he longs and strives for. A noble instinct sometimes raises him above this; but an instinct only, and acting only for moments. He has no religion; in the shallow age, where his days were cast, religion was not discriminated from the new and old light forms of religion; and was, with these, becoming obsolete in the minds of men. His heart, indeed, is alive with a trembling adoration, but there is no temple in his understanding. He lives in darkness and in the shadow of doubt. His religion, at best, is an anxious wish; like that of Rabelais, "a great perhaps."

He loved poetry warmly and in his heart; could he but have loved it purely, and with his whole undivided heart, it had been well. For poetry, as Burns could have followed it, is but another form of wisdom, of religion; is itself wisdom and religion. But this also was denied him. His poetry is a stray vagrant gleam, which will not be extinguished within him, yet rises not to be the true light of his path, but is often a wildfire that misleads him. It was not necessary for Burns to be rich, to be, or to seem "independent"; but it was necessary for him to be at one with his own heart, to place what was highest in his nature highest also in his life, "to seek within himself

for that consistency and sequence which external events would forever refuse him." He was born a poet; poetry was the celestial element of his being, and should have been the soul of his whole endeavours. Lifted into that serene ether, whither he had wings given him to mount, he would have needed no other elevation; poverty, neglect, and all evil, save the desecration of himself and his art, were a small matter to him; the pride and the passions of the world lay far beneath his feet, and he looked down alike on noble and slave, on prince and beggar, and all that wore the stamp of man, with clear recognition, with brotherly affection, with sympathy, with pity. Nay, we question whether for his culture as a poet, poverty and much suffering for a season were not absolutely advantageous. Great men, in looking back over their lives, have testified to that effect. "I would not for much," says Jean Paul, "that I had been born richer." And yet Paul's birth was poor enough; for in another place he adds, "The prisoner's allowance is bread and water; and I had often only the latter." But the gold that is refined in the hottest furnace comes out the purest; or, as he has himself expressed it, "The canary bird sings sweeter the longer it has been trained in a darkened cage."

A man like Burns might have divided his hours between poetry and virtuous industry—industry which all true feeling sanctions, nay, prescribes, and which has a beauty, for that cause, beyond the pomp of thrones; but to divide his hours between poetry and rich men's banquets was an ill-starred and inauspicious attempt. How could he be at ease at such banquets? What had he to do there, mingling his music with the coarse roar of altogether earthly voices, and brightening the thick smoke of intoxication with fire lent him from heaven? Was it his aim to enjoy life? To-morrow he must go drudge as an exciseman! We wonder not that Burns became moody, indignant, and at times an offender against certain rules of society, but rather that he did not grow utterly frantic, and run amuck against them all. How could a man, so falsely placed by his own or others' faults, ever know contentment or peace-

able diligence for an hour? What he did under such perverse guidance, and what he forebore to do, alike fill us with astonishment at the natural strength and worth of his character.

Doubtless, there was a remedy for this perverseness, but not in others—only in himself; least of all in simple increase of wealth and worldly “respectability.” We hope we have now heard enough about the efficacy of wealth for poetry, and to make poets happy. Nay, have we not seen another instance of it in these very days? Byron, a man of an endowment considerably less ethereal than that of Burns, is born in the rank not of a Scottish ploughman, but of an English peer—the highest worldly honours, the fairest worldly career are his by inheritance; the richest harvest of fame he soon reaps in another province by his own hand. And what does all this avail him? Is he happy, is he good, is he true? Alas, he has a poet’s soul, and strives towards the infinite and the eternal, and soon feels that all this is but mounting to the house-top to reach the stars! Like Burns, he is only a proud man; might, like him, have “purchased a pocket-copy of Milton to study the character of Satan”; for Satan also is Byron’s grand exemplar, the hero of his poetry, and the model apparently of his conduct. As in Burns’s case, too, the celestial element will not mingle with the clay of earth; both poet and man of the world he must not be; vulgar ambition will not live kindly with poetic adoration; he cannot serve God and Mammon. Byron, like Burns, is not happy; nay, he is the most wretched of all men. His life is falsely arranged; the fire that is in him is not a strong, still, central fire, warming into beauty the products of a world, but it is the mad fire of a volcano; and now—we look sadly into the ashes of a crater, which, ere long, will fill itself with snow!

Byron and Burns were sent forth as missionaries to their generation, to teach it a higher doctrine, a purer truth; they had a message to deliver, which left them no rest till it was accomplished; in dim throes of pain, this divine behest lay smouldering within them, for they knew not

what it meant, and felt it only in mysterious anticipation, and they had to die without articulately uttering it. They are in the camp of the unconverted. Yet not as high messengers of rigorous though benignant truth, but as soft, flattering singers, and in pleasant fellowship will they live there; they are first adulated, then persecuted: they accomplish little for others; they find no peace for themselves, but only death and the peace of the grave. We confess that it is not without a certain mournful awe that we view the fate of these noble souls, so richly gifted, yet ruined to so little purpose with all their gifts. It seems to us there is a stern moral taught in this piece of history—twice told us in our own time! Surely to men of like genius, if there be any such, it carries with it a lesson of deep impressive significance. Surely it would become such a man, furnished for the highest of all enterprises, that of being the poet of his age, to consider well what it is that he attempts, and in what spirit he attempts it. For the words of Milton are true at all times, and were never truer than in this—"He who would write heroic poems must make his whole life a heroic poem." If he cannot first so make his life, then let him hasten from this arena, for neither its lofty glories nor its fearful perils are for him. Let him dwindle into a modish balladmonger; let him worship and be-sing the idols of the time, and the time will not fail to reward him—if, indeed, he can endure to live in that capacity! Byron and Burns could not live as idol-priests, but the fire of their own hearts consumed them; and better it was for them that they could not. For it is not in the favour of the great or of the small, but in a life of truth, and in the inexpugnable citadel of his own soul, that a Byron's or a Burns's strength must lie. Let the great stand aloof from him, or know how to reverence him. Beautiful is the union of wealth with favour and furtherance for literature, like the costliest flower-jar enclosing the loveliest amaranth. Yet let not the relation be mistaken. A true poet is not one whom they can hire by money or flattery to be a minister of their pleasures, their writer of occasional verses, their purveyor

of table wit; he cannot be their menial, he cannot even be their partisan. At the peril of both parties, let no such union be attempted! Will a courser of the sun work softly in the harness of a dray-horse? His hoofs are of fire and his path is through the heavens, bringing light to all lands; will he lumber on mud highways, dragging ale for earthly appetites from door to door?

But we must stop short in these considerations, which would lead us to boundless lengths. We had something to say on the public moral character of Burns, but this also we must forbear. We are far from regarding him as guilty before the world, as guiltier than the average—nay, from doubting that he is less guilty than one of ten thousand. Tried at a tribunal far more rigid than that where the *plebiscita* of common civic reputations are pronounced, he has seemed to us even there less worthy of blame than of pity and wonder. But the world is habitually unjust in its judgments of such men; unjust on many grounds, of which this one may be stated as the substance. It decides like a court of law, by dead statutes; and not positively, but negatively, less on what is done right than on what is or is not done wrong. Not the few inches of reflection from the mathematical orbit, which are so easily measured, but the ratio of these to the whole diameter, constitutes the real aberration. This orbit may be a planet's, its diameter the breadth of the solar system; or it may be a city hippodrome—nay, the circle of a ginhorse, its diameter a score of feet or paces. But the inches of deflection only are measured; and it is assumed that the diameter of the ginhorse and that of the planet will yield the same ratio when compared with them. Here lies the root of many a blind, cruel condemnation of Burnses, Swifts, Rousseaus, which one never listens to with approval. Granted, the ship comes into harbour with shrouds and tackle damaged; and the pilot is therefore blameworthy, for he has not been all-wise and all-powerful; but to know how blameworthy, tell us first whether his voyage has been round the globe, or only to Ramsgate and the Isle of Dogs.

With our readers in general, with men of right feeling anywhere, we are not required to plead for Burns. In pitying admiration he lies enshrined in all our hearts, in a far nobler mausoleum than that one of marble; neither will his works, even as they are, pass away from the memory of men. While the Shakespeares and Miltons roll on like mighty rivers through the country of thought, bearing fleets of traffickers and assiduous pearl-fishers on their waves, this little Valclusa Fountain will also arrest our eye. For this also is of Nature's own and most cunning workmanship, bursts from the depths of the earth with a full gushing current into the light of day; and often will the traveller turn aside to drink of its clear waters, and muse among its rocks and pines!

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1. The first part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

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